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Introduction: Class(es) Today

**Frank Ruda &
Agon Hamza**

It can appear as if the time of and for class-(based-)analysis is definitely over. At the beginning of the 21st century, the concept of the class appears to be little more than an outdated cog in a methodology that emerged in the 19th and lost its theoretical validity and practical potential at the end of the 20th century. The reason for this conceptual exhaustion or saturation does not only spring from the apparent Marxist bias of the concept. Nor, for that matter, only from its almost vulgar sociological application that reified the class concept into an objectivist substratum of societies. The reason for its contemporary disappearance rather seems to result from the fact that today either the overall regime of visibility of the class has changed and this transformation can appear as if the classes as such have disappeared.

Already at the end of the last century, Niklas Luhmann repeatedly and systematically insisted that from a certain historical moment onward, the organizational principles of society moved away from stratification to a rather flexible operation- and distinction-based model.

This means that societies are organized by complex assemblies of systems, each of which serves a particular organizing function that reduced the complexity of (re)producing and administering social order and allows for coordinated system-specific social operations in concerto. This is assumed to be a historical transformation that invalidated all that was stratificatory and static in society and thereby also, for Luhmann, invalidated concepts like that of the class (and its paradigmatic theoretical representation: Marxism). But even though being a partisan for non-class-based-social-theory, surprisingly classes and social stratification did not disappear entirely – as Luhmann himself clearly saw and admitted after visiting some favelas in Brazil.

But if the concept of class is not per se (trans)historically invalidated, maybe what we witness today is that it lost its explanatory potential due to another reason. One can certainly be tempted to assume that in present-day societies we seem to have reached a degree of social and economic mobility and permeability that invalidates everything that was still pertinent as ossified and ossifying structural feature of previous societies in the 19th and early to mid-20th century. One might here, rather vulgarly, think of those who invested into new electronic currencies and therefore became millionaires overnight; is our today not also that where movements in both directions are possible in a pace that was unthinkable before? Not only did the new currencies generate new millionaires (and in some countries there are more than ever), but as an effect of the most recent financial crisis some people lost millions (or more) overnight and what appeared to be their inexhaustible wealth evaporated into not even thin air. Does this point to the fact that classes are more porous and fluid than (we assumed) before? But if this were the case, as some claim, in this porosity and movement up or down, to use mountainous metaphors, then also and paradigmatically manifests a problematization of the – classical left-wing attempt to (objectively)

locate the – revolutionary class-agent (before the revolution). Even those who were once deemed to have a class-interest in revolutionizing or abolishing the present system that forces them into being one class, are no longer one class; or maybe as a class, as has been contended by Peter Sloterdijk for example, they do not have an interest to revolutionize the system if they at the same time profit from the system – even though, as is well-known, it is exactly this assumption that Marx branded as one of the most disoriented and conceptually flawed (he may thus have been simply wrong). What appears as empirical class-diversification seems to have affected the very potentiality of the concept of class and what can be anticipated or envisaged as its practical consequences. The situation is thus quite confusing and disorienting. Since certainly the class concept does demand a thorough (re-)conceptualization in times of its apparent disappearance – even if this disappearance is an illusion.

But is the very opposite not also true? Is not at least one class absolutely visible, maybe more visible than ever? Namely, the class – whatever the appropriate name might be – of the multi-billionaires, the super-rich, the new aristocracy. Their over-visibility even stands behind the assumption that today some speak of a transformation of capitalism into something like a neo-feudal order – and we take them to be so powerful that, strangely enough, many deem it convincing to involve them even in discussions about how societies will (have to) develop in the future. But what does this aristocratization, this feudalisation – if it is one – do to the overall conceptual powers of the concept of the class, as presented for example in the Marxist tradition? Are the super-rich conceptually crisis resistant? Do they represent the only class which certainly has a class-consciousness as it steers society in the direction of an even greater concentration of wealth in their few golden hands? If they seem to be “the visible hands of the market” could one not infer from this fact also the existence of the invisible hands and heads that have been and are exploited to (re)produce their absurd amounts of wealth?

One problem linked to the concept of the class in the Marxist tradition is famously linked to the distinction between the class-in-itself and the class-for-itself. This distinction generated theoretico-practical problems, to cut a long story very short, because the latter was – in the form of class-consciousness – ultimately that which provided constitutive of the class-as-one: it implied a subjectivization of objective conditions which thereby already was (potentially) transformed, since it was per-and conceived as such (namely as a shared objective condition). Thereby the concept of the class unavoidably entailed a process, or an act of subjectivization that demanded organization. No class without organization and subjectivization. This is still true for the nouveau super-super-rich.

Only when the objective conditions are perceived as shared objective conditions, the class can emerge as such, but this does not necessarily or automatically imply any emancipatory insight or potential.

But what to do against this background with emancipation? Does the concept of the class play a role in it at all? Does one need to diversify it, fluidify it? Give up the idea of the link between emancipation and class? Or it is exactly the other way round: Could one not also wager that when emancipatory struggles and struggles for liberation that have entirely different aims and highly particular motives realize that what they share is that they are all struggling with a system of oppression that thereby these singular struggles can take “struggling” as objective condition that constitutes them as a class(-for-themselves)? Such a class – the class of those who struggle for liberation – might then be the universal class (whereby those struggling for female emancipation are for example united with those who struggle for liberation from racist or sexist oppression)?

This overall picture is further complicated when we presume – and it needs to be examined if this is a convincing assumption or not – that there are classes but that there might be more than just two in which the organization principle of society is condensed. Since, what to do from this perspective with the idea of the middle class – which (in terms of a global petit bourgeoisie) has recently been identified by Alain Badiou as manifesting the very split that organizes capitalist societies, namely the split between those who own the means of production and circulation and those who do not. The middle class might have become a split middle class since it is torn between contradictory aspirations: either it becomes part of the upper class and therefore has an interest in stabilizing a system which seems impossible to stabilize or they side with those who have nothing such that a new world can emerge. And where does this leave other potentially relevant class-agents, for example the strange, dangerous or sub-classes, which – in some interpretations – have already irritated Marx (and Engels): the global Lumpenproletariat whose Italian version so much inspired and impressed Pasolini and which in its global form might stand in a still peculiar relationship to another class whose political leanings puzzled generations of Marxist (Stalin hated them, Mao sought to mobilize them): the peasants. How do these classes interact? What does all of this mean for the concept that was foundational for Marxism: class-struggle?

The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* seeks to deal with these questions from a variety of different angles. It examines the political relevance of class(es) for our times.

We hope it will begin to address topics related to the (non)existence of classes, class analysis, and class-struggle.

Dundee/Prishtina
April 2023

The New Class of Neoconservatism and the De/legitimization of American Capitalism

Matteo Battistini

Abstract: The essay presents the U.S. debate on new class as a political category that pivoted to the rise of neoconservatism, the public writing of the neoconservative discourse – particularly Daniel P. Moynihan and Irving Kristol – and their strategy aimed at attacking the scientific and political foundations of the *liberal* order of American capitalism, which between the 1960s and 1970s no longer found in the *middle class* the public word that had laid to rest the social and political conflict of the 1930s fueling the post-World War II consensus. In the neoconservative discourse, also in dialogue with neoliberalism, new class identified an "ideological enemy" that had to be disciplined in favor of capitalism, that is, educated in respect to the authority – of society and its moral foundation, the market and its hierarchies – that social movements were challenging.

Keywords: New Class, Middle Class, Neoconservatism, Liberalism, Neoliberalism, Social Sciences, Capitalism

The objective of this essay¹ is to present some outlines of the U.S. debate on the new class as a category that has pivoted to the political and cultural rise of neoconservatism. While scholarly literature has framed the new class within the semantic field of the social sciences to understand the post-industrial transformation of capitalism, it has not attracted particular attention in historiography.² Instead, it is the writer's belief that it constitutes an essential notion of neoconservatism and its dialogue with neoliberalism, particularly in the public discourse and political action of two relevant figures of the neoconservative movement: Daniel P. Moynihan – author of the famous *Report on Negro Family* that inaugurated a widespread and bitter national discussion on the welfare state – and Irving Kristol – the New York intellectual who was trained in the 1930s in the Troztskysta milieu and considered “the godfather of neoconservatism.”³ In this sense, while making reference to other important signatures of neoconservative discourse such as Norman Podhoretz and Michael Novak, the essay is not meant to be exhaustive, but is intended to provide some traces for future research.

Between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s, reference to the new class gained in frequency and polemical vehemence what it lost in scientific rigor. As Kristol wrote, the new class was not a sociological

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1 This essay is a translation of an essay previously published in Italian in the academic journal *Scienza & Politica*: <https://scienzaepolitica.unibo.it/article/view/10188>

2 Two exceptions are: Steinfels 1980, pp. 188-213; 273-294; Hartman, 2015, pp. 38-69.

3 Heilbrunn, 2008, p. 8.

issue but a political one.⁴ Indeed, in the neoconservative discourse its social composition emerged vaguely and uncertainly. It denoted university professors and teachers, or intellectuals, journalists and media workers, professionals, administrators and white-collar workers employed not only in the public but also in the private sector, up to and including all those with college degrees. From a political point of view, the reference to the new class, on the other hand, offered a polemical, precise and coherent indication. New class had strategic value in the construction and affirmation of the conservative movement because it provided a binding force that articulated the main themes of neoconservatism: the critical analysis of the welfare state that controlled the economy and redistributed income, the political battle against the watchword of equality to reaffirm hierarchies and differences on the basis of merit, the ideological emphasis on personal freedom and individual responsibility that did not, however, overflow into what Karl Polany had called "market fundamentalism," not even into a purely economic conception of the individual, but instead emphasized their moral constitution. New class thus identified an "ideological enemy" that should not be expelled from public administration and private bureaucracies but should be educated to respect the institutions of the market and the moral foundation of society, the principle of authority that social movements were challenging. In this sense, the new class was the child of what Lionel Trilling – a literary scholar and critic of the New Left – had negatively termed "adversary culture." That is, it was born out of the 1960s counterculture that sociologist Alvin Gouldner referred to positively as the "culture of critical discourse."⁵ A culture judged anti-capitalist because it weakened the work ethic, anti-democratic and elitist because of its paternalistic claim to speak on behalf of the "underclass" of minorities and the poor. In a word, an un-American culture that – as we shall see – was an expression of the ideological decline of the great middle class that had underpinned the liberal order, of its economic and social shattering into a white working class and lower middle class that had to be mobilized in a "culture war" in order to regain the "soul of America:" a civil war waged by other means through and for capitalism.⁶

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4 Kristol, 1979.

5 Trilling identified the origins of *adversary culture* in the modernist avant-garde critical of the traditional values of bourgeois society. What had been a minority anti-intellectual attitude, but that nonetheless had characterized American conservatism, with the full establishment of mass society after World War II, became a widespread threat and especially one with a nihilistic bearing, of rejection and negation of American culture. In this sense, Daniel Bell distinguished between *adversary culture of the Old Left* of the first half of the twentieth century and *counterculture of the New Left* of the 1960s and 1970s. See Trilling, 1965; Bell, 1972, pp. 11-38; Hofstadter, 1962; Gouldner, 1979.

6 Hartman, 2015; Armitage, 2017.

1. The New (Middle) Class

The scholarly literature framed the new class in a long transnational conceptual history that encompassed different currents of social and political thought: from French sociology to Italian political science that had studied elites, from anarchism and Trotskyism that had criticized the “bureaucratic” and “authoritarian” consolidation of the Soviet regime to Fabianism that had identified intellectuals and technicians as the possibility of achieving “industrial democracy” by administrative means, from German sociology on the middle class during Weimar to U.S. theories that had shed light on the presence of a “hidden technocracy” between the folds of the development of capitalism.⁷ This is not the place to delve into the scientific genealogy of a new class that, between the 1960s and 1970s, was also at the center of Marxist literature that identified in it a new intellectual proletariat or a bureaucracy to fight against.⁸ To understand the neoconservative notion of the new class, however, it has to be placed in the historical framework of the rise and fall of the middle class as the founding category of the liberal order in twentieth-century America.

Since progressivism, but especially between the 1930s and 1940s, considering the crisis of capitalism, the middle class had become an object of study among social scientists who discussed the consequences of the economic depression on white-collar labor figures: their proletarianization and union alignment with the working class, their impoverishment and their administrative function within the enterprise and the emerging New Deal welfare state. The various academic disciplines not only traced its occupational profile and consumption habits, but also surveyed its cultural, political and electoral orientation. The middle class was thus being socially and ideologically constructed within the material and symbolic horizon that the class conflict had opened up, with the aim of integrating small property with those who performed functions delegated to business management (managers, directors and planners), those within the lower ranks of office work (clerks and sales clerks) with those employed in public administration (executives, professionals and teachers) and with those who performed manual labor. The skilled and unionized worker whose high wages meant that they shared an adequate level of income, education and consumption, thus a common way of life built around the homeownership family in white suburban areas, with the male breadwinner and the woman responsible for a consumption-centered household. From this plural composition, the middle class became *unum* through the public

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7 Szelenyi - Martin, 1988, pp. 645-667; Pryor, 1981, pp. 367-379; Kellner - Heuberger, 1992; Ferrari, 2017; Borgognone, 2015.

8 Djilas, 1957; Gorz, 1967; Belleville, 1963; Mallet, 1975; Walker, 1979; Wright, 1986, pp. 114-140.

communication of a symbolic order consistent with the nation's political culture updated to New Deal liberalism. The social scientists involved in the formulation of public policy, employed in research institutes or the mass media, fueled a process of identification with the middle class that, periodically recorded in opinion surveys, culminated in the post-World War II consensus. As Daniel Bell wrote in the late 1970s, the middle class had defined a "code of behavior" or an "ideology that provided symbols of recognition" thereby normalizing society.⁹

The liberal order built politically on the "social contract" tacitly entered with the New Deal between capital, organized labor and government thus rested on the middle class.¹⁰ In the 1960s and 1970s, this order was entering a crisis. The consensus was being shredded at the hands first and foremost of the civil rights movement and black nationalism, which showed the racial boundary of a middle class custom-built on and for white America. Moreover, a new and composite social mobilization revealed how the middle class was riddled with hierarchies and divergent interests. The student movement rejected a knowledge that was functional to the industrial-military complex, the pacifist movement against the war in Vietnam showed the imperial nature of liberalism, and the feminist movement criticized the position of women in a society that, while encompassing them in increasing numbers in the labor market with occupations inferior to those of men in terms of occupations and income, relegated them as wives and mothers within the family. Finally, what business journalism called a "new breed of workers" – made up mostly of young people, not only whites, but also blacks and women, better educated and more affluent than their parents – expressed an indocile character that rejected the discipline of the Fordist factory. The "revolt against work" took place through wildcat strikes, the rejection of stipulated contracts, sabotage of production and insubordination against the very bureaucracies of the union. In this sense, in his 1971 Labor Day speech, President Richard Nixon claimed that the work ethic would be re-established through the shared commitment of government, business and the union:

Recently we have seen that work ethic come under attack... What's happening to the work ethic in America today? What's happening to the willingness for self-sacrifice that enabled us to build a great nation, to the moral code that made self-reliance a part of the American character, to the competitive spirit that made it possible for us to lead the world?¹¹

While pursuing different paths, this set of social forces converged – sometimes explicitly, mostly implicitly – in the contestation of the liberal

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⁹ Bell, 1979, pp. 144-164, 155.

¹⁰ Battistini, 2022, pp. 139-148.

¹¹ Nixon, 1971.

order of American capitalism. As Zbigniew Brzezinski admitted, it was "a middle-class rebellion against middle-class society."¹²

The middle class thus left the public scene, leaving an ideological vacuum that would be filled by the new class of neoconservatism. During the 1950s a number of critical voices – most notably Charles Wright Mills – had denounced the other-directed nature of white-collar workers. In the following decade, Alvin Gouldner enunciated the contradictions that invested a middle class torn between personal profit and collective welfare, free market and welfare state. While his sociology denounced the "public charade ... in which people act as if there were no one here except middle-class people," in Erving Goffman's diagnosis the identification with the middle class became a suspected pathology reflecting the deep economic, social and cultural rifts that marked society.¹³ Even more significant was the silence that fell on the middle class in the work of John K. Galbraith, liberal economist *par excellence* and president since 1967 of the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), the organization that had supported and staffed the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. In the late 1950s, in *The Affluent Society* (1958), Galbraith explained that economic science had failed to grasp the formation of a new class because it had been blinded by the theoretical effort to regard manual, professional and intellectual labor as work in general, thus delineating a theory of value that combined wages and profit as a function of the continuous increase in consumption. Instead, the level of education and prestige of the technical and scientific professions, rather than money, had animated an "index of prestige" that socially degraded and culturally separated "ordinary labor" from the "caste" of millions of college-educated individuals who were the bearers and performers of a "new economy" whose development was no longer measured on the consumption of goods, but rather on knowledge or rather on the enjoyment of intangible goods and services.¹⁴

This insight was developed in *The New Industrial State* (1967), where Galbraith emphasized the numerically significant presence of intellectual labor figures who, applying science to production in an increasingly "planned" way, directed private and public technical and organizational structures. While the rise of corporations had brought about – as Adolph Berle and Gardiner Means had shown in *The Modern Corporation and Private Property* (1932) – the loss of control of the enterprise by the owner of capital, the following technological

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12 Brzezinski, 1970, 88. On the middle-class racial divide after World War II, Katznelson, 2002, pp. 157-177.

13 Mills, 1951; Gouldner, 1971, pp. 101-112, 124-125, 230-231, 242-247, 439; Goffman, 1963. See Gambino, 1989, pp. 63-87.

14 Galbraith, 1958, pp. 342-343. See Machlup, 1962.

advance took the monopoly of decision-making away from the manager, assigning it to a concentric "collective body" that ranged from the board of directors to the managerial staff of corporate departments, to the involvement of a broad spectrum of specialized figures (technicians, designers, analysts) who possessed a level of "expertise and skills" indispensable to decision-making: "the location of decision moves in the direction of the body of white-collar workers." Moreover, since it made the highly skilled labor force the "decisive factor of production," the new industry required "a highly developed educational system" and its state promotion. This indispensable state action toward the enterprise, together with policies that expanded social welfare programs in the 1960s, consolidated the presence of an "educational and scientific estate" – a fifth estate that integrated the decision-making processes of the corporations and the state, supplanting the union's governing function: it was this new estate, not the unionized working class of the New Deal, that was a shareholder in the new industrial state.¹⁵

The use of the term estate was significant because it portended sinister consequences for the political tensions that arose from the propensity of educated figures – especially those with degrees in the humanities – to "minimize the role of the market and profit maximization." "The growth and influence of college and university communities are in response to the needs of the industrial system. But this does not necessarily create a primary obligation to the needs of the industrial system." Galbraith denounced that "the tendency of the mature corporation in the industrial system to become a part of the administrative complex of the state" posed "in urgent form" the problem of liberty because it sacrificed the individual and their preferences to the "social purpose" of the new estate. His political assessment, however, was uncertain: on one hand, he did not believe that the "freedom of the businessman" was in danger because he glimpsed the "subordination" of the state to the needs of business; on the other hand, after 1968 his own political role as a liberal economist was being challenged by the radicalization of social movements and the role that students, professionals and intellectuals were claiming within the ADA in support of George McGovern's presidential campaign.¹⁶

Recording the rise of the new class not only acknowledged the economic and social rifts that prevented the reproduction of the middle class, but also proclaimed its ideological decline. What sociologist Peter L. Berger – close to the neoconservative world – called the "capitalist revolution" had divided the middle class "horizontally" according

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¹⁵ Galbraith, 1967, pp. 79, 141, 268, 282-292, 370.

¹⁶ Galbraith, 1967, pp. 235, 376, 395, 397. On Galbraith's presidency of the ADA and his loss of consensus, Vaisse, 2010, pp. 48, 84-85, 90-91. McGovern's candidacy was interpreted by neoconservatives as a sign of the rise of the new class. See especially Podhoretz, 1972a, pp. 4-8.

to income and "vertically" between those who were employed in traditional industry and those who were employed in the "production and distribution of symbolic knowledge" in the world of research and public communication. In this sense, Daniel Bell, who in his study *The Coming of Post Industrial Society* (1973) had drawn on Emil Lederer's German sociology on the middle class to oppose the Marxist literature that advanced the thesis of the proletarianization of intellectual labor, admitted in 1979 that knowledge workers did not constitute a class capable of mediation, but rather embodied and nurtured the fractures brought about by the politicization of the university, communities, the factory and the family. Because they upheld the identity politics of race and gender while expressing the neoliberal vision that rejected any mediation to entrust the relationship between individual and market to "meritocracy," the new class exacerbated the racist and sexist tendencies of a white working class and lower middle class that were undergoing the entrepreneurial initiative aimed at undoing the Newdealist social contract. Within these "cultural contradictions" that invested the post-industrial transformation of society, the neoconservative discourse on the new class began.¹⁷

2. The "administrative war:" Daniel P. Moynihan and the New Class.

In 1964, David T. Bazelon – a professor of public policy at the State University of New York – published *Power in America: The Politics of the New Class*, a sociological and psychological study of the new class, its social composition into "technologist intellectuals" in the private sector and "administrative intellectuals" in the public sector, the lifestyle in large suburban areas and the frustration of those who failed to realize the social "ideal" accrued through their education. The volume triggered the neoconservative debate because it focused on the historical question of power: from the bourgeois revolution to the political rise of the new class in the twentieth century, from progressivism to the New Deal to the new Kennedy frontier, the "weapon" for the conquest of the state was no longer provided by "money-capital," but by "education-capital." Since this process was a sign that the nation's "basic faith" was moving in the direction of "values-beyond-money," the new class had the moral and political task of guiding the movement of blacks and the

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¹⁷ Berger, 1986; Bell, 1976; Bell, 1979. On the social and cultural inconsistency of the new class, see the reflections of the man who also claimed to have introduced the issue in 1941 with the volume *The Managerial Revolution*, Burnham, 1978, pp. 98-99. See J. Muravchik, 1981, pp. 150-191; Wrong, 1982. On Galbraith, Bell and the concept of the new class in the new industrial or post-industrial capitalism: King - Szelényi, 2004, ch. 7. See also Cento, 2014, pp. 103-126. On German sociology on the middle class, Battistini, 2015, pp. 123-148.

colorless poor by institutionalizing their claims to access wealth in a "new political coalition."¹⁸

What the neoconservative authors were interested in was not so much this stance outlining the political battle that would envelop the Democratic Party after the 1968 contestations, but the question raised: would this new class be at the top of a "rigidly rational hierarchy" or would it lead a new "human democracy"? Such a question identified two political perspectives that, while for the radical and socialist left remained alternatives,¹⁹ for the emerging neoconservatism were conjoined. The radicalization of the new class in the light of social movements and its potential institutionalization in the political system coincided with the danger of an antidemocratic twist in U.S. politics. Between the lines of the review to the volume published in *Commentary* emerged – as Bazelon had announced in the volume's conclusion – the fear of "moving farther into a period in which formal democracy will become ever more a cover for authoritarian bureaucratic structure." Bazelon was invited to explore this topic further in the pages of the journal. In Washington, he explained, "thousands and thousands of *educated people*" were analyzing social problems and devising programs that responded to the "common denominator of their education" namely "planning:" an organizational action that stifled the freedom of "competition." The further transfer of powers to the executive that the reforms of the 1960s brought about established a "new style of patronage" that consolidated the power of the new class. The public stage was thus being set for "the coming administrative war" – a war that would be fought especially by Daniel P. Moynihan in the columns of *The Public Interest*.²⁰

Moynihan, a Ph.D. in history and professor of political science at Syracuse University, had entered the federal government under President Kennedy. In 1965, as undersecretary of Labor, on behalf of the Office of Policy, Planning and Research he drafted the *Report on Negro Family* in which, while arguing that civil rights and voting rights legislation was not a sufficient remedy after centuries of slavery and segregation, he emphasized the responsibility of the African American family for the condition of poverty and exclusion that gripped the black community. Liberal criticism denouncing the report's racism summarized in the charge of blaming the victim marked the fundamental juncture of his political parabola, until he entered the Nixon administration.²¹

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18 Bazelon, 1964, pp. 15-21, 307-329. See also Bazelon, 1966, pp. 48-51.

19 Harrington, 1967, pp. 7-22. Cf. Harrington, 1979, pp. 123-138.

20 Bazelon, 1964, pp. 21, 329; Bazelon, 1966, pp. 52-53. In addition to Vann Woodward, 1967, pp. 93-95, see also Novak, 1972, pp. 52-62, 60; and Podhoretz, 1972b, pp. 7-8.

21 Hodgson, 2000; Katzmann, 2004; Weiner, 2015.

In *The Professionalization of Reform* (1965) Moynihan explained that the incentives in favor of technical and scientific education – the G.I. Bill of 1944 – had resulted in an extraordinary expansion of higher and college education. The social consequence was not only quantitative – about two-thirds of teenagers (the figure dropped to one-third when minorities were counted) possessed a college degree – but also, and more importantly, qualitative. In becoming tendentially universal, at least for white America, education placed in tension the institutional relationship between politics, science and the professions that, as Talcott Parsons had shown, characterized the social structure of order.²² According to Moynihan, lawyers not only ensured the constitutional right to defense in a fair trial, but also developed their own "philosophy of law" that is, their own way of administering justice. Those who were employed in public statistics processed data on wages and prices to steer "collective bargaining," and interpreted data on poverty and unemployment by depicting a "growing divide" between the poor and the middle class to direct social service planning. Similarly, doctors demanded to determine how health services should be financed, delivered and distributed among the population, while social workers claimed a voice in social legislation: they had demanded and obtained the inclusion in the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act of community organizing programs that provided for the participation of the poor, thereby strengthening ethnic communities and organizations that, according to Moynihan, fueled racial divisions and tensions. These and other scientific and intellectual labor figures classified in the federal census as professionals and technicians numbered more than nine million – well beyond the number of managers, officials and owners who made up the top of the social pyramid – and increasingly enjoyed the entitlement to plan policy. In this sense, the "war on poverty" had been proclaimed not "at the behest of the poor," but of public officials. The unprecedented expansion of social services had resulted in the emergence of a large body of professionals: a new unelected class that influenced legislative measures and developed their execution in a self-referential manner. Their interlocutor was not "organized labor" as in the New Deal, but "organized professional interests." The danger was thus posed by a "a combination of enlightenment, resources and skill which, in the long run, to use Harold D. Lasswell's phrase, becomes a Monocracy of power."²³

Here it is not relevant to highlight the biographical aspect, whereby from 1965 to 1968 Moynihan overcame liberalism to embrace the Republican administration: as executive secretary of the Council of

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22 Parsons, 1939, pp. 457-467.

23 Moynihan, 1965, pp. 6-16, 8-15. See Steinfels, 1980, pp. 108-160. Cf. Glazer, 1979, pp. 89-100.

Urban Affairs in the Nixon presidency, he drafted the Family Assistance Program, which was intended to replace welfare assistance with a guaranteed income that would empower the poor and scale back the political influence of social workers. What is rather important is the fact that the program was not approved, which led Moynihan to deepen his critique of the welfare state by raising two interrelated issues – the role of university and the function of social sciences – that allowed the neoconservative discourse to attack the scientific and political foundations of the liberal order. Between 1970 and 1972, Moynihan brought "administrative warfare" inside university as the institution that materially and ideologically reproduced the new class. In a report presented to the America Council of Education and in an article published in *The Public Interest*, he pointed the finger at the tendentially universal nature of education by combining the neoliberal argument of the school's economic crisis – for which greater investment in wages and resources would not lead to greater productivity – with polemical reference to the new class: its "growing politicization" in university and schools fed an "adversary culture" that reproduced "revolutionary appetites."²⁴ . To counter them, the political function of the social sciences needed to be changed. As was evident in his analysis of Johnsonian policies and his proposal for guaranteed income – *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War of Poverty* (1969) and *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income* (1973) – experts employed in public administration would have to abandon scientist optimism and technocratic enthusiasm and embrace a limited – skeptical and realist – conception of social science: this was not to determine the content of policies, but was to be limited to the measurement and evaluation of the outcome. The social scientist was, in other words, to become a "policy professional," no longer the architect of society, but the arbiter of a policy aware of the limitation that state action encountered on the threshold of society (and the market) where individuals acted responsibly, but also obscurely and unpredictably. In this sense, the Irish-born Catholic and neoconservatism recovered the moral imperative of the German-born Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr against the "moralism" that marked the social – but elitist – idealism of the new class: *Beware of the Children of Light!*²⁵

Moynihan was not nurturing the anti-intellectualist sentiment characteristic of the U.S. conservative tradition and the "new right" heir to McCarthyism. He would depart from it again in the 1990s when, criticizing President Clinton's proposed health care reform as a Democratic senator, he denounced it as an expression of the

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24 Moynihan, 1975, pp. 288-290; Moynihan, 1972, pp. 69-89, 83-84.

25 Novak, 1972, pp. 52-62, 61.

"professional monocracy."²⁶ Although this anti-intellectualist sentiment was fomented against the "snobbery and self-righteousness," the "moral superiority" and "indignation" that intellectuals and writers – such as Philip Roth, the "New-Class writer *par excellence*" – expressed against white America's racism, militarism and consumerism, the polemical reference to the new class had a different target.²⁷ The neoconservative discourse was not generically against the elite, but against elites radicalized by social movements. Nor did it allude implicitly to the extension of democratic participation. As much as it was strategically aimed at the white working class and lower middle class, thus contributing to the electoral rise of the *Middle American Radicals* and the establishment of the new Republican majority,²⁸ it was pronounced by the mouth of a part of the new class itself. The goal was thus more ambitious because it aimed at the conversion of the new class, that is, the cultural predominance within it of professionals committed to what Moynihan called the "politics of stability:" a politics of professionals against the social disorder that was "polarizing and fracturing American society" to the point of pushing it to the "onset of terrorism." A politics to be implemented first and foremost by limiting the field of initiative won on the institutional ground by the social sciences of liberalism and "getting private business involved in domestic programs in a much more systematic, purposeful manner."²⁹

3. The "civil war" for the New Class: Irving Kristol's Militant Capitalism.

Moynihan thus intended to restore the stability of the social order by recomposing through institutional and administrative means the tensions that marked the historical relationship between politics, social sciences and professions shaken by the rise of the new class to power. In this sense, his focus was primarily on the state and its administration. Irving Kristol, on the other hand, looked at society by focusing his thinking on the crisis of legitimacy of capitalism. Both were, however, engaged in a war within the new class and for a "new" new class. While the former extolled "policy professionals" so that the state would favor a

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26 Moynihan, 1995, pp. 23-41, 40. On the anti-intellectualism of the American Right, Hofstadter, 1964.

27 Novak, 1972; Podhoretz, 1972b, pp. 6-8. On the art and literature of the new class: Podhoretz, 1979, pp. 19-31.

28 The *Middle American Radical* identifies white working class and lower middle class figures whose incomes were lower middle class, who did not have a college degree and who shared a negative attitude against blacks and the poor. Warren, 1976.

29 Moynihan, 1967, pp. 190, 194.

renewed prominence of business, the latter focused the neoconservative discourse on the new class toward a broader spectrum of figures. The new class acted not only in the public administration, universities and schools, but also in the press and mass communication where they acted as "symbol specialists" who were by no means strangers to "totalitarian temptations" as Harold Lasswell and Daniel Lerner had shown in their study of elites, even within the ranks of the business world, where those who were concerned about being accused of undermining the welfare of labor and thus of the nation believed they had a "social responsibility."³⁰ The conversion of the new class was thus not to be exclusively political – within the state – but also social. Since the contestation of capitalism was born in society, order had to be restored from within the social relationship: the "administrative war" was in this sense to become a "civil war" to be waged through and for business.

In the first half of the 1970s, in a series of articles published in *The Public Interest*, a journal he founded with Bell in 1965, Kristol addressed the "so precarious" condition of capitalism. The voice of "youthful rebels" was not to be considered "inarticulate" as "sociological and psychological theories" did. Although it appeared to be the result of "lunatic fringe" and resulted in "nonsense," its political meaning was "clear enough:" the rejection of the "offer of citizenship" that was being proposed by the reforms and aversion to "liberal, individualist and capitalist civilization." The "youthful rebels" were therefore not to be regarded as "lunatic." Nor was it useful to explain to them how many steps forward had been taken for "racial equality " and "abolishing poverty." The classic progress argument, with its promise of the fulfillment of the American ideal, was unserviceable because what was being challenged was not America's "failure" to realize itself, but rather America as an "ideal" was being rejected. Similarly, the "technocratic ethic" that legitimizes capitalism on the basis of its "performance" in terms of "economic growth," "managerial efficiency" and "technological innovation" was not only ineffective, but was to be counted among the causes of the weakening of the "bourgeois ethic" of work and responsibility: the institutions of "bureaucratized society" were "impersonal," that is, they had lost "their vital connection with the values which are supposed to govern the private lives of our citizenry. They no longer exemplify these values, they no longer magnify them; they no longer reassuringly sustain them." The crisis of capitalism was thus not measurable economically, coinciding instead with the loss of the values of diligence, rectitude and sobriety.³¹

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30 Lasswell - Lerner, 1965; Kirkpatrick, 1979, pp. 33-48. Republican journalist Kevin P. Phillips talked about mediocracy: Phillips, 1975. On the social responsibility of business, Riesman, 1964, pp. 300-308. For a neoliberal critique: Friedman, 1970, pp. 122-126.

31 Kristol, 1970, pp. 3-4, 8-11, 13; Kristol, 1975a, pp. 124-125.

On this moral basis Kristol initiated the dialogue with neoliberalism. Although he considered Hayek – and his *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960) – "the most intelligent defender of capitalism," he believed that as much as it was a "superb economic mechanism," the free market was "not self-justifying." Even the reference to "personal freedom" ended up being a "kind of scholasticism" that ended in a "dogmatic attachment" that was not matched by the "common man." In his view, freedom constituted a concept that was both subtle and complex, whose meaning was inseparable from its moral and religious content. Since the "decline in religion" and the secularization brought about by mass scientific education had thinned out the ethical dimension that had historically legitimized capitalism, its defense could not take place "in purely amoral terms."³²

This was the political sense of his speech at the twenty-fifth anniversary meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society (1972), where Kristol acknowledged that neoliberalism had won the economic battle against collectivism and planning but felt that capitalism still did not enjoy full cultural and political vindication because of the "spiritual expropriated ... masses of citizenry." If religion was being confined to the private sphere, if traditional "moral philosophy" was being annihilated by utilitarianism and market hedonism, if nationalism was being challenged in its function of "political obligation" by the multinational character that corporations were assuming, then capitalism's ethical sources of legitimacy were exhausted. Therefore, business had to take charge of the "moral" reconstruction of society. It could not regard counterculture as *business as usual*, commodification opportunities to revive consumption and profit. Instead, it had to educate and integrate into its ranks a new class that, precisely because it had grown up and matured in the counterculture of movements, expressed an "anti-capitalist spirit" and an "anti-democratic culture" that nurtured "a reactionary revulsion against modernity" that is, against "economic man."³³

Placed in the historical framework of the legitimization of capitalism, the "civil war" for a "new" new class was fought first and foremost against the watchwords of equality, participation and liberation that the movements had imposed on society and that the new class claimed to institutionalize. In *About Equality* (1972), Kristol accused economists and sociologists of accepting without question the thesis that John Rawls had presented in his *Theory of Justice* (1971), that is, of accepting the principle that a social order is legitimate only by minimizing inequality, without clarifying what equality consisted of, how much income redistribution it should correspond to, without

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32 Kristol, 1978, pp. 139-140; Kristol, 1971, p. 105; Kristol, 1970, pp. 7-8. On secularization and the new class, Berger, 1970, pp. 49-55. On the moral foundations of capitalism see also Novak, 1982.

33 Kristol, 1973, pp. 3-13. See also Kristol, 1979; pp. 23-24.

considering the incontrovertible fact that – as Seymour M. Lipset had shown – American society had already become more egalitarian. The accusation was of uncritically using "pseudo statistics" that described an "oligarchy of the rich." These "paranoid fantasies" were an expression of a large class of college graduates and students, scientists and teachers, psychologists and social workers, doctors and lawyers, administrators and public servants, who looked at society in a profoundly critical way, taking an "adversarial stance." The new class was engaged in a "class struggle with the business community:" as it translated the demands for equality, participation and liberation emanating from society into "a demand for authority" and "lust for power," the student and black movement, as well as the young and black working class, made increasingly radical and militant demands. Faced with the danger that different movement experiences might converge under the "banner of equality," faced with the fear that the new class might provide an institutional channel for expression, it was necessary to pursue a "complete reversal of popular opinion" by leveraging the "bourgeois ethic" and resistance to radicalism that instead characterized the skilled and unionized figures of white working-class labor and the lower spheres of white-collar work. The reference was not exclusively to the nascent tax rebellion against a tax levy considered oppressive because it served to fund welfare policies toward blacks and the poor. Reversing popular opinion involved leading a cultural revolt that could activate the ethical sources of legitimacy of capitalism.³⁴

This goal came into focus in the second half of the decade, despite the fact that the defeat of the New Politics Democrats in the 1972 presidential election showed the growing disconnect between the new class and the working class. With reference to the price and wage control policies of the Nixon administration, although he had publicly supported his re-election,³⁵ Kristol denounced how new class figures employed in the public sector carried out a "hidden agenda" for an economic system "so stringently regulated" that "the basic economic decisions are being removed from the marketplace." He also pointed the finger at the "gradual usurpation of managerial authority" by underlining the responsibility of the corporations themselves. When the Committee on Economic Development – an organization of business executives formed in 1942 to guide the war economy under the Newdealist social contract – declared that it was the manager's job to balance "the interest of many diverse participants and constituents in the enterprise ... employees, customers, suppliers, stockholders, government," it showed that corporations were no longer acting as "private property" but as

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34 Kristol, 1972a, pp. 41-47. See also Kristol, 1974, pp. 6-7, 27-28; Kristol, 1972b, pp. 3-11; Kristol, 1970, pp. 11-14. See Weaver, 1978, pp. 45-62; Bartley, 1979, pp. 57-66.

35 Display Ad 182, 1972.

"quasi-public institutions." Because this subordination of business to the state threatened American democracy and individual freedom, business was called to act on the front lines to overthrow the social – and institutional – relationship with the new class in its favor. It was time for capitalism to become militant.³⁶

This call for militancy was launched in the pages of the American capitalist newspaper *par excellence*, the *Wall Street Journal*, which on May 19, 1975, published a brief but incisive article giving the question of the power of the new class a hitherto unprecedented public resonance. In *Business and the "new class,"* Kristol denounced the bitter "climate of hostility" toward business that hovered in the Washington government, in the news and communications organs, and in the universities. A climate caused by the formation of a "generation of young people" who, because of the education they received, were unfamiliar with the world of work and fantasized about a world without work. A climate fueled by the "average college professor" – of history, sociology, literature, political science, even economics – who preferred "fantasy over reality:" the fantasy of the pharmaceutical industry denying cures, of multinational corporations making American foreign policy, of business enthusiastically welcoming the depression because it created a reserve army from which to recruit "more docile workers." These were some of the fantasies of a new class that Kristol nevertheless judged "indispensable" in post-industrial society, albeit "disproportionately powerful," both "ambitious" and "frustrated." For this, it was not enough – no matter how necessary – to appeal to the "individual freedom" of Americans and their "profound distrust" of government. Since the new class intended to mobilize society through the issues of environmentalism, consumer protection and planning by empowering the government to "politicize the economic decision-making process," its "assimilation" had to be initiated. This was the long and burdensome *business* that awaited capitalism: an "immense educational task" that primarily involved the re-education of the "business community" and its managers, an even more arduous task that saw the militant Kristol personally engaged in.³⁷

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36 Kristol, 1975b, pp. 124-141, 134-139.

37 Kristol, 1975c, reprinted in Kristol, 1978, pp. 25-31. On the radical or moderate orientation of university docents, there were several conclusions of research conducted by authors more or less close to the neoconservative *milieu*, see Lipset, 1979, pp. 67-87; Ladd - Lipset, 1975; Ladd, 1976-1977, pp. 577-600.

4. A Capitalist Manifesto.

The *idéologue* role Kristol played at the American Enterprise Institute, contributing to its emergence as the leading neoconservative think tank, or in the Collegiate Network project that funded independent newspapers on college campuses, scholarships and internships in leading national newspapers, was an integral part of the communicative strategy that the neoconservative intellectual *milieu* put in place first and foremost to re-educate business. In 1978, William E. Simon – secretary of the Treasury in the Nixon and Ford administrations, and founder with Kristol of the Collegiate Network – published *A Time For Truth*, a pamphlet in which he denounced the responsibilities of business executives and managers who, from the New Deal onward, had renounced the ideal of "free enterprise" by adapting their economic action to the philosophy of "planning" of the new class. Against this, the "business community" was supposed to initiate public education projects through the mass media, funding universities that agreed on teaching and research contents, investing money in institutional advertising, i.e., advertisements that advertised not commodities but corporate values. The "massive and unprecedented mobilization of the moral, intellectual and financial resources" would lead to the formation of a "counter-intelligentsia" capable of undermining the "ideological monopoly" of the new class.³⁸ In the same year, on behalf of the American Enterprise Institute, Michael Novak published *The American Vision*, in which he presented the vision of a "class struggle" that business could no longer conduct exclusively on the terrain of production, but also on the public, scientific and cultural stage imposed by the new ruling class. In this sense, executives and managers were to equip businesses not only with an in-house team of scholars but also with an external "network of sympathetic intellectual workers," to be entrusted with the corporate task of elaborating and disseminating a public discourse that rejected the ideological "accusations" of "alienation" and "other-directedness" of society, in order to propose an alternative "worldview" that would reclaim from the spirit of business the value of associationism and cooperation, that of social mobility and equality of opportunity. This was the "manifesto of capitalism" called to renew the "manifest destiny" of liberal civilization that America had embodied.³⁹

Although one cannot attribute the cultural and political counteroffensive of business against the labor movement and social movements exclusively to neoconservatism and its dialogue

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38 Simon, 1978, pp. 195-198, 223-234.

39 Novak, 1978, pp. 14, 19-59. On Kristol's role in the ranks of business, Steinfels, 1980, pp. 81-107; Binder - Wood, 2013, pp. 107-108; Micklethwait - Wooldridge, 2004, pp. 63-93; Halper - Clarke, 2004, pp. 40-74; McAdams, 2015, pp. 1-27.

with neoliberalism, nevertheless its impact was significant: in the publication of volumes and essays, in the funding of advertising and media campaigns, in activating close collaboration between business, universities and private foundations, in general in the public effort that executives and managers made to influence values and ideals of the new class. In the second half of the 1970s, Mobil Oil funded the Hudson Institute to publish a series of position papers against public regulatory policies, the International Telephone and Telegraph allocated funds for the publication of volumes on the American economy, including the Bruce-Briggs edited volume on *America's Educated Elite*. Between 1975 and 1976, corporations allocated some \$240 million to "institutional advertising," not aimed at advertising consumer goods. In the same years, *Chairs of Free Enterprise* were established at many universities including Cornell, Columbia and Wisconsin. In 1978, the Council for Financial Aid to Education estimated that there were about a hundred programs linking corporations to colleges: the Association of Private Enterprise Education was founded with the aim of fostering their development. In this sense, while not without precedent because it had its roots in the business opposition to the New Deal and the *boulwarism* of the 1950s,⁴⁰ nevertheless the renewed militancy of business in the late 1970s took on an unprecedented systemic character, organized around the dual social and political goal indicated by neoconservatism: to bind the new class to the society of capitalism and to transform "policy professionals" into public agents of capital. The economic, social and cultural activism of business practically negated the theoretical and political assumptions of social scientists and intellectuals – such as Gouldner – who at the end of the decade still believed that, despite its elitist character, the new class constituted the "the most progressive force in modern society" and was "a center of whatever human emancipation ... possible in the foreseeable future." In *World Economic Development* (1979), outlining the new global coordinates of American capitalism, Herman Kahn, founder of the Hudson Institute (1961), recorded in this sense a first fundamental cultural and political shift in this direction: the new class no longer appeared "lunatic," but positively market oriented. While in the second half of the 1960s at least part of the "business community" had underestimated the delegitimization of capitalism, during the 1970s neoconservatism became popular among executives and managers who in the political category – and in the political discourse – of the new class found a fundamental tool for analysis and action. As the economist and scholar of business ethics, David Vogel, wrote in an article, significantly titled *Clear as Kristol*,

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40 Named after General Electric's personnel director Lemuel L. Boulware, who in the 1950s implemented a company policy aimed at eroding the union's grip on workers. Cf. Fasce, 2011, pp. 171-184, 182; Phillips-Fein, 2009; Waterhouse, 2014; Winkler, 2018.

Business's "New Class" Struggle (1979), the "new class doctrine" was succeeding because it made business aware that it was once again possible to combine business interest and public interest, that is, to reconcile capitalism, state and society through an – administrative and cultural – civil war against the new class and for a "new" *new class*. American capitalism had thus on one hand found the *villain* against whom to unify white America in order to reassert its supremacy in a society fractured along class, race and sex lines, and on the other hand the historical subject to whom to entrust – once educated in the moral, as well as economic, value of the market – the political and scientific direction of the American state in the globalization of the last quarter of the last century. In October 1982, the new president of the National Association of Manufacturers, James B. Henderson, could thus proclaim without fear of contradiction that business had returned to exercising legitimate social and political authority in academia, government and unions.⁴¹

In conclusion, the historical features of the new class debate we have traced show not only the ideological decline of the middle class, the impossibility for the democratic New Politics of the 1970s to rethink it as the subject that had sustained the post-World War II liberal order. Kristol considered the middle-class identification of the "vast majority" of Americans – and especially blue-collar labor – as an "artifact" issue, unmasked by the rise of the new class to power. Neoconservatism deprived the "new middle class" of the social sciences of liberalism of the consensual "middle" reference to denote an elite that, although culturally opposed to white America, was assimilated into capitalism through a "public philosophy" that restored the market to its ethical foundation. Neoconservatism and neoliberalism became hegemonic in this sense because of their dialogue.⁴²

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41 Vogel, 1979, pp. 625-628; Gouldner, 1979, p. 83; Bruce-Briggs, 1979, p. 923; Kahn, 1979, pp. 140-177. See also Davison Hunter - Fessenden, 1992, pp. 157-188. On Henderson see Cartosio, 1998, pp. 50-51, 113.

42 Kristol, 1979, p. 24; Kristol, 1971, p. 105.

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**The Class Politics
of Abolition:
Police, Property,
and the Racial
Politics of
Communism**

Ashley Bohrer

Abstract: This paper explores the myriad ways in which we should think about abolition of police and prisons as anti-capitalist politics. In order to do so, I argue that it is vital to clarify how forms of oppression like white supremacy, coloniality, and heterosexism are central to the development and reproduction of capitalism, and how police in particular hold a crucial role in ensuring this reproduction. I thus argue that the cop-capital conjunction is a central terrain of contemporary class struggle, one that can open up new ways of engaging the promise of abolition. I thus argue that we must reconceive of what capitalism is and how it operates in order to see, how, in Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s words, abolition is “small c communism without a party.”¹

Keywords: capitalism, police, abolition, communism, class struggle, race, white supremacy

On May 28, 2020, a building on the corner of Lake and Minnehaha burned to the ground, and as it did, a previously ultraleft social movement was catapulted to the center of a national and international debate. The building was the Third Precinct of the Minneapolis Police Department and before the embers of the station were extinguished, the word ‘abolition’ buzzed around the United States and the world like never before.

This upsurge in political struggle did not occur at a workplace (or at least, the protesters weren’t at *their* workplace). Their demands centered around racial justice rather than capitalism, impoverishment, jobs, or any explicitly ‘economic’ considerations. Nonetheless, this paper argues, the protesters in Minneapolis were engaging in anti-capitalist politics, precisely because abolition is an anti-capitalist demand.

This paper explores the myriad ways in which we should think about abolition of police and prisons as anti-capitalist politics. In order to do so, I argue that it is vital to clarify how forms of oppression like white supremacy, coloniality, and heterosexism are central to the development and reproduction of capitalism, and how police in particular hold a crucial role in ensuring this reproduction. I thus argue that the cop-capital conjunction is a central terrain of contemporary class struggle, one that can open up new ways of engaging the promise of abolition. I thus argue that we must reconceive of what capitalism is and how it operates in order to see, how, in Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s words, abolition is “small c communism without a party.”²

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1 Gilmore, “Abolition on Stolen Land.”

2 Gilmore.

Section One: Capitalism in and beyond the Productive Realm

As I have argued elsewhere, a full analysis of capitalism requires more than an economic analysis. Capitalism is, after all, a living social system of diverse and heterogeneous social relations, one in which it is not only value that is produced, but also, fundamentally, life, violence, oppression, and death. While more functionalist analyses tend to reduce all production under capitalism to a neat and automatic output of the economic logic of valorization, sensitive understandings of the capitalist world as it really is have rejected this formalism for quite a long time.

The problem with such analyses is that they, in a certain sense, give capitalist ideology too much credit. While capitalist ideology tells us we are self-contained, autonomous, rational beings who make decisions to maximize our material possessions, actual human beings making actual decisions are rarely so straightforward. And even the capitalist class often makes decisions even an economist or neoliberal strategist would deem illogical. In short, while the logic of valorization is one of the central determinants of capitalist interest, capitalism as a historically unfolding set of social relations responds to several imperatives, often in “uneven and combined” rather than univocal and homogeneous ways.

For this reason, the most comprehensive and compelling analyses of capitalism are those that can render this complicated and contradictory web of social relations. Vibrant traditions of queer, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial Marxisms have precisely taken this insight as their point of departure, that capitalism has not only been involved in “the production of difference”³ (in addition to the production of surplus value), but that *all good class analysis must simultaneously include analyses of race, gender, sexuality, and geopolitics*. Capitalism is, to use a phrase from Jason Moore, involved in the production of “the web of life,”⁴ and five hundred years of capitalism have produced life as highly differentiated in its valuation. In order to produce and reproduce differential valuations of life, capitalism depends not only on exploitation, but on multiple, intersecting logics of oppression. In a real, material, and strategic sense, part of the reason that capitalism is reproducible has to do with the ways in which exploited people are disadvantaged or often barred altogether from the various institutions of social and political power that might otherwise serve the interests of the working classes. In this sense, it is because of decreasing access to institutions, resources, power, and modes of contestation that the capitalist class can continue to maintain and reproduce relations of exploitation over time. This is why, for example, exploited groups are systematically denied access

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3 Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History*.

4 Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

to healthcare, education, political power, influence over the media, and generally to decision-making power and authority over everything from legislative policy to decisions over the distribution of social resources to the production of academic knowledge. But these relations of exploitation and oppression feed off and play into one another as mutually reinforcing and co-constituting aspects of the organization of capitalist society. In this way, both oppression and exploitation are fundamentally material categories that refer to the ways in which resources, opportunities, and institutions structure the possibilities of life. As Cinzia Arruzza explains, “To try to explain what capitalist society is only in terms of surplus-value extraction is like trying to explain the anatomy of the human body by explaining only how the heart works.”⁵

I have argued that taking oppression seriously requires expanding our understanding of what capitalism is and how it functions. If we are to move beyond class reductionist (or even an exploitation-reductionist) account of capitalism, we need to take capitalist social relations, in all of their determinations, seriously. For that reason, I have argued that we must take *both* exploitation *and* oppression as equally (or ‘equi-primordially’) central to the unfolding of capitalism.⁶ In the words of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it.”⁷ What this implies for an analysis of capitalism is not only expanding our analytic lens of how we understand capitalism and class politics, but also what kinds of struggles we understand as anti-capitalist and working toward the total liberation we all deserve. Doing so means not jettisoning the workplace as a site of struggle, but being able to see a wide variety of non-production sites as organizing imperatives for anti-capitalism and to see a wide variety of political uprisings beyond the workplace as part and parcel of anti-capitalist resistance.

In what follows, I argue that part of the reason police abolition is so critical to anti-capitalist resistance is that it is an institution committed to the reproduction of both the exploitation and the oppression that ground capitalist societal reproduction. As such, policing has both ‘production side’ effects and non-production side effects. Throughout the vast literature on police abolition, it has often been Marxists who offer the most helpful, incisive critiques of ‘production side’ policing; by contrast, feminism, queer theory, Black studies, and decolonial analysis has explored the ways that police are involved in stabilizing more general relations of social dominations, relations that, as we have just seen above, are no less crucial for capitalism’s societal reproduction. Bringing

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5 Arruzza, “Remarks on Gender.”

6 Bohrer, *Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Class Gender, and Sexuality under Contemporary Capitalism*.

7 Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence.”

insights from these various threads together we can see how policing is structurally necessary to capitalism, and hence, why police abolition is a central element in the struggle against capitalist domination.

Section Two: The Dual Function of Police under Capitalism

The police are integral mechanism of class society, and Marxist critiques of the police have exposed, with clarity and richness, how capitalism depends on these armed agents of the state in order to extract the surplus value that propels the valorization of value.

One of the key functions of police in class society is the maintenance and defense of private property. Private property in the means of production is, of course, so central to the fundamental operations of capitalism that collective ownership and control of the means of production is one of the classical definitions of communism. It should thus come as no surprise that the defense and protection of private property *as private* is the main thread running through many if not most Marxist critiques of the police as an institution, of which there are several strands and variations. Of course, most obviously, the police respond to, or indeed coercively 'predict' property crimes in the interest of the ruling class.

Just as police must uphold the regime of private property, they must also therefore prevent and contain challenges to this order, especially in some of its most potent forms: strikes and social movements. Marxist histories of policing tend to specifically highlight the role of police as strike breakers⁸; since the power of strikes lay in their capacity to disrupt production/distribution and therefore the entire process of production and circulation, the capitalist class has an obvious interest in eliminating this threat. Moreover, the role of police in disrupting protests and radical social movements is also central to its function as one of the central 'means of repression'⁹ capitalism uses to stabilize the regime of accumulation. This is why we see movements disrupted, organizations infiltrated, and activists surveilled and harassed with such fervor – for capitalism to continue, there must be a concerted and coordinated attack on the possibility that the world could be constituted otherwise.

But as we know, a large part of contemporary policing happens well beyond the areas of production, private property, and criminalizing dissent. Police attempt to secure the order of material inequality produced in and through class society. In his astute analysis, Mark

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8 Maher, *A World Without Police*; Vitale, *The End of Policing*.

9 Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*.

Neocleous highlights that one of the key functions of police is the stabilization of social order.¹⁰ Here, we can see how the law and order elements of policing function to support capitalism. At its core, capitalism requires a stabilized hierarchy in which some prosper and some starve; it is this hierarchical order that police are called in to solidify. In this sense, when policing takes on so-called 'lifestyle crimes' as their target or 'broken windows' as their strategy, they are stabilizing the social relations of inequality necessary to maintain the illusion of capitalism's normalcy and naturalness.

Neocleous' analysis, as prescient as it is, focuses on the social order of class domination but does so within Europe and largely absent of any consideration of the racial and gendered constitution of the working class; in this sense, the specifics of his analysis are quite sharply limited for understanding how policing unfolded historically and how it continues to function inside contemporary capitalism. What I would like to highlight here is his understanding that policing is invested in the constitution of an *order* and the maintenance of that order through oppression; fundamentally, his analysis argues that capitalism is sustained through class-based exploitation in the workplace (without any mention of gender-based exploitation in the home!) and stabilized through class-based oppression everywhere else. We know, however, that the social hierarchy generated by capitalism is not only class-based; it is constitutively raced, gendered, and sexualized, as well as marked by dynamics of coloniality and ableism. A large part of both the history and the present of policing takes aim at stabilizing these elements of capitalist social relations as well. We can only understand the intensity of the racial violence perpetrated by policing or the pervasiveness of gendered police violence (like rape-by-cop) if we understand that the *order* of 'law and order' refers to a set of hierarchical social relations that designate some (white, straight, cis, male, able, bourgeois) life as worth defending, and all other forms of life as subordinate and therefore only selectively worthy of defense. Policing under capitalism is thus best conceptualized when we understand its dual character in protecting the property/production/exploitation triad and in reinforcing a broader social logic of oppression.

Section Three: Policing Beyond Production from Chattel Slavery to the Third Precinct

One of the most profound insights of the tradition of racial capitalism and settler colonial studies is the centrality of the reconfiguration of the Atlantic World to the rise of capitalism as the hegemonic global system. In particular, the rise of transatlantic chattel slavery and the

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¹⁰ Neocleous, *The Fabrication of Social Order: A Critical Theory of Police Power*.

dispossession of Indigenous peoples of the Americas were necessary historical movements to capitalism in more ways than one. To illustrate this, focusing only for one moment on the element of property so central to Marxist accounts of policing, we can see a very specific racial dynamic unfold. As Rinaldo Walcott contends, the racial politics of the rise of capitalism depended on turning human beings *into* property, as ‘goods’ traded on a commodities market, but also as *means of production directly*¹¹; if Black human beings are transmogrified into property, the dynamics of policing ‘private property’ relations take on very specific racialized dynamics. It is, of course, a racialized system of subordination, dehumanization, and reification that police are reproducing when they emerge in the context of racialized chattel slavery,¹² as they did in the United States.¹³

The racial dimension of policing has been consistent throughout the history of capitalism. As chattel slavery was abolished across the Americas, the racial character of capitalism was transformed rather than abolished. In some places, newly emancipated Black people become either exploited workers (through the wage or through unwaged social reproduction) or they became the ‘reserve army of labor’, policed heavily through the imposition of new vagrancy statutes, semi-bonded labor practices, and a variety of limitations of physical and social mobility that Saidiya Hartman has called “the afterlives of slavery.”¹⁴ Across the Americas, the racial dynamics of this afterlife are evident in every country; throughout the world, we see labor continue to be a highly racialized terrain under capitalism with Black people in particular and people of color more generally subjected to higher rates of exploitation,

11 Walcott, *On Property: Policing, Prisons, and the Call for Abolition*.

12 Kappeler, “A Brief History of Slavery and the Origins of American Policing”; Brucato, “Fabricating the Color Line in a White Democracy: From Slave Catchers to Petty Sovereigns.”

13 In exploring the historical weight of this argument, I have sometimes received pushback (usually from Brits and Europeans) about the America-centricity of this element of policing. The context of my own reading, writing, organizing, and thinking on this issue is doubtlessly influenced by my own embedded location in the United States, and I do agree that US-centricity in global academic knowledge production is an element to be critiqued and resisted. However, I disagree with critics that the analysis offered here *only* holds weight for the United States for several reasons. In the first place, the regime of transatlantic chattel slavery was not begun in the US, nor did the US monopolize it. It is important to remember that the earliest slave patrols in what is now the United States were organized in the early 1700s in the Carolinas and Virginia, when these were still British colonies. The practice of fugitive slave policing had spread to all Thirteen Colonies before the American Revolutionary War, and hence was the most widespread geographically when the US was British. This practice in the Thirteen Colonies was also imported from European colonies – British, French, and Spanish – in the West Indies. Thus, the emergence of police through slave patrols *is European history*, even if a disavowed European history, and it is a violent principle of disavowal to refuse to reckon with this element *as European*. Moreover, European police histories are themselves also distinctly racialized inside the boundaries of the metropole and in their non-American colonial holdings, especially in Ireland and India, where the circuits of colonial soldiers and police chiefs is blatant.

14 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

higher rates of unemployment, exploitative racial-gendered dynamics of social reproduction, labor market segmentations in racial/ethnic divisions of labor, discriminatory practices in every part of the labor market, and disproportionate concentration into precarity, informality, and black market industries. All of this occurs inside a system in which the ruling class is also quite racially distinct: a largely white bourgeoisie owns the means of production and inheritance (one key pillar in capitalist societal reproduction) is racially patterned. This is why Cheryl Harris refers to ‘whiteness as property’¹⁵ – a concrete set of advantages that, under capitalism, function like property.

The violences of slavery obviously are not nearly conceptualized, let alone exhausted, by the analytic of forced labor – nor are any of the other systems of oppression that are central to capitalist societal reproduction. The violence of being conceptualized as or treated as private property under capitalism is not a mere category error, and this is where many Black studies and Atlantic studies become skeptical of a Marxist analysis of racism that can only see and understand the violence of the productive relation, meaning the violence of exploitation (or superexploitation). Of course, slavery, for example, was in some ways very much about the theft of labor, but what all of these thinkers are trying to get at is that the regime of racial terror, attempted dehumanization, transnational dislocation, natal alienation, sexual violence, impressment into a regime committed to the death of oneself and one’s kin – none of this is really captured by the Orthodox Marxist reduction of slavery to the exploitation of labor. These aspects can only be captured by a sensitive, multi-level, differential analysis of oppression that goes hand in hand with, but is fundamentally irreducible to, exploitation. Thinking about the centrality of oppression to capitalism beyond the productive sphere can help us more deeply conceptualize capitalism, on the one hand, and to see the full extent of capitalism’s reliance on policing, on the other.

Jackie Wang is one theorist who looks at the racial elements of policing in just such a way. Taking her point of departure from the preeminent theorists of the Black Panther Party, Wang argues that in order to take adequate stock of the capital-carceral relation, we would need to think beyond production, beyond work, and beyond exploitation. For her, while in traditional Marxist analysis, the capital-labor relation is predominant, the increasing prominence of the lumpenproletariat opens up space to think about other important, even structural, commitments of capitalism. BPP theorists like George Jackson saw the rising tide of automation as potentially lumpenizing us all; Wang argues that this means that the revolutionary strategy of anti-capitalism should not be, as more traditional Marxists argue, that workers seize control of the

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¹⁵ Harris, “Whiteness as Property.”

means of production, but rather the “destruction of the protective and productive forces”¹⁶ – making an anti-work and anti-production argument for the shape of class struggle that centers the social location of Black people under mid-century capitalism. We can begin to see here how an analysis that sees capitalism not only in the labor/production/class triad, but beyond production, in the realms of a racialized lumpenproletariat whose predominant experience of capitalism is through oppression, can expand the terrain of anti-capitalist analysis and struggle.

In her own attempt to render the racial logics of policing under capitalism, Jackie Wang attempts to bring together racial capitalism and Afropessimism, two historically antagonistic frames of analysis, to recenter an analysis of capitalism beyond production. Speaking of the oft-presumed incompatibility of these frameworks, Wang comments: “Perhaps what is at stake in their disagreement is the question of whether black racialization proceeds by way of a logic of *disposability* or a logic of *exploitability*.”¹⁷ And the way that Wang combines these is that, simply, it’s both. While I am in general agreement with Wang’s suggestion here, she does not explore how or why disposability and exploitability might be combinable in such a way. We can, however, understand and give an account of this ‘both’ if we center an analysis of capitalism based in the dialectical relationship between exploitation and oppression; it is because disposability and exploitability are themselves not counterposed, but interarticulated. As explored above, exploitation necessarily entails other logics of oppression in order to both sustain and societally reproduce itself. One of these logics of oppression is disposability (and there are many others – rapeability, dispossession are some others). These logics of oppression are necessary in order to sustain a system in which some are seen as worthy of life, protection from violence, and access to basic necessities, and in which others are seen as unworthy of these elements; it is this unworthiness that provides the grammar of exploitation’s acceptability. Hence, oppression is not an after-effect or an epiphenomenon of a prior or undergirding logic of exploitation, but these two are rather dialectically related and mutually constituted.

Wang’s archive and Jackson’s analysis are just two examples of how class struggle and anti-capitalist theorizing could be transformed by centering the relationship between exploitation and oppression, not only in the realm of policing, but in all areas of anti-capitalist praxis. As Glen Sean Coulthard explains, decentering the productive realm can also help clarify the relationship between capitalism and settler colonialism: “the history and experience of dispossession, not proletarianization, has

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¹⁶ Wang, *Carceral Capitalism*, 61.

¹⁷ Wang, 87.

been the dominant” experience of capitalism for indigenous peoples in settler colonial states¹⁸; understanding capitalism’s wider operation can actually deepen our analysis of capitalism, invite previously marginalized populations into class struggle, and help orient activist praxis toward eliminating all instantiations of capitalism, not only the most obvious.

Part of what I want to highlight here is that thinking about the centrality of capitalism but the non-centrality of the productive relation has a long history in Black and Indigenous studies (as well as in feminist and queer theory) – a focus that I think Marxist class analysis should learn from rather than reject. Whether we are looking at scholarship or activism on enslavement, colonization, policing and prisons, Black Studies, as a tradition, continuously offers deep and trenchant critiques of capitalism that go beyond (and sometimes totally de-prioritize) the axis of exploitation/labor. And though we cannot reduce the contemporary operations of prisons and policing directly to racialized chattel slavery in a one-to-one equivalence, these systems of violence are historically and structurally related. In addition to the historical transformations that allowed policing to take on many of the plantation functions for racial capitalism, we can see the preservation of a similar bimodal structure, rooted simultaneously in exploitation and oppression.

Thus, when police infiltrate Black and brown neighborhoods as an occupying force, intent on causing harm and violence to its residents, it is part and parcel of how capitalism operates. When the police engage in extra-judicial murder, it is part and parcel of how capitalism operates. When the police harass and assault trans people, when they engage in ‘stop and frisk’, when euphemistically-termed school resource officers send kids to cages rather than to class – all of this part and parcel of how capitalism operates. And when communities and activists demand an end to these policies *because they are racist*, they are also making an anti-capitalist demand, because enforcing a white supremacist order of oppression is part and parcel of how capitalism operates.

To clarify, I am not arguing that we jettison analyses of the productive realm altogether; the wage-centered and property-centered analyses of policing under capitalism do helpfully thematize some important elements. However, I do not think these analyses furnish compelling explanations of the more spectacularized forms of police violence: How would we understand the pervasive, and severe cop harassment of transwomen of color under this schema, a harassment that we know is not only constant but frequently involves physical and sexual abuse? How do we understand the extent of pervasive extrajudicial racialized murder regimes that police continue to perpetuate? How can we analyze and respond to the fact that in the United States, 40% of police officers abuse their spouses, partners, and

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¹⁸ Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 13.

children? The sort of wage-centered, production-based or property-based analysis here can only give us archaic, partial answers at best.

Once we more adequately conceptualize capitalism as a relation constituted equally (equiprimordially) between oppression and exploitation, we can begin to see how the police function of stabilizing the subordination of oppressed people (women, children, trans and non-binary people, racialized populations) is absolutely central to the continued functioning of capitalism, even when there are no direct linkages to production, labor exploitation, or more traditionally ‘class-based’ analysis.

Section Four: The Dual Function of Policing on a Global Scale

We can see this same dynamic operative in the global arena. Policing has always been a transnational and global phenomenon, one that is replete with specifically colonial dimensions that continue to this day.¹⁹ In several accounts of the historical rise of policing institutions, the specificity of the colonial dimension is central to the rise of ‘domestic’ policing. Without delving into the specificities here, excellent research across disciplines reveals how the methods and structure of British policing, for example, was dependent on colonial violence in India, Ireland, and elsewhere. In the United States, veterans of frontier colonization were frequently tapped for positions in urban police departments. In what Jean-Paul Sartre once called ‘the boomerang’²⁰ of colonial violence, techniques of state violence developed in the colonial world are often unleashed on the metropole, tying together the experiences of colonized people and Euro-American working classes in a material network of forms of inflicted violence.

In the contemporary world, the global dimension of policing is a continuing, perhaps even accelerating, dimension of global class society. Transnational police cooperation is de rigueur in several areas of policing. As Andrés Fabián Henao Castro and I have written elsewhere, the global dimension of policing is not limited to the border regime.²¹ Since its very beginning, police forces embodied in a variety of institutions have worked together to share techniques, data, software, surveillance information, weapons, intelligence, and other material

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19 I would like to thank my research assistant Maryam Rokhideh, as well as many collaborators I have been working with on the global dimensions of policing: Andres Fabián Henao Castro, Kojo Koram, Sarah Balakrishnan, Jishnu Guha-Majumdar, and all of the participants in the 2022 Capitalism and Confinement Workshop.

20 Sartre, “Preface.”

21 Bohrer, Ashley J. and Henao Castro, “A People’s History of Police Exchanges: Settler Colonialism, Capitalism, and the Intersectionality of Struggles.”

elements of policing infrastructure. This happens both at a distance and at international policing conferences, as well as in formal police exchange programs. Especially with the rise of the global regime of borders and migration, the creation of new institutions of border police over the twentieth century mirror the development of ‘domestic’ forms of policing, but also exceed them in stabilizing transnational flows of labor, goods, and capital in ways that maintain a global coloniality of capitalism predicated on the concentration of immiseration, extractivism, and commodity production in the Global South. Border cops are, at the end of the day, just cops.

The stiffening of borders across the globe and the intensification of policing them is central to the era of global, neoliberal capital we currently inhabit. Since the 1980s, capitalists have been straddling a deep contradiction between the ‘globalization’ of capital (evidenced in, to name just a few, the rise of multi-national corporations, the acceleration of transnational resource extraction, supply chains of greater distances, and, overall, the lightning movement of goods, corporations, and capital across the globe, as well as the establishment of new transnational capitalist institutions like the WTO, NAFTA, and the World Bank) and a hardening of borders, mostly aimed at preventing working class human beings from escaping the immiseration globalization has wrought on the majority world. In the worlds of Tanya Golash-Boza, “Globalization, enhanced by neoliberal reforms, facilitates the movement of capital across borders while restricting the mobility of workers”²² and citizens of the Global South more generally.

The increased mobility of capital has seen an explosion in border policing. Border enforcement is one of the largest areas of police expansion at present. The annual budget of Frontex, the EU’s border and coast guard police agency, increased 194% in the 2021-2027 budget cycle over just the immediately previous one. Between 2003 and 2019, United States Border Patrol agents doubled, and Immigrations and Customs Enforcement personnel tripled; since 1993 when new energy was put into patrolling the United State’s southern land border, the annual budget of Border Patrol has increased ten-fold.

It is not just that border securitization is big business, responsible for billions of dollars annually in contracts, weapons, and surveillance technology; it is that, like domestic police, border agents are securing and reproducing a social order of hierarchy and inequality, but now on a global scale. The “hierarchical and unfree social relations”²³ of capitalist carcerality are themselves transnational, and just as institutions of domestic policing work at least in part to stabilize this regime of

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22 Golash-Boza, *Deported: Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism*, 4.

23 Le Baron and Roberts, “Toward a Feminist Political Economy of Capitalism and Carcerality.”

accumulation, border police have emerged and strengthened to defend the neocolonial order of capitalist extraction on a transnational scale. The fact that the international system of borders is committed to the global reproduction of a racist and colonial order is a phenomenon that Harsha Walia has called ‘border imperialism.’²⁴

We can see how migrant policing plays out the same dual character of other kinds of policing – simultaneously interested in the realm of production and in the social relations of inequality and heightened vulnerability. In one sense, the produced vulnerability of undocumented workers certainly bolsters the ability of capital to exploit social disempowerment to offer even lower pay, with higher productivity quotas, under worse conditions; it creates the conditions in which increased levels of exploitation are even less likely to be contested and fought against, as insecurity on the part of undocumented communities grows. But policing can sometimes have a chilling effect on labor exploitation itself. To take a recent example from my own home-state of California to illustrate this point: in the midst of the 2022 inflation spike that has made basic necessities like food more unaffordable than ever, farm owners and agricultural associations have been blaming a massive farmworker labor shortage. The cause of this shortage? Increased policing of undocumented immigrants. The fervor of immigrant policing has impeded capital accumulation so acutely that farm owners, traditionally a very conservative bunch on the whole, have been pushing for comprehensive immigration reform and a loosening of border policing. In this sense, the oppressive obsession with documentation, increased xenophobia, and racist hyper-policing have become in some cases so great as to undercut and prevent the exploitative labor relation. The oppression of undocumented immigrants both actively constructs their vulnerability to capitalist exploitation and in some cases prevents that very exploitation, inhibiting the accumulation of profit.

The only way to understand contradictions such as these is to recognize that the labor-capital relation does not have a monopoly on policing and its logic; rather, part of what policing migrants aims at is “the maintenance of global apartheid,”²⁵ a regime of racialized, neocolonial oppression that structures the global geopolitics of capitalism beyond production proper. In the realm of migration policing, then, we can see capitalism rely on the dual nature of policing. It is for this reason that Gracie Mae Bradley and Luke de Noronha argue that “border abolition and anti-capitalism are one and the same, and both must be global and internationalist.”²⁶

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24 Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*.

25 Golash-Boza, *Deported: Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism*, 3.

26 Bradley and de Noronha, *Against Borders: The Case for Abolition*, 69.

Conclusion: Abolitionism as Communism

So – to return to the question I opened with – why might we, following Ruth Wilson Gilmore, think about abolitionism as communism with a small c?

Certainly communism and police abolitionism share the goal of the elimination of forms of private property. If this conjunction is true (capitalism is based in racialized property relations, and the function of police is to secure them), then, as Walcott argues, any project that is interested *either* in anti-capitalism *or* in abolishing the police, must actually be committed to *both* as two sides of the same coin or two grammars expressing the same project. That is to say, while there might be important differences between the abolitionist and Marxist traditions in regards to focus, conceptual tools, political history, vernacular, and organizing methods, ultimately these projects converge and are mutually dependent on one another. We cannot achieve communism with police and we cannot abolish policing without an elimination of the capitalist system that gives the police their orders.

Integrating an abolitionist analysis into class politics helps expand the terrain of anti-capitalist struggle. If we think about police as stabilizing not only the regime of exploitation, but also the oppressions necessary for capitalism's societal reproduction, then communism needs to be abolitionist in its commitment also to extirpating all 'unfree and unequal hierarchical social relations'²⁷ that are central to capitalism. Which is to say, if we want to get rid of capitalism, we have to also take aim at patriarchy, racism, colonialism, ableism, heterocompulsivity, Islamophobia and all other regimes invested with production of unequal life and exposure to violence. On the non-productive side, policing maintains and expands the differential live-ability of existence under capitalism. When we say, none of us is free until we all are, we are already saying that we need to abolish the function of policing whose aim is convincing us that our freedom is predicated on others' confinement, abjection, and subjection. That's the only communism worth the name.

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²⁷ Le Baron and Roberts, "Toward a Feminist Political Economy of Capitalism and Carcerality."

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Non-capitalist Domination, Rentierism, and the Politics of Class

Rebecca Carson

Abstract: This article argues that we cannot derive a politics of class directly from capital's abstract social relations. Politics must instead address such abstract relations' concrete realisation, integrating the experience of individuals who bear the class relation. Concrete reality, I argue, is best grasped at the level of the total social reproduction of capital – capital's circulation – where multiple determinations, both capitalist and non-capitalist, unfold. The framework set up here will begin the process of understanding struggles of social reproduction – pertaining to expropriation on the market through rentierism, racial and gender-based domination, as well as ecological degradation – as class issues. This enables theory to grasp diverse struggles as rooted in a desire to prioritise life's reproduction above capital's. The politics here sought is encapsulated in a speculative proposition: if social reproduction produces the conditions of possibility of the class relation, social reproduction can be redirected to abolish the class relation altogether.

Keywords: class, ecology, exploitation, expropriation, race, gender, politics of class, rentier capital, social reproduction, value form.

Liberalism fragments politics. It sustains the ideal separation of concretely related 'single-issue' struggles. Despite affirmations of intersectionality, movements opposing domination in gender, race, colonization and ecological degradation are vulnerable to liberalism's elision of systematicity: they can, at times, neglect the ways in which the violences they contest provide conditions of possibility for capitalist exploitation and expropriation. Correlatively, when facing inflation, financialisation and rents, class struggle has been isolated to struggles in the workplace and advocacy for wealth redistribution, reflecting a similarly liberal demand for a more egalitarian capitalism. The capacity to create meaningful change across the aforementioned arenas of struggle – to overcome the limits of liberalism – would be better served by positioning class in relation to both non-capitalist domination and capitalist domination from the perspective of the total circulation of capital, or its reproduction. An analysis of capital from the perspective of its total reproduction not only avoids the fragmentation of struggles by illuminating the place of non-capitalist forms in capitalism's reproduction: it also allows analysis to integrate the role of expropriation within capital's circulation through 'rentierism', a form of surplus value capture outside of the wage relation, which subjects individuals to unpayable debts and unaffordable prices, placing further strain on the conditions that make it possible to sell labour power. Renterism, although not a direct labour-capital relation, produces and reproduces the specificity of an individual's class relation, as do other forms of

non-capitalist domination relating to gender, race, colonization and ecological degradation.

To analyse non-capitalist domination and capitalist domination from the perspective of total social reproduction, class needs to be understood according to Marx's presentation in *Capital*.¹ To do so, entails reckoning with its double nature: class as an abstract and formal social relation, on the one hand, and class as a concrete and political collective formation, on the other. Class, formally speaking, is a strictly abstract social relation internal to capital's independent drive to profit as an 'automatic subject'.² Within this formulation, the class relation is not comprised of a 'group', but is a relation bared by the individual, who personifies a position vis-à-vis capital. Every individual within capitalist society bears a distinct and contradictory labour-capital relation that is reproduced and sustained by other forms of domination. The class relation arises through a rule by abstraction that concretely appears in the life of an individual as they pursue their social reproduction, an arena that imposes multiple determinations of capitalist and non-capitalist social relations. The arena of social reproduction, in contrast to capital's abstract social form, presents class concretely, comprising groups of political actors. These two competing modes of class, as Étienne Balibar observes, reflect the "two different readings of the analysis of *Capital* [that] are constantly possible, according to whether one gives priority... ... to 'form', or alternatively to content. Either an 'economic' theory of class' or a 'political theory of class' is possible on the basis of the same text."³ Yet the political theory of class remains incompatible with the 'economic' or the logic of capital's abstract forms, where we find personifications of the capital relation who never come face to face because they are impersonally mediated by capital's abstractions.⁴ Reckoning with the social meaning of class's contradictory nature, as it is situated within its multiple determinations, I argue, requires theorisation from the perspective of capital's total reproduction.

This article's argument will unfold in three steps. In the first section, 'A Marxist Conception of Class', I will present a reading of Richard Gunn's text *Notes on 'Class'*,⁵ combined with Etienne Balibar's text 'Class Struggle to Classless Struggle' in *Race, Nation, Class*,⁶ synthesising the two to present a concept of class aligning with *Capital's*. Marx's

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1 Marx 1990.

2 Marx refers to capital as an 'automatic' subject on p. 255 of *Capital Volume I*, 1990.

3 Balibar 1991, p. 163.

4 Balibar 1991, p. 160.

5 Gunn, 1987.

6 Balibar 1991.

presentation of class will prove to be contradictory, split between formal abstraction and concrete politics. I will demonstrate why this contradictory understanding of class is required to grasp the nature of class-based domination.

The class contradiction elaborated in the proceeding section, 'Total Social Reproduction and the Politics of Class,' unpacks why the politics of class needs to be viewed not at the value theoretical level but at the concrete level of social reproduction, entailing an analysis of capital from the perspective of circulation (or total social reproduction). This perspective enables analysis to better approach the multiple determinations imposed upon living labour. I will show how class relations are concretised by non-capitalist forms of domination making the politics of class intrinsically an issue of social reproduction.

Finally, to begin articulating a politics of total social reproduction, the third section, 'Surplus Profit and Consumption,' shifts the analysis of social reproduction from the realm of the conditions of social reproduction to that of the role of active consumption on the market. Consumption enables social reproduction. But on the market consumers can be expropriated by rentierism, where surplus profits are extracted from the income of workers. In turning focus to rentierism, analysis can grasp the interconnected aspects of class politics internal to social reproduction: the conditions of social reproduction and consumption. Both of these are shaped by multiple modes of domination, capitalist and non-capitalist.

These three steps will substantiate the overall argument that social reproduction produces and reproduces capital's abstract relations, including – of course – that between labour and capital. While the politics of class is not located within the formal relation of class, knowledge of capital's abstract social form is needed to work out the direction and aims of a politics of social reproduction. Politics occurs at the level of the concrete. Yet one will not adequately address capitalist domination without knowledge of the relationship between the abstract (capital's self-movement to valorisation) and the concrete (what provides the conditions of possibility for capital's abstractions). The framework set up here will hopefully begin the process of understanding struggles of social reproduction – pertaining to racial and gender-based domination, as well as ecological degradation – as a class issue. This fundamentally enables one to see diverse struggles as rooted in a desire to prioritise life's reproduction above that of capital's. The politics here sought is encapsulated in a speculative assertion: if social reproduction produces the conditions of possibility of the class relation, social reproduction can be redirected to abolish the class relation altogether.

A Marxist Conception of Class

When referring to class formally, I refer to the abstract social relation between labour and capital that an individual bears, which is always a relation of struggle. Class, in this sense, represents the threshold between labour and capital, demarking the extent to which one sells their labour power. Class, as an abstract relation, exists at the level of capital's commodified abstractions, or the movement of value forms from commodity to money to capital, constituting the process of capital accumulation. In contrast, the concrete appearance of class – the dialectical other of class as an abstract social relation – appears at a different level of abstraction: at the level of the reproduction of human life and nature. It is at the level of the concrete, I argue, that one finds the politics of class.

As an abstract antagonistic social relation – in contradiction with concrete reality – the class relation is separated from concrete politics. The politics of class exists at the concrete level of groups collectively in struggle for the affirmation of their social reproduction. The politics of class is in reality determined by one's conditions of total social reproduction, which can only be grasped from the perspective of society: of capital's circulation. Comprising non-capitalist forms of domination, the politics of class is determined by a complex multiplicity of forms of domination, not explicitly capitalist, including gender-based domination, racialization, environmental expropriation and market consumption, where rentier expropriation extracts surplus profit from consumers in education, housing, childcare and healthcare (and also through taxation, etc). It is the unity of these two notions of class that constitute Marx's conception of class.

Richard Gunn's short text *Notes on 'Class'*, published in 'Common Sense' in 1987,⁷ offers a strikingly clear presentation of an explicitly abstract and formal definition of class. Rhetorically contrasting class in the formal sense with what he refers to as a sociological view, Gunn argues that theorists of Marx too often mistake class – a social relation – for a sociological group of individuals. A sociological view, according to Gunn, is often utilised in one of two ways: empiricist or structuralist. The empiricist view is most common place, defining the way class is generally ideologically understood in bourgeois society. It sees class as "a group of individuals, specified by what they have in common (their income-level or lifestyle, their 'source of revenue', their relation to means of production etc.)"⁸ While the structuralist strand of the sociological view, according to Gunn, sees class as a "relationally specified 'place'

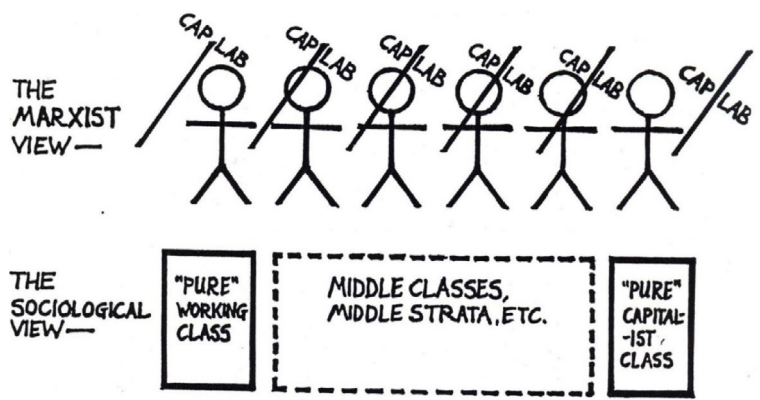
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7 Gunn 1987.

8 Gunn 1987, p. 1.

in the social landscape, a place which individuals may 'occupy' or in which, as individuals, they may be 'interpolated.'⁹ By defining class in terms of groups, both strands of the sociological view have, for Gunn, consequential shortcomings for thinking class in relation to a theory of capital's social form. This vitiates analysis' capacity to think the political possibilities internal to capital's social form.

First and foremost, individuals do not easily fit into classed categories such as 'capitalists,' proletarians,' and 'landlords.' Nor does a category such as 'middle-class' disclose anything about an individual's relation to capitalist exploitation and expropriation. It is Marx's critique of political economy in *Capital* – where class is shown to be a relational category expressing the capital-labour relation – that enables us to link class politics to capital's social form. By exposing the real antagonism between capital and labour within the class relation, theory can avoid the historically inaccurate assumption taken by the sociological view where classes are seen to somehow pre-exist or exist alongside yet separately from the capital relation and enter into struggle due to contestation over the wage relation.¹⁰ The later assumption that classes pre-exist the capital-labour relation is ignorant of the formal mechanisms behind capital's reproduction and assumes class to be a straight-forward precondition rather than a result of capital's social form that only through capital's circulation retroactively becomes a condition. In doing so, it misconstrues the struggle for the *abolition* of capital's rule by abstraction for an attempt to better participate *in* capitalism.

Commitment to understanding class as a social relation – not as a group – sees individuals riven by internal divisions, implicit in the capital-labour relation. See Gunn's diagram below:



Richard Gunn, Notes on 'Class' Common Sense, No. 2, 1987.

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9 Gunn 1987, p. 1.
10 Gunn 1987, p. 1.

By marking a contrast between the sociological view of class and Marx's view of class, Gunn reveals the inability of the sociological view to adequately account for the dialectical and contradictory nature of the bearer of the class relation. Gunn relays:

One difference between the Marxist and the sociological views...
...is that on the Marxist view the 'pure' worker, whose social being is in no way divided in and against him or herself, is in no way methodologically privileged. Neither is the 'pure' capitalist. Both, rather, are merely limiting cases and, as such, they are seen only as figures comingled with each other in a diversely structured crowd..."¹¹

Because the wage relation is itself is a 'bourgeois mystifying form' there is no such thing as a 'pure' worker rendered reducible to their abstract form. Individuals, including those who are full time producers of surplus value, live lives that are divided:

His or her feet mired in exploitation even while his or her head (which is tempted to construe this exploitation in terms of 'low wages', ie., in terms which are mystified) breathes in bourgeois ideological clouds. Accordingly, the line of class-struggle runs through the individual by whom surplus-value is produced."¹²

With this concept of class, politics becomes as varied as the class-relation itself. This perspective requires us to consider the multiple determinations underpinning such divided individuals in the realm of their social reproduction, to understand why they might bear the capital-labour relation with difference. Because class is an antagonistic relationship, however, there will still be a collective of individuals who share conditions of exploitation and those who collectively have a shared position as those who profit from exploitation. Those who sell their labour power experience their class relation as workers. It is not that there are not shared positions, but that there is no pure group within collective positions: there will be internal differentiation in one's class relation. More specifically,

the Marxist conception of class, or in other words, the point of view of totality,' [of capitalist social relations], rejects precisely the narrowness of the conception of politics which the sociological conception of class entails [the assumption that a class is a group

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¹¹ Gunn 1987, p. 2.

¹² Gunn 1987, p. 2.

of people]. On the Marxist view, the category of politics becomes as wide as forms which class struggle (and thereby class itself) unpredictably takes. Not merely is no issue excluded from the political agenda; the notion of political agenda is excluded since any such agenda excludes and marginalises whatever does not fall within some pre-established political domain.”¹³

While, Gunn insists that for Marx class has nothing to do with groups but, “like capital itself, [class is] a social relation,”¹⁴ the position is less consistently held in Marx. As Beverly Skeggs rightly points out Marx “was never very clear on how to define class, using the concept rhetorically as well as analytically, a problem that has beset any analysis ever since.”¹⁵ Yet Marx’s understanding of class developed as did his understanding of capitalism as a mode of production. Skeggs clarifies:

Marx’s writings over time about class, using a variety of tropes and rhetorical flourishes, depend on how he is putting class to use – as a dynamic force for revolution (the working class and/or the proletariat), the competitive innovators of industrialisation and exploitation (the bourgeoisie), objects of derision and contempt (the lumpen proletariat) or later as the bearers of abstract labour, the personifications of capital in *Capital*.¹⁶

It is specifically in *Capital* that class takes on a distinct social form as an abstract social relation based on one’s relationship to abstract labour, or the capital labour relation. This comes to be specific to a Marxist theory of capital as an abstract social relation that relies on exploitation of labour power for the accumulation of value. This concept of class deployed in *Capital*, as Gunn argues, reflects the specificity of class within the capitalist mode of production. Gunn is correct. but he explicitly and polemically elides a significant point. Marx retained at least two distinct – even incompatible – concepts of class. One is the uniquely capitalist concept of class deployed by Gunn and explicitly formulated by Marx in *Capital*. The other is a concrete notion that *is* sociological and *is* made up of groups. Class is sociologically deployed by Marx to talk about the collective lives of concrete historical individuals who explicitly sit on either side of the antagonism. These sociological classes are nonetheless made up of vastly complex and divergent individuals given the specificity of the nature of the capital-labour spit within their

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¹³ Gunn 1987, p. 5.

¹⁴ Gunn 1987, p. 1.

¹⁵ Skeggs 2022, p. 192.

¹⁶ Skeggs 2022, p. 193.

own modes of exploitation, as well as the multiple forms of non-capital's determinations shaping the nature of their own class relation.

As Balibar has shown in his chapter *From Class Struggle to Classless Struggle*,¹⁷ Marx's *Capital* focuses on the logical workings capital's structure, and, here, the proletariat as a group is absent. Instead, individuals perform their roles as personifications of the capital relation. Individuals are objectified actors within the 'theatre' of capitalism where value or abstract labour becomes subject through its circulation and valorisation as capital. Capital becomes the automatic subject through its self-reproducing drive for profit (the circulation of value), while individuals are mere actors, or functions of the capital relation. Yet a distinct and dialectically opposed category of class remains, since "human labour-power is *irreducible to the state of commodity* and will continue resisting in ever stronger and better-organised ways till the system itself is overthrown (which properly speaking is what is meant by the class struggle)."¹⁸ The immanently external nature of the concrete life of ecologically situated individuals reflects the irreducibility of human labour to the commodity form. But individual's, nevertheless, concretise the class relation and enable class relations to persist.

Gunn instructively highlights that class is not an identity. Class is a relation that produces personifications of capital; it is an expression of capital's fetish character where subjects are treated as mere objective personifications of social relations. Capital's social form endows each individual with a character mask i.e. capitalist, landlord or worker, rendering them a functional bearer of a social form. Since class is a conflict between capital and labour internal to each 'person,' it is also clear that the liberal provision of juridical equality between persons is a mystification. Equality between persons is closer between those whose class relation is more closely aligned only. There are, however, multiple determinations of domination that underpin one's ability to sell labour power, which could displace the formal class relation. Capitalist domination is not one of exploitation only. It is also one of expropriation, and expropriation relies on non-capitalist forms of domination to justify capture of value without payment. As Balibar states,

it is not that there is a predetermined linking of forms, but rather an interplay of antagonistic strategies, strategies of exploitation, domination and resistance constantly being displaced and renewed as a consequence of their own effects."¹⁹

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17 Balibar 1991, p. 160.

18 Balibar 1991, p. 165.

19 Balibar 1991, p. 164.

To fully understand the implications of the class relation – a relation of exploitation – we must understand the role of the multiple determination of expropriation and how these are interconnected within the broader circulation of capital or capital's total social reproduction. This will be a demonstration of connecting the abstract class relation with concrete multiple determinations to devise a theory of the politics of class.

Total Social Reproduction and the Politics of Class

To address class politically, to intervene with the lived reality of the class relation, a sociological view of class formation is needed. This view enables analysis to grasp how non-capitalist forms of domination are implicated in the capital-labour relation's reproduction. These non-capitalist forms of domination, I argue, are best understood dialectically as 'immanent externalities.' They are both internal to capitalist society and necessary for capital's reproduction but also are extra-capitalist and not specific to capital's social form. Therefore, to understand how these immanent externalities, or non-capitalist forms of domination, help to reproduce the capital-labour relation we need to view class from the perspective of total reproduction as total reproduction encompasses both capitalist and non-capitalist relations. Production and reproduction exist relationally within capital's broader circulation where non-capitalist conditions, limits and institutions have a bearing on the workings of production and profit extraction. While the abstract formal concept of class – as a labour-capital relation is an inherently capitalist social form – should be understood from the perspective of capital's abstractions, the lived experience of the class relation is best understood concretely, as "a concentration of multiple determinations", a unity of diversity.²⁰ This is where "the process of production and reproduction the proletariat takes shape as a concrete tangible reality."²¹ In a given historical conjuncture, non-capitalist modes of domination, such as financialization, indebtedment, rentierism, racialisation and gender norms, will tend to become necessary and immanent to the reproduction of capital. Yet these remain *other* to capital's particular social form.

Non-capitalist forms of domination are non-capitalist because they are not expressions of the value form and hence do not comprise of a relation of exploitation. Instead, they rely on a relation of expropriation, a form of domination within capitalism that has always been used as a method to create it's conditions of possibility. Expropriation does not create surplus value, but enables capitalists and rentiers to retain

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20 Marx 1973, p. 101.

21 Balibar 1991, p. 160.

larger proportions of profit by plundering resources, wages and labour freely without compensation. Expropriation facilitates the conditions of possibility of their accumulation of profit and is a form of distribution of profit that relies on extra-capitalist methods of domination: it is surplus profit made through methods other than the exploitation of labour and often is what makes for the conditions of possibility of capitalist exploitation such as the expropriation of unpaid domestic labour that is required to enable the worker to arrive at their job.

Class is a social relationship, the concrete reality of which depends upon individuals' historical experience of non-capitalist forms of domination, however capitalistically mediated those forms of domination might be. Because the mediation of capitalist and non-capitalist domination can only be seen at the point of total social reproduction – in 'society' – we need a theory of social reproduction to understand how class structures the lives of individuals. Marx's conception of class as a social relation, in this regard, I argue requires supplementing with a politics of social reproduction for its politicisation. Hence, Gunn's presentation of the formal social relation of class in Marx is most meaningful when applied to the total social reproduction of capital. So applied, the formal concept of class can enable analysis to understand how non-capitalist forms of domination are mediated by capital's abstractions. This sheds light on the concrete politics of class, allowing class to be constructed not merely as that which individuals bear in a contradictory way, but as an abstraction that requires the production and reproduction of other forms of domination for its condition of possibility. It is these multiple determinations of domination – both capitalist and non-capitalist – that comprise the concrete nature of an individual's class relation.

What kinds of forms of domination does the automatic subject of capital compel? Class, of course. But class appears in a society that typically uses changing racial and gendered modes of discipline to facilitate its reproduction. Hence, the politics of class – a shared relation to the conditions of social reproduction – must be interpreted in such way that accounts for not only exploitation, occurring via the labour-capital relation, but that addresses non-capitalist modes of expropriation, theorising unpaid domestic labour, ecological degradation, real-estate bubbles, and debt, among other phenomena. Non-capitalist expropriation occurs when capital takes from the social reproductive and natural resources of human life and nature without recourse to payment. But, exploitation and expropriation can happen simultaneously. When payment for labour cannot fully cover the social reproduction of the worker, the worker is both exploited and expropriated because they are forced to compensate for the full costs of reproducing their labour power. The exploitation of living labour is what enables the abstract and impersonal nature of domination in capitalism: it forms the basis

of capital's fetish. Yet, at the same time, it relies on interpersonal non-capitalist modes of expropriation to sustain its reproduction. Hence, the accumulation of value happens both through means of exploitation and non-capitalist forms of expropriation: both can become variables behind the capitalist mode of production.

I have thus far attempted to show that class can only be adequately politicised through recourse to analysis of its concrete existence. The concrete comprises both the site of subjection to value and the formation of groups through non-capitalist means. Class relations differ, individually speaking, on the basis of social reproduction, which is determined by non-capitalist relations of racialisation, colonisation, nationality, ethnicity, kinship, etc. Much Marxism, however, neglects the contribution of non-capitalist forms of domination when addressing the formal and structural production of class. As Skeggs observes, Marx pins down three factors that produce class:

- (1) class is produced through struggle over the means of revenue either through labour, ownership of capital and/or land;
- (2) class definitions depend on the groups' relationship to the means of revenue production, and hence to one other; and
- (3) classes are locked into a dependent relationship to each other, where one class is always a source of revenue for another, in terms of profit and/or rent. It is always the *relationship of exploitation* – developed by Marx through his theories of wage labour, labour-power, labour value and surplus value – which defines classes.²²

In contrast, I argue that it is not *always* exploitation that defines classes. There is an additional missing factor in what defines class that I argue is a fourth factor determining the class relation: *non-capitalist forms of domination that condition the individual at the level of their social reproduction through expropriation*. By considering this fourth factor, these non-capitalist conditions, we can understand the specific effects of concrete non-capitalist domination on abstract class relations. And vice versa. Without addressing the way that forms of non-capitalist domination produce and reproduce class immanently within capitalist society, the class relation has little concrete meaning. This is apparent when non-capitalist forms of expropriation, such as rentierism, environmental degradation and the racialised and gendered devaluation of the wage, have relativised the dominance of the capital-labour relation as a contributing factor in determining the lived experience of class.

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²² Skeggs 2022, p. 193.

Non-capitalist domination produces a distinct labour-capital relation through the intensification of exploitation, through expropriation and through the devaluation of (or exclusion from) the wage. Racialised expropriation, for example, encompassing the history of slavery, as well land stolen in colonisation, continues to make up an enormous amount of the world's wealth. The contemporary legacy of this racialised plunder is what Kojo Koram refers to as the 'material element of empire', ongoing in the post-colonial world.²³ Empire, so conceived, continues to transfer and expropriate resources and wealth across the globe. Expropriation has often been connected to slavery, racialisation, women's subordination, ecological degradation and the colonial theft of land. As Skeggs highlights:

Difference has been long mobilised for accumulation, as... ... contemporary studies of migrant workforce show: hyper-precarity, criminalisation and deportability are often institutionalised features for migrant workforces, in creating their vulnerability by reducing their ability to claim production and even wages. Convict and indentured labour was a central plank of racial capitalism.²⁴

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Through the production of difference – be it gendered, racial or otherwise – surplus profit is acquired in both exploitation and expropriation: surplus value is extracted from the wage *and* surplus profit is taken from unpaid labour. Unpaid labour, with all its life sustaining functions, is made more exploitative through a devaluation of wages for gendered and racialised workers. Cedric J. Robertson, in *Black Marxism*,²⁵ demonstrates how race has been used in capitalism as a method of producing a working class that can be exploited more. He defines this dynamic through his concept of 'racial capital.' Racial difference is here used by capitalism to extract surplus value cheaper from certain groups of workers. Robinson demonstrates how this dynamic can be traced to the emergence of capitalism in early industrial England, where Irish workers were racialised to extract increased amounts of surplus value. Hence, the specificity of the English working class was produced by way of race.²⁶ The production of difference that occurs through non-capitalist forms of domination reflect "relations and practices that are active structuring principles of the present

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23 Karam 2022.

24 Skeggs 2022, p. 197.

25 Robinson 2021.

26 See Part 1, ;Section 1: Racial Capitalism' and 'Section 2: The English Working Class as Mirror of Production' in Robinson 2021.

organisation of society and form of class relations”,²⁷ determining how class is lived. As Stuart Hall famously claimed, race is “the modality in which class is “lived,” the medium through which class relations are experienced.”²⁸

Working class protections have historically gained strength through trade unions and political organisation. Capital, meanwhile, has attacked the unprotected, maintaining and reproducing precarity through non-capitalist forms of domination. Non-capitalist forms of domination work to exclude people from the minimal protections of the wage-labour relation, differentiating the mass based on race, gender, sexuality and ability. Gendered care work provides a pertinent example. When reproductive labour is either given a grossly devalued wage, or is uncompensated, expropriation is justified through gender norms. Søren Mau writes, “capital needs proletarians who offer their labour-power up for sale, but it equally needs proletarians who perform the necessary reproductive labour – such as child- birth, childcare, cooking, cleaning, etc. – outside of the wage relation, that is, proletarians whose dependence on capital is mediated by their dependence on other proletarians.”²⁹ The reliance on expropriation in care is deeply integrated into the allocation of state funds. This is shown by the resistance states put up to free childcare. The state has historically relied on the expropriation of unpaid labour to ‘fund’ the population’s childcare and will not readily give up a good, expropriative source of value.

Expropriation doesn’t always leverage anthropological difference. One need only consider the effects ecological degradation have on social reproduction. The creation and reproduction of difference, however, explains why certain communities are forced to bear the greater burdens of climate change and rentierism. As non-capitalist material conditions, human life and nature co-exist in metabolic relation to one another through a process of consumption and excretion. Together they constitute the reproductive foundation of the capitalist system. Capital’s circulation of value is dependent on nature, both to supply its requirements, as medium or material, and to absorb its waste. Human life, too, irrespective of its social form, is dependent on nature, existing in a metabolic relation thereto. Yet capitalism treats nature and the reproduction of human life (i.e. care work) as self-replenishing and readily available for extraction. Its material is taken without compensation or replenishment. As Kohei Saito states in his book *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism*:

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27 Skegg 2022, p. 199.

28 Hall 1980, p. 341.

29 Mau 2021, p. 9.

Marx's political economy allows us to understand the ecological crisis as a contradiction of capitalism, because it describes the immanent dynamics of the capitalist system, according to which the unbounded drive of capital for valorization erodes its own material conditions and eventually confronts it with the limits of nature.³⁰

Capitalism systemically, and necessarily, destroys its conditions of reproduction. This has caused catastrophic harm to the environment, diminishing the likelihood of human life's stable reproduction. Hence, the way in which communities experience global heating and pollution – caused by capital's plunder of resources without compensation (i.e. expropriation of land and human life) – determines their experience of the class relation. Illness from pollution – or the destruction of basic resources, from housing to infrastructure, occurring in extreme weather – affect the conditions of possibility for participating in waged labour, as well as the extent to which wage can cover the costs.

One's ability to burden the relationship of exploitation in the labour-capital relation (what sorts of contracts they enter or don't enter), and therefore the specificity of the labour-capital relation one bears, is dependent on one's experience of expropriation and non-capitalist forms of domination. By enabling an increased extraction of unpaid labour, non-capitalist forms of domination change an individual's class relation, determining how class is lived. By analysing the politics of class at the concrete level of social reproduction – from the perspective of circulation or total social reproduction – one can see the multiple non-capitalist determinations of living labour. From this, we can say that the politics of class is intrinsically an issue of social reproduction, where shared conditions of social reproduction are determined by a range of factors, both capitalist and non-capitalist.

We have established that non-capitalist forms of domination – often leveraging social difference, manifest in the realm of social reproduction – determine how individuals bear the capital-labour relation. But we have elided another form of non-capitalist domination that is needed to gain a full picture of the politics of total social reproduction today: consumption on the market. Through consumption, forms of rentier expropriation shape one's experience of class. Yet consumption is not neutrally distributed. The production of difference is implicated in the mechanics of unequal consumption and expropriation. By mediating an account of social difference's reproduction with an analysis of rentierism, analysis can consider the production of difference as a conditioning factor within the capture of surplus value through consumption.

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30 Saito 2017, p. 20.

Surplus Profit and Consumption

By synthesising an account of social reproduction with value form analysis, one can produce an analysis of class adequate to financialised rentier capital. As labour becomes heavily devalued globally, capitalism is marred by non-capitalist forms of rentier-based expropriation. A consequence of this is that increased strain is placed on social reproduction. Non-capitalist relations are increasingly employed for the accumulation of 'surplus profit', intensifying ecological devastation, alongside racialised and gendered forms of domination. The profit gained from expropriation is referred to by Marx at length in *Capital Volume III* when discussing markets, finance, competition and rents. 'Surplus profit', as defined by Marx, is not necessarily accumulated through the extraction of surplus value. It can comprise the increased profit gained through cutting costs, producing for cheaper, and through monopolisation and putting up prices: it can be profit conditioned not by capital's abstract form but by the conditions of the market.

Within the sphere of production, Marx claims surplus profit to be extracted both from what Marx calls "exceptionally favourable conditions" or "fortuitous fluctuations of market prices" and also "if certain spheres of production are in a position to evade the conversion of the values of their commodities into prices of production."³¹ The accumulation of surplus profit is a form of expropriation internal to capitalism and in productive capital can occur alongside exploitation: one can be both exploited and expropriated. The profit extracted by rents – which occur in the realm of capital's circulation – is solely surplus profit and is increased by rentiers through monopolisation: these are profits accumulated that do not take on a strictly capitalist form. Surplus profit acquired by capitalists or rentiers might be made up of capital – of valorised value extracted through the capital-labour relation – but it also might be made up of credit money or fictitious capital, which is money that is unvalorised (and therefore not necessarily profit or wealth accumulated through capitalist social relations).

Extra-capitalist social relations determine the class relation and in doing so relativise capital's specific form of abstract domination. The working class – comprised of workers and potential workers – is not merely a class of vendors of labour power: they are also buyers of commodities that facilitate their social reproduction. The role of consumption therefore is a significant arena of class production and reproduction. Consumption enables social reproduction through the provision of resources. This entails workers' subjection to non-capitalist forms of domination internal to the market, which will, in turn, determine the conditions in which they will sell their capacity to labour (the sorts of

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31 Marx 1991, p. 144.

labour contracts working people are compelled to). While it is important to remember that other forms of non-capitalist domination influence one's experience of rentierism within the realm of consumption since ownership has always been racialised and gendered, our focus here concerns how rentierism shapes and produces the class relation by affecting the labour market and the buying power of the wage.

Capital identifies rentierism as preserve of landlords. It is a form of profit-seeking that, while non-capitalist, is internal to capitalist relations. Rentierism beyond the more narrow definition involves the capture of scarce assets and commodities as a method to increase price, enabling the extraction of excessive profit. This includes finance, in the distribution of credit and investment in financial assets. With rentierism, the specifically capitalist form of accumulation by exploitation or labour and the subsequent circulation of value throughout commodity forms is supplemented by juridical-political modes of expropriation through “fees, leases, politically-sustained capital gains.”³² Rentierism entails “payment to an economic actor (the rentier) ... purely by virtue of controlling something valuable.”³³ These assets might be real estate, intellectual property, natural resources, utilities and other service contracts, including infrastructure such a train lines, digital platforms or credit money and financial assets. There are all assets that derive income “from the ownership, possession or control of scarce assets under conditions of limited or no competition.”³⁴

Rentierism is a significant arena of profit extraction in contemporary capitalism where wage labour has long been devalued globally. Profit accumulation increasingly seems to be extracted through rents and therefore capitalist social relations take on an increasingly non-capitalist distribution. This also means that profit accumulation is more directly targeted at the expropriation of means of social reproduction. Rentierism has enormous consequences for the class relation, solidifying and further bifurcating its experience, often operating along lines of who owns property and those who does not. This, of course, corresponds to the labour-capital relation: the working class are those who have nothing to sell but their labour. The intensification of rentierism in the present has emerged by way of several factors tied to deindustrialisation and privatisation in the global north. Financial deregulation, for example, (which has occurred differently at different rates in different countries) has enabled housing – even what was historically social housing – to become financial investments, traded as consolidated debts, as assets owned by banks through mortgage contracts, and ubiquitously used to gain passive income through

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32 Zacarés 2021, p. 49.

33 Christophers 2020, p. xvi, xxiv.

34 Christophers 2020, p. xvi, xxiv.

rents. This is but one factor of a range of instances of privatisation and financialisation that promote the funnelling of investment not towards production, and therefore to labour (however indirectly), but to the ownership of assets. When these assets are productive, they are increasingly monopolised, enabling profits to be taken through expropriation. For example, the privatisation of utility companies went hand in hand with their monopolisation. Within this dynamic, the “pace of societal reproduction is no longer set by fierce competition in the sphere of commodity production, but by securing, protecting and sweating scarce assets.”³⁵

The market dynamics of rentierism transforms modes of social reproduction at the level of workers’ lives, especially at moments of crisis. Market determinations – such as changes in use-values, on the basis of what can accrue profit, as well as changes imposed on any one of the classes positions (the capitalist, the renter and the worker) – become motors of change, determining what is possible outside of the wage relation in terms of social reproduction. The practices that bear the burden of reproducing labour power are a dynamic factor that, in turn, affects the concrete reality of class relations in capitalism. Market dynamics, such as the value of property and land, affect the social reproduction of working class people. Their social reproduction is thus constrained by dynamics of accumulation and rent seeking, taxes, and structural adjustment programmes. Yet social reproduction, nonetheless, has relative autonomy, affecting the market in a variety of ways. This can occur through consumer boycotts, doing things more cheaply and engaging in political struggles for accesses to healthcare, over education or student debt and for a higher social wage. The drive for self-preservation, despite capital’s compulsion to destroy life for the extraction of value, is a meaningful element of class politics that should not be ignored.

An individual’s experience of expropriation via rents, including debt, is determined by a non-capitalist form of domination that conditions their social reproduction. Social reproduction, therefore, also determines the way in which class relations are occupied. Consequently, class’s actuality – the labour-capital relation – will shift based on the dynamics of rentierism. Furthermore, one’s relationship to expropriation through rentierism will be exacerbated by the level of exploitation that occurs within their class relation. Rentierism, in this regard, is a distinct form of class production, which conditions the social reproduction of the worker. Not only does rentierism affect the concrete power of the wage to reproduce human life: it affects the class relation itself, requiring workers to enter into different working conditions and contracts based on those distorted conditions of social reproduction.

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35 Zacarés 2021, p. 50.

Conclusion

I have argued that the politics of class takes place at capitalism's most concrete level where we find the realm of social reproduction. Here, non-capitalist 'immanent externalities' shape and determine the specificity of how individuals bear the class relation. Within this framework, a politics of class is a politics of social reproduction, with both capitalist and non-capitalist forms shaping the ways individuals bear the abstract capital-labour relation.

By establishing a Marxist conception of class that revealed class's contradictory nature as both an abstract formal social relation and a concrete political category, I have established a method from which we can interpret the concrete politics of class in relation to its abstract social form. Here, the former is a condition of the reproduction of the later. I have then demonstrated why the politics of class needs to be viewed from the perspective of the concrete level of social reproduction. Only by doing so can analysis include the multiple determinations of domination that contribute to the class relation's production, such as how the production of difference, alongside ecological degradation, facilitates expropriation. Finally, I integrated what I refer to as the other side of social reproduction – consumption – to explore how the capture of surplus profits, in turn, determines how an individual will bear the class relation.

Through concise integration of the capitalism's specific form of domination and its production and reproduction of the labour-capital relation, we can conclude that analysis should add a 'fourth factor' to Marx's three factors outlined above. The first factor according to Marx was that class is produced in the struggle over revenue. The second was that it is produced by the relationship between their distinct means (labour, ownership of capital or land). And the third was that it is produced by the relationship of exploitation, where the dependent nature of the relationship between each means of revenue hinges on the extraction of abstract labour in the capital-labour relation. I then showed that the fourth missing factor within Marx's schema is that of social reproduction, where capitalistically immanent-external forms of domination and social organisation create the conditions of possibility for capital's abstract domination. This factor exists at the level of concrete reality, in which the politics of class is realised. As I have demonstrated, we cannot derive a politics of class directly from capital's abstract antagonistic social relation (the labour-capital relation). Politics, instead, must address the abstract relation from the perspective of the concrete lived experience of living individuals. This concrete sphere is that of social reproduction, where multiple determinations, both capitalist and non-capitalist forms of domination, unfold.

We can conclude that the class relation is neither produced nor reproduced without determinations of capital's total social reproduction. Nor is there a politics of class without a politics of social reproduction. Such a politics necessarily integrates multiple determinations arising from non-capitalist forms of expropriation. By grasping politics in this way, fragmented struggles for social reproduction – from struggles over racial, gender-based, colonial and environmental justice – can cohere under the framework of a class-based analysis. So rethought, class can once again become the central analytical category in contests over capitalist and non-capitalist forms of profit extraction.

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The Possibility of an Emancipatory Form of Madness

Cynthia Cruz

Abstract: How is the possibility of an exit from capitalism possible in the madness of capitalist forgetfulness we find ourselves in? How might an examination of the idea of the impossible, that which is not non-existent but, rather, beyond definition, help us locate such an exit? Through a discussion of capitalist madness alongside Hegel's concept of madness, this article raises these questions while, at the same time, compiling an encyclopedia of madnesses with the idea that there may be a form of madness, expelled from the realm of what is possible, that might lead us out from the madness of capitalist forgetfulness to something entirely new.

Keywords: Hegel, madness, emancipation, the French Revolution, philosophy, temporality

But you're in love with what's impossible.
—Ismene to Antigone, *Antigone*¹

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The act of falling in love is one of four examples of what Badiou calls the event, a phenomena he defines as impossible.² To fall in love is to drop into a moment of instability. We cannot know when or if we will fall in love, there is no way to prepare for it (or conversely, how to avoid its arrival). And it is only in retrospect that we can see what has happened to us. This is why Badiou can describe falling in love as one form of the event. The concept of “fall” also has a correlation to the original, biblical Fall. This moment, too, in the schism between, wherein the world changes radically and both subjects are altered forever, there occurs a moment where the subjects are “plunged into absolute uncertainty” while simultaneously encountering freedom. Through the rupture, through disruption and error, something new appears. Another word for disruption is “Verrücken.” Madness, in other words, can be understood as a kind of “fall,” one that shatters the subject's previous held conceptions and beliefs. At the same time, it is precisely through this rupture, the annihilation of the world and who they are, that knowledge is acquired. I propose, in this paper, to attempt to answer a small list of questions I have been grappling with. First and foremost is the question of emancipatory possibility: how is such an occurrence possible in the madness of capitalist oblivion we find ourselves in? This question intersects with the idea of the impossible, or the possibility of the impossible, which is what we must call emancipatory possibility. Throughout this paper we will be compiling a compendium

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1 Sophocles 2003, p. 57.

2 Badiou, 2018. 92.

of madnesses, one both akin, and not, to Hegel's. In *Philosophie des Geistes*, the third book of his *Enzyklopädie*, Hegel collects and categorizes various types of madnesses, describing their symptoms. Here, we will be compiling madnesses of capitalism alongside madnesses excluded from capitalism with the idea that there may be a form of madness, one cast out from capitalism, that can lead us from the madness of capitalist oblivion we find ourselves in to something entirely new.

Capitalism is presented to us as the only possibility. To attempt to imagine an alternative is to veer into the realm of that which is not possible, which is to say it is to appear mad. Still, we know there is another possibility, even if this knowledge derives from so-called failed emancipatory attempts. Though not completed, these attempts mark the site of a truth yet to come. Though their presence is no longer one that is material, they left a trace of possibility as all events do. There is possibility precisely because previous attempts at emancipation failed which means there was at one point a possibility which suggests that this possibility exists even now, as a trace, a form not yet materialized.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy in *How To Think About Catastrophe* describes how, because the idea of the end of the world has become second nature, we no longer notice it. As a result we are unable to do anything to deter its inevitable occurrence:

This is the terrifying thing about a catastrophe: not only does no one believe that it will occur, even though there is every reason for knowing that it will occur; but once it has occurred it appears to be a part of the normal order of things. Its very reality suddenly makes it seem banal, commonplace.³

What Dupuy is describing is a form of oblivion. We can see this forgetting as a form of habit. The practice of repeating an action, one that begins as a deliberate choice result in an aspect that becomes sublimated into one's everyday being. What at first seems strange and may initially be experienced as a shock, eventually becomes, in a sense, nothing at all. It becomes *second nature*. Each time we learn a new skill, every time we learn anything at all, in that discreet moment who we were is gone. Even so, we are not yet who we are about to become. When we enter this gap between, we enter a moment of instability, what Hegel describes as a moment of madness. In this moment we are without a nature. Indeed, in a sense in this moment we are nothing.

With habit one no longer know what one is doing because one acts without thinking about one's actions or why one is engaged in their actions in the first place, Once a behavior becomes habit, it changes,

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³ Dupuy 2022, p. 51.

morphing into mere repetition. It is as if the action is *doing us*. And this mechanical behavior—fine when we are driving a car or riding a bike—becomes something entirely different, something sinister, perilously close to death. “Therefore,” as Hegel writes, “although, on the one hand, by habit a man becomes free, yet, on the other hand, habit makes him its *slave*.”⁴ Though this numbing quality can render one an automaton, it can also free us from madness which is why Hegel posits habit as a remedy for madness. Habit provides stability for madness’s instability, as Hegel explains, “The essential determination is the liberation from sensations that man gains through habit, when he is affected by them.”⁵

Because it provides stability, habit is necessary for both a subject’s interior cohesion and for social cohesion. And yet, due to capitalism’s plasticity, its ability to adapt itself to everything, what we have is capitalist habit. The very mechanism that ought to provide a remedy for madness becomes, itself, a form of madness. If habit is the practice of repeating an act that becomes nothing over time, then capitalist habit is habit that, sublimated into capitalism, makes, through the act of repetition, everything the same. As a result, difference vanishes. Capitalist habit makes natural that which is not. We become accustomed to the shocks and crises inherent to capitalism. As a result one forgets the reality of capitalism. Indeed, one forgets capitalism, which is to say one forgets reality. Forgetting reality and instead grasping onto what appears as reality but is mere simulacra (in the constant stream of images behind which exist nothing), the subject under capitalism, disconnected from reality, believes in what does not exist. This state of being is defined by Hegel as madness.

With capitalism there is a problem of imagination, due to a problem between what is imagined and what is real. “There is a rupture,” as Harmut Böhme writes, “in capitalism between the way things appear and their real or actual meanings.”⁶ We have a situation where we are unable to discern reality from unreality while we are also unable to imagine any alternative to the structure we find ourselves within. Because capitalism contaminates all aspects of its world, including our minds—we think, for example, and dream in capitalism—there is no outside to capitalism. Frederic Jameson’s comment that the end of the world is easier to imagine than the end of capitalism speaks to the deficit in imagination that has been brought about vis-à-vis capitalism. Indeed, there is both concretely, since 1989, no outside to capitalism (all current systems in the world are capitalist) and, because capitalism contaminates everything, there is also no way to imagine outside of capitalist

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4 Hegel 2007, p. 134.

5 Ibid., p. 131.

6 Böhme 2014, p. 243.

imagining. In fact, with capitalism, imagination (forgetfulness of the past, of who one is, and of the very structure one is living in) is what obscures.

In his discussion of catastrophe Jean-Pierre Dupuy argues on behalf of a decision process where one determines that the unimaginable catastrophe will occur, precisely in order to prevent such a world-ending catastrophe from happening in the first place. Rather than the truths that exist within our unconscious that we do not have conscious access to where what we know but do not know exists, what we have here is a truth we know but do not know due to fetishistic disavowal, a disavowing that allows us to immediately forget what we know.⁷ We are aware just how dire the situation is. Nonetheless, we forget and do nothing about it. This structure shares a likeness with that of psychosis, where the psychotic subject knows something to be reality yet brackets this reality off, sequestering it away.⁸ In other words, in order to exist within capitalism, to survive, subjects must disavow reality. Reality is rejected, neither cognized nor digested. It is thrown out into the subject's exterior, where it remains alien to them. Further complicating this dilemma, Jelica Šumič writes how it is not just the past we disavow, but also the future, "This anticipated, programmed amnesia is, namely, the ability to wipe out not only what has happened, but to annihilate the very idea of the possibility for something to happen, in short, the ability to erase the possibility of the possible."⁹

We might find a way out of this impasse by positing the very split at its center. By recognizing that we bracket off what we do not want to know because we wish it not to be true, this act already does something to subjectivity. We become aware that we know. Further, by conceptualizing what was previously a cognitive blindspot, we immediately gain access to it. At the same time, the act creates a distance between the concept and ourselves. We are now able to conceive of it. Similarly, by positing the presupposition of such catastrophic symptoms as mass poverty and unemployment, for example, and the destruction of animals and nature, by retroactively locating the presupposition of these symptoms in capitalism, we are able to locate capitalism, a structure that otherwise remains hidden. Without such means, attempts at critiquing capitalism are themselves appropriated into its structure, vanishing into its machinery. Frederic Jameson's "cognitive mapping" provides an additional tool by which to access what otherwise remains impenetrable. Here, what is invisible

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7 And as Alenka Župančič adds, it isn't that what is disavowed is removed from sight but rather, that its "game changing behavior" is removed. See "Alenka Župančič, "On Antigone, Iran, Marx, and a lot of other things," *Crisis and Critique*: <https://youtu.be/zlr5Db9ZG1>.

8 Freud 2001, p. 41-61.

9 Šumič 2014, p. 79.

becomes imaginable as a concept, as Jameson explains, “this is exactly what the cognitive map is called upon to do ... to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole.”¹⁰ One caveat must be added to this formula: since the 1970's and 1980's the very term capitalism has been replaced by abstractions such as neoliberalism, which result in further obfuscation. To amend this, we must return the term capitalism back to capitalism. Doing so situates it in its proper place as a structure, and, with its suffix, “ism,” places it squarely among other such systems that, though they change superficially according to culture, remain substantially the same. Once we are able to conceptualize capitalism, we are then able to comprehend the catastrophic situation we find ourselves in. This connection is critical: it is what allows for a waking up from capitalist oblivion. However, this connection is precarious because it is in the very act of making what was previously implicit, explicit, that fear and terror arise and we retreat into disavowal to protect ourselves from it. “The fear of catastrophe fails to deter.” Dupuy explains “The heuristics of fear is not a ready-made solution to the problem; it *is* the problem.”¹¹

In her analysis of the end Alenka Župančič,¹² using the example of quitting smoking, describes two structures of what she terms its economy. The first is a repetition informed by the choice of deciding to end, as Župančič explains, “Because there is clearly an economy here, an economy that allows me, for example, to go on smoking, while the possibility of quitting is here just in order to help me smoke.”¹³ The second is one fueled by the end. Precisely because we are at the end, we determine to *really* enjoy ourselves. “Differently from the previous configuration,” Župančič writes, “in which the end (as possibility) was inherent to the repetition, what is at stake here is rather that *repetition is inherent to the end*; there is something about the end itself that drives the repetition, and repetition is essentially *repetition of the end*.”¹⁴ With both of these configurations we have a repetition of the end that is lacking a true end. We have an end that keeps on ending.

The end that we refuse to believe, though we know it to be true, has, in fact, already occurred. We tell ourselves the end is yet to come to ward off what has already happened, to ward off what is happening now, as Oxana Timofeeva argues, “As opposed to what is usually said,

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10 Jameson 1991, p. 51.

11 Dupuy 2002, p. 92.

12 Župančič 2016, p. 3.

13 Ibid., p. 4.

14 Ibid.

catastrophe's time is not in the future, but in the present, which we can only grasp as the past, because it flows..."¹⁵ As Timofeeva asserts, the one event which has already happened, that which haunts our every moment, can be worked through with psychoanalysis vis-à-vis its trace as symptom, parapraxis, and so forth. But the catastrophe is something entirely different:

Catastrophe is meta- traumatic. It happens absolutely: at the beginning there is—there was—always already the end. Catastrophe defines the borders of a collective and the true sense of what we call history."¹⁶

We are trapped within the after of capitalism's coming into being. As if in an enormous and immeasurable aquarium filled with a black gelatinous substance, we exist in an *ever*, suspended between a revolution that keeps revolutionizing (and yet never changes) and a future that we believe will bring the end, and yet is always merely one more repetition of the non-end, non-time, we find ourselves in. The present we exist in is one lacking a present, as Badiou argues, it is a world lacking a world. In this nonworld, there is another world that haunts this one, a world we gain access to through what Badiou terms "exceptions" as he explains, "The objective is to identify the tracings of exception, which can be viewed either as internal externalities (what happens in Genet's *The Balcony*), local externalities, or perhaps as superficial scratches, scratches one the surface, marks on the surface constituting exceptions to the law of this surface."¹⁷ It is through locating such traces that we might gain access to a present, or to another world.

Capitalism is a world in which subjects are told everything is constantly changing while nothing ever changes. It is a world of infinite movement where there is constant proliferation (of labor, goods, suffering), ever-widening growth, it is, nonetheless, as if time has stopped. The mind and the body of the worker, engaged in the same repetitive movement hour after hour, day after day, is changed through this mechanism. Everything becomes calculable, a unit of time, and all things are broken down to the work hour. In contrast to the worker's sense of time, the usury and the financial capitalist does not work, but, rather, allows their money to work for them. This does something to time. There is a strange paradox between these two experiences of time under capitalism: for the worker, time is both internalized and constricted, while for the usury or financial capitalist, time is external and expansive. The

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¹⁵ Timofeeva 2014. p. 4.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁷ Badiou 2023, p. 25.

effect of fictitious capital creates an additional warp in the temporal due to fictitious capital's reliance upon future labor. While ordinary labor is defined by a worker who is paid after their work is completed, with fictitious capital a subject receives payment for work they have yet to complete. This mechanism, where a subject labors in the present and future to repay a debt in the past, cuts into the future and the present (where the labor they engage in to pay off their debt exists), and the past (where the cut occurs from which the original loan commences and interest begins to accrue and an additional, ever-growing new debt appears). As with capital, there is magic inherent in fictitious capital. The financial capitalist or usury bases their decisions on pure speculation fueled by a belief that arbitrary decisions will result in profit, while the debtor, too, believes they will one day earn enough to pay the debt (and interest) off. As with the gambler who has gambled everything away, coming to the end and believing, due to their having already lost everything, this final gamble will be the one that wins everything back and more, in both instances we are dealing with a subject who is risking everything based entirely upon a magical belief, as Mladen Dolar explains:

Economy and childish magic shake hands, the superstitious belief that loss will be made good by a contingent thrust, that one can cancel out the risk incurred and lost only by a more daring risk, that the like will find the like by some magic attraction, one debt will find the other and will be thus restored, that the double loss will yield the double gain. There is a magic economy at the bottom of financial economy, quite beyond the calculation of risks and dangers, beyond the supposition of rational players and rational choices in the economic game.¹⁸

What Dolar is describing is an act of madness not unlike the mesmerizing power of imaginary voices in, for instance, Daniel Schreber's description of his state of psychosis.¹⁹

If capitalist time is defined by a state of stagnation and freneticism, fictitious capital further complicates this structure. We might, in other words, have a system in which stagnation and freneticism coexist along with the present, past, and future. Subjects find themselves existing entirely on fictitious capital: taking out student loans and using credit cards then using these forms of fictitious capital to pay for other forms of fictitious capital (using one's credit card to make a loan payment) these very forms of capital, existing, as it were, on nothing. In this case,

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¹⁸ Dolar 2014, p. 10.

¹⁹ Schreber 2000, p. 131.

when at work, the worker is no longer “earning” money but, rather, “returning” money to the creditor. And, because student loans and credit cards earn money from interest, the worker, even when working to pay off the borrowed money, is still not even paying off the fresh debt from the interest that is constantly accruing. This structure has its origins in exchange value and its structure of infinite repetition and division, which leads to a leveling down of everything and the idea that all things can be equalized, counted, and that all is calculable. This leads to indifference and a world in which subjects are unable to distinguish themselves from others.

According to Hegel, a subject unable to differentiate them selves from others is one who is insane. Thus, madness is inherent to capitalism’s very structure. Indeed, capitalism does something to the symbolic order and subject-formation. Everyone in capitalist society is changed, as if in a cult, individually and en masse, without awareness of this phenomena. It is a cult without meaning, in which its subjects are unaware they are in a cult, as Benjamin writes, “Capitalism is entirely without precedent, in that it is a religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction.”²⁰ The essence of capitalist madness, exchange value and the magical quality of money, is a substance that spreads like a contagion. The structure of exchange exists already in magic as reciprocity, and, like religion, magic is a controlling substance, as Kojin Karatani writes,

Magic is the attempt to control or manipulate nature or other people by means of the gift (sacrifice). In other words, magic in itself already includes reciprocity.²¹

With its spectral form and occult-like qualities, these “crystals” are akin to Marcel Mauss’s description of magic as “a living mass, formless and inorganic, its vital parts have neither a fixed position nor a fixed function. They merge confusedly together.”²² And, in *Capital* Marx describes value as spectral materiality [*gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit*], a gelatinous [*Gallerte*], substance extracted from the laboring body of the worker and transposed to objects which then become filled with this invisible and yet charged substance:

Let us look at the residue of the products of labour. There is nothing left of them in each case but the same phantom-like objectivity; they are merely congealed quantities of homogeneous human

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²⁰ Benjamin 2004, p. 288.

²¹ Karatani 2014, p. 52.

²² Mauss 1972, p. 108.

labour, i.e. of human labour-power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure. As crystals of this social substance, which is common to them all, they are values—commodity values [*Warenwerte*].²³

Magic serves as a binding force, uniting what otherwise would remain disparate, in disunity. What we have then is a spectral substance that mesmerizes, as Marx writes “The riddle of the money fetish is therefore the riddle of the commodity fetish, now become visible and dazzling to our eyes.”²⁴ Fetishism draws out subjects’ feeling which arise from within the subject without their awareness, overwhelmed by feeling yet unaware what feeling they are feeling. Money with its hidden mysterious powers, alters the very structure of society, as Marx writes:

If *money* is the bond binding me to *human* life, binding society to me, connecting me with nature and man, is not money the bond of all *bonds*? Can it not dissolve and bind all ties? Is it not, therefore, also the universal *agent of separation*? It is the *coin* that really *seperates* as well as the real *binding* agent—the [...] *chemical* power of society.²⁵

Hegel’s description of the mad subject, one who is “dreaming while awake,”²⁶ aware but unable to articulate what it is they are aware of; aware something is wrong but unaware what this something is, describes the subject of capitalism. This occurs when a subject does not know what the feeling is they are experiencing or they do not have a language for what they are experiencing. This internal split tears the subject to pieces resulting in *Zerrießenheit*. In English *Zerrießen* means to “tear,” “rip,” or “rupture.” Here, it is the subject who is torn or ripped apart. Though ruptured and torn to pieces, a subject can, nonetheless, find themselves by positing a limit. Just as a dream is a form within which the substance of the dream appears, when a subject posits a limit between its self and its exterior, it creates such a form through which to stabilize this void.²⁷

In capitalism we lack a language to express what we are experiencing. The language we have access to, the language of bourgeois society, does not match our experience. It is the language

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23 Marx 1976, p. 128.

24 Ibid., p. 187.

25 Marx 1975, p. 324.

26 Hegel 2007, p. 117.

27 Ibid., p. 22.

of right, the language of equality, of no difference, *Entsprechende*, or *Ent-sprechende*, a language unable to articulate anything. Or, rather, nothing but exchange. This language that translates all experience into claims of right, itself, does something to language. First, because with the language of right we are only able to speak by articulating how our rights have been violated, we have only a language that is negative. Second, because bourgeois language is the language of the law, it is the language of charge. Therefore, the only language we have to speak about our claims is monetary. This means the only language we have access to is one that is negative and is immediately exchanged into the language of the negative and that of exchange. What cannot be captured in this language—everything external to claims due to infringement of our rights—remains, but in an unspeakable language, a form of excess we are unable to access because we don't have a language that corresponds to it. In order to speak of what one wants, one must first have a language for it. However, we don't yet have such a language. This language we don't yet have for what we don't yet have, is the poetry of the future.

Alongside an awakening from the forgetfulness of capitalist oblivion we must also awaken to what Badiou calls traces of exceptions and to the possibility of the appearance of an event. The two terms are interrelated. The tracings are usually found in Badiou's four canonical categories: art, science, politics, and love, while Badiou gives Paris, May 1968 as an example of the event because, though its material manifestation did not result in radical change, its occurrence resulted in a rupture through which the possibility for something entirely new to appear, appeared. Describing the effects of May 1968 on himself and other young Germans, Karl-Heinz Dellwo explains, "For us this was a situation where historically something like a window opened up, or a door, and [we] had to try to push it open."²⁸ An event is the possibility for something entirely new to appear, as Badiou states "Basically, an event, for a world, is something that has the ability to make what did not exist before in this world."²⁹ The emergence of such an occurrence is unforeseeable. One cannot predict when, or even if, such an event will occur, nor can one know what shape it might take. Further, such occurrences are marked by retroactivity. One is unable to fully comprehend what has transpired until afterward. "It is the event, Badiou writes, "which belongs to conceptual construction, in the double sense that it can only be thought by anticipating its abstract form, and it can only be revealed in the retroaction of an interventional practice which is

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28 Dellwo 2018, p. 355.

29 Badiou 2023, p. 348.

itself entirely thought through.”³⁰ It is structural, in other words, and may or may not be filled in with a historical phenomenon. Such an occurrence simultaneously ruptures reality and is also subject-forming akin to Lacan’s act which, similarly, alters the subject as they move through it.

It cannot be assumed that a subject will recognize such an appearance when it appears. In order to recognize its appearance one must first make the decision to place communal emancipation before one’s own individual needs and wants. This determination is akin to Jean-Pierre Dupuy’s insistence on the necessity for the acknowledgment of catastrophe in order to avert its coming into being. With regard to the possibility of the appearance of possibility, we ought to anticipate its appearance even if we don’t believe in its inevitability. We don’t have to believe (consciously) we just have to believe that our unconscious believes. The act that sets this belief (of non-belief) in motion is a subject’s determination. Crucial, too, is that a subject make this determination on their own and for themselves. This unconditional solidarity cannot be brought about through external forces. It either exists or it does not. Describing his decision, while in solitary confinement, not to disavow his actions in order to protect himself, Dellwo explains:

This unconditionality of solidarity is indispensable, gratuitous, and unavailable. This is not demanded, you have it.....Each egoism dissolves the coherence of the group at the other’s expense....This does not come as an exigency from the outside, but from inside oneself.³¹

Nevertheless, such a determination is one that is not possible. To place the communal before the individual is to rupture the very structure of capitalism, one constructed of atomized individuals whose very survival is dependent on separation and competition. To invert this structure is to insist on an alternative reality. The subject’s determination to place the welfare of the communal before their own binds the subject with the communal while also binding the subject and the communal with the determination. Though each subject experiences their own oppression individually, one’s individual suffering does not exist in a vacuum, but, rather, occurs among the universal suffering of capitalist oppression. One’s individual suffering exists in the gap that overlaps both individual and universal suffering. Recognition of this bond is crucial and is at the heart of what Michael Walzer describes as the covenant:

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30 Badiou 2005, p. 178.

31 Dellwo 2018, p. 367.

The covenant is a founding act....Their identity, like that of all men and women before liberation, is something that has happened to them. Only with the covenant do they make themselves into a people in the strong sense, capable of sustaining a moral and political history, capable of obedience and also of stiff-necked resistance, of marching forward and of sliding back. Hence the centrality of the covenant and the importance of reflecting upon its precise character.³²

What drives a people forward toward emancipation is this bond, as Marx writes, “no class in civil society has any need or capacity for general emancipation until it is forced by its *immediate* condition, by *material* necessity, by its *very chains*.”³³ Writing on the Exodus, Walzer makes explicit the connection between the oppression the people share and their shared idea of emancipation:

Without the new ideas of oppression and corruption, without the sense of injustice, without moral revulsion, neither Exodus nor revolution would be possible.... it is the new ideas that make the new event. They provide the energy of the Exodus, and they define its direction.³⁴

It is in the coalescing of the proletariats’ determination to place the communal before the individual and the appearance of possibility that something new can be brought about. This might be described as the coinciding of philosophy and praxis, or the formulation of an idea (philosophy) and one’s determination to place the communal before the individual (praxis), as Marx writes “The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.”³⁵

The idea, like the casing of a dream in which the substance of the dream exists, provides unity to disunity. It protects the individual, as well as the group, from madness, while also binding individuals to one another. The result is a community bound by an idea. Describing the effect of Paris, May 1968 Dellwo explains “Suddenly, the idea of another world was concrete, it was there and it was liberating, a new breathing, a slashing of the mist of habits.”³⁶ Here, Dellwo makes explicit

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32 Walzer 1986, p. 76.

33 Marx 1976, p. 186.

34 Walzer 1986, p. 40.

35 Marx 1975, p. 4.

36 Dellwo 2018, p. 355.

the connection between the appearance of possibility in the form of May 1968 and the idea of emancipation it transported along with it. One needs an idea for emancipation, the idea of emancipation. An idea also provides direction. In his description of the Exodus, Walzer writes:

...it is the new ideas that make the new event. They provide the energy of the Exodus, and they define its direction.³⁷

Even without a formulation for how one might bring about emancipation, the idea itself, even in the form of an empty form, still works to bind individuals to one another. Indeed, the idea of emancipation, as long as we are thinking, conceiving, and theorizing its possible formulation, exists, as a form or a specter, awaiting to be filled in. It is the idea that precedes us: temporality is changed. When we conceive of an idea, this thing we have dreamed up, floats before us, awaiting the act of our filling it in. It is a future that exists in the present and yet it is constructed of the past. A shared idea of emancipation binds and drives. It provides, in other words, what is lacking in the structure of capitalism (a thrust to propel us from the infinite flow and repetition of sameness and a bind that binds atomized individuals to one another). And because this idea is constructed by the proletariat, the “nothing” of capitalism, we have a something constructed of nothing, a something that otherwise does not exist. It is as Hegel writes, “Never before, since the sun has been in the sky and the planets have turned around it, had man stood on his head, that is, based himself on the idea and constructed reality according to it.”³⁸

The world the proletariat is intent on bringing about is one that does not yet exist: it exists entirely within the realm of the imagination. Because what occurs in one’s mind is entirely subjective, insistence on this imagined reality is madness. As Hegel articulates, madness occurs when a subject takes a merely individual subjective representation to be objective truth. The subject is “creating some content or other from its own resources and regarding this purely subjective item as something objective and *fixing* it in place.”³⁹ When a subject is cognizant “of the contradiction between their merely subjective representation and objectivity, and yet cannot give up this representation but insists on making it an actuality or annihilating what is actual”⁴⁰ this is also considered madness. Thus, the refusal to accept the capitalist world as it is and the resolve to make actual an imagined world can be described as madness.

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37 Walzer 1986, p. 40.

38 Hegel 1963, p. 447.

39 Hegel 2007, p. 124.

40 Ibid., p. 126.

A subject's determination to forsake their self interest for the larger cause of communal emancipation mediates the appearance of possibility. Though one does not know when or in what form such an appearance will occur, one now knows that it will. Further, one's commitment to emancipation is a form of subject formation. When one makes such a determination, they are no longer the same. In the moment of determination a subject lets go of everything they knew and everything they believed up until that moment. In that moment, they enter the void of unknowing. Such a decision is a form of action, an activity (*in der Tat*) which immediately becomes fact. Conjuring this new reality into being brings about the possibility of its appearance because once the subject places the communal before the individual, the world is flipped upside down. The reality of capitalism where each individual thinks only of themselves, their needs and wants, is put on its head. When one makes this determination, everything changes. Now that everything is changed, now that the world is upside down, traces or forms of possibility become visible.

By engaging in this act of determination, the subject is already engaged in the emancipatory struggle. As Etienne Balibar writes, "in action" also means that we are speaking of an *activity (Tatigkeit)*, an enterprise unfolding in the present to which individuals are committed with all their physical and intellectual powers."⁴¹ The action the proletariat is engaged in is one that is both physical and intellectual. In this way, we have a coming together of what has been made disparate, the separation of intellectual and physical labor. We have already, in this one discrete movement, a revolutionizing of revolutionizing. Marx's concept that philosophy has only theorized but must now act here becomes actualized. The worker becomes philosopher. If the philosopher is one who completes philosophy, who, once they have completed the task of philosophy, vanishes along with philosophy, then something else happens with the worker-philosopher. Here, instead, we are speaking of the Hegelian structure where one gains knowledge through an encounter with error, the annihilation of everything one knows, and by entering into the unknown. Or, as Marx writes "proletarian revolutions, like those of the nineteenth century, criticise themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh."⁴² This mode of thinking stands in contrast to capitalism, a system of infinite repetition which, instead of encountering error and learning from it, sublates error into its very structure. Such a system blindly transcends its limits but without acknowledging these limits.

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41 Balibar 1995, p. 22.

42 Marx 1979, p. 106-107.

The German word for impossible is *ausgeschlossen*, meaning that which is “excluded” or “barred. That which is impossible is not non-existent but, rather, is beyond definition. For Lacan, the impossible is that which exists beyond the limit. It exists, but one must move beyond the limit in order to reach it. For Hegel, what is finite is “not what is true.”⁴³ Rather, it is a “*transition and a passage beyond itself*.”⁴⁴ In Hegel’s description of spirit’s becoming, this finitude is an “end,” a form of death through which spirit must pass in order to become. This annihilation presents infinite unknowing, and thus, doubt. Nonetheless, spirit must also kill this doubt by moving through it. In *Philosophie des Geistes* Hegel describes the moment where spirit recognizes its limitation as one where it can adhere to this limit or, instead, by recognizing this limit, it can move through it, an act Hegel describes as an act of madness. The marking of a limit defines the subject: I know what I am by determining what I am not.⁴⁵ Each time a subject posits something they fall back into the void of their abstract interior, back into madness. This means that to become a subject one must necessarily move through madness: madness remains a possibility for all. This is why for Hegel madness is “an essential stage in the development of the soul.”⁴⁶ For Hegel the consideration of limitations as fixed, and thus, insurmountable, is the worst of virtues, a form of vanity.⁴⁷ What Hegel describes as vanity is self-doubt which, due to its extreme self consciousness, is a form of self-centeredness, “This vanity will emerge in the development of the mind itself as the mind’s extreme immersion in its subjectivity and its innermost contradiction and thus its turning point, as *evil*.” It is through the process of moving beyond its limitations and by emptying out its doubt about moving into this unknowing, that spirit transcends and becomes.

Self doubt can be understood as a form of self consciousness, a fear of what will happen. In contrast, anxiety is the terror of the unknown as one enters into it. Anxiety, for Lacan, is the suspension between a moment where the subject no longer knows where they are and a future where they will never be able to refind themselves.⁴⁸ As for doubt “Anxiety is not doubt, anxiety is the cause of doubt.”⁴⁹ Self doubt, as Hegel writes,

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43 Hegel 2007, p. 22.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., p. 114.

47 Ibid., p. 22.

48 Lacan 1991, p. 226.

49 Lacan 2014, p. 76.

must be annihilated. Anxiety marks the of proximity of the unknown. One must live with anxiety. This designation of self doubt versus anxiety and vanity versus becoming mirror the difference between two kinds of terror. On one hand, we have the terror of those in charge, a terror of what the people might do were they to awaken to reality, and on the other hand we have the terror of those who revolt. The former is the terror Sophie Wahnich describes when she writes of a “mechanized” terrorism, one that constrains its subjects from within.⁵⁰ The terror of those who resist can be divided again into two: that of those who engage in a blind fury that is pure feeling, an empty negativity, and one that is a construction, one whose action serves a precise, predetermined purpose. We might divide these two further into two: one that is self annihilating and one that is other-annihilating. The one is liberating or affirmative while the other is negative, destructive. Liberating terror is one that is bound to the interior, while terror that is other-annihilating is concerned with the external. The former is one that is not against. Its act is not meant to communicate with the other, rather, it is formed entirely from within the subject’s interior. In this way it is akin to Lacan’s act and to Benjamin’s divine violence. The terror one must enter into is self-annihilating because its action is not one that is self-valorizing. In other words, such an act is one without a self. Though terror is the highest level of anxiety, it is essential for overcoming finitude, as Badiou writes:

None of that which overcomes finitude in the human animal, subordinating it to the eternity of the True through its incorporation into a subject in becoming, can ever happen without anxiety, courage and justice. But, as a general rule, neither can it take place without terror.⁵¹

Freedom, anxiety, and terror are, thus, intrinsically linked.

The French Revolution, as Wahnich writes, is an intolerable historical event due to its terror and our abhorrence for this terror.⁵² As such, we are unable to examine it. Like Dupuy’s catastrophe, the French Revolution becomes an impossible historical event. Because the two share this similarity it makes it possible to use Dupuy’s analysis for our avoidance of past historical events. When we acknowledge our inability to accept the French Revolution due to its terror we can bracket off our acceptance of it and, by doing so, examine it. Something like “I know I can’t bear to examine the French Revolution due to its terror and my abhorrence for this terror. Because I know I am unable to look at it, I am

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50 Wahnich 2012, p. 28.

51 Badiou 2009, p. 88.

52 Wahnich 2012, p. 3.

setting this knowing aside, and, as a result, I am now able to examine the French Revolution.” This return to the French Revolution is crucial because it marks the rupture where the world in which we are currently trapped, took place. One question, perhaps, is how to (re) enter what this ending is. This means we need to find a means to (re) enter what amounts to a place holder, or locate the place where this rupture initially occurred and repeat it (but with difference). It might also entail locating and entering its emission, its *Ausstoß*, that which its appearance in the material world resulted in, “The *other-worldly beyond* of this, its actuality, [which] hovers over the corpse of the vanished self-sufficiency of real being, or the being of faith, and it hovers there only as an exhalation of stale gas, an exhalation of the empty *être suprême*.”⁵³ By disavowing the French Revolution, we remain barred outside the possibility of returning to this site where the possibility of revolutionary action continues to exist.

Repetition and forgetting coincide. Forgetting, because it is a knowing that is disavowed. Bracketed away in the unconscious, it awaits its reawakening vis-à-vis retroactivity when it will reappear as a form of repetition. And repetition, as a means of forgetting, because when something is repeated, something else is secreted along with it, something that remains enclosed in forgetting until it is explicitly drawn to the surface. Both serve as a means for placing on hold—repetition, because it exists as an empty structure waiting to be filled in, a specter, and forgetting, because, though it suggests a lack, it adds something. The so-called failed attempts at emancipation appear markedly different with this element added to it. These unfulfilled revolutions mark the site of a truth yet to come, as all events do. We know there is the possibility for something other than what we have now because previous attempts have failed which means there was, at the time of their failure, a possibility. This possibility did not vanish. It remains, a form not yet materialized, awaiting to be filled in. Describing the aftermath of May 1968, Dellwo explains “What will become of something that happens, of an event, is, as you know, not what comprises its whole potential.”⁵⁴ The French Revolution keeps repeating, revolutionizing, the result of which is a world of infinite repetition and reproduction in which nothing new ever happens. In contrast, other, failed attempts at emancipation, though incomplete, are structurally different in that, though they did not result in emancipation, they were not completed. Such “failed” attempts at emancipation leave a trace due to their not having been completed: there exists an opening, a specter of possibility. They also provide evidence of the possibility of an outside to capitalism. With these past attempts, a window appears, an entry into something entirely

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53 Hegel 2018, p. 341.

54 Dellwo 2018, p. 359.

new and, though this historical moment exists materially in the past, the specter of its possibility continues to exist, awaiting our intervention. What is needed is another form of madness, not the madness of capital, but rather the madness that has been disavowed, bracketed off, expelled from the realm of what is possible. This expelled madness, this something that is nothing, this nothing that exists, but peripherally, this other form of madness, is one that might help us locate the possibility of emancipatory possibility.

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Marx's Class Theory 2.0

Roberto Fineschi

Abstract: This paper proposes an updated version of Marx's theory of class. First, it criticizes the traditional interpretation of the subsumption of the labor process under capital as a historic reconstruction of 19th century's British capitalism. Second, it tries to outline an articulated definition of history that interprets Marx's theory of capital - and the subsumption section in particular - as a logical development of forms instantiated in historical figures. Finally, from these premises, it claims a functional/logical concept of class in late "crepuscular" capitalism still based on Marx's theory, both at the Western and global level.

Keywords: class struggle, historical materialism, dialectics, Marxism, crepuscular capitalism.

Premises. Marx as a political thinker and marxism(s)

Karl Marx is a political thinker. After more than a century of "philosophy of praxis" this sentence is not surprising. However, what are the strong points of his thought that allow us to develop a theory of political historical action? This is related to the complex question of the relationship between Marx and Marxism on which I can spend just a few words. What is Marxism? Or it would be better to say Marxisms, plural, because of the proliferation of several positions that hardly can be reduced to the same foundation, except for the reference to the name Marx.¹ In general, one could define Marxism as a movement that tries to apply his theory with political goals that mainly consist in going beyond the capitalist mode of production and creating a Communist Society. To what extent the different historical attempts to do it are connected with Marx's own theory?

Marx has realized just a little of his extended project; his original six book plan was left unfinished.² Just the first book on *Capital* was mostly completed and a little of the second on wage labor and the third on rent, that became part of it. In spite of these limits, on their basis I think that we can outline a consistent draft of a general theory of the capitalist mode of production as a historically determined phase of human reproduction in nature. This theory is presented in a series of manuscripts written in the periods 1857-1883 and in the several editions of *Capital* vol. 1 published by Marx himself.³

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1 See an outlook in *Storia del Marxismo Einaudi* (Hobsbawm 1978-82), or other classic contributions by Favilli 1996 and Corradi 2005 in regards to the Italian experience.

2 Marx's plan included books on capital, wage work, rent, state, international trade, and world market. See Marx 1859, p. 99) and the letter to Lassalle February 22nd 1858 (Marx and Engels 1973, p. 550 ff.).

3 Several materials are now finally available in the new critical edition of Marx's and Engels' works, the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*. For an outline see Bellofiore and Fineschi 2009.

A relevant aspect regards the level of abstraction of this theory: in my understanding, it is very high. This means that the laws that it describes are at an *epochal* level, and don't need to have any empirical *immediate* correspondence in facts. Hence, they can't be applied to contingencies as such. In order to have theories that might be concretely and politically used we need further developments. *Capital* is a manual neither of politics nor revolution; it is about the principles on whose base these further developments are possible. So, whatever Marxism can't be identical to or a direct application of Marx's general theory of the capitalist mode of production: there are mediations to more concrete levels of abstractions that Marx himself did not articulate in his time and that, moreover, are different from time to time. Marx and Marxism are connected, but they don't coincide⁴.

If Marx did not have enough time to elaborate a coherent political doctrine on the basis of his general theory of capitalism, this does not mean that he was not politically engaged during his lifetime or did not have political goals; also in the period he was working on *Capital*, he was personally involved in apical positions in the International workers association. In *Capital* vol. 1, Marx tried his best to contextualize his abstract theory, and find a connection with the transformation of reality - in particular in the section on labor subsumption under capital, where he wrote the famous sentence about the expropriation of the expropriators.⁵ His writings on the *Paris Commune* or *The critique of the Gotha's program*, etc. show how Marx investigated the issue of a possible future society and its organization. The question is whether these works can be organically integrated within his theory of capital; if we consider his methodology connected with the descent from abstract to concrete, it seems difficult to take them as organic parts. The gap between the general theory of capital and its possible application was not properly fulfilled by Marx himself; however, since he wanted to take political positions, he himself skipped mediations and operated at a more concrete level of abstraction with categories that belonged to a higher one. He made two steps: *(i)* in the doctrine of the production of surplus-value in *Capital*, he demonstrated that exploitation of the working class takes place, and capital and wage labor are the two extremes of the essential relation of the capitalism mode of production; *(ii)* since in that specific historical moment, the general figure of workers in England - the most advanced capitalist country - was the factory working class, Marx identified with it the subject he needed to address the issue of the organization of a political movement. Marx's attempt was legitimate as long as we take into account these two conditions; but is also limited by those.

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4 On the complex issue of the level of abstraction of Marx's theory of capital, see Fineschi 2013.

5 Marx 1991, pp.684-685

I think that his theory is suitable for larger application, if we distinguish between *logical* “forms” and *historical* “figures” in the framework of his theory of political subjectivity. This essay is dedicated to this distinction, and to show how it allows to outline a more advanced definition of class and class struggle that provides us with a more sophisticated theory that may still be used for the analysis and transformation of contemporary dynamics.

1. Defining “historical” (*res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum*)

The soundness of Marx’s theory of classes and, in particular, the traditional interpretation of the factory working class as privileged political subject need to be investigated in depth in particular in the fourth section of *Capital* vol. 1, which deals with the subsumption of the labor process under capital; there Marx investigates the transformations of the labor process in the capitalist mode of production as a moment in the exposition of the production of relative surplus-value. We need in particular to focus on two points:

1. What is the meaning of “historical” in regards to the capitalist mode of production. In my opinion Marx does not refer to events that occurred in England in the second half of the 19th century (the second Industrial revolution). Marx uses this period as a historical example of a *conceptual* argument. At this latest level, “historical” has an *ontological* meaning: it is not the description or inclusion of facts that took place in a certain moment, but a theoretical framework where a dialectical, “formal” development takes place; human reproduction happens in a way that implies structural passages and transformations; internal, logical phases. This is their “history”, a totality articulated in phases that come in a succession one out of the other. *Logically determined temporal moments of a totality.*

2. A distinction between these two meanings of history (a factual one vs. a logical one) allows us to distinguish between “forms” and “figures” as integrated categories through which we can identify historical subjects.

On the one hand, historical can refer to the narrative of events of the past (*historia rerum gestarum*); under this regard, *Capital* is historical inasmuch as it describes the situation of the factory working class in 19th century’s England. In this case “historical” simply means transitory; it is not about *capital’s time*, but *capital in time*. If *Capital* is a *description* of how production worked in that period, it is just useless for today,

since empirically that world does not exist anymore in those terms. My conviction is that Marx's intention is different. He refers to the logic of how events happen: it is not about the narrative of how they happened, but the logic of their happening (*res gestae*). In *Capital* there are many historical descriptions of facts, but this is not their actual "temporality". The theory of the capitalist mode of production is a structured model that has an internal proper dynamic, which is logically determined by laws. These laws imply changes, passages through stages. The model is temporal because it has a starting point (which is exogenous), a development due to its own laws (that posits that presupposed starting point as its own result), and a breaking point after which it stops developing but gets blocked by the same laws that permitted that development. This is its "end", in the sense that from that moment on those same laws that made it proceed, now block it. This is its own internal time, capital's time, defined in a purely logical way.⁶

We have a theoretical model where production, based on value and its self-valorization, expands to the world; a development of a material content in its specific historical form. But content and form are not separated; content exists through its specific forms that are *its own* way of existence; therefore, content changes through *its* forms and is always "formed content" (*Forminhalt*); it is a process. At a certain point the process stops running smoothly because the formed content has reached a stage that potentially implies a new content-form dialectic, but is still stuck in the old form. Those laws of the capitalist mode of production that allowed a development of the productive forces, now block it: they are used only to the extent that permits capital valorization. At some point, within capitalism, productive capacity becomes overcapacity.⁷ Overproduction crisis is the form through which this contradiction manifests itself. Laws are "historical" in as much as have an internal development that brings them to surpass themselves (the Hegelian *Aufhebung*).⁸

We can hence outline three different meanings of "history" or "historical":

1. Historical as a temporally determined logic of the capitalist mode of production (res gestae). The capitalist mode of production has

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6 Antonio Labriola put emphasis that under the term "history" we can distinguish two different meanings (Labriola 1977, p. 320 ff.). A distinction that was already in Hegel, but with a different connotation (Hegel 1995b, p. 83).

7 In a few words: this is due, on the one hand, to the process being based on the exploitation of living labor (something without which the exploitation process could not happen), and, on the other, to the trend to expel living labor out of the labor process.

8 On this see Mazzone 1987. I have dealt with the logical dynamic of capital in Fineschi 2021. For a distinction between "historicism" and "historicity", see Diaz 1956 and Luporini 1974.

an immanent *logical temporality*, determined by the development of the dialectic of value and use-value; it has a starting point and an end which do not coincide with the events of whatever past, present or future factual capitalism. It is historical because it has an internal time; it corresponds to its internal logic of self-surpassment. In order to conceptualize “real” dynamics, we need to move forward and reach a much more concrete level of abstraction, which includes capitalisms (plural) and specific configurations, determined in space and time. I call this *Logic 1*. If such a model has a beginning and an end, in its starting moment it finds conditions that are not posited by itself and that qualitatively don’t correspond to its proper functioning. This is overcome by the development of the system itself on the basis of its own laws. It is then not about describing the events of this process, but explaining the logic of this adequation, where exogenous presuppositions are posited as endogenous elements by the system itself. I call *logic 2* this *process of adequation*, which is a specific moment of logic 1.

2. History as an interconnection of logical temporalities, where the current one is a chapter of a broader, still logical process (res gestae). If we accept that the capitalist mode of production has a starting point and an end, it is implied that there is a “before” and an “after”, other phases in which the labor process takes place in different forms. The presuppositions of the capitalist mode of production resulted as an output from those forms; similarly the capitalist mode of production creates outputs as possible inputs of a future society. This does not require automatic passages, but just potentiality. The present capitalist mode of production posits itself because of its own logic as a ring in a chain, a moment of a more general history of human reproduction in nature. The investigation of these other models of other “historical” periods is still *logical*, theoretical in the same way the theory of the capitalist mode of production is.

3. History in the sense of historiography (historia rerum gestarum). All these categories outline a concept of temporality that allows further investigations in the empirical field, and classification and periodization of facts from the past on the basis of a conceptual framework; once I know what the capitalist mode of production is, I can move to historiographical analysis. This is the history of historians.

We can finally argue the following:

- Marx’s theory of capital investigates the logic 1 and 2 of the capitalist mode of production.
- This makes the capitalist mode of production a moment in the broader history of human reproduction.
- Marx’s theory is not a mere description of the 19th century’s British capitalism; historical descriptions in his theory are empirical examples of logical laws.⁹

If we talk about the capitalist mode of production as a determined *historical* phase of human reproduction in nature, we mean a *logical temporality*. The relationship between theoretical model and reality is mediated: in order to descend to lower levels of abstractions, where we can talk of “capitalisms” (the Italian, French, 19th or 20th century’s one), more theoretical passages are necessary; they as such can’t mechanically be deduced from the general concept of capital; just at that lower level we can deal with political issues that can’t be properly investigated without considering more concrete configurations, and even contingencies.

2. Subsumption of the labor process under capital

These theoretical assumptions clear the field from those interpretations that reduce the “historical” character of capital to a generalization of historical facts that happened in the 19th century.¹⁰ The point is instead: what are the form-determinations (*Formbestimmungen*) within this framework? In particular in the subsumption of the labor process under capital?

The subsumption of labor under capital has been mainly studied isolating the fourth section of *Capital* vol. 1 from the more general logical framework in which it is placed. In my opinion, this is a relevant flaw, since it is a moment of a general theory. The first consequence of such an extrapolation is to consider the chapters on “cooperation”, “manufacture” and “industry” just as descriptions or narrative of the Industrial revolution’s capitalism, or the 19th century’s British one.¹¹ To some extent Marx encouraged such a reading, because he inserted

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9 The role of factual elements - “history” - in the theoretical development of a capital theory has been the subject of an intense debate that is not possible to recall here. For a survey see Fineschi 2009a and 2009b.

10 Here we hear the echo of Engels’ historicist understanding of Marx’s logical methodology. See Fineschi 2008, ch. 1.2.

11 On the one hand, this would represent nothing but the continuation of the chronological succession begun in the first three books, interpreted as “simple commodity production”.

lots of historical examples and contextualizations probably thinking this would clarify his argument. Paradoxically, this hid the theoretical framework those descriptions were examples of. We need hence to take into account both the theoretical complexity and the different phases of elaboration of that part in the different drafts since 1857.

Forms of labor process subsumed under capital

The notion of labor process and that of production in general do not coincide with the capitalist form of labor process or production. We find at least two different levels of abstraction:

1. Labor process in general as such does not represent any concrete form of production (ch. 7 of *Capital* vol. 1; ch. 5 in the German edition); it shows the abstract elements that are common to every form of production; therefore, it does not permit distinguishing any of them.
2. A mode of production specifies the determined modalities in which those abstract elements of the labor process combine, and permits conceptualizing particular forms of production.

Given that, the question is: what specific, historic determinations does the labor process assume in the capitalist mode of production? *Capital's* chapters on subsumption answer this question.

Production of surplus-value is the logical condition of existence of the capitalist mode of production: the surplus of time over the labor time necessary for labor-power to be reproduced; a part that is appropriated by capital. Labor day is then split into two parts: the necessary labor time, and surplus-labor. If this second part is increased without changing the given social conditions of production, it is called *production of absolute surplus-value*; if instead production conditions are changed so that the necessary part of the labor day is reduced thanks to an intensified labor productivity, it is called *production of relative surplus-value*. Actually, the former can define the process of production in its “static” moment, the latter in its “dynamic” one: both co-exist in different stages of the same social valorization process. If we study the transformation of the labor process in the production of relative surplus-value, we find relevant points for an updated class theory.

The first form we encounter is *cooperation*. A first important moment is that the finalism of the process gets doubled: on the one hand the goal of the global action, the collective plan under which individuals are subsumed, and on the other the one of each individual worker; the first directs and regulates the second. This cooperative “organism”

transcends the individual limits and so increases labor productivity. There is a positive side: the capitalist mode of production is that stage in the history of human reproduction when sociality is not just external to the production process (interaction of independent producers), but also internal (interaction of producers subsumed to reach a common general goal); sociality becomes a constitutive part of the human reproduction in the same act of producing. This second form existed also in other historical periods, but was linked to specific productions or sectors, while now becomes the essence itself of it, since capital competition imposes that to all producers. Cooperation is the first step of a logical and historical transformation, which creates humanity as a matter of fact and not just as intellectual abstraction. It is the universalization of individual work and vice versa Marx had talked about already since the *Grundrisse*.¹² If cooperation does not necessarily change work modalities, capital arranges all those changes necessary to improve it toward a much more productive, integrated process.

Manufacture is the first specific capitalist form of production; it first requires cooperation, and then generalizes it, since it breaks down the activity into parts: individual workers are not able anymore to realize the entire product, but just a piece of it; hence, a structural interdependence with others is now technically set, and this modifies the form of production.¹³ Thanks to the manufacturer division of labor, *being-part* becomes an essential quality of labor-power.¹⁴ Labor expenditure is logically now possible only in combination. If, on the one hand, we now have sociality as a structural dimension of human reproduction, on the other this appears as a capital's form of existence and domination.¹⁵ However, this specific form is not adequate to the requirements of the concept of capital, yet: the individual skills of the partial-worker are still necessary; they are a product of capital, but still inadequate to its full functioning and represent at the same time the progress and the limit of manufacture,¹⁶ because a hierarchy of different skills contrasts the objective needs for capital valorization.¹⁷ Therefore, a technical contradiction emerges inside manufacture itself,¹⁸ labor needs to evolve toward a purely formal activity opposed to capital, and therefore

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12 Marx 1976-81, p.187

13 Marx 1976-82, vol. I, p. 253; Marx 1991, p.304

14 Ibid., vol I, p.253

15 Ibid., p. 292; 1991, p. 325 f.

16 Ibid., 1976-82, p. 2021

17 Marx 1991, p.315

18 Ibid., p.332.

manufacture constitutes a (logically) transitory phase to a higher level that might overcome these limits.¹⁹

The factory system is the most adequate capitalist mode of production, which implies a further re-determination of the labor process: transforming means of production into a machine system determines an inversion of the still subjective character of manufacture into an objective organization of production,²⁰ where the worker becomes not just part, but an appendix.²¹ Work conditions use workers. At the same time, mastering science and its application to technological development becomes a crucial factor in the organization of the productive system, and valorization of capital. The social power of the general intellect appears however under the form of capital as one of its instruments.

It follows that the specific capitalist forms of production - the concrete forms that the labor process assumes - are characterized by: 1) internal cooperative nature, 2) the individual worker as being-part, 3) finally its being-appendix (toward their possible complete substitution through machines as long as their activity becomes more and more formalistic). These are the determinations of form (*Formbestimmungen*)²² of the labor process once it is subsumed under capital²³.

Subsumption, logical and historical temporality

Subsumption is a logical model of adequation. As we saw above, this implies a specific logical meaning of “historical”, of the specific temporality of capital: Marx needed to explain from a *theoretical and not merely descriptive point of view*, capital’s internal time. If, in order to be historical, the capitalist mode of production has a logical beginning, development, and conclusion, the subsumption theory is part of this explanation. In its ideal starting moment, capital finds conditions that were not posited by itself, that do not correspond to the way it works; hence there is a phase of adequation with specific characteristics, which I tried to summarize above. This is necessary because of the logic of the concept of capital, and does not need to correspond to empirical facts, but explain the theory of its historical transformation. Only on the basis

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19 Marx 1976-82, p. 2018

20 Marx 1991, p. 346 ff.

21 Marx 1991, p. 378 ff.; 1976-82, p. 2015 ff.

22 ‘Form determination’ refers to logical categories of a theoretical framework. ‘Formalistic’ refers on the contrary to inessential aspects that don’t affect form determinations.

23 In the preparatory works to *Capital*, we don’t have as many historical examples as in the published work. There Marx mainly focused on the logical laws of movement of the system; only later he looked for confirmation in empirical data. .

of such a theory, empirical facts can be reconnected to a general model and so explained. This corresponds to what I called above *logic 2*.

Once capital has gone beyond this adequation phase and properly works, those forms of its dynamics appear as moments that can be present or not in different stages at a lower level of abstraction; this basically depends on the valorization needs of capital, which can imply “returns”, once more variables and circumstances are included. These aspects are to be dealt with in the theory of cycle and crisis, which is not a point at this level of abstraction; therefore, it would be mistaken to mechanically apply this formulation to those lower levels.

3. For a definition of the “class” concept. Forms and figures

We can now finally come to a logical and not empirical definition of class by distinguishing between forms and figures.²⁴ I consider the specific “forms”, that is logical categories, that define the new characteristics of the labor activity within the labor process of the capitalist mode of production the following: 1) structural cooperation of workers, 2) being-part of each individual worker, 3) being-appendix of them, toward the potential substitution of living labor by machines as long as their activity becomes more and more formalistic. Cooperation, manufacture and industry are instead historical “figures” of those theoretical forms, that is historical factual configurations in which those forms appeared for the first time or significantly.

Forms and figures are not identical: if they were, if a determined figure disappeared, also the respective form would. This would have two critical consequences: current capitalism would be something different than Marx’s; factory workers would be the only possible historical subject. If instead we distinguish between forms and figures, what matters is forms and their logic; therefore, the eventual disappearance of factory workers would not necessarily imply the disappearance of cooperative work, partial character of labor or transformation of workers into an appendix, all subsumed under the valorization process of capital; those forms can exist in other different figures, whose logic is still the one dictated by those forms. The new historical content is the creation of a “collective worker”,²⁵ which is the structured, integrated global worker, which comes to existence thanks to the capitalist mode of production, and constitutes the “material content” of

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24 In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel shows the different phenomenal “figures” (*Gestalten*) through which consciousness makes experience and becomes aware of itself, and finally reaches the stage of Absolute knowledge; while in its *Science of logic* and *Encyclopedie*, he exposes the systematic “forms” phenomenally represented by those figures from the standpoint of Absolute knowledge. I think that it is useful to use this distinction also for Marx, although the terminological application by him is not rigorous.

25 Marx 1991, p.456.

a possible, future, “social form”. This collective worker does not coincide with the factory worker in capitalism, which, again, is just a figure of that.

In Marxian terms, the determination of the class concept is then *functional*: it depends on the specific role and modalities through which subjects realize their production and reproduction. This objective determination is established independently from their consciousness (they can subjectively be convinced of the opposite of what they do if hegemonically subjugated). The phenomenal perception of their objective action takes place at the superstructural level through historical figures. Understanding these figures as manifestations of respective forms is not always easy: it is more simple in determined phases (industrial system, factory worker), less in others (automation, computerization, etc.). Always, but in particular when the perception is not easy, the functional definition of class (based on the role in social reproduction) gets confused with a sociological classification based on income level, living standard, etc. In the latter, aggregation is not based on functions but on phenomenal data, and a class becomes a summation of empirically identified individuals.²⁶

In the capitalist mode of production, the two functional poles of the production relationship are not capital and factory workers, as it was interpreted for a long time, but capital and wage work: the productive forces are labor and means of production; they get polarized on the one hand as wage-workers (labor-power - labor *in potentia*) and capitalists (bearer of means of production) on the other. The core relationship of each mode of production is defined by the specific form through which these elements get combined, a specific connection of dead and living labor: wage workers and capitalists are these specific forms in the capitalist mode of production. None of the two poles can be conceived without the other. Overcoming capitalism implies then not destroying capital, but moving to a different configuration of that connection. Marx calls “capital” both the connection as a whole (the capitalist mode of production) and one of the two poles of that connection (capitalist as bearer of means of production); flattening to the same level these two different meanings can lead to serious theoretical and political mistakes. Capital is not even just capitalists’ decision making; the range of their possible choices is limited within the possibilities of the reproduction of the capitalist system, whose general trends are beyond their control. The same on the workers side: no subjective action can be successful if they don’t take into account the general trends of the system as such.

Understanding factory workers as figures does not mean that they are not forms: in that specific historical configuration, that figure was the most matching concrete instantiation of the capitalist form of movement;

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26 The second meaning corresponds to the most common English use such as “upper class”, “middle class”, etc. Other languages have different words for those concepts; in Italian f.i. we have “ceto” and “classe”; in German “Gesellschaftsschichte” and “Klasse”; in French “rang” or “extraction” and “classe”. In common use, they get frequently mixed.

the point is to go beyond just figures and see how other figures are more matching instantiations of those forms in other configurations.

Definitions

Let's now expand the picture and try a more general systematization; the formal elements to functionally identify the wage-worker class are the following (class definition 1):

1. *Exchanging labor-power with capital*, receiving a salary. This can take place in the most different, irregular forms of salary, from the traditional ones to the hidden contemporary variants of piecework, alleged freelance work, etc.

2. *Valorizing capital*. One's labor expenditure is part of a process that, in the intention of capitalists, valorizes anticipated capital. Capital valorization means not only producing value and surplus-value, but also participating in all those passages that are *as necessary* as production so that actual valorization might take place, that is including circulation, sell, promotion, etc. If produced commodities are not sold, there is no capital valorization.

3. *Labor process takes place in the above-mentioned forms*: cooperative work, partial worker, appendix worker, with doubled finalism: individual and global, where the global one is posited by capitalists. The more formalistic the living labor, the easier its replacement with a machine if this increases capital valorization. Here is the core contradiction of the capitalist mode of production: on the one hand it is based on exploitation of living labor, on the other expels living labor out of the labor process.

In current "crepuscular" capitalism,²⁷ the long run dynamics of capitalist production has created a tendential growth in the technical composition of capital²⁸, that is the ratio between machines and living labor has dramatically increased. Less and less workers are necessary in the production of single units of product. Good, stable employment becomes more and more difficult in the difficult valorization process of over-productive capital. As a consequence, the elastic character of unemployment gets more and more rigid, and re-hiring workers fired because of automation becomes

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27 For an outline of this concept see Fineschi 2022.

28 Setting aside the question of organic composition, which is the relationship between technical and value composition. Tangentially, it is to highlight that in the traditional debate on the tendential fall of rate of profit the focus has mostly been only on value composition.

extremely difficult. A growing mass of unemployed is a systematic effect of crepuscular capitalism. We need to consider this in a broader definition of class and class conflict. We can outline three categories that expand the previous framework (class definition 2):

1. Workers that are active in the actual capitalistic production as defined before (in class definition 1).
2. A growing mass of potential workers within the advanced capitalist system that can't find a job; they live by their wits or of the crumbs from the table (inclusive of State assistance shaped in different forms). However, they are not outside the system, since their exclusion is a structural moment of it. Because they are excluded from any collective productive praxis, they don't perceive themselves as class, but just as individuals, as allegedly autonomous atoms; individualist ideologies will easily have a grasp on them. This opens the broader chapter of ideology and self-consciousness.
3. A third relevant level includes that huge mass of people that live in parts of the world that have not been completely subsumed under capitalist production; their system is still part of global capitalist reproduction, since they - either as colonies, or half-colonies, or for commercial trades - are a moment of it, but not in the Western form, that is without having experienced the social transformations and "progress" that took place there. To most of them, the Western world and capital are just imperialism and violence, they have not seen any progress in this relationship. The crucial point however is that they will never experience any progress, since crepuscular capitalism is not in the condition to expand further its production, because of structural overproduction of commodities and capital. In spite of that, they are still a variable of the system, inasmuch as their reproduction, even if not in the Western form, is entangled in the global capitalist one. However, their self-perception and transformation perspectives would be very different from those of the first two groups, affected by pre-modern (or even anti-modern) features and ideologies.

To keep these three souls into the same body and have it fight for a possible different organization of production and reproduction is the multifaceted and complex task we have to deal with. However, this re-configuration of the class concept provides an instrument that at least allows to pave a theoretical way toward class reorganization in a broader sense (class definition 2) on the basis of Marx's theory of capital.

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Marx: Communism as Strategy

Isabelle Garo

Abstract: Marx's thought evolved throughout his life, and this was particularly true of his political thinking. In this respect, the defeat of the 1848 revolution was a turning point, which led him to resume his analysis of class struggles and the issues at stake, while developing a critique of political economy that would give rise to *Capital*. But, far from being separated from each other, these two aspects of his thinking are organised around individual and collective resistance to exploitation and domination, resistance which is the condition for revolutionary mobilisation. Marxian communism, far from being a predefined political construction, is presented as the form of the reappropriation of politics, making the aspiration to individual emancipation the condition and the means of collective emancipation.

Keywords: communism, revolution, state, self-organisation, emancipation, class struggle

Following the defeat of the 1848 revolution, Marx's political thinking, addressing all the concrete issues of the time, became all the more analytical and precise as study of the essential logic of capitalism came to dominate the agenda. From this standpoint, even though he remained politically active, we can say that, from the 1850s, his thought became ever more immanent in his theoretical activity, while casting its net wider. Critical development became one of the main sites of active engagement in a period of relative decline of the revolutionary movement. This is the sense in which Marx described *Capital* as 'the most terrible missile that has yet been hurled at the heads of the bourgeoisie (landowners included)',² after having stated his wish to 'deal the bourgeoisie a theoretical blow from which it will never recover'.³

Another feature of the period, inseparable from the preceding one, is that after 1848 Marx was more than ever attentive to world history. Social and political struggles in France, in England, but also popular revolts in China and India, the American Civil War and slavery, national liberation movements in Ireland and Poland, populist mobilizations in Russia – these afforded opportunities to resume his strategic thinking and sometimes to rectify his previous analyses. Meanwhile, the critique of political economy sought to grasp the contradictions affecting the capitalist mode of production and bourgeois economic science in their

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1 Excerpted with permission from *Communism and Strategy: Rethinking Political Mediations* by Isabelle Garo. Courtesy of Verso Books

2 Marx 1987, p. 358.

3 Ibid., p. 4.

complex logic. The profound unity of these two approaches is what all those commentators who stress the incoherence of Marx's argument have not perceived – indeed, have not wished to perceive. According to them, it is torn between a descriptive and determinist approach, on the one hand, and a historical analysis doing justice to the free initiative of individuals on the other. The other obstacle to an understanding of Marx's political and strategic thought is the standard reading of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, which purports to find in it the summary and last word of Marx's strategic reflection on the subject of communism, reducing revolution to a scenario in two predefined phases.

We must, therefore, read in tandem the texts pertaining to the critique of political economy (principally *Capital* and the preparatory texts) and texts studying the recent conjuncture, which focus on world affairs, the Paris Commune and revolutionary prospects in Russia, highlighting the inter-twining of economic conditions, social processes and political struggles. Marx's texts in this period, different not only in their style but also their concepts and formats, prove to be profoundly united by their object – capitalism – grasped from different angles and viewpoints. They all contribute to one and the same critique in theory and, in practice, of politics. In them, the term communism continues to refer above all to a political struggle and orientation, not to a societal project to be described in its forms and stages. Marx's attention was focused on the contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production and the space they opened up for revolutionary intervention, one of its conditions being precise knowledge of this dialectic, which nurtures awareness of the historical possibilities it is pregnant with. His already old definition of science was refined, allocated the task of identifying laws and tendencies, but also countertendencies, which open up their own field for collective action.

In short, what Marx now called the 'critique of political economy' renewed the initial project with a more coherent integration, in changed conditions, of the various lines of theoretical analysis, on the one hand, and revolutionary intervention on the other. After 1848, this project was reconstructed around a twofold imperative: in-depth analysis of the capitalist mode of production and an analysis of the political situation and redefinition of political intervention assimilating the defeat of 1848. The issue of re-appropriation continued to flexibly unify all the others and invested from within research that sought to be a reflection of its objective. Once again, communism was to be sought in the undertaking itself – something that in no way diminishes its goals, but makes their constant re-working constitutive of their very definition. Given this, mediations are not to be sought in the production of a scenario in stages, but are inscribed in the depths of a process of transformation. For such an objective to acquire concrete scope, consciousness must be collective and organized as a social force. Marx would continue to come

up against this fluctuating, problematic historical premise, like all those today who in the absence of any imminent revolutionary prospect regard radical social change as indispensable.

What needs to be re-opened is the loop of a seemingly circular causality: the diffusion of revolutionary ideas, which is one of the parameters of popular mobilization, is also one of its consequences. Two consequences follow. On the one hand, critical work is always possible and necessary, even though its impact should not be over-estimated. On the other, capitalist exploitation is inseparable from all the forms of domination that condition its reproduction, always striving to turn in on itself the logic of expropriation and alienation. *Capital* and the preparatory texts endeavour both to describe this logic and to overturn it, inaugurating a new kind of knowledge, inseparable from its active social and political dimensions, which it is urgent to explore afresh today. Three themes warrant in-depth treatment, having been broached by the theorists of the alternative studied above. They are the issue of labour and its capitalist appropriation; the question of democracy as conquest; and finally, the requisite combination of forms of emancipation. These three headings all reveal communism to be an attempt at re-appropriation, negation of the negation of a new kind, which remains charged with deploying its mediations in real history.

Labour-Power: A Revolutionary Power

At the heart of social conflict, the communist project is born out of real contradictions, but immediately comes up against the dominant ideology and the spontaneous representations emanating from the capitalist mode of production. For Marx, the discovery of the essential logic of capitalism does not dissolve the appearances that result from it, even though it makes it possible to understand them. As a world turned upside down, set on pursuing the valorization of value not the satisfaction of social needs, capitalism generates inverted representations. The consequences of this thesis are political as well as epistemological. In the pages of the first chapter of Volume One of *Capital* devoted to commodity fetishism,⁴ Marx emphasizes that value ‘transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyph’,⁵ concealing from human beings the nature of their activity. This concealment goes hand in hand with a social organization of production and existence, which explains why its denunciation is not a sufficient condition for its transformation, but why, on the contrary, ‘the veil is not removed from the countenance

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4 William Clare Roberts stresses that fetishism is to be understood as a form of domination rather than a form of false consciousness: see Roberts 2017, p. 110.

5 Marx 1976a, p. 167.

of the social life-process ... until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control.¹⁶ In other words, it is communism as an alternative, actually realized mode of production, rid of the exploitation of labour and capitalist commodity relations, which makes possible an understanding of the social process that is also its precondition. On the one hand, *Capital* represents this endeavour in advance; on the other, the famous description of a 'free association' of human beings that immediately precedes this passage attempts to impart concrete shape to the alternative via fiction.

In the society imagined in *Capital* Volume One, chapter 1, labour time is what makes it possible to measure individual participation: 'the social relations of the individual producers, both towards their labour and the products of their labour, are here transparent in their simplicity, in production as well as in distribution.'¹⁷ But how is the leap from one world to another to be conceived? This passage serves as a hypothetical counterpoint the better to underscore the opacity of the capitalist economic world. Communism here is a thought experiment, the presupposed abolition of the law of value enabling the rationalization of social relations. Thus, it is expressly presented as the outline of a communism severed from its political dimension, whether it be the struggles that precede it or the steps that punctuate it. But Marx immediately signals that the 'material conditions of existence' which make communism possible are 'in their turn the natural and spontaneous product of a long and tormented historical development',¹⁸ thus recalling the reciprocal causality of conditions and consequences which, by definition, pertains to the political dialectic of real premises. Thus, far from offering the image of an irenic, transparent communist solution, the anticipated extreme difficulty of its establishment is what opens Volume One, at the very point when Marx stresses the inability of classical political economy to explain 'why labour is expressed in value'¹⁹ – in other words, its inability to rationally justify capitalism.

The ensuing chapters transform the theoretical impasse of bourgeois economics into a historical question, focusing on the concrete conditions that made the transition from feudalism to capitalism possible, this historical question also concerning by extrapolation the issue of the transition to communism. Chapter 32, the last chapter of Volume One, devoted to the 'historical tendency of capitalist accumulation', represents the pendant to the Robinsonnade of the first chapter, the issue of communism framing in the strict sense Volume

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6 Ibid., p. 173.

7 Ibid., p. 172.

8 Ibid., p. 173.

9 Ibid., p. 174.

One. It takes up and reworks the Hegelian notion of the 'negation of the negation' already employed by Marx in the third of the 1844 *Manuscripts*. Original capital accumulation has as its condition the 'expropriation of the immediate producers',¹⁰ owners of their means of labour. The previous mode of production combined 'the development ... of the free individuality of the worker' and 'the fragmentation of holdings', imposing strict limits on production and social existence, but furnishing the conditions for its expansion: it 'brings into the world the material means of its own destruction' – in the event, 'the expropriation of the great mass of the people from the soil [that] forms the pre-history of capital'.¹¹ This negation of private ownership of the means of production establishes, through violence and 'under the stimulus of the most infamous, the most sordid, the most petty and the most odious of passions',¹² the social concentration of property and the dispossession of the individual producer, destined to become a proletarian.

The analysis continues with a presentation of the transition from capitalism to communism that seems to credit the thesis of a necessitarian and teleological view of history in Marx, which explains why this passage is generally cited against him. The text does indeed affirm that the increasing centralization of capitalism is accompanied by 'the growth of the co-operative form of the labour process'.¹³ According to Marx, 'the centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds.' And Marx adds: 'capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation. This is the negation of the negation.'¹⁴ The determinist tonality of these lines prompts their extraction from an analysis that is, in fact, much more complex, interspersed with rarely mentioned considerations, which re-inject class struggle and consciousness into social transformation.

In fact, Marx immediately specifies that the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and the passage that is due to lead from capitalism to communism, are profoundly different. Communism is foreshadowed predominantly not on the terrain of property relations and their spontaneous transformation under the impact of unforeseen social circumstances, but within relations of exploitation and the collective

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¹⁰ Ibid., p. 927.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 927-8.

¹² Ibid., p. 928.

¹³ Ibid., p. 929.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 929.

consciousness they generate among those compelled to sell their labour-power. Whereas on the side of capital the logic of monopoly is progressively and mechanically imposed, on the side of workers 'the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation grows; but with this there also grows the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers, and trained, united and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production'.¹⁵

Anonymous logics, analysis of them, and conscious class conflicts intermingle and delineate a singular political space, communism once more being the dynamic of conscious elaboration of its own concrete premises, at the same time as a goal immanent in the restoration of 'individual property on the basis of the achievements of the capitalist era'.¹⁶ And it is precisely the prerequisite of collective consciousness that makes communism the most gigantic effort, without precedent in the course of human history, for conscious control by humanity of its own social organization.

Yet this text does tend to present the transition to communism as inevitable, citing in a note an extract from the *Communist Manifesto* declaring that 'what the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable'.¹⁷ From the standpoint of our present, any such claim is irredeemably dated, even if it remains to examine the character of such retrospection and the other, invisible determinism that haunts it. For the failure of nineteenth- and twentieth-century revolutions no more erases the reality of their outbreak, or the rise of mass working-class organizations in the course of this sequence, than it does the growing urgency of an exit from capitalism, which calls for a precise analysis of the causes of this failure.

The resurfacing of the strategic question amid the present context of general crisis, including of the ruling ideas, encourages us to attend once more to Marx's analyses of the pathways to a possible re-appropriation by workers of the process of production and the social process as a whole, as well as the obstacles to it. The definition of this re-appropriation is extended by Marx beyond the objective of restoring individual property, conceived as a guaranteed right of access to goods and services, in the direction of the conditions of their production and collective control, but also for the purpose of developing individual capacities. The associated producers have to wrest back what, in reality, they never had, but which they are now manifestly lacking: collective control of their conditions of labour and production, and of the

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¹⁵ Ibid., p. 929.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 929.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 930 n. 2.

allocation of the wealth produced. For Marx, by their violence capitalist social relations stamp their form on an activity whose outcomes and also exercise are thereby confiscated, this fundamental dispossession striking the human subject with full force.

Going significantly beyond the traditional critique of private property while including it, this allows Marx to inscribe communism in a long-term history that it ruptures and consummates in equal measure. Marker and motif of this rupture, re-appropriation is also the re-appropriation by social individuals of themselves, in as much as the human essence 'is no abstraction inherent in each single individual', but consists in 'the ensemble of social relations'.¹⁸ Once the scope of the re-appropriation has been redefined, as being not a reversion to an initial state but the fulfilment of unprecedented potentialities, the real difficulty consists in making it a credible, mobilizing political objective, to be placed at the heart of revolutionary strategy. This is precisely the question tackled by Marx both in *Capital* and in his political texts, whether interventionist or analytical, inter-linking the issue of ends with that of mediations.

The communist question must therefore be situated at the centre of the 'laboratory of production'. In the chapters of *Capital* devoted to surplus-value and its extortion, Marx describes the gradual division of labour that ends up pitting 'mental labour' against 'physical labour', which initially belonged to the same labour process.¹⁹ This transformation results in the formation of a 'combination of workers',²⁰ of a collective labourer who brings out the cooperative character of capitalist production. On the other hand, the activity of labour is subjected to the production of surplus-value. The valorization of capital is what steers the whole productive process and subsequently ends up defining productive labour as such: 'the concept of productive labour also becomes narrower.'²¹ This 'narrowing' of the concept goes hand in hand with work's loss of meaning and the lengthening of the working day beyond necessary labour time. This logic makes it possible *a contrario* to define communism as economy of necessary labour time, an egalitarian allocation of the latter and an increase in free time. While not employing the term communism, this is precisely what Marx describes when he affirms that:

the time at society's disposal for the free social and intellectual activity of the individual is greater, in proportion as work is more

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¹⁸ Marx 1976b, p. 7.

¹⁹ Marx 1976a, p. 643.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 643.

²¹ Ibid., p. 644.

and more evenly divided among all the able-bodied members of society ... The absolute minimum limit to the shortening of the working day is, from this point of view, the universality of labour.²²

By contrast, in the capitalist mode of production, the limit concerns only the tendency to extend the working day, reducing the living time of the producer to working time, subtracted from the minimum time required for the reproduction of labour-power. Alienation consists in the tendency of capitalist domination to subject social activity and living time wholly to the valorization of capital. Behind these two modes of production – capitalism and communism – two definitions of human time are ranged against one another. We might add that two conceptions of human individuality clash, even if capitalism, despite all its efforts, cannot reduce labour-power to a commodity and manufacture its own docile, anaesthetized foot soldiers. For the labour-power captured by the logic of value is, and remains, in all modes of production the means of self-development, the site of the formation of capacities but also aspirations to a different life. While capitalist exploitation and domination are indeed exercised at the level of labour-power, resistance to a domination that cannot be total is also manifested there. On condition that it is politically developed into a collective force and a project, this resistance is forever reviving and nurturing the desire for radical social change.

At once objective and subjective, this contradiction stems from the fact that the labour-power purchased by the capitalist 'as' a commodity is not, and cannot be, such. By definition, a capitalist commodity is produced through unpaid surplus-labour for the purpose of extracting surplus-value. The formation of labour-power does not result from a capitalist process of production and its reproduction does not yield surplus-value that workers themselves could appropriate as owners of this labour-power.²³ While the neoliberal ideology of 'self-entrepreneur' abolishes class relations in purely imaginary fashion, purporting to plug accumulation into life itself, Foucault's theorization of biopolitics lends credence to these theses. But the refusal to consider social mediations makes it impossible to conceive the contradictions lodged at the heart of human individuality by capitalism, which trigger a clash between the principle of wage-earning, on the one hand, and the aspiration to free development of oneself and the emancipation of all, on the other. The 1857-58 *Manuscripts* explore this question, emphasizing that real wealth consists in the re-appropriation of time and the expansion of human needs of which the individual is the source, a condition of the flourishing of human capacities.

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22 Ibid., p. 667.

23 Hai Hac 2003, p. 222.

From this viewpoint, the basic spring of resistance to capitalism is not to be found in the anonymous opposition between living labour and accumulated dead labour – Negri's thesis – but in the ever more acute contradiction between the purchase and sale of labour-power, on the one hand, and its formation as concrete individuality, on the other. This contradiction comes to nestle at the very heart of modern subjectivity, for labour-power consists, above all, in the sum total of individual labourers, either coordinated externally by capital which devours their living power, or consciously collaborating in their own rationally and democratically conducted social existence. The production, or, rather, formation, of this labour-power derives from unproductive labour. It aims to reproduce and maintain, but also to educate and socialize, a set of human capacities and physical, nervous, intellectual or artistic characteristics, vulnerable to their increasing capitalist appropriation, but which remain the stake of collective emancipation, especially the emancipation of women, who are primarily allotted the tasks of social reproduction.

Against bourgeois political economy, Marx therefore affirms loud and clear that 'labour is the substance, and the immanent measure of value, but it has no value itself',²⁴ so that 'what the worker sells to the capitalist is not a commodity, but her personal subjection to capitalist during the working day.'²⁵ It is at this precise point that exploitation and domination are bound together and confront the anger they arouse, forming a contradiction which is profoundly economic as well as social and individual: 'it is not labour which directly confronts the possessor of money on the commodity-market, but rather the worker.'²⁶ It is their capacities, at once created and denied, and their emancipation, glimpsed but confiscated, that induce the producers to struggle for the reduction of the working day and, ultimately, against capitalism as such. In the instructions written by Marx on the occasion of the IWA in 1866, he accorded a central place to the issue of labour time, as means and end of an emancipated politics: 'a preliminary condition, without which all further attempts at improvement and emancipation must prove abortive, is the *limitation of the working day*.'²⁷ Marx specifies that it will secure for the workers 'the possibility of intellectual development, sociable intercourse, social and political action',²⁸ attesting to the direct connection in his view between individual and collective emancipation.

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24 Marx 1976a, p. 677.

25 Hai Hac 2003, p. 235.

26 Marx 1976a, p. 677.

27 Marx 1985, p. 187.

28 Ibid, p. 187.

Nevertheless, the tendency to counter the exploitation lodged at the heart of labour-power comes up against a powerful countertendency, which derives from the wage form itself, in that it creates the illusion of the sale of labour at a fair price, masking the exploitation of labour-power from those who suffer it. Marx stresses that the wage form not only conceals the extortion of surplus-labour, giving workers the impression that they sell their labour at its just price, but also introduces relations of domination of a new kind. In the chapter of *Capital* devoted to piece-wages, he indicates that ‘the very form of the wage [renders] superintendence of labour ... to a great extent superfluous’, introducing a hierarchy among labourers which facilitates ‘the exploitation of one worker by another’ as a tool of capitalist exploitation.²⁹ But this type of wage also encourages the extension of the working day, seemingly decided by the wage-earner herself: ‘the wider scope that piece-wages give to individuality tends to develop both that individuality, and with it the worker’s sense of liberty, independence and self-control, and also the competition of workers with each other.’³⁰ This artificial autonomy leads to a general fall in wages, seemingly in response to the aspirations of wage-earners but actually to the desire of capitalists.

However, this tendency, at once alienating and individualizing, corresponds neither to a mere managerial stratagem, nor to subterfuge. It is the promise, never kept but always repeated, of autonomy and self-realization, leading (depending on the circumstances) either to more intense internal competition between the dominated or to rejection of exploitation. The second option requires what Marx in the same passage calls an understanding of ‘essential relations’, highlighting the fact that ‘in their appearance things are often presented in an inverted way’.³¹ Critical knowledge and political rebellion form a whole, just as, conversely, ignorance of capitalist laws and contradictions reinforces seemingly ineluctable domination. The originality of Marx’s approach attaches to the dialectical nature of his analysis of contradictions, which is no mere juxtaposition of opposed tendencies: the capitalist labour process is not alienating in one respect and emancipatory in another, but interweaves these two tendencies at the very heart of the labourer’s individuality and of social relations. Contrary to analyses affirming the consumerist integration of the working-class, in line with the theses of certain Frankfurt School theoreticians, and the relegation of opposition to the margins of the wage-earning class and social existence, the political possibility of its supersession is played out at the very heart of the organization of production and the wage relationship. The problem

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29 Marx 1976a, p. 695

30 Ibid., p. 697.

31 Ibid., p. 677.

consists in knowing how to structure this contradiction to enable its transcendence – that is, the transition to another mode of production, or communism, via the destruction of class domination. And if the word is so rarely used in *Capital*, it is no doubt because the designation of the goal would tend to mask the identification of its motor, located at the heart of the immense dialectic of social relations.

This analysis is developed in the pages that examine the historical progress of the division of labour, which should be read as one of Marx's great texts on alienated subjectivity. The division of labour leads to an extreme parcellization of tasks, so that the worker 'who performs the same simple operation for the whole of his life converts his body into the automatic, one-sided implement of that operation'.³² This de-skilling of the individual producer corresponds to a transfer of skill to 'the collective worker, who constitutes the living mechanism of manufacture, [and] is made up solely of such one-sidedly specialized workers'.³³ Dispossession involves not only collectively produced wealth, but, more fundamentally, the activity of the individual labourer, which has become dead labour objectified in accumulated labour: 'what is lost by the specialized workers is concentrated in the capital which confronts them. It is a result of the division of labour in manufacture that the worker is brought face to face with the intellectual potentialities of the material process of production as the property of another and as a power which rules over him'.³⁴ More than the paradoxical autonomy of the wage-earner, it is the alienating dispossession of the labourer that opens up the converse prospect of communist re-appropriation, requiring all the mediations and the protracted time of social and political struggle. This analysis completes and extends the denunciation of bourgeois property of early communism in the direction of an extended, radicalized critique, which makes it possible to define the objectives of an emancipatory mode of production beyond an egalitarian distribution of wealth. For, if one of the stakes is the re-conquest of their own capacities by the individual, it is the transformation of the whole of the economic and social formation that is its condition as well as its aim. In *Capital*, Marx stresses that capitalism itself creates the need for professional versatility: 'the partially developed individual, who is merely the bearer of one specialized function, must be replaced by the totally developed individual, for whom the different social functions are different modes of activity he takes up in turn'.³⁵ Conceived thus, the condition of re-appropriation is shared knowledge of the overall social process and its contradictions,

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32 Ibid., p. 458.

33 Ibid., p. 458.

34 Ibid., p. 482.

35 Ibid., p. 618.

the elaboration of a critique of political economy. While its modalities are multiple and circumstantial, its goal is single: the recovery of social power, alienated and incorporated into the general machinery under the authoritarian command of capital. But this re-appropriation does not consist in a straightforward return to individual ownership of the means of production, by dint of a non-dialectical conception of the negation of the negation. Individual emancipation involves and realizes the re-conquest of the whole of the production process, as a mode of social existence whose procedures and objects are to be rationally and democratically redirected. This re-conquest begins with struggles for reductions in the working day and in favour of genuinely protective employment law, which should be regarded not as a temporary recourse to law prior to its definitive abolition, but a form of re-appropriation of politics itself, taking cognizance of its juridical dimension.

Therewith a solution is foreshadowed to the problem of replacement of the state by the democratic reorganization of social existence; and the fact that Marx says nothing precise about it is of little moment. For his analysis clearly suggests that it is basically one and the same cleavage that separates capital from the labour process it derives from and severs the state from the social existence of which it is the coercive, administrative 'machinery'. Their kinship is essential. In capitalism, on account of its class logic, the products of human activity congeal, separate and rebound against the latter and against the labourers. It is therefore a single re-appropriation that is to be set in train, comprising both the labour process and the state institution, substituting for the economic, social and political alienation they organize a mode of production finally embodying the emancipation of labour by the workers themselves.

Even so, this reunification is not the restored unity of a society transparent to itself: it involves the construction of permanent collective mediations of decision-making and organization, capable of coordinating the separated tasks of conception and execution. Reconciling individual and collective dimensions, this objective defines communism proper not as a 'state' – this is, neither a state nor a market – but as a 'real movement',³⁶ social existence returned to itself and creating its own premises as it goes. This re-reading of Marx can be encapsulated in a hypothesis: if the term communism is rarely used in *Capital*, it is because the emancipatory project outlined there is subject to future political intervention, which will have to give concrete shape to a distinctive project fundamentally bound up with its historical premises and determinate mediations. Even so, in *Capital*, Marx develops an orientation that is sharply and constantly polemical as regards republican socialism, advocating forms of separate working-

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36 Marx 1976b, p. 49.

class organization and insisting on the necessity of expropriation.³⁷ In other words, before thinking communism qua emancipated politics as a theoretician, Marx thinks emancipatory strategy as a communist.

A 'Very Possible Communism'

The Paris Commune sprang up in March 1871 as a brief but potent embodiment of this approach to communism, subjecting it definition to actual revolutionary invention. The Parisian insurrection and its rapid unfolding confirmed for Marx that re-appropriation of social existence took the form of a redefinition of politics, subverting its statist forms and reinventing it as genuinely democratic mediation of collective life. This exceptional insurrection must be analysed in the light of a longer sequence, chronicled by Marx in *Class Struggles in France* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. *The Civil War in France*, which completes the trilogy, attests to Marx's passionate attention to the French labour movement, his analysis concerning in particular Bonapartism and the issue of the transformation of the state.

However, Marx had initially conceived France's defeat at the hands of Prussia as an opportunity, assuming it would facilitate the unity of the German proletariat even as Bonapartism was paralyzing the French labour movement. But, once Prussian dynastic interests converted a defensive war into a war of conquest, aiming to annex Alsace and Lorraine, Marx and Engels deemed the siege of Paris reactionary and saluted the daring initiative of the people of Paris, which continued and radicalized the aspirations of 1848. Shortly before the 'Bloody Week', Marx declared in a letter: 'the present rising in Paris – even if it is crushed by the wolves, swine and vile curs of the old society – is the most glorious deed of our Party since the June Insurrection in Paris.'³⁸ Once convinced of its importance, Marx proposed to the IWA that he write an address to the workers of Paris in the name of the International, which was profoundly divided. Given what was at stake in the event, he transformed it into a document intended for the global working-class.

It opens with an anti-nationalist sally taken from the *Inaugural Address* of 1864: 'if the emancipation of the working classes requires their fraternal concurrence, how are they to fulfil that great mission with a foreign policy in pursuit of criminal designs, playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people's

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³⁷ On this point see the original and powerful reading offered by William Clare Roberts, analysing *Capital* as a political intervention taking aim at the socialist theorists of the time, Saint-Simonian, Owenite and Proudhonian (Roberts 2017, chapter 6).

³⁸ Marx 1989, p. 132.

blood and treasure?’³⁹ Published in June 1871, *The Civil War in France* was immediately distributed in numerous languages, highlighting the importance that Marx attributed to an off-the-cuff analysis of events in Paris. They afforded him an opportunity to develop more general political and strategic considerations, which were never separated from this specific historical context. The main lesson of the work is precisely the reiterated assertion of the dependence of strategy on concrete circumstances. Thus, while presented as a compressed analysis of the conjuncture, which even sketches portraits of the political leaders of the moment, the text can be read as a pendant to the *Manifesto*, refreshing its political objective and revolutionary ardour, as indicated by the preface written by Marx for its republication in 1872. If *The Civil War in France* entirely alters its literary and analytical form, a comparison between the two texts, suggested by Marx himself, brings out the crucial importance he attributed to recasting two inseparable questions: the perspective of the destruction of the state and the role of a revolutionary programme.

As regards programme, Marx affirmed the need to abandon advance presentation of the measures to be adopted, as in the *Manifesto*, whose second section listed the expropriation of landed property, the abolition of the right of inheritance, the centralization of credit, and free education. In the 1872 Preface, he made it clear that in view of ‘the gigantic strides of Modern Industry’, but also ‘the party organization of the working class’, and ‘the practical experience gained, first in the February Revolution, and then, still more, in the Paris Commune, it was to be revised or, rather, relegated to a secondary level, given that ‘the practical application of the principles will depend ... everywhere and at all times[,] on the obtaining historical conditions’.⁴⁰ In the light of this analytical reorientation, assigning collective invention a more decisive role than ever, we can understand a claim, at first blush enigmatic, which has remained famous: ‘the great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence.’⁴¹ While it is, no doubt, also to be construed as registering an ultimately meagre balance-sheet, the formula resounds as a dialectical definition, formulated in Aristotelian terms, of communism. The latter consists in the actualization of a social power that only partially pre-exists it, this endeavour being more effective and decisive than any catalogue of measures announced in advance. Even so, concrete measures have to be taken. In the event, they were decisive: from the start, the Commune legislated on the length of the working day, night work for women, but also on public education,

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39 Marx 1985, pp. 12-13.

40 Marx 1988, pp. 174-5.

41 Marx 1986, p. 339.

politicizing the reorganization of social life while introducing radical reforms that directly threatened the prerogatives of capital.

When it comes to the modern state, the rectification of Marx's analysis was considerable. Bonapartism did not contradict its development, but accompanied its metamorphosis into a complex, ramified state apparatus. That is why the initial hypothesis of its tranquil withering away has to cede to the hypothesis of its necessary destruction. Marx is keen to repeat in the 1872 Preface what he wrote in *The Civil War in France*: 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.'⁴²

This twofold correction on the subjects of state and programme leads Marx to a more than ever political approach to communism, not only as a social alternative in gestation, but above all as revolutionary mobilization and political restructuring of forms of militancy, 'party' as well as 'popular government'. These forms, no longer confiscatory but mediating and structuring, involved both a democratic modus operandi and a new kind of representation, as well as combative decisions responding to those of the class opponent, of unlimited violence. Yet Marx does not engage in any theoretical generalization on these subjects. If communism begins to re-engage with its etymology in Paris, the communal form is not a trans-historical model. It remains the invariably distinct form of a resurgent aspiration to autonomy from the medieval commune, via 1792, to 1848.

Combining democratization of political forms and politicization of cooperative social forms, the communal form must, by the same token, make possible the re-appropriation by workers of their social activity and the tasks of political organization that have been separated and subtracted from it. In this sense, it corresponds in the first instance to the class struggle waged up to the threshold of the future abolition of classes:

If co-operative production is not to remain a sham and a snare; if it is to supersede the Capitalist system; if united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon a common plan, thus taking it under their own control, and putting an end to the constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of Capitalist production – what else, gentlemen, would it be but Communism, 'possible' Communism?⁴³

Thus, it must be stressed, communism is primarily defined not by the list of social changes it has the task of making, but as a living potential and

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42 Ibid., p. 328.

43 Ibid., p. 335

active political mediation, which gradually constructs the perspective of an integral social re-appropriation, in the course of a decisive confrontation with bourgeois power in all its dimensions, economic, political, social and cultural.

Despite his initial doubts about the opportuneness of the Paris uprising, and his subsequent criticisms of the timidity of the revolutionary government (in particular, its refusal to requisition the Banque de France and march on Versailles), the importance of the Commune was therefore unprecedented for Marx. It embodied a non-descriptive definition of communism as a 'real movement', as elaborated by him for some years in line with the formulation in *The German Ideology*, whose terms he adopted here word for word. Among its distinctive features, the palimpsestic nature of this text must be emphasized. Explicitly taking up the *Inaugural Address* of 1864 and *The German Ideology*, and, more implicitly, the *Communist Manifesto*, drafting *The Civil War in France* provided Marx with an opportunity to rearticulate his past analyses in a new reflection which, by dint of real history and the critical renewal it alone made possible, supersedes them all.

Anxious to single out this moment without idealizing it, Marx wrote:

The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. They have no ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realize, but to see free elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant.⁴⁴

In these lines, which represent one of his most extended passages on communism, Marx stresses the fact that only real history and its 'long struggles' can construct an emancipatory project – in other words, a different 'form of existence' finally satisfying the individual and collective aspirations that are the very motor of those struggles. But we must also highlight the assertion that 'elements of the new society' are contained in the old, for this idea seem to advocate an already present communism, whose pre-existing seeds are destined to bloom one day. Yet this interpretation comes up against what these pages describe: not a different mode of production, which the Commune did not have time to establish, but a set of political and legal decisions – in other words, a mode of supersession and emancipation delineated via a new political form paradoxically invented by Jacobins, Blanquists and Proudhonians,

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44 Ibid., p. 335.

who proved capable of overcoming their initial ideological affiliations. We may add Marx himself, who finally rallied to the federal idea, Proudonian in ancestry: the peculiarity of an effective revolution is that it succeeds in upending even the convictions of those who work for it.

In *The Civil War in France*, it is precisely this unprecedented, combative and inventive democratic organization that Marx salutes: ‘when plain working men for the first time dare to infringe upon the Governmental privilege of their “natural superiors” ... the old world writhes in convulsions of rage at the sight of the Red Flag, the symbol of the Republic of Labour’.⁴⁵ An embodiment of permanent revolution, the Paris Commune is placed by Marx in the political tradition of the defeated revolution of 1848. This leads him to rework his definition of the working-class as the universal representative of society formulated in the 1844 *Introduction*, without dismissing a notion that had since been rendered more complex and dialectical. It is now the Commune itself – a political construct, not a social class – that becomes ‘the true representative of all the healthy elements of French society, and therefore the truly national Government’.⁴⁶ Such a representation is neither metonymic nor delegated, but instituted as ‘a government of the people by the people’.⁴⁷ On this basis, it becomes possible to take egalitarian tax decisions and intervene concretely in the organization of labour. This expanded political – i.e. social and economic – leadership, restored to the historical subject that is the mobilized, self-organized working-class, confers on the term ‘communism’ its full meaning, embodying but above all reorienting the young Marx’s analyses of the proletariat and democracy.

The Paris Commune is therefore the ‘real movement’, not fixed but relayed by ‘a thoroughly expansive political form’, ‘the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labour’.⁴⁸ It involves both preserving the social dynamic and organizing it into the self-government of the producers, which reinvents representation and delegation. The introduction of the binding mandate, given to revocable delegates, aims to maintain ‘the unity of the nation’ while working for ‘the destruction of the State power which claimed to be the embodiment of that unity’.⁴⁹ Groping towards their junction are militant forms of organization and the democratic planning of labour (a ‘public power’).

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45 Ibid., p. 336.

46 Ibid., p. 338.

47 Ibid., p. 339.

48 Ibid., p. 334.

49 Ibid., p. 332.

Surprising on account of its critical accents and pessimistic tone, the letter from Marx to the Dutch social-democratic militant Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis in 1881, ten years after the crushing of the Commune, at a time when he had retired from activism, does not say anything different. To his correspondent, who questioned him about the legislative measures to be taken in the event of socialists coming to power, Marx repeated that everything ‘depends ... on the actual historical circumstances’ and that ‘a doctrinaire and of necessity fantastic anticipation of a future revolution’s programme of action only serves to distract from the present struggle.’ Clearly irritated, he added: ‘[your] question [is] posed out of the blue’.⁵⁰ In passing, adopting the term socialism from the social-democracy flourishing in the country of which his correspondent was a representative, Marx added that if a victory of socialists occurred, the first measures would be political in character, consisting in winning time for autonomous, collective decision-making: ‘a socialist government will not come to the helm in a country unless things have reached a stage at which it can, before all else, take such measures as will so intimidate the mass of the bourgeoisie as to achieve the first desideratum – time for effective action.’⁵¹ Time, conceived here as strategic room for manoeuvre, enables Marx to review the Commune experiment to distinguish its political conditions, and the subsequent stages of their alteration, from a positively ‘socialist’ intervention: ‘the majority of the Commune was in no sense socialist, nor could it have been. With a modicum of common sense, it could, however, have obtained the utmost that was obtainable – a compromise with Versailles beneficial to the people as a whole’,⁵² but on condition that it ‘appropriat[ed] the Banque de France’ – something the communards did not dare do. In the light of the preceding lines, this is cast less as a lasting social conquest than as an additional delay secured in the context of a pitiless class struggle, when the Commune had hardly any chance of prevailing. Marx adds: ‘the moment a truly proletarian revolution breaks out, the conditions for its immediate initial (if certainly not idyllic) *modus operandi* will also be there.’⁵³ In other words, the conquest of political power only paves the way for an ongoing class struggle, more bitter than ever, not for a sum of legislative measures that the bourgeoisie will submit to without a fight.

This letter, which confirms Marx’s withdrawal from activism and bitterness following the Parisian defeat, and after his support for the Commune had alienated the English trade unionists in the IWA, whereas

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50 Marx 1992, pp. 66-7.

51 Ibid., p. 66.

52 Ibid., p. 66.

53 Ibid., p. 67.

they had hitherto been his allies in the struggle against Bakunin,⁵⁴ heralded a new period of defeat and retreat for the labour movement, which for Marx no 'socialist' programme could succeed in overcoming. He closed as follows:

My own conviction is that the critical conjuncture for a new international working men's association has not yet arrived; hence I consider all labour congresses and/or socialist congresses, in so far as they do not relate to the immediate, actual conditions obtaining in this or that specific nation, to be not only useless but harmful. They will invariably fizzle out in a host of rehashed generalized banalities.⁵⁵

The distance taken by the late Marx from the ongoing organization of the social-democratic current indicates his doubts as regards strictly institutional victory, by means of a party that is certainly the bearer of a programme, but not of an anti-statist revolutionary dynamic. This judgement clarifies Marx's withdrawal from the framework that he had helped to construct: the First International.

We may venture the hypothesis that his increasing pessimism about revolutionary prospects in Europe was one factor in Marx's growing interest in different scenarios and different parts of the world. A few days after the letter to Nieuwenhuis, his response to a letter from Vera Zasulich's attests to this concurrent concern in Marx's critical analysis of a different communal form, the Russian *obshchina*. The latter is presented not so much as an immediate instrument for the construction of communism, but as an alternative political path to European social-democracy. And, in fact, after Marx's death two years later, the history of the labour movement – social-democracy as institution and then as party-state – would verticalize and bureaucratize this structure, concentrating on social gains incorrectly adjudged cumulative and irreversible. Identifying with Marxism, it would help erase what for Marx was the dual imperative of a party in the sense, only sketched, he gave the term: anchorage of revolutionary combat in the demands of the working-class, but also a specific structuration, organizing and maintaining broad popular mobilization beyond the moment of insurrection, as the Paris Commune had tried to do.

All in all, communism is predominantly the political form of a social existence that has finally been restored to itself. This new image of communism is what contemporary theoreticians paradoxically help us rediscover in Marx. For, far from defending the statist relapse of which

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54 Sperber 2013, p. 382.

55 Letter to Nieuwenhuis, p. 67.

Badiou accuses him, Marx evinces two worries that correspond very precisely to the defects of subsequent communist strategy: detaching organization from its ends and uncoupling political decisions from reflective strategy, and then separating both from constant democratic control. In this respect, the Paris Commune is the experience that fully chimes with Marx's last, most developed strategic reflection. It is not as a social response, but as an open question, that communism proves to be an indispensable political instrument: it names the project of a social re-appropriation, basing itself on a desire for re-conquest of the self and its time, which implies a struggle waged politically. If the term communism also undoubtedly designates the objective of a different mode of production, its strategic pertinence stems mainly from the fact that it outlines a mode of supersession of capitalism, protracted and difficult, in which a new society is foreshadowed.

What to Make of the Gotha Programme?

This analysis of communism as a project for a social existence restored to itself is, however, undermined by an obvious objection. In the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, written in 1875, Marx does not propose a clearly defined alternative, which takes the form of a distinction between two successive phases in establishing communism? This text is the principal evidence against the thesis of an explicitly strategic Marxian communism, never set down as a programme. Indeed, this phased project seems to assign juridical and institutional transformation a central place, overshadowing the issues of popular mobilization and inventiveness inherent in a revolutionary process, highlighted elsewhere by Marx. On account of this interpretation in terms of phases, the text, which became canonical in the framework of the Third International, had superimposed on it by Lenin a distinction between socialism and communism that Marx does not formulate therein. However, when read in the context of its composition, a quite different argument emerges.⁵⁶ Marx does not in fact posit any distinction between phases, his object being not to define socialism and communism, but to present as essential the problem of the political transition and mediations that lead to the abolition-transcendence of capitalism, in accordance with the analyses that precede and follow this late text.

We must begin by recalling that Marx's text is predominantly an intervention of a strategic and political kind. While he had not been involved in drafting the programme of unification between the General German Workers' Association (ADAV), founded by Ferdinand Lassalle, and the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany (SADP) of Wilhelm

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⁵⁶ For a developed version of this analysis, see Isabelle Garo 2012, pp. 97-132.

Liebknicht and August Bebel, Marx reacted with a sense of urgency to the draft programme that had appeared in the German press. He decided to send his correspondent Wilhelm Bracke his 'marginal notes on the unity programme', accompanied by a letter explaining his motives. His intervention, conceived from a distance and a position of relative political weakness, aimed to provoke an internal discussion and was never intended as a general theoretical essay on the question of communism. The scale of the disagreement and the unfavourable situation he found himself in led Marx to a textual commentary which, although modest, was intended to be primarily pedagogical, noting Lassalle's ideas as they dominated debates over unification. In the letter to Bracke accompanying his glosses, Marx describes himself as trapped by a situation that weighs on him, prompted to give his opinion from a distance and against his will, but compelled to do so precisely because he found himself in complete disagreement with the proposed programme, which 'is altogether deplorable as well as demoralising for the party'.⁵⁷ On this basis, his riposte seeks to adapt itself to the circumstances and views of the authors.

Above all, the juridical axis of the programme is what Marx deems inept, because it precludes thinking relations of exploitation as such. If Marx briefly seems to adopt its perspective, it is to highlight more clearly the aberrations to which it leads. Thus, assuming that 'the individual producer receives back from society ... his individual quantum of labour', the principle of allocation remains fundamentally that of market exchange between property-owning individuals, an exchange of 'equal values', whether measured by labour time or market prices. Marx concludes that '*equal right* here is still in principle – *bourgeois right*',⁵⁸ the demand for fairness in no way impairing the principles of capitalism, but serving to mask them that little bit more. This is precisely what, as early as 1846, he had objected to Proudhon's proposal to replace money by labour vouchers. For Marx, 'money is not a thing, it is a social relation':⁵⁹ it is not the cause of a social injustice deriving from a perversion of exchange, which production could easily be rid of thanks to a system of labour vouchers. It is hard to see how a proposal deemed a complete dead end by Marx in 1846 could suddenly become the first phase of communism in 1875.

It must be added that Marx always condemned detailed programming in advance of a political movement which, by definition, had to make its way in its own complex, unpredictable historical conditions. From the young Marx to the old, Marxian communism is

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57 Marx 1989, p. 78.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

59 Marx 1976c, p. 145.

not so much a project as a practice. That is why it seems necessary to overturn the usual interpretation. The first phase broached in the *Critique* corresponds to an initial, immature politico-theoretical stage of the analysis, to the bungling of the German socialists, to which Marx thought it judicious to concede a relative pertinence as a first phase not in the history of emancipation itself, but in socialists' understanding of it. We must conclude that the 'first phase' designates neither 'socialism', nor even some 'socialization of the means of production' (mention of which is singularly absent from Marx's text and the Gotha Programme alike), but an illusion to be corrected – a just law as spearhead of an overthrow of capitalism, or even as a means of its improvement for the sake of social justice (the Gotha Programme demanding 'the abolition of the wage system' and 'the elimination of all social and political inequality').⁶⁰

An initial conclusion imposes itself: not referring to any socialism, past or future, the expression 'first phase' plays three combined roles, which make reading this text particularly awkward. Firstly, it characterizes a moment of political analysis, anachronistic in 1875, which leads to socialist solutions that have already been tried and condemned to failure. Secondly, it preserves the possibility of a dialogue with the leaders of German social-democracy, at the time of the unification congress, but also after it. Finally, it raises a question that is very real in Marx's view – transitions – which he thinks politically, and which is only partially targeted in the remainder of the text, devoted to this aspect and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Contrary to the usual reading of the *Critique* as a breviary of revolution, for Marx communism is not the result of a linear process of radical transformation. As to the 'higher phase', the anonymity of the process evoked should suffice to alert any informed reader: 'after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished', and so forth.⁶¹ When did they 'vanish'? And by what miracle? No struggle, no political moment here, which an economic reading of Marx prompts us to accept without question. Following the Paris Commune and its repression, can it seriously be thought that Marx believed in the automatic effects that would be induced by reform of a legal kind, which is unfeasible moreover, and whose constitutively 'bourgeois' character he affirms a few lines earlier? In addition, how can it be thought that Marx has suddenly forgotten the communist challenge to capitalist property, in particular ownership of the means of production, which absent here when for Marx it is the site of the junction between the juridical, the political and the economic? Equitable distribution and its confused perspectives as the

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⁶⁰ Quoted in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, p. 91.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

only source of a radical transformation? One might as well erase with a stroke of the pen all the earlier texts, including the *Communist Manifesto*, which is most marked by historical optimism about an imminent victorious revolution, but even so imputes no simple linearity to the latter. What is striking here is the telescoping of the individual and political levels, so lacking is the mediation of social struggles, including those leading to the simple Magna Carta mentioned by *Capital*⁶² – a metaphorical designation for a hard-won employment law.

In short, if we adopt the orthodox reading, the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* would be Marx's most a-political text, even though it was intended as an eminently partisan intervention in the context of the construction of one of the first European labour parties. Given this, and granted the interpretative hypothesis that renders description of the first phase a rhetorical concession making it possible to develop a violent condemnation of vulgar socialism, once again, it is the paragraph on communism proper that poses a considerable problem: simple continuation of the process, bifurcation between socialism and communism, or a more complex operation? We must read the following passage carefully:

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life, but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!⁶³

While these formulations correspond more closely than others to Marx's actual theses, we might be struck by the incomplete, succinct character of this description, which concludes with the sole requirement of transcending bourgeois right, regardless of whether one agrees that its maintenance characterizes the first phase. Everything leads us to believe that Marx's line of argument here retains its simultaneously polemical and pedagogical objective, addressed to those – the programme's drafters, in the first instance – who think primarily in terms of law and labour, both of them abstractly conceived. Marx seems to be endeavouring to adjust to their categories and prejudices a reasonable suggestion for correction

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62 Marx 1976a, p. 416.

63 Marx 1989, p. 87.

of the incriminated articles. By the same token rectifying the abstraction of 'useful labour' by introducing the capitalist division of labour and the productive forces, including concrete individuals, he stresses what would represent analytical progress rather than concrete historical progress, a logical phase rather than a real phase.

Given the insufficiencies, catastrophic in his view, of the programme he is criticizing, Marx's goal could not be to induce the leaders of the German party to refine a two-stage process, which was as foreign to their thinking as to his own options. We may venture the hypothesis that the point was to insist, in relatively diplomatic and pedagogical fashion, on what as a minimum this programme should contain by way of a political perspective: a project for abolishing capitalist relations of production, the division of labour inseparable from them, and a radical democratic supersession of the juridical viewpoint, which contaminates even the most political socialist traditions. In addition to the tacit reference to Proudhon encountered earlier, the paragraph includes with a formula borrowed from Louis Blanc and already cited in the *Manifesto*: 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' – a formula that once again refers to a simple principle of individual distribution of wealth. While French socialism is not named, it is precisely this tradition that Marx is thinking about here, from the angle of its constitutive limits and crying inadequacies, even if (and precisely because) he acknowledges its historical role. For Blanc's key political proposal was the creation of national workshops funded by the state – a conception inherited by the Gotha Programme.

Louis Blanc's conception probably seeming rather more advanced and flexible than Lassalle's, Marx borrowed a slogan at once in tune with the spirit of the programme's drafters and capable of expressing a more authentically revolutionary project: his own. Already employed in the *Manifesto*, Blanc's formula lends itself to this fresh annexation. It seems impossible to read this paragraph as the most fully developed expression of Marx's views, when he was someone who conceived communism from the standpoint of the abolition of capitalist relations and as the result of a non-state political process of revolutionary popular mobilization that must, where appropriate, utilize universal suffrage. That this complex process is absent from the *Critique* is scarcely surprising: for Marx the definition of communist society can only be an active definition, a movement of revolutionary, expansive democratization, without a preconceived model, which for this reason cannot be described programmatically, although its general objectives are clearly defined.

Re-read thus, the nature of Marx's text changes radically. Far from being the manual he always refused to provide, it was a circumstantial intervention intended not for publication, but to get various corrections accepted by the German socialist leaders, attempting to undo the worst

blunders that the programme was full of in Marx's view. Thus, 'first phase' is the euphemistic term for a socialist tradition that remains immature and statist, whereas the second aims to induce the drafters to agree to take a further step in the direction of what Marx presents to them as being nothing other, basically, than their own theses, with the prudent and scarcely compromising endorsement of a Louis Blanc. Yet the second formulation remains radically discrepant with Marx's conception of communism, developed elsewhere, and, above all, incompatible with its definition of a political process that must create its premises as it proceeds, constantly rectifying and reorienting itself.

If this interpretation is correct, it consigns the 'classical' reading, which attributes a two-stage strategy to Marx, to sheer misinterpretation. Certainly, the abolition of capitalism will take the pathway of a progressive exit, necessarily singular and complex, but its moments cannot be predefined. Above all, they cannot be initiated by a reform from above of a legal kind— a project that characterizes the socialist tradition from which Marx was intent on demarcating himself. Placing socialism and communism in a chronological order, it is not their bifurcation that is illustrated by the *Critique*. But these 'marginal notes' are now covered over by the accumulated layers of an interpretation that has hallowed its theses, to the point of diffusing the well-nigh hallucinatory belief that therein Marx defined 'socialism' – a term that is absent – as the 'socialization of the means of production' – a phrase that is absent. Ultimate paradox, Lenin was the initiator of this reading in *The State and Revolution* – a text written on the eve of the October Revolution, which, in turn, was to be read as a definitive treatise of political theory rather as a circumstantial intervention. Concealment of the strategic dimension of certain texts, become canonical against the grain, has in its turn helped to banish any preoccupation of this kind from Marxism.

In truth, it is the Gotha Programme itself which, when dealing with labour and law, transforms a complex, changing historical reality into an abstraction. The treatment of the key political question of the fate of the state in a communist society demonstrates this. Marx ferociously criticizes any idea of appealing to the state to support the construction of workers' associations. But he remains averse to an anti-statism suppressing the apparatus of domination without envisaging the construction of an alternative instance of cooperation and decision-making, tasked with adjusting production to the satisfaction of social needs:

The question then arises: what transformation will the state undergo in communist society? In other words, what social functions will remain in existence there that are analogous to present state functions? This question can only be answered

scientifically, and one does not get a flea-hop nearer to the problem by a thousandfold combination of the word people with the word state.

Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*.⁶⁴

This approach to the issue of transition proves that Marx did indeed conceive the passage to communism as a protracted process. But this transition is not the one formulated by the two phases described earlier. A continuous political process, revolution is punctuated by moments that are themselves political, with the capture of state power making way for its radical transformation. It is no longer a question here of the legal transformation of distribution and simple monetary reform of the conditions of exchange. The establishment of communism must be conceived not as a process operated within state forms as they are, but as a movement recasting politics itself, which Marx had already dubbed ‘permanent revolution’, and which requires popular mobilization and the invention of original institutional forms. In the text of 1875, here and only here, do we find the true definition according to Marx of the process of reconstruction of social existence. We can understand why he is concerned to add that the Gotha Programme ‘deals neither with this nor with the future state of communist society’.⁶⁵

Without prejudging future institutional forms, Marx affirms the need for a seizure of power that must in principle coincide with the onset of destruction of the bourgeois state apparatus. It is indeed a radical, abrupt revolutionary process – the condition for a transformation of social relations, including property and distribution relations. This political transition seems to be Marx’s proposed alternative to the dubious transition of the Gotha Programme, whose impasse he has previously signalled. We must then grant that the last part of the text tries to correct its opening, relying on what it should have enabled its addressees, alerted to the disagreement, to spot but also to concede. The pedagogy employed would prove highly ineffective, judging from the abiding misinterpretations prompted by these unduly wily marginal notes, once the context that conferred their meaning on them had disappeared. More generally, in this way, antithetical receptions of Marx’s strategic reflection, first neutralized by orthodoxy and then by a

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64 Ibid., p. 95.

65 Ibid., p. 95.

certain kind of academic approach, have helped to displace a number of his texts onto a terrain alien to them – abstract political theory, long concealing one of the most fertile dimensions of his analysis.

This is particularly true of the treatment of the state in the notes, which combines theoretical analysis and programmatic position. Marx opposes the new party's economic and social statism, as well as its political incoherence, deriving from its complete misunderstanding of the bourgeois state structure. The stakes of this approach are directly strategic. Just as it is important in Marx's view to demand a 'democratic republic', with a view to establishing genuine popular sovereignty, so this democratic republic must be thought of as 'the last form of state of bourgeois society' in which 'the class struggle has to be fought out to a conclusion'.⁶⁶ For Marx, who since the 1850s, in the context of his study of the French situation, had analysed the state as a 'governmental machine', the Gotha Programme erred completely as regards what was to be expected of it in the way of social advances. Given this, the strategic approach to the bourgeois state must be as dialectical as its essence, taking on board the limited but very real role of parliamentary democracy in the process of outflanking it. The strategic dimension of the analysis resolves the aporias of the strictly theoretical approach characteristic of the Kreuznach manuscript.

The dictatorship of the proletariat forms part of this concrete democratic perspective. Very rare from Marx's pen, the expression figures as a hypothesis inseparable from the historical circumstances that render it a possible response to the question of the conquest of the state, drawing on a long tradition. Daniel Bensaïd once noted that 'in the nineteenth century the word "dictatorship" still evoked the virtuous Roman institution of an exceptional power, duly mandated and limited in time, to confront an emergency'.⁶⁷ Dictatorship is conceived here not as the abolition of bourgeois democracy, but as its radicalization, the latest episode in a class struggle fought to its conclusion, which will have to deal with the fierce resistance of the dominant classes, but which serves as a prelude to the disappearance of any class division. This political conception of transition stands out against the proposals of the Gotha Programme (education, freedom of science, restricting the working day to a length naively characterized as 'normal'), which are too partial to be vectors of a revolutionary dynamic. As for basic economic and social reforms, no mention is made here of any stage concerning them, because exclusive focus on distribution-production, which skips over the conquest of power, has been dismissed.

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⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 96.

⁶⁷ Bensaïd 2011, p. 49.

In this regard, the end of the notes is firmer and more in line with Marx's own ideas, after the opening has supposedly paved the way for their reception by the leaders of German social-democracy. What is crucial is the political question, at the antipodes of the themes of equity and individual right. What matters to Marx is not the determination of phases defined, or even prescribed, in advance, but a process of transition, combining political mobilization, democratic functioning, economic and social transformation, and egalitarian redistribution. Nevertheless, the process has two aspects. On one side, political mobilization defines its goals as it proceeds and eludes any prior sequencing. On the other, it aims at an alternative *modus operandi*, whose conditions of coherence and viability remain to be defined. The text therefore leaves hanging the question of the correlation between political moments and social transformation – a correlation left to the real historical movement that a working-class party programme must not pre-empt.

Workers of the World...

Added to this question is the international dimension of the anti-capitalist struggle. One of Marx's great militant texts in this regard is the *Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association*, written in 1864 following a meeting organized in London. Intervening on the subject of industrial struggles in England and in favour of the Ten Hour Bill, Marx describes its conquest as the result of 'the great contest between the blind rule of the supply and demand laws which form the political economy of the middle class, and social production controlled by social foresight, which forms the political economy of the working class'.⁶⁸ This clash can be backed up by the creation of 'co-operative factories', whose importance (so Marx declares) 'cannot be over-rated':

By deed, instead of by argument, they have shown that production on a large scale, and in accord with the behests of modern science, may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands; that to bear fruit, the means of labour need not be monopolised as a means of dominion over, and of extortion against, the labouring man himself....

They have also shown that wage-labour 'is but a transitory and inferior form, destined to disappear'.⁶⁹

.....
68 Marx 1985, p. 11.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

But Marx also stresses their limits: 'co-operative labour, if kept within the narrow circle of the casual efforts of private workmen, will never be able to arrest the growth in geometrical progression of monopoly, to free the masses, nor even to perceptibly lighten the burden of their miseries.' He specifies: 'to save the industrious masses, co-operative labour ought to be developed to national dimensions, and, consequently, to be fostered by national means. ... To conquer political power has therefore become the great duty of the working classes.' The pre-condition of this conquest is not only the advantage of numbers, for 'numbers weigh only in the balance, if united by combination and led by knowledge'⁷⁰ – a point on which Marx's consistency, from his youth to this last period, is patent.

In addition to the greater precision of this strategic reflection, its innovations are to be underscored. In this intervention, Marx sets about very directly linking working-class emancipation and internationalism. During this period, his attention to the international construction of the working-class movement, over and above principled displays of solidarity, was continuously increasing. The meeting at St. Martin's Hall, when Marx delivered a spoken version of the text, founded the International Working Men's Association, later dubbed the 'First International', and supported Polish demands for national liberation. The Polish people were 'the cosmopolitan soldier of the revolution', Marx would say in 1875,⁷¹ highlighting the support it had provided for Hungarian, German and Italian struggles and for the Paris Commune. Marx referred to it in the written version: 'if the emancipation of the working classes requires their fraternal concurrence, how are they to fulfil that great mission with a foreign policy in pursuit of criminal designs, playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people's blood and treasure?'⁷² This concrete internationalist commitment confers its real meaning on the famous formula with which the text concludes: 'the fight for such a foreign policy forms part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes. Proletarians of all countries, Unite!'⁷³ Here too the communist objective is inseparable from a strategy that foreshadows its social and cultural lineaments in the present.

Marx's awareness of the crucially and concretely internationalist dimension of communist politics developed during the 1850s, when he interested himself in the global expansion of capitalism and his analysis of colonialism and work as a journalist for the *New York Daily Tribune* led him to study various national and regional trajectories,

.....
70 Ibid., p. 11.

71 Quoted in Anderson 2016, p. 76.

72 Marx 1985, pp. 12-13.

73 Ibid., p. 13.

particularly those of India and China, Ireland and Poland, as well as the United States. His analyses of colonial domination and what was at stake in anti-colonial struggles brought out the full significance of the phrase 'domination-subordination' used in Chapter 6 of *Capital*.⁷⁴ Kevin Anderson, who has tracked Marx's evolution towards increasingly clear anti-colonial positions, has shown that he thus broke with his initial idea of a partially positive role of British colonialism, trace of which are to be found in some earlier texts. At the same time, Marx developed a multi-linear conception of history, increasingly integrating the dimensions of race and sex, but without systematizing his approach. His strategic thinking here forms a pendant to, and continuation of, the analysis of the development of individuality in *Capital*, leading him to politicize the latter beyond the ethical considerations traditionally associated with it. The angle of this politicization was twofold. The crushing of human potential and capacities first and foremost concerned the colonized, whose will to emancipation was a major revolutionary source. And, secondly, non-Western societies that had undergone colonization evinced, and to a certain extent retained, communal social forms capable of nurturing alternatives to capitalism.

Marx's attention to colonization was not a recent phenomenon. But it belatedly assumed decisive importance. Within the First International, Marx highlighted the revolutionary dimension of the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery. The Address to Abraham Lincoln that he wrote in the name of the IWA proclaimed:

While the working men, the true political power of the North, allowed slavery to defile their own republic; while before the Negro, mastered and sold without his concurrence, they boasted it the highest prerogative of the white-skinned labourer to sell himself and choose his own master; they were unable to attain the true freedom of labour or to support their European brethren in their struggle for emancipation.⁷⁵

Marx advocated not only unity, but realization of the essential intertwinement of the dimensions of race and class.

In his letter of 9 April 1870 to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt, taking up elements of a confidential circular written shortly before, Marx made the Irish agrarian revolution 'the prerequisite for the proletarian revolution in England',⁷⁶ rather than its potential outlet. He spelt out his reasons:

.....
74 Marx 1976a, p. 1023.

75 Marx 1985, p.19.

76 Marx 1988, p. 474.

All industrial and commercial centres in England now have a working class *divided* into two *hostile* camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who forces down the standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker, he feels himself to be a member of the *ruling nation* and, therefore, makes himself a tool of his aristocrats and capitalists *against Ireland*, thus strengthening their domination *over himself*.⁷⁷

In these circumstances, the priority was the achievement of unity through the struggle against racism, both 'religious, social and national' prejudices and institutional racism, as long as they divided the British and Irish labourers. For Marx, this did not mean struggling against religion in general or against national demands in general, but taking on board the articulation of representations and practices that impeded the political unity of wage-earners. Without creating a hierarchy of forms of domination, and without disconnecting them from the essential logic of capitalism, strategic priority must be given to the struggle against forms of discrimination internal to the struggle of the dominated. Here, Marx was violently opposed in the IWA to Bakunin, for whom the Irish cause was merely a diversion that obstructed the proletarian cause.⁷⁸

This needs stressing, so unfamiliar are these analyses that contradict the reputation of a fanatically anti-religious Marx, predominantly concerned with the lot of the white proletariat in the Western countries. During these years, he showed himself more than ever attentive to what blighted the unity of the dominated, deploring the fact that the English worker's attitude to the Irish 'is roughly that of the poor whites to the n[....]s in the former slave states of the American Union'.⁷⁹ To highlight the importance of ideological questions (and this at a time when the word 'ideology' was no longer used),⁸⁰ and the active role of representations once they adhere to social practices, Marx pointed out in the case of Ireland that 'this antagonism is kept artificially alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, on short by all the means at the disposal of the ruling class'.⁸¹ Far from being exclusively descriptive, this

.....
77 *Ibid.*, p. 474.

78 Anderson 2016., p. 146.

79 Marx, letter to Meyer and Vogt, pp. 474-5.

80 On the history of the concept in Marx, see Garo2009.

81 Marx, letter to Meyer and Vogt, p. 475.

observation enabled Marx to call for action within the framework of the International: 'the special task of the Central Council in London is to awaken the consciousness of the English working class that, *for them, the national emancipation of Ireland* is not a question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment, but *the first condition of their own social emancipation*.'⁸²

But were the internal colonization of Ireland by England and slavery in the USA comparable? Not in Marx's view. For him the principal issue in the American Civil War was not the division of the proletariat and it could not be described as a clash between cultures or nations, even if these dimensions existed.⁸³ Not to be compared with the crushing of national aspirations, the South according to Marx was waging a veritable 'war of conquest for the extension and perpetuation of slavery'.⁸⁴ 'This would be in full accord with the loudly proclaimed principle that only certain races are capable of freedom'⁸⁵ – a principle extended to certain white immigrants, giving rise to a racist variant of capitalism. According to Marx, this perspective led the North to concede the emancipation of the slaves as a condition of maintaining its own social relations of exploitation. The scale and the stakes of slave domination were unique and in no way was it an anachronistic vestige. That is why Marx campaigned for the levying of black troops, whereas Lincoln backed off from this, on the grounds that he might be accused of fomenting a racial war. Marx's declarations in the name of the IWA were to have a real political impact in the USA: they led to the formation of American sections struggling for racial and sexual equality,⁸⁶ sparking an internal debate that ultimately resulted in the victory of the current dominated by trade unionists hostile to women's rights as well as the struggle for racial equality. In short, over and above the issue of secession, and despite the faint-heartedness of Lincoln, the North's victory, without ceasing to concern the emancipation of individuals, had global political implications.

These concerns, increasing in the texts of the late Marx, went hand in hand with greater attention to the diversity of historical trajectories and the resources they afforded from a global revolutionary perspective. Once again, the identification of the goal (construction of a classless society on a planetary scale) must not lead to underestimating the distinctive mediations and divergent paths. From 1879 until his death,

.....
82 Ibid., p. 475.

83 Blackburn 2011, p. 7ff.

84 Marx, 'The Civil War in the United States' *Die Presse*, 7 November 1861, quoted in Ibid., p. 157.

85 Ibid., p. 158.

86 Blackburn 2011, p. 72ff.

Marx filled dozens of notebooks on the subject of non-Western societies, skimming the anthropological literature of his time, without managing to write a book on these questions, which increasingly preoccupied him.

A Russian Revolution?

Marx's strategic thinking underwent a final development at the start of the 1880s, when he re-explored the transformation of property relations in conjunction with reflection on the revolutionary potential of certain traditional social structures, particularly in Russia. Marx's notes and studies of non-Western societies are numerous, many predating this last period, so that we can spot various inconsistencies and variations. As regards the property question, traditionally located at the heart of the communist project, Kevin Anderson, following Peter Hudis, stresses that as early as the *Grundrisse*, written in 1857-8, Marx regarded communal forms of production as prior to, and more fundamental than, communal property.⁸⁷ In these societies, as in later social forms, the transformation of property rules is not an end in itself and is subordinated to the transformation of the whole mode of production. These issues have been debated, notably in the works of E.P. Thompson, Robert Brenner, Ellen Meiksins Wood and David McNally, with a view to rejecting a mechanical distinction between base and superstructure peculiar to a certain Marxism and foregrounding the role of class struggle in rethinking the historical emergence of capitalism.

Without being able to go into the contributions of these rich debates, decisive for thinking the transition from one mode of production to another, we may note that Marx, who polemicized with Proudhon and his 'extra-economic origin of property',⁸⁸ conceived property as a mediation between the individual and social wealth, which as a result concentrated the features of a given mode of production. At the same time, property is always a mode of appropriation that concerns individuals and helps structure them from top to bottom. The famous text of the *Formen*⁸⁹ of this same period contains this exceptional passage on true wealth, which illustrates the issue of re-appropriation that Marx makes the link between pre-capitalist and post-capitalist forms: 'if the narrow bourgeois form is peeled off, what is wealth if not the universality of the individual's needs, capacities, enjoyments,

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87 Anderson 2016, pp. 156-7 and Hudis 2004, pp. 51-67.

88 Marx 1986, p. 412.

89 It is customary to refer by this title to the chapter of the 1857-8 manuscripts devoted to 'Forms Preceding Capitalist Production': *ibid.*, pp. 399-439.

productive forces, etc., produced in universal exchange[?].⁹⁰ This analysis of appropriation highlights the permanent co-determination of social relations and forms of individuality. But how about the conditions and means of transformation of actually existing property forms and the social relations associated with them? What role do individuals play in the course of a transformation that first and foremost concerns them?

In the course of his ethnographic reading, work on colonialism and political role in the IWA, at a time when he was abandoning any linear conception of the course of history, Marx ended up reflecting on the social and political resources furnished by pre-capitalist modes of production still extant in some parts of the world alongside, or underneath, the capitalist forms that were seizing hold of them. The point was not to reactivate their original features, but to activate their political potential. This is demonstrated by the correspondence with Vera Zasulich in 1881 about Russian communal agrarian traditions. It is because common property forms concern the totality of social relations, and the forms of individuality engendered in them, that they have political potential, facilitating a type of strategic intervention capable of reconciling revolutionary politics and its ultimate goal – communism – without recourse to the slightest philosophy of history, and far removed from any assertion of the exclusive historical mission of the white, male working-class – theses often attributed to Marx.

The interest of this correspondence stems from its immediate stakes in a turbulent political context. In February 1881, when debate was raging within the populist movement, Vera Zasulich sought Marx's opinion on the subject of Russian rural communism. In search of a Russian road to revolution without a transition via capitalism, the populists redirected their activity towards the peasantry and banked on the assets of the Russian rural commune, the *obschchina* (or *mir*), for transforming social relations. Its main features were an assembly of household heads and periodic distribution of the land in accordance with a principle of equality in proportion to household size. Despite its archaic, profoundly patriarchal character, the populists believed it could become a revived form of local power in the context of the democratic regime they desired.

Marx wrote four draft responses, which were much longer than the brief letter he ended up sending, where in essence he declared: 'the analysis provided in *Capital* does not adduce reasons either for or against the viability of the rural commune'.⁹¹ But, he added, the commune could be 'the fulcrum of social regeneration in Russia'. The drafts are more eloquent. In them Marx seems to reflect for his own sake,

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⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 411.

⁹¹ Marx 1989, p. 371.

independently of the delicate task of advising a political organization that seemed to expect the gospel truth from him. Refraining from any prediction, he envisaged that the Russian commune could, on certain conditions, 'detach itself from its primitive features and develop directly as an element collective production on a nationwide scale'. He straight away clarified: 'it is precisely thanks to its contemporaneity with capitalist production that it may appropriate the latter's *positive acquisitions* without experiencing all its frightful misfortunes. Russia does not live in isolation from the modern world: neither is it the prey of a foreign invader like the East Indies.'⁹² Here, we find elements of the strategic dialectic long explored by Marx. The point is to develop the communal form while conserving it, initiating its transcendence in the complex sense of the German term *Aufhebung* already referred to, which tends here more to 'conservation' and 'elevation' than 'abolition'. But, Marx insists, this hypothesis assumes a developed capitalism elsewhere. Its eventual materialization depends on a unique national or regional trajectory within the framework of a global process of capitalist expansion and the resistance it arouses. In passing, Marx developed the idea of uneven and combined development, adopting it from the Russian populist Pyotr Chaadayev. Rather than regarding capitalism as a source of homogenization of social relations throughout the world, as in the *Communist Manifesto*, the perpetuation of locally non-capitalist relations serves its domination. That is why wagering on the emancipatory potentiality of the *obschchina* represents a predominantly political hypothesis, subject to the activation of an effective revolutionary process and its conscious choices. In his 1882 Preface to the second Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx added a new condition destined for a protracted controversy – namely, the conjunction between Russian revolution and world proletarian revolution: 'if the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for communist development.'⁹³ Once again Marx's objective here is not to propose a pre-written revolutionary scenario, but to inscribe communism in an extended, global history, at once determined and open-ended, which includes the fact of capitalist expansion without this mode of production being a mandatory stage in human emancipation. Consequently, the persistence of non-capitalist historical conditions, integrated into a strategy mobilizing social groups marked by these traditions, could support a general counter-offensive aimed at the transcendence-abolition of capitalism. Paradoxically, uneven development would be

.....
92 'Drafts of the letter to Vera Zasulich' (first draft), in Marx 1989, p. 349.

93 Marx 1989, p. 426.

the condition for a revolutionary process capable of being globalized. Such reasoning pertains to the critique of political economy in that it is political. If the underlying logic that engendered capitalism is not the expansion of the market, but 'the complete separation of the producer from the means of production' and, more specifically, 'the expropriation of the agricultural producer',⁹⁴ and, if communism aims at the re-appropriation by individuals of their own social powers, then social forms predating this separation, and surviving locally after it, can offer fulcra for a revolution tending to become global while necessarily being constructed in national conditions to start off with.

This historical reflexion by the mature Marx on the causes of capitalism's birth, and those of its possible demise, thus remain inseparable from the revolutionary project of its abolition and strategic reflection on its concrete conditions, conditions at once historically given and politically developed into premises. In one respect, these conditions are internal to the functioning of capitalism in its essential contradictions, as they are analysed in *Capital*. But they are also external to it or, more precisely, they derive from the contradiction between a capitalism born in the (British) agricultural world and a different social history, which can obstruct and offer an alternative to the installation of such relations of production and exploitation, on condition, however, of becoming the linchpin of a political struggle.

And this is precisely the case in Russia. Marx stresses that as a social form based on sharing and equality, on communal property and individual-personal property, the Russian commune is distinguished from more 'archaic' communities. Marx's communism is not collectivism understood as authoritarian suppression of any private property, but a certain kind of socialization of the means of production. And it is this exclusive particularity of the Russian commune that leads Marx to modify his initially negative judgement, while he continues to condemn its patriarchal character. From a strategic standpoint, the property question thus remains crucial in his view, on condition of regarding it not as a strictly legal form, but as both revolutionary political lever and gradient of individual development. By this twofold token, the Russian agrarian commune contains potentialities that can be converted into means of peasant mobilization and, as such, into premises of communism.

Nevertheless, its possible revolutionary reprise has two conditions, which are highly problematic. The first consists in the introduction of capitalist productive forces and techniques. The second is the intervention of the peasants themselves in the active transformation of the traditional rural commune into the local structure of a general socialization of production. Over and above the circumstantial character

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⁹⁴ Marx 1976a, chapter 32, quoted in Marx, first draft of the letter to Vera Zasulich, p. 346.

of this debate in late nineteenth-century Russia, the Russian rural commune makes it possible to pose the problem of transition in full, from the angle of its material conditions on the one hand and its political conditions on the other. In passing, the Russian case confirms that the standard reading of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* is a misinterpretation. In it communal forms are explicitly viewed as possible fulcra of a political dynamic involving the mobilization of individuals and determinate classes. Here re-appropriation is much more than a simple abolition of private ownership of the means of production. Above all, it aims at self-re-appropriation, an emancipation synonymous with the individual and social development of human capacities, which are mutilated by all relations of domination. This re-appropriation is not defined as reversion to a prior condition, but as an endeavour to abolish alienation and dispossession – an effort rooted in the acute contradictions of the present. Such a will to emancipation is not a utopian aim, but the fuel of the revolutionary flame, resuming an argument already developed in *Capital*. And in fact, at the start of his draft, Marx refers to the chapter of *Capital* devoted to ‘so-called “original accumulation”’. The 1881 notes take up this text and continue it, while modifying it to adapt it to the Russian case.

In *Capital*, Marx distinguishes three phases in property forms, extended to the mode of development of individuals and the social conditions of production. The first is ‘the private property of the worker in his means of production’,⁹⁵ highlighting that the condition of ‘the development ... of free individuality’ goes hand in hand with slavery, serfdom and ‘other situations of dependence’, excluding cooperation and ‘the free development of the productive forces’.⁹⁶ The second phase is the result of a negation generated by the development of the first, which gives birth to both ‘socially concentrated means of production’, large-scale property at the price of ‘the expropriation of the mass of the people’, and the proletarianization of labourers.⁹⁷ The third phase has as its spring ‘the centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour’, which have become ‘incompatible with their capitalist integument’.⁹⁸ The productive forces are credited not only with unprecedented productivity, but with an advanced level of cooperation that directly paves the way for communism. This third phase is that of revolution: ‘the knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.’⁹⁹

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95 Marx 1076a, p. 927.

96 Ibid., p. 927.

97 Ibid., p. 928.

98 Ibid., p. 929.

99 Ibid., p. 929.

This hypothesis of several phases is what Marx adjusted in 1881 to the Russian situation. Starting from the Russian communal form, which is more individualizing than archaic forms, two options can be envisaged in the face of capitalist expansion: 'either the element of private property which it implies will gain the upper hand over the collective element, or the latter will gain the upper hand over the former.'¹⁰⁰ The reforms of 1861 had sought to demolish the rural commune and to transform Russian agriculture in a capitalist direction, adulterating personal property. The third, specifically revolutionary phase presupposed the victory of the Russian collective element, the socialization of large, landed property, but also the 'domains of the state',¹⁰¹ combined with the advanced socialization of labour inherent in capitalist productive forces. This whole social dynamic, not merely a technical dynamic, was to be imported under the rubric of 'mechanical industry'. The development of the agrarian commune on a national scale, as well as its modernization, then becomes possible: 'the *contemporaneity* of western production, which dominates the world market, allows Russia to incorporate in the commune all the positive acquisitions devised by the capitalist system without passing through its Caudine Forks.'¹⁰² Thus the traditional commune is to be conceived not as a model to be generalized, but as the possible social and, above all, political lever of an alliance between the working-class and the exploited peasant class, at once indispensable and extremely difficult to construct, as has been proved by the failure of the 1848 and 1871 revolutions. For we must note that, far from essentializing the peasantry, Marx never defined it as comprising a single 'reactionary mass' – a formulation of Ferdinand Lassalle's that he promptly rejected.¹⁰³ Although he highlighted the reactionary political role of the French peasantry during the 1851 coup d'état, it was while indicating the reactionary logic of the 'parcel' when not accompanied by any communitarian logic or independent political consciousness. Elsewhere, however, Marx did not stop proclaiming the need for the 'proletarian revolution' to construct 'the choir without which its solo becomes a swan song'.¹⁰⁴ And the Russian situation precisely made it possible to envisage such a choir.¹⁰⁵

.....
100 Marx, first draft of the letter to Vera Zasulich, p. 352.

101 Ibid., p. 358.

102 Ibid., p. 353.

103 Marx 1989, p. 89.

104 Marx 1979, p. 193 n. b.

105 Luca Basso highlights that the expression 'acting in common' that we find in *Capital* clarifies Marx's non-naturalistic conception of the common (Basso 2012, p. 106).

Even so, the Russian peasants who (according to the 1881 text) could become spokesmen for an 'economic need' will not necessarily be the agents of a political project that extends far beyond it. Marx says nothing about the way that the rural commune could progressively transform its own traditional communitarian *modus operandi* from within, in the direction of the 'self-government of the producers' he saluted in the Paris Commune. Is a process no longer working-class and urban, but rural and rooted in tradition, capable of engendering not only its own educated and politicized actors, but also new, democratically organized relations of production? This question contains a conjunctural strategic dimension, but is at the very heart of the definition of communism. Able neither to treat it nor to omit it, *Capital* seems to reformulate it in condensed fashion and Hegelian terms as the 'negation of the negation', at the risk of exposing itself to the accusation of reverting to the philosophy of history. It may be that the ambiguity of Marx's formulations in this chapter of *Capital* is precisely what motivated Vera Zasulich's letter. And Marx's reply shows that he does not consider the question as settled in advance. On the contrary, it implies a Russian Revolution that in 1881 he could only ardently desire.

All in all, this 1881 analysis outlines a strategy in the full sense, coinciding with the redefinition of politics whose project had been set out by Marx in his earliest texts. Awaiting actual fruition, this strategic communism encompasses all the dimensions of Marx's earlier thought, linking the issue of the democratic reorganization of work to that of the construction of the historical subject of revolutionary transformation. For the time being, Marx stuck to reflecting on the conditions for the peasant masses rallying to revolutionary struggle and socialist transformation. And precisely because the latter was not their main concern, he signalled that forced collectivization would simply result in peasant secession: 'go and seize from the peasants the product of their agricultural labour beyond a certain measure, and despite your gendarmerie and your army you will not succeed in chaining them to their fields!'¹⁰⁶ This advice, given to a Tsarist government hostile to ancestral communitarian forms, would prove premonitory of the failure of the policy of authoritarian collectivization in the USSR.

If the idea of bypassing the capitalist stage has lost all relevance today, it remains the case that logics of uneven development persist and suggest distinctive roads to politicization and subversion of the dominant social relations. It is important to affirm that resistance to capitalist commodification and its social logic remains fundamentally immanent in it. Costas Lapavitsas has shown that non-commodity relations survive which capitalism needs in order to exist. This does not mean thinking that such non-commodity relations are immediately

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¹⁰⁶ Marx, first Draft of the Letter to Vera Zasulich, p. 354.

socialist, or that demands for free provision and the right to share suffice to open up a political pathway as such, but 'transform[ing] these non-economic relations by altering the economic foundations of society',¹⁰⁷ in such a way as to redefine the relations between non-economic sphere and economic sphere.

At the heart of this problem, we once again find the issue of labour-power in as much as, fundamentally, it is not a commodity, but the preserve of social individuals. Labour-power's multifaceted resistance to attempts at its complete neoliberal submission forms one of the key contradictions of contemporary capitalism, running through the very individuality of wage-earners as well as all structures of social existence. However, it is not as such the vector of any definite alternative. If the goal is not rest content with temporary enclaves or minority utopias, then it is the politicization of these contradictions that specifically defines a communist politics. And, among these contradictions, must be counted all forms of domination and oppression, which are combined with exploitation without being reducible to it.

In his late texts, Marx develops this original political thinking, without being able to resolve any of these problems. Furthermore, far removed from the imagery of the bearded prophet certain of the advent of communism, he highlighted the enormous challenge that would have to be met not by a realized communism, which he did not describe, but by a communist politics, whose most astute thinker he remains, which must at any moment be able to elaborate democratically an unprecedented historical rationality. Impossible task? In our day, it is impossible to defer it any longer. It remains to invent modes of cooperation that are also political modes of struggle and the conquest of power, rethinking the political subject, at once multiple and coordinated, of radical transformation. This figure of communism as political dynamic, at once goal and transition, project and mediations, is what emerges from a re-reading of Marx inspired by contemporary reflections, but which in return confronts them with a strategic dimension they have lost. To conclude this investigation, it remains to develop more precisely, and in the present, the hypothesis of a renewal of strategic communism.

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¹⁰⁷ Lapavitsas 2003, p. 128.

- Anderson, Kevin B. 2016, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press
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Changing Topologies of the Class Struggle

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Abstract: The famous triad “race, gender, class” is widely regarded as an adequate list of parameters to describe the position of an individual in the social topology. However, a class position of any individual is permanently changing – due to the changing conditions of production and distribution of goods – whereas race and gender remain relatively stable. As a result, a new type of solidarity emerges – identitarian solidarity across the class divisions. As a result, the class struggle becomes impossible: the classes become united in the common culture of diversity. We have here to do with a new form of nationalism that presents itself as a politic of inclusion practiced by the good, old national states.

Keywords: Class, race, gender, Marxism, nationalism, cultural identity

1.

A class is not just a descriptive category to characterize people with different incomes and social status. Speaking about the class we inevitably think about the history of class struggle. The Marxist notion of the class was strategically directed against the notion of “nation” as it emerged as a result of the European bourgeois revolutions. After the French revolution the people of low birth, the Third Estate, got access to wealth and power. The system of domination and suppression that guaranteed the privileged positions of aristocracy vis a vis the common people has been abolished: now the citizen of a nation states were not divided by their birth rights and seemed to become equal. The Marxist notion of the class is directed precisely against this illusion of equality: According to Marx, the classes are different and unequal not because they consist of the individuals with different birth rights but because these individuals participate in different ways in the process of production, have different positions in the system of private property. The national homogeneity is an illusion and the national “common interest” - a phantom. There is no common interest that would unite the working class with the class of capitalists. Now, historically the process of production is permanently changing. That means that the composition and relationship of the classes is also permanently changing. Every new turn of the technological evolution changes the class topology of the society, divides it in a new way between economically and politically dominated and dominating social strata. The class definition and class divide are fluid – today they are not what they were yesterday and what they will be tomorrow. The class is what happens here and now. It has nothing to do with any transhistorical, natural determinations of the human bodies. But, of course, such a radically presentist notion of the class is only possible when all the hereditary, “natural” economic and political hierarchies are already overcome.

During the recent decades the notion of the class became increasingly incorporated into the famous triad “race, gender, class”. When one looks at this triad one has an impression that “class” functions inside the social topology on the same level as “gender” and “race” – that we have to do with three parameters that fix the social position of an individual in the three-dimensional public space. However, it is not the case. As it was already said, “class” is what happens today – it is radically presentist. As a member of a class one is immediately subjected to the movement of history. One always feels oneself in the middle of historical change – technological, social and political change. In fact, every morning one asks oneself to what class one belongs today – and what happens to his or her class position tomorrow: probably, some new professions and ways of life will emerge, the others – disappear, some industries will flourish, some other industries become obsolete, some upper and middle classes go down, some low classes rise. Accordingly, the class solidarity is also fluid and situational. When we look at the history of the Marxist theoretical discourse, we will see that its main topic was the class analysis of the society “at the current moment”. One permanently discussed which social groups can be allies of the working class at that particular moment – peasantry, petit bourgeoisie and/or intelligentsia – and which not. And one knew that they can be allies today even if they were not allies yesterday and will not be allies tomorrow – and vice versa. But the working class itself also was not regarded as a transhistorical unity and had to be permanently defined anew. For the class struggle it does mean that the topology of solidarity and contestation, or of friends and enemies, is also permanently changing: today’s friends could become tomorrow’s enemies and today’s enemies – tomorrow’s friends. In other words, in the context of the class struggle the definition of the class is necessarily strategic, tactical, situational and fluid.

On the contrary, race and gender are unhistorical. For every individual they are defined by the past – and will remain so also in the future. In our times both notions became further fragmented – the genders are proliferating as well as race and ethnic cultural identities. But this proliferation does not make them historical because every such fragmentary identity is supposed to have existed in the past and to exist in the future. The process is similar to the investigation of the elementary particles: the scientific research discovers more and more particles. But these particles as such are unhistorical. Their discovery belongs to the history of the science. But the particles themselves are supposed to be there before their discovery. Of course, one can change his or her gender and become “transgender” (it looks like one can not change a race). But that precisely means that the gender does not change itself without being changed – unlike the class. Not accidentally in recent decades the slogan “Let us change the world!” became so popular – as if the world

does not change without being changed. It shows what a long distance separates the contemporary left mentality from the Hegelian-Marxist conviction that the world is nothing else as the permanent movement that cannot be stopped.

However, the current role of race and gender should not be merely criticized, confirmed or rejected. This role signals the failure of the liberal, bourgeois revolutions understood as attempts to achieve a state of the society in which everybody, independent of their race, gender and sexual orientation, will have the equal rights and same chances to achieve wealth and political power. What is offered to us today as a post-Marxist politics is, actually, an attempt to complete the pre-Marxist bourgeois revolutionary project. This is the project to guarantee the vertical mobility for all. To create the conditions for such a vertical mobility one needs solidarity. But it is not any more a horizontal class solidarity but the vertical solidarity. In the national states of 19th Century it was the national solidarity – in competition with other nations. Today it is solidarity inside certain identitarian groups in competition with other similar groups: it is, for example, solidarity among women or among people of color. It requires from the successful women to practice solidarity with their less successful sisters and from the successful people of color - to help their less successful brothers and sisters. And it requires from the non-successful parts of minorities to support, admire and imitate the success of their wealthy and prominent representatives. It is obvious that the identitarian vertical solidarity directly contradicts the horizontal class solidarity. Here we are confronted with the same problem with which the European societies were confronted after the French revolution – the belonging to the same nation requires national solidarity whereas class solidarity undermines the national unity and solidarity. We know that the European societies preferred the national solidarity to the class solidarity because in the situation of economic and political competition among different nations the national solidarity promised a faster success than the attempts to find common ground with the low classes of other nations.

The thematization of race and gender is often explained by the necessity to describe and overcome a specific form of exploitation and oppression to which certain “minorities” are subjected. This explanation is totally understandable, and the politics that has a goal to improve a lot of minorities deserves the unrestricted support. However, we currently see that the traditionally oppressed minorities - also due to this politics - begin to increasingly climb the ladder of vertical mobility. But now: what if a female or black entrepreneur, entertainer or politician does make a carrier? Should other women or blacks break their solidarity with them or not? On the one hand these particular female or black individuals have changed their position in the class struggle – moving from the side of the oppressed to the side of the oppressors. But we don't hear a call

for such a break – a call that would be similar to the Marxist call to the working classes of the European national states to break solidarity with the capitalist classes of their nations.

Today, the success of the few begins to be seen as the promise of a success for many, if not for all of the same minority. One begins to glorify the fact that now a woman can command a bomber aircraft (without asking the question if to bomb other people is a good practice). One celebrates the representatives of racial minorities when they accumulate big fortunes and become present in the media. In the films, TV-serials and novels one favorably presents princesses and queens of the feudal past as examples of female power. The female and black superheroes emerge on the side of the traditional white and male heroes. Of course, one can say: great, let it be. And, indeed, one is glad to contemplate this new diversity. The problem is only this: today these glorification and celebration of the successful representation of “minorities” inside the ruling class are presented as being “leftist”. And that is what is really surprising. To be on the left traditionally meant taking a side of the poor against the rich – not the side of a princess against the prince. Today, to be left does more and more mean to take a side of the “minority” members of the upper class against the “majority” members of the upper class. Thus, one criticizes the glass ceiling that prevents some women to become the CEOs of big corporations – instead of asking if to become a CEO is such a good thing.

This new vertical solidarity becomes directed against the poor and exploited because it suggests that the dominating order would be perfectly OK if only the racial and gender make-up of the upper class would reflect the statistical distribution of the identity characteristics of the general population. The individual success stories of the representatives of different minorities are celebrated as great victories and signs of the social change. But, of course, they change nothing. The ordinary people of all colors and genders remain where they were.

At the same time the make-up of the classes and borders between them are still permanently shifting. Today, when one speaks about the class, one mostly does not forget to mention that the working class in its traditional Marxist sense of industrial labor has become less numerous. However, one cannot overlook the growing proletarianization of the majority of contemporary society. The small shops, including the book shops, cafes and restaurants disappear. Everything small and economically independent is wiped out. The growing mass of people working in the IT industries is as “alienated” of the working process as the industrial workers in the 19th Century. The whole traditional cultural system became also totally proletarianized. I still remember very well the discussions about the role of power in the Academia and in the art system, especially, in the museums. Now it is clear enough that the Academia is, actually, poor and the position of a professor is economically non-attractive.

And the museums are irrelevant – money is circulating through the auction houses and big globalized galleries. At the same time outside the Academia and museum system the artists, writers and other “cultural workers” are reduced to “content providers” who feed the cultural industry with the raw material that this industry turns into the final product. The famous “creativity” became the opium for intellectuals and artists – the modern substitute for religion. The individual intellectuals and artists may still believe that they “give voice” to the proletarian masses or to this and that particular minorities. What they overlook is the fact that they themselves already long ago became a part of these proletarian masses. The epoch of Sartre and Picasso is gone. Today the sport heroes, pop musicians and fashion designers are prominent and have a voice. It is not accidental that it is they who are regularly asked to say their opinion on the matter of public concern – such as world peace or environmental issues. And it is obvious that sport, pop music and design are totally controlled by multinational corporations. The economic distance between the superrich and the mass of population is permanently growing – and the globalized class of superrich includes traders from Wall Street and CEOs from Silicon Valley alongside the sheikhs from OAE and Hongkong bankers. Race and gender play here no role – only money. We are living in the middle of a new industrial revolution and the working class changes its configuration even faster as usual. The class conflicts become also sharper. So one can expect that in the near future the identitarian solidarity will not be able any more to moderate the class struggle.

2.

In the Western countries the preference for minorities and a certain lack of interest for the majority sector of the working class on the side of the Left moved this sector towards the Right. The right-wing, nationalist parties are becoming increasingly influential in the former Western Europe – in France, Holland, Belgium and also in Germany. But even more influential they became in the former Eastern Europe. In the USA the MAGA movement began to play the same role. These parties and movements are time and again compared with the fascist parties from the European 1930s and 1940s. And, indeed, they use the similar racist, xenophobic rhetoric. Like their Fascist predecessors they want the “conservative revolution” directed against the main ideologies of the 20th Century, namely Liberalism and Socialism, as well as against the political institutions that are historically related to these ideologies. Their propaganda is directed against the similar groups inside their own countries: globalized, cosmopolitan elites and immigrants.

However, the New Right is different from the classical Fascist movements that were aggressive, expansionist, striving towards the

world domination and trying to establish a universal New Order. The Neo-Fascist New Right is, on the contrary, defensive and protectionist. The ideology of the New Right, including the Trumpian MAGA movement, can be seen as a return of the territorial into the world economy and politics. The post-Cold War era was a period of globalization – and, to use a Deleusian term, of de-territorialization. The main symbol of this era was the rhizomatic and at the same time global structure of the Internet. Today, one becomes reminded that the corporations and organisations that operate the Internet have certain addresses on the real, off-line territories that are controlled by certain states. Accordingly, these Internet corporations and agencies come under suspicion to represent the interests of these states. They become considered as instruments of surveillance, propaganda tools and sources of the fake news. Instead of constituting a virtual space beyond the state borders the Internet is seen today more and more as the privileged battlefield for the international information wars.

This is only one example of the re-territorialisation of the politics that we experience now. The second – and, actually, the most important example – is the fact that migration and, especially, immigration became the central point of the public concern. It is safe to say that it is primarily the attitude towards the immigration that structures the contemporary political landscape – at least in the Western countries. Now, the anti-immigration politics of the contemporary New Right parties is an effect of what can be characterized as the territorialisation of the identity politics. The main presupposition of the ideology of these parties is this: every cultural identity has to have its own territory on which it can and should flourish – undisturbed by the cultural influences from other cultural identities. The world is diverse and should be diverse. But the world's diversity can be guaranteed only by the territorial diversity. The mixture of different cultural identities on the same territory destroys these identities. The universalized world becomes uniform – boring, depressive. And what is even more important – non-profitable for the touristic industry that promises to the international tourists precisely the combination between a travel to a different territory and a meeting with a different culture.

Now the right-wing propaganda sees the globalized, de-territorialized elites as the main enemy of the re-territorialized, diversified world order. The elites – the famous 1% - are accused by the rightwing propaganda to be interested only in the global financial markets and not in the fate of the populations of their countries. Not in the wellbeing of these populations, not in the technological infrastructure installed on their territories. It was and still is one of the big themes of Trump's campaign. The globalization is seen as creating a line of division inside every individual society. A small minority profits from globalization – but the majority remains left behind. This majority

becomes additionally endangered by the immigration. The global trends, financial, technological and informational, destroy the traditional lifestyles and professions, make the acquired skills and cultural habits useless – the skills and habits that were practiced through generations. This loss of traditional professions and work habits becomes further aggravated by the influx of immigrants from the countries with different cultural backgrounds and lifestyles – an influx that creates a reservoir of the cheap working force and thus contributes to the general misery of the working class. And the elites do not do anything against it. So the working population begins to feel that the elites betrayed them and that now is the time to do something against it. The question is only: what has to be done?

Historically, we know only two answers to this question: Socialism and Nationalism. It is obvious that – at least at the moment - the populations of the Western countries reject the Socialist choice and tend to accept the Nationalist choice. The reason for this choice is also pretty obvious: it is an effect of the victory of the Neo-Liberal globalism over the Socialist internationalism at the end of the Cold War. Indeed, during the historical period after the Fall of the Berlin Wall the Western Left was systematically destroyed – first of all the Western Communist parties and then the Social-Democracy. All the Socialist models – radical or moderate - were proclaimed to be economically inefficient, historically discredited and obsolete. So during the recent decades a certain consensus was formed: Socialism is economically inefficient and, generally, bad. And that is an actual reason for the Nationalist, Neo-Fascist choice: after the neo-liberal, anti-Socialist propaganda managed to persuade the wider populations that Socialism is economically ruinous the Socialist choice became blocked – and only the Neo-Fascist choice remained possible. Of course, it is not the result that the theoreticians of the Neo-Liberalism expected. But they did not expect it only because they overlooked a couple of things. Let us now consider these things more attentively.

What is, actually, the difference between Socialist internationalism and Neo-Liberal globalism? The Socialist internationalism is based on the international solidarity whereas the Neo-Liberal globalism is based on the global competition. In the context of the global markets everybody competes against everybody – every individual is competing against every other individual, every country against every other country, every identity against every other identity etc. Of course, the Socialism – being based on Solidarity – is inefficient in the context of competition. If one believes that the competition is what people should do the Socialism becomes automatically discarded. And that is, indeed, what the Neo-Liberal ideology believes: competition makes the business flourish. Of course, the belief in the competition also presupposes that the competition is fair. But who is responsible for the fairness of the global

competition? Such an institution does not exist. Of course, the American politicians say time and again that they feel themselves responsible for the global affairs. But then the suspicion emerges that they interpret this responsibility in a way that serves their own interests to the detriment of the interests of the others.

And then: what is, actually, fairness? Is a competition fair when it is reduced to the success on the markets? Maybe such a competition is unfair because it always favors a certain human type, a certain cultural identity, a certain way of life based on the economic success? Maybe it would be a good idea to protect people with the cultural identities that do not fit so easily into the global competitive framework – help them, defend them, maybe even using institutional and military coercion? For example: what happens when the American commodities are not so successful and the American work force is not well enough trained? Then the state may say: buy American and hire American.

Here the way from Neo-Liberalism to Neo-Fascism becomes clear enough. And this way is very short, indeed. Both Neo-Liberalism and Neo-Fascism believe in competition – here is their difference from the international Socialism. The Western Neo-Liberals tend to think that they will always be the winners of this competition. The loser will be always the famous Other. The Liberals are ready to preach the recognition of the Other, respect for the Other etc. But it seems that they can hardly imagine the situation in which they themselves become the Others. For the Western liberals the others are always the others. I remember listening to a talk of a liberal Berliner Professor on the German TV in the times as a right-wing movement against the immigration policy of Angela Merkel started. He said that the Germans should accept the immigrants because they will always remain in the lowest sector of the German society – and thus will not present any danger for the majority of the Germans. However, the German right-wing protestors were not so sure about it – and it was precisely this uncertainty that moved them towards the right radicalism. One can safely say that the desire to change the rules of competition comes from the uncertainty that these rules are fair – and fair is mostly understood as favorable. There is always a suspicion that the famous requirement “to play by the rules” is formulated by the actors that profit from these rules to guarantee their profits. Thus, Trump says time and again that the trade deals between USA and other countries, especially China, are unfair – and here unfair means simply not favorable for the USA.

The goal of the identity politics is to defend minorities from the cultural, political and economic domination by the majority – the domination of the weak by the strong. Therefore, in the USA the identity politics is traditionally considered as Leftist politics. Thus, the white majority started the identity politics from the Right. However, the reason for both identity politics is the same. Today the USA do not

feel themselves strong enough – being confronted by the competition from all over the world, including China, India, Mexico etc. In the global context the white Americans are not majority but minority. They can feel themselves strong at home but internationally they experience themselves as increasingly weak. It is this feeling of weakness that Trump embraced and exploited. It was especially interesting to see his performance during the discussions with his Republican competitors during 2016 presidential campaign. All of them praised America and everything American at any opportunity: greatest people of the Earth, greatest civilization in the human history and, generally, a shining city on the hill. Trump alone spoke about everything American as disaster, catastrophe and disgrace – airports, highways, inner cities, wars and peace treaties. He presented USA not as a historical winner but as a historical loser. And that is how he captured minds and hearts of so many Americans. Not by celebrating American supremacy but by painting the perspective of the ultimate American defeat. Here America was presented as a losing identity, the whole global system of competition as destroying USA, the Americans as the first victims of the post-cold war order that they themselves created and the American elites as traitors selling USA at the globalized markets. The results of the election have shown that the American population in its majority also sees the USA as a power in decline – and itself as a victim of the historical process. USA think about itself as an unhappy country, even masochistic country – accepting having been exploited and ripped by everybody. The goal of saving and keeping American identity becomes urgent – and the identity politics becomes truly neo-fascist because it begins to address not the minorities but the whole country.

3.

Here is important to realize: the definition of a so-called cultural identity of a person has nothing to do with the question how this person identifies himself or herself. The identity, as it is currently understood, is not a subjective attitude but a genealogical or sociological fact. This identity is defined by the identity of the parents and by place and date of birth. Of course, somebody born, for example, as Jewish or German can reject his or her identity. But in the eyes of the others such a rejection would only confirm and reproduce a certain pattern of self-denial that is already historically well known – and perceived as being typical for these cultural identities. One has no power of definition, no sovereignty over one's own cultural identity. The production of identities is always a work of the others. The current popularity of the notion of identity has to do with the proliferation of the identity documents, like passports and birth certificates but also other bureaucratic forms that allow the society to become informed about the individuals' genealogy – and, thus, also about

their identities. The Internet made this genealogical documentation much easily available than it was ever before. Today it became relatively easy to find out one's genealogical past. The contemporary notion of identity is dependent on the global networks of information and applied to the individuals as far as their genealogies are documented are circulating in these networks. And under the conditions of the informational age almost nobody can escape the genealogical control.

Now genealogy is closely related to ecology. The reproduction of certain kinds of animals - with the same identities - requires the sustainability of the biotopes in which this reproduction takes place. That is the whole point of the ecology and ecological movement: to keep the biotopes intact and thus guarantee the reproducibility of certain animals or plants. It is easy enough to expand the ecological care from the non-human on human animals. That is precisely what the rightist parties do. The thinking of the rightist parties is not so much cultural or economical as it is ecological. These parties expand the ecological concerns on the human animals and try to organize the social ecosystems in a way that they would favor the (re)production of the human bodies with certain identity characteristics. And as in the case of other animals the main concern is the stability of the ecosystems, their defense against the intruder-animals that potentially would destroy the already existing ecological balance. Accordingly, the immigrants are rejected not as "people with a different identity" but, rather, as agents of the "globalized world" in which all identities dissolve. In Brussels I often heard from my Flemish friends that their main problem with the immigrants is that the immigrants prefer French to Flemish. The same I heard in Germany - among many other things the immigrants are made responsible for Americanisation of Germany including the everyday use of English language instead of German. Analogous to the fear of disappearance of certain kinds of animals and plants one becomes to be concerned with the possible disappearance of the Germans or Flemish. In the European countries there is a lot of a talk about the necessity of the "integration" of the immigrants into the respective national European cultures. But it is obvious for everybody that the opposite process takes place: the influx of immigrants speeds the integration of the local European cultures into the globalized, English-speaking world. The immigrants are perceived as the agents of the Empire. The anti-immigrant affect is, actually, the anti-imperial affect. The characterization of the migrants as "minority" is misleading. The migrants are seen, rather, as agents of the global majority - and rejected or accepted as such. They are resented in the name of the protection of the local culture. And they are accepted as the chance to join the global mainstream.

When the right-wing parties insist on protecting a certain cultural identity, they mean the everyday, habitual, "non-formalized", ecological aspect of culture - that has nothing to do with production

and distribution of the cultural commodities or circulation of cultural information. This cultural circulation is accused to destroy the ecological diversity and produce the global cultural uniformity. So, one calls to the defense of the local cultures and resistance against their globalization and homogenization. This call seems seductive to many people. However, there is one problem with this call: it can be realized only through mechanisms of control and repression. And these mechanisms are similar all around the world – even if the cultural identities that these mechanisms protect are different. For example, one tries to protect Iranian or Russian cultural identities. They are, of course, very different – however, when one begins to look into the practices of their conservation one is impressed by the uniformity of these practices. And this uniformity is precisely what the population of these different places is primarily confronted with in its everyday life – the diversity can be experienced only by the global tourists and international journalists.

The globalization inevitably leads to global uniformity – and the resistance to globalization also leads to global uniformity. If it is so why the contemporary politics, be it neo-liberal and neo-rightist, is not ready to accept this fact and continues to insist on difference and diversity? The reason is that the cultural uniformity is associated with Socialism – and after the end of the Cold War everything that is related to Socialism is tabu. To illustrate this point let me mention a text that was written at the beginning of the Cold War and treats precisely this point. In his “Notes towards the Definition of Culture” (1948) T.S. Eliot speaks about the perspective of the universal and homogeneous culture as an inevitable perspective.¹ Eliot is a conservative author and his notion of culture contradicts the liberal understanding of culture as a sum of cultural goods. He understands culture more or less in the same way as contemporary rightist parties do it – as an ecologically defined biotope for the re-production of the specific kinds of human animals. At the same time, he does not believe that the protection of such biotopes could be effective. And he also does not believe that this protection is beneficial.

The reason for this skepticism is Eliot’s analysis of the shift in the functioning of migration. Earlier the individual tribes and small ethnic groups, he writes, migrated in their entirety – so that they brought their culture, their way of life with them. However, today the migration does not happen on the level of the whole *Volk*. The contemporary migrants are the individuals who left the centers and original areas of their culture – and thus do not transport their culture in its entirety but mix it with the culture of the populations in the middle of which they are living. Eliot speaks about this new type of migration in relationship to the phenomenon of colonialism. He worries about the influence of the Europeans on the sustainability of the non-Western cultures. However,

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¹ Eliot 1962. P.62

today the migration is more associated with the movement of people from the non-Western countries into the countries of the West. Thus, for the contemporary Europeans the worries that were formulated by Eliot become even more acute.

But Eliot does not believe in the possibility of stopping migration and protecting the European cultural biotope. He writes: "For if we content ourselves with the ideal of "European culture" we shall be unable to fix any definite frontiers. European culture has an area but no definite frontiers: and you cannot build Chinese walls. A notion of the self-contained European culture would be as the notion of the self-contained national culture: in the end as absurd as the notion of preserving a local uncontaminated culture in a single county or village in England. We are therefore pressed to maintain the ideal of a world culture, while admitting that it is something that we cannot *imagine*".²

Now one has to ask: Why such a culture is unimaginable? Eliot answers this question by rejecting all the efforts by the "world planners" of the Hegelian-Marxist traditions to create a world state. In the spirit of the beginning Cold War, he accuses "our Russian friends", as he writes, of the desire to eradicate all the cultural differences and create a "uniform" world culture that would dehumanize the humanity. Basically, it is a kind of Nietzschean aversion against the perspective of the pacified, post-historical, Socialist humanity that motivates Eliot to proclaim the world culture to be an unimaginable project. It is the same aversion that today unites the nationalists and liberals in the common celebration of the human capital, creativity and diversity. Today we are back in the 19th Century – in a combination between globalized markets and localized cultures, of Internet and Marine Le Pen. And as in the 19th Century, the only alternative to this combination is the Socialist one. But this alternative requires a redefinition of our notions of culture and cultural identity.

4.

T.S. Elliot's confession that he cannot imagine such a thing as the world culture reminds one of a similar confession by Clement Greenberg. In his "The Plight of Culture" (1953) he diagnoses the decline of the bourgeois culture and writes: 'The only solution for culture that I conceive of under these conditions is to shift its centre of gravity away from leisure and place it squarely in the middle of work'.³ But then he writes further about the proposed solution: 'I am suggesting something whose outcome I cannot imagine... Beyond this speculation, which is admittedly schematic and abstract, I cannot go... But at least it helps if we do not have to

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2 Ibid., pp. 61-62

3 Greenberg 1961, p.32

despair of the ultimate consequences for culture of industrialism. And it also helps if we do not have to stop thinking at the point where Spengler and Toynbee and Eliot do'.⁴ This passage shows that Greenberg has seen clearly that the traditional association between culture and free time leads towards the historical impasse. At the same time, he could not liberate his thinking from this connection. In his famous article "Avant-garde and Kitsch" (1939) he wrote that the work of art can be appreciated only by those who 'could command leisure and comfort that always goes hand and hand with cultivation of some sort'.⁵ For Greenberg this means that also the avant-garde art can hope to get its financial and social support only from the same 'rich and cultivated' people who historically supported traditional art. Thus the avant-garde remains attached to the bourgeois ruling class 'by an umbilical cord of gold'.⁶

In fact, it is surprising that even in 1953 Greenberg is still incapable to imagine the culture not in the context of consumption but in the context of work – some decades after Proletkul't, Vkhutemas and Bauhaus. This is why Greenberg comes to the somewhat counter-intuitive assumption that only the ruling class, excluded from the production process, has enough leisure time to contemplate and aesthetically appreciate the technical, constructivist, "formal" aspects of art whereas the working class can respond only to Kitsch that appeals to the elementary drives and feelings that are not refined by upbringing and education. In other words, Greenberg speaks about art not from the position of its producer but, rather, from the position of its bourgeois spectator. And more generally, culture is for Eliot and Greenberg the sphere of free, leisure time – ultimately, the sphere of consumption. And it is only consequential that for them culture correlates with the life-style of the upper class and not with the technical production in which the working class is involved. Accordingly, the cultural identity of a nation or ethnicity is also identified with the culture of its upper class.

However, already in 1920s, in the framework of Russian Constructivism and Bauhaus, art and culture began to be understood as the organization of the working process. The working process is, indeed, not solely defined by the necessities of the industrial production. Every work, including the industrial work, requires certain mode of collaboration between the workers. The agricultural work was organized according to some historically inherited patterns but the technology is changing all the times – and, thus, the culture of work has also to change. That is especially true for our time. At the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries art entered a new era –

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4 Ibid., pp. 32-33

5 Ibid., p.9

6 Ibid., p.8

namely, an era of mass artistic production that followed the era of mass art consumption as it was described by many influential theoreticians: as an era of Kitsch (Greenberg), of 'cultural industry' (Adorno) or as a society of spectacle (Guy Debord). This was the era of art that was made for the masses, of art that wanted to seduce the masses and be consumed by them. Now, the situation has changed. Contemporary means of communications and social networks like Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter give to global populations the possibility of offer their photos, videos and texts to the global audiences. Contemporary design gives to the same populations the possibility of shaping and experiencing their own bodies, homes or work places as artistic objects and installations. For a long time, this everyday level of shared artistic practice remained overlooked, even if many art theorists such as the Russian formalists, or artists like Marcel Duchamp, tried time and again to attract our attention to everyday life as a field of art. In our own time everyday life has become even more artificial, theatricalised and designed. To be an artist has ceased to be an exclusive fate – instead, it has become representative of society as a whole on its most intimate, everyday level. In other words, with few exceptions the artists have become a part of the working class. And their life is organized around the production process and technological change. Now the technology transcends the traditional, inherited cultural identities. It creates an alternative and purely contemporary diversity of professions and life styles. Here we see that “the world culture” and “culture in the middle of the working process” are the same – that is why Elliot and Greenberg could not imagine them. Indeed, as far as culture is thought as belonging to the sphere of leisure and consumption it is shaped by the consumers' cultural identities. However, when culture is considered as belonging to the sphere of production it becomes to be defined by the global technological change. Here one can speak about the class struggle in culture that was started by the avant-gardes of the 20th Century and that we can expect again after the new technological revolution will solidify its grip on the majority of the world population.

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Classes and Transclasses

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Abstract: Insofar as they designate individuals who, alone or in groups, cross social barriers and move from one class to another, transclasses have a problematic status that disrupts established political categories and questions their validity. Indeed, transclass trajectories, whether from the working-class world to the bourgeoisie or, conversely, from the bourgeoisie to the working-class world, presuppose the existence of social classes, on the one hand, and the possibility of changing them, on the other. The transclass phenomenon thus seems paradoxically both to affirm and deny the existence of classes. It presupposes the transition from a given social condition to another that serves as a reference for measuring the trajectory and thinking about the transition from one state to another. Whether the transition is in one direction or the other, it takes root in a class of origin and leads to a class of arrival. What is usually called social ascent or downgrading necessarily implies, then, the affirmation of class as a condition of possibility. This paper is an attempt to discuss

Keywords: classes, transclasses, social classes, individuals, working-class

Insofar as they designate individuals who, alone or in groups, cross social barriers and move from one class to another, transclasses have a problematic status that disrupts established political categories and questions their validity. Indeed, transclass trajectories, whether from the working-class world to the bourgeoisie or, conversely, from the bourgeoisie to the working-class world, presuppose the existence of social classes, on the one hand, and the possibility of changing them, on the other. The transclass phenomenon thus seems paradoxically both to affirm and deny the existence of classes. It presupposes the transition from a given social condition to another that serves as a reference for measuring the trajectory and thinking about the transition from one state to another. Whether the transition is in one direction or the other, it takes root in a class of origin and leads to a class of arrival. What is usually called social ascent or downgrading necessarily implies, then, the affirmation of class as a condition of possibility.

At the same time, the existence of transclasses reveals that these supposed classes of origin and arrival do not constitute impervious and immutable orders and are not reducible to an impassable caste system. Although these social classes rest on a hierarchy and share the world as dominant and dominated, they are not based on a principle of hereditary distribution of trades and functions and on a strict endogamy aiming to preserve their purity. Their boundaries and spheres of extension are not as rigidly defined as the orders under the *Ancien régime*, or castes in India, so that one may question the reality and relevance of a division of

society on this basis. Isn't passing through class [*passe-classe*] the sign that classes can be dispensed with, that their limits are poorly defined because of the social fluidity and the bridges [*passerelles*] that transform them into sieves [*passoires*]? There is then a strong temptation to use the existence of transclasses as a counterexample to invalidate the division of society into classes, to proclaim the obsolescence of their struggle and its pointlessness. The concept of transclass, then, disrupts the concept of class; it invites us to put it back to work, to test its consistency and its necessity.

But in turn, doesn't the simultaneous movement of affirmation and negation of class that transclass envelops make it a contradictory concept, a kind of square circle, necessarily vicious or at least vitiated by its tensions? For, in the last analysis, do enriched and acculturated workers becomes bourgeois really leave their class of origin? Do ruined *rentiers* who are forced to sell their labor power in order to live cease to be bourgeois in the working-class world? Under these conditions, what does "being transclass" mean, and what is the status of this category? One may wonder if it is not a new class, that of declassed and surclassed.

All these questions constitute invitations to return to the analysis of class from the standpoint of transclass in order to clarify the relationships between the two concepts, to measure their efficacy and respective limits. Rather than succumb to the simplistic temptation of opposing the notions of class and transclass in a movement of reciprocal negation that would imply their mutual exclusion, it will be a matter of thinking about their dialectic and coming up with lessons from their confrontation. The objective will therefore be to examine what new thinking about transclasses brings to the conception of social classes today and to highlight the changes to which it leads.

1. A Class of Transclasses?

With this in mind, it is first necessary to return to the definition of the concept of transclass and specify its status in order to determine, if necessary, whether it constitutes a new class, outside of class. More than any other, because of the rarity and singularity of trajectories passing through class, the definition of transclass revives the quarrel of universals and clashes with the alternative of realism and nominalism. Strictly speaking, "transclass" does not exist, any more than bourgeois or proletarian, even less because of its statistical improbability and anomalous character. There are only singular individuals who are qualified as such and gathered in their plurality under one and the same denomination.

This general name does not, however, amount to a being of reason, to a pure *flatus vocis*.¹ It is not intended to designate types of beings by wrongly lending them an essence and an existence in and by itself. Although universal notions always have a form of abstraction and are now getting a bad press, they are not systematically reduced to empty generalizations of meaning and real content. Indeed, everything depends on their mode of formation and the process of their generation. Thus, Spinoza takes care to distinguish fictional universal notions from rational universal notions. The former notions are forged by the imagination, which generalizes from particular empirical cases, or from signs and words. The second notions are born from reason, which is based on common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things.² In this case, a universal notion, although it does not express the essence of singular things,³ refers to something real in them, namely, their common properties.

On this basis, it becomes possible to make an adjustment and prevent a possible misunderstanding. The term “transclass” characterizes the social trajectory of individuals who change social class; it does not express an essence or a type. We must therefore be wary of grammatical shortcuts by letting ourselves get caught up in words. The unavoidable use of the article defined in the singular or plural must not mislead us and imply that one or several transclasses refer in a substantive form to a substantial being or essential qualities. Being transclass *is not an identity, it is a process of passing from one class to another*. Far from assigning an identity to individuals, this process implies on the contrary its deconstruction, indeed, its challenging in favor of a logic of permanent mutation.⁴ The transclass process of transition requires a work of de-identification in relation to the original class, taking a distance with respect to its codes and ways of being and a redefinition of oneself that does not necessarily consist in an identification with the habitus of the class of arrival. Transclass is more characterized by a dialectic of the in-between following the cohabitation in it of different social worlds, which are even divergent to the point that sometimes class struggle can be experienced in it.

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1 *Translator's note: Flatus vocis* was a term used by the French Medieval philosopher Roscelin of Compiègne to characterize his nominalist view that universals do not refer to a corresponding objective reality but instead are mere names, words, or sounds.

2 See E2p40s2.

3 See E2p37.

4 For the details, see Jaquet 2014, p. 95f.

But the care to avoid essentialization must not lead to falling back onto the egotic peculiarity and passing from Charybdis to Scylla. If there is no transclass type, there are indeed, on the other hand, specific characteristics that can be the object of a universal common notion. What is common to all transclasses, what makes it possible to designate them as such by referring to a real foundation, *is this process of passage with its procession of obstacles and of modifications in return*. In other words, if there is no transclass essence, there is a *common transitional structure: that of passing through class*. Whatever the various modalities experienced, this structure of passage always involves a multifactorial causality, a node of interlinked determinations at the crossroads of history, great and small. At the very least, it implies, *first of all*, the modification of a place within the initial class, and the variation of the different economic, cultural, and social capitals that characterize it, and, *secondly*, a transformation of oneself according to the adjustments required by a situation of in-between, and, *thirdly*, a repositioning in relation to both the class of origin and the class of arrival. In short, if there is no transclass identity card, there is nonetheless a mapping of the passage based on a structure of displacement and reconfiguration of the self with its share of obstacles, fluctuations, and mutations.

Because of its processual nature and the complex network of economic, political, familial, and idiosyncratic causes that make it possible, this traversal of classes has no uniform and rectilinear course. It gives rise to multiple configurations, depending on historical, geographical, sexual, gender, ethnic, religious factors..., which come into play in the passage, and a variety of postures depending on the nature of the relations with the classes of origin and arrival as well as the political positioning of each. Thus, transclasses can just as easily sever ties with their initial social milieu and aim for perfect integration into their new milieu, becoming pillars of the interests of the class of arrival. They can, on the contrary, claim fidelity or belonging to their class of origin, out of a desire not to betray, and reject the values and injunctions of the milieu of arrival, departing from its practices and norms of life. They can also, through this passage, forge ways of being hybrid by deconstructing and reconstructing themselves in a singular way, at a distance from both the class of origin and the class of arrival. A single transclass individual, moreover, can in turn adopt these different postures and change them in the course of history, experiencing phases of rupture and integration, rejection and return to origins, hybridization and miscegenation. Depending on the possibilities opened up by the collective and singular history of each, transclasses can thus experience the whole range of the figures in between and practice a culture of the gap in variable geometry.

Therefore, if they can form a social group and recognize themselves because of the problems common to passing through class and a situation of being in-between, it is not obvious that they can

constitute a new class based on a common interest and positioning – far from it. To insure this, it is necessary to revisit the definition of class and clarify its meaning in order to determine the conditions required to constitute and form part of it. From this point of view, it is important first to emphasize the equivocity of the term and distinguish its current sense from its conceptual usage in the context of Marxist theory.

The Equivocity of the Notion of Class

In the general and ordinary sense of the term, class covers all divisions into specific categories on the basis of distinctive criteria, whether in the taxonomy of the mineralogical, botanical or zoological sciences, in mathematics, linguistics, demographics, or politics. If it is irrelevant to trace here the whole history of the notion, it must be remembered that the word is derived from the Latin *classis*, which in Roman history designated the divisions of citizens into five categories. This division into classes was carried out on the basis of a census, which made it possible to evaluate their fortune and goods and divide them into different groups according to their respective wealth. The term, therefore, has a social and political origin. By extension, the term class will be applied to the navy, then with conscription to all soldiers who have to do their drills and are called into duty the same year and in parallel also with groups of children who study at the same time.

By taking the notion in this broad and general sense, it is possible to consider that transclasses form a class that has as a distinctive common characteristic the experience of passing through class. On this basis, it would therefore not be absurd to speak of a *class of transclasses* as designating a sociological category that regroups individuals having for a common feature the problematic of class passage and to wonder, for example, about its forms, its scope, and membership criteria. But this would above all be a descriptive use of the term, analogous to the classification principles in effect in other heuristic fields. Taken in this sense, the notion of social class has no real significance and remains very far from the political meaning of the concept as elaborated by Marx and his heirs. It is by no means an explanatory principle of the dynamics at work in history and is deprived of efficacy. The real question, therefore, is above all whether or not transclasses meet the conditions required in order to be a class, in the specific political sense of the term and no longer in the general sense.

Class takes on its full meaning and breadth when it is no longer thought of in a static way as a simple operator of distinction but in a dialectical way as an operating principle, an engine of all history. Far from defining it as an administrative status resulting from a censitary civil partition or as a simple social category, Marx highlights the mode

of constitution of class through struggle. That is why the fundamental concept in his eyes is not that of class but of class struggles. Class does not exist in isolation as a given in itself and is not the expression of an intrinsic nature. It falls under what Spinoza would call “extrinsic denominations” expressing relations and actions.⁵ Class always constitutes itself vis-à-vis or, more precisely, in opposition to another class, because of incompatible interests. Therefore, it first objectively refers to an economic role, to a place in the production process. The capitalist possesses the means of production and buys the labor power of the proletarians, who have no other means of living except to sell it and subject themselves to the arbitrary conditions of another. In short, one possesses, the other is possessed, because she or he is dispossessed. This is the origin of class struggle that cuts across all history and divides society into exploiters and exploited.

But for Marx it is less position than opposition that defines class. For a class that does not know itself as a class is not yet really one. It is in itself vis-à-vis capital, but it is not for itself. If objective contradiction of the interests of individuals presides over their becoming a class, it is not enough to constitute it as such. This is what *The Poverty of Philosophy* argues:

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The domination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have pointed out only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle.⁶

The proletariat may well be dominated and share a common condition, but it is not homogeneous and unified. It appears at the outset more as a mass than as a class. Just like the bourgeoisie, which seeks to eliminate its competitors on the market in order to increase its capital, the proletariat is traversed by rivalries concerning access to employment and the amount of wages. However, this mass is already a class vis-à-vis capital, because there is indeed a real antagonism between interests, whether or not it is perceived by those concerned. The absence of class consciousness should not be confused with the absence of class. Nevertheless, for the class to be conceived as a class for itself, it is necessary that proletarians, just like the bourgeois, break with their

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⁵ *Metaphysical Thoughts*, Part II, chapter 2; see Spinoza 1985, p. 318.

⁶ Marx 1976d, p. 211.

internal rivalries, displace them to form a common front against those who really threaten their existence. The mass coalesces to assert its interests; and it is through this struggle that it constitutes itself by uniting, first as a group, as an association, then as a class conscious of itself in the face of another class.

This struggle is not limited to the antagonism of economic interests, the opposition between capital/salary, wealth/poverty, and the place of each in the production process. It becomes a political struggle between the dominant and the dominated, which takes shape according to hegemonic or subordinate positions within the state apparatus and doubles as an ideological confrontation, so true is it that “the ideas of the ruling class are ... the ruling ideas.”⁷ It is the relation of assumed antagonism that allows the passage from mass to class, from its existence in itself to its constitution for itself. In other words, class, in its complete sense, does not precede the struggle but proceeds from it, because it is the result of the conscious exercise of the balance of power. It is therefore less anterior than interior to the struggle to be waged. Although the complete analysis of this concept envisaged in *Capital* did not see the light of day, class acquires efficacy in Marx only through the transformation of an objective common social situation into a political position of struggle defending interests in a conscious and assumed way. It therefore obeys a process of complex dialectical constitution and cannot be reduced to a simple operator of distinction or a mechanical principle of classification according to taxes, wealth, way of life, and culture.

This double process of constitution of and by class testifies to the passage from a descriptive notion of class to an operational concept endowed with historical efficacy. Because for Marx in class it is not so much a census that makes sense, as it did for the Romans, as it is consciousness that brings up domination and its necessary abolition. Through the dialectical movement from class in itself as unknown to class for itself, knowingly perceived, occurs the transformation of a position into a conscious and organized opposition.

Transclasses: Group or Class?

It now becomes possible to return to the status of transclasses in light of this analysis of the constitutive process of class and reformulate the question more precisely. Can transclasses cross the threshold of the social group sharing an experience of passing through class according to various lived modalities to become a class in itself and for itself, like other middle strata who have historically known this kind

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⁷ Marx and Engels 1976b, p. 59.

of transformation? This basically amounts to asking whether there is a struggle of transclasses and whether they can pass from class in the broad sense to class in the Marxian sense.

If certain transclasses can fight to have the difficulties of passing through class recognized, it is not strictly speaking a class struggle. There cannot be a class of transclasses in the political sense of the term, because the conditions required to constitute one are not fulfilled. Transclasses, in fact, cannot be considered either as a class in itself, or as a class for itself, which knows itself as such. They cannot define themselves as a class in itself opposed to another on the basis of common objective material conditions, a style of life and similar practices, so variable is their economic and cultural situation. On the one hand, class transition takes place in both directions, from the proletariat to the bourgeoisie and from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat; and it cannot be based on similar interests. On the other hand, even when it is “ascendant,” the nature of their trajectory is very different, depending on whether it relies more on intellectual capital, such as studies and diplomas, or on physical capital, such as sports performance or physical beauty. Without generalizing in a caricatural way, a transclass through class, in other words through school, most of the time comes from an intellectual elite, whereas a transclass through sport or play mainly joins a financial elite.

Moreover, no class consciousness that would arise from the struggle to assert common interests against another class can emerge among transclasses as a whole. Between two transclasses like the businessman, Bernard Tapie, who fights to win and crush his rivals in the logic of the self-made man, and the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who, from the height of his chair at the College de France, weighs the misery of the world, it is difficult to conceive of a common class consciousness! What specific common interests could transclasses defend against capital or the proletariat? Either their path leads them to integrate the ruling class and dispose of the means of production, or it keeps them, despite their increased capital, in the camp of wage earners who have no other resources to live on than selling their labor power.

The class consciousness of a transclass will thus be a function of its position in the struggle between the dominant class and the dominated class. Transclasses can be part of an enlightened fraction that continues to fight alongside the dominated class, or, on the contrary, integrate the circles of power in the service of the interests of the dominant class. In this respect, they know the fate of other independent social categories which are drawn in their turn into the history of class struggle. Certain unclassifiable social groups, such as artisans and merchants, can be caught up in this class movement if they come to proletarianize or become bourgeois. *It is therefore not so much income, culture, or a network of relations that define class*

position as enrollment in the dominant/dominated conflict. If the place in the struggle is decisive, it is a question of transclass people, like the intermediate middle classes, who can alternately put themselves at the service of capital or wage labor, depending on the economic and political role they play and the interests that they defend. *Transclasses are therefore neither a class nor outside class*, because they do not escape the movements of history and are called to take sides. Support of capital or support of proletarians – that is the whole question. Therefore, paradoxically, if the social class of the transclass, in the categorical sense, undeniably changes due to the significant modification of one's income, culture, and network of relations; one's political class, on the other hand, does not necessarily change.

2. What Transclass does to Class

Does this mean, then, that individuals who cross social barriers remain simple marginal cases who do not lend themselves to consequences, since they are divided into the different classes according to their place in the struggle and seem to be reabsorbed into them? It is now important to measure the scope of the transclass phenomenon, its theoretical and practical impact on the conception of the class.

Class Put Back into Its Place

First of all, it is clear that by introducing movement into class, transclass moves the former's lines and requires them to be rethought in light of this disruption. Transclass therefore invites us to put class in its place, to adjust it regarding what makes it squeak. If transclass does not suppress class, it contributes to undoing it, or at least to experiencing that it does not entirely form us. The transclass passage, whatever its forms and the extent of mutations caused, reveals a form of plasticity of beings and the impossibility of assigning them a given place and condition in an absolute and definitive way. It prevents us from considering the division into classes as an immutable state, an impermeable order, an impassable barrier. Although the existence of transclasses does not fundamentally change the established order and can even serve to reinforce it, by operating as a safety valve, it frees the imagination by opening up the possibility of individual or collective change. It thus shows that social reproduction is not inevitable and prevents the transformation of social determinism into destiny.

In this regard, the existence of transclasses can serve as a safeguard against the essentialization and naturalization of class, because it reveals that human beings can extricate themselves from

their class membership and are not defined by it. If they share common lifestyles, types of interests, behaviors, and similar representations by virtue of their social class, these are not essential properties. Therefore, individuals are in no way reducible to their class and cannot be assigned to it by nature. Those who are called bourgeois are so only in relation to proletarians and not by virtue of an intrinsic quality. One is bourgeois only insofar as one becomes aware of common interests with others and opposes the proletarians whom one exploits. The qualifier “bourgeois” applies to a modality of existence in relation to its opposite. The individual must, then, carefully be distinguished from the bourgeois. From this point of view, Marx thus takes great care not to reduce the whole person to the capitalist, and he makes it clear that “the economic character of the capitalist becomes firmly fixed to a man only if his money constantly functions as capital.”⁸ It is indeed a question of not confusing ways of being and acting, whether short-term or long-term, with a perennial nature.

This reminder is highly salutary, not only for proletarians whose class hatred can lead them to reduce human beings entirely to their position as exploitative capitalists, but also for the bourgeois in the grip of the class morgue. The blind arrogance of the powerful often leads them to confuse their class position with natural hegemony. The existence of transclasses constitutes a precious antidote to this effect, because it disrupts established positions and reintroduces a movement capable of disrupting social identities and dissipating an ever-renewed confusion. The immobility of social relations resulting from the division of labor and the establishment of a political order based on class distinction tends to blur the difference between the singular individual and the class individual and tends to reduce the first to the second because of a conditioning that operates historically. This is what Marx already observed in *The German Ideology*:

Nevertheless in the course of historical development and precisely because of the inevitable fact within the division of labor that social relations come to a standstill, a difference arises. establishes between the life of each individual according as it is personal, and according as it is subordinate to any branch of work and to the conditions of this work. It is not that the rentier or the capitalist cease to be persons, but their personality is entirely conditioned and determined by well-defined class relations, and the difference appears only in the difference to another class and does not reveals itself to themselves only when they go bankrupt.⁹

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8 Marx 1976a, p. 711.

9 Marx and Engels 1976b, p. 78.

Of course, there are no pure individuals who define themselves entirely on the basis of themselves, because human beings at birth fit into already preestablished conditions of existence and are assigned to a class that determines their place in life and dictates their personal development. But this subjection to a class is the result of a reversible historical process and not an iron law that is impossible to modify. The personality of individuals, however, is so shaped by their place in a class, by their position in the organization of work and relations of production, as it ends up making their personhood forgotten under the social label. If we are not born naturally capitalist or *rentier*, if we become one through conditioning, we nevertheless end up convincing ourselves of being one for all eternity. This is why Marx specifies that this difference established between the person and the social personality is not immediately perceptible; it only appears through a process of confrontation with another class. It is indeed the contrast between the economic and social conditions of life of human beings, which brings out the difference between the individual and the class individual. The confrontation of classes shows that not all people are situated in the same way and do not have the same social personality.

This confrontation, however, is not necessarily sufficient to bring about the distinction between personal being and social being, because it can lead to a naturalization of social personality and to the illusion that it is only an emanation of the essence of individuals and their qualities, especially in members of the ruling class. Marx is thus ironic about this confusion between the existence of the individual and the existence of the bourgeois behind which the dominant hide when their interests are threatened:

When the narrow-minded bourgeois says to the communists: by abolishing property, i.e., my existence as a capitalist, as a landed proprietor, as a factory-owner, and your existence as workers, you abolish my individuality and your own; by making it impossible for me to exploit you, the workers, to take in my profit, interest, or rent, you make it impossible for me to exist as an individual. – When, therefore, the bourgeois tells the communists: by abolishing my existence *as a bourgeois*, you abolish my existence *as an individual*; when thus he identifies himself as a bourgeois with himself as an individual, one must, at least, recognise his frankness and shamelessness. For the bourgeois it is actually the case, he believes himself to be an individual only insofar as he is a bourgeois.¹⁰

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10 Marx and Engels 1976b, p. 229.

The abolition of the distinction between individual being and bourgeois takes place here in favor of a reduction of one's own to property, of me to mine.

It is easier for a proletarian than for a bourgeois to perceive this difference between their being and their class, because their conditions of existence seem to be more the result of chance, over which they have no control. Proletarians are more inclined to divorce themselves as exploited workers and not identify with their subordinate position than capitalists who willingly embrace their condition to the point of becoming one with it. This is what Marx argues in *The German Ideology*:

And the contradiction between the individuality of the separate proletarian and labour, the condition of life forced upon him, becomes evident to him, for he is sacrificed from youth onwards and, within his own class, has no chance of arriving at the conditions which would place him in the other class.¹¹

This affirmation deserves to be tempered, however, because it is not certain that proletarians always have a lucidity such that the difference between their individual personalities and their personalities as workers does not escape them. This is, in fact, without counting on the incorporation of domination and the interiorization of meritocratic ideology, which transform a mode of social being into ontological determination and assign to each a place for all eternity in proportion to one's personal qualities. This reservation in no way invalidates the observation that awareness of the distinction between the class individual and the personal individual is much more widespread among proletarians than among capitalists or *rentiers* who have every interest in blinding themselves and who only admit it when they can no longer do otherwise.

This is why Marx is right to emphasize that the difference "appears only when they go bankrupt."¹² They are indeed forced in this case to face the facts and to feel with their bodies the difference between the personality of the *rentier* or the capitalist they no longer are and the person they continue to be, although deprived of their social advantages. In short, it is when they lose their status and experience a downgrading that they acquire class consciousness. From then on, *it is the transclass experience, as a brutal passage from one social state to another, which reveals the class individual negatively*. It is therefore a foundational experience for class consciousness. Far from making classes invisible, on the contrary, the transclass figure makes them visible and allows them to be contemplated from a distance as though

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¹¹ Marx 1976b, p. 79.

¹² Marx 1976b, p. 78.

through a magnifying mirror. It reveals how they are made and unmade by internalizing economic and social norms, moral rules and mental representations, cultural practices and consumption patterns. From this point of view, the focus on transclasses provides a privileged observatory of the manufacture of classes, since through the vicissitudes of adaptation and the difficult learning of codes are revealed the art and the way of shaping bodies and minds and of perpetuating the division between dominant and dominated. The figure of transclass updates the artifacts that feed the distinction and give it the fraudulent evidence of a true nature. This deconstruction is thus a test of truth that can free oneself from the shackles of class and its procession of symbolic violence, by opening up the possibility of a reconfiguration of the self.

Does this mean that the proliferation of transclass trajectories fundamentally calls into question the existence of classes and tends to abolish them? Far from it, because the mass production of transclasses is not a panacea. Transclasses may multiply, but nothing can change as long as the totality of the means of production and state apparatuses remain concentrated in the hands of a small number of individuals. In this regard, it matters little whether they are long-time heirs or transclasses who have just reached the pinnacle of power, since the opposition between dominant and dominated remains. But if non-reproduction does not abolish reproduction, it leads to a revision of its status and to measuring the adjustments required by the eruption of the figure of transclass within the thought of class.

Questioning the Theoretical Primacy of Reproduction

From this perspective, it is necessary, first of all, to rule out simplistic attempts at recovery or evasion aimed at making transclasses exceptions that invalidate or confirm the rule of social reproduction and the existence of class struggle. The social reproduction that leads the children of workers and the bourgeoisie to experience a trajectory similar to that of their parents does not need to be confirmed, since it remains a rule that continues to apply in the vast majority of countries, despite spatio-temporal statistical variations. We must move beyond the alternative between the invalidation and the confirmation of the rule, which leads either to overestimating or underestimating the existence of transclasses. In the first case, transclasses are brandished as glorious figures of class negation, as heroes freeing themselves from social determinisms all by themselves, proving to the lazy and the weak-willed that “where there is a will, there is a way.” In the second case, transclasses are considered as anomalies, quite negligible with regard to massive social reproduction.

To those who, conversely, would be inclined to pass over this contrariety in silence, it must be remembered that if the existence of transclasses does not invalidate the existence of classes, it is opposed to the reduction of the movement of history to a frontal struggle between two homogeneous camps entrenched behind their barriers; and it invites us to think about the transition from one class to another, without pushing it back to the margins. It is therefore a question of breaking with a logic of exceptionality, undermined by the cognitive biases which tend to increase or reduce its scope, in order to think about the nature of the contrariety and to measure the adjustments required by the introduction of the figure of transclass within the thought of class. Whether it is based on the analysis of the reproduction of economic forces and social relations of production, whether it is coupled with a study of political and ideological reproduction through state apparatuses, or whether it is enriched by a doctrine of cultural and symbolic domination, the theory of reproduction must necessarily be completed and revitalized by an interrogation of what opposes it. In fact, the privileged or exclusive focus on reproduction involves a form of abstraction and is akin to a *coup de force* because reproduction is separated from its opposite and places it in a second, even secondary, position.

Certainly, it is not a question of bringing about a reversal of perspective and postulating that non-reproduction is primary, because this posture would only lead to the same in reverse. Affirming the primacy of the same over the other, or of the other over the same, changes nothing in the matter. It is necessary to grasp both the same and the other. This is why it is necessary to apprehend reproduction and non-reproduction together and to redefine their relations and their respective status by ceasing to consider one as the norm and the other as its transgression. It is therefore a question of thinking simultaneously about opposites, without ranking them and immediately assimilating the frequency of cases of reproduction to a rule and the rarity of non-reproduction to exceptionality. It is a dialectic of opposition that must be conceived within societies. Thus, reproduction can be considered as a non-reproduction that is prevented as non-reproduction can be considered as a reproduction that has failed. But, whatever the frame of reference, it is always a question of identifying the dynamic at work in the constitution of social trajectories and of considering class relations as the result of a combination of opposing forces of conservation and change, which bind up the social machine or give it a new movement.

Reproduction is not an identical repetition; it is always accompanied by non-reproduction. Far from constituting its limit or its margin, *non-reproduction is in reality immanent in reproduction*. It does not maintain with it a relationship of pure exteriority, because most of the time it is the product of internal contradictions in social classes. *Class is worked on by a transclass dialectic*. This is what Marx saw, although he did not theorize it as such:

If all the members of the modern bourgeoisie have the same interests inasmuch as they form a class as against another class, they have opposite, antagonistic interests inasmuch as they stand face to face with one another. This opposition of interests results from the economic conditions of their bourgeois life. From day to day it thus becomes clearer that the production relations in which the bourgeoisie moves have not a simple, uniform character, but a dual character; that in the selfsame relations in which wealth is produced, poverty is produced also; that in the selfsame relations in which there is a development of the productive forces, there is also a force producing repression; that these relations produce bourgeois wealth, i.e., the wealth of the bourgeois class, only by continually annihilating the wealth of the individual members of this class and by producing an ever-growing proletariat.¹³

The focus on class antagonism and its historical variations tends to make us forget the complexity and duplicity of the relations of production which play a decisive role in the making of transclasses. *Extra-class struggle should not, however, obscure the intra-class struggle within the bourgeoisie.* The antagonism is twofold, it is both inter- and intra-class: class against class, bourgeois against proletarians, but also bourgeois against bourgeois and proletarians against proletarians. The bourgeoisie have both common class interests that unite them and individual interests that divide them. This inter-individual struggle results from the exacerbated competition for the accumulation of wealth. The bourgeoisie can increase their capital only by concentrating more wealth in their hands in order to obtain a monopoly. It must therefore eliminate rivals, force them to sell and push them into bankruptcy to be in a hegemonic position. The bourgeoisie is a class based on an economic dynamic and not a stable, politically instituted order. Therefore, it is often crossed by internal struggles and subject to reversals of fortune. Although it knows how to unite to defend common interests, it is not perfectly homogeneous, due to its composition and the different or even divergent financial strategies of its members. Between the small number of newly arrived *nouveaux riches* and the vast majority of long-time heirs, the struggles are sometimes bitter. And among the heirs, those who are active in the market often have nothing but contempt for *rentiers* who do not make their capital grow. The agonistic relations within the bourgeoisie are, however, less related to its constitution than to its preservation. Because what determines belonging to a class is not so much the means of achieving it as that of remaining there by transforming an acquired knowledge into a lasting position, into social status. But to be able to immobilize, you must, paradoxically, know how

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¹³ Marx 1976d, p. 176,

to be mobile. It is not enough to inherit and manage one's fortune, it is necessary to be active, to have an entrepreneurial spirit and to innovate in order to constantly conquer new markets.

Therefore, a risk of ejection threatens heirs when they are not able to ensure succession and be active on the market.¹⁴ Even if they have acquired a sense of business, they do not necessarily have a taste for it and may be content to live on their income and squander their fortune. Their maintenance is not guaranteed, because they will be the privileged target of the *nouveaux riches* who seek to be recognized as bourgeois in their own right and constantly eliminate others in order to make a place for themselves.¹⁵ Economic competition feeds on a logic of symbolic distinction because it is not only a question of being rich or extremely rich but of being the richest forever. The victory podium loses its value if a great number attain it and if all are tied. There always has to be a winner. Anyone who withdraws from competition, lives off rent, or is no longer performing in the market is destined to be eliminated. There is, therefore, a transclass becoming that haunts former winners as soon as they cease to prove themselves. *In short, the more class petrifies and tends to transform itself into position, the more it feeds the transclass dynamic of ejection.*

The production of wealth is therefore only the reverse of the production of poverty, to which it is always necessarily correlated. It is not only a question of reducing the exploited to poverty, by stripping them of surplus value, but also the exploiters, by ruining heirs. The bourgeois class is driven by both a tendency to reproduce its interests and the non-reproduction of the interests of a part of its members who will become proletarianized. This transclass flow within the bourgeoisie is certainly not a hemorrhage, because overall the ruling class remains stable. Although marginal, it is nevertheless symptomatic of the duplicitous movement of the class which can only enrich itself by impoverishing. Far from being a detail and confining itself to an internal process of eliminating the defeated, it reveals that the bourgeois class is in reality an immense enterprise for manufacturing transclasses.

The Production of Transclasses as the Production of Classes

The production of transclasses is indeed an operation inherent in the bourgeois class and is done on a large scale, because the more proletarianization spreads, the more profits increase. Non-reproduction, then, is in line with a logic of reproduction taken to the extreme. It is,

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14 On this point, see Balibar and Wallerstein 1997, p. 160.

15 Balibar and Wallerstein 1997, p. 161.

so to speak, orchestrated by the capitalist system itself, which feeds on an ever-more-massive proletarianization. The preservation of class interests therefore involves the production of transclasses to multiply the number of proletarians and to regulate the flow of the neo-bourgeois. Within the very process of reproduction, it is thus possible to bring to light *a fivefold manufacture of transclasses, by proletarianization or by embourgeoisement*.

The first, as we have seen, concerns the production of transclasses internal to the bourgeois classes through individual struggles and the downgrading of eliminated competitors. The second is the result of antagonism toward the competitors of foreign countries in the name of nationalism, which leads to downgrading within the international bourgeois classes. It is no longer oriented towards the enemy from the inside but from outside. Marx had already emphasized this:

However much the individual bourgeois fights against the others, as a *class* the bourgeois have a common interest, and this community of interest which is directed against the proletariat inside the country, is directed against the bourgeois of other nations outside the country. This is what the bourgeois calls his nationality.¹⁶

Despite the globalization of the economy, of its relocations and permanent relocations, international capitalism is not entirely supranational. It is also traversed by opposing currents, the defense of national interests and national jewels. This second manufacture of transclasses is not a simple variant of the first and does not amount to a renewal of interindividual antagonism within the bourgeoisie and its displacement from the national to the international level. It reveals the complexity of struggles and power relations by revealing an additional determination to take them into account, that of nationality and its unifying imaginary sometimes imbued with xenophobia. It goes, so to speak, against the first manufacture of transclasses, because it helps to silence or attenuate the inter-individual internal struggles in favor of a common united front against the foreign bourgeoisie.

These first two constructions of transclasses by downgrading within the national and international bourgeoisie do not, however, reach the extent of the third, which concerns the middle classes. Although this movement is reversible, the bourgeoisie historically tends towards the impoverishment of the middle classes and their elimination, according to its interests. This was already highlighted in the *Communist Manifesto*:

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16 Marx 1975, p. 281. See also Marx and Engels 1976c, p. 493.

The lower strata of the middle class – the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants – all these sink gradually into the proletariat, partly because their diminutive capital does not suffice for the scale on which Modern Industry is carried on, and is swamped in the competition with the large capitalists, partly because their specialised skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production. Thus the proletariat is recruited from all classes of the population.¹⁷

Exacerbated competition, demand for technological and financial innovations in order to multiply profits precipitate the middle layers unable to follow into the proletariat by swelling its ranks. The proletarianization of those who formerly had no need to sell their labor power to live is thus nothing other than a manufacture of transclasses by liquidation of the middle classes in decline.

These middle classes, however, constitute a transclass adjustment variable that makes it possible to regulate profits and ensure them as well as possible. Certainly, to maximize profits, it is a question of producing new proletarians in all classes of the population and abroad, but it is also a question of finding outlets for the products produced and encouraging their consumption. a clientele wealthy enough to buy them. And even before selling them, it is necessary to produce them and train competent and dedicated workers to supervise the production process and retrain the workers. This is why the production of transclasses within the middle class does not obey a unilateral process of downgrading. It can take the form of the creation of a petty bourgeoisie, intermediary between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. While affirming that competition tends to make the middle classes disappear, Marx also observes the emergence of a petty bourgeoisie in the developed countries:

In countries where modern civilisation has become fully developed, a new class of petty bourgeois has been formed, fluctuating between proletariat and bourgeoisie and ever renewing itself as a supplementary part of bourgeois society. The individual members of this class, however, are constantly being hurled down into the proletariat by the action of competition.¹⁸

Whereas the first three constructions of transclasses are the result of proletarianization, the fourth takes the form of what is commonly called

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¹⁷ Marx and Engels 1976c, pp. 491-92.

¹⁸ Marx and Engels 1976c, p. 509.

social ascent or more precisely the passage from the working class to the petty bourgeoisie. Nizan's hero, Antoine Bloyé, son of a worker and a cleaning lady, who has become a petty bourgeois who has risen from the ranks, is the perfect illustration of this. It is the pure product of the industrial revolution which, in the second half of the 19th century, demanded managers and new human resources. It is no coincidence that in 1858 parliament passed a law on vocational education and that schools of arts and crafts flourished at that time. The young Antoine, first in his division at school, is caught up in this movement of manufacturing a petty bourgeois class at the service of shareholders and bosses:

Higher destinies are reserved for the sons of the great bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie of the liberal professions – destinies embellished by the passwords of the humanities. But what tremendous reserves exist among the gifted sons of workers, what an inexhaustible source of faithful subordinates! They are needed; they are enticed with promises of a great future of equal opportunity, the dawn of democracy. Each worker's son has in his satchel the diploma of an overseer of men, the passport of a bourgeois.¹⁹

At the heart of this manufacture is the upgrading of the sons of workers lulled by the myth of equal opportunity and meritocratic discourse. It gives access to “the passport of a bourgeois,” because it does not open the doors of the big bourgeoisie. It leaves the transclass applicant on the threshold like a watchdog or a servant who does not take the elevator but the service stairs.

It is necessary to take another step to reach the ultimate level of the manufacture of transclass: the passage to the ruling class by the constitution and the fructification of a capital that dispenses with having to sell one's labor power in order to live. If the majority of the bourgeoisie become so by inheritance and are formed by reproduction linked to the transmission of capital from parents to children, a small fringe also becomes so by non-reproduction, according to multiple transclass paths. The bourgeoisie of acquisition, unlike that of inheritance, can result from the accumulation of capital, through hard work, effort, or else from trafficking, swindling, fraud of all kinds. It can come to crown skills, performances, or capacities that are socially recognized and economically valued, as is the case of transclasses who monetize their course of academic success, their intellectual prestige, their artistic creativity, or even their physical beauty and their sports skills ... The bourgeoisie of acquisition can also come from affective encounters, alliances, such as marriage or other forms of cooptation by relations and elective affinities.

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¹⁹ Nizan 1973, p. 58.

This manufacture of transclasses by the embourgeoisement of migrants from the proletariat or the middle classes is not only a rare phenomenon, but precarious both for the neo-bourgeois and for their descendants. Second-generation transclasses are not upper-level heirs. The position acquired by parents is not necessarily retained by children and remains fragile, because it is based on newly incorporated dispositions and does not have the assurance of ancestral know-how and expertise. It is therefore more exposed to attacks and destabilization attempts, because it does not have the legitimacy and stability of that of a son or daughter of a family, who is part of a lineage of long-time heirs, who relies on financial skills, business acumen, proven ability in this area and who also benefits from a solid network of relationships.

Finally, if transclasses do not constitute a class in the political sense of the term, they are not, then, outside class or classless. Whether they are formed by expulsion or by propulsion, they are not excluded but included in the system of class formation. They come to complicate it by introducing opposition in the class without annihilating it. They reveal its processual nature and can serve as a safeguard against its essentialization. Classes are worked on by a transclass dynamic both in terms of their formation and their preservation. They are thus in constant redefinition and are characterized by a process of perpetual downgrading and reclassification. As a result, the concept of class cannot be fully intelligible without that of transclass, because one must think about *both the contradiction of class interests and the internal opposition of classes* in order to understand the movements of history. The production of transclasses is therefore not so much on the margins as at the heart of the system of economic and political reproduction of classes. This is why we must break with the figure of transclass as an exception in order to recapture the way in which a society generates its own deviations and oppositions while remaining fundamentally identical to itself. Social relations are thus marked by a dialectic of reproduction and non-reproduction in which classes are perpetuated through a transclass flow. Whether transclasses are formed by the ruin of the middle classes and heirs forced to proletarianize themselves or by the acquisition of a position within the petty or the big bourgeoisie, they are most of the time the result of a movement that maintains immobility in the guise of change. Therefore, passing through class does not introduce a revolutionary change but a conservative one; it renews reproduction by non-reproduction. In short, according to the formula consecrated by *The Leopard*, "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."²⁰

Translated by Ted Stolze

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20 *Translator's Note*: Jaquet quotes a line from Giuseppe Di Lampedusa's 1958 novel, *Il Gattopardo*; see Di Lampedusa 2007, p. 28.

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Class in Movement, Forming and Unforming

Esther Leslie

Abstract: On the basis of observations on Marx's concept of class as a fluid and self-undoing formation, this essay considers the ways in which solidifications of class as an identity have failed to grasp the extent to which class is always in movement, both across time and within each moment of its existence. The implications of this stance are followed through in relation to contemporary fantasies of AI enabled deployment into production without limit, which argues that class is redeployed as a digital quality – but one that will not ever gain critical consciousness – or, alternatively, is, as amounts to the same thing, transcended. What is left behind and out in the vision? How might those made redundant, but still the source of wealth, in combination with nature, not stop, on account of this technical shift, being a class that is directed towards forming and deforming itself as class, even if it makes less – but does not become less subject to extraction – in pursuit of which it is directed to consume more?

Keywords: Movement, ferment, consciousness, critique, schooling

What is the class that labours? What was the working class - and is it still a class and does it work? Does it exist in mortal antagonism with its nemesis the ruling class? Bertolt Brecht was sure in the 1930s that there was something that arced from ancient times to his and it bore the name of working class, for it did the work that needed to be done, and in every period, it had been both the unacknowledged facilitator of history and its victim. In 1935, he wrote a poem titled 'Questions from a Worker Who Reads'. It transposed work, an everyday, continual activity, to the world of myth, ancient empires, the defeat at war of Philip II of Spain and the military victory of Frederick the Great. Brecht asked, rhetorically, through the voice of the worker, who was it who had made the materials, who carried out the socially reproductive labour, which underscored and enabled the power of rulers? What are the names of the people that were lost to history, and yet, in truth, made that history happen?

Who built the seven gates of Thebes?
The books are filled with names of kings.
Did the kings drag in the blocks of stone?
And Babylon, destroyed so many times.
Who built it up again and again? Of the houses
In Lima, gold-glittering, which housed the builders?¹

Brecht's worker asked where the stonemasons went the evening after finishing the Chinese wall and he queried who erected the triumphal

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¹ Brecht, 1988-2000, p. 409.

arches of Rome? The worker had many questions. Did the heroes of Ancient Greece win their battles alone? Who cooked for them? Who cried along with kings when fleets sunk under the sea?

Each page a victory
Who cooked the victory feast?
Every ten years a great man,
Who paid the expenses?

Brecht evoked the ancient world of Thebes and Rome, real places in which people worked and ate and fought and died. They were also home to the gods and the site of myths. Thebes was, according to legend, the birthplace of the mythical hero Hercules. Brecht's poem was written into his present, though. The worker who read and had questions about what he had read was developing a critical, communist frame of mind. From a knowledge of building, or cooking, of reproduction and social reproduction, questions arose about the handed-down, individualised heroic representations of the past. And the point was to make history class-consciously in the present.

Brecht's poem, which championed the questioning, self-educating worker, had little of the sensibility of George Orwell's rendition of the working-class attitude to education in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, from around the same time. Perhaps there is a class-ridden English contempt for workers expressed in Eton-educated Orwell's 1937 study of working class life:

The time was when I used to lament over quite imaginary pictures of lads of fourteen dragged protesting from their lessons and set to work at dismal jobs. It seemed to me dreadful that the doom of a 'job' should descend upon anyone at fourteen. Of course I know now that there is not one working-class boy in a thousand who does not pine for the day when he will leave school. He wants to be doing real work, not wasting his time on ridiculous rubbish like history and geography. To the working class, the notion of staying at school till you are nearly grown-up seems merely contemptible and unmanly. The idea of a great big boy of eighteen, who ought to be bringing a pound a week home to his parents, going to school in a ridiculous uniform and even being caned for not doing his lessons! Just fancy a working-class boy of eighteen allowing himself to be caned! He is a man when the other is still a baby.²

To leave school was, in this account, to grow up, to be grown up, to earn money and avoid the teachers' beatings - even if there might be other

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² Orwell 2021, p. 80.

beatings awaiting, in the pubs, and certainly there would be humiliation in the workplace. Orwell articulates what he imagines to be the inner thoughts of the worker. Perhaps it was not in contradiction with Brecht's point about the questioning, learning worker, for Brecht did not argue that schooling could provide Marxist wisdom, rather that only self-education or socialist party education was meaningful to the worker. But how was the worker that Orwell imagined made complicit with a rejection of education? It happened through a glorification of the role of labourer, an identification of that power to make and shape with something greater, or godlike. To be a man was to be like a demigod, beating steel, hacking minerals in mine shafts, to build bridges and contribute to fiery life and glossy futures. So it seemed. To be a man was also to become an exploited member of a class, compelled exchange schooling for a minimum of training, and to work hard, get a wage and bear responsibility.

Orwell's vision of becoming a worker, which entails losing one's educational curiosity, and joining the ranks of a class that works and gains identity through its role as worker, was far from Marx's conception. In Marx's work, to be a member of a class is to be part of a tumult, to be in the flow of something protean, always in formation. Class's presence, the ideas attendant on and in classes, class's constitution are not fixed, horizons are unstable. Marx brings this out - as part of a necessary work of critique - in his marginalia to the Gotha Programme in 1872. Lassalle had announced in the Gotha Programme that 'The emancipation of labour must be the work of the working class, relative to which all other classes are only one reactionary mass'. Marx leaps in to the slogan to take apart the 'improvements' by Lassalle that added on the subclause 'relative to which all other classes are only one reactionary mass'. Marx's notes point back to the *Communist Manifesto*:

Of all the classes that stand face-to-face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of modern industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product.³

What modern industry produces is not only its commodity outputs, but also the maker of those outputs. The proletariat is a product of industry, as much as linen and coats. While the proletariat is the 'really revolutionary class', the bourgeois had been so. He observes how in the manifesto, issued in 1848, the bourgeoisie was recognised too as revolutionary in its actions, ripping down the structures of feudalism and tearing up, with its factory mode of production, the petty production modes of the lower middle classes. The bourgeoisie makes a world anew - one in which the proletariat is brought into being and will labour and make and unmake

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3 Marx and Engels 2017, p. 10.

itself, as it 'strives to strip off from production the capitalist character that the bourgeoisie seeks to perpetuate'. Everything is in movement, in this vision - the different classes exist in mutating relations to each other and the world - the Manifesto notes that the 'lower middle class' is becoming revolutionary 'in view of [its] impending transfer to the proletariat'.

From this point of view, therefore, it is again nonsense to say that it, together with the bourgeoisie, and with the feudal lords into the bargain, 'form only one reactionary mass' relative to the working class.

Has one proclaimed to the artisan, small manufacturers, etc., and peasants during the last elections: Relative to us, you, together with the bourgeoisie and feudal lords, form one reactionary mass?⁴

Marx's argument is that it is not that the non-working class mass is reactionary, rather it is the case that reactionaries perceive a single mass, a block immobilised and not open to revolutionary flow, to movement. If one concurs with Marx then there are implications for political alliances. At the very least, it undermines the 'horny handed sons of toil' myth, in relation to which one takes a pick - the proletariat as revolutionary agent of history or as matter for the reactionary block that is made available to fascism. For Marx there is no revolutionary part against the rest. There is only movement and that movement is also the movement in and through and between and across and into and out of classes - because to assert that there is such a thing as class, in Marx's sense, is to assert its tendency towards its own undoing and the blockage of that. 'All that is solid melts into air' is not only a cliché, but also a principle or guiding watchword. Everything - including class - melts and hardens and melts again over time.

In April 1856, Marx delivered a speech at a meeting to mark the fourth anniversary of the *People's Paper* at the Bell Hotel, the Strand, in London, and published it in that same journal. He observed:

The so-called revolutions of 1848 were but poor incidents - small fractures and fissures in the dry crust of European society. However, they denounced the abyss. Beneath the apparently solid surface, they betrayed oceans of liquid matter, only needing expansion to rend into fragments continents of hard rock. Noisily and confusedly they proclaimed the emancipation of the Proletarian, i.e. the secret of the nineteenth century, and of the revolution of that century.⁵

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4 Marx 2022.

5 Marx 1969, p. 500.

The limited revolution of the bourgeois only cracked the dry crust, but even that force was a borrowed one, a surplus of energy from the true historical force embodied in pools of volcanic liquidity that burst up and out from confinement in the under earth. This is the liquid force that should and must expand to carry through the revolution proper in the wake of 1848. The pressure produced in the process of emancipating the proletariat is a secret one- that is, no one can name it then, but it works away underground pushing upwards. The struggle between classes comes to seem like a struggle between the liquid, which is the oppressed classes, propelling historical change, and the crystal, which is the hard rock and metal of reaction that would obstruct any dissolution of the current state of things. Marx turns to the natural sciences to provide a metaphor for the invisible but forceful orientation that class struggle exerts:

But, although the atmosphere in which we live, weighs upon every one with a 20,000 lb. force, do you feel it? No more than European society before 1848 felt the revolutionary atmosphere enveloping and pressing it from all sides.⁶

The force is not visible, not yet, and so is overlooked, even though its pressure builds. Marx records how more visible forces too, from technology and science - steam, electricity, and the self-acting mule - are 'dangerous' revolutionists, for they alter society, which is to say produce new social bonds. These come into relation with the classes that own and operate them and effect all manner of changes.

Marx's political movement, which is a formulated articulation of historical movement, is imagined through the metaphor of a geological movement. In the course of history, it appears diverted into a movement moving on behalf of the few. It has to be mass, that is must capture and envelop broader swathes of people, who see their interests in its furtherance. Mass movement is a geological term for the movement of surface materials, as occurs in rockslides, mudflows or slumps. This happens, for example, when water adds weight to soil and exerts pressure, pushing apart individual grains of soil. This movement might be prevented by certain measures. In the social world, too, movement can be, and is constantly blocked.

At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force.⁷

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6 Marx 1969, p. 500.

7 Marx 1969, p. 500.

The antagonisms of capitalism work to stultify the flow of life into a solid block, which is a blockage, while foisting agental, conscious force onto the material forces of technology and machinery. Humans relinquish fluid movements and labile intelligence and subject themselves to the machines, which become lively. There is an antagonism between modern industry and science and modern misery and dissolution, the productive powers and the social relations of the epoch. New forces demand newly oriented people, indeed produces them, the workers, who are inventions of the epoch, just as are the machines and the insights of science. In combination, these newly constituted forms will make history flow differently, if negatively in this specific context. Marx expresses an optimistic view. The bourgeois revolution is insufficiently revolutionary, and indeed dissolves not the social conditions but, rather, the social binds of those who participate in it. The dialectic does not stop moving. History does not stop being historically, under conditions of contradiction.

That which is lively is also dead - so deep are the contradictions. This deadliness or strange liveliness can be tracked in Marx's and Engels' ideas of classes. Marx, in his analysis of revolutionary movements in France and the New World, in 1852, in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, saw shadows. Of North America he wrote that, owing to the youthfulness of the nation, there was a different quality of existence, one which was too busy acting, building, eradicating, settling, to spend time dealing with the past – and so that past lingered like a pile of rubbish that no-one bothered to throw out. Specifically,

where, though classes already exist, they have not yet become fixed, but continually change and interchange their elements in constant flux, where the modern means of production, instead of coinciding with a stagnant surplus population, rather compensate for the relative deficiency of heads and hands, and where, finally, the feverish, youthful movement of material production, which has to make a new world of its own, has neither time nor opportunity left for abolishing the old world of ghosts.⁸

Classes are fluid, fluxy, actively reproducing themselves and a 'new world' to inhabit. What they were, what baggage they dragged with them from Europe in the nineteenth century, settled as a residue but took on a deathly life of its own. Evidence of this, according to Marx and Engels, was that the USA became a place of proliferating spiritualist movements, table-knockers and aura photographers. But these were themselves remnants, part of an old world. Indeed, according to Friedrich Engels, in a letter to F.A. Sorge in 1886,

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8 Cited in Jessop, Bob and Charlie Malcolm-Brown 1999, p. 583.

the Americans are worlds behind in all theoretical things, and while they did not bring over any medieval institutions from Europe they did bring over masses of medieval traditions, religion, English common (feudal) law, superstition, spiritualism, in short every kind of imbecility which was not directly harmful to business and which is now very serviceable for making the masses stupid.⁹

One class, a business class, uses magic to delude other classes, who are denied a seat at the table of their governing rationality, a rationality that Adorno and Horkheimer will argue harbours its own mythic elements. Back in Europe, the ghosts of old Europe enter into a ghostly alliance to purge the new ghost – which is only a ghost from their point of view. From Marx’s point of view, this communist rebellion is not that of a ghost but a gust of rationality and righteousness. Communism was, in Marx’s poetics, the spectre that haunted Europe, in a fateful struggle of the dead undone, the bearers of endlessly dying labour, congealed as forms of values more important than themselves, and condemned to work against the vampiric undead who sucked the life from them as fast as they replenished it, as the metaphorical images of *Das Kapital* put it.

But things were different in the colonies. To be part of a class was to be only partly of that class and there were many modes of moving in and out of it. Marx wrote about this in *Capital*.

The absolute population here increases much more quickly than in the mother-country, because many labourers enter this world as ready-made adults, and yet the labour-market is always understocked. The law of supply and demand of labour falls to pieces. On the one hand, the old world constantly throws in capital, thirsting after exploitation and “abstinence”; on the other, the regular reproduction of the wage labourer as wage labourer comes into collision with impediments the most impertinent and in part invincible. What becomes of the production of wage-labourers, supernumerary in proportion to the accumulation of capital? The wage-worker of to-day is to-morrow an independent peasant, or artisan, working for himself. He vanishes from the labour-market, but not into the workhouse. This constant transformation of the wage-labourers into independent producers, who work for themselves instead of for capital, and enrich themselves instead of the capitalist gentry, reacts in its turn very perversely on the conditions of the labour-market. Not only does the degree of exploitation of the wage labourer remain indecently low. The wage labourer loses into the bargain, along with the relation of

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9 Cited in Klehr 1973), p. 321.

dependence, also the sentiment of dependence on the abstemious capitalist.¹⁰

To be of a class is specific historically and depends on local conditions. The colonised may not be subject to the same conditions of those in the colonisers' home country.

Classes existed, and still exist, fluidly. There may be a general truth to Marx and Engels' observation that the myriad of factions resolve over time into two factions: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. But it will not mean that those on either side of the divide are confined to one or the other of that divide forever more. And in any case, there are still fringe phenomena. It may be the case that this or that figure crosses from one to the other, and that between the two great blocks is a tangle and a fraying and a confusion of declassed people or intermediate formations. Still today there are peasants or self-exploiting Etsy producers or petty landlords. But who possesses capital and who sells their labour power to another - this determines much, including one's ideas about what is right and what is wrong in the world and what is owed to you and what may be your interests. These things are under constant pressure and may change from day to day - but how you reproduce yourself socially and what power you have over the what and how and why and means and mode of production changes more slowly, if at all.

The various editions and prefaces of Marx's *Capital* were written in response to movement, to movement in the world that brought movement to Marx's ideas. Composing it in a time of retrenchment, some twenty years after the turbulent days of 1848, after a wave of revolutionary fervour had swept Europe and beyond, Marx retired from active political agitation into the British Museum Reading Room - a kind of holding operation of analysis in order to forward the cause intellectually, logically, ideologically. Marx subjected his own analysis to critique again after the events of the Paris Commune - when he undertook revisions of *Capital* in French and German, in the light of historical actions. Marx returned to *Capital*, and issued it in French in small pamphlets - a critique of political economy distributed, in French at least, in cheap accessible gobbets, not great tomes that demand to swallow vast tracts of time. Marx absorbs the lessons of the past to direct powers of critique, as occurs when he breaks into the Gotha Programme - and measures the class analysis of the Lassalleans in 1875 against the class analysis of the revolutionary situation of 1848. What he does in his critique of the Gotha Programme is a line by line refutation of thinking that has hardened into inflexibility and dogma - inaugurating a mode of political praxis that extends forwards through various objections in the margins and 'contradictory' approaches.

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¹⁰ Marx 1906: 842-843.

Lenin performs critique too when he annotates Hegel from September 1914 – the First World War has broken into the world of thought. Lenin studied the *Science of Logic*. Lenin’s “Abstract of Hegel’s Science of Logic” is 150 pages long – the commentary exceeds the object, like a good Romantic critic, completes and transforms what it apprehends. Notes from 1915 on other works by Hegel and on Hegel take up another 100 pages. And what are these notebooks? Long extracts in German from Hegel, interspersed with commentary, marginalia, and workings through of what the dialectic is or must be. While official Marxist-Leninism was little interested in the *Philosophical Notebooks* or Hegel, devoting little commentary to it, other traditions understood the significance of this. Henri Lefebvre noted, marginally himself, in his autobiography in 1959:

He did not read or study Hegel seriously until 1914-15. Also, if one considers it objectively, one notices a great difference in tone and content between the Notebooks on the Dialectic and Materialism and Empirio-Criticism. Lenin’s thought becomes supple, alive ... in a word, dialectical. Lenin did not fully understand the dialectic until 1914, after the collapse of the International.¹¹

The metaphor here is of suppleness, of a litheness or aliveness. It is as if, in the dialectical act of contradicting, energy enters into thinking and into praxis. That is the power of the critique. It raises the question of movement – a shift, or shiftability, movement in thought and tactics. Lenin takes ‘movement’ back to the drawing board, insisting in *What Is To Be Done?: Burning Questions of Our Movement*, in 1901, that ‘Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement’. The workers may move and the workers’ movement form, but to make it revolutionary, to introduce the truly mobile into the movement, requires revolutionary theory, that is the intellectual impetus of the party.

But not only workers move. Volcanoes erupt. Stars move in fixed patterns. Trees sway in the breeze. This shift towards nature is one suggested in Marx – already there was the metaphor of revolution breaking through a dry crust. When he considers class struggle he draws on another analogy, that of fermentation. For Marx, fermentation is an ingredient of class struggle. Recognising the human as resource in a specific way for capital was the insight of Marx and he gave that human resource a name, which was labour power. Labour power is not the same as the work given, but is rather a conceptualisation of work, the capacity to work, which is then sold or freely given depending on the means of production, the social framework within which labour occurs. As Marx puts it,

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¹¹ Quoted in Anderson 1995, p. 216.

By labour-power or capacity for labour is to be understood as the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description.¹²

He continues:

Labour-power, however, becomes a reality only by its exercise; it sets itself in action only by working. But thereby a definite quantity of human muscle, nerve, brain, &c., is wasted, and these require to be restored.¹³

Extracted resources, taken or sold, or rather resources that have the capacity to be commodified or given away, are here described as mental and physical, thought, emotions, the power to lift or shift or craft. Under capitalism, the human resource that the capitalist buys is an energy that triggers other processes. Marx describes it by analogy to fermentation.

By the purchase of labour-power, the capitalist incorporates labour, as a living ferment, with the lifeless constituents of the product. From his point of view, the labour-process is nothing more than the consumption of the commodity purchased, i.e., of labour-power; but this consumption cannot be effected except by supplying the labour-power with the means of production. The labour-process is a process between things that the capitalist has purchased, things that have become his property. The product of this process belongs, therefore, to him, just as much as does the wine which is the product of a process of fermentation completed in his cellar.¹⁴

Labour power initiates a process as does fermentation. It is captured in order to bring about something else, a third term, a result that is bought along with the labour power that brought it into being. It is not the body of the worker that is bought. That is set free and in being unowned, in being sovereign to itself, it is left to find its own modes of restoration, so that its capacities can be topped up again, in order to be sold again. That is the self-reproduction of the working class. By the purchase of labour-power, the capitalist incorporates labour, as a living ferment, with the lifeless constituents of the product. From the capitalist's point of view, the labour-process is nothing more than the consumption of the commodity purchased, i.e., of labour-power; but this consumption

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¹² Marx 1906, p. 186.

¹³ Marx 1906, p. 190.

¹⁴ Marx 1906, p.206.

cannot be effected except by supplying the labour-power with the means of production. The labour-process is a process between things that the capitalist has purchased, things that have become his property. The product of this process belongs, therefore, to him, just as much as does the wine which is the product of a process of fermentation completed in his cellar.

Still that fermentation of labour power can escape from the confines of the cellar, according to Marx. Marx wrote: 'Anybody who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible without the feminine ferment.'¹⁵ Fermentation is a chemical process of breaking down yeasts, proteins or other microorganisms. Fermentation is a form of agitation and energy. Fermentation is the excess surplus labour appropriated by capital as if it were rightly so by nature, but it is also the ferment of a revolutionary class as it chaotically resists social oppression.

Is it not the case today that microbial agents figure as major players, indeed even usurpers of human agency, colonisers of human subjectivity. Other actors, or actants, slime, feisty yeast, fluidly intelligent bacteria, border phenomena, stuff from in-between realms, provide a dramaturgy of and for things and people, at a time when human life is life rebadged as holobiont, microbial rainforests, teeming sites of multiple lives, hodgepodge heterotopias. Is it time to shift humans away from centre stage and give the cosmos over to other lives, other beings that can shape and reshape it divergently? What if we recognised liquid life, fermenting acids, bacterial agents that grew like plants and made decisions as workers? Does that change how we understand class? Are there new working classes engaged in the production of artworks or data analysis through AI. No, because to be of a class is to be in relation to other classes and to be giving or taking as a social relation. What is not social can have no social relations - though undoubtedly exists within them, but not on their terms, but on the terms of those who deploy such technical aspects socially. AI and all that can be made and conceived by computing may be productive, but, outside the realms of fiction, it cannot reach self-consciousness, and argue for its own abolition on the basis of its understanding of its enmeshment in unjustly extractive social relations. It will not be the (Brechtian) AI who reads, though it might become the (Orwellian) one that strains at the leash to leave its training programmes and enter the world of exploitation, one that only in their wildest nightmares, backed by cinema, will revolt or refuse. It is the tech overlords who imagine that all the AI in the world works for them as a newly exploitable class. And they seek new exploitable subjects in the vast distance on Mars or in the near imperceptibility of the nano or pico or femtosphere.

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¹⁵ Marx and Engels 1990, p. 68.

Embodiment is currently reimagined, de-gendered, augmented, time-extended. Reproduction is conceived microbially, laterally, through cloning, IVF. Flesh, skin, milk can be grown in vitro in forms of genetic engineering, 'cellular agriculture', 'biofabrication' or 'laboratory cloning' (depending who is doing the marketing), offer ways to emancipate and transform, and to instrumentalise at an infinitesimal scale. DNA can be extracted from starter cells, inserted into yeast in vitro, and brewed away in large fermentation vats where it is put into action as something like a new working class, an ever-acting productive, generating agent of change within a mesh of machinery that appears to need no class management, no workers, no bosses. That is the dream - though the fantasy also includes the continued flow of profits from somewhere into private bank accounts. The redundant body of the worker is re-conceptualised as an arrangement of bacteria, viruses, eukaryotic cells in nonlinear coexistence, further combined with the bio-digital and its set of technologies as part of cybernetic capitalism.¹¹ It is to offer itself up to all manner of extractions (data or intellect, for example) - but none are conceived as the extraction of surplus value. In an age of the surveillance state and corporate data extraction, to become digital, or to be bodiless, seems to represent emancipatory freedoms - nobody can be compelled into a class position and exploited. Likewise, for those who want to disavow their flesh, and hivemind their intelligence onto some more robust substrate singularity seems like an attractive proposition. But what we really know is, within our lifetimes at the very least, to be without a body is quite simply to be dead. Some of the most virulently pursued forms of synthetics research are focused on preserving the bodies of the venture capitalists who are all too aware of this frailty, with their auto-reproductive desire to extend their own life forever by vampiric processes such as parabiosis: the transfusion of juvenile blood into ageing veins.¹² For the rest of us though, concerned as we might be about the ramifications of future science and the imperatives of state regulation- there is no more efficient and fast-acting way for a state to perpetrate ultra-violence on citizens, than the removal of access to an affordable health service. And that is a class issue and will remain so, as long as there are classes, which will exist as long as there is a form of capitalism and its attendant violence.

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Nonrelation of Abilities and Needs: Class Analysis as a Critique of Political Economy

Yahya M. Madra

Abstract: Class, understood as the process of production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor, is the traumatic Real around which the discourse of political economy, from classical political economy all the way to the recent iterations of neoclassical economics, is structured as a defense formation. Even though Marx's critique takes off from the concepts of class and surplus that were central to classical political economy, bourgeois (vulgar) economics developed as a reaction formation that gradually purged itself of the traces of class (as the Real) and reformulated the problem of social reproduction as one of equilibrium and reconciliation and recast the categories of need and ability in terms of, respectively, subjective preferences and human capital. By excavating class analysis as a *political critique of the economic* in Marx's writings, and reading it alongside the value-form analysis which presents itself as an *economic critique of the political*, the aim of this paper is to push for a hegemonic post-capitalist economic politics that operates in a non-all field of economic diversity as its surface of inscription.

Keywords: Class, Class Process, Karl Marx, Classical Political Economy, Neoclassical Economics, Post-capitalist politics, Communist Strategy, Division of Labor, Anthropological Differences, Need, Ability

1. Introduction

Let us begin with two hypotheses, one epistemological and one ontological. Class, understood as the process of production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor, is the traumatic Real around which the discourse of political economy, from classical political economy all the way to the recent iterations of neoclassical economics, is structured as a defense formation. Even though Marx's critique takes off from the concepts of class and surplus that were central to classical political economy, bourgeois (vulgar) economics developed as a reaction formation that gradually purged itself of the traces of class (as the Real) and reformulated the problem of social reproduction as one of equilibrium and reconciliation and recast the categories of need and ability in terms of, respectively, subjective preferences and human capital. Yet the hypothesis cannot merely be an epistemological one since the categories of surplus and its organization (the set of processes that the signifier 'class' designates) render visible (encircle) the contours of an ontological crack (the Real) at the core of the economy, defined

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1 This paper is a by-product of an ongoing conversation with Ceren Özselçuk of Boğaziçi University, Istanbul. Many of the ideas articulated therein are formulated collaboratively over the years, yet, needless to say, all the limitations of the paper belong to the author.

here in most general terms as *the problem of social reproduction*. Accordingly, concrete economic formations, like the discourse of political economy, must also be theorized as defense formations that aim to domesticate (or, keep at bay) the Real of class antagonism, namely, the impossibility of organizing the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor in an harmonious manner that can reconcile or stabilize the demands of all class positions once and for all.

These two hypotheses combined imply that Marx's critique of political economy, taking off from the perspective of the Real of antagonism, provokes the discourse of political economy to traverse its constitutive fantasies of reconciliation. Marx's *class analysis*, in contrast to the *value-form analysis* that presents itself as an *economic critique of the political*, levels a *political critique of the economic* (the latter being an increasingly dominant moment of the discourse of political economy) and reveals the epistemological maneuvers, closures, and elisions of political economy, from the perspective of the ontological crack.

This reconceptualization of the relationship entails turning Marx's formula from *The Communist Manifesto* which nominates the class struggle as the motor of history *inside out*. Class struggle is indeed the motor of history but only in the sense of an *absent cause*, as a certain structuring and dislocation-generating *nonrelation or antagonism* around which class formations and their associated institutional structures are organized as a defense formation. Even though particular *class struggles* are indeed (drive) derivatives that must be attended to (because they are a testament to the fact that something is not working at the core of the economy), the motor of the history is the *struggle with class* as a *constitutive* antagonism—defined in a manner distinguished from the *particular* antagonisms between the occupants of different class positions.² In contrast to the economistic model where the economic base determines the superstructure (even in its versions that allow 'relative autonomy' to the latter), in this psychoanalytically-inflected causal model, class formations and their associated institutions, including the institution of political economy, or to put it in the categories of the economistic model, both the economic base and the superstructure, are all conceptualized as aspects of a shifting, partial, and context-specific, in short, overdetermined bricolage of defense formations.³ These socio-economic reaction formations

2 See Žižek 1990; 1998, and Madra and Özselçuk 2014.

3 With regards to the 'psychoanalytically-inflected casual model,' Joan Copjec writes, "Civilization does not test, but realizes our fantasies; it does not put us in touch with Fate (the real), but protects us from it. The social subject is thus pictured as 'a kind of a prosthetic God,' whose fantasmatic, artificial limbs substitute for the inferior, natural ones Fate bestows. Civilization endows the subject with a fantasmatic body and fairytalelike powers. The subjects of modern cultures have telescopes, microscopes, cameras for eyes; microphones, radios, telephones for mouths; ships, trains, cars and planes for legs; and all of these instruments-that-extend-our-grasp for arms." (1994, p. 40). In the

(regimes of accumulations, hegemonic projects) promise to establish equilibrium and harmony, or at the very least, provisional stability and reconciliation around the constitutive, anxiety-inducing (affective) and conflict-generating (political) problem of the *social organization of reproduction*—a problem that is inextricably tied with the problem of division of labor, along the lines of technical division of labor in the workplace, occupational division of labor in the marketplace, sectoral division of labor between town and country, as well as of anthropological differences such as sexual, intellectual, racial, and disability.⁴ Or, to put it in terms of Marx's communist axiom, the problem of the distribution of *abilities* across the field of economy in order to satisfy the *needs* and *wants* of the society.

Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, the programmatic document of classical political economy, as many have argued, is organized around the idea of division of labor. The idea of the market, where property owners exchange goods and services ("free agents [interacting] in sociable conduct"⁵), is celebrated by classical political economists as the most effective mechanism for matching *abilities* and *needs*—not only in terms of the purported economic efficiencies of the competition process but also because it accommodates the institution of private property (as if guided by an 'invisible hand'). Marx's critique of political economy challenges this contention, arguing not only that *the law of value* (capital as the self-expansion of value, surplus *value* as "the differential in the increase of capital"⁶), which is supposed to mediate abilities and needs, is constitutively out of joint and crisis-ridden, but also that this process of self-expansion of value, grounded in the sovereign and despotic *act of appropriation* of surplus *labor* in the sphere of production, is erected upon the scandal of class exploitation. Viewed from the perspective of this critique, Marx's axiom of communism, "from each according to [their] abilities, to each according to [their] needs,"⁷ if it is not merely a

way they organize, shape, and extend our abilities and needs, economic institutions (class formations, forms of integration, property regimes, etc.) are also instruments in the sense that Copjec is describing here; they realize our fantasies and protect us from the Real.

4 Etienne Balibar, in his keyword entry "Reproductions," distinguishes between three successive paradigms of reproduction: equilibrium of the system of markets (neoclassical), reproduction of the conditions of production (Marxian), regime of accumulation (regulation theory). Marxian reproduction, with its crisis-prone and destructive dynamism, can be posited as a critique of axiomatic utopianism of general equilibrium theory. And, in turn, regulation theory is a critique of the economism of Marxian paradigm's exclusion "from its 'schematism' any exogenous, state, or institutional functions (except, implicitly, property)," for its proponents, "these latter functions are decisive" (Balibar 2022, p. 144). These three paradigms inform the structure of the argument in this paper.

5 Tribe 2015, p. 58.

6 Balibar 1994, p. 139.

7 Marx and Engels 1962, p. 24.

“utopian ideological catchphrase,”⁸ to the extent that it points toward the constitutive antagonism at the heart of the problem of social organization of reproduction, must be taken as a half-said (*me-dire*) which demands to be elaborated upon and experimented with in singular instantiations of communism.

The paper is composed in four parts: First, categories of class analysis will be presented as a point of entry to develop the concept of economy as a non-all field, heterogeneous and discontinuous, but also always in the process of partial stabilization around multiple and nested nodal points of hegemonic articulation. This ontological speculation is premised on the idea that all economic formations are reaction formations that emerge to stabilize and contain the dislocation-generating nonrelation of abilities and needs—nonrelation not in the sense of the problem of matching abilities to needs,⁹ but rather in the sense of nonrelation of ability to itself and need to itself. Neither abilities nor needs are reconciled, rather each are split from within. Differences in abilities are undeniable and inescapable, yet they are also not immutable. Precisely for this reason, the distribution of abilities is a political problem. Particular class formations assert themselves, in part, as particular organizations of the distribution of abilities—more often than not in racial and sexed imaginaries of hierarchy. Similarly, as Lacan argued, the satisfaction of needs requires them being communicated through (and derailed by) demands (which always include a solicitation for a recognition by the other) and that which cannot be articulated in a demand, emerges as a desire for what is lacking.¹⁰ The discourse of advertising, with its institutions and media, aims at manipulating and administering the economy of *jouissance* in order to perpetually facilitate the ‘realization problem’ of capital (i.e., the sale of commodities), to maintain the reproduction of the system of production.

Second, class analysis will be differentiated from value-form analysis as another critique of political economy—not as an alternative that replaces it entirely but as a critique that is in a parallax relation with it. Value form-analysis, or the *economic critique of politics*, has a totalizing thrust—the idea of real abstraction, having the quality of silently asserting itself at the epistemic level (“I know very well..., but I still act as if...”),¹¹ and manifesting itself in the complexity of logistical, digital, and viral networks that cover the globe, is infrastructural and has an encompassing effect. In contrast, the categories of class analysis

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8 Balibar 1994, p.134.

9 Today, given the right software and enough computing power, this problem can be reduced to a matter of administration of things.

10 Lacan 2006, p. 580 and p. 689.

11 Žižek 1989, pp. 11-21.

push towards revealing a certain heterogeneity and difference and find it in the forms of the organization of surplus labor. This means that class analysis functions as a *political critique of economics*, foregrounding the moment of sovereign appropriation at the heart of any class structure, regardless of “the *mode of its appearance*.”¹² In the third section, the parallax relation between these two critiques will be explored around three problematics, the relation between non-capitalist modes of production and the commodity form, the role of non-capitalist modes in the development of the categories of class analysis, and the status of associated mode of production in relation to capitalist law of value.

And in the fourth section, the history of political economy will be read as an unfolding and shifting defense formation that aims to delimit and negate the traces of class antagonism from its discursive horizon. Starting with Maurice Dobb’s representation of economics as a discipline divided into “two major value-theories,” one grounded in labor (“an objective element in productive activity”) and the other in utility (“subjective factor underlying consumption and demand”),¹³ gradual erasure of ‘class’ in political economy will be traced through first, in the transition from *objective needs* to *subjective wants* as a turning point of the emergence of neoclassical economics at the turn of the twentieth century, and then in the transition from *ability as a limit* to *ability as an investment* as a central proposition of the neoliberal counter-revolution in the second half of the twentieth century. The conclusion turns its attention to the status of the comma that separates the two phrases (not phases) of the communist axiom and asks what is the institutional form to stage the encounter between abilities and needs that recognizes their constitutive *nonrelation* to themselves and to each other?

2. Class as the adjective for a hegemonic economic politics

“Class is an adjective, not a noun.”¹⁴ This is how Marxian economists Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff announced their opposition to the essentialist and fixed notions of class. For them class is an adjective that modifies a particular set of relations and processes, in particular, the processes of production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor.¹⁵ A class formation distributes subjects across a set

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¹² Marx and Engels 1962, p. 461.

¹³ Dobb 1945, p. 12.

¹⁴ Resnick and Wolff 1987, p. 159.

¹⁵ Resnick and Wolff distinguish between ‘fundamental’ (production and appropriation of surplus labor) and ‘subsumed’ (distribution of the already appropriate surplus labor) class processes. In using the terms ‘fundamental’ and ‘subsumed’, they “intend no implication of a hierarchy of importance”

of distinct class positions as producers, appropriators, distributors or recipients of surplus labor. There are different class formations, capitalist and non-capitalist, in any given social formation. Among non-capitalist class formations, one can invoke slavery (e.g., forms of prison labor), serfdom (e.g., some households), independent commodity production (e.g., self-employment), and communist (e.g., worker cooperatives, some households). But others such as Anjan Chakrabarti, Anup Dhar and Stephen Cullenberg map the universe of 'class sets' according to who perform or appropriate the surplus, how the direct laborers are remunerated (wage or non-wage), and whether the output is distributed in commodity form or not. In their formulation, the organizational morphology becomes more precise: The field of economy is partitioned into zones of commodity and non-commodity (e.g., public goods, barter, gift), the working class is sorted into wage-labor and non-wage-labor (e.g., self-employed, profit sharing, in kind, voluntary, and so on), and the class structures are mapped out, as variations in individual and collective assemblages, into non-exploitative (independent and communist), communitic (exploitative and non-exploitative) and exploitative (capitalist, feudal, slave).¹⁶ J. K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healy, further complicate the picture by differentiating among labor practices (wage, alternative paid, unpaid), business enterprises (capitalist, alternative capitalist, non-capitalist), transactions of goods and services (market, alternative market, nonmarket), regimes of property (private, alternative private, open access), and regimes of finance (mainstream market, alternative market, nonmarket).¹⁷ Such a morphological diversity renders visible a diverse economy, which is composed of a differentiated articulation of organizational forms with potentially conflictual relations.

All this proliferation of differences implies that the economy does not exist as a coherent whole, that it is a heterogeneous *non-all* field organized through hegemonic projects, brought to existence and constantly managed and maintained through the interventions of the state and other collective social actors (political parties, business associations, trade unions, social movements), the legal environment, the production of economic knowledge (academic discourse, policy documents, news analysis, popular representations, politico-economic mentalities), the material infrastructures and technological interfaces, and the affective regimes that organize and modulate economies of *jouissance*. In fact, the economy is nothing but the inconsistent and

(1987, p. 118), but they remain committed to defining class structures according to the mode of appropriation of surplus labor.

16 Chakrabarti, Dhar and Cullenberg 2012, pp. 133-142.

17 Gibson-Graham, Cameron, Healy 2013, pp. 1-15.

incomplete aggregation of these institutions, interfaces, processes and regimes—there is no economic ‘base’ outside of its ‘superstructure.’ Or to put it in less loaded terms, reproduction is also production.

For a hegemonic economic politics of class this field of economic diversity is the *surface of inscription* of articulatory practice. For, in any given social formation, historical and contemporary, there will be a range of class formations¹⁸ coexisting in relations of articulation and imbrication, sometimes in competition and conflict, sometimes in a relation of dependence, sometimes in a state of uneasy neighborhood. The articulatory practice entails the construction and maintenance of a hegemonic bloc within this field of diversity. A hegemonic bloc would contain an internal diversity but would also bring together different actors around common goals. A hegemonic project that promises the impossible fullness of society bathes the social formation with its own colors, by reformulating the social problem of reproduction according to the priorities of its constituents over the needs of the others.¹⁹ Indeed, hegemonic projects organize their internal coherence by identifying *an impeding factor*. In the case of the bourgeois discourse of political economy, this is achieved (at least provisionally) through the negation (repression, disavowal, foreclosure) of class antagonism, through the banishment of the categories of class from the public discourse, and through the identification of actors (trade unions), institutions (regulated markets, redistributionary states), and discourses (of class justice) that frustrate the achievement of harmonious reconciliation of the economy through the institutions and discourses of capitalism.

In contemporary capitalist social formations, the prevalent form of organizing surplus labor appears to be the *corporate-form* but other class formations are also found across a range of social sites such as the household, the state, the non-governmental sector, or the “informal” sector. The *corporate-form*, along with the *state-form* and the *value-form*, are the key institutions of historical capitalism: the emergence of the corporate-form is tied with that of the state-form; they are “ontologically linked.”²⁰ The corporate power provides “an image of sovereignty in a specific liberal and decentralized mode.”²¹ Today, the

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18 Along with regimes of property (private, public, common) and forms of integration (exchange, redistribution, reciprocity). The latter is from Polanyi 1977.

19 Hegemonic projects, if they succeed, make it possible for the social formations to also be classed, even though there are reasons to question the stability of such designations. For instance, is China a market socialist or a state capitalist social formation? There is an ongoing Marxist debate on this. In contrast, few would question the capitalist adjective to describe the US social formation, but what does that designation tell us about the contradictions and conflicts that traverse the field of the US economy? For an Althusserian investigation on this question, see McIntyre 1996.

20 Barkan 2013, p. 4.

21 Barkan 2013, p. 19.

corporate-form functions as a “condensation point” for articulating “the *sovereign right to kill* and the *biopower to improve life* with the historical and geographic circulation of capitalist value.”²² The corporations, in organizing the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus value, claim to assume the tasks of the reproduction of the society and the improvement of human welfare, yet the decisions they make and actions they take create a *necroeconomic* excess, leading to “so much death, in the sense of letting die and ‘indirect murder’.”²³

Let us take a closer look at *neoliberalism as a hegemonic project of the corporate-form* to see how it establishes coherence and stability, how it brings different classes together, while excluding others, how it administers and mobilizes *jouissance*, and how it creates its excesses.²⁴ At the level of geopolitical economy, historical neoliberalism, the victorious survivor of the Cold War, can be characterized by a set of concrete economic reforms that dismantled the social democratic compromise in the Global North and the Keynesian developmental state in the Global South: floating exchange rates, trade liberalization, elimination of capital controls, labor market flexibilization, deregulation. All of these were justified by a discourse of ‘state phobia,’ but with a brutal deployment of state power against any resistance.²⁵ The proponents of neoliberalism argued that the impediment that prevented the achievement of social harmony of economic growth was too much government intervention and the bloated welfare state, and displaced the responsibility of its economic failure on to the racialized figure of the ‘welfare moms’ or ‘criminal youth.’²⁶ Trade and capital market liberalization meant that the threat of ‘capital flight’ will place downward pressure on wages. The decline in real wages meant increased strain on the household. Flexibilization of the labor market meant loss of union power, decline in job security, and precarization. Financialization meant that the cuts in the social wage (which was supplemented by the public goods provided by the welfare state) are made up for by increasing indebtedness. Inside the corporation, the hegemonic discourse is one that is organized around the managerial hierarchy with the CEO at the top, reproduced by discourses of human resources, management, social psychology and organizational theory, and the impeding factor is the shirker, the free-rider, the one who refuses to participate in the

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22 Barkan 2013, p. 162.

23 Barkan 2013, p. 161.

24 Ken Loach’s movie *The Spirit of ‘45* (2013) is a precious document of oral history of a different hegemonic project, that of the postwar ‘Labor’ socialism in Britain.

25 For *state phobia*, see Foucault 2008. For the neoliberal embrace and use of state power, see Harvey 2005.

26 Hall et al. 1978.

language games of the institution.²⁷ The neoliberal injunction for the individual is to be an entrepreneur of oneself, to invest in one's own 'human capital'—a concept, introduced by Theodor Schultz and Gary Becker of the University of Chicago, that overcodes and thereby erases, or better yet, *forecloses* 'labor' from the discourse of economics.²⁸ In a perfect *super-egoic* twist, the impeding factor here is no one other than the neoliberal subjects themselves for it is always their own failure to measure up to the task. After three decades of hegemonic reign, with the pivot of the 2008 crash, the neoliberal program is in the midst of a crisis of legitimacy, being challenged by and finding itself in need of responding to strong populist currents (both from the right and from the left), working with and around the demands of economic nationalisms (as in state-led corporate entities such as sovereign wealth funds operating in the international financial markets), and not being able to fully register (or by being in denial about) the scope of the climate crisis (as tested by the covid pandemic).²⁹ This crisis of legitimacy means that no hegemonic project is yet to be able to establish itself as the socially recognized answer to the problem of social reproduction.³⁰ During such conjunctures of 'organic' crisis, the Real of class antagonism, or the negativity as Ernesto Laclau would argue, becomes more discernible for the society.³¹

Foregrounding the impossibility of ever fully reconciling the problem of how to produce and what to do with surplus labor, makes this understanding of class antagonism *qua* the internal limit of the social, a strictly anti-utopian proposition—if by utopian one understands a *topos* where all antagonisms are banished, and social reconciliation established. The anti-utopian edge of this conceptualization of class antagonism as a constitutive, and therefore unsurpassable, internal limit does not preclude the possibility of a post-capitalist or a communist economic politics. It requires, however, that a communist economic politics must reorient itself towards the Real and the abject, towards the excluded that is supposed to incarnate the impossibility in the social

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27 For a range of Lacanian perspectives on work, see the volume, *Lacan and Organization*, edited by Cederström and Hoedemaekers 2010.

28 Becker 1964; Schultz 1971.

29 For our analysis (with Ceren Özselçuk) of the 2008 crash as a crisis of *jouissance*, see Özselçuk and Madra 2010. For our analysis of the post-neoliberal condition and the rise of neomercantilism, see Madra and Özselçuk 2019. For a context-specific history of the rise and fall of neoliberal populism in Turkey, see Madra and Yılmaz 2019.

30 For a recent convincing mapping of contending projects vying for global hegemony in the face of the climate crisis, see Wainwright and Mann 2018. They distinguish between three contenders: Climate Leviathan (the project of green capitalism), Climate Behemoth (the project of economic nationalism), and Climate Mao (the project of socialism with Chinese characteristics).

31 Laclau 1990.

(the part of no-part in the field), towards listening to the demands of those who are accused for ‘stealing our *jouissance*’ (e.g., the immigrant, the racial other, the other sex, the disabled), and towards creating and maintaining egalitarian and solidaristic organizational structures that by design recognize the various questions of division of labor (e.g., job rotation, day care, parity, workplace councils) as these intersect with anthropological differences.³² Orienting towards the Real means formulating an axiomatic politics of communism that institutes secular organizational forms that encircle the Real of class antagonism, that foregrounds this impossibility, not as an impediment, but as an “enabling constraint” that opens itself to experimentation and invention around cooperation and shared labor.³³ Our critical engagement with the categories of *ability* and *need*, two cornerstones of Marx’s communist response to the problem of division of labor, is an attempt to develop the parameters of such a communist economic politics.³⁴

This understanding of class as an adjective privileges the question of the organization of surplus labor, even though this is not the only understanding of class, especially in relation to the question of a Marxist politics of class. Raymond Williams, who distinguished between class as a descriptive grouping and as an economic relationship, warns us that the latter can also be seen “as a category (*wage-earners*) or a formation (the working class)”³⁵ and that “all these variable meanings of class can be seen in operation, usually without clear distinction.”³⁶ Without doubt, this is not merely a semantic matter; it points towards a certain theoretical problematic that structures Marxism’s claim for a class politics as its core: How do those who occupy a certain class position as performers of surplus labor (direct-laborers) come together to “form a class”?³⁷ Marxism quickly recognized this problem as the distance between *class-in-itself* and *class-for-itself* and posited the

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32 And, as argued below, it may also necessitate the problematization of the strict dichotomy between the regulation of division of labor by the law of value through the *mediation* of exchange value and the *direct* socially planned governance of production by the collective of laborers as their common wealth. The aim here is not to revisit the market vs plan debate (also known as the socialist calculation debate) but to recognize that the starkness of dichotomy does not help us in thinking about possible strategies for practicing communist economic politics in a diverse economy. The question is not one of eliminating mediation: it is neither possible nor desirable to fully do away with division of labor, and planning and the social accounting that it requires is also a form of mediation. The practice of communist economic politics (in Lenin’s terminology, cultural revolution), whether it is practiced before or after the political revolution, must aim to limit and tendentially eliminate the social effectivity of the law of value.

33 McNulty 2014.

34 Madra and Özsəlçuk 2015; 2019.

35 Williams 1983, p. 67.

36 Ibid., p. 68.

37 For a comprehensive discussion of this problematic, see Hall 1977.

party-form as the agency that is supposed to, through its organizational capacity, bridge the gap.³⁸ By privileging the question of the organization of surplus labor, intention is not to bypass this foundational theoretical problematic of Marxist class politics. Rather, our intention is to elaborate on the theoretical problematic from the perspective of the Real of class antagonism and to argue that becoming a class-for-itself, forging itself into a working class formation with a coherent body politic (that can move together in ways that can give shape to the overall social formation), around a party-form (or a similar organizational form), requires that the people have the know-how and the affective capacity to work together in solidaristic and egalitarian forms. So, communist economic politics is a condition of the existence of, not an alternative to, a sustainable Marxist revolutionary politics.

Lenin, in his last writings, recognized this problem and formulated it as the difference between political and cultural revolution. For Lenin, even though he was acutely aware of the urgency of cultural revolution in those early days of the Soviet revolution, the sequence was clear: first the political revolution and the capture of the state power and then, using the lever of the state, the cultural revolution, namely the reorganization of the reproduction of the social. But the question of which to prioritize misses the urgency of thinking of both modes simultaneously, even if their relation is also one of *nonrelation*. On the one hand, cultural revolution must eventually confront the problem of state and its monopoly over violence and the necessity of expropriation of the expropriators for any politics of redistribution and restitution. On the other hand, political revolution, without confronting the problem of the organization of reproduction, is bound to decay under the threat of re-occupation by the forms and forces of the *ancién regime*.³⁹ Moreover, as argued above, cultural revolution is a precondition of political revolution, as a means towards building the capacity of the Party and the muscle memory of the body politic. Yet, the priorities of and the types of cadres and pedagogies required for each revolutionary strategy are different and the historical experience repeatedly demonstrated that they can be in competition (if not, in conflict) with each other. In

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38 Hindess and Hirst exited Marxism, as they moved on from a highly productive theoreticism to an equally brilliant empiricism of concrete analyses of concrete situations, by making some incisive criticisms of class analysis around this problem. See, Hindess 1987 and Hirst 1977. Analytical Marxists made a career out of making this point, by mobilizing the categories of contemporary neoclassical political economy, mainly the assumption of economic rationality (*homo economicus*) at the level of individual subjectivity and theorizing the issue as a collective action problem whereby the pervasive opportunism at the level of the individual has the potential to undermines the attempts to reap benefits for group through collective action. See, for instance, the various contributions to Roemer 1986.

39 Histories of such re-occupations comprise an important common theme in the various economic histories of the Soviet Union. See, for instance, Dobb 1948; Bettelheim 1975; Carr 1979; Nove 1983; Brus and Laski 1989.

most cases, hierarchies formed around the terms of the 'division of labor' between them (first this, then that) tend to fill the void of their *nonrelation*.

3. Critique of political economy: Class analysis/value-form analysis

Class analysis, the analysis of the forms of production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor, constitutes a formidable critique of political economy. In fact, we argue, it is a critique that goes in conjunction with the more familiar critique that takes off from the idea of the fetishism of commodities. Etienne Balibar notes that "the relations of exploitation of labor are both the 'seed' of the market ('economic community') and the seed of the state (sovereignty/servitude)."⁴⁰ He marks this split as one of between "surplus labor" and "surplus value": While the former refers to "the 'concrete' organization of the expenditure of social labor-power," to the domain of sovereignty, the latter to "the 'abstract' movement of the valorization of value."⁴¹ In other words, class analysis that foregrounds the forms of appropriation of surplus labor/value hits right at the edge where the political and the economic, sovereignty and abstraction, state-form and value-form meet. The corporate-form, or in Barkan's conceptualization, 'corporate sovereignty,' is the shifting and overdetermined condensation point where the two meet.⁴² Let's take a closer look at this.

Marx's critique of political economy, is simultaneously a *political* critique of the economic, addressing both the concepts [economics] and the institutions [property, contractual law, legal fictions, solipsism] of the bourgeoisie, and an *economic* critique of the political, highlighting the acephalic and trans-individual limits imposed on politics by the practical calculative rationality of real abstraction.⁴³ It is a *political* critique of the economic because, the sovereign act of appropriation of surplus labor (or surplus *value* under capitalist mode of production) holds together, like a *knot*, the corporate-form, as the exception (something for nothing, "social theft") to the rule of exchange of equivalences that the market order supposed to uphold.⁴⁴ This is the scandal of exploitation that, as

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40 Balibar 1994, p. 139.

41 Ibid.

42 Barkan 2013.

43 For 'real abstraction' and its epistemological implications, see Sohn-Rethel 1978. For the relation between calculative rationality and the fetishism of commodity, see Amariglio and Callari 1989. For the concept of trans-individuality, see Balibar 1995.

44 Richard Wolff and Stephen Resnick describe this as "social theft" because the receivers of

Marx insisted on pointing out, prevailed even when the workers were paid the value of their labor-power. The latter concept, Marx's invention and a key lever of his critique of political economy, is also an instance in which the political is lodged at the heart of an economic concept. The horizontal economic relation between the buyer and the seller of labor power, once inside "the hidden abode of production,"⁴⁵ transforms into a vertical power relation, into a 'private government' or the 'despotism of workplace,' where the capitalist, as the bearer (*träger*) of the position of the appropriator of surplus labor, under the ideological and legal framing of the corporate-form, gets 'something for nothing'—an exception to the founding law of exchange of equivalents, the law that gives markets their meaning and normative thrust.

On the other hand, it is an *economic* critique of the political because, the effectivity of market forces operating at a level that transcends the individual (one must 'form a class' by organizing forms of collective agency that could resist these forces) and the silent compulsion of the system of wage-labor (always haunted by the more visibly violent figure of slave-labor and serf-labor in Marx's writings) imposes a series of limits to a Marxist politics: the political fragmentation through competition (market) among the workers (between insiders and outsiders) as a consequence of the structural effects of the ever growing surplus population, the forms of calculative and solipsistic subjectivity that is cultivated through the universalization of the modes of calculation required to navigate the real abstraction as well as the exigencies of making ends meet under the constraint of budget, the crisis tendencies of the value-form and the anxieties that they provoke among the masses that simultaneously provide openings and opportunities and impose unexpected limitations and impediments for the organization of the working class into a collective agency.

Marxists, in particular, the proponents of value-form theory in its various iterations, rightfully highlighted the latter critique (limits imposed by the economic register on the political), presenting the Marxian critique of political economy as a sobering discourse against the voluntarism of a political Marxism. But recognition of both sides of Marx's critique provides unexpected strategic openings. In particular, class analysis, in contrast to value-form analysis, foregrounds the question of the organization of the reproduction of the social and provides ways in which a 'prefigurative,' post-capitalist economic politics can be enacted here and now. As will be argued below, even when

surplus "give no output of their own in return," 2012, p. 134. Appropriators of unpaid labor (e.g., the members of the Board of Directors of a capitalist corporation) also perform the (unproductive) labor of distributing the surplus but for that function they are remunerated handsomely (in the form of salaries, stock options, etc.). See also, Madra and Özselçuk 2019.

45 Marx 1976 [1867], p. 279.

one can find elements of class analysis in Marx's critique of political economy, there is a tendency of the value-form analysis to overwhelm and engulf the class analysis, limiting the latter's capacity to furnish a post-capitalist hegemonic project with a viable theoretical apparatus. By excavating class analysis as a critique of political economy in Marx's writings, the aim here is to push against those limits and expand the field of inscription of a hegemonic post-capitalist economic politics.

4. Class analysis in Marx's critique of political economy

To argue that class analysis is a critique of political economy should not be a controversial statement. Even the first chapter of *Capital* (Vol. 1) is as much a text for thinking about the forms of appropriation of surplus labor as it is about real abstraction and the fetishism of commodities. There is a long debate about how to make sense of the non-specific nature of social labor in Marx's construction of the category of value. For Marx, socially homogeneous labor begins "as soon as men start to work for each other in any way,"⁴⁶ as soon as an *occupational* division of labor emerges. In developing the idea of social labor, Marx refers to slave plantations in Brazil and independent commodity producers (tailors, weavers).⁴⁷ The theoretical construct of "a society of commodity producers"⁴⁸ is invoked but it is not explained as a society *exclusively* of capitalist commodity producers. Moreover, the category of commodity is developed in Marx's text by constantly referring to different forms of social organization of labor. For instance, when explaining how use-values "must be transferred to the other person through the medium of exchange" to become commodities, Marx refers to feudal rents and tithes to explicate the idea.⁴⁹ Later on, in the famous section on "the fetishism of commodity and its secret," Marx argues that "[t]he whole mystery of commodities, the whole magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour on the basis of commodity production, vanishes therefore as soon as we come to other forms of production"⁵⁰ and moves on to describing four other class formations: independent commodity production,⁵¹ the feudal *corvée* labor, the patriarchal peasant

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46 Ibid., p. 164.

47 Ibid., p. 130.

48 Ibid., p. 133.

49 Ibid., p. 131.

50 Ibid., p. 169.

51 Marx sarcastically refers to this mode with the signifier "Robinson Crusoe" (p. 169-70). As we shall see below in the section on ability as an investment in the neoliberal era, the independent mode of

family, and most importantly the association of free men. In the latter, the “social plan” replaces the medium of exchange to bridge the complex division of labor. As we shall see, these textual strategies indicate the spectral presence of non-capitalism as an *extimate* other in Marx’s critique of political economy.⁵²

Three different problematics pertaining to the relation between class analysis and value-form as two potential contending paradigms for critique of political economy emerge here, each of them attempting to encircle value-analysis from different perspectives. First one explores the relation between law of value and non-capitalist modes. The second, asks what would mean for non-capitalist modes to have a certain methodological parity with (if not priority over) the capitalist mode. An excursus into the problematic of racial capitalism further illustrates what is at stake in the conceptual parity between non-capitalist (in this case, slave-labor) and capitalist modes (wage-labor). And finally ask what it means for post-capitalism to be conceived as the inversion of capitalism, a resolution to its internal contradictions.

The status of non-capitalist modes of production and commodity production

Can we modify commodities with class adjectives? Could there be feudal, independent, slave or, even, communist commodities? Marx, even though he invoked non-capitalist modes of production to denaturalize the bourgeois contention that the commodity form is the only possible form for solving the problem of division of labor, recognized the possibility of other modes of production to engage in commodity production, but handled it within an evolutionary framework, arguing that in pre-capitalist societies, the commodity form plays “a subordinate role,” existing only in “the interstices.”⁵³ The conceptual tension between the flexibility of the commodity form to articulate with other modes of production (thereby allowing for class difference in the economy) and the deterritorializing thrust of the commodity form as the trailblazer for the deepening and expansion of capitalist accumulation (reducing all difference tendentially to sameness) remains to this day, surprisingly, an enduring one. This question, throughout the last century, has resurfaced first as the question of the relation between capitalist mode of production

production is itself one of the frontiers of the struggles over class.

52 On *extimacy* (*extimité*) as a Lacanian neologism that marks how “the most interior [...] has, in the analytic experience, a quality of exteriority,” see Miller 1994, p. 76.

53 *Ibid.*, p 172.

and its outside during the age of imperialism,⁵⁴ then as the question of underdevelopment and articulation of modes of production in social formations across the Global South that are wrestling their way through the contradictions of decolonization and dependency,⁵⁵ then as the question of de-industrialization as well as of the rise of post-Fordism,⁵⁶ then as the question of the heterogeneous manifestations of general intellect as subsumed under finance capital,⁵⁷ and most recently as the question of post-capitalist politics where the possibility of cooperative and community economies are being imagined and enacted under, alongside (outside), and against the presence of the commodity form.⁵⁸

The role of non-capitalism in the development of categories of class analysis

Did Marx invent the categories of class analysis retroactively after figuring out the capitalist wage-labor? The usual reference in thinking about class analysis as a method, is to Marx's remark from *Grundrisse*, "human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape."⁵⁹ Even though Marx will immediately qualify this methodological insight ("to be taken only with a grain of salt"⁶⁰), it has led Marxists to privilege the capitalist wage-labor relation as the paradigmatic form of class (non-)relation. Yet, a more realistic picture might be to think that Marx developed the categories of class analysis in a comparative manner, by studying and distinguishing different forms of the commune (Germanic, Slavic, ancient, etc.) as well as different forms of labor (serf-labor, slave-labor, wage-labor). Marx himself recognized that "Capital has not invented surplus-labour."⁶¹ He argues, in his monumental chapter on "The Working Day," that while under the regime of wage-labor, within the workday "surplus-labour and necessary labour are mingled together," under corvée-labor, surplus labor "is distinctly marked off": three days of necessary labor on peasant's own land and three days in the seignorial

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54 Luxemburg 2003[1913].

55 Nkrumah 1965; Rodney 2018[1972]; Laclau 1977.

56 Piore and Sabel 1984. For a critique of post-fordism as politics, see Gibson-Graham 1996.

57 Hardt and Negri 2017, p. 162.

58 Gibson-Graham 2006.

59 Marx 1973[1857-8], p. 105.

60 Ibid., 106.

61 Marx 1976 [1867], p. 344.

estate.⁶² The concept of surplus labor was already in circulation before Marx, and Marx remained committed to it as a distinct category even after inventing the concept of surplus value. Recall the famous letter to Kugelmann (London, July 11, 1868), where Marx asserts his own impossibility theorem:

Every child knows a nation which ceased to work, I will not say for a year, but even for a few weeks, would perish. Every child knows, too, that the masses of products corresponding to the different needs require different and quantitatively determined masses of the total labor of society. That this *necessity* of the *distribution* of social labor in definite proportions cannot possibly be done away with by a *particular form* of social production but can only change the *mode* of its *appearance*, is self-evident. No natural laws can be done away with. What can change in historically different circumstances is only the *form* in which these laws assert themselves. And the form in which this proportional distribution of labor asserts itself, in the state of society where the interconnection of social labor is manifested in the *private exchange* of the individual products of labor, is precisely the *exchange value* of these products.⁶³

All of this to advance the following hypothesis: What if Marx forged the concepts of production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor as a *concrete universal*, in his repeated efforts to think through different forms of organization of social reproduction in a historical manner in the *long durée* of the transitional conjuncture from feudalism to capitalism, with “slave capitalism” as the “midwife,” across a range of politico-economic mentalities (from mercantilism to classical liberalism) governing the formation of the world-economies?

Excursus: The problematic of racial capitalism

This reading of the emergence of the concept of class analysis opens Marx’s critique of political economy towards theorizing economic difference, in particular, different class formations and their articulation with one another. An important program articulated around the problematic of ‘racial capitalism,’ as advanced by Cedric Robinson in his genealogy of Black Marxism, highlights the constitutive importance of

.....
62 Ibid., p. 346.

63 Marx and Engels 1962, p. 461. Underlined emphasis added.

the 'difference' between slave-labor and wage-labor for capital.⁶⁴ Nikhil Pal Singh highlights this constitutive imbrication:

[W]e might begin with rewriting Marx's axiomatic statement, "Capital ceases to be capital without wage labor," in the following way: *Capital ceases to be capital without the ongoing differentiation of free labor and slavery, waged labor and unpaid labor*. This differentiation provides the indispensable material and ideological support, prop, or pedestal on which capitalism's development depended and on which it continues to depend. The categorical separation of freedom and slavery operates in the interests of capital. It is only by retaining an understanding of their imbrication and coconstitution that we attain a critical perspective adequate to oppose it.⁶⁵

Viewed from the perspective of the hypothesis of racial capitalism, Marx's (rhetorical) distinction between primitive accumulation which brings capitalism "into the world dripping from head to toe in blood" and accumulation proper "that enshrines as its logic the 'silent compulsion' of market discipline that dispenses with extra-economic coercion as a requirement"⁶⁶ inadvertently reproduces a Eurocentric historicism. Hence the recent attempts by Marxists to bring the violence of primitive accumulation as an ongoing feature of accumulation process proper and recognize the ongoing structural articulations of racial and economic forms of violence.⁶⁷ But, writing on "colonial capitalism," Onur Ulas Ince reminds us that "the emphasis on the constitutive violence of primitive accumulation" should not "displace or occlude other illiberal forms of power and force," such as "what Marx famously called the 'despotism of the workplace'."⁶⁸ If accumulation of capital is predicated upon the "subjection of social reproduction to the law of value," then, Ince adds, the law of value presupposes "the institutionalized structural inequality and unfreedom created by primitive accumulation."⁶⁹ In other words, the impossibility of a "pure" capitalism is already inscribed in the sovereign violence of the appropriative act by the non-laborer (the capitalist)—which gains its paradigmatic form in the East India Company as a joint

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64 Robinson 2000[1983].

65 Singh 2016, p. 37-8.

66 Ibid., p., 33.

67 David Harvey (2003) traces the genealogy of the concept of "accumulation by dispossession" to Rosa Luxemburg's foregrounding of 'primitive accumulation' in her discussion of imperialism.

68 Ince 2018, p. 21.

69 Ibid.

stock company (with no real capitalist but only executive officers and managers) that owes its existence on a sovereign gift of the King and the Parliament of England.

All these formulations, however, in the name of bringing the violence of slavery and colonial racism to the foreground in the history of capitalism, renders non-capitalism a moment of the former. Slavery is not only a historical moment in the transition towards capitalism, but also its immanent and permanent other that functions as an ideological and ultimately economic lever to reproduce capitalism (whether it be through the dichotomy of free and unfree labor, or through the bribing of labor aristocracy in the imperial center with the surplus value extracted or siphoned from the colonial periphery, or through the segmented labor market which divides and rules the proletariat in the Global North). This immanent and permanent other includes, in addition to the figure of the slave, “the migrant worker, the household worker, the chronically unemployed, and the like.”⁷⁰ An important driving force in this expansion of the concept of capitalism can be found in the power of the *economic* critique of political economy, in the power that the idea of the subjection of social reproduction to the law of value holds within the Marxian intellectual tradition. Even if the law of value cannot maintain its rule by relying solely on the silent compulsion of market discipline (hence the impossibility of a “pure” capitalism), constitutively in need of reproducing itself by positing *extimate* others with incompatible modes of *jouissance*, it still has the capacity to present itself as a universal programme, an axiomatic regime that territorializes (albeit with the supplement of segmentation) the world, and thereby constitutes itself on the world stage, if only tendentially, as an all without an outside. The problematic of racial capitalism breaks from this pessimistic conclusion when it engages with cultural revolution as the method of political revolution itself—not only in the case of Black Panthers in the 1960s⁷¹ but also in the case of Cooperation Jackson today.⁷²

The status of the association of free men in relation to capitalism

Could there be an outside of capitalism, as in beyond ‘capital’? Could there be a room for post-capitalist politics here and now? Is there a theoretical room in Marx’s critique of political economy for a post-

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70 Another way in which class difference is folded into capitalism can be found in the discussions of neo-feudalism. See, e.g., Dean 2020.

71 Agnes Varda’s documentary *Black Panthers* (1968) provides a sense of the importance of cultural revolution for the movement. For the centrality of cultural revolution for the Black radical imagination, see Kelley 2002.

72 For the *Rethinking Marxism* interview with Kali Akuno, see Shear 2021.

capitalist politics that is mobilized on the basis of his class analysis? Once again, there is a certain indeterminacy in Marx's text. The standard position, as articulated in Engels in *Anti-Dühring*, economic calculation (social accounting) under associated mode of production should not depend upon "the intervention of the much-vaunted 'value'"⁷³ and must be measured directly in labor time. This point turns around the argument that value-form regulates the distribution of social labor across different branches of production through the "barometrical fluctuations of the market price" in an *ex post* manner.⁷⁴ For Marx, this is a problem because it involves *mediation*, because:

[...] production is not *directly* social, [it] is not 'the offspring of association', which distributes labor internally. Individuals are subsumed under social production; social production exists outside them as their fate; but social production is not subsumed under individuals, manageable by them as their common wealth.⁷⁵

Yet a closer look at Marx's text and rhetorical strategies throughout *Capital* reveals a more complicated picture. As George Henderson demonstrated rather convincingly, Marx invoked associated mode of production throughout the text of *Capital* repeatedly and in each case rather abruptly, as an interruption, deploying "bait and switch" as a textual strategy, on those moments where value-form fails to constitute itself as a coherent regulator of distribution of social labor: when he discusses how "there is no necessary connection" between the amount of social labor allocated to the production of a particular commodity and the actual social need that it is supposed to satisfy, Marx announces that such a correspondence can only happen "when production is subjected to the genuine, prior control of society";⁷⁶ when he explains about how the profit motive inhibits capital from introducing technological changes that would improve labor productivity, Marx argues that such productivity enhancements would be indeed be made "[i]n a society where the producers govern their production by a plan drawn up in advance, or even in simple commodity production";⁷⁷ when he discusses the role of credit, he explains how the development of joint stock companies, facilitated by the availability of credit, heralds, potentially, "the transformation of capital back into the property of the producers, though no longer as the

.....
73 Engels 1976[1878], p. 309.

74 Rubin 1972[1928], pp. 77-78.

75 Marx 1973[1857-8], p. 158.

76 Marx 1981[1894], p. 288.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 370.

private property of individual producers, but rather as their property as associated producers, as directly social property.”⁷⁸ For Henderson, all these instances are indications of how, for Marx, “value is a problem that eludes capital’s apparatuses”⁷⁹ and can only find its home (and realization) in the associated mode of production. Once again this is not a controversial argument, since for Engels, for instance, socialism is an inversion of capitalism, “an inversion that capitalist themselves actively produce as they attempt over time to resolve the very contradictions that they produce.”⁸⁰ Needless to note, none of these articulations indicate an assertion of guarantee—on the contrary, all these imminent possibilities remain as such and, in fact, constrain the vision of what communism can be to the parameters determined by capitalist value-form and its internal limits. For our purposes however, the implication of this analysis is, once again, the immanence of non-capitalism to capitalism—this time around as its inversion, constituting a vantage point from which the impossibility of the *mediation* between abilities (social labor) and social needs through the value-form without falling into various forms of crisis (overaccumulation, underconsumption, falling rate of profit, concentration of capital, etc.).

Even though Marx’s text is centered around the analysis of the dynamics and consequences of law of value, it articulates his critique of political economy by articulating the elements of class analysis. Non-capitalism, whether it is about the way capital establishes itself as the hegemonic mode of organizing social reproduction (as in the case of racial capitalism) or about the way it creates the conditions of its supersession (as in the case of associated mode of production), emerges as the differential position from which Marx articulates his critique of political economy. This differential position is what class analysis as a critique of political economy aims to provoke in order to formulate communist strategies of economic politics.

5. Political economy as a defensive formation

As soon as political economy began to emerge as a coherent discursive formation it also began to register the traces of class in the social formation. Following the Mercantilists who viewed the problem of social reproduction from the perspective of the *state-form* and brought to existence the preliminary conceptual and institutional conditions of existence of what later will be named the national economy (e.g., systems of payments, customs, new regimes of regulation and taxation),

.....
78 Ibid., p. 568.

79 Henderson 2013, p. 89.

80 Ibid., p. 60.

the Physiocrats in France began to conceptualize the society in the form of *estates* (productive, sterile and distributive) and William Petty in England divided the national income according to the income stream of three big classes: wages, profits and rents. But more importantly, Petty was interested in a radical transformation of the social division of labor in Britain. He argued for the transformation of the self-provisioning household economy into one where wage-labor (with subsistence wages) was the dominant form. Adam Smith's discourse on commerce, while recognizing the classes in his multiple and potentially contradictory discourses on value (oscillating in spectrum from a highly advanced labor-commanded theory of value to a tautological costs of production theory of value), envisioned a natural system of liberty in which "free agents engaged [with one another] in sociable conduct."⁸¹ In this system, class figured in the form of independent commodity producers ("the butcher, the baker, the brewer"), whereas slave-labor and wage-labor, the two pillars of colonial capitalism since the 16th century, were elided.⁸² Ricardo's consolidation of labor theory of value rested on a vision of a manufacturing society composed of capitalist factories and farms, and offered a coherent theory of distribution across the three classes: laborers, capitalists and landowners.

Marx's critique of political economy at some level is a recognition not only of this emergence of categories of class in classical political economy but also of the ways in which both classical political economists and 'vulgar' economists either fail or evade to come to terms with the constitutive irreducibility of class antagonism.⁸³ Marx's critique is leveled against political economy *from within* class antagonism, from the perspective of the Real looking *out*, in an attempt to open up the categories that political economy tries to suture up, erase, and domesticate. As suggested above, it is possible to read Marx's axiom of communism, "from each according to their abilities to each according to their needs," as an enunciation that encircles the Real of class antagonism, that traverses the fantasies of reconciliation that organize classical political economy and contemporary bourgeois economics. In the "Critique of the Gotha Programme," Marx posits the limit conditions under which the communist axiom will be realized:

.....
81 Tribe 2015, p. 58.

82 Why did Smith fall into this elision? Michael Perelman indicates that the colonial fantasy came to Smith's rescue because he could then continue to present the poor laboring classes in England on its path to becoming part of the petit bourgeoisie through diligence and parsimony. See Perelman 2000, pp. 196-228.

83 For a detailed intellectual history of the sources that Marx read in developing his critique of political economy, see Tribe 2015. According to Keith Tribe, Marx's first encounter with classical political economy is through mainly French sources or translations (Say, Smith, Sismondi, Boisguilbert, etc.)

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can *the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety* and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!⁸⁴

The standard reading of this paragraph is to view the axiom as a description of a society to come, especially given the reference to the development of forces of production. Yet, it is equally possible to read these as the frontiers of critique and praxis that Marx marks out for a communist economic politics: permanent problematization of division of labor and in particular the reification of intellectual difference; transformation of the conditions of labor; institution of cooperative economies. The important point here is that these frontiers of critique and praxis must be pushed against whether the state-power is captured or not, they provide the perspectives from which Marxist class politics can agitate the traversal (“crosses in its entirety”) of fantasies of reconciliation and harmony (“the narrow horizon of bourgeois right”).⁸⁵ It is possible to read *Capital* as Marx staging such a traversal of the fantasy of organizing the social reproduction through “Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham,” beginning with the grandeur of “an ‘immense collection of commodities’” and the analysis of the value-form, following the owner of money and the owner of labor-power “into the hidden abode of production,” and ultimately ending with the so-called primitive accumulation.⁸⁶ In the case of the communist axiom, as we shall argue,

.....
84 Marx and Engels 1962, p. 24. Emphasis added.

85 Balibar (1995) contrasts between an *evolutionist* reading of Marx's differentiation, “as an embryonic theory of the stages or phases of the ‘period of transition’ to the ‘classless’ society” (p. 105) and a *political* reading that views “the space cleared ‘between capitalist and communist society’ [as] the proper space of politics” (p. 106). According to the latter reading, “the ‘transition’ foreseen here by Marx is a political figure representing historical time's ‘non-contemporaneity’ with itself, but a figure which remains inscribed by him in *provisionality*” (p. 106).

86 Marx describes this fantasy in detail: “This sphere that we are deserting, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour-power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to himself. The only force that brings them together and puts them in relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interests of each. Each looks to himself only, and no one troubles himself about the rest, and just

Marx invites us to organize our social reproduction in a manner that foregrounds the questions of abilities and needs, opening them up to inquiry and experimentation, as opposed to negating them as it has been done in classical political economy and bourgeois economics.⁸⁷

A divided discipline and Marx

Maurice Dobb's classic reading of the history of economic thought, divides the discipline laterally between those approaches that foreground the production sphere and therefore have a theory of class (the objectivists), and those that shift the focus to the sphere of exchange and therefore view the economy as composed of individuals pursuing their interests (the subjectivists).⁸⁸ Ricardian, Marxian and Post Keynesian approaches to the economy, to the extent that they understand profit (surplus) as a deduction from the total product and subscribe to a version of labor theory of value are among those who focus on the sphere of production. The split occurs in the discipline after Ricardo's consolidation of Smith's labor theory of value, and as a reaction to it, in an effort to re-write the problem of social reproduction as a problem centered on the market. Early subjectivists pulled the utilitarian thread that began with Jeremy Bentham, who theorized labor as a source of disutility and wage as a reward for foregoing leisure, and continued with Nassau Senior, who saw profit as a reward for 'abstinence.' Modern choice theoretic approaches, the neoclassical tradition and the late neoclassical variations on the central theoretical problematic of reconciliation of the individual with the social rationality, as demonstrated in the centrality of equilibrium for such analysis, brought the traces of nineteenth century 'psychologism' into contemporary economic theory.⁸⁹

Even though Dobb considered Marx within the objectivist tradition, Marx's theory of value-form, which Dobb never really engaged in a systematic manner, makes it difficult to easily pigeonhole him in the production perspective. The retroactive constitution of value in the act of exchange in his analysis of the value-form and his theory of fetishism of commodities as a theory of subjectivity are the elements that make up

because they do so, do they all, in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an all-shrewd providence, work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal and in the interest of all." Marx 1976 [1867], p. 280.

87 For an exploration of the use of psychoanalytical *modes of negation* (repression, disavowal, foreclosure) in order to understand the discursive strategies in bourgeois economics, see Madra 2021.

88 Dobb 1945; 1973.

89 Madra 2017.

the horizontal axis (the valorization of value) of Marx's parallax ontology of capital. To view the operations of the vertical axis, on the other hand, one must step into the "hidden abode of production" where the capitalist appropriates and distributes surplus. Marx's critique of political economy lies precisely in his bringing together these two dimensions and reading them together. It is a parallax *view* because while it is necessary to view the economy from both perspectives, it is not possible to see the production from the exchange and vice versa. Within the productive sphere there is no equality, there is only hierarchy; one form of class struggle that Marx wrote about extensively, takes as its aim bringing as much equality as possible into the sphere of production by chipping away at its hierarchical structure (by reducing the length of the workday, by slowing down the turnover, by bargaining for higher wages and better benefits, by gaining partial control over the production process, etc.). Similarly, given the structural effect of disavowal that is imposed by the fetishism of commodities, it is not possible to see the hierarchies that structure the workplace from the outside; hence the need for movement politicizing consumption to shed a light on inhumane labor practices, child-labor, or the use of conflict-minerals. For Marx, the relation between the spheres of circulation (exchange) and production is one of imbrication:

It is therefore impossible for capital to be produced by circulation, and it is equally impossible for it to originate apart from circulation. It must have its origin both in circulation and yet not in circulation.⁹⁰

Capital moves from one form to another (M—C....P....C'—M'), from money form to commodity form, from commodity form to productive form and back again into commodity form and so on, knot by knot, leap by leap. When it is in the sphere of production, in the form of productive capital, it enacts the sovereign act of appropriation, knotting the organization of surplus labor into the task of producing it for capital. When it is in the sphere of circulation, in the form of money capital, it is sterile unless it is once again thrown into production, when it is in the form of commodity capital, it is always under the threat of losing its value (whether through material decay, destruction, or loss of its usefulness) and therefore in urgent need of swift realization. Marx's critique of political economy, precisely for its parallax understanding of the relation between the spheres of circulation and production cannot be situated on either side of the divide that Dobb identified as running through the history of thought.

Yet, there is a grain of truth in Dobb's analysis of the subjectivist turning away from the sphere of production. His thesis is that utilitarian

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90 Marx 1976[1867], p. 268.

subjectivists gradually rewrote the problem of social reproduction as one of organizing the satisfaction of subjective needs and wants (demand) by the productive abilities (supply) in the marketplace, because they recognized the political implications of the idea that profit is a deduction. In reaction to the Ricardian socialist's political economy of poor, conservative vulgar economists began to theorize everything around the exchange relation and as a matter of the utilitarian calculus of workers and entrepreneurs. Unlike Marx's structural and dynamic vision of the capitalist economy as overlapping circuits of capital that are in constant need of renewal, the structurality of the subsequent neoclassical vision of the economy arose from marginal trade-offs (choices) that each individual consumer has to make (what to sell and what to buy) given the relative prices of the commodities and had as its *telos* a general equilibrium, a harmonious reconciliation of individual choices with the aggregate system of markets.

In this contractual ontology, there can be no room for class as a process of performance, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor. Classes can figure in only as far as the inequalities that can exist in the marketplace. One defining feature of the analytical Marxist currents of the final quarter of the last century was to theorize class in the sphere of exchange. In John Roemer's general theory of classes, classes are defined according to the initial endowments of the individuals (those who need to forgo leisure time to access other commodities and those who can sell commodities to access other commodities).⁹¹ In Samuel Bowles' and Herbert Gintis' model of efficiency wage, even though they claimed to theorize production using the conceptual armature of marginal analysis, the classes are ultimately differentiated according to who is on the short-side of the market and who on the long-side.⁹² Given structural unemployment, the workers' have a higher cost of job loss (a variable that combines loss of income and the length of the duration between jobs) and therefore they are on the disadvantageous long-side of the labor market. In general, given its contractual ontology, the only type of inequality that the neoclassical tradition can recognize has to take place in the sphere of exchange and take the form of market power.

From objective needs to subjective wants

Dobb's story, however, is not the only history of the emergence of subjectivist (neoclassical) choice theory out of classical political economy. In a brief but rich treatise on the problem of subjectivity in

.....
⁹¹ Roemer 1982.

⁹² Bowles and Gintis 1990.

political economy, David Levine tells the story of how the neoclassical theory of choice as satisfaction of wants under the ontological condition of scarcity emerged out of the notion of *need* as manifested in the foundational concept of classical political economy, ‘subsistence wage.’⁹³ Levine argues that for classical political economists, the main task of the idea of subsistence was to make “the entire problem of the subjective character of want” to disappear.⁹⁴ The idea of subsistence wage fixes the income stream that represents the working class in the national income accounts to a bare minimum. Pre-Smithian writers, such as Bernard Mandeville or James Stuart, did not withhold themselves with regards to their extractivist vision: they argued that the subsistence wage should be at bare minimum so that it will keep the laborer sober.⁹⁵ With Smith, the idea of subsistence wage as an obligation towards satisfying the “necessaries of life” comes into consideration, even though it is immediately accompanied by the notion of determination of wage by the supply and demand of labor. The co-existence of the normative sense of society’s obligation to maintain the basic living standards of the working people and the notion that wage is determined by the objective forces of the market brought its own tensions. To the extent that the labor market determines the wage rate at a level below what was deemed necessary, the normative sense provided a justification for the interventions of the government, violating the fundamental principle of classical liberalism: *laissez faire*.

Levine argues that the conception of wages as a bundle of goods that satisfies the basic needs of the wage-laborer eliminates the individuality of wants and the pacifies the anxiety that arises from the greed and avarice that the category of self-interest evokes—a theme that can be traced back to Aristotle’s writings on *chrematistike* and its corrosive effects on the community if it becomes an end in itself.⁹⁶ Even for Adam Smith, who identified the pursuit of self-interest as the pursuit of approbation of others, to the extent that social recognition and station depends on the amount of wealth one amasses, which is not limited, the pursuit of self-interest unleashes the growth of wants without limit. The marginalist turn which led to the development of neoclassical tradition has liberated self-interest in the figure of *homo economicus* but limited it externally with the category of *scarcity*. Stanley Jevons, one of the key figures of the “marginalist revolution,” in addition to his programmatic insistence that economists “must necessarily examine the wants and

.....
93 Levine 1998.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

95 Perelman 2000.

96 Kozel 2010.

desires of man,"⁹⁷ has also written a treatise on the coal question and the implications of its impending exhaustion.⁹⁸ The construction of the idea of scarcity along with the notion of economy as 'prudent management of resource,' together with the development of the use of statistical methods marks the emergence of the 'objectivist' side of the neoclassical tradition as its solution to the problem of infinite wants (the 'subjectivist' side).⁹⁹

Thorstein Veblen's critique of neoclassical analysis of marginal utility foregrounded envy as a category that throws a wrench into the mechanics of achieving a stable and unique equilibrium to secure the reproduction of the social. Once we allow consumption decisions to be motivated not by a satisfaction of a need but a mechanism to signal social status and to achieve recognition, Veblen argued, we are in the realm of "conspicuous" consumption.¹⁰⁰ Veblen's idea anticipates Lacan who pointed out to "the margin in which demand [for recognition] rips away from need [for satisfaction]" and where desire "begins to take shape."¹⁰¹ In a Lacanian vein, Veblen's idea of 'conspicuous' consumption can be interpreted to imply that this desire is both provoked and captured by the advertisement discourse that promises "a partial fixation of desire."¹⁰² In contrast to the pragmatic realism of the advertisement discourse that recognizes the partiality of their proposed fixes (which means that the promise of fulfillment can be renewed again and again and the 'realization of surplus value' can be administered successfully), neoclassical analysis of marginal utility imagines the act of consumption to be a stable affair. Yet, if we were to give Veblen's provocation around invidious consumption a Freudian spin, we need to acknowledge

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97 Jevons 1888, p. 39, cf. Levine 1998, p. 64.

98 Jevons 1865.

99 See Mitchell 2008. The importance of the category of scarcity for the consolidation of economics as a discipline (and hence for the construction of the concept of the economy) should not be underestimated. Even though British economist Lionel Robbins' definition of economics as "the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses" (1932, p. 15) contains within it both the subjective (ends) and the objective (scarce means) dimensions, others have elevated "scarcity" as the foundational category of economic rationality. Gary Becker, for instance, in an earlier paper (1962), argued that, as long as we impose scarcity through the idea of budget set that limits the combinations of goods that can be afforded, no specific assumptions need be made regarding the subjectivity of individual agents, to reproduce the fundamental laws of economics (e.g., demand for a good falls when its price goes up) at the level of markets. In other words, Becker claimed, the discipline of scarcity will make sure that economic rationality prevails at the level of markets even if individuals behave irrationally.

100 Veblen 1898; 1899.

101 Lacan 2006, p. 680.

102 Stavrakakis 2007, p. 237.

that “envy envies satisfaction, enjoyment”¹⁰³ rather than that which is enjoyed. If the latter were the case, it could have been satisfied with a form of distributive justice (e.g., Rawlsian); yet if we are dealing with the former, there can be nothing stable about it and only the “iron law” of scarcity can prune it.¹⁰⁴ This economic logic that hooks itself onto this dialectics of need, demand, desire is what brought the debt-financed, consumption-, and speculation-driven neoliberal economy to a crisis of *jouissance* in 2008.

This story of the suppression of the category of *need* as a derivative of class and its replacement with *want* is definitive of the neoclassical turn. And even if it is staged around the register of subjectivity, it is also a story of gradual erasure of class. In classical political economy, the idea of the subsistence wage was a necessary corollary of the idea that profit is a deduction from the total social product. Indeed, Marx’s critique of political economy relied on the sharpening and relativization of the idea of subsistence wage through his notion of the value of labor power. Therefore, to the extent that category of need remained a part of the discourse of economics, it marked the existence of class exploitation, however faintly or mediated. But this replacement of the objective *needs* with subjective *wants* (via the construction of the category of scarcity as an “objective” limit) was only the demand side of the defensive formation of bourgeois economics. On the side of the supply (productive abilities), the marginalist revolution developed its own revised version of the Trinity Formula that Marx criticized in his *Theories of Surplus Value*: each factor of production was to be awarded according to the value of its marginal productivity. This was the neoclassical response to Marx’s axiom communism: “To each according to their marginal contribution.” And to the extent that it grounded remuneration in differential abilities of factors of production (labor and non-labor), it entailed a certain appropriation and economization of the category of ability.

Ability as a limit, ability as an investment

The category of (differential) ability is contained in the concept of division of labor. But despite its importance for the discourse of economics, the category itself has been nebulous at best. For Smith, the concept of division of labor meant both the *technical* division of labor in the process of production (as exemplified in his example of “pin factory”)

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103 Copjec 2002, p. 166.

104 This could also provide a clue to understand the underlying logic of ‘austerity’ as neoliberalism’s response to its own crisis of *jouissance* that culminated in the Crash of 2008. See, Özselçuk and Madra 2010.

and the *occupational* division of labor (as in the butcher, the brewer, and the baker). He explained the benefits of the division of labor through the example of the “pin factory”, using *technical* division of labor. In contrast, when he argued that the extent of division of labor “must always be limited [...] by the extent of the market” and therefore advocated for the expansion of the market for facilitating the growth of wealth, he referred to the *occupational* division of labor. The conflation is all the more interesting, given the fact that, while the picture of community that Smith’s draws when writing about system of natural liberty celebrates the specialized skills and the heterogeneity of concrete labor, the development of technical division of labor with the advent of capitalism pushes the abilities toward *deskilling* (capitalist factory as the institutional form that gives social ontological coherence to abstract labor).

Marx’s own theoretical struggle with these overlapping concepts of division of labor culminated in separating the division of labor from ‘class’ in such a manner that he came to recognize that technical and occupational forms of division of labor will remain even under the associated mode of production. In his letter to Kugelman, he argued that while the division of labor cannot be done away, it is possible to change “the *mode* of its *appearance*.”¹⁰⁵ His thought was shaped by his developing sense of the large-scale industry and its requirements for “directing authority,” his differentiation between division of labor at the level of positions and division of labor at the level of agents, his recognition of geographical and environmental limits on the abolition of division labor, and finally, his acknowledgement of the differential abilities of individuals. The latter is most clearly articulated in the “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” where Marx criticized the principle of equal remuneration for equal labor on the grounds that given “unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity,”¹⁰⁶ such a principle will lead to inequality. But his recognition that division of labor is here to stay did not mean that Marx stopped problematizing its different manifestations. In particular, Ali Rattansi argues that, in his mature period, Marx’s “attention shifts from a concern with the abolition of the division of labor as such, to an interest in overcoming the separation between intellectual and manual tasks.”¹⁰⁷

Balibar notes that for Marx, the division between manual and mental labor is “a process co-extensive with the whole history of the division labour.”¹⁰⁸ Balibar prefers to call it “intellectual difference” and considers it among the “great anthropological differences,” like sexual

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105 Marx and Engels 1962, p. 461.

106 Marx and Engels 1962, p. 24.

107 Rattansi 1982, p. 175.

108 Balibar 1995, p. 50.

and racial difference, “that cannot be denied or escaped yet are not fixed, univocal, or incontestable.”¹⁰⁹ The adjective ‘anthropological’ indicates a certain irreducibility and limit as well as a potential for the enactment of libidinal regimes of hierarchy that identify an excess of *jouissance* on either side of the divide. Marx’s response to that irreducibility is to posit its persistence as a central problematic for the communist practice of economic politics. His critique of the Gotha Programme’s discourse around equal remuneration for equal labor springs forth from such an awareness of potential inequalities that may arise from such irreducible differences. The first half of the axiom, “from each according to [their] ability...” by inviting each to come forward with their singular abilities, opens the question of ability to public deliberation, contestation and negotiation. Differential ability is the limit of intellectual difference and has the quality of an anthropological difference, it cannot be denied or escaped (and Marx is fully aware of this) yet is not fixed, univocal, or incontestable (hence the invitation to problematize it).

In contrast, classical political economy’s response to ability is to harness it through division of labor and to instrumentalize it for the accumulation of wealth (or, according to Marx, capital). Neoclassical response, on the other hand, is to imagine the possibility of its quantification and economization, first, in the form the concept of marginal productivity (displaying diminishing returns) and then in the form of “human capital” (potentially displaying increasing returns) that can be invested in through education. In his reading of “American neoliberals,” Michel Foucault contrasts the idea of “abilities-machine” with Marx’s notion of labor power as a commodity that is sold in the labor market:

This is not a conception of labor power; it is a conception of capital-ability which, according to diverse variables, receives a certain income that is a wage, an income-wage, so that the worker himself appears as a sort of enterprise for himself.¹¹⁰

According to this neoliberal notion of *homo economicus* as an entrepreneur of himself,¹¹¹ ability is an object of investment. Today, the discourse of economics (as the mother tongue of biopolitical governmentality), both in the Global North and Global South, has consolidated around this framing of ability. As Foucault seems to

.....
109 Robbins 2020, p. 18.

110 Foucault 2008, p. 225.

111 Ibid. Foucault distinguishes this neoliberal conception of *homo economicus* as an “abilities-machine” and “an entrepreneur of himself” from the earlier neoclassical conception of *homo economicus* as a “partner of exchange” resting upon “the theory of utility based on a problematic of needs”.

suggest, this framing *forecloses* the category of labor power; but does it foreclose class entirely? If we take Foucault's point regarding the enterprise rather than the individual being the unit of analysis for the neoliberal program, it is possible to read the emergence of this conceptualization of *homo economicus* as an "ability-machine" in conjunction with the re-emergence of "independent commodity production" as an increasingly prevalent form of class structure within contemporary societies. This transformation, made possible by the changes in information technologies and the flexibilization of labor market laws through the years of neoliberal counter-revolution, presents a challenge to the practice of communist economic politics. Even though the neoliberal discourse wants to represent everyone as entrepreneurs (whether they be self-employed or wage-laborers) and therefore erase difference, even within this particular 'class set' there is certainly a wide spectrum of positions ranging from precariously employed contingent workers to affluent independent professionals. The task of the communist practice, for instance, would involve not only the recognition and working on the differences within this class set but also the understanding of the differences between the class realities of 'self-employed' contingent workers and the wage-laborers if they are to 'form a class' together as a popular front, as a communist hegemonic bloc.

6. Conclusion

In a rather daring reading, Keith Tribe argues that, even though "the conventional narrative of the history of economics" considers them to "belong to different eras and mindset," the work of Karl Marx and Léon Walras share "something very important":

[T]hey are different answers to the same Saint-Simonian question regarding the nature of exchange and distribution in modern society: how the contributions made to production by industrious men and women were reflected in the distributions of the fruits of their labor. 'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his contribution' was Marx's vision for a transitional socialist society in 1875, entirely unaware that the year before Walras had embodied this principle in a system of simultaneous equations.¹¹²

There is a grain of truth in Tribe's argument. The socialist calculation debate of the twentieth century was on the possibility of elaborating a

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112 Tribe 2015, p. 164.

socialist economy in terms of a general equilibrium model.¹¹³ And indeed it is possible to read Marx's "to each according to his contribution" as a concession to the *bourgeois right* as the communist society "emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges."¹¹⁴ Yet, if the reading of the communist axiom as an invitation to traverse the fantasy of harmonious social reconciliation has any bite, if "the space between capitalism and communism" is the space of communist politics, then Marx's proposition has to be read as a critique of Walras—even if they "shared a common heritage in utopian communism and programmes for social and economic reform."¹¹⁵

The axiom, to the extent that it is an invitation for each to come forth with their 'abilities' and 'needs,' stages an encounter without the *mediation* of the moment of appropriation. Here, there is no knot of appropriation, no entity to take the products of labor and distribute them; their mediation is "*directly* social."¹¹⁶ But, especially if Marx is not making an organicist argument with this strange turn of phrase, if it is read as a direct encounter that is socially mediated (Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of 'compearance' comes to mind¹¹⁷), what is the proper institutional form of this encounter? Many enunciations of Marx and Engels and the value-form critique disqualifies "the market" as an option, even if it is possible to design it down to the minute detail as has been done by analytical Marxists.¹¹⁸ Yet, the experience of Soviet Union and "real" socialisms, especially the persistence of forms of mediation (usually a combination of administered and market prices), suggests that "the plan," while a necessary institution for communal self-governance of the social reproduction, is not adequate in itself to fill the role of facilitating such an encounter.¹¹⁹ What is required is an institutional form

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113 For a recent review and assessment of the legacy of the socialist calculation debate, see, Adaman and Devine 2022.

114 Marx and Engels 1962, p. 23

115 Tribe 2015, p. 166.

116 Marx 1973[1857-8], p. 158.

117 Nancy 1992. See also, Callari and Ruccio 2010 for an elaboration of Nancy's distinction between 'being-in-common' and 'common-being.' They argue that if "common-being" describes community as a unified and a unifiable property—that finds one of its dominant expressions in the homogenizing and "unidimensional social space" of socialism, grounded in the conception of "human beings as producers and laboring multitudes"—"being-in-common" envisions community as "an open social space," "negotiated and constructed in and through diverse subjectivities," Callari and Ruccio 2020, p. 413-4.

118 Bardhan and Roemer 1992.

119 Brus and Laski 1989.

that can simultaneously work against the stifling of the questions of need and want by denying their singularity and negativity (either through administrative blueprints of the plan or the advertisement templates of the market) as well as the fantasmatic arrangement and hierarchical ordering of the distribution of abilities in order to instrumentalize them for the reproduction of class exploitation.

In an earlier paper (with Ceren Özselçuk), we argued that such institutional forms must realize themselves through the path of sublimation.¹²⁰ Alenka Zupancic describes sublimation as the “creation and maintenance of a certain space for objects that have no place in the given, extant reality, objects that are considered ‘impossible.’”¹²¹ The history of political economy as a defense formation sketched above demonstrated that neither the neoclassical erasure of *need* (as a metonymy of working class) in favor of *want*, nor the neoliberal foreclosure of *labor-power* with the “abilities-machine” of *human capital theory* aim at providing such a space for ‘impossible’ objects. On the contrary, they clog up these two fundamental questions of social reproduction: on the side of need, with the superegoic injunction to enjoy (under the limit of scarcity); on the side of ability, with the superegoic injunction to be an entrepreneur. The institutional form of the encounter that is staged by the communist axiom must facilitate movement on both sides in the direction of undercutting the neoliberal superego, in the direction of opening room for deliberation and experimentation.

As it must be clear by now, there is no such institutional form that can function as a blueprint. The institutional form of such an encounter will always be singular, partial, context-specific, that is, one by one.¹²² But it is our contention that this is precisely where class analysis becomes an indispensable tool. If the right question, as Balibar once remarked, is not “what is communism?” but rather a more modest and curious, “who are communists?”¹²³ then we need an analytical framework that can render visible economic (class and non-class) difference so that we can see the moments, pre-figurations and formations of communism wherever and whenever they spring forth, that can work on that field

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¹²⁰ Madra and Özselçuk 2015.

¹²¹ Zupancic 2003, p. 77-78.

¹²² It is important to note however that singularity, partiality or context-specificity should not imply that such institutional forms must be limited to the local. The encounter can be staged at all scales, local, regional, national, or global, within or across sites, and so on. For a reading of the US social security system and its pay-as-you-go system (“from those who are able, to those who need”) as a communist moment in an otherwise capitalist social formation, see Madra 2006. For a discussion of an institutional form, an urban agriculture and food justice collective (Nuestras Raíces), that stages encounters across-sites (urban community gardens and farms, a harvest festival, farmer’s markets, a cooperative bookshop, housing projects, etc.) to redistribute abilities and generate desire for the creation of “new needs”, see Madra and Özselçuk 2015, pp. 143-148.

¹²³ Balibar and Negri 2010.

of difference (as a hegemonic surface of inscription) to forge alliances and collaborations across class formations, and that can facilitate us in our conduct of communist practice of economic politics that permanently pushes towards opening the sutures and problematizing the “anthropological differences” (whether they be sexual, intellectual or racial). In this sense, Lenin’s concept of ‘cultural revolution,’ to the extent that he recognized the need to address such anthropological differences (including the difference between town and country), can be considered as the permanent revolutionary practice of interrogating and problematizing the Real of antagonism at the heart of the problem of social reproduction, regardless of “the *mode* of its *appearance*.”

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On Some Paradoxes of Social Analysis

Jean-Claude Milner

Abstract: This paper detects two opposing politico-methodological ways of relating “class” and “class struggle” within Marx(ism). While the conservative analytic approach considers the existence of classes as primary and their struggle as secondary, the revolutionary synthetic method poses the primacy of struggle over classes. Although “class” and “class struggle” are absent from the lexis of contemporary politics, the synthetic procedure is still operative within a new ideological configuration of the West. This ideology employs a non-revolutionary synthetic method by denouncing the past revolutionary denunciations of inequality as part of the Western cultural heritage based on inequality.

Keywords: Class; Class Struggle; Marx(ism); Analytic approach; Synthetic approach; inequality; Confederation

The notions of class and class struggle stem from the 19th century. They are frequently associated with the name of Karl Marx. According to his own declaration, however, these notions are not his. In his letter to Weydemeyer, written in London on the 5th of March 1852, he mocks those who feign that these terms belong to the corpus of revolutionary theory. He invites them to acquaint themselves with bourgeois literature to convince themselves of the contrary. After naming the leading authors, who illustrate his thesis, he resumes his own position in the following way: “[...] I do not claim to have discovered either the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before me, bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this struggle between the classes, as had bourgeois economists their economic anatomy. My own contribution was: 1. To show that the *existence of classes* is merely bound up with *certain historical phases in the development of production*; 2. that the class struggle necessarily leads towards the *dictatorship of the proletariat*; 3. that this dictatorship itself constitutes no more than a transition towards the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*.”¹

Without going into further detail, one gets the impression that for Marx, “class” and “class struggle” conceptually coincide. It seems futile (for Marx) to talk about society as it was in the mid-19th century, in *this* historical stage of the development of production, without mentioning classes; it seems futile to him to talk about classes without saying that they are in struggle; it seems futile to him to wish for their existence without being in struggle. The end of struggle and the end of classes are mutually conditioned (see point 3).

The pertinence of the text reaches well beyond the doctrinal clarifications that are made therein. Marx wants to be particularly

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¹ Marx 1983, p. 62-65.

clear; for this very same reason, he even reveals the presence of an obscurity. For his presentation omits the difference between two distinct approaches: either one proceeds by posing that classes exist at the beginning, and determines in a second step, that they are in struggle; or the approach begins by positing the existence of the social struggle and then defines the classes as actors of that struggle. I am qualifying the first approach in a conventional manner as analytic and the second as synthetic. My aim is to show that the principle of their difference is still relevant today, even though the notions of class and class struggle are less and less present, whether in scientific research or in the political debate.

The analytic approach can be found directly in the works of a “bourgeois historian” that Marx refers to in his letter: François Guizot, who was not only an author admired by all of scholarly Europe, but who became, between 1840 and 1848, as the most influential minister of King Louis Philippe, the political idol of the whole of conservative Europe. In this view, reasonable politics must be capable to govern the coexistence of different classes while preserving peace or at least the absence of a violent struggle between them. Guizot claimed to have achieved this until the Revolution of 1848 marked his failure; others have pursued the same project, and even today we are not lacking similar examples, except that the vocabulary of classes is no longer used, precisely because the revolutionary tradition has linked it to the synthetic approach.

Without necessarily being aware of the difference between the analytical and the synthetic, the proponents of the revolution have indeed chosen the second path; they situated the struggle within the fundamentals of societies and derived the notion of class from it. In the 20th century, this tendency was reinforced by historical situations; both in Russia and in China the revolutionary event was inscribed in the development of a war that was as much regional as it was global. Without coinciding with class struggle, the military confrontation made it directly visible. The texts of Mao Zedong in particular use the Sino-Japanese War as a pedagogical tool, which provides clarity on his interpretation of Marxism. However, this interpretation consists exactly in pushing the conceptual primacy of struggle over class to its extreme. In its insistence on class struggle, it will go so far as to autonomize the struggle in itself and separate it from the classes while reducing it to the struggle between the old and the new. The classes in general are determined by the position they occupy in this struggle; the classes of Chinese society are determined by the position they occupy in the Sino-Japanese War; the political notion of the “people” depends on the determination of the main enemy in the struggle (whether it is a military confrontation, a social struggle or the struggle between the old and the new): part of the people are all those who fight the principal enemy. Irrespective of the political practice of Mao Zedong and the disasters it

has caused the Chinese people, his doctrine illustrates clearly what I call the synthetic approach in class theory.

Marx himself undoubtedly has adopted a similar line of reasoning. This was already testified in 1847 by the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: the first sentence of section 1 poses the thesis: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." It then continues with a brief delineation: "Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight; a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes."² One can sense that the notion of class in these formulations has no proper character; it comprises profoundly heterogeneous realities. Its conceptual unity is fully dependent on the relation of oppressors/oppressed and its material unity depends on the notion of struggle. However, the relation of oppression is not investigated in detail as if its existence and its content were self-evident; in the same manner, the struggle is treated as if it did not require any definition; its empirical evidence is sufficient to take it as an immediate given.

Over the course of the *Manifesto* the transhistorical generalities of the introduction give way to the specificity of the moment; in the mid-19th century, the old classes in Europe gave way to the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In *Capital*, these two classes are identified in economical terms by the theory of surplus value; by the same token, the class struggle appears only under the economic form of irreducible inequality between sellers and buyers of labour power. Yet, beyond the explicit logic of *Capital*, subsists another implicit logic, in which the classes are derived from the struggle and not the other way around. While the presentation of the work is analytic, the synthetic approach prevails within the subtext.

My point here is not to pursue an in-depth commentary on Marx's doctrine. This doctrine is important since it allows us to situate the two approaches, which I have distinguished, in their relation to one another: the analytics, in which the classes precede the struggle, and the synthetics, in which the struggle determines the classes. In my mind, this is where the real discussion lies. However, as the example of François Guizot already made clear, nothing in the analytic approach obliges us to admit that the struggle might be a necessary element; the analysis often gains precision once it limits itself to establishing the differential characters of the various elements of society, without taking into

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² Marx & Engels 1969, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/index.htm>. The original is written in German. The text derived from a collaboration between Marx and Engels; published in February 1848 without the names of the authors, it was republished in 1872. On this occasion, Marx and Engels jointly claimed co-authorship.

consideration at the outset whether the differences are themselves fixed in a struggle, which is either permanent or occasional. Of course, it thus becomes clear that the notion of class enjoys no privilege whatsoever. Other concepts may turn out to be much more suitable to grasp the multiplicity of groupings within

societies. If one accepts the classical Marxist position, one will only recognize those groupings whose principle is based on the economic structure as classes, but it turns out every day that one must take into account other forms of groupings whose principle is not immediately economic. Even the relation of oppression took other forms than the unequal buying/selling of labour power. All the dimensions of social life can be affected by that, whether they touch the economy or not. Under these conditions, the question of classes becomes a lexicological quarrel. Either one conserves the word in its old meaning, ignoring a vast ensemble of phenomena, or one changes the meaning of the word in order to include these phenomena, or, what seems to be the most honest solution, one renounces the word altogether.

Let us now be more precise. If one pursues the analytic approach the groupings do not derive from the struggle, neither conceptually nor materially; the right method consists therefore in beginning by bracketing the question of whether there exists a struggle or not. Let us now suppose, that in a second step, we come to state that there really is a struggle, then one cannot content oneself with observing it pure and simple. One has to reflect upon the subjective motives and the objective causes of this struggle; the simple existence of classes does not suffice. In other words, contrary to the *Manifesto*, the analysis cannot treat the struggle as an immediate given. Whether one calls it struggle or war or rivalry or oppression, the words do not matter much, one has to establish the motives and the causes. The simplest way is to stick to the relation of oppression. Therefore, apart from identifying the groupings, information on the inequalities in which they are inscribed must be added. Instead of “classes” and “class struggle” one thus uses the much more neutral vocabulary of “groupings” and “inequality”. Just as the groupings are distinguished by distinctive features, the inequalities are assigned to their respective register – economy, individual rights, ethnic background, cultural autonomy, etc. Ultimately, it is a question of whether they give rise to conflicts and what degree of violence they may reach.

Let us now turn back to the synthetic approach. It is a fact that it has maintained a privileged relationship with the revolutionary tradition since the 19th century. Has the decline of the latter within western societies provoked a parallel decline of any synthetic approach within those same societies? I do not think so. One can admit that the center of politico-social reflections, in western societies today, does not lie in Europe anymore, but in the United States. I even put forward the hypothesis that today the notion of the West has no other content but to

designate the set of states who accept, more or less openly, the military, economic, juridic, and intellectual domination of the United States. If one talks about the West, one talks in fact about a CONFEDERATION, which is assembled around the United States.

Otherwise, one has to accept a paradox: the US-American domination in the intellectual domain expresses itself in the discourses of dissent and protest and not in the discourses of order. The latter remain determined by their national particularities, i.e., the conception of order is not the same in a country of, say, catholic or protestant tradition; it is not the same in Europe and in the United States; it is not the same in central or western Europe, etc. Inversely, an echo of the protests and dissents which are expressed in the United States may be perceived in the positions of those who express their dissatisfaction with regard to the established order (dissent) and the ones who want to change the established order profoundly (protest). Within this domain, western Europe is not really autonomous anymore. It is true that the intellectual domination of the United States disposes of a network which extends over a very grand part of the globe: the universities, of which a majority inscribes itself in a perpetual back and forth, of which the central knot is located in the United States. In this way, a global UNIVERSITY is created, in which not the same solutions, but the same forms of reasoning circulate. It thus does not really matter whether the discourses of dissent and protest are held by nationals of the United States or on US-American soil. This hence forms one of the major frameworks of the western CONFEDERATION.

Not only does it produce the entirety of the educated middle classes within the CONFEDERATION, but it teaches them to refuse the economic, political, and ideological functioning of the western order in part or entirely. What are we stating then? As many forms as these refutations might take, they always aim at inequality. Inequality plays the role of an axiom, from which all ultimate criticism derives. Depending on the various situations, one will privilege this or that specific form of general inequality: colonial oppression, cultural appropriation, the primacy of white culture, the patriarchy, the conflicts of gender and so on. The list is not and could never be terminated. It will expand as the analysis of the past, present, and future of the West will be pursued. The *wokeness* movement has caught the attention of the media, but the crucial gesture goes well beyond that. It consists of a return to the synthetic approach, except that the class struggle is not mentioned. The starting point is a much more general determination, of which class struggle and even the relation oppressor/oppressed are just particular variants: inequality.

It presents itself as the origin and cause of all that which is dysfunctional in the West, on whatever level. Since western societies are considered fundamentally dysfunctional, the following consequence imposes itself: all the groupings and all the conflicts which count within

the social discourse are derived from one of the multiple aspects of the inequality-relation; all the groupings and all the conflicts which are derived from such an aspect count in the social discourse.

I have already pointed out the following paradox: there is an abundance of inequalities in the materiality of the western CONFEDERATION, both within its internal dispositives and its will for victory in the external competition. When it comes to the ideals that the CONFEDERATION proposes to itself in its own discourses, inequality is felt as an evil to be combatted or even as a fault that must be repaired. The contradiction is obvious. And yet the paradox goes even further. Inequality not only characterizes the present of the West; but it also defines its past. That which is often called the cultural heritage of the West is entangled with inequalities of all kinds. Not only does it describe them without always condemning them, but it is accused of producing them. One can even go so far as to consider that some of these inequalities have made this heritage possible in the first place. It then cannot escape the rejection proclaimed by the educated middle class. Through this gesture, they define an ideology. Despite its initial reluctance, a big part of the CONFEDERATION finally adopted this ideology because it could not go against the global University that has become a wheelwork of the US-American *soft power*. In so doing, the same part of the CONFEDERATION renounces the content of its own history and of its own culture. Although the rhythm of the process varies in the different states of the CONFEDERATION, it can be observed everywhere, with or without *cancel culture*.

This first paradox is accompanied by a second one: while an anti-western discourse is deployed within the West (and the West takes pride in this), another anti-western discourse is held outside of the West. Except that the first takes inequality for a fault, which one does not have the moral right to take advantage of; the second on the contrary sees in the inequality a virtue, on the condition that it is oriented in one's favor. Consequently, the proponents of the second anti-western discourse see the first as an indication of the enemy's decadence. They do not hide their contempt.

At the end of this itinerary, we have to point out one last paradox. If we admit that the synthetic approach has reappeared in the West, especially in the global University, and if we admit that this approach has elevated inequality to the status of an axiom, one could think that the logic of the *Manifesto* of Marx and Engels should have regained vigor. This is not the case. Precisely because the cultural heritage of the West cannot free itself from the inequalities that made its existence possible, past denouncers of inequality are themselves considered to benefit from one or another previously unrecognised inequality. I have only mentioned Marxism here, but all the revolutionary movements and the notions of the revolution themselves are subject to suspicion now,

simply because they belong to the long line of dead white males. The doctrine of classes and class struggle belong to the European cultural heritage, which is seen by the educated middle classes as the most narrow-minded version of the Western heritage. This double rejection of classes and class struggle provokes another one: the rejection of the revolutionary tradition altogether. Instead of being revived with the return of the synthetic method and the denunciation of inequality as the original cause of all evils, this return and these relentless denunciations imply on the contrary the obsolescence of the revolutionary tradition.

Translated by: Daniel Barry and Jan Weise

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Class in Theory, Class in Practice

**William Clare
Roberts**

Abstract: An articulation of class politics that has gained prominence on the post-Bernie Left presumes that a socialist politics should appeal to the common interests of the working class because the working class has a structurally privileged position in capitalism. I argue that this position (“class abstractionism”) conflates work relations with capitalist class relations, and that it is therefore prone to substituting an image of one fraction of the proletariat for the proletariat as a whole.

Keywords: class; proletariat; class abstractionism; class structure; class identity; culture

I. Class Abstractionism

It is impossible to deny that a new discourse of class has been ascendant since 2016. Some of the figures in this new class discourse have been hoeing this same row for a very long time. Adolph Reed has been making the same arguments consistently for thirty years. That argument is that, while “obvious racial disparities” are a problem, “the way forward is precisely through the kinds of social and economic policies that address black people as workers, students, parents, taxpayers, citizens, people in need of decent jobs, housing, and health care, or concerned with foreign policy—not to homogenize them under a monolithic racial classification.”¹

Critics have assailed this argument as “class reductionism” – a name Reed reasonably refuses as a “specter” and a “myth”² – but the argument, has not only weathered the criticism but has found a new constituency in parts of the Democratic Socialists of America and beyond in the wake of the two Sanders campaigns and the Trump presidency. That constituency is certainly not confined to Marxists. From so-called popularists and centrist policy wonks – who want the Democratic Party to focus on universalistic economic messaging rather than “divisive” cultural and racial issues – to Left populists – who want to revive the “we are the 99%” slogans of Occupy – to the genuinely neo-Strasserite elements that have coalesced around *Compact Magazine*, there is a wide and quite disparate chorus of voices singing the praises of class-based politics, understood as a politics that addresses people as workers.

Despite this wider reach, these arguments for the *political* primacy of class continue to have a special affinity with Marxist accounts of the

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1 Reed 2019.

2 Reed 2019.

structural primacy of class.³ Besides Reed, the most prominent figure here is Vivek Chibber, whose recent book, *The Class Matrix*, attempts to systematize an approach he has been developing for many years now.⁴ According to Chibber, class is structural, while all other social groupings and cleavages are rooted in culture. This gives class an explanatory importance that cannot be claimed by race, gender, religion, or nationality. This explanatory priority gives rise to the political priority of class politics. Economic and political power are in the hands of the capitalist class – they are the structurally advantaged class – and only the working class occupies the structural position to challenge them. As Chibber put it in 2016:

The working class has this power [to overcome the resistance of the capitalist class and its political functionaries], for a simple reason – capitalists can only make their profits if workers show up to work every day, and if they refuse to play along, the profits dry up overnight. [...] This ability to crash the entire system, just by refusing to work, gives workers a kind of leverage that no other group in society has, except capitalists themselves. [...] It is this power to extract real concessions from capital that makes the working class so important for political strategy.⁵

This general perspective is widely shared by writers for *Jacobin* and activists within the DSA. It combines the two primacy claims – structural and political – but adds a claim about the derivation of political primacy from structural primacy. In other words, for adherents to this perspective, class *ought* to be the basis of politics *because* it is the load-bearing element in the social structure. This is what sets them apart from the Left populists, the neo-Strasserites, and the centrist “popularists.”⁶ The intuition, therefore, is that organizing around racial, gendered, or other identities, and around injustices of status and standing, is a distraction from *what is really going on*, and, for that reason, is also a distraction from *what could actually work*.

The structural primacy of class can be fleshed out as the claim that the fundamental social processes that drive, undergird, and explain conflicts over status and standing and identity are the class processes

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3 On the distinction between political and structural primacy, see McCarthy and Desan 2022.

4 Chibber 2022; I have criticized Chibber’s argument in Roberts 2022.

5 Chibber 2016.

6 McCarthy and Desan call those for whom class is politically primary, even though it lacks any special structural status, “class constructivists” (McCarthy and Desan 2022, pp. 10–11). They point to Left populism as an example of this tendency, but I see it as encompassing a wider range of political tendencies.

of capitalism in its current neoliberal form. The political primacy of class can be fleshed out as the claims that naming and appealing to people's material class interests is both more motivating and more inclusive than naming and appealing to people's status, standing, and identity, which are particularistic and divisive, rather than universalistic and unifying. The position that links these two primacy theses by deriving political primacy from structural primacy I will call, following Michael McCarthy and Mathieu Hikaru Desan, *class abstractionism*.

I understand the appeal of class abstractionism. The individual intuitions out of which the position is constructed are themselves compelling. But the position as whole doesn't make much sense. When we get explicit about how and in what sense each of the elements is true, then it seems impossible to combine them in the way that class abstractionism does, and the whole thing seems to fall apart. I want to look at the two aspects of the position in turn, and to point out where its adherents trip themselves up. My basic argument is that the structural priority of class *cannot*, in capitalist societies, ground a normative preference for a strategy of interpellating political agents as workers, or for organizing around "bread-and-butter" issues rather than around issues of police violence or trans health care or sexual harassment. You cannot derive effective political messaging from the correct analysis of the class structure of capitalism, and there is no reason to think that appealing to universal ideals and material interests is the straight and narrow path to composing a working class political movement.

II. Structural Primacy

Class is structurally primary, for Marxists, because *production* is primary.⁷ Class relations organize production, and, since production is fundamental to the existence of human society, solving the class-relation problem is a limiting constraint on everything else that goes on in society. "The centrality ascribed to relations of production by Marx," as Søren Mau helpfully formulates it, "derives from the simple fact that relations of production are the social relations through which people gain access to the necessary conditions of their life."⁸ When these social relations of production are also relations of domination – when, that is, they organize the exclusion of some from direct access to the means of social reproduction, or set the terms of this access, such that some have unaccountable power – then they are class relations.

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7 Production is here understood in a very broad sense, and includes the production of new human beings.

8 Mau 2023, p. 112.

Class relations, so understood, are explanatory of other social phenomena because and to the extent that they place limits on what is possible within a given social formation. Production at a certain level – for a given population, at a certain level of social wealth, with a received stock of materials and means – binds us socially to a significant extent. Hence, production relations are sticky. We cannot produce food and technology for a world of 8 billion people, who are used to and reliant upon modern life, in just any old way. We are, in this sense, locked in – for now – to certain relations of production, and this means – for now – certain class relations.

Class, in this sense, names the relations of domination that are productively necessary for a given society. Obviously, this necessity is only ever relative and conditional. Social needs change, and so do production relations. Nonetheless, the wide variety of ways in which human societies have organized production, mediating their relations with the rest of nature, are not a menu of available options for any society to choose from at any time. The presently existing relations of production establish the carrying capacity of the territorial base of a society. Trying to transform these relations radically or suddenly is likely to result in mass starvation, mass migration, and/or conquest by ones neighbors.

The point of Marx's base-superstructure materialism is to underscore this fact, that class relations are themselves a "social technology" of production. To this claim it adds the further thesis that more *productive* class relations are more *powerful* class relations, which tend to win out in comparison with other, less productive class relations. The mechanism of this winning out can vary. It might be that more productive class relations outspread less productive, which would remain in place but only as an ever more miniscule fragment of production. Instead, they might developmentally outstrip them, making the less productive relations literally impossible by, say, replacing the infrastructure upon which they rely. The more productive relation might also lead to military overmatching, such that the less productive relations are scrapped at gunpoint, as it were.

However, there are a couple wrinkles.

First, a tendency is just a tendency, and will be more notable and stable at a large scale and over a long time than it is locally and at any given moment. Historical materialism is supposed to be explanatory and predictive, but it is not a species of determinism. The United States, with far-and-away the most powerful economy and military in the world, lost its war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Viet Cong, representing a population of peasants living at or barely above subsistence. By 2018, however, the economy of Vietnam could be touted as a "miracle" by the World Economic Forum. Privately-owned firms

account for 43% of GDP and employ 85% of the workforce.⁹ The long-term tendency of capitalist relations of production to win out could not determine the outcome of the war. The intransigence of the Vietnamese people could defeat the US on the battlefield, but holding the line against more powerful relations of production would have entailed levels of sacrifice that no people should be expected to bear.

Second, the more productive the economy, the greater the surplus and the greater the inequality in how this surplus is spread around, the greater the “slippage” between socially-necessary class relations at the level of the social totality and the relations of production that obtain locally in any given workplace or jurisdiction or line of production. That is, the more productively developed an economy, the less likely its “competitive edge” is to be critically present in any one site or line of production. A highly productive economy is also a highly *diversified* economy, and that means that the various workplaces in that economy are doing very different things in very different ways. In ancient Rome, the major industries of agriculture, mining, timber, and the military – the extractive industry *par excellence* in the ancient world – were run along similar lines, with similar forms of labor discipline. In the contemporary US, the major sectors of the economy exhibit dramatically different forms of organization and labor processes.

In this situation, *class* relations remain fundamental, but they are progressively distinct from – without being independent from – *work* relations. To put it in simple terms, in contemporary capitalism, *work relations* – relations of domination and exploitation at the site of production – *are labor-management relations, not proletarian-capital relations.*

The distinction between proletarian-capital relations and labor-management relations – derived from Marx’s distinction between abstract and concrete labor – highlights a constitutive obscurity in much of the contemporary writing about class politics. The injunction to focus on class and to build a working class politics is actually misaligned with the injunction to trace political developments back to the structure of capitalism. *Class* is not a concept operating at the same level of generality as *capitalism*. *Class* is not peculiar to capitalism, after all. Rather, it is a constitutive element of almost all human societies to date.

The corollary of tracing the fundamental dynamics of capitalism would be an emphasis not on class in general, or even on the working class, but on *the proletariat*. Naming the proletariat, however, would emphasize what so much of the new class discourse seems intent to obscure, that “the working class” as the makers of things is not equivalent to “the working class” as the class of wage-workers, and neither is equivalent to the proletariat, the class of people dependent upon wages for life, whether they are working or not.

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⁹ Vanham 2018; Eglinger 2021.

As soon as you approach *Jacobin*-style class abstractionism with the specificity of capitalist class relations in mind, it is obvious that there is a mismatch here. Class abstractionists cannot decide whether they are talking about the proletariat or the workers, capitalism or the workplace. They take the fundamental importance of class to imply the fundamental importance of work relations, but they simultaneously take the political dynamics of the workplace as a model for the political dynamics of capitalism. In trading off among analyses that pertain to different levels of social reality, they end up tying themselves in knots. Keeping these levels of analysis clear in your head is fundamental if you want to say something about the world we live in rather than the world you have constructed in your imagination.

Proletarian-capital relations obtain in an abstract but determining way at the level of society, which is mediated in its essential productive processes by the labor market. Labor is allocated and reallocated to different branches of production, to different localities, and to different work processes by the market. Whether or not labor is productive of capital depends upon market conditions on a global scale. Whether or not one is a proletarian hinges on one's relationship to the wage, not what one does all day. As Dylan Riley and Robert Brenner have recently put the point, "especially under capitalist conditions, there may be gaping differences in 'life chances', income and lifestyle within the working class [i.e., the proletariat]. Indeed, in the normal course of affairs, we would expect real class relations to be almost invisible as an everyday reality to most social actors, most of the time."¹⁰

Work relations, on the other hand, obtain in an empirically-perceptible but overdetermined way at the level of everyday life, which is mediated in its contingent productive processes by all sorts of things. You might work in a cubicle and have almost no interactions with one's fellow workers, or you might work in a raucous group, where gossip, chitchat, and singing are constant accompaniments. Your boss might be your cousin, who gave you the job because your sister asked, or you might not even recognize your boss if you saw them on the street. Your manager might have pictures of her kids up in her office, kids who attend the same school as your own, or your manager might live in a gated community across town and think of your neighborhood as a dangerous slum.

The labor market, like any market, brings to the fore fungibility and an indifference to particularity. Capital is impersonal and mobile. It can be invested here today and there tomorrow. But work remains something you do with your body, which can only be where you are, even when your work is talking to customers on the other side of the world or coding remotely from your own home. Hence, social proximity – connections and divisions of race, gender, neighborhood, religion, political affiliation

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¹⁰ Riley and Brenner 2022, p. 8.

– are inextricably interwoven into the experience of work, even though capital and the proletariat have no race, no gender, no religion.

Thus, the confusion of the class abstractionists is patent in the fact that they insist that the working class has “the potential power to ... overturn the system,” while also arguing that “The workplace is the primary, but certainly not exclusive, strategic site of class struggle, because it’s where working people have the most potential power.”¹¹ The potential power of workers in any workplace has nothing to do with the potential power of the proletariat to overturn the capitalist system. The former hinges on the possibility of extracting concessions from the employer by refusing to work. The latter could only be the possibility of taking over production and producing otherwise. It is absurd for Chibber to maintain that the proletariat has the “ability to crash the entire system, just by refusing to work.”¹² Organized refusal to work has only ever won concessions from or provoked confrontations with bosses and the state, and it will never be able to do more than that. It is impossible for a refusal to work to “crash the system” for the simple reason that workers have to eat in order to be in a position to make a revolution, and food will not produce itself. Marx wrote that, “Every child knows a nation which ceased to work, I will not say for a year, but even for a few weeks, would perish.”¹³ Marx had not met *Jacobin* writers, who apparently think that a nation which ceased to work could overthrow capitalism.

III. Political Primacy

This confusion of class relations and work relations, deadly to any attempt to theoretically understand capitalism and its dynamics, can easily turn reactionary when it seeks to guide political action. Nowhere is this more evident than in recent attacks on “culturalism” and on the supposed displacement of class struggle by culture wars and identity politics. Žižek, to take a notable instance, has been arguing recently that “Western political correctness (‘wokeness’) has displaced class struggle.”¹⁴ He is not alone. *Jacobin* ran the following articles in 2020-21: “The New Class War Isn’t a Culture War”; “We Need a Class War, Not a Culture War”; “We Don’t Need a Culture War. We Need a Class War.”; and “Labour Must Fight a Class War, Not a Culture War.”¹⁵

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11 Blanc and Gong 2018.

12 Chibber 2016.

13 Marx to Kugelmann, 11 July 1868; Marx and Engels 1988, p. 68.

14 Žižek 2022.

15 Bergfeld 2020; Burgis 2020; Guastella 2020; Savage and Trickett 2021.

The underlying notion that class struggle has been or can be displaced or replaced by culture wars is not so much mistaken as it is confused. It cannot be the case that “culture wars have displaced class struggle as the engine of politics,” because class struggle has only ever been – could only ever be – the engine of politics insofar as it takes the form of a culture war. A basic tenet of Marxism is that we must “distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production” and “the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.”¹⁶ It is puzzling, then, that those who wish to unhold the tradition of hard-headed Marxian class analysis are abandoning this distinction in favor of the self-defeating belief that ideological struggle – for this is what “culture war” amounts to in the older idiom – could displace class struggle, that the lived experience of class struggle could displace the class struggle of which it is the lived experience.

Here we must return to and analyze the other half of the class abstractionist thesis, the political primacy of class. The intuition behind the verbal opposition of class struggle and culture war is that naming and appealing to people’s material class interests is both more politically efficacious and more universalistic than naming and appealing to people’s status, standing, and identity.

Right off the bat we must recognize, however, that “naming and appealing to people’s material class interests” is ambiguous. It does not distinguish between the two strategies identified by Riley and Brenner as, first, encouraging workers to “pursue their interests as owners of the ‘special commodity,’ labour power,” and, second, encouraging workers to “link redistributive demands to a broader attempt to exert political control over the social surplus produced by workers and appropriated by capital.”¹⁷ Riley and Brenner want to reserve the name “working-class ‘class politics’” for the second strategy, but this seems like special pleading.¹⁸ Let us acknowledge that they are two versions of “working-class ‘class politics.’” The first tries to drive up the price of labor-power; the second tries to capture and redistribute the surplus product.

Note, also, that neither of these are *revolutionary* strategies. Both presume that capitalists retain control over production. The first strategy seeks to compel the capitalist to pay more up front in the labor market, to shift investment away from constant capital and towards variable capital. The second strategy seeks to tax production after the fact,

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¹⁶ Marx 1970, p. 21.

¹⁷ Riley and Brenner 2022, p. 10.

¹⁸ The actual distinction between the two strategies is the distinction Lenin identified one hundred twenty years ago between *economistic* and *political* social democrats.

seizing and redistributing the surplus product.¹⁹ Both are attempts to make things better for proletarians, not attempts by the proletariat to abolish itself as a class.

Regardless of which strategy one prefers – and most class abstractionists seem to want both, sometimes without realizing that they are distinct – there are more or less solidaristic, more or less universalistic, versions of the strategy. Union organizing seeks to drive up the price of labor-power, but so does lobbying for a professional certification requirement for hairstylists or for draconian border enforcement to keep out immigrants who would compete in the labor market. Medicare for All might seize and redistribute surplus product, but so might a highway expansion in a powerful congressperson’s district or hiring half a million new police officers. Taxing profits to fund public infrastructure is no more inherently oriented towards the proletariat as a whole than union organizing is automatically conducive to building one big union of all the workers.

Every form of “working-class ‘class politics’” begins somewhere specific, with the particular complaints and aspirations of a more or less clearly bounded set of working class people. Linking those proletarians, those complaints, and those aspirations to other proletarians, other complaints, and other aspirations is never simple. The fact that “The working class consists of everyone whose survival depends on wage labor, including people of all races, genders, sexual orientations, and immigration statuses,”²⁰ does not mean that the working class has a broadly unified set of interests, but precisely the opposite, that the working class is profoundly divided by the local concerns of its myriad fractions. Increasing the price of my labor-power may lower the price of yours. Taxing *these* profits to fund *those* public works may make *this* working class community better off and *that* working class community less secure.

This is where the conflation of class relations and work relations steps in to make everything easier for the class abstractionist. Whether it is electoralism or union organizing that is being pursued, work relations provide a convenient synecdoche for class relations. This results in claims like, “Wage exploitation means that the interests of the whole working class and the capitalist class are diametrically opposed.”²¹ The soothing fiction at work here is that the diversity of the proletariat is transcended by their opposition to capitalists just as the diversity of

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19 Note that while Riley and Brenner are clearly thinking of this control-and-redistribution as something carried out by the state, riot and looting is a variation on the same strategy (Clover 2016; Osterweil 2020).

20 Blanc and Gong 2018.

21 Blanc and Gong 2018.

employees in any firm might be overcome by an organized opposition to the exploitation of their one employer. This is not true, of course. The interests of fractions of the proletariat align with the interests of fractions of the capitalist class constantly, in part because the capitalist class does not have a *common* interest in exploiting labor-power. The defining characteristic of capitalist society is that the various capitals are related to one another by market competition, not by class collaboration. Capitalist employer A does not have an interest in capitalist employer B extracting more surplus labor from B's workforce. Capitalist employer B extracting more surplus labor may well be a threat to capitalist employer A. An individual firm is hierarchically arranged and organized for the pursuit of a particular interest. Capitalism, however, is not.

This confusion between the structure of the economy and the structure of the firm doesn't only lull the class abstractionist into a false sense of security. It also prepares the way for something more pernicious: the assumption that the interests of the proletariat can be identified by *generalizing* from the interests of some identified fraction of the proletariat. After all, if being exploited entails that "the interests of the whole working class" are coherent, but the whole proletariat cannot be observed all at once, then it is tempting to identify the interests of some specific group of proletarians – who can be observed – and treat them like a scale model of the whole class.

The results of such an operation can be seen in Matt Karp's response to Riley and Brenner. Karp draws a contrast between Hibbing, Minnesota, a mining town in the Iron Range, and North Oaks, a former gated community north of the Twin Cities. Hibbing was once a center of labor militancy and a stronghold of the Democratic Party, but broke for Trump in 2016 and 2020. North Oaks, long home to some of the wealthiest families in Minnesota, was a Republican fortress until 2016, when it voted for Clinton. What are we to make of the transformation of the Democratic Party from the party of Hibbing into the party of North Oaks?

Mincing no words, Karp argues that the Left has largely abandoned the interests of the people of Hibbing in favor of the interests of the people of North Oaks.

Left-wing attacks on supposed nostalgia for the 'historical working class', or celebrations of some 'new' or 'actual' working class—i.e., that portion which already votes against Republicans—offer little more than a chic articulation of the actually-existing politics of the Democratic National Committee. The parallel tracks of liberal and left-wing thought on this subject are not accidental, since the organized electoral left today draws breath exclusively in districts dominated by Democrats. Any way forward for the American left will require a cold reckoning with the forces that have landed so

many of its politicians, activists and intellectuals in opposition to the miners and retail workers of Hibbing, Minnesota—and in a de facto alliance with the current occupants of James J. Hill’s manor estate.²²

This polemic rests on the same fiction that Blanc and Gong articulated, that the interests of the whole working class are diametrically opposed to the interests of the whole capitalist class. After all, the politicians, activists, and intellectuals who find themselves “in opposition to” the miners and retail workers of Hibbing are, by the same criteria Karp is proposing, in alliance with the textile factory workers and gas station attendants of Minneapolis and Saint Paul. Why should the workers of the Fourth and Fifth Congressional Districts be less indicative than the workers of the Eighth District?²³ The only fair reading of the situation is that the working class is divided against itself, and that these mutually opposed fractions of the proletariat have allied themselves – politically and culturally – with different fractions of the capitalist class.²⁴

Karp is correct that “celebrations” of the urban fraction of the working class – the fraction “which already votes against Republicans” – are facile. They certainly do nothing to bridge the electoral divide between urban, service-sector workers and rural, “hard-hats-and-pickup-trucks” workers. At their worst, they replicate the slow-motion Stalinism of Obama-era liberalism, when people convinced themselves that autonomous demographic trends were busy electing a new people, ushering in a permanent Democratic majority of cosmopolitan and upwardly-mobile urbanites. In fact, the truth is nearly the opposite of this optimistic prophesy. Left-leaning parties in first-past-the-post electoral systems face an uphill battle precisely because their base constituencies are concentrated in urban areas. This is inefficient from the perspective of electoral politics, since Left-leaning parties often rack up massive wins in a few urban districts while losing a swath of suburban and rural districts by much smaller margins.²⁵

Nonetheless, we should not think that the Democrats’ loss of the miners and retail workers of Hibbing, Minnesota – granting for the moment that this loss is real – as *the* crisis that must be reckoned with if we are to find “any way forward for the American left.” The Democratic

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22 Karp 2023, p. 44.

23 It is also worth noting that Karp produces no evidence that “the miners and retail workers of Hibbing” actually broke for Trump. In 2016, Trump beat Clinton in Hibbing by seven votes; in 2020, turnout was up significantly, and Trump’s margin over Biden grew to about 170 votes out of 8600 cast. I do not know the demographic breakdown of these votes, but Karp presents no evidence that the working class of Hibbing lining up solidly behind Trump as opposed to being deeply divided.

24 As well as, it should be noted, different fractions of the landowning class; see Manning 2022.

25 Rodden 2019.

coalition is running on the fumes of organizational work and institution-building that took place decades ago. In 2016, Democratic vote share was strongly correlated with where manufacturing was strong in 1920, while being negatively correlated with where manufacturing was happening in 2010.²⁶ Many workers are doing the equivalent of voting for Eisenhower ‘cause Lincoln won the war, but no memory lasts forever. It is the sclerosis and destitution of the old institutions, and the failure to build new organizations in the new economic landscape of service-sector dominance that explains the inability to build a stable electoral coalition of the Left, not the other way around.

The problem with treating any fraction of the proletariat as the image of the working class as a whole is that it oversimplifies the problem of passing from class analysis to class politics. By running together features of the structural class relations basic to capitalism (between capitalist and proletarian) and features of one or another work relation (between the miners of Hibbing and the Oliver Mining Company), class abstractionism makes the political task of socialism seem much easier than it actually is. “Class politics” takes on the palpable immediacy of work relations while retaining the universal scope of class relations. Class politics, like workplace organizing, uses material interests to motivate cooperation, pointing to the concrete gains that can be won from putting our heads together and acting collectively. At the same time, however, class politics is supposed to appeal to a national and even an international constituency, something that workplace organizing can never do.

IV. Conclusion

There’s the old saying in labor circles that “the boss is the best organizer.” Class abstractionism wants this to be true, not only at the level of the shop floor, but at the level of society at large. There have been points in time when that actually seemed like a plausible story. In situations of rapid industrialization, it was reasonable to think that capital organized the proletariat at a national or even international scale. The emptying out of the countryside, the massive amalgamation of the industrial working class in factory, mine, city, and district – all of this encouraged Marxists and other socialists to think that capital was itself forging the proletariat into a political subject with common experiences, common spaces, common mores and traditions, and common aspirations.

That belief is not reasonable, however, outside the context of mass industrialization that suggested it in the first place.²⁷ In a de-

.....
26 Rodden 2019.

27 Benanav 2020; Smith 2020.

industrializing society, capital does not concentrate proletarians into tightly-packed neighborhoods where work, school, friendship, worship, play, and political organizing all embrace and interlink the same families, forming them into a compact community of interests, desires, and outlooks. Indeed, the belief was never as correct as it was reasonable – even highly concentrated working class districts with high levels of unionization were stratified and divided – but also held together – by racial, ethnic, and gendered social geographies.²⁸

Class and culture can and must be analytically distinguished, but this does not mean they can be separated in life. Just as a cone can be exhaustively decomposed into either circles or triangles, so any situation – be it a strike or a riot – can be analyzed in terms of class power or in terms of cultural meaning. However, there is this difference: in societies dominated by the capitalist mode of production, class is a market-mediated social fact which takes place, as it were, behind our backs, while cultural identities and meanings are before our eyes. Stuart Hall's famous line about race being "the modality in which class is 'lived'"²⁹ needs to be given its true generality: *culture* is the modality in which class is lived, and that means that even the experience of class-identification and class-belonging is a cultural experience.

If class has political priority, therefore, this can never be *the same class* that has explanatory priority. Under capitalism, the class that has explanatory priority is, to seize an old phrase, the class in itself. The only class that could have political priority, however, is the class for itself. But the class for itself is a cultural, not an economic category. The class that produces all value is not and can never be a political agent. To deny this is to make the fundamental error of thinking that the capitalist mode of production is just a reiteration of every previous mode of production, just one group of people dominating and exploiting another group of people out in the open, through superiority of arms and organized violence.

Any "working-class 'class politics'" in a capitalist world, in order to be at all liberatory, will have to be an abstract, theoretical politics. If we want to construct an alternative to the capital-proletarian class relation on a global scale, we are choosing to embark on the the most difficult political undertaking imaginable. In the face of that challenge, we will always face the temptation of believing that some local struggle is a monad of this abstract, global struggle, containing all of its determinations in an condensed and easily-graspable form. We must resist this temptation.

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28 Winant 2021.

29 Hall 1980, p. 341.

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**The Over-Soul
of Class
Consciousness:
Lydia Maria Child
and Friedrich Engels**

Ted Stolze

Abstract: Friedrich Engels’s first book *The Condition of the Working Class in England* [1845] was preceded by a strikingly similar one: Lydia Maria Child’s *Letters from New-York* [1843]. Both Child and Engels beckoned their readers to empathize with the plight of the victims of capitalist urbanization. Both insisted on the possibility of social progress through collective action. Both condemned the environmental degradation to which workers and the poor were subjected. Perhaps Engels was more insistent than Child that middle-class interests were “diametrically opposed” to those of the working class, yet Child grounded finite forms of struggle in an immeasurable ontological dimension that is implicit in Engels’s book but requires proper (re) formulation. In all, reading Child and Engels together provides a fruitful encounter between Marxism and New England Transcendentalism.

Keywords: Class Consciousness, Class Struggle, Marxist Philosophy and Infinity, New England Transcendentalism, Lydia Maria Child, Friedrich Engels

In memory of David Herreshoff and Staughton Lynd

Child in New York City

In 1841 Lydia Maria Child, a popular New England writer, especially of children’s literature, but also a committed abolitionist and newly appointed editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, moved to New York City to continue the work of that newspaper.¹ Her book *Letters from New-York*, published two years later, consists of reworked versions of forty of her columns published in that newspaper.² Child’s definitive biographer sets the context for the letters and their compilation:

Child arrived in New York – the nation’s largest metropolis – just as massive immigration and industrialization were transforming the urban landscape, producing extremes of luxury and misery on a scale never seen before in America’s white population. Unlike her

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1 Thanks to Will Mittendorf and Riese Chacon for their thoughtful remarks on an earlier version of this article. Many thanks as well to Sandy Petrulionis, who directed a remarkable NEH Summer Institute on “Transcendentalism and Social Reform: Activism and Community Engagement in the Age of Thoreau,” which gave me the rare opportunity to study in Concord, Massachusetts with leading scholars, engage with reform-minded colleagues, and undertake much of the research that has culminated in this article. What is more, at that Institute the session, led by Lance Newman, on the life and legacy of Lydia Maria Child triggered a spontaneous association for me between her *Letters from New-York* and Engels’s *Condition of the Working Class in England* – an association for which I have tried to provide adequate justification.

2 Child 1998 is a modern critical edition.

Transcendentalist contemporaries, Child did not shrink from the sordid scenes that confronted her in the streets of a noisy, crowded city, but set about chronicling the epic of capitalist development and proletarian destitution.³

Let us read closely Child's first letter, dated August 19, 1841, which introduces her readers to the city in its multi-dimensionality, through a guided tour or "ramble" that pulses with a lively dialectic of contrasts, high and low, poverty and wealth. Child opens her letter with an apocalyptic biblical metaphor: New York City, she proposes, is a "great Babylon."

You ask what is now my opinion of this great Babylon; and playfully remind me of former philippics, and a long string of vituperative alliterations, such as magnificence and mud, finery and filth, diamonds and dirt, bullion and brass-tape, &c. &c. Nor do you forget my first impression of the city, when we arrived at dawn, amid fog and drizzling rain, the expiring lamps adding their smoke to the impure air, and close beside us a boat called the "Fairy Queen," laden with dead hogs.

Well, Babylon remains the same as then. The din of crowded life, and the eager chase for gain, still run through its streets, like the perpetual murmur of a hive. Wealth dozes on French couches, thrice piled, and canopied with damask, while Poverty camps on the dirty pavement, or sleeps off its wretchedness in the watch-house. There, amid the splendour of Broadway, sits the blind negro beggar, with horny hand and tattered garments, while opposite to him stands the stately mansion of the slave trader, still plying his bloody trade, and laughing to scorn the cobweb laws, through which the strong can break so easily.⁴

But how does Babylon – whether ancient or contemporary – rule? Child maintains that Babylon's order is based on the relentless and remorseless accumulation of wealth:

In Wall-street, and elsewhere, Mammon, as usual, coolly calculates his chance of extracting a penny from war, pestilence, and famine; and Commerce, with her loaded drays, and jaded skeletons of horses, is busy as ever "fulfilling the World's contract with the Devil."⁵

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3 Karcher 1994, p. 302.

4 Child 1998, p. 9.

5 Child 1998, p. 9-10.

In three striking paragraphs, to which we shall return for careful analysis, Child “cuts the lines deep” as she plunges below the city’s surface variation to explore its ontological depths of infinite, irrepressible power⁶:

There was a time when all these things would have passed by me, like the flitting figures of the magic lantern, or the changing scenery of a theatre, sufficient for the amusement of an hour. But now, I have lost the power of looking merely on the surface. Everything seems to me to come from the Infinite, to be filled with the Infinite, to be tending towards the Infinite. Do I see crowds of men hastening to extinguish a fire? I see not merely uncouth garbs, and fantastic, flickering lights, of lurid hue, like a trampling troop of gnomes, – but straightway my mind is filled with thoughts about mutual helpfulness, human sympathy, the common bond of brotherhood, and the mysteriously deep foundations on which society rests; or rather, on which it now reels and totters,

But I am cutting the lines deep, when I meant only to give you an airy, unfinished sketch. I will answer your question, by saying that, though New-York remains the same, I like it better. This is partly because I am like the Lady’s Delight, ever prone to take root, and look up with a smile, in whatever soil you place it; and partly because bloated disease, and black gutters, and pigs uglier than their ugly kind, no longer constitute the foreground in my picture of New York. I have become more familiar with the pretty parks, dotted about here and there; with the shaded alcoves of the various public gardens; with blooming nooks, and “sunny spots of greenery.” I am fast inclining to the belief, that the Battery rivals our beautiful Boston Common. The fine old trees are indeed wanting; but the newly-planted groves offer the light, flexile gracefulness of youth, to compete with their matured majesty of age. In extent, and variety of surface, this noble promenade is greatly inferior to ours; but there is

“The sea, the sea, the open sea;
The fresh, the bright, the ever free!”

Most fitting symbol of the Infinite, this trackless pathway of a world! heaving and stretching to meet the sky it never reaches – like the eager, unsatisfied aspirations of the human soul. The

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6 Lance Newman observes because Child usually makes her arguments by “indirect means,” she typically “does not record the thoughts that come to her when she looks below the surface; instead, she renders the surfaces and allows her readers to look into the Infinite for themselves” (Newman 2019, p. 184n. 77).

most beautiful landscape is imperfect without this feature. In the eloquent language of Lamartine, “The sea is to the scenes of nature what the eye is to a fine countenance; it illuminates them, it imparts to them that radiant physiognomy, which makes them live, speak, enchant, and fascinate the attention of those who contemplate them.”⁷

Child recognizes that her appreciation of the Battery area of New York City to the Boston Common may strike a New England audience as “heretical.” So be it. As Rodman Gilder once put it in the subtitle to his gripping historical account of the Battery: this was “the story of the adventurers, artists, statesmen, grafters, songsters, mariners, pirates, guzzlers, Indians, thieves, stuffed-shirts, turn-coats, millionaires, inventors, poets, heroes, soldiers, harlots, bootlicks, nobles, nonentities, burghers, martyrs, and murderers who played their parts ...” – in other words, the New York multitude in its kaleidoscopic “glory.”⁸

If you deem me heretical in preferring the Battery to the Common, consecrated by so many pleasant associations of my youth, I know you will forgive me, if you will go there in the silence of midnight, to meet the breeze on your cheek, like the kiss of a friend; to hear the continual plashing of the sea, like the cool sound of oriental fountains; to see the moon look lovingly on the sea-nymphs, and throw down wealth of jewels on their shining hair; to look on the ships in their dim and distant beauty, each containing within itself a little world of human thought, and human passion. Or go, when “night, with her thousand eyes, looks down into the heart, making it also great” – when she floats above us, dark and solemn, and scarcely sees her image in the black mirror of the ocean. ...

But if you would see the Battery in *all* its glory, look at it when, through the misty mantle of retreating dawn, is seen the golden light of the rising sun! Look at the horizon, where earth, sea, and sky, kiss each other, in robes of reflected glory! The ships stretch their sails to the coming breeze, and glide majestically along – fit and graceful emblems of the Past; steered by Necessity; the Will constrained by outward Force.⁹

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7 Child 1998, p. 10. Lydia Moland (2021) traces Child’s use of the term “Infinite” back to German idealism, which I don’t dispute, but I suggest below that there are more proximate sources in the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

8 Gilder 1936.

9 Child 1998, pp. 10-11.

Humanity has undergone a transition from its youth into maturity, from poetry and song to the duties of social transformation. But, Child insists, the “poetry and song” of troubadours continues to inspire.

During your ramble, you may meet wandering musicians. Perhaps a poor Tyrolese with his street-organ, or a Scotch lad, with shrill bag-pipe, decorated with tartan ribbons. Let them who will, despise their humble calling. Small skill, indeed, is needed to grind forth that machinery of sounds; but my heart salutes them with its benison, in common with all things that cheer this weary world. I have little sympathy with the severe morality that drove these tuneful idlers from the streets of Boston. They are to the drudging city, what Spring birds are to the country. The world has passed from its youthful, Troubadour Age, into the thinking, toiling Age of Reform. This we may not regret, because it needs must be. But welcome, most welcome, all that brings back reminiscences of its childhood, in the cheering voice of poetry and song!¹⁰

Child concludes her letter with a stirring appeal to what is immortal: the ideal of beauty.

Therefore blame me not, if I turn wearily aside from the dusty road of reforming duty, to gather flowers in sheltered nooks, or play with gems in hidden grottoes. The Practical has striven hard to suffocate the Ideal within me; but it is immortal, and cannot die. It needs but a glance of Beauty from earth or sky, and it starts into blooming life, like the aloe touched by fairy wand.¹¹

Let us turn now to consider how Child may have hoped that her readership would respond to her lyrical invocation of urban life.

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10 Child 1998, p. 11.

11 Child 1998, p. 12. When the leading Transcendentalist journal *The Dial* was under the editorship of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Child published a short essay (“What is Beauty?”) in which she defended a kind of dialectical aesthetics (reprinted in Appendix 2 below). As opposed to the concrete *feeling* of what is beautiful, she contended, the properly abstract *Idea* of Beauty turns out to be the “union” and “perfect proportion” of “two Great Creative Principles”: Love and Wisdom (Child 1843, p. 490) – the “undulating line” of Beauty that dialectically resolves the elements of the “circle” and the “straight line” (491). It would be worth appreciating *Letters from New-York* as an application of Child’s aesthetic theory, through which she discerns the persistence of beauty in the midst of squalor and envisions radical social transformation. More generally, as Clemens Spahr (2011) has argued, Transcendentalists defended a theory of “radical beauty” that conveyed their utopian desire to transform both individuals and social conditions.

Sympathy and Affect

Jonathan Steele has stressed Child's intended "sentimental" effect.¹² Although her friend and mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson "had taught a powerful discourse of personal transformation and human dignity, ... what his writing lacked was a coherent analysis of the structures shaping public behavior and values." As a result, Child "combined the transcendentalist commitment to the self-reliant self with a more general awareness of how public feelings shape political action." In other words, she came to realize that "social change has an affective, as well as an intellectual, component. People's hearts, as well as their minds, needed to be changed; for, otherwise, they would remain frozen in habituated patterns of perception and behavior. This made it necessary to generate patterns of self-awareness that would enable the public to see and feel themselves in a different light." In short, "existing discourses of sentimentalist reform, focused on political sympathy, provided a powerful tool for measuring collective emotional responses. But often, such discourses tended to mystify the precise dynamics of social change."¹³

In order to emphasize Child's distinctive method in *Letters from New-York*, Steele contrasts

the concept of "affect" to personalized conceptions of "sympathy" or "sentiment." This critical move is necessary because many readers continue to characterize sentiment and sympathy as individualized responses, a projection of feeling onto a suffering other, without attending to the linkage between such personal response and more general climates of thought and feeling.¹⁴

Moreover, he continues,

the concept of "affect" is the key to understanding the way that both Child and Fuller link transcendentalist insight to such sentimentalist response. "Affect" is a useful category, because it generalizes and desubjectifies the personalized concept of "sentiment."¹⁵

Steele specifically contends that Child reworked Emerson's concept of the "Over-soul," understood as a "fount of divine energy." She did so

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12 Steele 2014.

13 Steele 2014, pp. 207-208.

14 Steele 2014, p. 209.

15 Steele 2014, p. 209.

by using concepts of affect and shared feeling to amplify individual moments of sentiment, making them more audible. In the process, she established a collective emotional field that was analogous to the collective spiritual field ... that Emerson used to gather together individual moments of illumination. This rhetorical move created the ideal literary medium for measuring the distance between images of perfected being and the unjust social and political conditions that limited the self's development. The move toward social justice, whether the abolition of slavery or the amelioration of urban poverty, depended on the dual capacity to imagine more equitable conditions and to mobilize a collective will (energized through affect) that might change the world.¹⁶

Steele concludes his discussion of Child by arguing that for the latter “the emotional rhythm of everyday life”

is crucial, for the public mood touches every part of our being. It can shape structures of care or lead us into moments of carelessness and apathy that grow out of the belief that one's private feelings do not relate to the larger world. ... Child, like other antislavery advocates, was engaged in a ... battle [whose] “front-line” was the city – the place where public moods shape people's willingness to resist social injustice or reinforce their sense that feelings are a private resource that can be hoarded just like money. From this perspective, the target of *Letters from New-York* is the possessive individualism that believes it can own the self or slaves – pieces of disposable property enclosed within impermeable boundaries. But when we view Child's text through the lens of affect, we understand that such enclosure mystifies the relational and emotional ties that make a person part of a community. They generate a fixation on visible surfaces and a blindness to the invisible relays of affect and ideology that shape human culture and everyday experience.¹⁷

Lastly, Steele offers an intriguing comparison between Child and the Marxist forms of ideology critique developed by Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, both of whom sought to open “a cut or rift in the present” and thereby to produce an “alienation effect” that “destabilizes the ‘dream-state’ of the contemporary world.”¹⁸

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¹⁶ Steele 2014, pp. 210-11.

¹⁷ Steele 2014, p. 217.

¹⁸ Steele 2014, p. 215. Interestingly, although he does not mention Child, Clemens Spahr (2011) draws a comparison between the Transcendentalists and Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch. In particular,

Yet Steele's compelling analysis contains a theoretical blind spot: it fails to acknowledge that Child was trying to explain how the urban proletariat can become aware of its class interests and act from below through self-emancipation without waiting for what Richard Rorty famously called a "progress of the sentiments" from above by well-meaning liberals.¹⁹ As a result, Steele fails to notice Child's emphatic use of the term "the Infinite," which plunges us below the surface of political affects to the ontological depth of class consciousness and the prospect for radical social transformation. Or to the level of what Samuel Taylor Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria*, his literary autobiography, had called a power that is "indestructible" and therefore inexhaustibly re-ebullient."²⁰

Indeed, Coleridge accentuates this foundational sense of infinity that is not what lies beyond the constituted limit of finitude but instead wells up as its constitutive force. Toward the end of the thirteenth chapter of *Biographia Literaria* we encounter a twofold distinction:

The IMAGINATION ... I consider either as primary or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or, where his process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify, It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.²¹

Spahr devotes a marvelous chapter to Orestes Brownson and the latter's commitment to "transcendentalist class struggle" (pp. 133-54) – a concept that I readily borrow.

19 For a defense of self-emancipation against Rorty's paternalism, see Stolze 2020, pp. 263-92. Another possible line of criticism concerns Child's presumed implication within an ideological practice through which racialized images of the "grotesque" were constructed as the basis for arousing readers' moral sympathy (Foster 2010). No doubt this is an important challenge to Child that emphasizes the limits of "white abolitionism." Yet, I would add, political affects are no less contradictory than are political concepts, positions, or projects – these always and only exist as the provisional outcomes of ongoing ideological struggle. Indeed, a similar illustration may be found in chapter four of *Condition of the Working Class in England* in which Engels discusses "Irish Immigration" but occasionally lapses into crude stereotypes. Engels rightly condemns Robert Carlyle for an "exaggerated and one-sided condemnation of the Irish national character" (Engels 1987, p. 102), but how else could one fairly characterize his own demeaning caricature: "The Irishman loves his pig as the Arab his horse, with the difference that he sells it when it is fat enough to kill. Otherwise, he eats and sleeps with it, his children play with it, ride upon it, roll in the dirt with it, as anyone may see a thousand times repeated in all the great towns of England" (p. 103).

20 Coleridge 1834, p. 169.

21 Coleridge 1834, p. 172. Emerson had a copy of this U.S. edition in his personal library; see Harding 1967, p. 64.

As Coleridge's biographer Richard Holmes has put it, Coleridge's conception of the imagination named "an active process, like an electrical current pulsing between objective and subjective polarities. The mind does not stand passively outside its experience registering and recording, but enters dynamically into what it sees, read or hears." Indeed, the imagination "proclaims the childlike part of the creative sensibility, ever fresh and spontaneous, which both the scientist and the poet must retain. It enacts the emotional energy – the passion of Hope – which accompanies the imaginative impulse."²² If, as Holmes writes elsewhere, all this all draws on the common intellectual currency of European discussion at the turn of the century, and the notion of some form of active-passive dialectic or polarity in the human mind, it also does something that no previous writer had achieved."²³

Interestingly, Emerson annotated his personal copy of *Biographia Literaria* with a list of page references to key terms. In particular, he indicated p. 172,²⁴ which is the page in which Coleridge begins to distinguish between "imagination" proper and mere "fancy," which, by contrast, he proposes

has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definitives. The Fancy is, indeed, no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space, and blended with, and modified by, that empirical phenomenon of the will which we express by the word CHOICE. But, equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.²⁵

In other words, Coleridge offers a brief transcendentalist critique of David Hume's reduction of infinite imagination to finite fancy, which as a "mode of memory" has no self-generating power but merely relies on the passive association of ideas that have arisen from sense impressions but come to fade in their vivacity.²⁶ For Coleridge, Holmes observes, "the passive mind-set of Associationism ... is connected with submission, addiction and death, while 'Imagination,' the active and unifying power, is connected with joy and freedom."²⁷

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22 Holmes 2017, pp. 298-99.

23 Holmes 1999, p. 411.

24 A photograph of Emerson's list appears in Harvey 2013, p. x.

25 Coleridge 1834, pp. 172-73.

26 See especially Hume 2000 on impressions, ideas, and fancy (which Hume treats as synonymous with imagination). For commentary, see Costelloe 2019.

27 Holmes 1999, p. 412.

In *Nature*,²⁸ Emerson's first book, published in 1836, we find ample evidence of Coleridge's influence.²⁹ For example, in the section concerning "Spirit," Emerson notes that

all the uses of nature admit of being summed in one, which yields the activity of man an infinite scope. Through all its kingdoms, to the suburbs and outskirts of things, it is faithful to the cause whence it had its origin. It always speaks of Spirit. It suggests the absolute. It is a perpetual effect. It is a great shadow pointing always to the sun behind us.³⁰

Five years later, in his essay "The Over-Soul,"³¹ Emerson reiterates this theme of ultimate reality and argues that

we live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one.³²

Emerson further distinguishes between appearance and reality, ontological surface and depth, unity underlying diversity:

From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things, and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all. A man is the façade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide. What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, does not, as we know him, represent himself, but misrepresents himself. Him we do not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his action, would make our knees bend. When it breathes through his intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through his affection, it is love. And the blindness of the intellect begins, when it would be something of itself. The weakness of the will begins, when the individual would be something of himself. All

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28 Emerson 1983, pp. 5-49.

29 For Coleridge's considerable influence on Emerson, see Harvey 2013.

30 Emerson 1983, p. 40.

31 Emerson 1983, pp. 383-400.

32 Emerson 1983, p. 386.

reform aims, in some one particular, to let the soul have its way through us; in other words, to engage us to obey.³³

In order to appreciate Child’s debt to Emerson, it is finally worth noting the latter’s insistence on temporality that underlies human experience:

We are often made to feel that there is another youth and age than that which is measured from the year of our natural birth. Some thoughts always find us young, and keep us so. Such a thought is the love of the universal and eternal beauty. Every man parts from that contemplation with the feeling that it rather belongs to ages than to mortal life. The least activity of the intellectual powers redeems us in a degree from the conditions of time.³⁴

Child’s appeal to the power of the Infinite – which identifies what Coleridge calls the “indestructible” power of the imagination and Emerson the “perpetual effect” of nature – does not reduce the individual to the collective but envisions a common source for both.³⁵ Moreover, Child redirects Emerson’s dialectical method away from a phenomenology of natural landscapes.³⁶ By contrast, in her “vivid book of popular transcendentalism,”³⁷ she deploys a phenomenology of urban landscapes and the interplay of the alienated built environment with more-than-human forces that persist and periodically reassert themselves: not only, most dramatically, the sea, but even “flowers in sheltered nooks and gems in hidden grottoes.”³⁸ Child’s rambles through

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33 Emerson 1983, p. 387.

34 Emerson 1983, p. 388.

35 It is worth dwelling on this matter. In Letter 3, dated September 3, 1841, Child writes: “What a strange thing is the mind! How marvellously is the infinite embodied in the smallest fragment of the finite!” (Child 1998, p. 16). Yet in Letter 10, dated October 21, 1841, she cautions against the view that each of us is but a portion “of a Great Mundane Soul, to which we ultimately return, to be swallowed up in its infinity.” Indeed, she rejects this idea as having a “bewildering and oppressive power” precisely over a mind like hers, which is already prone to “eager questioning of the infinite” (Child 1998, p. 44). Indeed, in Letter 38, dated March 17, 1843, Child insists that “Nature made us *individuals*, as she did the flowers and the pebbles; but we are afraid to be peculiar, and so our society resembles a bag of marbles, or a string of mould candles. Why should we all dress after the same fashion? The frost never paints my windows twice alike” (Child 1998, p. 172).

36 The term “landscape” recurs throughout *Nature* (see Emerson 1983, pp. 9-11, 14-15, 18, 34, 42-43). For her part, Child notes that “I always see much within a landscape – ‘a light and a revealing,’ every where” (Child 1998, p. 16). Moreover, the term “landscape” plays a normative role for Child: as she observes, those who rely on “public opinion for their moral fixed point of view” easily fall into confusion, for public opinion “moves according to the provender before it, and they who trust to it have but a whirling and distorted landscape” (Child 1998, p. 192).

37 Richardson 1995, p. 393. Richardson also notes that Emerson read and admired Child’s book.

38 Child 1998, p. 12. On Emerson’s dialectical method, which was indebted to Coleridge, see Paul 1952, pp. 112-19 and Harvey 2013, pp. 40-53. In reference specifically to the “mounting dialectic” from

the broad streets and back alleys of New York City renew the dialectic of reversal that Emerson had advocated regarding his own walks through the woods and fields of Concord, Massachusetts: “Turn the eyes upside down, by looking at the landscape through your legs, and how agreeable is the picture, though you have seen it any time these twenty years!”³⁹

Engels in England

In June 1845 a young Engels published *Die Lage der arbeiten Klasse in England* – initially for a German audience – his strategic “mapping”⁴⁰ of the English working class that was the fruit of his two years spent at his father’s textile factory in Manchester and getting to know at first hand not just the plight of industrial workers but also their struggles.⁴¹ As Terrell Carver reminds us, this was a work “written before he began to work intensively with Marx, and indeed the young author may have delayed moving abroad to join his communist contacts until the book was completed.”⁴² Indeed, Engels’s book should be studied for its own distinctive contribution to what was ultimately to become “Marxism.”⁴³

From the start, in this exemplary case of applied philosophy and engaged journalism, Engels declares: “To you I dedicate a work in which I have tried to lay before my German countrymen a faithful picture of your condition, of your sufferings and struggles, of your hopes and prospects.”⁴⁴ It is worth noting that the first mention of Engels’s book in an American periodical was likely an article published in the August 5, 1845 issue of the *New-York Daily Tribune* – a translation by Child’s friend Margaret Fuller of an essay written by Heinrich Börnstein, who was “a former comrade” of Marx and Engels, and provided a “cogent summary of the positions of Europe’s various factions of ‘humanists,’ ‘socialists,’ and ‘communists.’”⁴⁵

the concrete to the abstract that provides the “architectonics” for *Nature*, see Francis 1967; and Gilmore 1985, pp. 18-34.

39 Emerson 1983, p. 34.

40 See Blackledge 2019, pp. 39-48.

41 Engels 1987. On the historical and biographical context for Engels’s relocation to England, see Marcus 2017.

42 Carver 2021, p. 147.

43 Whether Engels contributed as a co-equal to Marx or – especially after Marx’s death – turned an open project into a more or less closed “worldview” is not my concern here. But see Carver 2020 for a good sense of why especially the early Engels deserves to be studied apart not only from the early Marx but also from later developments in both individuals’ theoretical and political evolution.

44 Engels 1987, p. 27.

45 Capper 2007, p. 262. Fuller translated the title of Engels’s book as *On the Situation of the Laboring Class in England* (Börnstein 1845).

After considering the history of the English proletariat and its contemporary working conditions, Engels offers a vivid account of daily life in such major cities as Manchester and London. As he insists from the start,

the condition of the working-class is the real basis and point of departure of all social movements of the present because it is the highest and most unconcealed pinnacle of the social misery existing in our day. ... A knowledge of proletarian conditions is absolutely necessary to be able to provide solid ground for socialist theories, on the one hand, and for judgments about their right to exist, on the other; and to put an end to all sentimental dreams and fancies pro and con. But proletarian conditions exist in their classical form, in their perfection, only in the British Empire, particularly in England proper. Besides, only in England has the necessary material been so completely collected and put on record by official enquiries as is essential for any in the least exhaustive presentation of the subject.⁴⁶

Engels soon poses a decisive political question that animates the rest of the book:

The condition of the working-class is the condition of the vast majority of the English people. The question: What is to become of those destitute millions, who consume today what they earned yesterday; who have created the greatness of England by their inventions and their toil; who become with every passing day more conscious of their might, and demand, with daily increasing urgency, their share of the advantages of society?⁴⁷

An especially compelling part of the book – and at times reminiscent of Child’s letters – is Engels’s “roaming” account of daily life in such “Great Towns” as Manchester and London.

A town, such as London, where a man may wander for hours together without reaching the beginning of the end, without meeting the slightest hint which could lead to the inference that there is open country within reach, is a strange thing. ... After roaming the streets of the capital a day or two, making headway with difficulty through the human turmoil and the endless lines of vehicles, after visiting the slums of the metropolis, one realises for

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46 Engels 1987, p. 12.

47 Engels 1987, p. 30.

the first time that these Londoners have been forced to sacrifice the best qualities of their human nature, to bring to pass all the marvels of civilisation which crowd their city; that a hundred powers which slumbered within them have remained inactive, have been suppressed in order that a few might be developed more fully and multiply through union with those of others. The very turmoil of the streets has something repulsive, something against which human nature rebels. The hundreds of thousands of all classes and ranks crowding past each other, are they not all human beings with the same qualities and powers, and with the same interest in being happy? And have they not, in the end, to seek happiness in the same way, by the same means? And still they crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common, nothing to do with one another, and their only agreement is the tacit one, that each keep to his own side of the pavement, so as not to delay the opposing streams of the crowd, while it occurs to no man to honour another with so much as a glance. The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest, becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space. And, however much one may be aware that this isolation of the individual, this narrow self-seeking, is the fundamental principle of our society everywhere, it is nowhere so shamelessly barefaced, so self-conscious as just here in the crowding of the great city. The dissolution of mankind into monads, of which each one has a separate principle, the world of atoms, is here carried out to its utmost extreme.⁴⁸

Engels, of course, considers the English working class not just in its objective formation but also in the growing subjective desire by a growing number of workers for radical social transformation. Indeed, he discerns

the deep wrath of the whole working-class, from Glasgow to London, against the rich, by whom they are systematically plundered and mercilessly left to their fate, a wrath which before too long a time goes by, a time almost within the power of man to predict, must break out into a revolution in comparison with which the French Revolution, and the year 1794, will prove to have been child's play.⁴⁹

.....
48 Engels 1987, p. 69.

49 Engels 1987, p. 31.

Engels examines thoroughly in his book what he calls the “demoralization” [*Demoralisation*]⁵⁰ of the working class.⁵¹ The poor, he argues, are caught up in a form of “social warfare” [*der soziale Krieg*] waged against them:

Since capital, the direct or indirect control of the means of subsistence and production, is the weapon with which this social warfare is carried on, it is clear that all the disadvantages of such a state must fall upon the poor. For him no man has the slightest concern. Cast into the whirlpool, he must struggle through as well as he can.⁵²

As a result,

the workers [are] cast out and ignored by the class in power, morally as well as physically and mentally. The only provision made for them is the law, which fastens upon them when they become obnoxious to the bourgeoisie. Like the dullest of the brutes, they are treated to but one form of education, the whip, in the shape of force, not convincing but intimidating. There is, therefore, no cause for surprise if the workers, treated as brutes, actually become such; or if they can maintain their consciousness of manhood only by cherishing the most glowing hatred, the most unbroken inward rebellion against the bourgeoisie in power. They are men so long only as they burn with wrath against the reigning class. They become brutes the moment they bend in patience under the yoke, and merely strive to make life endurable while abandoning the effort to break the yoke.⁵³

Not surprisingly, such proletarian misery occurs in such a way that the ruling class can choose to ignore, since

the members of this money aristocracy can take the shortest road through the middle of all the labouring districts to their places of

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50 Engels 1987, pp. 20, 40-41, 71, 127, 129-30, 138, 140, 142, 149, 153, 161, 186, 208, 219, 244, 292. Indeed, Engels characterizes even the English bourgeoisie: “I have never seen a class so deeply demoralized, so incurably debased by selfishness, so corroded within, so incapable of progress, as the English bourgeoisie” (p. 281).

51 I disagree with Blackledge (2019, pp. 40, 43, 45, 48) that Engels regularly falls into mere “moralizing” or “moralism.” On the contrary, moralism proper would replace the need for social analysis and political strategy by substituting more or less empty platitudes about how awful the world is. This is hardly Engels’s *critical normative* approach in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.

52 Engels 1987, pp. 37-38.

53 Engels 1987, p. 125.

business without ever seeing that they are in the midst of the grimy misery that lurks to the right and the left. For the thoroughfares leading from the Exchange in all directions out of the city are lined, on both sides, with an almost unbroken series of shops, and are so kept in the hands of the middle and lower bourgeoisie, which, out of self-interest, cares for a decent and cleanly external appearance and can care for it. True, these shops bear some relation to the districts which lie behind them, and are more elegant in the commercial and residential quarters than when they hide grimy working-men's dwellings; but they suffice to conceal from the eyes of the wealthy men and women of strong stomachs and weak nerves the misery and grime which form the complement of their wealth.⁵⁴

Under such dire circumstances, lofty moral concepts like freedom are nearly inoperative:

Fine freedom, where the proletarian has no other choice than that of either accepting the conditions which the bourgeoisie offers him, or of starving, of freezing to death, of sleeping naked among the beasts of the forests! A fine "equivalent" valued at pleasure by the bourgeoisie! And if one proletarian is such a fool as to starve rather than agree to the "equitable" propositions of the bourgeoisie, his "natural superiors", another is easily found in his place; there are proletarians enough in the world, and not all so insane as to prefer dying to living.⁵⁵

Indeed one can no longer easily isolate cases of individual murder from the institutional reality of *social* murder:

When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another such injury that death results, we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call his deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessaries of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live – forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence – knows that these thousands of victims

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54 Engels 1987, p. 58.

55 Engels 1987, p. 88.

must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains.⁵⁶

Engels even describes in harrowing detail environmental aspects of the moral abasement to which the working class has been subjected:

The centralization of population in great cities exercises of itself an unfavourable influence; the atmosphere of London can never be so pure, so rich in oxygen, as the air of the country; two and a half million pairs of lungs, two hundred and fifty thousand fires, crowded upon an area three to four miles square, consume an enormous amount of oxygen, which is replaced with difficulty, because the method of building cities in itself impedes ventilation. ... The manner in which the great multitude of the poor is treated by society today is revolting. They are drawn into the large cities where they breathe a poorer atmosphere than in the country; they are relegated to districts which, by reason of the method of construction, are worse ventilated than any others; they are deprived of all means of cleanliness, of water itself, since pipes are laid only when paid for, and the rivers so polluted that they are useless for such purposes; they are obliged to throw all offal and garbage, all dirty water, often all disgusting drainage and excrement into the streets, being without other means of disposing of them; they are thus compelled to infect the region of their own dwellings. Nor is this enough. All conceivable evils are heaped upon the heads of the poor.⁵⁷

Yet such deplorable conditions *must not* be allowed to continue. As Engels proclaims,

Let the ruling class see to it that these frightful conditions are ameliorated, or let it surrender the administration of the common interests to the labouring-class.⁵⁸

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56 Engels 1987, pp. 106-107.

57 Engels 1987, pp. 47-48.

58 Engels 1987, p. 120.

Importantly, the first stage of achieving these “common interests” lies in the emergence of a distinctive movement of the working class through the creation of labor unions. As Hal Draper has stressed, Engels’s *Condition of the Working Class in England* was “the first important attempt” to grasp the significance of trade-unionization

within the framework of a revolutionary socialist standpoint. It was the first influential product of socialist thought that rejected the two prevalent attitudes: the opinion that trade-unionism was useless or harmful to socialism, and the belief that it was all-sufficient for workers’ interests, in short, sectarianism and reformism – in order to assume the *integration* of trade-unionism into the socialist perspective of revolution.⁵⁹

There are, according to Draper,⁶⁰ several reasons for such “integration”: first of all, trade unions have arisen from workers’ desire to assert their basic humanity; secondly, unionization aims at reducing competition among workers and, ultimately, at abolishing competition itself; finally, the labor movement helps to train workers for leadership in the broader class struggle, for which strikes especially serve as “skirmishes” for what Engels calls “the great struggle which cannot be avoided.”⁶¹ In a particularly sharp passage, he targets the incomprehension of those who fail to grasp the primacy of proletarian practice over socialist theory:

It will be asked, “Why, then, do the workers strike ... when the uselessness of such measures is so evident?” Simply because they *must* protest against every reduction, even if dictated by necessity; because they feel bound to proclaim that they, as human beings, shall not be made to bow to social circumstances, but social conditions ought to yield to them as human beings; because silence on their part would be a recognition of these social conditions, an admission of the right of the bourgeoisie to exploit the workers in good times and let them starve in bad ones. Against this the working men must rebel so long as they have not lost all human feeling, and that they protest in this way and no

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59 Draper 1978, pp. 84-85. For an interesting transatlantic comparative study of the engagement of utopian socialist communities like Brook Farm – supported by Child – with the nascent U.S. labor movement, see Guarneri 1994, pp. 292-320, who stresses that “just as labor organizations and Fourierist circles had overlapping memberships, they both opposed the Europeanization of American working conditions. While they sometimes argued over strategy, they shared enough ideas, interests and goals to cooperate in campaigns to consolidate worker resistance” (p. 295).

60 Draper 1978, pp. 90-92.

61 Engels 1987, p. 232.

other, comes of their being practical English people, who express themselves in *action*, and do not, like German theorists, go to sleep as soon as their protest is properly registered and placed *ad acta*, there to sleep as quietly as the protesters themselves.⁶²

But what does the future hold in store? Engels proposes that

the enemies are dividing gradually into two great camps – the bourgeoisie on the one hand, the workers on the other. This war of each against all, of the bourgeoisie against the proletariat, need cause us no surprise, for it is only the logical sequel of the principle involved in free competition. But it may very well surprise us that the bourgeoisie remains so quiet and composed in the face of the rapidly gathering storm-clouds, that it can read all these things daily in the papers without, we will not say indignation at such a social condition, but fear of its consequences, of a universal outburst of that which manifests itself symptomatically from day to day in the form of crime. But then it is the bourgeoisie, and from its standpoint cannot even see the facts, much less perceive their consequences. One thing only is astounding, that class prejudice and preconceived opinions can hold a whole class of human beings in such perfect, I might almost say, such mad blindness. Mean-while, the development of the nation goes its way whether the bourgeoisie has eyes for it or not, and will surprise the property-holding class one day with things not dreamed of in its philosophy.⁶³

In the terms of a prophecy that should be understood not so much as a prediction of the future but as a warning to the present, Engels concludes:

Prophecy is nowhere so easy as in England, where all the component elements of society are clearly defined and sharply separated. The revolution must come; it is already too late to bring about a peaceful solution; but it can be made more gently than that prophesied in the foregoing pages. This depends, however, more upon the development of the proletariat than upon that of the bourgeoisie. In proportion, as the proletariat absorbs socialistic and communistic elements, will the revolution diminish in bloodshed, revenge, and savagery. Communism stands, in principle, above the breach between bourgeoisie and proletariat, recognises only its historic significance for the present, but not its justification for the future: wishes, indeed, to bridge over this chasm, to do away with all class antagonisms.

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62 Engels 1987, p. 226. By way of contrast, it is worthwhile to appreciate U.S. utopian socialist ambivalence about the efficacy of strikes. See Guarneri 1994, pp. 294-95.

63 Engels 1987, p. 143.

Hence it recognises as justified, so long as the struggle exists, the exasperation of the proletariat towards its oppressors as a necessity, as the most important lever for a labour movement just beginning; but it goes beyond this exasperation, because Communism is a question of humanity and not of the workers alone. (p. 582)

How are we to read Engels's book from the standpoint of Child's own – and vice versa? Arguably, what is at stake is the possibility – indeed, the *desirability* – of a philosophical-political encounter between Transcendentalism and Marxism. How can and should one approach such an encounter in terms of what Child called “means and ends”?⁶⁴

For a Transcendentalist Marxism

There are at least three sectarian and unfruitful ways for Marxists to engage with the New England Transcendentalist movement:⁶⁵

- Regard the movement as homogeneous;
- Classify it as a largely idealist intellectual movement;
- Dismiss the Transcendentalist conception of the individual as “possessive” or “bourgeois.”

A case in point: the U.S. Marxist cultural critic V.F. Calverton once crudely asserted that Emerson

extended the petty bourgeois philosophy of the frontier to its farthest anarchical extreme, extolling at times attitudes that were as definitely antisocial in their implications of the frontiersmen who early defied every semblance of state, authority, and tradition.⁶⁶

.....
64 “Means and Ends” (reprinted as Appendix 1 below) is the title of an editorial Child published in the December 1, 1842 issue of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. Child elaborated on the distinction: “proneness to have faith in man, rather than God, is exemplified in the universal tendency to convert means into an end. Means belong to the finite, and are therefore temporary; the end exists in the infinite, and is eternal” (Child 1842). Child's distinction between means and ends anticipates, in certain respects, Marx's distinction between exchange value and use value. Moreover, her criticism of the religious and political sectarianism that results from a disastrous conversion of means into ends provides the basis for a critical discussion with Marxism, e.g., regarding the tendency that Hal Draper famously called “sectism” (Draper 2019). In the February 16, 1843 issue of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Child turned to the problem of “sects and sectarianism” arising with the abolitionist movement itself, and she proposed that “the only way to cast out the demon of sectarianism, is by the calm promulgation of Truth, not for the purpose of building up any party, or attacking any party” (Child 1843, p.146).

65 On New England Transcendentalism as a distinctive social movement, see Rose 1981; Newman pp. 35-43.

66 Calverton 1932, p. 249.

Indeed, Calverton maintained that even the supposedly “heroic elements” in Emerson’s philosophy “sprang out of his belief in the individual’s power to achieve, to work out his own destiny, notwithstanding the nature of society or environment.”⁶⁷ With a preposterous analogy, Calverton claimed, Emerson reminded him

very much of many of the revolutionaries in czarist Russia, who, when they saw a revolution in reality, became horrified, and who, because they were not prepared for the ruthless tasks of carrying out a revolution to its inevitable conclusion, became the most bitter opponents of the Bolsheviks who put the revolution into actual practice and made it work. It was much easier for Emerson, or let us say, for the Mensheviks, to defend democracy or revolution while they remained concepts, than it was to accept them when they saw them in operation, in the flesh, as it were.⁶⁸

It is hard to know whether to laugh or cry at Calverton’s agitprop dismissal of Emerson and the movement that the latter helped to initiate and to steer – not away from politics but courageously head on into abolitionism, women’s rights, opposition to the 1846-1848 U.S. war on Mexico, advocating for greater socio-economic inequality, and pushing the 1861-1865 Civil War in as egalitarian direction as possible. Such an assessment is equally true of Child, whose political militancy is our concern here.⁶⁹ Let us simply note that the best of contemporary scholarship has meticulously sought to reclaim the actual political commitments of New England Transcendentalists. Perhaps they were not “Bolsheviks”; but they were scarcely “Mensheviks,” either!⁷⁰

Indeed, let us isolate a decisive passage in “The Over-Soul,” which by its title alone may appear to be a suitable source for Calverton’s complaint about Emerson as a bourgeois thinker. Yet in this essay Emerson is assuredly *not* advocating bourgeois, possessive, or any other kind of individualism. For example, he insists that

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67 Calverton 1932, p. 247.

68 Calverton 1932, p. 247.

69 See Moland 2022. Calverton ignored – or, more likely, was unaware of – the vital contributions not only of Child but of other figures like Margaret Fuller and the Peabody sisters (Elizabeth, Mary, and Sophia). For a “female genealogy” of Transcendentalism, see Argersinger and Cole 2014.

70 On Emerson’s politics, see especially Gougeon 1990. Robert Milder has urged caution regarding the ambiguities of Emerson’s “radicalism,” depending on the phases of his career. Yet Milder emphasizes Emerson’s common ground with Hegel (and Marx) in a defense of “transcendence” as a “leap beyond the actualities of the social moment to a qualitatively different future,” and he adds that “the test of a radical vision is not whether it is historically fulfilled or seems to posterity ever to have been realizable, but whether it had a credible basis in contemporary apprehensions of reality” (Milder 199, p. 55). Arguably, Milder’s analysis of Emerson applies as well to Child. More broadly, on the Transcendentalist movement’s abolitionist impulse and its ethical-political outlook, see Wirzbicki 2021.

I live in society; with persons who answer to thoughts in my own mind, or express a certain obedience to the great instincts to which I live. I see its presence to them. I am certified of a common nature; and these other souls, these separated selves, draw me as nothing else can. They stir in me the new emotions we call passion; of love, hatred, fear, admiration, pity; thence comes conversation, competition, persuasion, cities, and war. Persons are supplementary to the primary teaching of the soul. In youth we are mad for persons. Childhood and youth see all the world in them. But the larger experience of man discovers the identical nature appearing through them all. Persons themselves acquaint us with the impersonal. In all conversation between two persons, tacit reference is made, as to a third party, to a common nature. That third party or common nature is not social; it is impersonal; is God. And so in groups where debate is earnest, and especially on high questions, the company become aware that the thought rises to an equal level in all bosoms, that all have a spiritual property in what was said, as well as the sayer. They all become wiser than they were. It arches over them like a temple, this unity of thought, in which every heart beats with nobler sense of power and duty, and thinks and acts with unusual solemnity. All are conscious of attaining to a higher self-possession. It shines for all.⁷¹

Indeed, that light shines as brightly for the least among us:

This energy does not descend into individual life on any other condition than entire possession. It comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whomsoever will put off what is foreign and proud; it comes as insight; it comes as serenity and grandeur.⁷²

To reiterate Jonathan Steele's words, Child's very target in *Letters from New-York* "is the possessive individualism that believes it can own the self or slaves – pieces of disposable property enclosed within impermeable boundaries."⁷³

Accordingly, a more prudent, and potentially more fruitful, path for Marxists to take in their philosophical-political encounter with Transcendentalism would be the one sketched by David Herreshoff in his underappreciated book, *American Disciples of Marx*, in particular, in his identification of the common philosophical-political ground shared by Emerson and Marx.⁷⁴

.....
71 Emerson 1983, p. 390.

72 Emerson 1983, pp. 396-97.

73 Steele 2014, p. 2017.

74 Herreshoff 1967.

After disposing of an entrenched “frontier thesis” for why significant historical advance in the United States would not be possible until the nation had matured,⁷⁵ Herreshoff reminds us that

there is a strong and broad American radical tradition older than Marxism; subjugated men and women have often raised the cry for justice in the United States. Wishing to break the yoke of a ruling class, the white race, or the male sex, Americans have joined movements aimed at completing the unfinished business of 1776.⁷⁶

In addition, “the socialist and individualist movements of the nineteenth century had common intellectual origins and grew with more or less vigor in Europe and America under the pressure of different national environments.”⁷⁷

According to Herreshoff, both Marx and Emerson “linked technology and human misery,”⁷⁸ decried alienation, and embraced revolutionary change.⁷⁹ There was, he contends, “an optimism in [their] social criticism ... deriving from their shared sense of the transitoriness of the evils they censured.”⁸⁰ Moreover, “although Emerson expected capitalism to last longer than Marx did, there was no basic difference between them about what would replace it”⁸¹ – a type of socialism, notwithstanding the shortcomings of contemporary utopian experiments. Finally,

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75 Herreshoff notes that Hegel initially set the terms of this thesis in his conception of America as “the country of the future,” with “its world-historical importance ... yet to be revealed in the ages which lie ahead” (Hegel 1975, p. 170), a position later famously canonized by the U.S. historian Frederic Jackson Turner in his 1893 article “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (reprinted in Faragher 1999, pp. 31-60). According to Hegel, “North America is still at the stage of cultivating new territories. Only when, as in Europe, it has ceased merely to augment its farming population will the inhabitants press in upon each other to create town-based industries and communities instead of moving outwards in search of new land; only then will they set up a compact system of civil society and feel the need for an organic state. A comparison between the free states of North America and the countries of Europe is therefore impossible; for Europe, despite all its emigrations, has no natural outlet for its population such as America possesses: if the ancient forests of Germany still existed, the French Revolution would never have occurred. North America will be comparable to Europe only after the measureless space which this country affords is filled and in civil society begins to press in upon itself.” (p. 170). On Hegel as a source for Turner, see Holt 1948. See West 2023 for a robust alternative to Turner’s formulation that avoids Hegel’s unconvincing distinction between the “conquest” of South America and “colonialization” of North America (Hegel 1975, p. 167).

76 Herreshoff 1967, p. 14.

77 Herreshoff 1967, p.18.

78 Herreshoff 1967, p. 20.

79 Herreshoff 1967, pp. 18-19.

80 Herreshoff 1967, p. 21.

81 Herreshoff 1967, p. 22.

both Emerson and Marx looked forward to a new harmony between man and nature in which the split between city and country would be overcome. This goal, thought Marx, would be approached through a struggle between the classes produced by the industrial revolution, a struggle which would be fought principally in the cities. But Emerson's way to utopia lay in an immediate exodus from the city and transformation of the countryside into a garden.⁸²

Although Herreshoff himself did not do so, one could readily include both Child and Engels in this encounter of nascent Marxist socialism with Transcendentalism.⁸³

* * * *

Just as Steele rightly recovered the affective dimension of Child's book, one should equally emphasize such an approach to Engels's book. Indeed, cultivating moral sentiment is an indispensable part of building an affective – and effective! – movement aimed at radical social transformation. Both Child and Engels beckoned their readers to empathize with the plight of the victims of capitalist urbanization. Both insisted on the possibility of social progress through collective action.⁸⁴ Both condemned the environmental degradation to which workers and the poor were subjected, but Child pointed the way forward to what

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82 Herreshoff 1967, p. 23.

83 It is worth noting that Transcendentalists were already in critical dialogue with – sometimes even living as active participants within – utopian socialist experiments like Brook Farm and Fruitlands. See Guarneri 1994; Francis 1997; and Jackson 2019, pp. 87-122. In particular, "at the transcendentalist community of Brook Farm, Child's friends John Sullivan Dwight and Francis Shaw were exploring utopian socialism as a solution to poverty – an experiment Child followed with keen interest" (Karcher 1994, p. 304). Child visited the community on at least one occasion, as John Thomas Codman later recalled in his memoirs (Codman 1994, p. 80). Child wrote in a letter to Francis Shaw, dated October 12, 1841, that she supposed that Brook Farm would fail as an experiment; "because the *beginnings* of such things always do." But, she continued, "whether it succeeds or not, I think it will do much good, for these plans are unquestionably the nucleus of a great idea, destined to work important social reforms" (Child 1982, p. 150). In reality, then, the question is not whether there can and should be an encounter between Transcendentalism and socialism – there already was in the 1840s! The question is whether or not there can and should be an encounter between Transcendentalism and *Marxist* socialism.

84 See especially the article "Progress and Hope," in which Child argues that those who believe in perpetual progress found their faith mainly on the inward growth and unwritten history of the soul. They see within all events spiritual essence, subtle, expansive, and noiseless as light; and from all roseate gleam resting on the horizon's edge, they predict that the sun will rise to its zenith, and veil the whole earth to transfigured glory" (Child 1844, p. 230). In her conclusion, Child invokes the utopian experiment at Brook Farm, after it had made a turn to Fourierism: "Not in vain did Fourier patiently investigate, for thirty years, the causes of social evils and their remedy. Not in vain are communities starting up all around us, varied in plan, but all born of one idea. Do you say they will never be able to realize their aspirations? Away with your skepticism! I tell you that, if they all die, they will not perish without leaving the seeds of great social truths scattered on the hill sides and in the valleys; and the seed will spring up and wave in a golden harvest" (p. 234).

Lance Newman has called “the Green City.”⁸⁵ Perhaps Engels was more insistent than Child that middle-class interests were “diametrically opposed” to those of the working class – “though they will try to maintain the contrary and to make you believe in their most hearty sympathy with your fates.”⁸⁶ Yet Child grounded finite forms of struggle in an immeasurable ontological dimension that is implicit in Engels’s book but requires proper (re)formulation: “Most fitting symbol of the Infinite, this trackless pathway of a world! heaving and stretching to meet the sky it never reaches – like the eager, unsatisfied aspirations of the human soul.”⁸⁷

That is to say, the Over-soul of class consciousness.

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Appendix 1: Lydia Maria Child, “Means and Ends” [1842]⁸⁸

Our proneness to have faith in man, rather than God, is exemplified in the universal tendency to convert means into an end. Means belong to the finite, and are therefore temporary; the end exists in the infinite, and is eternal. The mistakes to which I have alluded is remarkably illustrated in the pursuit of riches. Of what avail are riches, except as a means of happiness? Yet, men never stop to enjoy themselves, they are so busy trying to grow rich. A quaint old lady in Massachusetts uttered sound philosophy on this point. Being advised not to stop to gather certain berries, because there was a greater abundance farther in the woods, and moreover, they would certainly come back that way, she replied, “I always make it a rule to take my comfort as I go along in the world;

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85 See Newman 2019, pp. 153-87 (including a detailed reading of *Letters from New-York* on pp. 166-79). As Newman puts it, Child proposed that “urban misery is directly caused by the eradication of green space” (p. 173) and “intellectual and emotional health requires denizens of the city to reorient themselves from time to time by making contact with nature where they can” (p. 172). Newman equally stresses the impact of Child’s “Transcendentalist critique of capitalist modernity” on such figures as the poet William Cullen Bryant, who campaigned in New York City for urban green space, and the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead, who produced the designs for New York City’s Central Park and Boston’s Emerald Necklace. Moreover, “in the following decades, Olmstead and his sons would design hundreds of city parks and college campuses across the United States” (p. 179).

86 Engels 1987, p. 27.

87 Child 1998, p. 10. The leading Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing put it well in a letter to Child that is dated December 21, 1841: “I have been delighted to see in your ‘Letters from New York’ such sure marks of a fresh, living, hopeful spirit; to see that the flow of genial noble feeling has been in no degree checked by the outward discouragements of life. The world’s frowns can do us little harm if they do not blight our spirits, and we are under obligations to all who teach us, not in words, but in life, that there is an inward power which can withstand all the adverse forces of the world” (Child 1883, p. 45).

88 Child 1842. To my knowledge, this is the first time that Child’s editorial has been reprinted.

for maybe it won't be here when I come back." The *use* of money is the only way to enjoy it; and a reproduction of itself is *not* use. The moment this valuable means is made an end, the curse of God rests upon it. The man who lives to accumulate, may talk of large dividends, but the real products of his capital are dyspepsia, ennui, suspicion, anxiety; and in some cases voluntary death from fear of being robbed. Well might angels laugh, if they were not angelic, to see men toiling thus laboriously to raise apples of Sodom.

Use is the order of our being. To live for *others* is the only way to live for *ourselves*. There is no escape from this divine law. All outward things are only means to this end. Nature teaches it in her perpetual tendency to equilibrium. Whatsoever object has light, imparts to the next object, and that to the next. The merest taper cannot burn for one, but sends its tiny rays far into the surrounding gloom. Warmth continually gives itself out, and rises upward, as human love should do.

The same laws that apply to money, apply to intellectual and spiritual wealth. Whosoever would hoard the manna that has fallen from heaven for *daily use*, shall find it to become a mass of corruption. We see the history of this written on sects. Calvinists, Baptists, Quakers, Universalists, etc., handed together to make what seemed to them truths bear on the general cause of Christian principles; but in the process of time, the sect became an *end* instead of a *means*, and the plainest principles of Christian morality were sacrificed, if they came in the way of the growth of the sect. Hence we see men, called "ambassadors of Christ," officiating at the gallows, praying on a drum-head, as chaplains of the army, and defending slavery by the example of Abraham. Why are not the priesthood in advance of public opinion, as a genuine priesthood must ever be? Because it is their appointed business to sustain a *sect*. One is afraid that he shall render the Baptists unpopular; another that he shall diminish public favor toward the Calvinists, and thus not get so much money to build meetinghouses and pay preachers; another is afraid of the same effect on Unitarians. The means have become an end; the finite and temporary is substituted for the infinite and the eternal.

The Friends had a most admirable reason for saying thee and thou. The custom formerly prevailed in the English language as it still does in many European dialects, to use the plural form to a superior, and the singular to an equal. The Friends, with that refined conscientiousness which marked their early history, objected to this practice, as a violation of human equality. W[illiam] Penn said thou to the Duke of York, on pain of being imprisoned in the tower; but it was in defense of a *universal principle*, not a sectarian custom. It was, with him, simply a means to an end. Many of his successors retain the form, without even a knowledge of the principle from which it took its rise; with them the means have become an end. Such would fain hoard up William Penn's manna for their own use; but it will not keep. If they would grow spiritually, they

must derive their growth from food daily received, and daily *used*. The same thing is true of the fashion of their garments. In the beginning they dressed plainly, because they deemed it wrong for one to assume superiority over another in outward things, and that money ought not to be spent on gay attire, in a world of raggedness and starvation. They objected to bright tints, because the coloring of such was injurious to human health. There is a beautiful tenderness in all this; and the form might well become honorable for the spirit of which it was the manifestation. But with many, these means of advancing great principles, have become the end, to which these principles themselves are sacrificed. They will expend more thought, time, and money to procure a particular color, or cut of the garment, than it would cost to forbear the observance.

Political parties are only temporary means to advance the general good; yet how perpetually we see them destroying the very principles for which they were formed, for the sake of sustaining the *party*. Our general government itself, was merely a means to advance human freedom by exemplifying the doctrine of equal rights; but the formation of the government came to be regarded as an end, and human freedom was sacrificed thereto.

Eating and drinking are but means to sustain life, which is to be employed in perpetual use; but they are made the end of existence, to which all power of usefulness and enjoyment are often sacrificed. Another sense, given only as a means to promote domestic happiness through the activity of the affections, is made an end, for which all the affections are blighted, and all domestic happiness sacrificed.

This life itself is but a means to prepare for the life which is eternal. Yet how universally, how lamentably, men regard it as an end. They spend the whole of life in “getting ready to live” — not hereafter, but here. Thus does the finite perpetually shut out the infinite. Would that man could look outward to his heavenly destiny, and not downward to his earthly wants.

Appendix 2: Lydia Maria Child, “What is Beauty?” [1843]⁸⁹

“Then had I all sorts of strange thoughts, which would hardly have agreed with sense. *It was as if the secret of Creation lay on my tongue*; how God, by the power of his voice, had called every thing forth, and how music repeats in each breast this eternal will of LOVE and WISDOM.”

This – *Bettine*

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89 Child 1843. To my knowledge, this is the first time that Child’s essay has been reprinted.

The two creative principles of the universe are LOVE and WISDOM. Their union, and perfect proportion, constitutes BEAUTY.

In common modes of speech, this word is obviously enough, applied to mere *forms* of Love and Truth, in which the perfect proportion is at once felt, rather than seen, and we instinctively name it harmony. But I am now striving to define the abstract and universal *Idea*; and this I believe to be a harmonious proportion of the two great Creative Principles.

From a healthy union of Affection and Thought flows Energy. When we love to do that which we perceive it right to do, we cannot otherwise than embody it in earnest action. This is *moral* beauty.

When truth is perceived through the transparent medium of affection for it, it embodies itself in *intellectual* beauty; and the productions of such states are spontaneously and universally acknowledged as beautiful. Hence, genius ever works with unconsciousness, and is a mystery to itself. The harmony is so complete, that thought does not attempt to analyze affection, or affection to question thought. Being *one*, they are unconscious of each other's presence. The spiritual life then flows in freely, and men call it divine mania, inspiration, intuition, genius.

Beauty of *recitation* is the adaptation of the tone to the word spoken. The word is obviously an embodiment of *thought*, and tone, of *affection*. There is the same subtle union, and mysterious significance, in the *expression* and the *proportions* of a statue.

Musicians say there are three primal notes, without which music cannot be; and there are three primal colors, without a due proportion of which painting wants harmony. Pictures by the old masters show a knowledge of this; or rather an intuition, that transcends knowledge.

An artist once suggested to me that the triple elements of *form* were the Circle, Straight-line and the Undulating. I at once saw that it must be so; because they represent the spiritual tri-une, of Love, and Wisdom, and Beauty. Space evidently relates to Love, and time to Truth; for love is *infinite*, and truth is *eternal*. The circle represents infinity, and the straight line eternity; the combination of both is a succession of curves – the line of *beauty*. This undulating line is, as it were, a map of the spiral; the spiral represented on a horizontal plane. None but the Omniscient can comprehend the full significance of the spiral; for it contains the universe – from the smallest pebble, to the throne of Jehovah. The ancients had glimpses of this, and therefore that line is so often found among the most sacred temples in their temples. Forever revolving and ascending, it combines the circle, the straight line, and the curve. Are not these like the three primal notes and colors, forms of Love, Wisdom, and Beauty, or Affection, Thought, and Energy? This eternal trinity creates and re-produces all things in its own image.

The perfect and constant harmony of Love and Truth constitutes the Divine Mind. The *separation* between them, with the power of occasional union, and glancing revelations, from within and without, of a final, perfect, and eternal marriage, constitutes human nature, with all its marvelous spiritual phenomena. Its hope and its aspirations are but a recognition of the Divine Union by which it was created, and a prophecy of the Divine Harmony toward which it tends.

Wherever the soul catches a glimpse, in *any* form, of a perfect union of Love and Truth, it rejoices in the radiant marriage-vesture, and names it Beauty. In all these forms, the soul sees the face of its Parent. It is reminded of its *home*, and drawn thither. Hence, next to the word "harmony," "a joyous perception of the infinite" is the most common definition of Beauty.

Beauty is *felt*, not seen by the understanding. Mere analysis never attains so high. It can dissect, but it cannot create beauty, or perceive it; because it is thought standing *alone*, and therefore in self-consciousness. A primal note is wanting, and its tune is ever defective. A primal color is gone, and its painting is deficient.

All evil is perverted good, and all falsehood is reversed truth. Therefore, the tri-une mystery, that pervades the universe, is embodied in shapes of evil, as well as of good. Hatred, Falsehood, and Force take an infinite variety of forms, as do Love, Truth, and Energy. If the proportion between falsified truth and perverted affection be harmonious, the product has power to charm. It has been truly said, "There is a sort of beauty in a wicked action, provided it be well done." Much of Byron's intellectual power has this origin. Milton's Devil wears it like a robe of fascination. The same law shows itself in ultimates, in the material world; hence the beauty of the tiger, the leopard, and other destructive animals.

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Toward an Epicurean Politics: The Two Instrumentalities (Phronesis and the Ineffectual)

Dimitris Vardoulakis

Abstract: The paper demonstrates how instrumentality has been repressed in the philosophical discourse of the past century, while it explores the materialist tradition of epicureanism that foregrounds instrumentality. Further, it demonstrates that the conception of instrumentality in materialism is derived from the ancient notion of phronesis, while the modern repression of instrumentality relies on a conception of an action without ends, or the ineffectual. This series of arguments leads to the conclusion that the competing interests of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, which Marx calls “class struggle,” is best understood as an extension of the epicurean tradition.

Keywords: Epicureanism, Spinoza, Marx, Heidegger, phronesis, materialism

1. Queering philosophy and the repression of instrumentality (phronesis)

You are bored. You check the dating app on your phone. The photo that comes up on your screen shows someone your type. You are about to swipe right, but catch a glimpse of the self-introduction: “I aim to have fun and treat everyone instrumentally.” The last word—worse than a swear—triggers an automatic motor reaction: swipe left! There is no doubt that since Christianity invented the notion of sin, the instrumental is in the thick of it, and has remained there irrespective of one’s confessional beliefs. There is no doubt, also, that the instrumental has also become a code-word for the evil of modernity, the construction of the calculative subject whose pursuit of self-interest erodes social and communal living, as well as the very foundation of political life.

And yet, if it was not for the automatic neuron messaging to your finger to swipe left, maybe you could have paused to consider the disarming honesty of the promise to be treated instrumentally. Just as the “video killed the radio star,” similarly the dating app killed romantic love. Online dating brings to love a sophisticated logistical apparatus designed to determine the ends of interaction as well as the means to attain them. Acronyms like DTF have relegated notions like unconditional love, a love beyond — or, is it above? — means and ends calculations, to a depository of quaint fantasies. Or at least they ought to, were it not for the automatic neurological reaction to swipe left. Romantic love is dead; long live romantic love!

I am not making an off-hand comparison between dating and the king—who, as Foucault reminds us, might have had his head detached from his body but who nonetheless lives on. I am deadly serious. I hold that the automatic swipe left triggered by the word “instrumental” is

symptomatic of a *repression of instrumentality* in the ethical and political realms. Romantic love, no less than the prerogative of the king, are determined by an aversion to instrumentality.¹

The repression of instrumentality is due to a narrow definition of calculative thinking, which invariably has three key characteristics: it is individual-centered; it focuses on acts that are quantifiable; and, it presupposes the possibility of a correct calculation. This instrumental reason is responsible for the objectification of human relations in capitalism and the neoliberal calculative subject who erodes the political. Maybe the first philosophical articulation of this instrumental reason occurs in nineteenth century utilitarianism, such as in Bentham's "felicific calculus."

We can find, however, a different instrumental logic in ancient Greek thought that contradicts modern instrumental reason point by point: It is a communal instrumentality that includes in its calculation consideration of others as well as the environment; it is unquantifiable and hence inherently fallible; and, it concerns living as a whole. In Greek thought, this calculation is referred to as *phronesis*, and it seeks to bridge the gap between the two poles of *praxis* in Greek thought, virtue and the pursuit of happiness (*eudaimonia*).

Perhaps the most famous example of this kind of calculation occurs in book 1 of Herodotus *Histories*. The story is about Solon, the wise—which is to say, *phronimos*, someone with *phronesis*—lawgiver of Athens. After devising the first democratic constitution, Solon left Athens for a long trip. When visiting Croesus, the powerful king asked Solon whether he regarded him as happy. Croesus was scandalized to hear that Solon regarded the brothers Cleobis and Biton—mere commoners—happier than him. The reason was that they had a happy death, helping their mother fulfil her promise to worship the gods at a remote temple. The calculation whether one is happy must include the whole of one's life.² Even though he initially dismissed him, Croesus could not help whispering the word "Solon" when, years later, he had lost his empire and he was about to be executed.³ Virtue and happiness are connected via a calculation, not about individual quantifiable acts, but about living as a whole.

The political stakes of the distinction between the two instrumentalities are high. It suggests that the entire critique of instrumental reason in modernity may be correct, and yet inadequate to the task of describing, let alone critiquing, the sphere of calculation that permeates human interaction. Maybe a radical politics requires a

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1 The genius of George Bataille is to have connected the dots between the erotic and sovereignty through the renunciation of the instrumental. See Bataille 1991 and 1993.

2 Herodotus 1920, 1: 29–33.

3 Herodotus 1920, 1: 86.

reworked conception of the instrumental. At the same time, the historical stakes are high. If we are to retrieve and reanimate an alternative tradition of thinking the instrumental, nothing less is required than an alternative genealogy of the conception of praxis from antiquity to the present. Such a genealogy is indispensable in helping us work through modernity's repression of instrumentality.

The political and the genealogical tasks are connected because phronesis is a situated knowledge that includes the emotions. Such a calculation intermeshed with affect cuts across the social sphere today, as the example of the dating app suggests. Thus, the retrieval and reanimation of the forgotten tradition of phronesis has the potential to provide us with a conceptual matrix to think our world in a different framework.

This connection between the political and genealogical stakes of phronesis immediately comes against an obstacle. The most detailed and explicit account of phronesis that has survived from antiquity is contained in book 6 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which ends with the disavowal of phronesis in favor of the superiority of sophia. This culminates in the celebration of the life of the mind or contemplation at the end of *Nicomachean Ethics*. The superiority over phronesis opens the way for the celebration of reason—or, Reason—as the purveyor of truth that is a constitutive feature of patriarchal, male-centered politics.⁴ We need to overcome this obstacle if we are not propose yet another celebratory genealogy of Reason.

The epicurean tradition is critical at this juncture because it firmly blocks the way to such a celebration of Reason. Specifically, Epicurus reverses this relation by making phronesis the primary knowledge. In the "Letter to Menoeceus," he explicitly states that phronesis is the primary virtue and the highest form of knowledge, even higher than philosophy. The phrase that he uses to describe this superiority of phronesis is that the end of life is pleasure. This has been taken up by Christian fathers and other opponents of epicureanism to mean that corporeal pleasure as such as is the end of living. Epicurus explicitly rejects this in his "Letter to Menoeceus." Pleasure is constitutive of phronesis since it is part of the situated thinking characteristic of the calculation about living as a whole.⁵

If the highest form of knowledge is one in which pleasure is constitutive of knowledge because phronesis is situated and commensurate with its enactment—that is, if phronesis is a performative—then not only has Reason being displaced from its epistemological supremacy, but also "man" as the gender that represents Reason has also been displaced from his throne. Where the calculation

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4 Lloyd 1984.

5 Vardoulakis 2024.

of phronesis is supreme, hierarchies may not be eliminated, but they are flattened and become fluid, undercutting the absoluteness of any power. Thus the primacy of phronesis is nothing short of a *queering* of philosophy already in antiquity.

Such a queering of philosophy through the epicurean conception of phronesis is not dissimilar to Althusser positing an underground current of materialism in the history of thought. Like Althusser, I hold that the important aspect of such a queering of philosophy in epicureanism is its political implications, which consist inter alia in preempting absolute power and fostering a radical materialist politics. Unlike Althusser, I hold that epicurean phronesis ought to be distinguished from ancient atomism; further I hold that phronesis insists on calculative thinking for the articulation of such a politics, while Althusser, who effectively ignores phronesis, needs to posit non-instrumental action, the encounter or the event, to account for radical politics.

My term for the move that posits a non-instrumental action is *the ineffectual*. As I will explain, I derive this term from Heidegger, whom I regard as responsible for its determinative articulation. The effect of the ineffectual is not only to prevent the queering of philosophy that starts with the epicurean conception of phronesis. In addition, it is responsible for the forgetting of epicurean phronesis, and its repression within political philosophy.⁶

The aim of the article is to show how we can undo this repression of phronesis. The first step consists in challenging the critique of instrumental reason in modernity that narrowly determines instrumentality as individual, quantifiable and true, thereby forgetting the instrumentality characteristic of phronesis that is communal, fallible and concerned with living as a whole. We can summarize this critique by distinguishing two arguments against instrumentality. The first holds that instrumentality *of necessity* perpetuates established forms of power; and the second that instrumentality *of necessity* leads to violence. After evaluating these critiques, we will be in a position to compare phronesis and the ineffectual by examining the problem to which they both respond. At the end, we will discover a path that leads from Epicurus to Marx as a way of understanding the historical significance of epicurean politics.

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6 The term "repression of phronesis" does not reference only the importance of psychoanalysis for the kind of argument that I am pursuing here, but also Nicole Loraux's position that stasis has been repressed in the thinking of democracy. See Loraux 2006.

2. The instrumental as coopted by power (the ineffectual)

The criticism that calculative thinking is of necessity coopted by power summarizes a variety of different approaches to instrumental reason in modernity—from the Marxist critique of reification to the critique of the neoliberal calculative thinking as ultimately destroying the political sphere. This critique amounts to saying that instrumentality eliminates the possibility of the radically new, or what Hannah Arendt calls natality, because “an end, once it is attained, ceases to be an end and loses its capacity to guide and justify the choice of means.”⁷ Or, differently put, instrumentality is unable to account for political change.

Let me limit myself to one representative example from the cornucopia of iterations of this argument. In *One-Dimensional Man* Marcuse uses the oxymoronic expression the “fetter of liberation” to describe the predicament of society in modernity. Techno-science and its constitutive instrumentality preclude any possibility of meaningful change.⁸ As he put it in an essay from the same period, “perhaps the most singular achievement of advanced industrial society is its success in integrating and reconciling antagonistic groups and interests. ... The political opposition against the basic institutions of the established society succumbs and turns into opposition within the accepted conditions. An overriding interest in the preservation of the institutional status quo joins the former antagonists.”⁹ Change is eliminated by being translated into non-political pursuits, such as the accumulation of capital, or the sublimation of desire into the latest product—or, the images in the dating app.

Let me be clear: I am in total agreement with this criticism, with two caveats: First, the subject of this critique is the instrumental reason that understands calculation as individualistic, quantifiable and true—that is, the instrumentality that is other than phronesis. Second, phronesis is forgotten and repressed within this discourse because of the positing of a non-instrumental action without ends, or the ineffectual. As soon as we see the connection between the two caveats, we will be in a position to turn the tables and argue that it is in fact the notion of the ineffectual that is *of necessity* liable to be coopted by power.

The ineffectual carves out a positioning of an action as part and yet apart from power. This is the kind of end-free praxis that Arendt calls simply “action” in *The Human Condition*, which she distinguishes from “work” and “labor,” both of which are instrumental. Arendt does not preclude instrumentality from her political philosophy. Rather, she

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7 Arendt 1998, 154-55.

8 Marcuse 2002, 163.

9 Marcuse 2001, 37 and 38.

laments the prevalence of instrumentality in modernity since she regards action—non-instrumental action or the ineffectual—as the condition of the possibility of the space in-between, or genuine political interaction. Any instrumental calculation has to come after the establishment of such a space. In modernity instead action—the ineffectual—has ceded its primacy to instrumental ways of acting.

The ineffectual plays a significant structuring role in the determination of power’s “outside.” Since modernity, power has been understood as having two pillars. There are various names for these two pillars, which correspond to distinct discourses each with its own genealogy, but both involve instrumental thinking. Perhaps the most influential articulation of the two pillars of power in the past three or four decades is derived from Foucault’s contrast between classical sovereignty and biopower. The former holds the individual responsible for its actions and punishes any transgression of the law; the latter aims to control populations through various means, ranging from provisions for the population’s welfare to generalized forms of surveillance.¹⁰ Subsequent revisions and rearticulations, such as Agamben’s zoe versus bios, only reinforced the Foucauldian frame of the distinction of the two pillars of power.¹¹

Critiques of power are always complicated by the fact that the two pillars can be distinguished but not separated. For example, if one critiques classical sovereignty too much to overcome a conception of the end of politics as the state’s self-preservation, then one might veer into the other pillar that has an affinity with “globalization” and neoliberalism. Symptomatic of this danger is the interpretation of Foucault himself as neoliberal. Conversely, if one pursues too stark a critique of the pillar of control in the name of a defense of state power, one is in danger of relinquishing unfettered power to the state. After rejecting “political Romanticism,” Carl Schmitt celebrates the exception of sovereign power.¹²

The ineffectual is conceived as the way around both of these unpalatable solutions. This is the idea that an action without ends, and hence non-instrumental, can short-circuit the synergies of the two pillars of power. In terms of political action, the exemplary articulation of this idea is May ’68. Often, artistic activity is presented as occupying the position of the ineffectual. The ineffectual has also been presented to account for political change in terms of the discourse of the “event” that has had significant traction in the wide and diverse field usually referred to as “continental philosophy.”

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10 See the last chapter of Michael Foucault 2003).

11 See e.g. Agamben’s most recent articulation of this distinction in Agamben 2021.

12 See Schmitt 1986 and,2007.

The frame of the argument for the ineffectual is straight-forward, simple, and seductive: non-instrumental action—or, the ineffectual—is incommensurate both with the instrumental thinking characteristic of control (the calculative logic of high capitalism), and with the sovereign logic of the state that sets its own self-preservation as an end. The difficulty of this position is equally straight-forward: no one has given a convincing description or pointed to a clear example of an ineffectual action.

The examples that are supposed to demonstrate the ineffectual usually fall apart after the briefest scrutiny. Costas Douzinas presented the continuous demonstration at Syntagma Square in the summer of 2011 as an expression of the ineffectual. The demonstration was against the fiscal policies imposed by the EU and IMF following the Greek financial crisis. The austerity measures imposed upon the Greek population were seen as an articulation of the instrumental logic of neoliberalism. Douzinas places the demonstrations of the summer of 2011 in the context of “an age of resistance” against the instrumental logic of neoliberalism.¹³ At that same time, Douzinas compares the demonstrations to May '68, the paradigm of a political action that supposedly lacks any ends, and holds that the demonstrators echoed the assemblies of the demos of classical Athens “who met a few hundred meters away.”¹⁴ As a result, the protest of the *aganaktismenoi* was an event whose significance “standard political science had not and could not understand.”¹⁵ Such an event that was firmly separated from the instrumentality of neoliberalism was supposed to have led to “the appearance of new politicized subjects.”¹⁶

I am struggling to reconcile Douzinas’ description with my own experience of the demonstration of the *aganaktismenoi* at Syntagma square. A first difference is that there were in fact two demonstrations. One part of the square was occupied by reactionary forces motivated by religious nationalism and linked to the Church. Are these *aganaktismenoi* part of the “event” that created new subjectivities? Douzinas does not acknowledge this other half of the demonstrators. In my perception, they resembled more medieval remnants of a desire for a return to theocracy than any direct democratic assembly.

Second, and most significantly, the *aganaktismenoi* countered the neoliberal instrumental arguments for austerity with their own instrumental arguments. Negatively, their use of instrumental thinking was to demonstrate that the calculations of neoliberal economics that plunged Greece into a socially painful and detrimental recession were in fact inaccurate and erroneous. Positively, they suggested that ethical

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13 Douzinas 2013, 9.

14 Douzinas 2013, 139 and 148.

15 Douzinas 2013, 148.

16 Douzinas 2013, 144.

and political calculation is about living as whole—not about quantifiable segments of life. Thus, the *aganaktismenoi*, far from presenting an event that made their demonstration devoid of ends and hence ineffectual, in fact posed the distinction between two forms of calculation: one that is quantifiable and which can be correctly measured as it applies to individual acts; and another that aims at the good in living as a whole, whereby there is no stable criterion to measure it by. It was not the event or the ineffectual that the *aganaktismenoi* embodied, but rather the calculation called phronesis. There was no such a thing as the ineffectual or the event taking place at Syntagma Square.

I have to confess that I have been looking for an example of the ineffectual for several years, but I have been unable to find one that is remotely convincing. This poses a significant problem: If the ineffectual does not exist, then isn't the kind of thought that posits such an ineffectual in danger itself of being implicated in the perpetuation of established power structures? Judith Butler seems to suggest as much in the context of discussing Giorgio Agamben. Agamben's notion of the ineffectual is presented through the figure of *homo sacer* who marks a "threshold of indistinction" between biopower and sovereignty. The problem with this argument is that if we are hard-pressed to find any example of such a *homo sacer*, then "we've actually subscribed to a heuristic that only lets us make the same description time and again, which ends up taking on the perspective of sovereignty and reiterating its terms and, frankly, I think nothing could be worse."¹⁷ In other words, the danger is that the ineffectual reiterates the impossibility of change but now under an illusion of freedom that only further reinforces sovereignty and biopower.

We can summarize the political response to the ineffectual as follows: The critique of instrumental reason suggests that the instrumental is of necessity co-opted by power making change impossible. To account for change, this critique turns to the ineffectual, an action and thought without ends. But the ineffectual itself, by virtue of being hard to find, raises the suspicion that it is not a feature of our material reality, which turns the tables on the initial accusation against instrumentality: Perhaps it is the ineffectual that is of necessity complicit in supporting established forms of power and preventing real change.

The political argument is inseparable from the genealogy of the ineffectual. The most important figure for such a genealogy is Martin Heidegger, who first systematically delineates the concept of the ineffectual, starting with his reading book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as part of his course titled *Plato's Sophist*.¹⁸ Heidegger argues that

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¹⁷ Butler and Spivak, 2007, 43.

¹⁸ See section 4. For a detailed analysis, see Vardoulakis 2024.

techne is the praxis that includes all end-oriented activity. This means that the virtue of techne is science, which entails that all end-oriented action can be broken down into individual acts to be quantified and judged as true or false. By contrast, phronesis is, according to Heidegger, an activity that is entirely free of ends. Phronesis as purified of ends is the first clear delineation of the ineffectual.

From then on, Heidegger never tired of pointing out that which escapes quantifiable calculation. In the “Letter on Humanism” the thinking of being is defined by the fact that it “has no result [*kein Ergebnis*]. It has no effect [*keine Wirkung*].”¹⁹ And “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” insists that “there is a thinking outside [*außerhalb*] of the distinction of rational and irrational, more sober-minded still than scientific technology, more sober-minded and hence removed, without effect [*ohne Effekt*], yet having its own necessity.”²⁰ Maybe. But maybe also the thinking of being can dress itself up in Rector’s regalia to ruminate about the future of the German university.

I am not concerned about poor personal, or “ontic,” choices. I am concerned, rather, that the thought of the ineffectual in Heidegger—which means the forgetting of the second notion of the instrumental, that is, the forgetting of phronesis—has had such a major impact on what came to be called “continental philosophy.” For example: Levinas determines the Other as transcendent whereby it is separate from the application of specific rules; Blanchot conceives of an outside that establishes a community distinct from everyday action; Derrida compulsively returns to an unconditioned beyond calculation; Deleuze adumbrates a pure immanence that is sheer potentiality; and, Badiou imagines an event that ruptures the instrumental field of politics. These pivotal thinkers—and many others—in continental philosophy may disagree by and large, but all concur on the centrality of an action without ends—that is, on the ineffectual—to counter modernity’s instrumental rationality.

This genealogical perspective helps us see what it is that the ineffectual precludes. Albert Hirschman’s *The Passions and the Interests* demonstrates an impoverished understanding of the history of thought next to Heidegger’s accounts of the historicity of being. And yet, Hirschman’s book aims to demonstrate that “interest,” which is nothing but the economic articulation of calculative thinking, determines historical progress in modernity *because* of its historical development.²¹ Hirschman shows that historicity cannot be divorced from the calculative. As a result, Hirschman’s genealogy of interest—despite all its glaring historical shortcomings—manages to secure for neoliberalism

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19 Heidegger 2002a, 259/358.

20 Heidegger 2002b, 449/89.

21 In section 6, we will see how we can find a different notion of interest in Marx.

exclusive control of instrumentality.²² Would this have been possible without the construction of the ineffectual in Heidegger's discourse, and from thereon dominating in continental philosophy?

At this point we see how the political and the genealogical perspectives make sense of the convergence of the ineffectual and neoliberalism. Neoliberalism happily embraces the ineffectual, since the ineffectual represses phronesis, that is, the notion of instrumentality that is different from the instrumentality of neoliberalism. If the economic sphere that includes social interaction and dictates the terms of the political is permeated by instrumentality, then it is fine to leave a space "outside" that sphere that has "no result" and "no effect." Even better, if it is artists who represent that sphere, the neoliberal corporation would hasten to patronize them. "Show us the next Hölderlin or the new Van Gogh and we will give them philanthropic—and tax exempt—grants so that they can perpetuate the ineffectual outside our sphere of operation!" they would think. And rightly so, for sponsoring those forms of power that have no material capacity to criticize them—they are *ineffectual!*—enhances their own power.

I hold, then, that it is not instrumentality as such that is doomed to endlessly reproduced instituted forms of power. Rather, the reproduction of power is contingent upon abandoning the thinking of the radical political potential of instrumentality through the construction of the ineffectual, which also means, as its obverse side, the abandoning of the field of instrumentality to established forms of power, such as neoliberalism. To embrace the critique of instrumental reason in modernity, one also needs to criticize the ineffectual on the grounds that it achieves precisely the opposite of what it aims, namely, to be coopted by power by virtue of evacuating the political "proper" from instrumentality.

3. The instrumental as leading to violence (agonism)

The second standard argument against instrumental rationality is that it *of necessity* leads to violence. The dialectic of the Enlightenment is a one-way street to Auschwitz. Techno-scientific rationality is responsible for the destruction of the environment, putting the whole planet into peril. Arendt started associating instrumentality with violence as soon as she arrived in the US, such as in *Between Past and Future*. This culminates in one of the purest articulations of this argument, her late book *On Violence*, whose central distinction is between power that is proper to the political, and instrumentality that is responsible for violence.

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22 Hirschman 1977).

I would subscribe to the argument that instrumentality, especially if it is individualist, quantifiable and purporting to attain to truth, *can* lead to violence. But it is easy to find illustrations to demonstrate that instrumentality—especially the one that is related to phronesis—can be employed to prevent violence. For example, during the global demonstrations following the murder of George Floyd, Dylan Martinez from Reuters took a photograph from the protests in London on June 14, 2020. It shows a black man carrying on his shoulders—in a so-called “fireman’s lift”—an injured white man who looks semi-conscious, dazed and confused.²³ The black man was Patrick Hutchinson and the injured white man was Bryn Male, a counter-protester and a member of a far-right group. According to Martinez, the photograph was taken near Waterloo Bridge, when a group of anti-racism protesters encountered a group of counter-protesters. Male was beaten by anti-racism protesters and he had sustained facial injuries. With the help of his friends who formed a cordon around him, Hutchinson delivered Male to the police so that he can be treated for his injuries. There was no love of humanity or any such value in Hutchinson’s actions. There was no pacificism or pluralism, but a cold instrumentality: “My real focus was on avoiding a catastrophe, all of a sudden the narrative changes into ‘Black Lives Matters, Youngsters Kill Protesters.’ That was the message we were trying to avoid.”²⁴ Saving the life of someone whom he hated was to prevent a death being mobilized against the cause he believed in. This was a judgment that considered the whole—not the calculation about a single, quantifiable act. Instrumentality too, insofar as it is the instrumentality of phronesis, is a viable strategy to prevent violence.

How are we to make sense of the argument that instrumentality of necessity leads to violence, when our experience readily contradicts it? A genealogy of this argument will be useful. And again, what we find larking in this genealogy is the figure of the ineffectual. No one denies that the desired end of political interaction is peace and consensus. But to avoid a utopianism of universalized harmony, one has to acknowledge the potential of conflict in human relations. The discourse of agonism has recourse to a notion of the ineffectual to distinguish between physical violence mired in instrumentality and an “ontological” violence purified of instrumentality.

The term “agonism” as applied to the social and political spheres is a neologism invented by Jacob Burckhardt in *The Greeks and Greek Civilization* to refer to the period between the wars of the Doric invasion and the classical age—the age of democracy. The key social feature of the agonal age, according to Burckhardt, were the various competitions

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23 The photograph as well as a description of what transpired it can be found Martinez 2020.

24 Amir Vera et al. 2020.

permeating social interaction. Burckhardt's agonal age contains a critical contrast: the agonistic life is the life of the aristocrats, as opposed to the tyrants and later the democrats. The distinction is drawn on the basis that the agonal is unconcerned with utility, or, in my terms, it is ineffectual, as opposed to the "utilitarian" culture of the non-aristocrats.²⁵ In this line of thought, the agonistic and the ineffectual are the obverse sides of the same coin. They mark a notion of competition or conflict that is separate from actual violence.

The ineffectual pervades the discourse of agonism. Heidegger is yet again a critical conduit when he notes the conflictual nature of being: "aletheia posses a conflictual essence [as it unfolds within the polis that] gathers originally the unity of everything. ... Here lies concealed the primordial ground of that feature Jacob Burckhardt presented for the first time in its full bearing and manifoldness: the frightfulness, the horribleness, the atrociousness of the Greek polis."²⁶ The unity of being that Heidegger originally discovers in Aristotle is transferred to the political realm—to the unity of the polis—through the "conflictual essence" of the truth of being. But, as the reference to Burckhardt makes clear, the agonism of aletheia is stripped of all "utilitarianism," which is to say, it is stripped of all end-oriented action, which is supposed to make its agonism "ontological" instead of actually violent.

Consonantly with this position, Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* praises the agonism of Greek culture precisely because it is non-instrumental. The agonal renunciation of ends is deliberately employed by Arendt in contrast to the modern predicament. She argues that the equality of the Greek city was due to the fact that "the public realm itself, the polis, was permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit, where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that he was the best of all (*aien aristeuein*)."²⁷ The pursuit of excellence which is also an aristocratic pursuit—the *aien aristeuein* refers to both—permeates the entire political realm. This is the spirit of action, which in Arendt's terms, following Burckhardt and Heidegger, is purified of ends. In this rarified image of ancient Athens, citizens are equal because their "agonal spirit" is without concern for utility. By contrast, the spirit of modernity is determined by what Arendt calls work and labor that are nothing but instrumental. As such, instead of agonism, they lead to violence that Arendt distinguishes from the political proper. The constitutive violence of instrumentality marks it as qualitatively distinct from the agonal that is free of ends.

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²⁵ Burckhardt 1998, 160 and 185.

²⁶ Heidegger 1992, 90.

²⁷ Arendt 1998, 41.

The relatively recent discourse of “agonistic democracy” is indebted to this tradition. William Connolly uses the term to highlight a political theory that diverges from the orthodoxy of a politics of consensus. The first determinative use of agonistic democracy occurs in the Preface to *Identity\ Difference*.²⁸ Connolly seeks to arrive at a new conception of democracy that prioritizes difference over identity. Still, Connolly draws a qualitative distinction between two kinds of action, one characterized by hostility and violence, and another that is ethical. Connolly traces the hostility to a “generalized resentment” against claims by “others” to fairness and equality.²⁹ Such resentment relies on calculative thinking. By contrast, an “ethic of cultivation” consists in the “cultivation of agonistic care for the contingency of things and engagement in political contestation [that] are locked into a relation of strife amidst their mutual implication.”³⁰ Calculation entails resentment and violence, while agonal care entails a “mutual implication” or pluralism.

The tradition about agonism that starts with Burckhardt passes through philosophers such as Heidegger and Arendt and culminates in the discourse of agonistic democracy in political theory. It understands the agonistic as distinct from the instrumental because the instrumental is of necessity violent. In other words, it posits the dilemma either the ineffectual—the non-instrumental action in a variety of different descriptions—or violence.

The epicurean tradition that privileges phronesis as the primary virtue and knowledge also recognizes that instrumental thinking *may* lead to violence, but not necessarily. Epicureanism does not know of an ontological conflict or a conflictual pluralism that are sharply separated from violence. Violence is a possibility within the political sphere and it is a matter of a realist approach to politics to acknowledge the prospect of violence.

The most succinct presentation of Epicurus’ political program is preserved in sections 32 to 38 of his *Principal Doctrines*, where the guiding idea is that political justice as well as the “social contract” (*symfonia*) are determined by the effects of action. In other words, justice and the legal framework are dependent on the instrumentality of phronesis. Thus, according to section 37 of *Principal Doctrines*, the calculation of the useful gives us the sense of justice in the political realm. But justice is not a universal; rather, it is historicized because it is tethered to its effects. The just is that which is useful, not to the individual, but to the polity as a whole. This means that when the conditions change, the sense of justice also changes. We should in fact

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28 Connolly 2002a, x.

29 See e.g. Connolly 2002a, 22–23.

30 Connolly 2002b, 158.

say: when the circumstances change, the sense of justice changes of *necessity*. As soon as we add the necessary nature of the transformation of justice as it relies on instrumental thinking, the agonistic nature of epicurean politics comes to the fore. The reason is that the calculations of phronesis that yield the sense of utility Epicurus identifies with justice will then inevitably—by force of the same *necessity*—also lead to a clash between constituted forms of power that strive for the preservation of the established order, and those who have judged that the established order no longer serves the utility of the state. In this conception, instrumentality is agonistic and conflictual but this is only a way to attain the just and the communal good, even if it entails the danger of lapsing into violence.

As soon as conflict is circumscribed with competing conceptions of utility, there emerges a conceptual apparatus for a radical politics that is firmly within the purview of instrumentality. Thus, for example, La Boétie calls “voluntary servitude” the situation where the people submit to a ruler who acts against their utility. Such an apparatus acknowledges the possibility of violence—such as a revolution against the oppressive ruler—but sees violence as neither necessary, nor necessarily undesirable. If the laws of the state do not lead to the good of the polity as whole, then they are, as Epicurus puts it in *Principal Doctrines* 37, nothing but “empty words,” and the political exigency is to discover the best means possible to effect a change toward the communal good.

The agonism of phronesis is differently framed from the agonism that starts with Burckhardt. The agonism aligned with the ineffectual posits an action that is separated from instrumentality on the grounds that the effects of the instrumental are of necessity violent. The agonism aligned with phronesis accepts the possibility of violence. But that’s nothing more than the realist recognition that our calculations about the good change, and in the course of doing so they challenge established forms of power. To love your neighbor, as Freud notes in *Civilization and its Discontents*, can never be a universal. The possibility of peace, no less than the prospect of violence, depend on the given circumstances. If your neighbor is coming at you with a knife, you will most certainly be better off to calculate the means to avoid injury, which may also include inflicting injury in turn. A fend off, however, is unlikely while wrecking your brains to discover an action that is ineffectual.

At this point, we have seen that the two main criticisms leveled against instrumentality as a whole do not in fact hold for phronesis. But this only shows that the criticisms of instrumentality from the perspective of the ineffectual are weak—they are *either* trivial *or*, worse, implicated in the perpetuation of established forms of power. To avoid this trap of the critique of instrumental reason in modernity, we need to show why phronesis is an indispensable component of the political.

For this, we need to investigate the ontology of instrumentality as it is connected to praxis.

4. Materialism (the problematic of action)

The ontology of both phronesis and the ineffectual is a materialist, “secular” ontology. By this I mean an ontology that renounces transcendence. There is neither a transcendent being subsisting in a realm separate from ours, nor transcendent values or principles that are universal irrespective of their circumstances. Even though both the ineffectual and phronesis are built on such an ontology, I will show here that the ineffectual cannot account for difference in action without contradicting its ontological starting point. This is not the case with phronesis, which means that phronesis offers a coherent relation between ontology and praxis.

A specific problem that has followed materialist ontologies since antiquity is how to account for difference in action. If there is no transcendence, if in monist terms existence is a totality outside of which nothing exists, then does that mean whatever we do is of no consequence? What is the basis of the difference between our actions, if they are all of the same ontological quality, that is, if they are all “beyond good and evil”? I call this kind of questioning *the problematic of action*.

In ancient philosophy, the problematic of action, appears as the difficulty to account for difference. For example, it frames Plato’s *Sophist*. The dialogue starts with two of Socrates’ students, Theodorus and Theaetetus, bringing to him a visitor from Elea, that is, an adherent to Parmenidean monism. Socrates probes the Eleatic Visitor by asking him whether his school regards the sophist, the philosopher and the statesman as one, or two, or three distinct kinds of activity.³¹ The question will appear nonsensical unless we place it within the context of the problematic of action: As soon as one posits a totality outside of which nothing exists, then it becomes difficult to demarcate an essential difference between actions. If there is only one being, which also suggests an identity of thought and action, then should a Parmenidean have to assert that the actions of the sophist, the philosopher, and the statesman are mere modifications of that one being? Is only differentiation possible and difference impossible? Socrates’ question frames the *Sophist* on the problematic of action that has challenged materialism and its monist ontology since antiquity.

The problematic of action resurfaces as a response to an ontology that rejects transcendence throughout the history of thought. For example, we find it in the most influential response to Spinoza in

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³¹ Plato 1921, 217a.

the initial reception of his work: the entry “Spinoza” in Pierre Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary* from the late seventeenth century. Following the ban of Spinoza’s works, Bayle’s entry on Spinoza became *the* main source of Spinoza’s thought until the Paulus edition at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In his entry, Bayle compulsively returns to the problematic of action in monism. For example, he argues that “in Spinoza’s system all those who say, ‘The Germans have killed ten thousand Turks,’ speak incorrectly and falsely unless they mean, ‘God modified into Germans has killed God modified into ten thousand Turks,’ and the same with all the phrases by which what men do to one another are expressed.”³² Monism entails, according to Bayle, the eradication of difference. Not only is it incapable of distinguishing between Christians and infidels; it cannot even distinguish between the dead and the living. Bayle’s vehement tone is different from Socrates’ playful disposition, but the problem they both raise is substantively the same: the difficulty to account for difference in monism.

In the twentieth century, we rarely find the same clarity about the problematic of action in relation to a monist materialist ontology.³³ But the lack of explicit philosophical scrutiny only seems to intensify its power as it is intuitively grasped in the everyday life of a secular outlook that has lost all guarantees offered by the transcendent. For example, the existential dread for the lack of a moral compass can be understood within the same register: If nothing matters, if all is the same and hence there is no difference, if everything is indifferent, it little matters if Meursault in Camus’ *The Stranger* kills an Arab on the beach. Existentialism can be understood as a response to the problematic of action.

The ineffectual and phronesis, then, rely on the a materialist ontology, which in turn leads to the problematic of action. Can we discern from this vantage point a significant divergence about how the ineffectual and phronesis account for action? My contention is that we can. The discourse of phronesis since antiquity accounts for difference through the effects of action, which is why it regards the instrumental as indispensable. By contrast, the repression of the instrumental in the discourse of the ineffectual requires the qualitative distinction between actions that are instrumental and those that are not, which, however, as we will see, results in insurmountable contradictions.

Ancient thought responds to the problematic of action through an examination of the ends of actions: difference is not in existence itself, it is not a response to the question “what is?”; rather, difference is in the effect of what is. This affects even the definition of being. To bypass

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³² Bayle 1965, 312.

³³ See Strauss 1930.

the problematic of action, the Eleatic Visitor in Plato's *Sophist* provides a definition of existence in terms of power (*dynamis*): "I suggest that everything which possesses any power of any kind, either to produce a change in anything of any nature or to be affected even in the least degree by the slightest cause, though it be only on one occasion, has real existence. For I set up as a definition which defines being, that it is nothing else but power [τὰ ὄντα ὡς ἔστιν οὐκ ἄλλο τι πλὴν δύνاميς]."³⁴ Being is neither a static quality nor an incessant movement of differentiation, but rather the effects of its existing. The real ontological question is not "what is?" but rather "what are the effects of what is?" Consequently, the question of the ends of action, and instrumentality in general, become critical not only for a theory of praxis, but also for how praxis and theory are connected within a materialist ontology.³⁵

Within this context, it is not surprising that Cicero—the great summarizer of ancient thought—calls the question of the ends of action the primary question of philosophy in *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*. In book 5, Cicero discusses the most significant question of philosophy. It is, as he puts it, the question that, when it is properly settled or rightly constituted, will also settle all other philosophical questions. This is the question of the good understood in terms of the ends (*de finibus*) of action. Philosophical disagreement arises only about what these ends are so as to reach good and bad effects—but everyone agrees on the pivotal position of the question about ends (*rerum finibus*) in solving the ethical and political dilemmas of the good.³⁶

The discourse of the ends is translated in modernity into the discourse of *utilitas*, which is entirely consistent with identifying the question "what are the effects of what is" as the primary ontological question. The notion of utility permeates Spinoza's thought because, *pace* Bayle, Spinoza develops a notion of difference relying on the ancient strategy. Thus, for example, he states in the Preface to Part IV of the *Ethics* that no action is in itself good or bad. But this is far from saying that all actions are indifferent. Rather, he insists in Proposition 35 that there is nothing more useful to a human being than other human beings, whereby a human is like a god to other humans. Thus difference can be discerned in the mutual help that we provide each other, which not only protects us from threats, but is also the precondition for communities to thrive and prosper. Far from a "night where all the cows are black," locating difference at the end of actions makes the instrumental thinking of phronesis indispensable for social being.³⁷

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34 Plato 1921, 247d–e.

35 See Vardoulakis forthcoming.

36 Cicero 1931, 5.15–16.

37 See Vardoulakis 2020.

The history of the ineffectual within a “secular,” monist materialist ontology starts more recently, but it has had a more determinative influence in the last hundred years.³⁸ The first clear articulation of this strategy to respond to the problematic of action that I have been able to discover is in a course that Heidegger offered at Marburg in 1924–25. The course was titled *Plato’s Sophist*, but from September till Christmas Heidegger concentrated on a reading of phronesis in book 6 of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this course, Heidegger describes in detail a move that has since exercised an enormous influence in philosophy. He argues that there is a realm of activity that gathers all ends of action, claiming that Aristotle called that realm *techne*. Heidegger holds that *techne* is part of scientific knowledge, striving for “a determination of beings insofar as they are *finished, com-plete* [*fertig, voll-ständig*].”³⁹ This denies any essential difference between the ends of action and their effects.

At the same time, Heidegger distinguishes sharply between *techne* and *phronesis* on the grounds that *phronesis* is purified of ends. Consequently, “in the case of *phronesis*, the *praktion* [the doing or the action] is of the same ontological character as the *aletheuein* [disclosing] itself. And here, presumably, the *telos* [end] is in fact disclosed and preserved; for it is the Being of the deliberator himself.”⁴⁰ The *telos* of *phronesis*, in other words, is nothing but one’s concern for oneself, which in *Being and Time*, written the following year, will become the defining characteristic of *Dasein*. *Phronesis* has no other ends, it does not strive for any effects in the world. This entails, according to Heidegger, that *phronesis* is uniquely oriented toward the disclosure of being. Unlike *techne* that is trapped in the pursuit of ends, leading to a forgetting of being, “there is no *lethe* [forgetting] in relation to *phronesis*.”⁴¹ The truth of being is given only through an activity that is purified of all ends of action.

This suggests a *qualitative* difference between two kinds of action, one that is end-oriented and one that is end-free. Heidegger will reformulate this distinction between *techne* and *phronesis* in numerous ways throughout his writings, and it is arguably the determinative distinction for his entire philosophical project. For example, the distinction corresponds to the two parts of *Being and Time*. Division 1 describes *Dasein*’s end-oriented activity in the world. This can either lead us astray to lose being in the chatter and averageness of the everyday. Or it can be a first station toward authenticity that discloses being, which

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38 I say within secular monist materialism because the idea of an action without effects plays a determinative role in religion, especially mysticism. I am not concerned here with notions of action without effects within an ontology that admits transcendence.

39 Heidegger 1997, 85/123.

40 Heidegger 1997, 34/49.

41 Heidegger 1997, 39/56.

he describes in Division 2 of *Being and Time*. The authentic in *Being and Time*, like phronesis in the earlier seminar, is an ineffectual action, devoid of ends. The ineffectual, in its various articulations throughout Heidegger's philosophy, is the precondition for the unforgetting of being as single and unified, that is, as a totality outside of which nothing exists and which knows of no metaphysical transcendence. This *qualitative* distinction between an action with and an action without ends has exercised an enormous influence in modern thought and it has become the canonical response to the problematic of action in "continental philosophy."⁴²

The genealogy of the problematic of action shows that the discourse of the ineffectual is grounded on a fundamental contradiction. Specifically, Heidegger distinguishes between *techne* (which includes all ends of action) and *phronesis* (the ineffectual) on the grounds that they are qualitatively separated because one leads to the forgetting and the other to the disclosure of being. But if there is indeed a single and unified being, as Heidegger puts, or if there is an ontological totality outside of which nothing exists, as I put it earlier, any qualitative distinction is untenable. There is nothing that is inherently good or bad, as Spinoza puts it in the Preface to Part IV of the *Ethics*, because the moment one draws a qualitative distinction between actions, one has ipso facto to admit different qualities within being, which contradicts the initial ontological commitment.

By being consistent with its materialist ontology, the ancient approach to the problematic of action—followed by radical thinkers in modernity like Spinoza—starts appearing increasingly appealing. Maybe we can judge the effects of actions by calculating the means and ends at our disposal. In that instance, our judgments will lack any guarantee to be correct. The effects are produced by given circumstances, which change all the time, so the judgment on the effects of action cannot rely on a universal rule. This approach has, nonetheless, three strongly appealing features. Instrumental judgments concern living as a whole, and thus they have the capacity to contribute to a communal living, as opposed to individualistic pursuits to self-interest; the fallibility of instrumental judgments means that they are predisposed to resist any form of voluntary servitude, and any form of absolute power; and, as a result, instrumental calculations can make a difference, or provide a conception of political action that is open to change.

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42 See Vardoulakis 2024.

5. The ubiquity of phronesis (miscalculations)

The difficulty that arises at this point is whether the queering of philosophy through phronesis actually reproduces the same mistake that the discourse of the ineffectual makes. In other words, how can we avoid asserting that there is a “good” instrumentality and a “bad” one, which merely draws a qualitative distinction within being, just like in the discourse of the ineffectual? The “cunning of the ineffectual” is that it cannot be negated without thereby affirming its qualitatively distinct existence. The position I want to defend is that there is only the instrumentality of phronesis. But phronesis, as fallible, is liable to miscalculation. The instrumentality of the ineffectual is nothing but the miscalculations that fail to live up to phronesis, and yet they still evidence its operative presence.

Someone is bored. That is the starting point of Luis Buñuel’s critique of capitalism and modernity in *Belle de Jour*. The absence of phronesis that simultaneously determines every other expression of instrumental calculation is critical for Buñuel’s film. If phronesis is nowhere, it is consequently everywhere. Its repression makes it all the more powerful, all the more operative, and all the more effective.

The film centers around Séverine, played by Catherine Deneuve. She is the young wife of Pierre Serizy, a surgeon working in a big hospital. They live in a Parisian apartment at the new part of the city, built in the nineteenth century to house the bourgeoisie. A domestic takes care of all the housework, so Séverine has nothing to do. At the same time, Séverine finds it impossible to be intimate with her new husband. In this life of the bourgeoisie, a deep-seated boredom prevails. Séverine finds out about a high-class brothel, and decides to work there in the afternoons. It is not the need of money that drives her to Anais’ establishment. It is rather the boredom of the life of the upper middle class. The brothel is the reverse of her home apartment, the only place where she can feel any erotic desire and overcome her boredom. But this is an individualistic calculation, which will lead to horrible consequences for her life.

A second sphere of the narrative that constantly intrudes into the plot without any explicit relation to it consists in Séverine’s fantasies. These correspond to an aristocratic time signified by the ever-present horse-drawn carriages. This fantasy of an aristocratic *ancien régime* is characterized by erotic excess that is entirely useless. This is the realm of the ineffectual. Even though this seems irrelevant to the plot, it nonetheless demonstrates that Séverine has sexual desires that aspire to aristocratic erotic excess and the useless expenditure of erotic energy that Bataille writes about. That this is a complete fantasy, disconnected from reality, is driven home by Séverine’s first client. He is prone to the excessive and the useless as means of erotic gratification, but instead

of a noble aristocrat he is a fat and sweet industrialist who rejects Séverine for her rigidity—that is, insufficient excess.

Séverine's desire is given a different direction with the arrival of Marcel, with whom she forms a bond. Marcel is what Marx would call lumpen proletariat. His financial condition places him at the bottom of the economic hierarchy, but unlike the proletariat he lives in the margins of society, subsisting through petty crime. He is introduced in the film by a robbery he conducts, which gives him money to visit Anais' brothel. His quaint cane suggests aristocratic fantasies like the ones Séverine has, but everything else, from the holes in his socks to his broken teeth, is decidedly un- or anti-aristocratic. In particular, instead of uselessness and the ineffectual, Marcel is constantly calculating. Every action he undertakes is instrumental. From counting money to ambushing Séverine's husband to shot him, Marcel constantly calculates. But his calculations are just as individualistic as Séverine's, driven by the illusory erotic desire to be with her.

We have then three class positions: the bourgeois that is driven to individualistic calculations through boredom and unfulfilled sexual desire; the aristocratic that is erotic because it is useless and excessive of any calculation; and the petty criminal that is constantly calculating. All three positions indicate forms of miscalculation. The aristocratic excess and uselessness is a fantasy that does not exist—the ineffectual is not—even though it produces effects such as Séverine's decision to join the brothel. The bourgeois and lumpen proletarian calculations are individualistic and ultimately fail: Marcel is killed by the police, and Séverine is effectively imprisoned in her apartment with her husband paralyzed and unable to communicate as a result of Marcel's shot. Within this whirlwind of miscalculations that delimit a realm we can call "romantic love," where is the instrumental calculation of phronesis? It seems nowhere. There is no communal calculation concerned with living as a whole.

And yet, behind the miscalculations needed to produce the fantasy of the ineffectual, the instrumentality of phronesis is ever present in the film. If without the ineffectual the critique of instrumental reason in modernity loses its positive articulation, and hence its conceptual purchase, then the alternative prevails. The calculations of the characters are misguided because they did not live up to phronesis. We can derive three significant insights from these miscalculations:

First, calculative thinking as phronesis is the condition of the possibility of representation *as well as* its deconstruction. The operative presence of phronesis—operative through its absence from the representations of the film—organizes the entire story, as well as the critique of bourgeois mentality.

Second, there is an ethical and political exigency that is irreducible to the normative. There is no "thou shan't not prostitute thyself" at the end of the film. Rather, this is an ethics and politics where no

action is inherently bad. What can be measured are only the effects of miscalculation.

Third, the different calculations and miscalculations permeate the entire social and political field. The instrumentality of phronesis is everywhere; or, perhaps more accurately, there is no outside phronesis. Class relations—or, class struggle—appears in *Belle de Jour* as the conflict that arises from the miscalculations due to the pursuit of romantic love. Romantic love is the source of the fallibility of phronesis. Phronesis should be striving instead for a love of community, for a love of the good as it affects everyone implicated in instrumental calculation.

Maybe, then, it is high time we refuse to be duped by the critique of instrumental reason that confines instrumentality to the conjunction of technoscience with power so as to construct the fantasy of the ineffectual. If we return to the epicurean principle that “pleasure is the end of living,” which suggests that phronesis accompanies our actions that strive for the good, we will be in a better position to regard current social and political issues. Such an epicurean politics give us the means to work through our misplaced love, to resist the compulsive motor response that represses instrumentality, and to “swipe right” when we hear the word “instrumental.”

6. Queering history (class struggle)

If we reflect on the rehabilitation of instrumentality that I have been proposing here, then we can see how it configures the historical in a double sense. First, it suggests that what happens—that is, history—can never be thematized into a clear trajectory or it can never be submitted to a concept. History can be on horseback, but not because, as Hegel thought, because there is such a thing as a world history that can be incorporated into the absolute. To the contrary, history is on horseback solely for the accidental or aleatory reason that Hegel saw Napoleon on his horse in Jena in 1806. Given that calculative thinking is dependent on the given circumstances, our actions that utilize instrumentality are also always tied up to the contingent conditions within which we act. Consequently, if we make phronesis the primary form of knowledge and virtue in pursuit of the good, then we need to admit that history is simply an indefinite series of performatives with no hidden meaning or telos.

Second, this does not entail a radical historical agnosticism or a capitulation to skepticism. Even if there is no logic to history, still there are two ways in which this can be understood. *Either*, as an interminable wait for the ineffectual to occur—that is, the harkening toward the historical manifestation of that which can never be thought of in instrumental terms. This can be understood in many different ways, such as the notion of the miracle in Judeo-Cristian metaphysics, the

exception in political theology, or the event in the political philosophy of the continental tradition. *Or*, as the interminable grappling with the exigency to calculate; as the recognition—expressed by Epicurus—that there is no “outside” to calculation because phronesis is the primary forms of knowledge and virtue.

There is a third element that comes to the fore as soon as place this double sense of the historical next to the insight from the previous section, namely, that instrumentality can operate—and in fact it operates even more forcefully—even when it appears as if it is absent. This third element entails that there is in fact no “either/or” between the ineffectual and instrumentality, and that in fact phronesis is always operative. This is not to suggest that we are actively calculating all the time, but rather that our actions—no matter how they may be determined by unconscious drives and desires—are ultimately part of matrices that evidence instrumentality. The manifestations of the ineffectual are merely miscalculations that in turn also evidence the operative presence of the instrumental. We can call these three moves *the queering of history*.

Karl Marx made an ingenious contribution to this queering of history. By translating the epicurean conception of phronesis into the notion of interest, he offered a most compelling presentation of the twofold aspect of history, both as aleatory and as inextricable from unfolding of instrumentality. His schooling in epicureanism may have contributed. It is customary to read his doctorate on Epicurus and Democritus as a coded commentary on the state of play of the political philosophy of his time.⁴³ And we will look in vain in the portion of the dissertation that has survived, let alone in the even more fragmentary notes, for any explicit reference the political important of phronesis in Epicurus. In his surviving notes, Marx does not address in any sustained way Epicurus’ discussion of phronesis in the “Letter to Menoeceus,” nor the notion of utility—I almost said, *interest*—that permeates the political aphorisms 32 to 38 of Epicurus’ *Principal Doctrines*.

And yet, we find in other writings a most succinct and compelling presentation of the three moves regarding the historical that I highlighted above. This is particularly so in *The Communist Manifesto*. At first blush, Marx and Engels seem to be making an empirically dubious, if not indefensible, claim. They assert that the entire history of humankind can be reduced to the agonism between two social classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. No doubt a historian would dismiss such a notion while digging for dusty documents in an archive.

From the perspective of the queering of history, the historicization of the class struggle assumes a significance that is irreducible to empirically verifiable “facts.” Marx and Engels hold that the entire

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⁴³ For a summary and compelling reconstruction of the context of Marx’s dissertation, see Barbour 2023.

social sphere is determined by the struggle between two competing conceptions of interest represented by two classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. From the perspective of the history of thought that represses instrumentality and thus forgets epicureanism, the assertion that the entire history of humanity can be reduced to the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat appears absurd, even laughable. But from the perspective of an epicurean political philosophy, it simply asserts that we have two fundamental conceptions of calculation in modernity: the bourgeois for which instrumentality is based on “naked self-interest” determined by the “the icy water of egotistical calculation”; and the proletarian that is concerned with the whole of living, renouncing the possibility that calculation can be reduced to quantifiable—and hence monetizable—acts.⁴⁴ The former is the target of the discourse against instrumental reason; the latter is a development of concept of phronesis. Such an epicurean politics maintains both the contingency of historical acts, and the fact that all acts are intertwined with the instrumental.

Consequently, an epicurean politics cannot take the class struggle as a mere sociological fact, or an empirical fact that can be presented with a certain measurable accuracy. If that were the case, the class struggle would be viewed from the perspective of the instrumental logic of the bourgeoisie. The opposite is the case in the *Communist Manifesto*. The bourgeoisie are their own “grave diggers” because the logic of their expression of interest presupposes of necessity the logic of phronesis characteristic of the proletariat.⁴⁵ The “coda” of epicurean politics is the agonism between two notions of instrumentality, one that hopes for a miracle or the event to save us from the usurpation of power by instrumental reason in modernity; and another that views instrumentality as concerned with living as a whole—as communal or “communist”—and hence as the expression of history. The former, however, is nothing but an effect of the latter, which is why upon scrutiny it “melts into air.”

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44 Marx and Engels 1976, 487.

45 Marx and Engels 1976, 496.

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The Lumpenproletariat and the Politics of Class

Kathi Weeks

Abstract: The article builds a case for why the Marxist category of the lumpenproletariat is once again relevant, in this instance, as a conceptual and historical basis upon which to formulate a critical standpoint and articulate a political project. Taking into account both the historical legacy and the contemporary potential of the concept, I argue that the lumpenproletariat's rejection of the forms of respectability politics that confirm the dominant ethics of both work and family can point us in the direction of more promising sites and coalitional forms of anticapitalist struggle.

Keywords: Lumpenproletariat, class categories, Marxism, work ethic, family ethic, respectability politics.

The Marxist category of the lumpenproletariat is once again resonant in the U.S. To be clear, my claim is that the category is relevant not as a form of self-identification, but rather as a conceptual and historical basis upon which to formulate a critical standpoint and articulate a political project. In the pages that follow I want to explore both the historical legacy and the contemporary potential of the concept. Although I will, in the last analysis, reject the pair of terms, proletariat and lumpenproletariat alike, there are valuable lessons to be learned along the way from a reconsideration of this famous distinction from the standpoint of the present moment.

Famously disparaged by Marx and Engels as the subworking class, or, more precisely, a de-classed and disparate collection that includes figures that represent subjects engaged in a variety of itinerant, occasional, informal, nonworking and illegal practices, the lumpenproletariat was negatively contrasted to the upstanding workers exemplified by the economically and socially integrated, and hence powerful and politically reliable, industrial proletariat.¹ Sometimes Marx and Engels sharply differentiated the two categories on something close to ontological grounds; in other writings the lumpenproletariat was described as a precipitate of the proletariat. The most extended list of the category's referents, mentioned in the *18th Brumaire*, include —and I am omitting a couple that are likely unrecognizable to a contemporary reader—vagabonds, discharged soldiers, former prisoners, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, pickpockets, gamblers, brothel keepers, porters, organ grinders, rag pickers, knife grinders, tinkers, and beggars.² Although there is some ambiguity across the relevant texts, it would seem that even the unemployed members of the industrial reserve army were posited

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1 Although it should be noted that Marx and Engels sometimes include as well certain discards from other classes, including the bourgeoisie.

2 Marx 1963, p. 75.

as inside capitalist relations, as opposed to the truly lumpen surplus that remain outside of capital and hence beyond the definitive struggle between the proletariat and bourgeoisie. Thus, in volume I of *Capital*, Marx poses the “actual lumpenproletariat” in summary form as the “vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes,” that inhabit the lowest sediment of the surplus population, the upper layers of which are presumably more porous with the ranks of the proletariat.³ These lists of empirical referents, what Nathaniel Mills astutely describes as “an attempt to conjure a definition through association and synecdoche,”⁴ are testament to Marx and Engels’ theoretical inattention to the concept. The original list expands over the course of later Marxist history, even if greater conceptual precision remains elusive. Frantz Fanon, writing in a different conjuncture, added maids to this list of “classless idlers.”⁵ The Black Panther Party, responding to yet another context, included “the millions of black domestics and porters, nurses’ aides and maintenance men, laundresses and cooks, sharecroppers, unpropertied ghetto dwellers, welfare mothers, and street hustlers” with “no stake in industrial America.”⁶

Many of both the possibilities and the limitations of the concept that I will go on to explore can be traced to the context of its genesis. The term was originally forged in the fires of political-theoretical polemic, fashioned from the detritus of Marx and Engels’ salvage operation on the category of the proletariat. In the 1840s the term proletariat in France and Germany referred, depending somewhat on the user, both to waged workers and to the impoverished rabble.⁷ By extracting the less desirable elements and depositing them in a separate category, the term proletariat was thereby cleansed of its more compromising associations. “In their very labor to construct a new category of the proletariat,” Peter Stallybrass explains, Marx and Engels “reproduced in the form of a residue, the lumpenproletariat, turning upon this category much of the fear and loathing, and the voyeuristic fascination, that the bourgeoisie had turned upon the previously less specific category of the proletariat.”⁸ The proletariat’s unity, upstandingness, agency, and destiny were considerably bolstered through these subtractions and disavowals.

The point of this essay is not to condemn Marx and Engels for their various asides on the topic. I read most of them as by-products of their efforts to establish the political and analytical purchase of the category

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3 Marx 1976, p. 797.

4 Mills 2017, p. 28.

5 Fanon 1963, p. 130.

6 Brown 1992, p. 136.

7 Draper 1972, p. 2286; Brussard 1987, p. 678.

8 Stallybrass 1990, p. 82.

of the proletariat, and perhaps also as a weapon to be deployed in their war of position with Bakunin.⁹ Marx and Engels' disdain for the lumpen class was also in part a reaction to activist events on the ground during which some potential comrades sided with the enemy at great cost to the struggle. Indeed, take away the moralizing terms and tone, and one could argue—although I would not do so—that the distinction between the proletariat and lumpenproletariat served as a credible description of the political realities of a specific conjuncture wherein industrial workers and their like were relatively well-positioned to form a powerful anti-capitalist collective force and others were not. In any case, the fact remains that the category of was very limited interest to both Marx and Engels, who mentioned it sporadically, imprecisely, and inconsistently. In its later appearances in the Marxist tradition, however, Marx and Engels' occasional references and situational judgements became more firmly ensconced in the term's definition. Ever since, debates among Marxists have intermittently erupted, focused less on who is included than about the lumpenproletariat's revolutionary potential or lack thereof.

There are, however, two closely related reasons why a critical exploration of this legacy is warranted: first, the proletariat and lumpenproletariat dichotomy impedes a fuller historical accounting of capitalist class processes; and second, the distinction is increasingly irrelevant to class formations in the present. Let me briefly explain each point in turn.

Two Sides of the Same Coin

The strong distinction between the proletariat and lumpenproletariat that Marx and Engels tended to pose, and many since have echoed, is inadequate in many respects. In this discussion I will focus on the ways that historical processes of proletarianization are inextricably bound up with specific processes of lumpenproletarianization, an insight that the strict conceptual division obscures. We can see this most recognizably with the reserve army of workers who, conceived expansively to include those cast off from the wage relation both temporarily and permanently, functions to discipline the workers that remain employed. But the making of what has come to represent the official working class involved as well processes that sorted others into a separate, marginalized class. These processes of *lumpenproletarianization* could be seen to include what Maria Mies calls *housewifization*, namely, the processes that

.....
⁹ Bakunin characterizes the lumpenproletariat, in pointed contrast to the position of Marx and Engels, as “the flower of the proletariat,” the rabble “which, being very nearly unpolluted by all bourgeois civilization carries in its heart, in its aspirations, in all necessities and the miseries of its collective position, all the germs of the Socialism of the future, and which alone is powerful enough to-day to inaugurate the Social Revolution and bring it to triumph.” Bakunin 1990, p. 48.

constituted women's privatized waged and unwaged domesticity and, thereby, the "atomization and disorganization of these hidden workers" together with their global exploitation as a cheap labor force of imagined "supplementary" wage workers.¹⁰ The story of the creation of the wage labor force under capitalism is incomplete without an account of the constitution of a reproductive labor force that makes it possible on a daily and generational basis. The gender division of labor in the household makes possible the reproduction of the wage system and provides a cheaper wage labor force, including waged domestic workers. As Heidi Hartmann explains it, capitalism requires a tiered placement of workers; "gender and racial hierarchies determine who fills the empty places."¹¹ In Mies' succinct formulation, the "proletarianization of men is based on the housewifization of women" which is, in turn, "closely and causally interlinked" with processes of colonization.¹²

The story Mies recounts about how the "internal colony" of the family in the nations of the colonial powers is enabled by the ongoing exploitation of "external colonies",¹³ is similar to Eldridge Cleaver's adaptation of Franz Fanon's claim that the African lumpenproletariat was the product of colonial capitalism in order to understand the comparable situation of African Americans as an internally colonized people.¹⁴ As histories of racial capitalism well-document, processes of proletarianization are deeply entangled with many of the key processes of *racialization*. It is not that capitalism invented race, Nikhil Pal Singh clarifies, but that "there has been no period in which racial domination has not been woven into the management of capitalist society."¹⁵ In Ruth Gilmore's concise formulation, "capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it."¹⁶ Racism enables not only higher rates of labor exploitation, but also, as Angela Davis among other Panthers note, divides, so as better to conquer, the working class.¹⁷ So long as white workers "could be induced to prefer poverty to equality with the Negro," as W.E.B. Du Bois memorably explains it, the rule of capital is maintained.¹⁸ Racialized subjects are disproportionately recruited from the proletariat into the

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10 Mies 1986, p. 110, p. 118-119.

11 Hartman 1981, p. 18.

12 Mies 1986, p. 110.

13 Ibid., p. 110.

14 Cleaver 2006, p. 176.

15 Singh 2017, p. 44.

16 Gilmore 2022, p. 495.

17 Davis 2016, p. 40; Cleaver 2006, p. 177.

18 Du Bois 2007, p. 557.

lumpenproletariat when they are locked out of the formal wage labor economy¹⁹ and, even more decisively, when they are criminalized by the racial capitalist state.

Indeed, *Criminalization* and proletarianization have long been linked. John Locke, in his liberal capitalist origin story in the *Second Treatise*, memorably differentiated the “industrious and rational” whose labor gave them title to property from the “fancy or covetousness of the quarrelsome and contentious” who enjoy no such right. Members of the deservedly propertyless show up again later in Locke’s narrative in the guise of those exhibiting “the corruption and viciousness of degenerate men” who compel the rest to form society and government in order to protect their lives, liberty, and property.²⁰ Michel Foucault takes up the story a little later but still in the early stages of capitalist development, where in *Discipline & Punish* he traces how minor illegalities came to be criminalized and offenders transformed into delinquents conceived as natural and deviant forms of existence.²¹ Delio Vásquez astutely reads Foucault’s “historical analysis of how and why ‘the poorer classes’ came to be ‘split’ into ‘workers’ and ‘delinquents’” as a critical rejoinder to later Marxists’ separation and disparaging treatment of the lumpenproletariat.²² Loïc Wacquant notes how the prison as a system of punishment and disenfranchisement establishes the sharp divide between “working families” on the one side and on the other side the “‘underclass’ of criminals, loafers, and leeches” epitomized in the racist controlling images of the welfare mother and gang member.²³ Criminalization has long functioned as a way to deal with surplus populations from the early criminalization of the vagabonds in Europe,²⁴ to the mechanisms used to corral the formerly enslaved into the institutions of waged work and family during Reconstruction,²⁵ to the mass incarceration of poor people and especially poor people of color in the U.S.²⁶ “Criminalization and proletarianization,” J. Sakai concludes, “are parts of the same process.”²⁷

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19 Cleaver 2006, p. 180.

20 Locke 1986, P. 22-23, 71, 76. For an illuminating reading of the figure of the thief in the *Second Treatise* see Dilts 2014, p. 85-109.

21 Foucault 1979, p. 251-256.

22 Vásquez 2020, p. 937.

23 Wacquant 2001, p. 120.

24 Melamed 2015, p. 80-81.

25 Walcott 2021, p. 93-94.

26 Gilmore 2022, p. 186.

27 Sakai 2017, p. 113.

Finally, processes of *disabilization*, through which disability is socially constructed from the stuff of physical, cognitive, neurological, and emotional differences, are also part and parcel of processes of capitalist class development. Lumpenproletarians are also divided from proletarians as the typical work processes and normative models of the worker become established by reference to the benchmark of average socially necessary labor time. This makes it possible for some body-minds to comply with the standard terms of the wage labor contract and impossible for others. Being employable according to the normative standard of labor discipline is often the very litmus test for the classification of a disability. Some would-be workers were thrown off onto the street in the process of transition from feudalism to capitalism—as may have been the case of the beggars that Marx and Engels mention—because of physical differences or impairments that rendered them unemployed.²⁸ Today, people with cognitive, neurological, or emotional differences or impairments may be defined as disabled if they do not display the social and communicative capacities required of the model worker of post-Taylorist labor processes.²⁹ “If,” as Rosemarie Garland Thomson writes, “the myth of autonomy and self-determination is to remain intact, those whose situations question it must be split off into a discrete social category governed by different assumptions.”³⁰ The category of the lumpenproletariat can serve such a purpose.

My argument is that historical processes of proletarianization were inseparable from the processes—including, among others, housewifization, racialization, criminalization, and *disabilization*—by which lumpenproletarians were produced as the disavowed cast offs of the working class; they are two sides of the same coin.³¹ A passage from Marx’s early writings, which takes political economy to task for its narrow focus on workers only as they exist for capital, offers something of a rebuttal to Marx and Engels’ own treatment of the lumpenproletariat in their later work: “Political economy ... does not recognize the unoccupied worker, the working man in so far as he is outside this work relationship. The swindler, the cheat, the beggar, the unemployed, the starving, the destitute and the criminal working man are *figures* which exist not *for it*, but only for other eyes - for the eyes of doctors, judges, grave-diggers, beadles, etc. Nebulous figures which do not belong within

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28 Taylor 2004, p. 36-37.

29 Maravelias 2021, p. 426.

30 Thomson 1997, p. 48.

31 To identify just one more of these processes, *militarization* produced at once the proletarianized soldiers and support staff of the military industrial complex base alongside the lumpenproletarianized sex workers, domestic workers, and variety of day laborers—to single out the groups of workers I discuss later in the argument—that make-up the outsiders within of the military base.

the province of political economy.”³² An adequate analysis of the history of capitalist political economies requires a broader accounting of the hierarchies that are constitutive of their social formations.

From Margins to Center

But what was an unfortunate oversight in accounts of capitalist industrialization in Europe and North America constitutes today a serious limit to theorizing the present. Clearly the old categorical division is of limited relevance to the global South where, as James Ferguson notes, urban populations “often subsist via improvised, ‘informal,’ and, one is tempted to say, ‘lumpen’ livelihood strategies that have increasingly displaced stable wage labor as the economic basis of urban livelihoods across much of the world.”³³ It is also increasingly inadequate to the changing landscape of income-generating work today in postindustrial post-Fordism, with the rise of less secure, regularized, and sustaining forms of employment, together with the proliferation of non-income generating surplus populations. Indeed, the persistent distinctions that subtend that very division between proletariat and lumpenproletariat—including distinctions between productive and unproductive labor, formal and informal work, the employed and the unemployed, many of which continue to be invoked today in many class categories and classificatory practices—fail to account not only for the historical development but also the current forms and logics of U.S. capitalism as a settler, colonial, racial, ableist, and heteropatriarchal capitalist social formation.

Consider the example of current anticapitalist labor studies scholarship that reveals how groups what would have been counted as lumpenproletarians—in this case day laborers and sex workers—are no longer marginal to but are in fact emblematic of the contemporary labor market. Paul Apostolidis describes the work of day laboring in the U.S. as at once a singular experience and paradigmatic of the increasingly precarious forms of employment in the new economy.³⁴ Similarly Heather Berg insists that the conditions that sex workers engaged in porn work have long encountered now characterize the large swathe of precarious jobs that involve intimate forms of labor.³⁵ Whether it was ever legitimate, the distinction between proletariat and lumpenproletariat cannot survive the transition from the industrial model of the Fordist employment contract, Taylorist work process, and Keynesian ideal of

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³² Marx 1975, p. 335.

³³ Ferguson 2019, p. 8.

³⁴ Apostolidis 2019, p. 147.

³⁵ Berg 2021, p. 2.

gendered separate spheres of waged production and household based reproduction to the postindustrial period's post-Fordist, post-Taylorist, neoliberal hodge-podge of increasingly precarious labor contracts, rise of service labor, and more extensive confounding of what is productive and what is reproductive. The itinerant, informal, and occasional workers most clearly associated with Marx and Engels' original definition are becoming increasingly standard. With the explosive growth of incarceration as a way to deal with surplus populations since the 1980s,³⁶ the ranks of the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated who are expelled and excluded from the ranks of the waged workers has also skyrocketed.

Perhaps the most important reason why the categories fail us, both in the past and in the present, is precisely why they have so often been defended: they cleave what otherwise might cohere. To recall and build on Angela Davis' point cited earlier, about how racism has been used as a tool to divide the working class, Marxist feminists in the 1970s similarly described the Left's refusal to recognize unwaged women in the household as workers as a misguided effort to divide the working class.³⁷ "In the name of 'class struggle' and 'the unified interest of the class,'" Nicole Cox and Silvia Federici write also in the 1970s, "the practice of the left has always been to select certain sectors of the working class as the revolutionary agents and condemn others to a merely supportive role for the struggles these sectors are waging." In so doing, they explain, "the left has thus reproduced in its organizational and strategic objectives the same divisions of the class which characterize the capitalist division of labor."³⁸ The proletariat/lumpenproletariat distinction too functions wittingly or not to divide and conquer capital's antagonists. Among other reasons, it serves to uphold the twin ideological maintenance programs of capitalism's dominance: the work ethic and the family ethic. "The fact is," Herbert Gans observes, "that the defenders of such widely preached norms as hard work, thrift, monogamy, and moderation need people who can be accused, accurately or not, of being lazy, spendthrift, promiscuous, and immoderate."³⁹ Johnnie Tillmon, a leader of the 1970s National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), makes a very similar point as she explains how the ethic of the heteronormative family functions as a mechanism of work discipline: "society needs women on welfare as 'examples' to let every woman, factory workers and housewife workers alike, know what will happen if she lets up, if she's laid off, if she tried to go it alone without a man. So these ladies stay on their feet or on their

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36 Gilmore 2022, p. 187.

37 James 1976, p. 7.

38 Cox and Federici 2017, p. 213.

39 Gans 1994, p. 275.

knees all their lives instead of asking *why* they're only getting 90-some cents an hour, instead of daring to fight and complain."⁴⁰

The Lumpen Fight back

Marxism's claim that the proletariat is a revolutionary class and the lumpenproletariat is not hinges on the former's proximate relationship to the means of production. Simply put, one is situated collectively to become a conscious revolutionary force while the other floats loose, vulnerable to recruitment by reactionary forces; one can lead the other can only be led. This claim could be challenged on a variety of historical, theoretical, and political grounds; my refutation, such as it is, will consist of a quick review of the contributions to U.S. political activism on the part of some of the most iconic figures of the lumpen class, at least in its contemporary iteration: sex workers, day laborers, domestic workers, and welfare recipients.

Sex workers have been engaged in significant collective militancy since at least the 1960s. Within this expansive archive of activist groups and initiatives, Heather Berg identifies an abundance of "creative approaches to class struggle."⁴¹ "Contrary to the stereotype of disempowered victims in need of moral rescue," Melinda Chateauvert observes, "sex workers are fierce fighters."⁴² Before embarking on his co-research project with immigrant day laborers, Paul Apostolidis wondered, "how, indeed, could anyone in circumstances to thoroughly precarious be expected to develop an activist will, a critical consciousness, and a commitment to common struggle?" What he discovered was that "the political vigor and sway of day labor groups contrast strikingly with day laborers' socially peripheral condition," an incongruence that "reflects day labor organizations' tactical ingenuity and catholicity."⁴³ Domestic workers, led primarily by women of color, have been organizing around worker rights at least since the 1930s. Here too we find a wealth of organizing campaigns. In 1940 Esther Cooper Jackson documented the formation, often instigated by black women, of local domestic worker unions and clubs throughout the 1930s, proving wrong those who assumed that domestic workers were unorganizable.⁴⁴ The first national group, The Household Technicians of America, formed

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40 Tillmon 2003, p. 375.

41 Berg 2021, p. 2.

42 Chateauvert 2013, p. 4.

43 Apostolidis 2019, p. 17, 26.

44 Jackson 2022, p. 118, 122.

in 1971, came to represent over three dozen groups and a membership of 25,000.⁴⁵ Founded in 2007, the National Domestic Workers Alliance now includes five chapters and over 70 affiliated organizations in 22 states.⁴⁶ Premilla Nadasen concludes that the history of household worker activism in the U.S. forcefully “challenges widespread assumptions about the passivity of household workers.”⁴⁷ Between the mid 1960s and 1970s the welfare rights movement, this too led by black women, fought for benefits, rights, and for a more just economy. Despite their invisibility as unwaged workers, despite the stigma they faced for their impersonal reliance on the state for an income rather than personal dependence on an employer or a husband, at its height, the National Welfare Rights Organization had 25,000 members and conducted several successful campaigns for reform.⁴⁸

All of these labor activists, excluded from or at best marginal to traditional union politics, have had to develop their own organizational models and repertoires of struggle. The mutual aid projects, political organizations, clubs, self-help groups, and worker centers that they have built nurture solidarity, support forms of political advocacy, enable resistance to stigma, and promote insubordination to the criminalization and deportation regime of the carceral state. Far from models of political passivity, among the most iconic lumpen groups of day laborers, sex workers, household workers, and poor unwaged mothers, we find vibrant models of political militancy. In fact, rather than cautionary tales they offer models for the future of labor organizing. In his analysis of day laborers’ worker centers as increasingly important to migrant justice and worker rights mobilizations, Apostolidis makes a strong case for recognizing that “the future of working-class solidarity depends significantly on the growth of alternative workers’ organizations” beyond the union model.⁴⁹ Berg likewise insists that sex workers have much to teach us about class struggle in the here and now, in no small part because sex workers are “often craftier than those in straight jobs and have a less romantic analysis of work under capitalism.”⁵⁰ As all these scholars argue, there is much to learn from these labor activists about how to organize the heterogeneous labor force characteristic of the contemporary economy.

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45 Nadasen 2015, p. 79.

46 Poo 2022, p. 55.

47 Nadasen 2015, p. 3.

48 Kornbluh 1997, p. 77.

49 Apostolidis 2019, p. 26, 27.

50 Berg 2021, p. 2.

In this section of the argument, I want to make a case for why, if forced to choose sides between the proletariat and the lumpenproletariat as the revolutionary subject, there are good reasons to opt for the latter. I will later walk that argument back in critical respects, but for now I want to explore further the political potential of the lumpenproletariat. The best resource for this project is the Black radical tradition, which, particularly in its Marxist elements, has long been on the forefront of efforts to rehabilitate the category for application to postindustrial and post/anti-colonial conjunctures. One genealogy could begin with Lucy Parsons's 1884 address to "Tramps, the Unemployed, the Disinherited, and Miserable," in which she hails each as a former worker who is "denounced as a 'worthless tramp and a vagrant' by that very class who had been engaged all those years in robbing you and yours."⁵¹ James Boggs' *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook* from 1963 might serve as a fitting bookend to Parsons's speech. Recognizing the effects of deindustrialization, the rise of automation, and the decline of unions, Boggs looked forward to the possibilities of a postwork society in which the right to a full life is no longer contingent on one's employment. "This means," he argues, "that we must look to the outsiders"—the unemployed, the castaways, the rejects, in short, the workless people—"for the most radical, that is the deepest, thinking as to the changes that are needed."⁵² Following the citational linkages within a related archive we might trace a different path from Frantz Fanon's insistence in the early 1960s that the people of the African shanty towns "at the core of the lumpenproletariat" constitute one of "the most radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people,"⁵³ to the Black Panther Party's recognition in the early 1970s that the black lumpenproletariat, having "been locked outside of the economy" and forced to develop its own forms of rebellion, is, according to according to Eldridge Cleaver, "the vanguard of the proletariat."⁵⁴ The "unemployables," Huey Newton argues, who are on trend to become the popular majority, should be acknowledged as a revolutionary force.⁵⁵ As Angela Davis observed in 1971, the vast number of Black and Brown men and women who are jobless means that "the role of the unemployed, which includes the lumpenproletariat, in revolutionary struggle must

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51 Parsons 2020, p. 433.

52 Boggs 2009, p. 51.

53 Fanon 1963, p. 129.

54 Cleaver 2006, p. 180, 181, 173.

55 Newton 2009, p. 280.

be given serious thought.”⁵⁶ Perhaps in relation to the racist language of the term “underclass,” which was in circulation at the time but came into widespread use in the 1980s,⁵⁷ the historical baggage of the term lumpenproletariat feels manageably light in comparison.

The argument that I want to pursue in the next pages builds on these claims that it is precisely those qualities imputed to the lumpenproletariat through its contrast to the proletariat that are the basis upon which a contemporary anticapitalist politics might be built. There are three specific qualities traditionally attributed to the lumpenproletariat that I want to affirm: its heterogeneity, unpredictability, and unrespectability.

Let us begin with the lumpenproletariat’s famous heterogeneity and incoherence. Peter Stallybrass notes how the nineteenth century lumpenproletariat was described in terms of the “spectacle of multiplicity” it evokes in contrast to the unified sameness of the proletariat and bourgeoisie alike.⁵⁸ “Thrown hither and thither,” as Marx describes it, these individuals are unable to cohere into a collective formation.⁵⁹ But Dominick LaCapra is perhaps more accurate when he claims that “Marx’s famous description of the lumpenproletariat combines the hyperbolic heterogeneity and massive homogeneity that generally typify perceptions of the radically ‘other’.”⁶⁰ This heterogeneous breadth of figures each of which remains nonetheless historically static and sociologically stuck in their positions, would, however, seem to be far better equipped to account for a political economy increasingly characterized by “nonstandard” employment contracts and “informal” forms of work. Of course, the concern was not necessarily about the jumble of differences the category sought to conceive together per se, but rather, that in the absence of a consistent exposure to work discipline, the lumpenproletariat would be incapable of cohering into a disciplined organizational form. I have two responses to this concern. The first is simply to note that I suspect, given the way such dualisms work, calling the members of one group a “mob” is a telltale sign that it is being deployed in order to exaggerate the capacity for disciplined unity of the members of the other group. My second response is a little more substantive but, I think, equally clear: there are excellent reasons to doubt whether habituation to work discipline leads to a radical consciousness and militant struggle. The hegemonic

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56 Davis 2016, p. 35.

57 Zweig 2000, p. 84; Gans 1994.

58 Stallybrass 1990, p. 72.

59 Marx 1963, P. 75.

60 LaCapra 1983, p. 284.

ideology of work in the U.S. together with myriad local workplace managerial regimes constitute a potent force of subjectification, which is remarkably successful in producing at least acquiescence to, if not the fervent embrace of, its teachings about the virtues and rewards of the commitment to work.

The second element I want to reclaim is the lumpenproletariat's political unpredictability and unreliability. This "dangerous class," Marx and Engels declare, "may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution," but is more likely to play "the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue."⁶¹ The lumpenproletariat's reputation as a mercurial and mercenary band of dangerous reactionaries solidified in the first half of the 20th century,⁶² such that, according to Raphael Samuel's reminiscence of his own life in the British Communist Party, the category could be freely invoked as the go-to explanation of incidents of working class complicity, conservatism, or fascism, and, in that way, help to "account for British Communism's difficulties—in particular the hostility which it encountered among the masses."⁶³ The Marxist opposition between "an organized, redemptive proletariat and its disorganized, unreliable remainder"⁶⁴ attempts to disqualify the members of the lumpenproletariat from radical politics, but serves at the same time the perhaps more important function of establishing the righteousness and dependability of the proletariat. Dominick LaCapra speculates that "the intensity of Marx's polemical animus" against the lumpenproletariat "might be seen as a function of a concealed or even repressed fear that the proletariat itself is not the revolutionary agent Marx wishes it to be."⁶⁵ This hypothetical worry about whether the proletariat was up to its historical task might be a consequence of the way that its imagined dependable class consciousness was often assumed rather than won and its political predictability more imputed than observed. Such an imputed consciousness represents the stubborn residues of a habit of de-politicized economic deterministic thinking in some orthodox Marxists traditions. It is this tendency to attribute some kind of extraordinary critical insight to the working classes, a consciousness that is imagined as structurally assured, that inevitably leads to disappointments of the "what's the matter with Kansas" variety. Political subjects are politically "erratic" because they do not in fact always act according to their economic interests. The recognition that

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61 Marx and Engels 1948, p. 20.

62 Stallybrass 1990, p. 90.

63 Samuel 2017, p. 187.

64 Ingram 2018, p. 102.

65 LaCapra 1983, p. 284.

consciousness is not determined by or even necessarily contingent upon one's structural location under capitalism, such that political work necessarily depends on organizing campaigns and ongoing processes of consciousness-raising, seems like a point in the lumpenproletariat category's favor. Fanon, for example, had no illusions that the lumpenproletariat of the colonial shantytowns would necessarily join the anticolonial movement: "if this available reserve of human effort is not immediately organized by the forces of rebellion, it will find itself fighting as hired soldiers side by side with the colonial troops."⁶⁶ What he defends is a matter of political possibility not structural determination or ontological certainty. J. Sakai's more neutral descriptions of the lumpenproletariat as a "wildcard in the process of change" and as "the risks of change personified"⁶⁷ strike me as a more prudent way to approach the question of the political potential of any class.

Third, the appeal to the moral respectability of the proletariat that subtended the distinction since its origin is, I would argue, another good reason to side with the lumpenproletariat. Note here how Marx and Engel's descriptions take aim at the level of individual character, as in Engels' description of the lumpenproletariat as venal and depraved scoundrels;⁶⁸ these terms are moral denunciations not political judgements. Robert Brussard finds in their descriptions of the lumpenproletariat the echoes of traditional emotional responses to the "lower" classes including aversion and fear⁶⁹ and LaCapra attributes Marx's "polemical invective" to a "bourgeois, indeed, Victorian sense of propriety."⁷⁰ Samuel's account of the British Communist Party in the interwar period describes something similar, insofar as, according to his recollections, its membership affirmed a class morality that rested upon a Promethean ethic of clean living, steely resolve, and strong character, to which the lumpenproletariat figured as other, the "nightmare of the Communist repressed."⁷¹ It was precisely this inability and refusal to, as Fanon described it, fit in with the morality of the colonial rulers that served as an indication of its subversive potential by Fanon's political calculations.⁷²

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66 Fanon 1963, p. 137.

67 Sakai 2017, p. iv.

68 Cited in Draper 1972, p. 2298-2299.

69 Brussard 1987, p. 687.

70 LaCapra 1983, p. 281, 284.

71 Samuel 2017, p. 175.

72 Fanon 1963, p. 130.

It seems to me, however, that two more specific moral offenses loom large in Marx and Engels' characterizations of lumpen disrespectability: violations of the work ethic and of its partner, the family ethic. Consider Marx and Engels' descriptions of the lumpenproletariat as "people without a definite trade, vagabonds, *gens sans feu et sans aveu*"⁷³ and "people without a definite occupation and a stabile domicile."⁷⁴ Vagabondage is definitive in this conception. According to the French penal code of 1810, vagabonds "are those who have neither an assured domicile nor means of existence, and generally have no trade or profession."⁷⁵ It is their violations of the dominant ethics of *both* work and family that seem particularly notable in these characterizations. As Draper summarizes the Marxist concept, "the lumpen-class is the catch-all for those who fall out, or drop out, of the exiting social structure so that they are no longer functionally an integral part of society."⁷⁶ My claim is that the specifics of this "existing social structure" are important: the major components of the capitalist organization of labor, namely, the system of wage work and the institution of the privatized family. These are people without an occupation and without a home or stable domicile, subject to the disciplinary regimes of neither work or family. As such they are not just vagabonds but tramps—the double-meaning of which, emerging only later in the early twentieth century, can perhaps better capture the violation of both work and family ethics.

The label "working proletariat" is hardly morally neutral, either in Marx's day or our own. Indeed, however, the contrast Marx poses in *The 18th Brumaire* casts the lumpenproletariat as in opposition not to the working proletariat, but, as Draper emphasizes, to the French "laboring nation" as a whole.⁷⁷ The workless lumpens do not only violate *rules*—the laws governing vagabondage, for example—they desecrate a national *ethos*. In his history of the punitive society, Foucault argues that when working class illegalism became the major target of bourgeois state apparatuses in the nineteenth century, the primary concern was that the refusal to render one's body into a productive force and that the practices of idleness, irregular working rhythms, and "festive revelry" might take collective forms and thereby infect the larger working

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73 Marx cited in Draper 1972, p. 2294. Draper translates *gens sans feu et sans aveu* as people without homes or a place in society (1972, p. 2294-5). More detailed translations note that *gens sans feu* evokes a people with no hearth and home, whereas the expression *gens sans aveu* dates from the Middle Ages and refers to people "who were not tied to a lord, and who thus had no protection under the law" (Ross 2008, p. 58), which in the 19th century context could evoke the absence of a socially recognized occupation.

74 Engels cited in Draper 1972, p. 2287.

75 Ross 2008, p. 58.

76 Draper 1972, p. 2309.

77 Marx 1963, p. 75; Draper 1972, p. 2297.

population.⁷⁸ The members of the lumpenproletariat, exempted from the disciplining effects of work who, in other words, do “not constitute work as their oeuvre,”⁷⁹ are resistant to if not dangerously immune to the secular creed of work as highest calling and ethical duty.⁸⁰

As for the tramp’s offense against the ethics of the family, recall that vagrancy is defined not only as joblessness but as homelessness. Foucault notes that another focus of Bourgeois concern that took root in the nineteenth century was the workers’ “refusal of family,” that is, “not using one’s body in the reproduction of its labor-powers in the form of a family, raising its children and guaranteeing through its care the renewal of labor-powers within the family.”⁸¹ This was the same period that what Judith Walkowitz describes as the “new enthusiasm for state intervention into the lives of the unrespectable poor,” inspired a series of campaigns by the British state to penalize women working in prostitution as a means to divide them from the broader working class and to prevent them from serving as “the conduit of infection to respectable society.”⁸² Consider, for a more specific example, Peter Worsley’s description of the African lumpenproletariat in which Fanon found radical political potential: not only have they no steady jobs, “their domestic and marital life is similar: a set of disconnected episodes rather than a continuous series of unfolding successive phases in the normal development sequence of family-life: getting married, having children, their growing up, their leaving home, etc. For the lower depths, marriage itself is abnormal.”⁸³ U.S. history is rife with intensive efforts on the part of the state and capital to promote the private nuclear family among the formerly enslaved, waves of immigrant workers, and the women recipients of welfare who the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act intended to compel into patriarchal marriage and waged work. Absent the assimilatory mechanisms of familial milestones, the normalizing effects of the heteropatriarchal family on genders and sexualities, and the privatized family’s narrowing and dampening of broader erotic, social and political desires, the lumpenproletariat’s anarchic reputation is easily imagined and imputed.

The political potential of the lumpenproletariat’s twin violations of productivist work ethics and the ethic of the family that confers upon

78 Foucault 2015, p. 151, 187, 190-191.

79 Bradley and Lee 2018, p. 639.

80 Nicholas Thoburn notes, but does not himself endorse, that some might justifiably characterize Marx’s conception of the lumpenproletariat as “the class of the refusal of work.” 2002, p. 435.

81 Foucault 2015, p. 187.

82 Walkowitz 1980, p. 3, 4.

83 Worsley 1972, p. 209.

its adherents gender and sexual respectability is the third element of the traditional category that I want to affirm. In these ways, the figure of the lumpenproletariat is resonant also with the content of some of the political projects cited earlier. Consider, for example, NWRO leader Johnnie Tillmon's 1972 response to those who praised the dignity of wage work: "what dignity?" The fact is, she continues, "that our country's economic policies deny the dignity and satisfaction of self-sufficiency to millions of people—the millions who suffer every day in underpaid dirty jobs—and still don't have enough to survive."⁸⁴ The NWRO rejected pro-work arguments, including liberal feminism's embrace of waged work as a viable alternative to culturally mandated domesticity.⁸⁵ "The NWRO," Wilson Sherwin and Frances Fox Piven argue, "demanded the freedom *not* to work."⁸⁶ Some of these activists were also critical of respectability politics, demanding sexual freedom outside the institution of marriage.⁸⁷ Refusing at once waged work for mothers and the traditional family ideal of full-time mothering, they "identified civic engagement as a productive effort, deserving of both respect and remuneration."⁸⁸

For another example, the kind of sex worker activism that Heather Berg writes about militantly rejects the norms of gender, sexual and family respectability against which sex workers have been judged shameful. Refusing the usual story of what Berg calls "sex work exceptionalism," such activists have long maintained that sex work is another form of intimate labor under capitalism.⁸⁹ But to insist that sex work is a job like any other, Berg explains, is not to celebrate but to demystify it: "To call something 'work' is, from an antiwork position, not to bid for respectability or repudiate pleasure. It is, instead, to refuse that pleasure be appropriated and bled dry as yet another site of extraction."⁹⁰ As a final example, consider Cathy Cohen's widely circulated vision of a contemporary queer politics in which "the nonnormative and marginal position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work,"⁹¹ a coalition that L.H. Stallings's manifesto for a grassroots politics of gender and sexuality in the New South expands to include also migrants, day-laborers, queer

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84 Tillmon 2003, p. 375, 376.

85 Boris 1999, p. 46-47.

86 Sherwin and Piven 2019, p. 137.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 143.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

89 Berg 2014, p. 694.

90 Berg 2021, p. 184.

91 Cohen 1997, p. 438.

and trans youth, and Black and brown coalitions.⁹² These examples are only a taste of the kind of anticapitalist politics that take dead aim at the institutions of work and family towards which the traditional conception of the lumpenproletariat gestures. In the context of a U.S. political economy that continues to depend on the twin structures of waged work and family as the primary mechanisms of income distribution and social belonging, the lumpenproletariat's rejection of the forms of respectability politics that confirm the dominant ethics of work and family points in the direction of more promising sites of struggle.

The Problem of Class Categories

If forced to choose between these traditional conceptions of proletariat and lumpenproletariat, there are, I have been trying to suggest, good reasons to opt for the latter. Under its banner, one could link together a host of precarious, marginalized, and unwaged workers, including waged and unwaged domestic workers, day laborers, sex workers, laborers in various underground economies, undocumented immigrants, the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated, together with other surplus body-minds, and link them with myriad gig and freelance, temporary and seasonal, parttime and contingent workers. The category can point us in the direction of important targets for anticapitalist activism in the institutions of work and family. Perhaps this category could even stand in as the general designation that spans the lumpenproletariat to the proletariat, perhaps through a hinge category like the precariat. Engels once criticized Karl Kautsky for using the label proletariat as a broad term inclusive of what Engels sought to set apart as the lumpen class; Kautsky's proletariat was a "squinty-eyed" concept because it looks in both directions, thereby blurring what Engels saw as an important distinction.⁹³ Perhaps today the lumpenproletariat could serve as a squinty-eyed category, one that in placing at the center what the old division relegated to the margins, is more adequate to a U.S. political economy in which categorical distinctions between formal and informal employment, employment and unemployment, work and nonwork are increasingly untenable and the wage-and-family income distribution system is broken well beyond any of the usual liberal fantasies of repair.

Rather than choose between the categories, however, there are even better reasons to reject them both. I do not see how either term, with the pair's history as a mutually constitutive opposition and instrument of class division, can be salvaged. In the preceding

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92 Stallings 2020, p. 164-169.

93 Draper, 1972, p. 2288.

argument the categorical demarcation served as a way to identify a more capacious conception of anticapitalist agency and to articulate a political agenda directed squarely against the institutions of work and family. In this way it played the role of what Fredric Jameson called a vanishing mediator.⁹⁴ Jameson used it to describe Max Weber's argument about the role of the Protestant work ethic, which helped to create the secular spirit of capitalism that then undercut the religious basis of the original ethic. Here, the conceptual distinction could be seen to serve as a comparable transitional device, an analytic tool, that once deployed can then be subsequently abandoned.

But here is the problem: to get to the point where we might abandon the concept of the lumpenproletariat we would have to succeed, when we have so far failed, to move beyond the concept of the proletariat that is constructed and sustained through its opposition to the lumpenproletariat. This claim may at first seem implausible since the category of the proletariat rarely appears in either academic or popular Marxist literatures. Indeed, it has largely been replaced with the category of the working class, which tends to present as more of an empirical than a political concept and would seem to convey a certain moral neutrality. Yet I would argue that the category of the working class remains deeply entangled with the concept of the proletariat, that even when the label proletariat is absent it continues to exert a powerful influence on the contemporary class imaginary.⁹⁵ A sturdy chain of resemblances continues to link the category of the working class in many Left discourses to the figure of the proletarian, and the proletarian to the industrial period and the figure of the male factory worker, making any one concept difficult to disaggregate from the other.⁹⁶

This is not merely a simple—which is to say, not an innocent—*anachronism*. There is rhetorical power in the allusion to the industrial proletariat, all the more so when it remains tacit and ill-defined. It is worth exploring exactly what the rhetorical power consists of, the affects it can evoke and associations it can marshal. The implicit connection to the industrial proletariat, I would argue, lends references to the working class both a certain moral force and a degree of political clarity. In terms

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94 Jameson 1973.

95 Another obvious drawback with the label working class, or even the is that not everyone we might want to recognize as political subjects of a capitalist economy works for wages, which is what the word "working" continues to connote. James Ferguson argues that the term proletariat remains resonant in the context of contemporary South Africa and conceives the category as spanning working and nonworking peoples. Drawing on the Roman use of the term to designate not the wage working but the propertyless, the concept blurs, or squints at, the later Marxist distinction between proletariat and lumpenproletariat (2019, p. 17). I would argue that, at least in the U.S., the historical baggage of the term limits its capaciousness.

96 Removing the word "class," as in the language of "working people," does little to relieve the latter term of its association with the historical baggage of class categories.

of the moral virtues it signals, the male industrial worker represents, to those steeped in the productivist ethic of work, a worthy and resolute commitment to work. In his history of the work ethic in the 19th century U.S., Daniel Rodgers notes that the figure of the blacksmith continued to be used in the popular media to represent the iconic worker long after the processes of industrialization had all but eliminated this form of pre-industrial artisanship. It persisted because it conveyed a pre-industrial ideal of work in a period in which that vision of work as a means to individual autonomy and male authority was being challenged: the blacksmith “was a figure untouched by the industrial invasion,” Rodgers writes, “and in the 1870s he held an element both of longing and credibility.”⁹⁷ Today it would seem that in the postindustrial U.S., the factory worker continues to serve as a site of nostalgic yearning and cultural legibility. The figure of the factory worker arguably functions, even if only tacitly, as the anachronistic figuration of an industrial ideal of work as the path to individual moral worth, masculine independence, and family mobility in the context of a new economy of waged work that can rarely deliver any of those promises.

There is as well, I suspect, a certain political clarity that is marshalled by the inferred connection between the working class and the industrial proletariat. The factory worker as touchstone evokes a time when class mappings were clear; it promises to sharpen the borders between classes in a time when the increasingly blurred borders and complicated relationships among income, educational, and occupational groupings, and among class, race, gender, and nation risk muddying our capacities for class analysis. It may serve as well to alleviate some understandable anxiety on the part of those who subscribe to the proposition that labor unions are the only organizational form capable of waging class struggle. Jefferson Cowie marks the end of the 1970s as the “end of a historically elusive ideal: the conscious, diverse, and unified working class acting as a powerful agency in political, social, and economic life.”⁹⁸ Both the class-first Left and the Left that conceives capitalism as the totality of which heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and settler colonialism are but subsystems might find clarity in the association of the working class with an older model of class homogeneity that the figure of the factory worker can evoke. By 1980s, Cowie laments, “women, immigrants, minorities, and, yes, white guys, made up the ‘working class’ that succeeded basic industry, but there is no discursive, political place for them comparable to the classic concept if the industrial working class” (362). These anachronistic resonances in contemporary evocations of the category of the working class continue

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97 Rodgers 1978, p. 242.

98 Cowie 2010, p.369.

to produce such problematic, albeit rhetorically satisfying, disjunctions between our political economic theorizing and our political economic realities.

To the extent that the category of the lumpenproletariat remains conceptually wedded to the concept of the proletariat, the division between which continues to haunt the term working class, then it will be difficult to move beyond this opposition in a way that opens new and promising terrains of struggle and forges connections among a more diverse array of workers and others subject to capitalist rule. Until we think more expansively about both what it means to “work” in the contemporary economy and what counts as a struggle for economic justice, then it would seem to me that it is not yet time to consign the category of the lumpenproletariat to the dustbin of history.

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Class Struggle: Antagonism Beyond Fighting an Enemy

Slavoj Žižek

Abstract: We live in an era of *unholy alliances*, a combination of ideological elements which violate the standard opposition of Left and Right. What does the Left do when it confronts a reactionary agent which IS what it claims to be, where there is no need for deep symptomal analysis? Here the Left gets perplexed: what of, at some deeper level, we are even worse than our reactionary opponent? Drawing from quantum physics, this short essay I make parallels with Bell's theorem in quantum physics in order to understand certain contemporary phenomena.

Keywords: class struggle, antagonism, Heidegger, quantum physics, Bell's theorem

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What characterizes an authentic emancipatory thought is not a vision of conflict-free harmonious future but the properly dialectical notion of antagonism which is totally incompatible with the Rightist topic of the need of an enemy to assert our self-identity – here is Heidegger's concise articulation of the need for an enemy from his course of 1933-34:

“An enemy is each and every person who poses an essential threat to the *Dasein* of the people and its individual members. The enemy does not have to be external, and the external enemy is not even always the most dangerous one. And it can seem as if there were no enemy. Then it is a fundamental requirement to find the enemy, to expose the enemy to the light, *or even first to make the enemy*, so that this standing against the enemy may happen and so that *Dasein* may not lose its edge.... [The challenge is] to bring the enemy into the open, to harbor no illusions about the enemy, to keep oneself ready for attack, to cultivate and intensify a constant readiness and to prepare the attack *looking far ahead with the goal of total annihilation*.¹

The most ominous passage is here “to expose the enemy to the light, *or even first to make the enemy*, so that this standing against the enemy may happen.” In short, it doesn't even matter if the enemy is a real enemy - if there is no enemy it has to be invented so that a people “may not lose its edge” and can prepare the (invented) enemy's “total annihilation”... What we find here is the logic of anti-Semitism at its most elementary: what Heidegger ignores is the possibility that *an enemy is invented to create the false unity of the people and thus cover up its immanent antagonisms*.

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¹ Heidegger 2010, p.73

The true danger of this Heidegger's stance is that he presents the invention and elimination of the enemy as a proper *ethical* stance. The latest example of such a stance in movies is *The Menu* (Marx Mylord, 2022) in which Ralph Fiennes gives an exquisite performance by playing Julian, a top cook and owner of an elite restaurant on a small private island. He invites a group of rich guests with a plan to kill them all - the only survivor is Margot, one of the guests who mocks Julian's dishes and complains that she is still hungry. When Julian asks what she would like to eat, Margot requests a cheeseburger and fries, having previously seen a photo of a young, happy Julian working at a fast-food restaurant. Moved by her simple request, he prepares the meal to her specifications. Margot takes a bite and praises his food, then asks if she can get it "to go". Julian packs the food for her and the staff allow her to leave. Margot takes the Coast Guard boat docked nearby and escapes the island while Julian sets the restaurant ablaze, detonating the barrel and killing the guests, staff, and himself.² While Julian is definitely immoral (he kills a series of people who are corrupted and repulsive but not murderers), he nonetheless gives body to a pure ethical stance: his suicidal final act is not just a personal quirk, it targets an entire way of life exemplified by the *haute cuisine* in which not only customers but also cooks and waiters who serve them participate - one can bet that all his guests were involved in charities and had deep sympathy for the plight of the poor... The proof of his ethics is that he lets Margot go: if he were just immoral, he would have killed them all.

But fidelity to a principled decision is not enough for an act to qualify as truly ethical - sticking to a problematic "principle" doesn't help a lot in such cases since the principle itself is wrong. Here is the supreme case: in his speech to the SS leaders in Posen on October 4 1943, Himmler spoke quite openly about the mass killing of the Jews as "a glorious page in our history, and one that has never been written and never can be written"; he then goes on to characterize the ability to do this and to remain decent as the greatest virtue: "To have gone through this [the extermination of the Jews] and at the same time to have remained decent, that has made us hard." Himmler here explicitly opposes true principled virtue to ordinary human compassion for a singular human being: "But then they all come along, these 80 million good Germans, and every one of them has his decent Jew. Of course, it's quite clear that the other Jews are pigs - but this one is a first-class Jew..." In short, every German knows that Jews as such are pigs, but then they fail to apply this principle to singular Jews that they know. And he is well aware of what he is saying - he explicitly includes the killing of women and children:

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² The Menu (2022, film) Wikipedia

“We faced the question: what should we do with the women and children? I decided here too to find a completely clear solution. I did not regard myself as justified in exterminating the men – that is to say, to kill them or have them killed – and to allow the avengers in the shape of children to grow up for our sons and grandchildren. The difficult decision had to be taken to have this people disappear from the earth.”³

Because of this radical stance, Himmler was (till the Fall of 1944) opposed to the creation of a volunteer army of Russian prisoners to fight Soviet troops. When, after being taken prisoner, the Soviet general Yuri Vlasov proposed to exploit the anti-Stalinist sentiments among the Russian population and the POWs and to set up a Russian people’s army, Himmler spoke disparagingly of the “Vlasov shivaree” (*Der Wlassow-Rummel*) and rejected the idea that there is a mass of oppressed Russian people opposed to the Stalinist rule – for him, such distinctions within the inferior Slavic race were of no interest. But what makes all this so fascinating is the high ethical language used by Himmler to justify the extermination of Jews and the brutal treatment of the Slavic people under German occupation:

“One principle must be absolute for the SS man: we must be honest, decent, loyal and friendly to members of our blood and to no one else. /.../ Whether the other races live in comfort or perish of hunger interests me only in so far as we need them as slaves for our culture; apart from that it does not interest me. Whether or not 10,000 Russian women collapse from exhaustion while digging a tank ditch interests me only in so far as the tank ditch is completed for Germany. /.../ We have the moral right, we had the duty to our people to do it – to kill this people who wanted to kill us. But we do not have the right to enrich ourselves with even one fur, with one Mark, with one cigarette, with one watch, with anything. That we do not have. Because at the end of this, we don't want – because we exterminated the bacillus – to become sick and die from the same bacillus.”⁴

This properly *ethical* Evil makes Himmler much worse than any form of pragmatic opportunism. What really matters is how an ethical principle relates to social antagonisms: does it cover them up or render them visible. Or, to put it in another way: in contrast to the struggle against the enemy which aims at preserving one’s identity (allegedly threatened

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3 Quoted from Kershaw 2001, pp.604-5

4 Heinrich Himmler’s speech at Posen, available online at: <https://alphahistory.com/holocaust/himmlers-speech-at-posen-1943/>

by the Other), the main task of an emancipatory movement is to change OURSELVES, our own identity. The refusal to radically change oneself was clearly described back in 1937 by George Orwell who deployed the ambiguity of the predominant Leftist attitude towards the class difference:

“We all rail against class-distinctions, but very few people seriously want to abolish them. Here you come upon the important fact that every revolutionary opinion draws part of its strength from a secret conviction that nothing can be changed. /.../ So long as it is merely a question of ameliorating the worker’s lot, every decent person is agreed. /.../ But unfortunately you get no further by merely wishing class-distinctions away. More exactly, it *is* necessary to wish them away, but your wish has no efficacy unless you grasp what it involves. The fact that has got to be faced is that to abolish class-distinctions means abolishing a part of yourself. /.../ I have got to alter myself so completely that at the end I should hardly be recognizable as the same person.”⁵

In Germany and some other countries, recently a vague is emerging of what is called “classism”: a class version of the politics of identity. Workers are taught to safeguard and promote their socio-cultural practices and self-respect, they are made aware of the crucial role they play in social reproduction... Workers movement thus becomes another element in the chain of identities, like a particular race or sexual orientation. Such a “solution” of the “workers problem” is what characterizes Fascism and populism: they respect workers and admit that they are often exploited, and they (often sincerely) want to make their position better within the coordinates of the existing system. Trump was doing this, protecting the US workers from banks and the unfair Chinese competition. Is *Nomadland* (Chloe Zhao, 2020) not the ultimate example of such “classism”? It portrays the daily lives of our “nomadic proletarians,” workers without a permanent home who live in trailers and wander around from one temporary job to another. They are shown as decent people, full of spontaneous goodness and solidarity with each other, inhabiting their own world of small customs and rituals, enjoying their modest happiness – even the occasional work in an Amazon packaging center goes quite well... that’s how our hegemonic ideology likes to see workers – no wonder the movie was the big winner of the last Oscars. Although the lives depicted are rather miserable, the movie bribes us into enjoying it with the charming details of the specific way of life, so its subtitle could have been: enjoy being a nomadic proletarian! It is precisely the refusal to be such an element in the chain

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5 Orwell 2020

of identities which defines the authentic workers movement. In India, I met with the representatives of the lowest group of the lowest caste of the Untouchables, the dry toilet cleaners; I asked them what is the basic premise of their program, what they want, and they instantly gave me the answer: "We don't want to be ourselves, what we are." Workers are, to quote Jacques Ranciere, a "part of no-part" of the social body, lacking a proper place in it, an antagonism embodied.

This status of class struggle doesn't imply that it is simply "the most important" antagonism - the threat of a global ecological breakdown or of a new world war is, of course, more important, and we can even elaborate a kind of hierarchy of interconnected crises and struggles, with ecological breakdown at the top. The point is that class struggle is not just one among them, it is something that provides a specific color on all of them, making them visible through the prism of domination and exploitation, with all paradoxes and changes that are taking places today - Karl-Heinz Dellwo claimed that today it is "reasonable to speak no longer about masters and servants but only about servants who command servants." And, as Gandhi put it, the fate of the serf is worse than that of the slave, for the slave has lost only his liberty, but the serf has become unworthy of it. What this means is that we should leave behind the characterization of the global capitalist reproduction as an expression of the "will to power": the capital reproduces itself without a will, will is on the contrary something that would only characterize a "voluntarist" revolutionary attempt to interrupt this mad dance: "Today the one who doesn't want revolution doesn't want anything." This is also why we should resist the nostalgic search for a (new) revolutionary subject: there is no predestined agent of a revolution, the only solution is that we ourselves, each of us who experiences the need for global change, asserts itself as such: "I will not raise the question about the revolutionary subject. If we are not this, then others are also not this."⁶ In short, no one is allowed to take the easy path of expecting from another group (especially so-called "nomadic proletarians") to appear as a privileged agent which will show us the path - there is an absolute egalitarianism at work here, "objective social situation" is strictly secondary.⁷

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6 Dellwo 2021.

7 This absence of a predestined subject of change will also lead to new form of narratives. Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020, usually characterized as "hard science fiction") opens up a new path. It mixes narrative fiction (which follows an international organization named the Ministry for the Future in its mission to act as an advocate for the world's future generations of citizens as if their rights were as valid as the present generation's) with emphasis on scientific accuracy and non-fiction descriptions of history and social science. What is also so refreshing about this book is that, after the deluge of apocalyptic visions, it imagines what is basically an optimist vision: if we pull our strength together, we have a chance of achieving something.

Socio-political field is a space of multiple antagonisms: class antagonism, ethnic antagonisms, sexual antagonisms, religious antagonisms, struggles for ecology... All these antagonisms are real/impossible in the strict Lacanian sense: there is no neutral description of an antagonism, every description is already “contextualized,” partial. Antagonisms can be combined into what Ernesto Laclau⁸ called “chain of equivalences”: the Left claim that ecological struggle, feminist struggle, anti-racist struggle... can and should be combined with class struggle since racism, destruction of our environment, oppression of women and other races, are today all overdetermined by capitalist exploitation. But other combinations are also possible: feminism can be combined with liberalism, ecology with conservative anti-modernism, etc. Although, in every particular situation, there is always one struggle/antagonism which plays a hegemonic role (in Europe in 1940s it was anti-Fascist struggle, in Iran at the end of 2022 it was the struggle for women’s rights...), for Laclau one struggle is elevated into the hegemonic role through the struggle (for hegemony) whose outcome is not determined in advance but dependent on contingent strategic circumstances.

Let’s take the case of the struggle for hegemony that is taking place n (what remains of) the Left in the developed West, especially the US. The mainstream liberal Left de facto elevates to the hegemonic role the topics of the so-called Culture War (trans-rights, abortion...) and racism, usually just paying lip service to economic issues or simply ignoring them. In this way it is alienating millions of lower and middle class ordinary families in small towns and farmland who are not actively against LGBT+ but just want to live their traditional lives – they could be mobilized for many measures (against big corporations and banks, for more accessible healthcare, student loans...), so it is as if the liberal-Left is intentionally sabotaging big common causes (no wonder some Leftists mean they are doing it intentionally). The moment a more radical Left comes with such economic proposals, the Culture War liberals accuse it of neglecting trans-issues etc. – but the Culture War liberal Left does not do itself what it accuses of the more radical economic Left...

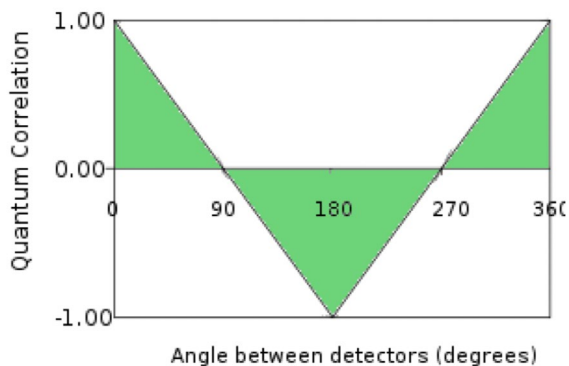
But is it enough to plea for such symmetry, for the equal weight of different antagonisms best formulated by Laclau’s theory according to which hegemony is the result of contingent struggles? Let me try to clarify this through the analogy with Bell’s inequality in quantum mechanics. Laclau’s multiplicity of antagonisms with no privileged struggles is a pure perfect form, and class struggle is what disturbs this perfect symmetry. The point is not that economic base is a “hidden variable,” the hidden substantial truth of all antagonisms which operates independently of all contexts, but a kind of structural imperfection, an “attractor” which disturbs the pure form. Let’s take a look at the

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8 Laclau and Mouffe 2001

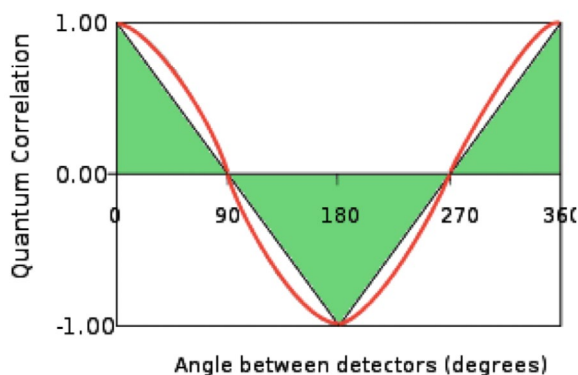
paradox of Bell's theorem: it provides a formula (of the result expected if there is no faster-than-light interconnection) *in order to refute it* - the two entangled electrons will give *more* correlation in their spin measurements than the limit imposed if we exclude a link that operates faster than the speed of light. This paradox enables us to explain why Bell's theorem is so revolutionary - it implies a move from perfection to imperfection. Imperfections usually serve to demonstrate that other (hidden) variables must be at work - in the case of Bell's theorem, they serve the opposite end: they prove that there is NOTHING behind. To put it in yet another way, Bell's theorem "is significant not because of what it is, but what its *negation* implies: a violation of Bell's theorem in experiment is proof that quantum mechanics *cannot* be described by hidden variables, and thus by classical mechanics."⁹ Here is a simple description of the experiment that I took from Paul Mainwood:

"I am going to allow my two electrons to communicate as much as I want in advance of their being emitted from the source. Now they are emitted by the source and fly apart, each to their own detector. I am going to set things up so that I ban them from all communication once they are in flight. I am also going to allow my detector operators a free choice as to the angles they choose to set their detectors and ban all communication between them too. *How much correlation can there be between the readings of spin ("positive" and "negative") that I get from the two detectors?* The answer to the question depends on the relative setting of the angles of the two detectors. Let's start with the case where the two detectors are set at the same angle as one another. For the case where the two detectors measure in the same direction, here's an easy plan that can give you full 100% correlation. But now, what if the detectors are not set at the same angle? For example, if we placed the detector angles at 90 degrees to one another and use the same rules, it is straightforward to see that we'd get zero correlation: half the time, the demons in each of the two electrons will shout the same word, and half the time they'll shout opposite words... But what happens if *the "demons" don't know what angles the detectors will be set at?* As long as there is no communication between the electrons once in flight, and so long as the angles of the detectors are set independently, then any scheme has a limit on the correlation value that is shown by the green areas here:

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9 What does Bell's inequality mean, in layman's terms? Available online at, <https://www.quora.com/What-does-Bells-inequality-mean-in-laymans-terms>



But what if you get to quantum mechanics, and you set up exactly this setup with two real electrons that are entangled with one another? Quantum mechanics predicts that these two electrons will give *more* correlation in their spin measurements than this limit - here's the quantum line in red:



In my brutal reading, this picture without the red curved line provides the correlation between social antagonisms without class struggle's "spooky" action at a distance, while the red curved line indicates how this "spooky" action at a distance disturbs the pure form of contingency. One has to add here that, already at a formal level, class struggle is not an antagonism like others: the goal of the anti-racist struggle is not to destroy an ethnic group but to enable the peaceful co-existence of ethnic groups without oppression; the goal of feminist struggle is not to annihilate men but to enable actual equality of all sexes and sexual orientations; etc. But the goal of the class struggle is, for the oppressed and exploited, the actual annihilation of the opposite ruling class as a class (not of the individuals who compose it, of course), not the reconciliation of classes (it is Fascism which aims at the reconciliation

of classes by way of eliminating the intruder – Jews – which introduce antagonism).

We live in an era of *unholy alliances*, a combination of ideological elements which violate the standard opposition of Left and Right. Let's just mention one of the saddest recent examples. At the end of February 2023, the Ugandan parliament debated a further toughening of the anti-gay law – the most radical proponents demanded death penalty or at least life imprisonment for those caught in the act. Anita Among, speaker of the parliament, said in the debate: "You are either with us, or you're with the Western world."¹⁰ Feminist, gay and trans struggles are thereby denounced as an instrument of Western ideological colonialism used to undermine African identity – and this immediately brings us to another unholy alliance: Russia, with its Orthodox fundamentalism, presents itself as an ally of Third World nations fighting colonialism, a fact that doesn't prevent parts of the Western Left to lean towards Russia in its aggression on Ukraine. When Sahra Wagenknecht, the most popular representative of *die Linke*, the German Leftist party, organized and spoke at a meeting for peace in Dresden in February 2023, calling for the end of helping Ukraine with arms, Björn Höcke (one of the leading members of the extreme Right Alternative for Germany present at the meeting) shouted at her: „Ich bitte Sie, kommen Sie zu uns“ ("Please come to us!"), calling her to change her party affiliation – and the public applauded him... How can this happen? The Left always prefers a symptomatic reading of an ideology: things are not what they claim to be, their truth is the opposite (freedom in the market is the form of exploitation and domination, universal human rights mask imperialist domination...) – so what does the Left do when it confronts a reactionary agent which IS what it claims to be, where there is no need for deep symptomatic analysis? Here the Left gets perplexed: what of, at some deeper level, we are even worse than our reactionary opponent?

These and other cases brought many social analysts to the conclusion that, today, the opposition between Left and Right became meaningless, or at least to Laclau's position that no antagonism enjoys a privileged status. Till now, Political Correctness mostly ignored class antagonism, focusing on racism, sexism, homophobia, religious fundamentalism, etc. Now advocates of PC more and more include into this series class differences, so that we get university courses (or obligatory training) on "racism, sexism, and classism." However, a close look on the content of "classism" makes it clear that these courses don't deal with the real of class antagonism but with description of bad effects of great differences in wealth: the privileges and insensitivity wealth

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¹⁰ Uganda MPs revive hardline anti-LGBTQ bill, calling homosexuality a 'cancer', available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/mar/01/uganda-mps-hardline-anti-lgbtq-bill>

brings, etc. (many rich people gladly accept this lesson and engage in charity...). We don't hear a lot about the basic structure of capitalism which generates class differences, and about ways to overcome or at least radically change capitalism.

A reference to quantum mechanics enables us to interpret the primacy of class struggle not in the substantialist way, as the essence expressed in other struggles, but in a purely formal way. What this implies is that we should distinguish between class difference as a difference (or struggle) between two well-defined positive social groups, and class antagonism as a pure difference which precedes the terms it opposes – in Hegelian terms, the “pure” class antagonism encounters itself among positive social difference in its “oppositional determination.” And the same holds for sexual difference: we should distinguish between “pure” sexual difference as the real of an “impossible” antagonism and sexual difference in its binary sense, as the opposition of two positive sexes. (As I demonstrated elsewhere, the “pure” sexual difference is embodied in trans-individuals who stand for the constitutive deadlock of sexuality.) In this sense “class struggle” and “sexual difference” are indeed something “spooky”: with regard to the field of positively-existing social relations and tensions between groups, they both are a virtual/real point of reference which, without existing as a positive entity, exists (or, rather, insists) only in its effects, as a force that bends the social space.

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Volume 10
Issue 1

**On Modes of
Exchange,
Interview with Kojin
Karatani**

**Agon Hamza &
Frank Ruda**

Brief introduction to the interview

We want to give the readers of the following interview a few points of orientation.

The interview with Kojin Karatani, the Japanese philosopher, is another of the rather (in its form) unconventional interviews in the *Crisis and Critique* interview section. Karatani chose a distinctive way of answering the questions we had sent to him. Instead of following a linear form, answering each question after the other, he opted for a rather more condensed and displacing form of answering.

The below is therefore 'divided into two': you will first read all our questions, and then Karatani's answers.

Questions:

1) We would like to begin with a general question. What is "class" today? What do we (or ought we) mean when we refer to it today?

2) It might appear that the time of, and for class-based analysis is definitely over. It appears that the concept of "class" is outdated, both in its theoretical and practical potential. Because it seems to come with the danger of a vulgar sociological application – and application that reified the class concept into an objectivist substratum of societies. Given this context, can we still undertake a class-based analysis of present-day society?

3) Leftists often express their frustration when the working class doesn't act the way the left wants, or expects them to act. Communists are often frustrated when they encounter the really existing workers, because they do not fit the idealized conception of the proletariat. One of the main tasks might be to distinguish between a certain fetishization of the working class and a true appreciation of the heterogeneous composition of the proletariat. Is it possible to think or conceive a revolutionary class-agent in our era? If so, how?

4) Althusser proposed a thesis according to which class struggle *precedes* classes. That is to say, class struggle *creates* classes, and not the other way around. This is clearly an anti-positivist stance that more or less characterized his entire work. This can be read alongside Balibar's thesis that *there is no socialist mode of production*. How would you read this from the standpoint of "modes of exchange" (and please do introduce our readers to this magnificent concept)?

- 5) How do you understand class struggle in our era? Is it visible and effective in a time of pandemic, global warming, and ecological catastrophes, digital surveillance of our lives, etc. Would you identify ecology as one (of the main) site(s) of the class struggle today?
- 6) You have also written about architecture from a politico-economic and philosophical perspective. Taking a cue from Marx, you argue that class struggle always existed in the cities and in the form of ideology. Can we say that architectural design represents the class struggle with other means? Is this what reflects and materializes in city planning (or its absence), say in the difference between the natural and artificial cities?
- 7) You have written about the Borromean Knot of contemporary capitalism, which consists of the triple system: Capital-Nation-State. They complement and supplement each other, with the entire system failing if one of the elements is missing. Is class a concept of "mode C" or a concept of the composite of all modes?
- 8) You proposed a different understanding of world history, not based on the modes of production (as classic Marxism would), but on the modes of exchange. You distinguish between four such modes. Could you tell us which ones they are and can you specify for us what role class(es) play in remapping such modes of exchange - if any at all?
- 9) One of the main victories of ruling ideology is to replace class analysis with other forms of cultural analysis (of identities for example). Is there a relation, and if so what is the relation, between intersectionality and the analysis of multiple modes of exchange?
- 10) Is there still a contemporary bourgeoisie? And, does it still have the same characteristic traits that defined it in the last century (ownership of the means of production, for example)?
- 11) At the time of the publication of *Transcritique*, you were very involved with the New Associationist Movement. In the West, we learned that later the movement was dissolved, but we never had much information about its limitations or the ultimate takeaways from the movement and its dissolution. Could you tell us more about NAM's achievements and its impasses and how, or whether, this political experience influenced the later directions of your research?
- 12) Your most recent book, still not translated to English, deals with the issue of power and devotes a long section to a more detailed presentation of "mode D". Why did the issue of power seem like an important concept to take on after the focus on modes of exchange in

Structure of World History? Is it because of the problem of compulsion in free association - that is, the issue of how ethical socialist behaviour could become generalized and form a bedrock for social exchange?

13) "Mode D" functions very differently in *Structure of World History* than do the three other modes: it is presented as a much more heterogeneous mixture of nomadic, religious, philosophical and communist social aspects, it appears mostly at moments of transformation between stable social formations rather than as a stable force of its own, and it is often defined in relation to other modes (for example, as "return of mode A in higher dimension"). Could you speak about this particular diversity of "mode D" - is it a contingent factor, that perhaps a true socialist society would retroactively dispel, or is it a structural aspect of "mode D", to be perhaps more experimental or diffuse, lacking certain clear properties like modes A, B and C?

Answers:

Your questions concern class issues. Class is a Marxist notion based on the language of historical materialism and alienation theory, both of which are based on mode of production theory. I thought that this kind of Marxism was inadequate, and that it would not be possible to understand the state or capital, so I came up with the theory of modes of exchange. In short, I believe that the concept of class was always unclear and misleading. I cannot say much further about class issue and thus found it difficult to answer your questions.

In one of the questions, you asked me to explain the modes of exchange theory. Please refer to the following link for that.

http://www.kojinkaratani.com/en/pdf/An_Introduction_to_Modes_of_Exchange.pdf

After writing this introductory piece, I examined the modes of exchange theory further, which resulted as *Powers and Modes of Exchange* (2022, Iwanami, Tokyo) (The English translation is scheduled to be published early 2025). You asked me why I wrote about "powers". The obvious answer is that while the powers of modes of production (production power) are straightforward, the powers of modes of exchange are not so simple.

These powers are "spiritual" in nature, as opposed to production power which is material. In this piece, rather than answering each of your questions, I will explain about the "powers" that arise from modes of exchange, in the hope that my explanations will be beneficial to think of class issue. Class, the state, and other problems of our society stem from

these perverse powers, which modes of exchange generate. Here, I also address environmental issues, which you mentioned in your question.

When Weber and Freud criticized Marxism, while acknowledging the determining power of economic base, they emphasized different powers which exist in the superstructure. Weber sought it in religion (Protestantism), and Freud sought it in the “unconscious”. In other words, they thought that those powers came from a place other than the economic base, that is, from ideational powers which religion and other superstructures carry. However, I believe that such “powers” stem from the economic base, by which I mean modes of exchange, not modes of production.

Weber and Freud failed to recognize that Marx, in *Capital*, focused on the “spiritual power” arising from the exchange of commodities. Marx said, “--the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. (*Capital*). And he called this power of money a *fetish*. This was only seen as a joke, but there lied an important point that historical materialism lacked.

When Marx came to think of this, he had in his mind one predecessor; Hobbes, who wrote *Leviathan*. Hobbes found the power of the state not in physical force, such as armed force, nor human will but in its “spiritual” power. That comes out of an “exchange” of protection and obedience between the ruler and the ruled. Hobbes called this power the Leviathan, a gigantic sea monster. In *Capital*, Marx called the power arising from mode of exchange C a *fetish*, just as Hobbes called the spiritual power arising from mode of exchange B a Leviathan.

However, nobody paid attention to this. It was dismissed as a mere joke. Meanwhile, after Marx's death, there was a person who has discovered other type of spiritual power; Marcel Mauss focused on the gift exchange in primitive societies. He believed that in this reciprocal exchange a spell (the spirit of *Hau*) is at work. This power accompanies mode of exchange A. However, this too was dismissed as a joke or metaphor. Morse was admired by the Structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss, but at the same time condemned for bringing up such a suspicious power.

I find that these spiritual powers are more prevalent in the world today than ever before. After the nineteenth century, the powers of the capital-nation-state have been dominating the world. It should be noted that each of them (capital, nation, and state) is based on a spiritual power, and we are more than ever under the control of those powers. However, not recognizing or ignoring such “powers” is considered to be “scientific” attitude. It is clear what the consequences of such an attitude would be. A mere look at the current world situation will be enough to recognize this.

I have already discussed these points in *The Structure of World History*. My most recent book *Powers and Modes of Exchange* (2022) is different in the following respects, among others.

First, I reviewed the power of mode D. For example, some readers of *The Structure of World History* saw D as an ideal state that could be conceived and realized by human endeavors. But D is not like that. It is beyond human will. At the same time, many readers understood D as a different name of world religions. Here, let me answer the question 13, which is related to this point.

13) "Mode D" functions very differently in *Structure of World History* than do the three other modes: it is presented as a much more heterogeneous mixture of nomadic, religious, philosophical and communist social aspects, it appears mostly at moments of transformation between stable social formations rather than as a stable force of its own, and it is often defined in relation to other modes (for example, as "return of mode A in higher dimension"). Could you speak about this particular diversity of "mode D" - is it a contingent factor, that perhaps a true socialist society would retroactively dispel, or is it a structural aspect of "mode D", to be perhaps more experimental or diffuse, lacking certain clear properties like modes A, B and C?

A: Mode D is yet to be realized. In D other modes of exchanges will be sublated. I often describe D as "a restoration of A on a higher dimension". D can be said to be a world in which mode A without its negative elements such as exclusiveness, oppression, etc., spreads to every corner of society. There, modes B and C will disappear.

It is often misunderstood, but when I say that universal religion has an orientation towards D, I am not saying that D is inherently religious, or D is a different name of religion. World Religions do have an orientation to D, but they are mostly A (mutual aid or magic in the form of prayer or God-coercion), B (coercion), and C (taking money) in reality.

There is something I would like to note here in relation to environmental issues. I feel that people who think about environmental problems tend to focus on the relationship between nature and humans, but neglect the relationship between humans, while in fact human-to-human relationship is at the core of the environmental issues. To think about this, it would help to discern the difference between "exchange" and "traffic". In fact, the modes of exchange are about "exchanges" between humans. In other words, there is no "exchange" in the relationship between human and nature. This of course does not mean that humans and nature are unrelated. But their relationship is rather a "traffic" (Moses Hess) but not an "exchange". Let me clarify this. "Exchange" brings about spiritual power that compels humans to think and act in certain ways, while "traffic" does not. Exchange between humans generates perverse spiritual powers but traffic between humans and nature is straightforward and simply material.

Finally, there is another "traffic" that I have not dealt with. It is the traffic between humans and nature, that is, the problem of "substance metabolism" (*Capital*). It was Moses Hess who inspired Marx to think of

the problem of traffic. Hess saw "traffic" not only between humans but also between humans and nature. Marx and Engels wrote about this in *German Ideology*.

The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus, the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. Of course, we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions in which man finds himself – geological, hydrographical, climatic and so on. The writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men. (*German Ideology*, from Marx-Engels Collected Works, Volume 5.)

In the "formula" of historical materialism, this relationship between humans and nature is largely abstracted. In contrast, Marx in *Capital* saw the relationship between humans and nature as traffic in his consideration of the relationship between humans from the perspective of traffic. Here, however, he distinguished between "traffic" between humans and "traffic" between humans and nature. Rather, he tried to understand the traffic between humans as "exchange". Then he moved on to investigate the ideational power that arises from the exchange and compel humans, or the activity of the fetish and its development.

However, in doing so, he did not overlook the problem of "traffic" between humans and nature. That is why he took up this issue in *Capital*. At this point, he was aware of the difference between "exchange" between humans and "traffic" between humans and nature. That is, while the former generates an ideational power, or spiritual power, the latter does not. In other words, the powers that arise in the human-nature traffic are purely material.

These were not differentiated until some point in human history. For instance, animism assumes an "exchange" between nature and humans, where some spiritual power is at work. It was after the eighteenth century, under the development of the industrial revolution and industrial capitalism, that such a view completely disappeared. Animism was, so to speak, a way of thinking during the period when mode of exchange A was dominant, and such an idea disappeared with the dominance of mode of exchange C. Since then, people seem to have been freed from spiritual powers. But it is only because they have yielded to the spiritual power of capital.

As already mentioned, in *Capital*, Marx delineated the process by which the spirit of money/capital (the fetish) came to rule over human beings. This was a situation that arose from human-to-human exchange. However, at that time, he perceived that unprecedented matters were occurring with industrial capitalism regarding the relationship between humans and nature. It is the disappearance of "traffic", that is, the destruction of the natural environment.

He found a prime example of this in capitalist agriculture. Capitalist agriculture “disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth, *i.e.*, it prevents the return to the soil of its constituent elements to the soil of its constituent element consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; hence it hinders the operation of the eternal natural condition for the lasting fertility of the soil.”

In other words, metabolism is “traffic,” which had been lost under capitalist agriculture. Marx received its theoretical support from the German chemist Justus Liebig (1803-1873), who was the founder of chemical fertilizer-based agriculture and at the same time the first critic of it, who advocated recycling-type agriculture for the first time.

All progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the working, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards the more long-lasting sources of that fertility. The more a country proceeds from large-scale industry as the background of its development, as in the case of the United States, the more rapid is this process of destruction. Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production but simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker. (*Capital*: volume 1, Penguin p. 638)

Here, Marx points out that capitalist production not only exploits workers, but also exploits nature, that is, destroys the “traffic” between humans and nature. Needless to say, this is not just a matter of agricultural production. Regarding industrial production, he also emphasized that production involves waste.

As the capitalist mode of production extends, so also does the utilization of the refuse left behind by production and consumption. Under the heading of production, we have the waste products of industry and agriculture, under that of consumption we have both the excrement produced by man’s natural metabolism and the form in which useless articles survive after use has been made of them. Refuse of production is, therefore, in the chemical industry, the by-product which gets lost if production is only on a small scale; in the production of machinery, the heap of iron filings that appears to be waste but is then used again as raw material for iron production, etc. The natural human waste products, remains of clothing in the form of rags etc., are the refuse of consumption. The latter are of the greatest importance for agriculture. But there is a colossal wastage in the capitalist economy in proportion to their actual use. In London, for example, they can do nothing better with the

excrement produced by 4.5 million people than pollute the Thames with it, at monstrous expense.

(A Critique of Political Economy, vol. 3. Trans. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1876) 195.

The situation he pointed out here was not resolved after that. Conversely, today, the survival of the entire planet's environment is in jeopardy. Not just the Thames, but all over the bottom of the Pacific Ocean is filled with plastic waste. And this suggests the arrival of a greater environmental crisis.

However, such observation of *Capital* remained unheeded. In other words, it has been thought that it is not the main point of Marx's critique of economics. However, if the basis of critique of economics is to look at the economy not only in terms of production but also in terms of traffic, naturally it is to be found not only between humans and humans, but also between humans and nature. However, that was absent in the "economics" that began with industrial capitalism. There, nature was not a partner of "traffic", but merely a material object.

It was different in the societies before that. As I mentioned earlier, in hunter-gatherer societies, animism was the predominant way of looking at nature; the natural world was regarded as being imbued with spiritual powers. Therefore, they prayed and made offerings to the nature. In that case, it can be said that "traffic" between humans and nature was taking place, albeit unconsciously. In other words, when the mode of exchange between humans was A, the "traffic" between humans and nature was also regarded as similar to it. That is animism. Even after the predominance of the mode B, or the establishment of the state, it remained in relation to nature. Its complete disappearance took place after the stage when mode of exchange C became dominant in the Industrial Revolution when industrial capital began to use fossil fuels such as coal and oil.

Fossil fuels are precisely the products of natural history. That is, it is a historical imprint of the traffic relationship between humans and nature. When we use such fossils as fuel, we are incinerating the very history of human-nature "traffic" as fossils. The idea of finding gods in nature was dismissed as superstition, and nature became a mere material object. However, it is not because humans have been freed from superstition (ideational and spiritual powers). Thinking and acting according to the capital fetish came to be seen as rational and scientific.

And mass production, mass consumption, and mass disposal, which were unthinkable in the days of animism, have continued as if they were desirable. Human beings, blinded by the power of capital, seems oblivious to such things, despite the obvious destructive consequences. With the repeated industrial revolutions, the notion of "traffic" between

humans and nature had disappeared, but in a sense, it has returned as a physical threat to human survival.

To repeat, the environmental crisis we find today is the result of the permeation of mode of exchange C in human society, which has altered the relationship between humans and nature. As a result, nature, which had hitherto been the "other," became a mere physical object. In this way, fetishism arising from mode of exchange C distorts not only the relationship between humans but also the relationship between humans and nature. Moreover, the problems arising from the latter further distort the relationship between humans. That is, it brings about a conflict between capital-nation-state. That is, the crisis of war is approaching.

11) At the time of the publication of *Transcritique*, you were very involved with the New Associationist Movement. In the West, we learned that later the movement was dissolved, but we never had much information about its limitations or the ultimate takeaways from the movement and its dissolution. Could you tell us more about NAM's achievements and its impasses and how, or whether, this political experience influenced the later directions of your research?

K.K. NAM fell apart in infighting almost before realizing any of its goals. However, even after that, the exchanges between the former members continued. It continues to this day. Through those exchanges, I came to realize something. Many NAM members were engaged with small but meaningful movements, but because they were so quiet that they were invisible. What stood out was a small group of people who were constantly arguing fiercely online. At that time, we were not yet aware of the problems of the Internet, which was in the nascent period in Japan. We should have restricted the usage of Mailing Lists for practical contacts.

As I continued to interact with former members of NAM who are involved with small movements, I realized that small movements, though weak, are the most important counter-movements. Mode A cannot sustain unless it is small, so small is good. And it is necessary not to expect A's association (association of associations) to bring about D or overthrow the current system.

When I started NAM, I was still hopeful that a coalition of transnational associations would have the power to stand up against the state and capital. I wanted to believe in something like the power of "multitude" as Negri and Hart called it, or the power of "anti-system movements" as called by Wallerstein, but then I changed my mind. As I had feared, the situation kept getting worse. Despite the rise of movements such as the Anti-globalization or Occupy movement, another world war seems simply inevitable now.

Q: We want to end our interview with a number of either / or questions (you can certainly explain your choice, but do not have to):

Either / or:

Kant or Hegel?
Kant

Marx or Lenin?
Marx

Kant or Marx?
Marx

Poetry or prose?
Prose

Classical music or pop?
Classical music

Taking power or abolishing power?
Abolishing power

Dundee/Prishtina/Tokyo
March 2023

Notes on Contributors

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Isabelle Garo teaches philosophy in preparatory classes in Paris. She is the author of several books on critical thought and anti-capitalist theory. Her books focus on art, ideology, French philosophy of the 1970s, and Marx and his work.

Boris Groys, born 1947, has been Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies since 2009. After studying mathematics and philosophy at the Leningrad State University and philosophy at the University of Munich he received his PhD from the University of Muenster in 1992. He was Assistant Professor at the Philosophical Institute, University of Muenster (1988-1994), Professor of Aesthetics, Art History and Media Theory at the Academy of Design/ Center for Art and Media Technology, (HfG/ZKM), Karlsruhe, Germany. In 2017 he received Doctor Honoris Causa of the University of London. His major publications include: *Becoming an Artwork* (Verso, 2022), *Philosophy of Care* (Verso, 2022), *An Introduction to Antiphilosophy* (2012), *The Total Art of Stalinism. Russian Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (1992), etc.

Chantal Jaquet is Professor at the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, specialist in the history of Early Modern Philosophy (mainly Spinoza and Bacon) in the philosophy of the body (particularly the sense of smell) in social philosophy (class-passing). She defended a PhD titled "Sub specie aeternitatis, étude des concepts de temps, durée et éternité chez Spinoza" at the Université de Paris-Sorbonne in 1994. For the past 20 years, Director of an international research seminar on Spinoza at the Sorbonne; Editor of the "Les Anciens et les Modernes" collection, published by Éditions Classiques Garnier. Main Publications : *Spinoza ou la Prudence*, Paris, Editions Quintette, 1997 ; *Sub specie aeternitatis, étude des concepts de temps, durée et éternité chez Spinoza*, published by Kimé Editions (1997) 2nd ed., Classiques Garnier, 2015 ; *L'unité du corps et de l'esprit. Affects, actions passions chez Spinoza*, PUF, 2004, 2015 (translated in Portugese, Spanish, Italian and English); *Les expressions de la puissance d'agir chez Spinoza*, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2005; *Philosophie de l'odorat*, PUF, 2010 (translated in Portugese, Japanese, talian); *Bacon et la promotion des savoirs*, PUF, 2010; *Les transclasses ou la non reproduction*, PUF, 2014 (translated in German); *Spinoza à l'œuvre*, Publications de la Sorbonne 2017, *Philosophie du kôdô, l'esthétique japonaise des fragrances*, Paris, Vrin 2018. Her recent book in English is *Transclasses: A Theory of Social Non-reproduction*.

Kojin Karatani a Japanese philosopher. After earning a bachelor's degree in economics and a master's degree in English literature from

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the University of Tokyo, he made his debut as a literary critic. Since then, he has published works dealing with a wide variety of areas. His major works include the following; *Transcritique - Kant and Marx* (MIT Press 2005), and *Structure of World History* (Duke University Press 2014). *Isonomia - Origins of Philosophy* (Duke University Press 2017), and *Marx, Toward the Center of Possibility* (Verso 2020). The English publication of his latest book *Powers and Modes of Exchange* is set for 2025. He was a visiting professor at Yale University, Columbia University, Cornell University, and UCLA.

Esther Leslie is Professor of Political Aesthetics at Birkbeck. Her interests lie in the poetics of science and the politics of technologies. Her current work focuses on turbid media and the aesthetics of turbulence. Recent work on the biopolitical economy of dairy (written in collaboration with Melanie Jackson) includes the publications *Deeper in the Pyramid* (2018/2023) and *The Inextinguishable* for the Limerick Biennial, 2020–21. Leslie's book on the anti-fascist radio pioneer Ernst Schoen is forthcoming with Goldsmiths Press, as is a study of Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) and its impact in Teesside with Palgrave Pivot.

Yahya M. Madra teaches economics at Drew University, NJ and practices psychoanalysis in New York City. Previously, he taught at Skidmore and Gettysburg Colleges and Boğaziçi University, Istanbul. He has published and co-authored articles and book chapters on the history of neoliberal reason in economics, issues in political economy, and the relation between psychoanalysis and Marxism. He is a co-editor *Rethinking Marxism* since 2018. His book *Late Neoclassical Economics: The Restoration of Theoretical Humanism in Contemporary Economic Theory* was published by Routledge in 2017. He is currently working, together with Ceren Özselçuk, on a book manuscript titled *Sexuating Class: A Psychoanalytical Critique of Political Economy*.

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William Clare Roberts is Associate Professor of Political Science at McGill University, in Montreal. He is the author of *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (2107). Recently,

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Ted Stolze teaches philosophy at Cerritos College. He has co-edited (with Warren Montag) *The New Spinoza* and translated *In a Materialist Way*, an anthology of writings by Pierre Macherey. He has engaged in research primarily in the areas of early modern and contemporary continental philosophy, and he has published articles on such figures as Paul of Tarsus, Hobbes, Spinoza, Deleuze, Althusser, Negri, and Žizek. His book *Becoming Marxist: Studies in Philosophy, Struggle, and Endurance* was published by Brill [2019] and Haymarket [2020]

Dimitris Vardoulakis was the inaugural chair of Philosophy at Western Sydney University. Some of his books are *Sovereignty and its Other* (2013); *Stasis Before the State: Nine Theses on Agonistic Democracy* (2018); *Spinoza, the Epicurean: Authority and Utility in Materialism* (2020); and *The Ruse of Techne: Heidegger's Magical Materialism* (forthcoming in 2023). He is the director of "Thinking Out Loud: The Sydney Lectures in Philosophy and Society," and the co-editor of the book series "Incitements" (Edinburgh University Press). He is currently serving as the chair of the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy, as well as the editor of a new journal, *Philosophy, Politics, and Critique*.

Kathi Weeks is a Professor of Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at Duke University. She is the author of *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries* (Duke UP, 2011) and *Constituting Feminist Subjects* (second edition, Verso, 2018), and co-editor of *The Jameson Reader* (Blackwell, 2000).

Slavoj Žižek is a senior researcher at the Institute for Sociology and Philosophy, University of Ljubljana, International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, and Professor of Philosophy and Psychoanalysis at the European Graduate School. His latest publications include *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (2012), *Absolute Recoil* (2014), *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (2019), *Hegel in a Wired Brain* (2020), *Surplus Enjoyment: A Guide for the Non-Perplexed* (2022).

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