

The Lumpenproletariat and the Politics of Class

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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

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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

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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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