Struggle without Classes: Why There Is No Resurgence of the Proletariat in the Currently Unfolding Capitalist Crisis

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From Class Struggle to Declassing

While living and working conditions continue to grow more precarious, affecting greater and greater segments of the population even in countries that have emerged victorious on the world market, widespread talk of a return of class society and of class struggle suggest the (re)birth of a new historical conjuncture. Given the rapid growth in social polarization, such talk can, at first glance, seem quite plausible. However, as is usually the case, resorting to the past modes of interpretation and explanation leads not to clarification, but only to greater confusion. Despite initial appearances, categories of class opposition cannot provide a basis for any adequate conception of the extreme growth in social inequality, nor are the oppositions and conflicts between social interest groups resulting from such inequality simply recurrences of what, measured by their real historical content, were once accurately conceived as instances of class struggle.

The great social conflict that, in the form of class struggle, decisively shaped capitalist society throughout the historical period of its formation and establishment was, as is well known, the conflict
between capital and labor. What is at stake in the structural logic of the commodity in its process of historical formation, when considered from its objectified side, are the opposed interests corresponding to two of capitalism’s functional categories: the opposition between the representatives of capital, who command and organize the process of production with the valorization of capital as their end, and the wage workers, who by their labor “create” the surplus value necessary for this process. Taken for itself, this is a purely immanent conflict arising from within the common system of relations presupposed by modern commodity production, a conflict that revolves around the manner of value production (working conditions, working hours, and the like) and the distribution of the mass of value (wages, profits, benefits, and the like). As such it is a conflict impossible to overcome as long as the capitalist mode of production, which is based on the valorization of value as a self-propelling end in itself, continues to exist. This, however, in no way means that such a conflict must always express itself as class opposition. The objectified opposition of capital and labor only developed into class opposition because a generalized social mega-subject was constituted on its foundation, and under very particular historical conditions: in the course of the struggle for their interests and for social recognition, the wage workforce developed a collective identity and a consciousness as a working class. It was the constitution of such a subject that first enabled those who sell their labor power as a commodity to shift themselves into a position from which they could endow their struggle with the necessary continuity and strength, even in the face of setbacks and defeats.¹

Now, if over the course of the second half of the twentieth century the class struggle has increasingly lost the dynamic and force that had placed its stamp on the whole of society, this was not of course because capitalism had suddenly dispensed with the production of surplus value. The objective opposition between capital and labor, as, at the same time, categorical functions within capitalism itself, has remained and remains still, even if its concrete shape has changed over the course of the development of capitalism, as will be shown more
extensively below. The working class nonetheless loses its character as collective subject to the extent that wage workers now become citizens with equal rights and thus, precisely speaking, commodity subjects absorbed into the universe of bourgeois society, and the sale of labor power becomes a generalized mode of existence. With this, the revolutionary nimbus of the working class, which had been a significant part of the cement holding its identity together, dissolved, revealing its feet of clay. For even if the idea that class struggle has an antagonistic character and thus points beyond capitalist society can in retrospect be revealed to be an illusion, it nonetheless played a thoroughly important role in class constitution, and furnished the working class with the consciousness required for it to act with its eyes trained on the horizon of a far-reaching social mission.

Ultimately, however, the opposition of capital and labor in its subjective form also emerged from its cocoon, revealing itself to be, no less than in its objective manifestation, an immanent conflict between social and economic interests internal to capitalism. Despite occasional rhetorical reenactments of times past, the conduct of labor struggles today is no longer premised on the irreconcilability between the interests of the sellers of labor power and those of capital. Quite the opposite: the emphasis is always placed on their compatibility, whether in the name of productivity, of local competitiveness, or of the purchasing power of internal, domestic demand. Criticism is not leveled at capital but rather at excessively high profits, unnecessary plant closures (or relocations) or, in a more ideologically charged version, at greedy bankers pitting the parasitical needs of Wall Street against the “real” economy of Main Street. Those transformed into commodity subjects, workers no less than anyone else, have long since considered it only natural and self-evident that profits must be made, capital valorized, productivity increased, and growth ensured at whatever cost. They know that their (however precarious) well-being in this society — and they can scarcely imagine any other — depends on precisely this.

The development of the struggle between labor and capital
into what more and more resembles their effective identity on the subjective level can be attributed to the systematic establishment of a fully generalized commodity society, one that has successfully invested the functional logic of capitalism with what appears to be the irrevocability of a natural law. But there is more to it than just this. At its basis also lie quite specific changes in the relationship of capital to labor, changes that had already been introduced in the Fordist era and that were brought to completion at an accelerated rate after Fordism came to an end. These changes in no way led to the suspension of the functional opposition of labor and capital, but rather to a state of affairs in which this functional opposition itself could no longer serve as ground for the constitution of any renewed class subjectivity whatsoever. There is thus, despite — or even because of — the extreme exacerbation of social inequality, no reclassing of society taking place today; we are rather dealing with a general process of declassing, a process which is expressed in at least four trends.4

First, since as early as the final phase of Fordism, the labor directly applied to the product has been reduced in favor of more capital-intensive technologies of automated oversight and control and of pre- and post-production functions. This has meant not only the melting away of the actual working class in the sense of the value-producing industrial workforce and the massive upsurge of the most diverse and non-traditional categories of wage labor (in circulation, in the state apparatus, and in the various “service sectors,” and so on), categories that become impossible to ascribe in any meaningful way to a given class.5 To this has been added the integration of a substantial part of the command function of capital directly within the various activities of labor, thereby shifting the contradiction between labor and capital in its immediacy to a point within individuals themselves (a process euphemistically configured as “personal responsibility,” “job enrichment,” “horizontal hierarchies,” and so on). This tendency has been further exacerbated under the pressure of crisis-induced hypercompetition and in the course of a general precarization of working conditions. This is most apparent in the many small-scale
freelancers and “entreployees,” whose welfare as well as whose woe now becomes purely a matter of taking on, under their own direction and at their own risk, the outsourced job functions of this or that company. But even within the enterprises themselves there is an increasing tendency to turn employees into “managers,” both of themselves and of their respective working areas (as, for example, through the establishment of so-called “profit centers”). And, in the end, this tendency even generates the cynical ideology for administering the unemployed in which praise of “self-management” and “personal responsibility” are all the more obtrusively propagated, and thus the clearer it becomes that the labor market cannot even come close to reintegrating all those whom it has spat out like so many “self-managing” bits of refuse.

Second, and as an extension of the above, the practice of constantly changing jobs and the resulting alternation among a huge variety of activities has, increasingly since the end of Fordism, become the norm — a norm that has substantially contributed to the dissolution of any given individual’s identification with specific productive functions. Individuals’ relationships to their position in the process of production thus ceased to be in any way anchored in their biography or environment, and empirically became closer to what it, according to its concept, already was: an external relationship. In the process the categorical imperative of flexibility now demands obedience more and more adamantly. It is well known that today there is no worse sin against the law of capitalism than continuing to adhere to a single function or activity of labor. This is not only preached by the priests of the market, but also results from the objectified compulsions of the global race to the bottom. Whoever wants to survive must be prepared perpetually to switch between the categories of wage labor and self-employment, and to identify with neither — although, of course, even this brings no guarantee.

Third, the new hierarchies and divisions cut across the categories of capitalist function rather than overlapping with them. Specifically, they are not determined by the opposition between wage labor and capital, for the social differential is just as steep within the category of wage
labor as it is in society as a whole. This applies in the first instance to the businesses themselves, in which (shrinking) core workforces with (at least for the moment) permanent jobs, even with collective bargaining agreements, carry out the same work alongside a growing number of part-time and agency workers under completely different conditions. However, the differences between sectors, branches of production, and regional locations are even greater, and ultimately there are huge discrepancies with respect to income, working conditions, and status depending on one’s position in the hierarchy of the global chains of valorization.

Fourth, declassing ultimately means that more and more people worldwide are falling through the grid of the functional categories, because there is no longer a place for them in the system of commodity production that can productively exploit less and less labor power. They are forced to find out that they cannot only be replaced at any time, but that they are also to a growing extent becoming superfluous in the capitalist sense. Being privileged means managing to cling to some function or other, or to switch between different functions, without coming crashing down. But since these functions are themselves becoming precarious or wholly obsolete, such a balancing act is becoming increasingly more difficult. Because the objectified functional structures are disintegrating, more and more people are also falling through their grid. How many this effect varies according to the position of a country or region in global competition, but the threat of falling into social nothingness looms over everyone. The trend is clear and unambiguous: across the world a growing segment of new underclasses has emerged, which have nothing to do with the old proletariat and which neither objectively (by their function or position within the process of production) nor subjectively (by virtue of their consciousness) constitute a new social collective (something like a “precariat”). Their relationship to the capitalist process of valorization is in the first instance a purely negative one: they are no longer required. But this forces us to formulate anew the question of the possible constitution of new emancipatory social movements.
Attempts to Save the Dead Subject

The resurrected left-wing discourse of class struggle hardly makes a contribution to the clarification of this question. While it is true that it has in some respects learned from social upheavals and transformations, and undergone a few alterations in its argumentation, it has ultimately not succeeded in freeing itself of the fundamental metaphysical patterns of traditional class-struggle Marxism. These patterns are perennially reproduced, even if the subjects to which appeals are made (or rather, which desire attempts to summon up) have changed. In the last issue of *Krisis* I attempted to show this above all in the examination of Hardt and Negri and John Holloway. But here attention should in the first instance be directed toward approaches with a less obviously metaphysical leaning, since their arguments proceed more in the mode of sociology, and concentrate more strongly on the analysis of the objective aspect of social development. In course it will be shown that it is precisely the empirical results of these investigations that refute the paradigm of class that has been applied. In the attempt to save class analysis by means of all sorts of extensions they become entangled in contradictions and aporias which clearly indicate that this rescue attempt is condemned to failure and that only abandoning the traditional Marxist construct can open a glimpse of a renewed perspective of emancipatory action.

Let us first hear the Gramscian class theorist Frank Deppe. The “working class,” he argues in the journal *Fantômas*, has by no means disappeared, capitalism is still based on the exploitation of wage labor and the natural, social and political conditions of production and appropriation of surplus value.

Between 1970 and 2000 the number of workers dependent on wage labor nearly doubled, and comprises about half of the entire global population. This can be explained in the first instance by development in China and other parts of Asia, where large parts of the rural population were “set free” as a result of industrialization.

In the developed capitalist countries the proportion of the
population engaged in wage labor has now reached 90% and more. 8

What is immediately striking about this argument is that it operates with a concept of the working class that swings back and forth between at least two different meanings. At first Deppe seems to classify among the working class only those wage workers who produce surplus value in the strict sense, whose surplus labor is skimmed off directly for the valorization of capital. However, this concept of class slides seamlessly into a completely different one, one which comprises all the “workers dependent on wage labor” and thus “half of the entire global population” and in the capitalist urban centers even almost the entire population (namely over 90 percent).

In this argumentative vacillation, the class theorist’s entire dilemma is expressed. If the category of the working class is interpreted in the first sense (which corresponds to Marx’s theory, to which Deppe explicitly refers), then it must be conceded that what is at stake is a global minority which is losing its significance to an ever-greater extent the further the processes of rationalization in the value-producing sectors advance, and the more labor is made superfluous in immediate production. In the second meaning, however, that is to say the expansion of the category of the working class to all “workers dependent on wage-labor,” it becomes a non-concept, for it no longer has any power to discriminate at all. It is then just another word for the general mode of existence and life in capitalist society, which mediates its connectedness simply by means of labor and commodity production, which for the huge majority of people presents itself as the compulsion to sell their labor power in order to survive. While this universal compulsion is an essential characteristic of capitalist society, it is by no means suitable for the determination of the working class, because all people are in principle subject to it, regardless of their positions in the social hierarchy their social status and life situation.

The aporias of the newer theory of class also become clear in the writings of the historian Marcel van der Linden, whose concept of class is even broader than that of Deppe. For him, “every bearer of
labor power, whose labor power is sold or hired to another person under economic or non-economic compulsion, belongs to the working class. Whether the labor power is offered by the worker herself or himself, and whether she or he owns her or his own means of production, is irrelevant.” With this definition, van der Linden wants to account for the fact that in globalized commodity society there has emerged a gargantuan multitude of differentiated and hierarchized working conditions that do not (any longer) fit the classical schema of wage labor. Among these he counts different transitional forms between slavery, wage labor, self-employment, and subcontracting, but also the unpaid subsistence and reproductive labor of women. Van der Linden accordingly no longer speaks of the class of “free wage workers,” but chooses the broader concept of “subaltern workers.”

But this, however, does not solve the problem, but rather goes one step further than Deppe by inflating the concept of class so that it becomes a metacategory which fundamentally encompasses capitalist society in its entirety.

It lies within the very logic of this metacategory that it is completely devoid of shape. It presents the paradox of a concept of capitalist totality, but precisely this totality slips through its hands. For on one hand it indirectly accounts for the fact that labor is the comprehensive principle — or more accurately, the principle of mediation — of bourgeois society. On the other hand, it is precisely this that is hidden by the fixation on the category of class. Traditional Marxism had always considered the mediation of the social context by labor as the transhistorical constant of all societies, and failed to recognize that what is at stake is the historically specific essential characteristic of the capitalist formation, which is inextricably linked to generalized commodity production and the valorization of value as if an end in itself. What seemed to Marxism to be specific to capitalism was rather the particular way in which surplus labor is skimmed off in the form of surplus value, the mediation via the market and private ownership of the means of production — characteristics which can all be brought together in the concept of class domination.
or of the class opposition between the capitalist class and the working class. This perspective was certainly ideologically compatible with the struggle of a particular segment of commodity owners for recognition within bourgeois society. But whoever wants to bring it up to date and to account for the gargantuan discrepancy in working conditions under the conditions of the globalization of the capital relation will necessary fall into irresolvable contradictions.

The idea, however, that class opposition characterizes the essence of capitalism rather than presenting a derived relationship is so deeply anchored in people’s heads that it obscures the view of the formal context of society even where it reveals itself to be analytically unsuitable at every turn. The very attempts to found this idea more precisely make this clear. An example of this is provided by van der Linden’s attempt at least to begin to delineate his concept of class, which evidently even he finds unsatisfactory, when he asks himself “what all these completely different subalterns actually have in common,” only to answer “that all subaltern workers live in the status of ‘institutionalized heteronomy.’” What is to be understood by this he explains with a reference to Cornelius Castoriadis: “Institutionalized heteronomy expresses an ‘antagonistic division of society and with it the domination of a particular social category over the whole [...] The capitalist economy thus alienates us to the extent that it coincides with the division into proletarians and capitalists.”

It is immediately striking that Castoriadis derives “institutionalized heteronomy” immediately from the class position of the workers. This definition, abbreviated as it is, logically corresponded to the traditional Marxist theory of class with its fixation on the good old proletariat. But what remains of this theory if, like van der Linden, one extends the concept of class to infinity and subsumes more or less the whole of humanity under it? Van der Linden implicitly says nothing other than that alienation is a universal feature of bourgeois society. But at the same time he cannot provide a plausible theoretical justification of this claim, because he does not set himself free from the paradigm of traditional Marxism. Even here the attempt to save this paradigm by
extending it uncovers its aporias and limitations, which the historical process had initially obscured. That alienation or fetishism cannot be directly attributed to class domination, but are essential characteristics of a society that is blindly mediated by commodity production and labor, had, as is well known, already been shown by Marx. It is quite possible that to the workers’ movement in its struggle for recognition within bourgeois society, this might have appeared as idle speculation. But today there stands in the way of this insight nothing more than an anachronistic refusal to let go of the paradigm of the theory of class that repeatedly disclaims itself.

The “Class” as Positive Totality

However, the protagonists of the more recent discourse of class do not acknowledge this self-disclaimer. It is true that they cannot help but implicitly recognize the emptying that results from the inflation of the concept of class, but that does not lead to a change of perspective in their critique of capitalism, but rather ensnares them in all kinds of evasive maneuvers and attempts to blur their own tracks. Above all, the shifting of the focus of investigation onto the empirical level enables the masterpiece at once to dispose of and to retain the fixation on the class opposition as essence of capitalism and center of gravity of all radical critique (“principal contradiction”): retain because the concept of class is elevated to the metalevel of the social relation, where it ekes out a living as an abstraction, devoid of content, which can be immunized against critique precisely because of this character; and dispose of because it no longer plays any real role in the empirical analyses, but only presents a diffuse, presupposed instance of invocation — which as such, however, shapes the perspective of investigation and colors the results in a particular way.

It sounds a little like unconscious self-irony when van der Linden ends his essay with the remark “But it remains to warn against every empirically empty grand theory.”15 For this is precisely what distinguishes his approach and that of all more recent protagonists of the discourse of class: their theory remains empirically empty and
their empiricism remains theoretically naked; they uphold the myth of class struggle, although no subject or a movement can any longer be found in social reality to which the class struggle could be affixed without great strain. When Deppe and van der Linden describe the social hierarchies and inequalities that are formed and sharpened in the context of global crisis capitalism, it is in some respects empirically illuminating, but by setting the headline “Fragmentation of the Working Class” at the top, a highly unfortunate turn of phrase enters the room. What is assumed is always a fundamental unity which is presupposed by all those fragmentations, even if it is not possible adequately to explain in what this unity is supposed to consist. The bridging of the oppositions of interest and the positions of competition with respect to an anticapitalist formation nonetheless appears as fundamentally prearranged.

Deppe even expands this construct to the extent that he speaks, referring to Gramsci, of a “new bloc of subalterns,” which alongside the “working class” is supposed also to encompass all other social movements of the last years (“landless peasants’ protests in Brazil, the uprising in Chiapas, [...] global mass-demonstrations against war and the threat of war”). This bloc, he concedes, “has not yet, however, articulated itself as a bloc, because it lacks an alternative programme and the capacity to act against neoliberalism, through which the fractions of this bloc could be welded together.” 16 The “bloc,” that is, already exists “in itself,” but has not yet “articulated itself politically” as such. It is no accident that this is reminiscent of the violent construction of “ascribed class-consciousness,” if admittedly in a sort of shrunken version which — in contrast with Lukács — does not do without a metaphysical foundation because Deppe is critically beyond such things, but because he carries it around with him unacknowledged. 17 It is only because he implicitly carries the corresponding ascription through to its conclusion and thus presupposes something like a fundamental objective congruence (of interests) of all parties that he can reduce the problem to the superficial question of an “alternative programme” that he imagines
could weld together the different “factions” of that bloc.

The almost incidental manner in which the fragmentations produced by capitalism are downgraded to a sort of secondary or derivative problem with respect to the presupposed “class” indicates a further aporia, which results from the frantic adherence to the paradigm of traditional Marxism. For traditional Marxism, the working class represented by its nature the standpoint of social universality — which was thought to be identical with the standpoint of labor. It was thus supposed to inherit the legacy of the bourgeoisie, which at the times of the bourgeois revolutions was supposed to have claimed this standpoint for itself, but then to have betrayed it for the sake of the selfish private interest of profit. The revolutionary aim accordingly consisted in the creation of a social totality — a totality, namely, that was mediated through labor in a conscious manner. As Moishe Postone has shown in extensive detail, this idea amounted, in two senses, to an ideologically distorted projection of the conditions of capitalism. On one hand, it is a contradiction in itself to desire consciously to shape mediation through labor (and thus through the commodity), because labor is by its nature self-referential and self-directed — that is, it follows its own reified laws, which it forces onto people as if it were a natural law. On the other hand, the constitution of the social context as totality is also an historically quite specific characteristic of capitalist society, which in contrast with all other societies is mediated through a single principle, and for that reason naturally cannot be the vanishing point of emancipation: “The capitalist social formation, according to Marx, is unique inasmuch as it is constituted by a qualitatively homogeneous social ‘substance’; hence, it exists as a social totality. Other social formations are not so totalized: their fundamental social relations are not qualitatively homogeneous. They cannot be grasped by the concept of ‘substance,’ cannot be unfolded from a single structuring principle, and do not display an immanent, necessary historical logic.”18 It follows as a consequence of this insight “that the historical negation of capitalism would not involve the realization, but the abolition, of the totality.”19 Now it is true that the
more recent discourse of class claims to offer a critique of the false identifications of traditional Marxism, but it undoes this work itself by its continued fixation on class and its inflation to a metacategory, the tendency of which is to encompass society as a whole. The appeal to totality — and the unconscious affirmation of the form of capitalist mediation that is contained within it — of traditional Marxism is thus surpassed, and at the same time reduced to absurdity. For if almost all people are ascribed to “the class” (or to the “bloc of subalterns,” or whatever), the social universality that traditional Marxism depicted as still on the horizon would already be potentially realized. But with this the theoretically justified standpoint of critique is also lost. For the totality constituted on capitalist terms could not then be criticized, but would only have to acquire consciousness of itself. Only a few say this as explicitly as Hardt and Negri, who already see communism everywhere peeking through from under the thin cover of capitalism; but this is in no way just an isolated quirk, but rather the logical consequence of the theoretical approach that they fundamentally share with all the discourse of class in its entirety.

This discourse certainly believes that it goes beyond traditional Marxism, because it has freed itself from the idea of a unified subject and instead permanently evokes the heterogeneity of the putative working class. But in this it fundamentally only reflects the inner disjointedness of commodity society, which as asocial sociality, by definition, disintegrates into countless particularities. 20 If this fragmented totality is immediately identified with the working class and appealed to positively, then the criteria necessary in order adequately to address the destructive capacities that are increasingly set free in the process of disintegration of bourgeois subjectivity are ultimately missing. This holds for racist and sexist violence as much as for antisemitic delusion and the ethnic and religious fundamentalisms that are gaining currency. From the perspective of class they cannot be decoded as inherent forms of expression of subjectivity in commodity society that present independent moments of the dynamic of capitalist crisis, because the fixation on the “fragmented class-
subject” would otherwise be called into question. It is basically for this reason that they are always treated as external appearances, as a sort of disturbing factor that might be able to split the class context, but are not of essential concern. It thus ultimately remains a matter of personal taste to decide whether or not reactionary movements, be they ethno-nationalistic currents (in Spain, for example) or the so-called Second Intifada, can be included in the great consensus of anticapitalist struggles. The partition between the elements of the more recent discourse of class and the regressive decayed forms of traditional Marxism is thus extremely thin for the reason that the theoretical foundation is at heart the same.

**No More Making of the Working Class**

In contrast to the attempts to save the working class by overexpanding its objective determinations are those whose arguments proceed primarily from the subjective side. According to these approaches, class is not defined by position in the process of production and valorization, but always constitutes itself anew and is subject to permanent changes which are an essential result of the dynamic of class struggles. Such a perspective has the initial advantage of drawing attention to the active moments in social conflict, their process character, and the possibilities for subjective development that are contained within it, because the category of class is kept open and not codified in a definition. But the appearance of openness is deceptive. It is fundamentally limited by an axiom that is always placed in front of all specific analyses in advance, and that restricts their perspective. For it can be seen how self-evidently class struggle is presupposed as a transhistorically valid principle, from which class can then in turn be derived: “Always already present in all social relations, class struggle precedes the historical classes,” so the editorial of the issue of the journal *Fantômas* that has already been cited many times in this chapter. But with this the argument becomes circular. Both the concept of class and that of class struggle are defined completely arbitrarily. All social conflicts can in principle be ennobled to class
struggles without differentiation, and all participants to class subjects. In this manner, the subjectivist concept of class attains in principle the same result as its objective counterpart. It is thus no wonder that these former theoretical rivals are increasingly becoming reconciled with one another and living together in peace (as, for example, is the case in that issue of Fantômas). For wherever all conceptual stringency is lost and the “class” can simply be anything and everything, the old differences no longer play any sort of decisive role.

What is problematic here is primarily that the concept of class struggle, once it is dissolved from the historically specific context of the workers’ movement, the only context in which it made any sense, can very easily be short-circuited with a completely nonspecific concept of struggle, which corresponds more to the “war of all against all” (Hobbes) than a struggle against the conditions and impositions of capitalism. Once again, this is particularly apparent in Hardt and Negri, who transfigure even the individualized daily struggle for existence to a form of expression of class struggle, and no longer have any sort of criteria to distance themselves from outbreaks of regressive violence or even fundamentalist movements. Class struggle thus becomes an abstract and ultimately affirmative empty formula which encompasses the permanent internal state of war of capitalist society and its disintegration in crisis no less than the endeavors to oppose precisely this. Now it is true that many proponents of the subjectivist standpoint of class for good reasons do not wish to pursue this consequence to its end, but in this they end up with a fairly considerable burden of justification. For their levitating, decontextualized concept of class struggle has no conceptual set of tools available that could distinguish between the mere action of bourgeois subjectivity in its ugliest facets (whether individual or collective) and the attempts to overcome precisely this (e.g., in grassroots social movements). To save the concept of class struggle, all kinds of argumentative bolt-ons are necessary (the recourse to discourse theory, for example), which only show how little it can itself contribute to the analytical clarification of social development.
One of the most important witnesses for the case of the subjectivist theorists of class is the English social historian E.P. Thompson, who always emphasized the active moment in the emergence of the working class. In the preface to his most important historical study, which has the programmatic title *The Making of the English Working Class*, he writes “Making, because it is a study in an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning. The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.”

However, Thompson’s analyses refer — as he himself always insists — to processes in a highly specific historical situation: the capitalist drive to assert itself during the last third of the eighteenth and the first third of the nineteenth century in England. But this situation is evidently different from today’s in a fundamental way. It was shaped by the repression and destruction of the comparatively heterogeneous pre- and proto-capitalist living and working conditions under the ever stronger pressure of standardization of the capitalist mode of production and of life; and this means not least by the massive creation of doubly free wage workers who were compelled to sell their labor power in order to survive. In Thompson’s investigations he concentrated on the revolts and the struggles of resistance that were provoked by this process, and showed how during the course of them (and also by the experience of defeats) something like a class consciousness first began to take shape.

But while it was important to emphasize the significance of these subjective processes that had been ignored by orthodox Marxism, it was just as important that the insights gained by this process not be deleted from their historical context if they were not to become abstract in the bad sense. While the formation of a class consciousness is in no way the automatic result of the process of establishment of the valorization of capital, this subjective unification in a working class nonetheless corresponds to the simultaneous objective process of subordination of all social relations under the principle of unity of abstract labor and commodity production. The two moments devour one another in a dialectical relationship. Thompson himself
emphasizes: “the class experience is largely defined by the productive relations into which men are born — or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not.”

If we transpose this claim onto the current situation, it must be acknowledged straight away that the objectively predefined context within which social experiences are made and social struggles are pursued is fundamentally different from that epoch. We are not standing today at the beginning of the process of establishment of capitalism; the main trend is not by a long way that of the extermination of noncapitalist modes of life by means of the steamroller of valorization (although this is still happening in some parts of the world). We are rather facing a situation in which the commodity-producing system has generalized itself the world over and at the same time entered a fundamental process of crisis, because it undermines its own foundations by the increasing displacement of living labor power. This development, however, which is expressed in the increasing precarization of living and working conditions and in the fact that worldwide more and more people are being made surplus to the requirements of and excluded from the valorization of capital, is directly opposed to that of the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the current direction of development of the basic logic of capitalism that has become an end in itself can be found not the formation of a (new) working class, but the increasing destruction of a society which is based on the universalized compulsion to sell oneself. People, that is to say, are not being forced into a unified social form; rather, the form of unity in which they live and by means of which they are constituted is disintegrating, and they are thus falling through its structures. However, it is possible to speak of a unification in this context to the extent that the process which I described above under the concept of declassing is a universal one. But in itself, this contains nothing of consequence. Quite the opposite: capitalist fragmentation
is only the intensification of the logic of capital in the stage of its decomposition. This is true not only objectively, as exemplified by the exacerbated competition between locations, a quandary that from the beginning imposes limits upon the struggle between particular interests (for example against factory closure or wage cuts), although this does not fundamentally mean that these struggles have lost their immanent justification. At the same time, the exacerbated pressure of the struggle for existence has also made an essential contribution to the atomization and decline in solidarity and the broad-reaching establishment of the capitalist subjectivity of competition and delimitation.

This development is also expressed in the subjective forms of operation and modes of action. The movements of social resistance at the start of the nineteenth century emerged against the background of a repression of non- and proto-capitalist living conditions that were incompatible with the industrial-capitalist mode of production. In the light of this collective experience and of the tremendous imposition that was daily factory labor and the selfishness of capitalist competition, cultural patterns of interpretation and forms of practical solidarity were developed in resistance, which ultimately led to the formation of the consciousness of belonging to a class with a common fate. However, because today such a process of constitution is no longer and cannot any longer take place, the beginnings of anticapitalist resistance are overlayed and pushed back by processes of collectivization that are determined by regressive forms from the core stock of commodity-society subjectivity. This is true for the formation of sects and gangs just as for the antisemitic delusion, for the racist and religious forms of identity politics of all shades no less than for outbreaks of violence for its own sake. There is no new working class emerging here; what is rather taking place is the action of people who have been formed into subjects of labor and the commodity but who can no longer ordinarily function as such.

However, the fragmentation of crisis capitalism does not only set free the regressive moments of the subject form; the emancipatory
impulses, ideas, and aspirations which had attached themselves to the struggle of the working class for recognition within bourgeois society have also lost their context and have to a certain extent begun to float free. The historical class struggle draws its comparative coherence from its focus on the opposition of the interests of capital and labor, an opposition which developed an integrating dynamic in the phase of the rise of capitalism. The resistance against the current wave of precarization and impoverishment, in contrast, continually exposes itself to the danger of itself reproducing the centrifugal tendencies of the unfolding capitalist crisis. It is thus faced with the difficult task of formulating and pursuing social conflicts in such a way that they counteract the intensified logic of competition and exclusion and the identity-political tendencies that accompany it. This will ultimately only succeed if different struggles and conflicts can be linked together across all borders without false proclamations of unity or hierarchies. This linking, however, cannot be derived from presupposed objective or subjective determinations (class standpoint or class struggle). It can only emerge from the conscious cooperation of such social movements that aspire to the abolition of domination in all its facets, and not only as an abstract, distant goal, but also within their own structures and relationships.

Blueprints for such movements cannot be drafted at the drawing board. Theory is unable to do anything other than formulate fundamental considerations in this direction. If we have anything to learn from Thompson's investigations, it is the significance of practical experiences for the constitution of social movements. For this reason it is important to turn our attention to those processes within which resistance to capitalist impositions turns away from hierarchical, populist, and authoritarian attempts to draw people together, and where struggles between interests are linked to the establishment of self-organized structures. While such movements (as for example the Zapatistas, the autonomous currents of the Piqueteros, and other grass-roots movements) are in many respects contradictory — and we must on no account attempt to transfigure them romantically —
they are also in a minority on a world scale, and always under the threat of marginalization and cooptation. However, here can be found approaches and moments which point to the perspective of a liberation from the totality of commodity society. The future belongs not to class struggle, but to an emancipatory struggle without classes.
Chapter 5

Lukács sans Proletariat, or Can History and Class Consciousness Be Rehistoricized?

Neil Larsen

I

There can be little doubt that, almost a century after its first publication, Georg Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness, especially its great centrepiece, ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’, remains the founding work of modern, Hegelian-Marxist critical theory. Within that tradition, even those who have come to question or repudiate one or another of its central arguments – Adorno, say, or Habermas – would be forced to admit that their own thinking presupposes the theory and critique of reification that Lukács first extrapolated from Marx’s writings, especially Capital, in the early 1920s. Whatever theoretical errors have now become apparent with the definitive ending of the historical epoch out of which History and Class Consciousness was born (roughly, from World War I to the end of the Cold War), new work in Critical Theory nevertheless runs the risk, to paraphrase Sartre’s celebrated mot regarding Marx himself, of falling back behind its point of departure.

This can be readily verified by a brief glance – to cite an especially egregious instance – at Axel Honneth’s 2005 Tanner lectures, Reification: a New Look at an Old Idea (2008). Honneth characterizes Lukács’s theory of reification in the following terms:

Regardless of whether objects, other persons or one’s own talents and feelings are at issue, Lukács maintains that all these get experienced as thing-like objects as soon as they come to be viewed according to their potential usefulness in economic transactions. But of course, this conceptual strategy is insufficient for the task of justifying the idea of reification as a second nature, for when we speak of a ‘second nature’, we are dealing not only with economic occurrences, but with all dimensions of social activity. How can one explain what reification means outside of the sphere of commodity exchange, if this concept solely denotes an occurrence in which all elements of a social situation get redefined as economically calculable factors? (50, my emphasis)
But, of course, it is just the existence of this ‘outside of the sphere of commodity exchange’ that is challenged by Lukács. Anyone who bothers to read even the first few lines of RCP learns that its crucial theoretical intent was precisely to extend, via the concepts of reification and ‘second nature’, Marx’s theory of the fetishism of the commodity to ‘all the dimensions of social activity’:

The problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them. (HCC 83)

Honneth has foisted onto Lukács, probably the most profound reader of Marx and of Capital of his time, something like a ‘rational choice’ model of liberal economic theory in which, pace Marx, the process of commodity production and exchange no longer takes place ‘behind the backs’ of society – all forms of social praxis being ‘viewed according to their potential usefulness in economic transactions’ (RNL 50, my emphasis). According to Honneth the category of reification is one in which ‘subjects are compelled to behave as detached observers, rather than as active participants in social life, because their reciprocal calculation of the benefits that others might yield for their own profit demands a purely rational and emotionless stance’ (51–2). Evidently, a passionate act of commodity exchange would, according to Honneth, escape reification (51–2).

Honneth, one hopes, remains an anomaly among contemporary readers of HCC. Take, at the opposite end of the spectrum, Fredric Jameson. Any contemporary and fully adequate attempt at a ‘rehistoricizing’ of HCC would, inevitably it seems, have to take stock of the latter’s essay ‘History and Class Consciousness as an Unfinished Project’. While such a review is not something I have the space to undertake in detail here, a word or two at least is in order. Initially published in the 1988 inaugural issue of the journal Re-thinking Marxism, the essay makes a second appearance as a chapter in Jameson’s Valences of the Dialectic (2009), and is thus certain to attract once again the serious and widespread attention it initially received more than 20 years ago. Worlds apart from the philosophical travesties of Honneth’s RNL, the bulk of Jameson’s essay advances a careful and unorthodox argument against what is still the general consensus that Lukács’s turn to aesthetics and a defence of literary realism from the 1930s onwards represented a radical break, even a betrayal, of the theoretical breakthroughs of HCC. Without underplaying Lukács’s embrace of a version of reflection theory acceptable to the Leninist orthodoxy of the time, Jameson – who, in Marxism and Form (1974) was almost single-handedly responsible for re-introducing Lukács to the broader North American literary-theoretical circles gathered around the New Left – challenges and effectively overturns this supposed retreat from HCC. Jameson convincingly shows that the crucial theoretical and
philosophical categories structuring the latter – reification and totality – continue to govern Lukács's thinking in works such as ‘Narrate or Describe?’ (in WC) and The Historical Novel.

But ‘Lukács’s Particular Epistemology’, the fifth and final section of ‘History and Class Consciousness as an Unfinished Project’, evidently republished in Valences without alteration, opens with the following assertion:

What is argued in this text [RCP] is essentially an epistemological priority of a particular social group or class in advanced society. Whatever the group or class identified and ‘privileged’ by such an argument, therefore, the form of the argument is itself unusual and demands attention in its own right, since in its very structure it seeks to relate a truth claim to the social structure and phenomenological experience of a specific collectivity. Epistemology thus passes over into social phenomenology. . . . (Jameson, 2009, p. 214)

What follows, as readers of the original 1988 essay will no doubt recall, is the promulgation of a species of theoretical-political peace treaty between Part III of RCP and the ‘standpoint’ theory then current on the academic flank of the identity-political and ‘new social’ movements of the 1980s, particularly in the case of feminism, but also including the cause of oppressed ethnicities, African Americans and Jews in particular.

This is not the place to rehearse the various twists and turns of the reasoning behind Jameson’s theoretical case for a Lukácsian ‘alliance politics’ (in the sense, prevalent in the late 1980s and early 1990s, of a united front between class, gender and ethnicity-based oppositional movements). Nor do I wish to imply that the broader questions of how the categories of reification, critical standpoint and totality impinge on gender and ethnicity do not deserve the most rigorous theoretical reflection. But Jameson’s opening assertion that class is, for HCC and RCP in particular, theoretically commensurate with other ‘social group[s]’, that it counts for Lukács as ‘the phenomenological experience of a specific collectivity’, erases a conceptual distinction so fundamental to Part III of RCP that the latter has, with this one casual remark, as good as disappeared as an object of any genuine critical reflection. Gone, as if by prestidigitation, is the crucial, still controversial theoretical distinction drawn by Lukács between the ‘empirically given’ and the ‘imputed consciousness’ (zugerechnetes Bewusstsein) of the proletariat – a disappearance made even more bizarre by the fact that no one could be more aware of and thoughtful about this distinction than Jameson himself. By stating outright that, for RCP, ‘epistemology passes over into social phenomenology’, Jameson has tacitly and knowingly dropped, along with the problem of ‘imputed consciousness’, the very question, perhaps one of HCC’s greatest and most revolutionary theoretical contributions, of (class) consciousness as form, as structured in its relation to reification and to social form as such. ‘Standpoint’ and ‘empirically given consciousness’ in the guise of ‘social phenomenology’ are simply conflated – a conflation as
unfortunate for any genuine critical-theoretical approach to questions of reification and nonclass social and cultural forms as it is fatal to any critical reassessment or possible rehistoricization of HCC itself. One hopes that, as ‘Unfinished Project’ finds a new generation of readers with the publication of a work as significant as Valences, this unfortunate type of critical concession – wholly uncharacteristic of Jameson – will not escape criticism.

Such careless or outright misreadings notwithstanding, the fact remains that the foundational, even paradigmatic, contribution of HCC to Marxian critical theory in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has long since become a problematic, not to say a deeply paradoxical one. Symptomatic of this problem, rather than explanatory, is the notoriously swift condemnation of HCC by the leading theoreticians, philosophers and ideologues of the Comintern, and Lukács’s own (as we now know, privately but angrily reluctant) recantation of its arguments soon after its publication, and his subsequent adherence to a Communist-Party-U.S.S.R.-sanctioned Marxism-Leninism and its philosophical tenets of dialectical materialism and reflection theory. The same applies to what was – with exceptions such as The Young Hegel (1938) – Lukács’s virtual self-confinement, at least up until his return to Hungary in 1945, to questions of aesthetics and literary criticism. For its repudiation by Soviet-sanctioned Marxism did nothing – perhaps a good deal less than nothing – to prevent HCC and the immanent critique of reification on which it centres from giving direction to the theoretical trajectory that was to become known as the Frankfurt School and, more generally, the Central and Western European as well as North- and Latin American traditions of ‘Western Marxism’.

The problematic issue I refer to here is rather the question of what to this day remains HCC’s most controversial and fraught theoretical claim, the one that, in a sense, won him sceptics and enemies in equal measure in both a Stalinist Communist Party–dominated East (where HCC was banned) and a non-Party, more dissidently Marxist ‘West’. This is the notorious thesis advanced in Part III of RCP, ‘The Standpoint of the Proletariat’: the claim to have discovered in that class, and its ‘imputed’ form of consciousness, material History’s ‘identical subject-object’.

Summarizing the many and wide-ranging debates to which this question has given rise, especially since HCC began to be widely read again by various sectors of the New Left in the 1960s, would far exceed the limits of this essay. So would a comprehensive rehearsal of the many and extraordinarily rich and complex arguments that make up RCP itself and its lengthy third section, a basic knowledge of which I will assume on the reader’s part. But it stands to reason that in order to sustain Lukács’s thinking as a whole in HCC and RCP one would have to square it somehow with the now historically inescapable reality that the ‘standpoint of the proletariat’, in the wake of the social and political history of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and its (counter)revolutionary démarche, simply could not and cannot sustain the historico-philosophical weight that Lukács had placed upon it. Thus it is that theoretically, if not
politically, and whether willingly or ironically, even the most forgiving readings of HCC line up with Lukács’s own self-critical 1967 preface to HCC, in which he reaffirmed his adherence to a Leninist, ‘materialist’ orthodoxy and conceded once again, evidently without reluctance this time, that equating proletarian class consciousness with a Hegelian ‘identical subject/object’ had been an idealist deviation. And yet if that is so, if the standpoint problem is either reduced to its explicitly Leninist, and implicitly Machiavellian partisan/ideological version as simply the revolutionary class interest of the proletariat, or is jettisoned outright as insoluble, what then again becomes of the critical-theoretical argument of HCC and RCP as a whole? Can an immanent critique of reification – there being no possible question that this is what HCC proposes to be – simply dispense with the question of the immanent standpoint of such a critique, in both the theoretical/objective and the practical/subjective sense, without violating its own premises and collapsing entirely? The Lukács of RCP certainly had no doubts on this score. And if that standpoint is not, after all, that of a class identified as the proletariat, to what else, in historically objective terms, might it correspond?

Herein lies the paradox referred to above. For, as convenient and even, in its way, intellectually self-sufficing as it may be to proceed no further in a reading of RCP than sections I and II, contenting oneself, say, with the still breathtaking critique of German Idealist philosophy developed in ‘The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought’, the theoretical argument of RCP is too self-integrated and systematic for it to undergo such a coupage and not, necessarily, begin to unravel. Recall the closing lines of ‘The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought’:

Classical philosophy did, it is true, take all the antinomies of its life-basis to the furthest extreme it was capable of in thought; it conferred on them the highest possible intellectual expression. But even for this philosophy they remain unsolved and insoluble. Thus classical philosophy finds itself historically in the paradoxical position that it was concerned to find a philosophy that would mean the end of bourgeois society, and to resurrect in thought a humanity destroyed in that society and by it. In the upshot, however, it did not manage to do more than provide a complete intellectual copy and the a priori deduction of bourgeois society. It is only the manner of this deduction, namely the dialectical method that points beyond bourgeois society. (148)

But if, failing to embody itself in the proletariat as the “we” of history (149), the revolutionary dialectic comes to a stop at a socio-historical stage correlative with an a priori deduction of bourgeois society – a position that often seems to be adopted, if only faute de mieux, by a thinker such as Adorno – then can we still maintain that it was either revolutionary or dialectical and not simply a species of preordained stasis, not to say disaster? For HCC, history itself must offer up, immanently, the subject/object synthesis that is to overcome and exit the antinomial treadmills of reification – ‘intellectual genesis must be identical in
principle with historical genesis’ (HCC 155) – otherwise, in the final analysis, even the critical theory of reification must, on its own standards, fall as well. Where, if not in the ‘standpoint of the proletariat’, could such a dialectical synthesis be found? To what else, in historically revised terms, might it correspond? How, that is – if at all – is one to rehistoricize HCC dialectically after the historical abdication of what was to have been its own central historical-philosophical truth-claim?

In the aforementioned preface to the 1967 re-edition of HCC, Lukács acknowledges the evident ‘contradiction’ of emphasizing the ‘negative aspects of History and Class Consciousness while asserting that nevertheless the book was not without importance in its day’. He goes on:

A momentous, world-historical change was struggling to find a theoretical expression. Even if a theory was unable to do justice to the objective nature of the great crisis [he is referring to WWI and the revolutionary wave it unleashed – NL], it might yet formulate a typical view and thus achieve a certain historical validity. This was the case, as I believe, with History and Class Consciousness. (xxv)

This, in a certain ironic sense, is just the question I wish to pose as well, only here with regard to the ‘great crisis’ of capital we are ourselves facing now, and, in that context, the form taken by HCC’s possibly contemporary claim to ‘a certain historical validity’ – even if a validity not precisely understood, consciously foreseen or perhaps even theorizable by its author.

II

Any attempt to answer this question must surely find its point of departure in those contemporary currents within Marxian critical theory that, without sacrificing the critique of reification, have already set about rethinking themselves ‘sans proletariat’. Here I have two sources in mind: (1) Moishe Postone’s seminal contribution to Marxian thought, as developed in his principal work, Time, Labor and Social Domination (1996); and (2) the closely allied, but more crisis-oriented and conjunctural critical-theoretical school known in German-speaking circles as Wertkritik (best translated as ‘value-form critique’), as represented chiefly by the journals Exit! and Krisis. Wertkritik’s most prominent theorists include the prolific Robert Kurz, along with Roswitha Scholz, Ernst Lohoff, Norbert Trenkle and increasingly numerous others. Because almost none of the latter work exists, as yet, in English translation and remains practically unknown in anglophone circles, as well as for the sake of brevity, I will focus mainly on Postone’s arguments, but will touch as well on a short essay by Trenkle which is representative of the general Wertkritik ‘line’: ‘Die metaphysischen Mucken des Klassenkampfs’ (‘The Metaphysical Subtleties of Class Struggle’).
The latter develops an especially rich and provocative critique of HCC. Time and space constraints again oblige me to provide little more than ruthless abbreviations of a highly developed and complex system of critical-theoretical arguments here. TLSD and Wertkritik share a common Frankfurt School, mainly Adornian genealogy, but depart radically from both latter-day Habermasian and ‘third generation’ Frankfurt School offshoots by focusing centrally on what Alfred Sohn-Rethel (another important Wertkritik precursor) once pointed to as the Frankfurt School’s greatest theoretical deficit: a sustained, reconceptualized and re-actualized critique of political economy.

In this light, the shared premise of both Postone’s work as well as of Wertkritik is that not only the commodity, value and capital but labour itself must be counted among the fetishized social categories of capitalism as mode of production and domination. Its ‘concrete’ manifestation notwithstanding, labour, no less than these more familiar Marxian categories as they are known to students of Capital, constitutes, for this line of critique, an immanent form of social mediation historically specific to capitalism. Labour here ceases to be grasped as the transhistorical, ontologized category with which, in Postone’s phraseology, ‘traditional Marxism’ (including the work of the early Marx himself, and, in a more contradictory fashion, aspects of his mature thought as well) has historically identified it. The goal of the genuine, radical and emancipatory core of Marxian critical theory and praxis is thus, from this standpoint, not to liberate labour (and its class embodiment, the proletariat) from capital, but to liberate society from labour, to abolish labour along with capital itself. The goal of critical theory and practice must be to supersede not only the fetishism of the commodity but that of the ‘real abstraction’ of work itself, as the substance-constituting social praxis, so to speak, of self-valorizing value. Indeed, in the thinking of Wertkritik, contemporary, post-Fordist capitalism is itself well on its way – even if, left to the working out of its own terminal logic, with anything but emancipatory effects in store – to completing this process of abolishing labour. In the wake of the quantum leap in labour productivity brought about by what Wertkritik terms the ‘third (microelectronic) industrial revolution’ and the correspondingly enormous increase in the organic composition of capital on a global scale, surplus-value generation itself tends now, not merely in relative but in absolute terms – or so the theory has it – towards zero.

Although Lukács is a frequent point of reference for Postone, he concentrates his critique of RCP in TLSD’s second chapter, ‘Presuppositions of traditional Marxism’. Here Postone readily acknowledges Lukács as, at least in RCP, a quintessential precursor and certainly not a traditional ‘traditional Marxist’ on the order of a Lenin, Hilferding, Kautsky, Luxemburg, Sweezy and others. Postone’s initial praise for RCP is as good a summary of the essay as one can find anywhere and is worth quoting in full:

By characterizing capitalist society in terms of the rationalization of all spheres of life, and grounding those processes in the commodity form of social
relations, [HCC] implicitly points to a conception of capitalism that is
deeper and broader than that of a system of exploitation based on private
property. Moreover, by means of his materialist appropriation of Hegel,
Lukács makes explicit the idea that Marx’s categories represent a powerful
attempt to overcome the classical subject-object dualism. They refer to struc-
tured forms of practice that are simultaneously forms of subjectivity and
objectivity. (TLSD 73)

It is crucial to note here that Postone’s quarrel with RCP is not with its
Hegelian-influenced attempt, adapted straight from Capital (and though
Lukács, at the time he wrote HCC, could not have known it, the Grundrisse) at
overcoming the subject/object-dualism of ‘reified consciousness’. Yet, even so,
HCC is ‘deeply inconsistent’, remaining ‘bound to some of [traditional
Marxism’s] basic theoretical presuppositions’ (TLSD 73). For RCP,
materializing the Hegelian totality of society, fragmented and alienated by reification,
can only be to restore it to its underlying, constitutive basis in labour, ‘traditionally’
understood here as ontological and transhistorical. For reified, bourgeois
society to become, for the first time, real, historico-material Subject rather than
Geist, it must, for RCP, become such labour as Subject. And – recall Lukács’s
equation of the principle of totality with class throughout HCC – this can only
leave us with the proletariat as labour’s subjective embodiment. But

[t]he idea that the proletariat embodies a possible postcapitalist form of
social life only makes sense, however, if capitalism is defined essentially
in terms of private ownership of the means of production, and if ‘labor’ is
considered to be the standpoint of the critique. In other words, although
Lukács’s analysis implies that capitalism cannot be defined in traditional
terms if its critique is to be adequate as a critical theory of modernity, he
undermines his implicit insight by continuing to regard the standpoint of
critique in precisely those traditional terms. (TLSD 73–4)

At this point in TLSD, Postone, in one of the book’s most controversial theses,
stands Lukács and RCP ‘on their head’. He disputes the supposition that
Lukács’s identification of the proletariat as historico-material ‘identical sub-
ject/object’ is a notion shared by Marx himself, arguing that, contrary to his
earlier, Feuerbachian practice of simply inverting idealist Hegelian categories
in the writings of the 1840s, in his mature work Marx ‘analyses the social validity
for capitalist society of precisely those idealist Hegelian concepts which he
had earlier condemned as mystified inversions’ (74–5). In Hegel’s concept of
Geist as Subject (that is, as the subjective moment immanent to the totality of
objects) Marx, according to Postone, sees the idealized manifestation not of the
proletariat but of capital itself. Citing the well-known passage in Capital which
terms capital an ‘automatic subject’ (Marx, 1990, p. 255), Postone claims that
here Marx, without naming Hegel,
explicitly characterizes capital as the self-moving substance which is Subject. In so doing, Marx suggests that a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism, yet he does not identify it with any social grouping, such as the proletariat or humanity. Rather, Marx analyses it in terms of the structure of social relations constituted by forms of objectifying practice and grasped by the category of capital (and hence value). (TLSD 75)

Moreover, continues Postone:

As the Subject, capital is a remarkable ‘subject’. Whereas Hegel’s Subject is transhistorical and knowing, in Marx’s analysis it is historically determinate and blind. Capital, as a structure constituted by determinate forms of practice, may in turn be constitutive of forms of practice and subjectivity; yet, as the Subject, it has no ego. It is self-reflexive and, as a social form, may induce self-consciousness, but, unlike Hegel’s Geist, it does not possess self-consciousness. (TLSD 77)

Sweeping, and, from the perspective of a ‘traditional’ Marxism, traumatic as this conclusion must appear – and whether one concurs with it or not – it is important not to lose sight of precisely what Postone is and is not proposing here. Restated in the terms of a general theory of reification, it asserts with impeccable logic that if, as the Lukács of RCP was the first to argue, revolutionary theory must be derived from Marx’s theory of the fetishism of the commodity, and in a broader sense from the theoretical structure of Capital as a whole, this provides no necessary basis from which to conclude that the proletariat as class, nor, indeed, the social category of class itself, occupies the place of a historic-material ‘identical subject/object’. The logic of the commodity as capitalism’s essential ‘form of social mediation’ refers to the category of (capitalist) society as a whole. At no point in Capital does Marx, despite the prominent role he accords to both proletariat and bourgeoisie on the historic-sociological plane, give the slightest indication that either class, or the category of class itself, supersedes or stands in necessary, immanent contradiction to this form of mediation. Behind reification as the blind, ‘automatic’ mediating principle binding together all the social atoms afloat in the ether of bourgeois society’s (to use Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s convenient phrase) ‘practical solipsism’, there must stand a no less blind, unconscious totality – and only capital, or, in an even more elemental sense, the value-form itself, answers, in Marx’s critical theory, to this logic.

But it does not follow, nor does Postone himself argue, that, because class as a form of social-relation immanent to capitalism cannot supply the theoretical or practical standpoint from which to overcome reification, no other form of (self-)conscious social-relation, and no other Subject could therefore possibly supply this standpoint. While not, as a fairly widespread misconception of the book seems to have it, ruling out the possibility of any historical subject other
than capital, TLSD does not venture very far beyond abstract generalities in the
effort to speculate theoretically as to what such a conscious, but non- or supra-
class ‘subject/object’ might be. And this, as we shall see below, has the potential
to create serious difficulties when it comes to the self-consistency of Postone’s
advocacy of the method, so lucidly expounded in TLSD – and a legacy of HCC
itself – of ‘immanent critique’.

But before turning back to these questions, I want first to take up Norbert
Trenkle’s initially parallel critique of Lukács’s claim to have ‘proletarianized’
the standpoint of the critical theory of reification. Trenkle’s arguments, briefer
but more forceful, contemporized and polemical than Postone’s, engage the
reasoning of Part III of RCP more directly and are more closely attuned to the
concrete problems and debates surrounding current theories of capitalist
crisis, casting the problems we are considering into sharper relief and better
clarifying what is really at stake here politically. ‘Die metaphysischen Mucken des
Klassenkampfs’ is framed mainly as a critique of what it terms the ‘retro-discourse’
of a return to class struggle then (and now) cropping up on the left among the
likes of Hardt and Negri, John Holloway, Marcel van den Linden and theoret-
cians associated with the European movement ‘Attac’. Like TLSD, ‘Die metaphy-
sischen Mucken’ is careful to credit the Lukács of HCC as still, however little
acknowledged by contemporary Marxism, the most ‘elaborate and coherent’
version of, in Trenkle’s acerbic terms, the ‘theology of class’.

The young Lukács’s theoretical achievement is his attempt to conceive of
class perspective together with the reification produced by the commodity
form, setting his thinking apart from that of almost the entire Marxist tradi-
tion and making him a reference point for the self-reflecting left to this day.
It should be kept in mind that even then this represented an attempt to
process in intellectual terms the defeat of the revolution in the Western
European countries. Basically, Lukács is concerned with questions of why the
proletariat had failed to overcome capitalism despite its growing numbers,
and why in fact its empirical consciousness had remained fixed within capitalist
categories. (‘Metaphysical’ op. cit., digital version; pp. 1–2; translation emended)

It is, according to Trenkle, the very theoretical depth of this drive to rescue
the proletariat and class struggle from the challenge posed by the latter’s ‘actually
existing’ political forfeitures that, ironically, produces Lukács’s ‘metaphysical’
leap in Part III of RCP to the highly controversial theory of an ‘imputed’
(zugrechne) form of proletarian class consciousness – a form theoretically
untainted by what was, as Lukács himself conceded, the still reified ‘empirical’
consciousness of most workers. Such a leap, argues Trenkle, must inevitably
follow from the Lukácsian conception of reification as weil concealing a social
totality mediated by a ‘labour’ presupposed as transhistorical, socially-constitut-
itive ‘essence’. The fundamental difference between capitalist and communist
society would thus in the end be merely that, in the latter, mediation by means of abstract labour would ‘take place consciously’ (2, translation emended). But ‘insofar as this is so’, reasons Trenkle,

the aim of liberating labor from reification turns into an impossible task. Labor is per se a reified activity and, as such, lies at the basis of modern commodity production. The ‘conscious recognition’ of labor as a social principle of mediation would be nothing other than the contradiction in terms of a ‘conscious recognition’ of commodity production and the ‘conscious’ self-surrender to its constraints and imperatives. (2; translation emended)

Echoing an ongoing critical-theoretical project of Wertkritik generally, in which not only ‘labour’ but the ‘subject form’ itself as a category purportedly bequeathed by bourgeois Enlightenment thought becomes the target of critique, Trenkle here effectively takes a step beyond Postone’s claim to have discovered the demystified Subject of History in capital rather than a disalienated labour on the level of ‘species-being’. In effect, the Hegelian dialectical categories in terms of which Lukács had derived a theory of the dialectical negation of reification and reified consciousness – essence, historical Subject and totality as telos, all purportedly in statu nascendi in the form of a revolutionary, proletarian class consciousness – turn out here to be, along with labour, forms of reification themselves, abstract labour’s ‘metaphysical’ pseudo-negations. Postone, though more cautiously, echoes this same line of thinking in TLSD:

[T]he notion that capital constitutes the historical Subject also suggests that the realm of politics in a postcapitalist society should not be seen in terms of a totality that is hindered in capitalism from emerging fully. Indeed, it implies the contrary – that an institutionally totalizing form of politics should be interpreted as an expression of the practical coordination of capital as the totality, subject to its constraints and imperatives, rather than as the overcoming of capital. The abolition of totality should, then, allow for the possible constitution of very different, non-totalizing forms of the political coordinations of society. (79–80)

The ‘metaphysical’ pitfalls of positing the category of class as the historical medium and fulcrum for overturning capital and the reified (un)consciousness of a society mediated through the value form, controversial as they remain, must, in my view, be granted. But the mere evocation of a ‘plurality’ of subjectivities and practices in both Trenkle and Postone nevertheless strikes me as still too theoretically limited and peremptory. Perhaps this is inevitable, given the many historical uncertainties and obscurities that cloud the horizon of the crisis of capital in its present phase. But such pronouncements smack of a certain theoretical pragmatism, even of a kind of ‘bad abstraction’. Indeed, without being further mediated and concretized, they risk calling into question
the viability of the very theory and critique of reification that they are meant to rectify and re-actualize. Take, for example, Trenkle’s warnings about contemporary efforts to rescue the idea of class struggle by simply equating the ‘proletariat’ with whatever forms of social subjectivity and agency appear to challenge the existing world order – whether in the guise of the ‘multitude’ (Hardt and Negri) or of a sheer, creative and active cry of negation in relation to what is (Holloway). Taken no further than this, do not Trenkle and Postone remain adrift in the political equivalent of an emancipatory ‘night in which all cats are grey’, unable to distinguish, except by voluntarist political identifications, between say, Al Qaeda and the *piqueteros*? One must at least question whether, theoretically speaking, the mere insistence on a ‘plurality’ of resistances to reification and, in Postone’s case, ‘non-totalizing forms of political coordinations of society’ get us very much further than Hardt and Negri, for example, despite resolutely parting company with the ‘retro-discourse’ of proletarians and class struggle. The mere abstract assertion that such post-class, antimeta-physical pluralities are what the real negative face of capital would have to look like, taken no further, risks limiting whatever critical force it is able to exert against ‘traditional’ and neo-‘traditional’ Marxisms by merely repeating those same negative features in an inverse and abstractly positive light.

To put it differently, Postone and Trenkle overcome the ‘metaphysical’ errors of a ‘traditional’ Marxism at the risk of merely deferring the question to which Lukács and RCP sought a definitive answer, even if it turned out to be the wrong one: that of the *immanent* standpoint of a critique of reification. Returning now to the principles of immanent critique as explicitly propounded by Postone, consider for example an assertion such as the following, drawn from the section of the second chapter of TLSD discussed in detail above. Here we are told that

> the Marxian theory neither posits nor is bound to the notion of a historical meta-Subject, such as the proletariat, which will realize itself in a future society. Indeed, the move from a theory of the collective (bourgeois) Subject to a theory of alienated social relations implies a critique of such a notion. It is one aspect of a major shift in critical perspective from a social critique on the basis of ‘labor’ to a social critique of the peculiar nature of labor in capitalism whereby the former’s standpoint becomes the latter’s subject of critique. (78)

But what, then, of the immanent standpoint of such a ‘social critique of the peculiar nature of labor in capitalism’? In what sense, precisely, is it ‘social’? The mere abstract assertion of the plural, ‘non-totalizing form’ of the social content (or contents) implied in such an immanent critical standpoint might be good enough for a left-poststructuralist, but falls short of an answer here if one keeps to the standards of the Marxian thinking upheld by Postone or Trenkle themselves. To drive the point home even further, one would do well to consult the exceptionally lucid exposition of immanent critique (often in language which echoes HCC’s ‘What Is Orthodox Marxism?’) in TLSD’s third
chapter (‘The limits of traditional Marxism and the pessimistic turn of Critical Theory’). In the chapter section entitled ‘Critique and contradiction’ one reads, for example:

The notion that the structures, the underlying social relations of modern society, are contradictory provides the theoretical basis for . . . an immanent historical critique. [Postone speaks interchangeably here and throughout TLSD of ‘immanent critique’, ‘immanent social critique’ and ‘immanent historical critique’ – NL.] It allows the immanent critique to elucidate a historical dynamic that is intrinsic to the social formation, a dialectical dynamic that points beyond itself – to that realizable ‘ought’ that is immanent to the ‘is’ and serves as the standpoint of its critique. Social contradiction, according to such an approach, then, is the precondition of both an intrinsic historical dynamic and the existence of the social critique itself. The possibility of the latter is intrinsically related to the socially generated possibility of other forms of critical distance and opposition – on the popular level as well. That is, the notion of social contradiction also allows for a theory of the historical constitution of popular oppositional forms that point beyond the existent order. (88, my emphasis)

The question, although unspoken here, fairly leaps from the page. What, if it is no longer (or never was) the class struggle of the proletariat, might these ‘social contradictions’, these immanent ‘forms’ – ‘socially generated’, ‘other’, ‘popular oppositional’ – be? We know from the general theoretical argument of TLSD that they must stem from what Postone, drawing on the Grundrisse, regards as the fundamental, unfolding contradiction of capitalism: the contradiction between value as the abstract labour-based form of wealth specific to the capitalist mode of production and what Postone terms ‘material wealth’. The latter, along with its corresponding social subject-form, the ‘social individual’, increasingly presses – and, so far, persistently fails – to extricate itself from the constraints (the so-called ‘treadmill effect’; see TLSD, 289–91) of the law of value as the exponential growth of labour productivity makes abstract labour itself socially redundant – not to say toxic. And, certainly, in a contemporary situation of unprecedented economic crisis in which, for example – whatever its contradictions and ambiguities – the question of defending, re-appropriating and perhaps expropriating the ‘commons’ has become virtually a global preoccupation of radical theoretical discourse as well as of real social struggles, it is not hard to picture, empirically speaking, such ‘popular oppositional forms’ and their possible links to the value/material wealth contradiction. But such phenomena remain, in their immediacy, a far cry from the immanent, ‘realizable ought’ that, for RCP in its ‘traditional’ Marxist self-understanding, was absolutely unambiguous: the revolutionary class-consciousness and deed of the world proletariat. That reification and the insurrectional consciousness expressed in the October Revolution were to reveal themselves to be yet another ‘antinomy of bourgeois consciousness’ rather than the dialectical poles of
capitalism’s structuring contradiction is proof of Lukács’s *historical* error. But that observation supplies neither Postone nor the rest of us with any necessary, determinate basis from which to specify what would have, or could now, rectify that epic theoretical failure.

Qua reification and its historical overcoming, the obscure shadow cast by that failure inevitably ambiguates even the most rigorous enunciations of the immanent unity of theory and practice. In a sentence immediately following on the one just cited, Postone writes: ‘Immanent social critique also has a practical moment: it can understand itself as contributing to social and political transformation’ (89). He chooses his words with admirable care here as always, but, consciously or not, the note of ambiguity is itself unambiguous: critique’s ‘practical moment’ becomes a function of a self-understood ‘contribution’ to transformation, not, as it is for the Lukács of HCC, the moment in which ‘the act of consciousness overthrows the objective form of its object’ (HCC 178). Postone goes on, entirely justifiably, to deny the merely ‘exhortative’ character of critique (178). But in place of the latter, subjective-irrationalist voluntarism (à la Badiou) he again must fall back on an immanent form of critique that, because its ‘practical moment’ cannot or will not enter more deeply into the question of its own genuine historical concreteness, must remain strangely ancillary, as if immanence were somehow possible at a slight distance from the object: ‘Revealing the potential in the actual helps action to be socially transformative in a conscious way’ (89). But, as Lukács, if not Marx himself, might have interposed at this point: ‘Who will help the helpers?’ Witness the spectacle of the present crisis, and the horrifyingly paralysed, if not pathologically self-destructive reaction that, so far, even if with scattered exceptions, seems, as Žižek has observed,9 to be its most characteristic ideological symptom. This raises the question of whether theory’s ‘revealing the potential in the actual’ itself fails to advance beyond a condition of abstract potentiality, a condition leaving us in a state of – to cite the title of one of Postone’s own recent essays – ‘history and helplessness’.10

III

Lukács begins the sixth and final section of Part III of RCP with a coda that not only summarizes the argument he has been developing throughout ‘The Standpoint of the Proletariat’ but also, after its own fashion, anticipates the critical-theoretical problems and questions set forth and elaborated above:

Reification is, then, the necessary, immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society. It can be overcome only by *constant and constantly renewed efforts to disrupt the reified structure of existence by concretely relating to the concretely manifested contradictions of the total development, by becoming conscious of the immanent meanings of these contradictions for the total development.* But it must be emphasised that . . . the structure can be disrupted only if the immanent
contradictions of the process are made conscious. Only when the consciousness of the proletariat is able to point out the road along which the dialectics of history is objectively impelled, but which it cannot travel unaided, will the consciousness of the proletariat awaken to a consciousness of the process, and only then will the proletariat become the identical subject-object of history whose praxis will change reality. If the proletariat fails to take this step the contradiction will remain unresolved and will be reproduced by the dialectical mechanics of history at a higher level, in an altered form and with increased intensity. (197)

Nowhere in RCP does Lukács specify precisely what is meant here by the ‘altered form’ of such an unresolved contradiction, but the present world crisis of capitalism certainly provides us with one unmistakable, if unintended, interpretation of this phrase. One might reasonably speculate that the social and ecological catastrophe, indeed the outright neo-barbarism into which contemporary late capitalist ‘globalization’ has already plunged much of the planet and its inhabitants, is not something that Lukács could have imagined. But a careful reading of HCC, I think, suggests otherwise. Lukács walks a very fine line indeed in ‘The Standpoint of the Proletariat’, acutely aware of the need to strike a balance between an officially Bolshevik triumphalism and the dangers such triumphalism posed to his own theoretical and philosophical project in HCC.11

That the proletariat, ‘aided’ or unaided by its vanguard Communist Party, did not, has not, will not and could not, whatever else it does, take the step that transforms it into Historical ‘subject/object’ is something very few would now dispute. Taking such a step, given the already reified form of ‘labour’ itself, its own immanence to capitalist relations of production, would be tantamount, according to Trenkle, to leaping over its own shadow. This is obviously a more controversial claim. But in the concluding, necessarily brief arguments and speculations that follow, it is taken as a given.

There is no indication anywhere in HCC, nor, as far as I know, in any other of Lukács’s extensive writings, of any incipient break with a ‘labour’-centred ‘traditional’ Marxism. Thus, when Lukács refers in the passage cited above to the intensification of contradictions should the (itself immanent) consciousness of their ‘immanent meanings for the total development’ fail to take root in the proletariat as class subject, this can only mean a setback, however terrible the cost, for a revolutionary process driven by the perpetuum mobile of class struggle. Still, there is another theoretical category at work here, one not necessarily reducible to class or labour, even if for RCP this reduction is never explicitly questioned. Lukács does not name it in the summary ‘coda’ mentioned above, but he does in earlier sections of ‘The Standpoint of the Proletariat’ and, indeed, throughout HCC itself; this is the category of crisis, or as RCP sometimes refers to it in a more sinister register, ‘catastrophe’. Take, for example, section 2 of Part III of RCP, in which Lukács attempts, here as so often under considerable logical strain, to establish an organic connection between the
proletariat and dialectical method. Despite the clear acknowledgement, repeated at regular intervals throughout RCP, that both bourgeoisie and proletariat are equally the prisoners of the reified immediacies of capitalist society, he writes:

For the proletariat to become aware of the dialectical nature of its existence is a matter of life and death, whereas the bourgeoisie uses the abstract categories of reflection, such as quantity and infinite progression, to conceal the dialectical structure of the historical process in daily life only to be confronted by unmediated catastrophes when the pattern is reversed. (164–5)

There follows a rapid attempt to construct a dialectical epistemology of individual and class in accordance with which only the proletariat, though no less composed of reified individual pseudo-subjects than its class antagonist, can, driven by the above evoked ‘matters of life and death’, rise above this plane and attain a genuine, class form of subjectivity or ‘imputed’ consciousness. Yet Lukács continues:

Thus we find the subject and object of the social process coexisting in a state of dialectical interaction. But as they always appear to exist in a rigidly twofold form, each external to the other, the dialectics remain unconscious and the objects retain their twofold and hence rigid character. This rigidity can only be broken by catastrophe and it then makes way for an equally rigid structure. (165, my emphasis)

This observation, read against the grain and out of the overall context of RCP – but read carefully – implies, *via negationis*, a discrete historical mechanism through which to arrive at a nonreified consciousness of the contradictory totality of capitalist society. And it is a mechanism that differs, if only by omission, from what is itself the ironically Kantian metaphysical requirement, stated at the outset of the ‘coda’, that the breakthrough be achieved by its own ‘infinite progression’ of ‘constant and renewed efforts’ to grasp the totality as praxis and process – a process ‘aided’, of course, *ultima instantia*, by the rationally pure postulate of the Leninist party. It is still clearly a ‘matter of life and death’ here. But with all explicit references to class momentarily suspended, what potentially emerges from this sinister crisis scenario is a theoretical insight into the reality that it must ultimately be society itself, the very possibility of the social in the face of the catastrophe of capitalism, that takes up the role of historical ‘subject/object’. The still intractable problem of how such a radically social Subject – one more radically and concretely totalized than its class variant – breaks free of reified into dialectical consciousness remains, of course, for Lukács as for us. But, unconstrained by the ‘traditional’ Marxist fetish-categories of labour and class struggle, here at least the problem is posed in a way that is consistent with the historical specificity of a society mediated by the
real abstractions of value, labour and capital, and the inexorable logic of social annihilation that comes ever more clearly into the scope of mass consciousness as capital’s terminal crisis – its genuine catastrophe – becomes historical reality. There is at least the potential here for a theory adequate to the increasingly self-evident truth that merely equating capitalism with the interests of the bourgeoisie as its ruling class, while not false on a limited sociological plane – thinking of capital as itself simply another form of the social, even if unfree and deformed – already does the latter too much justice. The abstracting logic of capital and its historical ‘laws of motion’ is, in the end – that is, now – to destroy not only the proletariat but the content of all organized social life as such. Capital’s laws of reproduction inevitably become the laws that undermine its own social conditions of possibility, and, along with them, those of society tout court.

From the historical vantage point of HCC – framed by the economic and cultural dynamics of Fordist modernization, whether in its Western or Eastern, Soviet-modelled variations – crisis and ‘catastrophe’ necessarily and, within limits, accurately appeared to Lukács as relative factors, increasing in destructiveness and intensity. Vide the twentieth century’s two world wars. But for the historical moment of HCC these invariably give way to new periods of stabilization, growth and ‘class struggle’. ‘Catastrophe’ might momentarily furnish a glimpse of the social and historical totality, loosening the ‘rigidity’ of reified, antinomial subject-object relations, but only so as to ‘then [make] way for an equally rigid structure’. The frequency with which the topos of crisis as catastrophe recurs throughout HCC, not merely in conjunctural but in theoretical and methodological contexts, is part of what sets that work apart from virtually all the other Marxian theory of its day. Again and again, especially in the final section of RCP, one gets the sense that references to the ‘proletariat’ are not only invocations of Marx’s disalienated humanity in embryo, Bolshevik slogan-eering – or, as Trenkle has it, metaphysical, Enlightenment stand-ins for a Rousseauist volonté general or a Kantian self-positing Reason. They are also pre-sentiments of something for which Lukács as yet lacked the precise theoretical categories: organized social life itself as, in relation to the social ‘Vernichtung-slogik’12 of the commodity-form in its crisis mode, sheer negativity.

To cite just one further illustration of this point: in section 3 of Part III of RCP, after observing the ‘transformation [under capitalism] of all relations between human beings into purely social relations’ – ‘social’ here for HCC, following Marx’s phraseology, denoting the idea of the pure abstraction of ‘asocial sociality’, ‘ungesellschaftliche Vergesellschaftung’ – Lukács goes on to write that, for the ‘proletariat . . . the same development progressively eliminates everything ‘organic’, every direct link with nature from the forms of society, so that socialized man can stand revealed in an objectivity remote from or even opposed to humanity’ (176). And, on the following page: ‘The proletariat “has no ideals to realize”. When its consciousness is put into practice it can only breathe life into the things the dialectics of history have forced to a crisis’ (177). Breathe
life, that is, into a crisis because crisis itself has already begun to be sensed as the bringer of (social) death.\textsuperscript{13}

In sum, then: \textit{History and Class Consciousness} has, fully in keeping with the radically utopian desires of its conjunctural point of origin, gone the way of the revolutionary proletarian, it as good as elevated to mythical status, fully justifying critiques such as those of Postone and Trenkle. Yet its absolute fidelity, no less radically utopian in its way, to the immanent critique of reification, correctly understood as the core of Marx’s own critical theory, led Lukács’s thinking into an impasse from which there could be only one way out: the idea of the crisis of capital as itself an immanent standpoint of critique. Concerning the latter, Lukács’s great work was anything but consistent or systematic, but with this idea it had – at least, so it could be argued – uncovered the antidote to the class fetish to which it all the while ceaselessly succumbed. Hatred of capital, a constant in every aspect of the life and work of Georg Lukács, and the indelible proof of his profound humanism, furnished the unvanishing mediator that, ironically, allowed HCC to survive what might otherwise have been the fatal contradiction between its utopian myth and its truth as radical critique.

Carefully read, \textit{History and Class Consciousness} itself furnishes the answer to the question posed in my title. And its own ambiguous history notwithstanding, history itself, our own ‘present as history’, demands, as never before, that we go on reading it.

Notes

\textsuperscript{1} ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’ is hereafter abbreviated as RCP.
\textsuperscript{2} ‘[A] “going beyond” Marxism,’ writes Sartre, will be ‘at best, only the rediscovery of a thought already contained in the philosophy which one believes he has gone beyond’ (1968, p. 7).
\textsuperscript{3} Works by critical theorists such as Nancy Hartsock, Sandra Harding (among the Marxist-feminists specifically addressed by Jameson in ‘Unfinished Project’), by the important Wertkritik theorist Roswitha Scholz, as well as by Moishe Postone on anti-Semitism, Marcial González on the Chicano novel and Kevin Floyd on queer theory, to mention only a few, are more than sufficient proof of this.
\textsuperscript{5} For an especially comprehensive account of this theory, see Robert Kurz’s \textit{Schwarzbuch Kapitalismus}, ‘Die Geschichte des Dritten industriellen Revolution’, pp. 622–800.
\textsuperscript{7} See, for example, Lohoff, 2005 and 2006.
\textsuperscript{8} TLSD, chapter 9, ‘The trajectory of production’; see \textit{Grundrisse} 705–11.
\textsuperscript{9} See \textit{First as Tragedy}. 
We need not go into further detail here concerning the ‘metaphysischen Mucken’ to which this cautionary stance, the product of what both Trenkle and Postone correctly identify as Lukács’s essentially divided theoretical loyalties, condemned RCP – nor the fact that, for the likes of Zinoviev and Deborin, the line was not fine enough.


See, in this light, the following passage from Žižek’s First as Tragedy: ‘... a new emancipatory politics will stem no longer from a particular social agent, but from an explosive combination of different agents. What unites us is that, in contrast to the classic image of the proletariat who have “nothing to lose but their chains,” we are in danger of losing everything: the threat is that we will be reduced to abstract subjects devoid of all substantial content, dispossessed of our symbolic substance, our genetic base heavily manipulated, vegetating in an unlivable environment. This triple threat to our entire being renders us all proletarians, reduced to “substanceless subjectivity,” as Marx put it in the Grundrisse’ (92).

Works Cited


AN IDENTICAL ABJECT-SUBJECT?

From “Endnotes 4: Unity in Separation”

In Endnotes 2, we presented an account of capital’s immanent tendency towards crisis that revolved around a theory of surplus population. What follows is an attempt to refine, clarify and develop the central categories of that theory. Our motivation to do so derives from certain misapprehensions we’ve encountered, which seem to betray a general tendency to directly map the category of “surplus population” onto a singular, coherent social subject or sociological group, with the potential implication that this group is to be viewed as a new kind of revolutionary agent. Far from representing the emergence of a coherent agent, the expansion of the surplus population marks the tendential disappearance of the previous revolutionary horizon.

It was once possible — indeed quite reasonable — to think of the proletariat as an emergent social subject, becoming ever larger and more unified with the global spread and development of the capitalist mode of production, and particularly with the incorporation of a growing portion of the class into industrial employment. Today, in an era of slowing economic growth — which is also an era of general deindustrialisation — the revolutionary orientations of the past no longer make sense. The working class — always internally differentiated — displays a diminishing capacity for unification under a single hegemonic figure, thus realising its always latent tendency to decompose into fragments, facing off one against the other.

At the heart of this fractiousness is the division of the class into two parts: (1) a shrinking one that retains higher wages and social protections, but must constantly fight rearguard actions against capitalist “reforms” and restructurings; and (2) a growing one that faces poor prospects of employment and is offered few social protections. The more secure sector — which is also more organised — often needs the support of the more precarious in order to win its struggles. However, calls for greater “inclusion” of such people may stoke valid fears that this will undermine more secure positions, opening up access to education and training, and thereby increasing labour supply and reducing bargaining power. At the same time, members of the more precarious part may be rightly suspicious of the motives of the more secure: after the sacrifices have been made, won’t it be merely the latter’s rearguard battles that have been won? After all, those with security rarely take to the streets when it is the less fortunate who are getting screwed. The expansion of the surplus population is important in explaining this division, but it is not the only meaningful one within the class.

There is a potentially infinite variety of such distinctions, so the question of explaining current divisions can in a sense be reversed: What was the unity that is now in advanced stages of decay? How did it come about? This is a question that we have attempted to answer elsewhere in this issue, in ‘A History of Separation’. For our purposes here though, it is enough to note simply that there was once a hegemonic identity and orientation among workers that could provide grounds for affirming certain struggles as central, while excluding others as secondary or unimportant. It is equally clear that this affirmation seems less and less plausible today. In place of the identity of the worker, we are now faced with so many competing alternatives, each with its own strategic priorities: those who want more jobs against those who want to stave off environmental catastrophe; those who want to preserve the family wage for unionised male workers against those who want gender equality; those of dominant national or racial identities against those of racialised minorities, and so on.

In this sense, the fractiousness of “identity politics” is symptomatic of an era. In a period of increasingly slow economic growth under the
threat of ecological catastrophe, it seems diminishingly plausible to claim that fighting the battles of one part of the class will advance the class as a whole. This is why we reject any attempt to find in surplus populations an ersatz social subject that might replace the hegemonic role played by the white male factory worker in the workers' movement. At present there seems to be no class fraction — whether “the most strategically placed” or “the most oppressed” — whose struggles express a general interest. At the same time, attempts to conjure up a new unity from this diversity by simply renaming it as “multitude” or “precariat”, for example, merely gloss over this fundamental problem of internal division.

If there is any revolutionary potential at present, it seems that it stands to be actualised not in the struggle of any particular class fraction, but rather, in those moments when diverse fractions are drawn together in struggle in spite of their mutual suspicions; despite the lack of a stable, consistent hegemonic pole. In such moments, the demands of various sections of the class come into conflict with one another — a conflict that may bring the prospect of destabilising or undermining mutually exclusive demands and identities. The modes by which social life is organised and segmented within capitalist societies can then come to appear as obstacles to further struggle, dividing workers against one another. The question of how to move forward is then at least raised, though with no easy answers. After all, a definitive answer would involve an overcoming of the unity-in-separation that organises social life.

WHAT IS A SURPLUS POPULATION?

The theory of surplus population derives from arguments presented by Marx in the first volume of Capital, chapter 25 in particular, on the “general law of capitalist accumulation”. Marx defines the surplus population as workers without regular access to work: a worker “belongs to” the surplus population “when he is only partially employed or wholly unemployed”.

In the history of capitalist societies, large masses of people have been absorbed into the labour market and have come to depend entirely upon earning wages in order to survive. They cannot leave the labour market unless they can get other workers to support them. In other words, workers have to work regardless of what sort and how much work is available. They are at the mercy of capital’s demand for labour. When that demand falls and there isn’t enough work to go around, workers do not stop working altogether — unless they really have no options, in which case they become paupers. Instead, they enter one or another branch of an extensive and variegated surplus population.

Marx describes “all kinds of forms” of surplus population. Due to transformations of production, workers are constantly being churned out of old and into new industries, depending upon the shifting needs of capital. This gives rise, in Marx’s account, to both “latent” and “floating” surplus populations, the latter of which Marx often called the “reserve army of labour”. However, as a consequence of this ongoing development, capital also produces a super-exploited “stagnant” surplus population, when it fails to re-absorb displaced workers into new lines.

Marx thought that the problem of the surplus population — ultimately a problem of the growing oversupply of, and under-demand for, labour — would intensify over time and, as a result, people would increasingly find themselves disconnected from labour markets, and hence from regular access to the wage. Indeed, Marx describes this as the “absolute general law of capitalist accumulation”. What happens is that capital’s ongoing accumulation process leads to rising labour productivity, which in turn expands the “industrial reserve army”, causing the “consolidated surplus population” — “whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour” — to grow, and increasing “official pauperism”; that is, those who cannot make enough in wages to survive, and so must beg for their bread.

The overall result is that the accumulation of wealth occurs alongside an accumulation of poverty.

In Marx’s account, the main reason capitalist development leads to the growth of the surplus population has to do with what we have called “technological ratcheting”. In essence, Marx argues that the demand for labour in each industry eventually falls as labour productivity rises. New industries do come on line, at a faster or slower pace, increasing the demand for labour. However, these new industries never start out from zero: they do not need to reinvent e.g. steam power, the assembly line, the electric motor. Instead, new lines absorb technological inno-
vations that preceded them. As a result, the emergence of new industries is less and less effective in increasing the demand for labour. Hence capital has what Marx terms a “rising organic composition”. Marx argues that it is the older lines, which have not yet been technically renewed, which tend to absorb the most labour.

This theory could be fleshed out further by developing links with Marx’s notes on overaccumulation in volume 3, but that is another project. Here we simply note that, today, what renders many workers surplus to the requirements of capital is a dual tendency: on the one hand, towards overaccumulation — which reduces profit rates and hence slows the expansion of output — and on the other hand, towards the ongoing growth of labour productivity, which arises out of capitalist competition and results in a loss of jobs in those economic sectors where output does not increase at a rate equal to productivity. The combination of these factors ensures that, in an economy wracked by overaccumulation, the demand for labour will fail to keep up with its supply. That, in turn, will expand the surplus population.

In Endnotes 2 we argued that these developments would tendentially lead to the reproduction of the proletariat becoming contingent to that of capital. If the post-war settlement had formalised the reciprocal but asymmetrical relation in which the reproduction of the working class is necessary to that of capital, with the end of that settlement and the rise in surplus populations, those who are surplus are effectively reproduced as a sort of “side-effect” of capitalist production. What this means is that capitalist productivity, especially in agriculture, is increasingly capable of supporting sections of the global population far removed from the dynamic industries at the core of capitalist accumulation. But when this happens, the dual interlocking cycles of the mutual reproduction of capital and class seem to make less and less sense. As “Screamin’ Alice” has argued, this leads in some senses to “disintegration” of these circuits at the same time as “integration” deepens in other respects — in the financialisation of ever new areas of life, for example.

DEINDUSTRIALISATION, THEN AND NOW

In the 20th century, this idea of the tendency of capital to increasingly produce workers as surplus was largely dismissed as an “immiseration thesis”, on the grounds that history had proven it wrong: the working class had clearly failed to become immiserated; on the contrary, living standards had risen. Industrial employment had grown dramatically, suggesting that the industrial working class would eventually account for the vast majority of the workforce. While Marx appears to have been broadly correct in interpreting mid-19th century tendencies (which limited the growth of the demand for labour in industry), he did not foresee the emergence of new lines of production that would prove capable of absorbing the surpluses of capital and labour that were being produced elsewhere in the economy. These industries — such as the auto and white goods industries — lay at the very core of 20th century capitalist development and industrial employment. The semi-skilled factory worker was the key figure in the old labour movement. But in Endnotes 2 we posed the question: What if Marx had just been wrong on the timing?

It is now clear that those twentieth century industries have long been in relative decline as employers. Newer industries, although they have emerged, have not absorbed all of the labour being shed from elsewhere. As a result, deindustrialisation has been ongoing since the mid 1970s across the high-income countries. But even newly industrialised countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa and Egypt have seen the industrial shares of total employment in their economies stagnate or decline since the mid 1980s or mid 1990s. China seems to be an exception to the rule, but even there, construction constitutes a large component of the new “industrial” labour force, and the Chinese manufacturing share of employment actually remained stagnant — at between 14 and 16 percent of the labour force — during the period of rapid growth from 1980 to 2006. New industrial firms were opening up and absorbing labour, such as in the Pearl River Delta region, but this only tended to balance — not reverse — the overall effects of the closures of state-owned enterprises, and the laying off of workers in China’s northeast. China’s manufacturing employment share only rose beyond previously achieved levels in 2006, reaching 19 percent in 2011 (the last year for which data is available). While the absolute number of people employed in industry in China is certainly staggering, the manufacturing share of employment in the new “workshop of the world” is nowhere near as high today as it was in the West during the heyday of industrialisation. In fact, the Chinese share is closer to the level that prevails in Mexico and Brazil today than to the level of Germany or the UK at mid-20th century (which hovered between 31 and 35 percent).

According to an old developmental narrative, agricultural employment would decline as agriculture became more productive, precipitating
lots of potential new workers into towns, who would then be taken up by expanding industrial production. These developments would eventually bring every country into modernity. For orthodox Marxists, this would tendentially form a proletariat unified under the hegemony of its most “advanced” fractions in industry. But as the global peak of industrialisation recedes into history, it looks like something else is now happening. While agricultural employment has not halted its decline, those workers shed are less likely to join the ranks of the industrial working class than to enter a vast and heterogeneous service sector. At the world level, there are now twice as many workers in services as compared to industry: services account for 44 percent of global employment, while industry accounts for just 22 percent. The share employed in factories is even smaller than that 22 percent suggests, not only because it includes the labour-intensive construction sector, but also because a sizable portion of industrial employment in the low-income countries is accounted for by the petty production of informal, self-employed proletarian households.

SERVICES AND SUPERFLUITY

Many commentators will argue that the ongoing stagnation or decline in manufacturing employment, which we described above, is nothing to worry about. It is supposedly a matter of a quasi-natural evolution in consumer demand, driven by market forces. Just as agriculture comes to employ a decreasing share of the workforce, since there are limits to growth in the demand for food, so too with manufacturing: there are supposedly limits to the demand for goods (apparently, there is, however, a limitless demand for services). The result, according to this perspective, is that over time, a rising demand for services will dynamically pull workers into the service sector, just as in an earlier phase workers were pulled into the industrial sector.

In reality, the dynamic draw of manufacturing during industrialisation was unique to that sector. To manufacture something is to take a good — or to transform a service, such as dishwashing, into a good, such as a dishwasher — and to produce that good in a factory, according to ever-more efficient techniques. It is the resulting rise in the efficiency of production within the space of the factory that rapidly lowers costs of production in manufacturing lines. That leads, in turn, to a rapid fall in relative prices. Markets for manufactures expand, making possible a dramatic expansion of output. Concomitantly, huge masses of humanity are pulled into work in manufacturing lines. That is the key to the dynamic growth of manufacturing output and employment: the former is very rapid, and that is why, in spite of high rates of labour productivity growth, the latter expands, raising the manufacturing employment share.

The same does not take place in the service sector. Services are precisely the sorts of activities that cannot be — or have not yet been — substituted by goods. In services, labour productivity tends to increase slowly if at all, and concomitantly, prices follow the same trajectory. In fact, as long as real wages are rising, the relative price of services will itself tend to increase. Since relative prices do not fall dramatically, there is no impetus for markets for services to expand rapidly. Hence, there is no dynamic tendency to dramatically expand output and thus to draw lots of labour into the sector; instead, employment in the service sector expands slowly.

On this basis, it is possible to describe a major distinction between phases of industrialisation and deindustrialisation in the history of capitalist societies. During the former phase, the demand for labour in industry — not during busts, but at least during booms — was very high. That affected the entire labour market, diminishing slack, reducing the size of the surplus population and increasing workers' bargaining power. Once industrialisation went into reverse, the industrial sector became, alongside agriculture, another source of growing slack in the labour market, increasing the surplus population and reducing workers' bargaining power. All the while, the demand for labour in services has been characteristically low. It has expanded, but slowly, due to the fact that more labour is generally needed to increase service-sector output, which is itself growing slowly. The shift from industrialisation to deindustrialisation is necessarily the shift from an economy that grows rapidly, with big booms and busts, to one that grows slowly, tending towards stagnation. In such a context, booms and busts are given merely by financial bubbles being blown up and deflated around the world by surplus capital.

There is a corollary to this theory, which explains why a large portion of the surplus population ends up in the service sector, particularly in the low-wage, super-exploited section and in the informal, self-exploiting section. As service work tends to be labour-intensive, a large proportion of the final costs are made up of wages. Because real wages do not usually fall across the economy, it is difficult for service sector firms to lower their costs on a regular basis (general tendencies towards falling costs in industry and agriculture are due to increases in the effi-
cient use of more expensive labour). This results in a relatively low level of output growth in services. But precisely for that reason, when workers are expelled from other sectors, it is possible to get much cheaper workers into services — as those discarded as surplus will usually have to accept a lower wage level. This lowers costs and allows for some expansion in demand for, and output of, services. In the service sector, there is greater room to expand the market by lowering wages. By contrast, in most manufacturing activities, wages make up only a small portion of the final cost of the product, so there is less room for manoeuvre.

Of course, this doesn't mean that each and every specific service stands no chance of becoming a basis for dynamic growth. Many jobs which were once performed as services have been at least partially turned into manufactured commodities in the course of capitalist history, either for the individual household or for collective spaces. As mentioned above, the service of washing clothes by hand was replaced by the washing machine, in people's homes or in launderettes. The transformation of services into goods is part of industrialisation, which transforms activities, making them amenable to constant increases of productivity in what Marx called the “real subsumption of the labour process”, opening up markets and allowing for long-term growth.

While it is difficult to identify a precise and determinate “logic” as to why some activities become really subsumed and others do not, the fact that certain activities require delicate work or direct human contact, and therefore must remain labour-intensive, is clearly key. There appears always to be a remainder of such activities, an assortment of differentiated tasks, mostly in services. Insofar as services remain services, they tend predominantly to be a source only of “absolute”, and not “relative” surplus value. This is simply another way of saying that there are limits to raising productivity. Consequently, economies that are “post-industrial” and concentrated around service work tend to be low-growth.

In such conditions, it is imperative for capitalists to get as much out of their workers as possible, by increasing the duration or intensity of labour. To some extent, the prerequisite for the existence of many jobs becomes pressurised work conditions. If super-exploited sectors take up a growing share of the labour market, this also puts downward pressure on all wages, and increases insecurity, as workers lose bargaining power and bosses are emboldened to demand ever more flexibility. With this, the door is opened for a whole range of abuses to be unleashed upon the worker — sexual, emotional and psychological, as well as the stealing or retention of wages and chronic overworking. Certain positions, such as that of the low-wage service sector worker, thus appear as a kind of special category of surplus worker, akin to the informally self-employed in low-income countries (and in high income countries over the past decade or so). Low-wage service workers must become extreme self-exploiters, as well as being super-exploited, if they are to get work. Many of these jobs (deliveries, house-cleaning, supermarket baggers, and so on) can only exist because the wages of the people performing the service are a fraction of what those consuming the service are paid. Thus, the condition for finding a job in a growing service sector is often accepting a significantly lower than average wage.

SURPLUS POPULATIONS AND UNEMPLOYMENT

As is now hopefully apparent, the tendency towards increasing superfluity is not a tendency towards a literal extrusion of a part of the working class from the economy. Surplus workers still need to buy at least some of what they need to survive, and therefore they must earn or acquire money in order to live. Those who are produced as surplus to the needs of capital may still receive wages in super-exploited sectors, or they may be informally self-employed and thus self-exploiting (since they lack access to capital).

Marx clarifies some of these points in his discussion of the “stagnant surplus population”. One cannot read his account without thinking of the global informal economy, much of which would have been included, in Marx's time, under the rubric of home-work or “domestic industry”. The stagnant surplus population:

forms a part of the active labour market, but with extremely irregular employment. Hence it offers capital an inexhaustible reservoir of disposable labour. Its conditions of life sink below the average normal level of the working class, and it is precisely this which makes it a broad foundation for special branches of capitalist exploitation. It is characterised by a maximum of working time and a minimum of wages. We have already become familiar with its chief form under the rubric of “domestic industry” ... Its extent grows in proportion as, with the growth in the extent and energy of accumulation, the creation of a surplus population also advances. But it forms at the same
time a self-reproducing and self-perpetuating element of the working class, taking a proportionally greater part in the general increase of that class than the other elements.\footnote{12}

It would thus be a mistake to identify surplus populations with “the unemployed”. This category is, to some extent, an artifact of 20th century high-income countries’ provision of unemployment insurance. In the 19th century, as in most low-income countries today, “being unemployed” in this sense was simply not an option. Unemployment insurance did not exist — and today covers few workers in low-income countries — so workers could not afford to be without work for long: they needed to find employment as soon as possible, regardless of the degree to which their labour was demanded by capital. If there was no demand, they needed to set up shop for themselves, without any employer — by picking through rags, for example.

In the high-income countries, the category of “unemployment” is currently being undermined once again, and appears as increasingly less defined. As a general tendency, the welfare state has been dramatically transformed, such that unemployment benefit, typically paid to a part of the workforce structurally excluded from employment, has tended to give way to means-tested benefits. These are meant to supplement and support incomes only at the very lowest end of the employment scale, rather than support those simply without work, and are contributing to major increases in low-wage, service sector employment. This transformation is of course occurring at different paces in different high-income countries. In many European countries, protections have remained in place much longer, preventing the bottom from entirely falling out of the labour market. For that reason, a major “jobs gap” opened up between the US and UK on the one hand, and continental Europe on the other, wherein the latter have experienced higher unemployment rates, as well as lower rates of labour force participation, particularly for women. This gap can be explained entirely in relation to the relative lack of service-sector employment in continental Europe, and in particular, low-wage employment. The service sector share of employment is lowest in Germany and Italy, at around 70 percent, as compared to the US, UK, and France, at around 80 percent.\footnote{13}

Additionally, in the global economy — in which mobile flows of surplus capital discipline states — high-income states must do everything they can to prevent outright unemployment, and thus unemployment provisions, from growing too dramatically. Welfare expenditures, which are ultimately funded from tax receipts, must be kept to a minimum to avoid worrying bondholders and taxpayers. Current UK government policy, for example, is to try to eradicate, as far as possible, possibilities for unemployment as any kind of stable category, transforming welfare into workfare. As a result, in the high-income countries, many workers fall in and out of relative superfluity during their lifetime, due both to the increasing flexibilisation of the labour market and its destabilisation of categories of employment at a structural level, as well as the falling demand for labour.\footnote{14}

Beginning from the identification of specific social subjects typically means reaching for pre-packaged figures who signify to the popular imaginary a simple economic marginality, such as the slum dweller. But “the surplus population” cannot be so easily identified. Though differential positions in relation to the labour process can certainly be empirically identified and taxonomised according to types and degrees of “surplusness”, it is necessary to first identify the broader logic at play, before mapping the complexly variegated ways in which this logic plays out; none of this permits a straightforward identification of surplusness with a singular social subject or group.\footnote{15} As we have seen, what facilitates the increasing production of workers as surplus is capital’s dual tendency towards both overaccumulation and an increase in the productivity of labour, which in turn decrease the number of workers needed to perform many tasks. But from their initial condition as surplus, these workers may turn out to compose just a “floating” surplus population — being reabsorbed into production at some later point — or go on to subist in one or another relatively stagnant part of the economy (the latter is, of course, much more common in low-income countries). In neither case are surplus workers necessarily either unemployed or unproductive of surplus-value. And at a general level “surplus population” refers to a large, massively varied part of the population, characterised by all sorts of internal divisions and stratifications, all sorts of relations to the labour process.

AN IDENTICAL ABJECT-SUBJECT?

On the one hand, this relatively simple theory of the tendential production of surplus population can help greatly in explaining various key aspects of the present global situation. It gives us a basis for explaining deindustrialisation, the relative growth of services, the spread of
forms of insecure and flexible labour, and the numerous abuses for which this opens the way. In turn, these tendencies intensify and exacerbate the difficulty of unifying the working class under the hegemony of the industrial worker, in the way traditional Marxism anticipated; it thus gives us a basis for explaining the crisis of the left and present strategic predicaments. It also seems to offer an explanation for declining growth rates over recent decades, as relative surplus value-producing labour has become a diminishing share of global labour. There are other things we could add to this list too, for instance: the difficulty of states balancing between welfare demands and those of markets; the formation of mega-slums; post-industrial forms of urbanism. Or, on the other side: “financialisation”, “neoliberalism”, and so on. Insofar as these combined tendencies sketch out the major dynamics and outlines of the present global situation, we take the theory of surplus populations to be an important reference point in framing the present.

On the other hand, when a theory has clear explanatory power, it can be tempting to slide into a sort of conceptual overreach, where the theory is presumed to explain things which it really can’t explain, or to say things which it doesn’t. It may be the case that Marxists have particularly bad habits on this level: for example, “capital” or “subsumption” are concepts that are often reached for too hastily, called upon to do more explanatory work than they are actually able to. For a theory to have real explanatory power, one has to be able to identify its limits clearly and honestly — to say what it cannot, as well as what it can, explain.

What seems to be a standard misinterpretation or over-extension of the theory of surplus population is characterised by a hypostatisation of “the surplus population” as a singular social subject, with the apparent implication that this may be viewed as the new revolutionary agent, or at least that it is the agent behind various forms of contemporary struggle. This involves a conceptual slippage between general tendency and particular sociological or empirical cases. While it would of course ultimately be false to separate the two, it is also important not to identify them too immediately or simplistically. Thus, the theory of surplus population does not involve some kind of neo-Bakuninite romanticisation of a surplus subject “more radical” or “more dangerous” than the organised working class; nor does it involve a reading of present struggles as those of some “surplus” subject.

ABJECTION

Such thinking was in the air in discussions around the 2011 English riots, which we analysed at some length in Endnotes 3. Briefly revisiting problematics that were at play at that time will help us to flesh out and specify these points about surplus population.

It seemed back then that for some the riots should be read as a rebellion of “the surplus population”. However, such readings appeared in some ways a simple — and disconcerting — inversion of standard and reactionary interpretations of such events, stoked by mainstream media, which held the riots to be the work of a disorderly and dangerous “underclass”. The latter is little more than a pseudo-concept, an ideological generalisation from the ungeneralisable. For this reason, it cannot simply be inverted into something positive that one might valorise.

And, in any case, it was clear that the British urban poor who came out on the streets could not be straightforwardly identified with the concept of surplus population. First of all, as we have already seen, the concept of surplus-population is relatively non-specific in sociological terms. It can apply to a large variety of workers, some of whom are fully employed but super-exploited, others of whom are underemployed or informally self-employed. It is reasonable to surmise that a substantial portion of the British working class is relatively “surplus” in one sense or another. Nor can the identity of the British urban poor be easily captured under specific categories of surplusness, such as “the unemployed”. While unemployment of course tends to be higher in poor urban areas, the unemployment rate in Britain has been relatively low in recent years, compared to other European countries, and a majority of the urban poor — and of those who rioted — were either employed or in full time education. Nor could they be simply identified with “informality”, in terms of the “grey economy”, or with illegality, in terms of the “black economy”. Early reactionary claims that most of the rioters were involved in criminal gangs predictably proved unfounded.

And as we have already seen, it doesn’t make sense to see the urban poor as “surplus” in the stronger sense of being excluded from the economy per se.

Another often ideological concept that gets thrown around when people discuss the urban poor is that of the ghetto. This has related conno-
tations to the ideas of superfluity that we have already discussed: the ghetto is conceived as a sort of social dustbin where the sub-proletariat is thrown, where state agents often fear to go and where the market is absent. The concept of the ghetto signifies superfluity, exteriority to the (formal) economy, and also tends to link the latter up with the concept of race. Ghettos are, of course, a reality in some parts of the world. But the British urban poor do not live in ghettos in anything other than a metaphorical sense: poor British housing estates are small, often ethnically mixed, incorporated into the broader cities in which they are placed, and managed as well as patrolled by the state. They are not surplus or external in any simple sense to either the state or the market.

If we can say unproblematically that what we've been calling the “urban poor” were a key active agent in 2011, this only works because this is a weak, vague, merely descriptive category. As soon as we try to apply the more technically specific category of surplus population here, we run into problems. Of course, it was not completely irrational to want to do so: there was a sort of intuitive “fit” at least at the level of representational thinking. The palpable, disruptive presence of strata of people on the street who are habitually cast out, excluded in various ways, was one of the most striking aspects of 2011.

This confronted us with three questions. Firstly, how to theorise the social subjects who came out in revolt in 2010–11, and to identify the ways in which these people really do appear as “excluded” or marginal, without collapsing this into the general political-economic logic of the production of a surplus population? Secondly, how to relink this exclusion or marginality with the concept of surplus population once it has been distinguished from it? Thirdly, how might these matters be related to deeper problems of revolutionary subjectivity and organisation?

It is clear when looking at the history of urban riots in Britain that they are distinctly periodisable, and that the period of the real emergence of their modern form is — as are so many things — contemporary with the capitalist restructuring that has occurred since the 1970s. If the tendential production of a surplus population at a global level gives us some basis for explaining this period of restructuring, then this tendency could presumably be linked with the emergence of the modern urban riot in this period, without necessarily needing to establish an immediate identity between urban rioters and “surplus population” as a simple and coherent social subject.

Since the 1970s, we have of course seen growing and generalising insecurity, as stable industrial employment has given way to employment by the state and the service sector. But these developments were uneven, hitting some sections of the working class before others. Prior to Britain’s full-scale deindustrialisation, the British working class was of course stratified, with a more insecure, informal, racialised stratum at the bottom, prone to being ejected from employment in times of economic stress, such as occurred throughout the 1970s: a classic industrial reserve army. These workers, at the racialised margins of the organised working class, were some of the first to feel the crisis of the 1970s. They were hit disproportionately by unemployment and they were not to be re-employed in newly emergent lines of production, since these lines did not in fact employ many people.

If surplus population is useful anywhere in this history in identifying an immediate sociological reality, it is here, where it can be used to distinguish a particular stratum in relation to the rest of the working class. However, in interpreting the deindustrialisation that really kicked in from this point on, it is necessary to move beyond the strictly political-economic level on which this theory is forged. This is because the timing and character of Britain’s deindustrialisation are inextricable from the particular dynamics of class struggle in Britain, and from the political mediations of this struggle. Though Britain’s industrial base had long been in decline, its trashing by the Thatcher government was pushed through actively, at least in part for strategic reasons. If the insecure margins of the workforce grew in England from the 1970s onwards, this is not completely reducible to the general global tendency towards the production of a surplus population. We need reference to the specific political mediations, even if this general tendency can help inform our understanding of what is being mediated by such mediations.

It is amongst these pressurised sections of the working class — the more insecure, informal, racialised stratum, which struggled to be reabsorbed by the labour market — that the riot became particularly prominent as a mode of struggle, from the mid to late 1970s, and it seems reasonable to hypothesise that this newfound prominence is directly related to the absence of possibilities for “normal”, regulatory, demands-making of the corporatist type. In developments dialectically entwined with the struggles of this section of the working class, the po-
lises in this period increasingly developed new tactics of repression specifically targeted at poor urban neighbourhoods. One might even say that the riot and its repression became a sort of proxy way in which class relations were regulated, in the absence of the “normal” mode of regulation exercised by wage bargaining, etc. This is not a perverse point: historically riots have pushed demands towards which the state has made concessions. This proved true of 2011 just as it did of 1981; more recently it has proved true in the US, after the 2014 Ferguson riots.\footnote{18}

In Endnotes 3 we termed the social logic of stigmatisation associated with such developments “abjection” — a concept borrowed from Imogen Tyler’s recent book Revolting Subjects.\footnote{19} With its in some ways dubious provenance, we were not especially fond of this term, but it seemed nonetheless quite appropriate as a name for certain problematics with which we were grappling.\footnote{20} What was useful was that this term named a particular kind of abstract structure in which something is cast off, marked as contingent or lowly, without actually being exteriorised. The relevance of such a structure here should be obvious: the initially racialised communities subject to the forms of oppression that develop through this period are socially marked as a problem — or even as a sort of rejection from the healthy core of the body politic — without being literally exteriorised in any sense from either economy or state. Police repression looms large in the immediate experience of abjection in this sense, but the term is also intended to capture broader social processes, such as the moral crusades of reactionary press, or the constant obsessing of politicians over the various failed subjects of the nation. These are not simply unconnected moments; concrete connections between all of them could be articulated such that we see a particular socio-political pattern of oppression.

It seems that abjection may be relatable, in a mediated way, to the production and management of a surplus population in that specific historical moment of the 1970s, as the restructuring began. But the mediations require careful articulation. After all — though there was at least a significant overlap — the stigmatised urban communities who were the “primary abjects” of this new style of policing were of course not composed exclusively of workers at the margins of industrial employment. Moreover, as Britain deindustrialised, and as broader global tendencies towards the production of surplus population were felt particularly in a generalised decomposition of the working class, the association of these typically racialised communities with a specifically reserve army function declined. Unemployment became highly generalised in the British economy, to then be slowly superseded by a highly flexibilised and insecure labour market. While this association of racialised margins of the working class with a reserve army function diminished, police repression of the poor mounted.

If the development of new styles of policing might be partially linked to the management of a surplus population at the outset then, this tie becomes increasingly tenuous as we get into the 1980s and 90s. One might speak of a developing “autonomisation” of the apparatus of repression and its related stigmatising and racialising logics. By this we mean that an apparatus which initially seems to apply in particular to clear, economically marginal, parts of the class, becomes dissociated from that strict function. While those who are subject to these processes of abjection come to symbolise the limits of affirmable class, these limits are in actuality unstable, shifting and ill-defined. They become more a socio-political, or perhaps socio-cultural, than a political-economic construct. If this is the case, it is doubtful whether we are likely to have any luck constructing the object of this apparatus in purely political-economic terms. Who is “abjected” then? We might provisionally reply, somewhat tautologically: those who are defined as such by the fact that they are the object of these processes of repression. There is no particular pre-existing trait or social categorisation which must, in itself, necessarily or inevitably mark one out as an object of these processes, which is not to say that certain social categories do not end up being reproduced in such positions. Abjection is closely related — though not identical — to racialisation.

If the mechanisms of abjection could once be related to a certain function in the state’s management of the insecure margins of the industrial working class, as the object of that management dissipates socially, the function itself would seem to be thrown into question. If something is being “managed” through abjection, it is no longer self-evident exactly what, by who, or to what end. We have blind social patterns of stigmatisation and oppression which are quite general, and can thus not be viewed as the work of some conspiracy. And we also have the continuing operation of formalised structures of power and oppression within these patterns, with police, politicians and media playing important active roles — though generally in part responding to the very real sentiments of the citizenry. In the process a new kind of “function” may be perceived, as the generalised insecurity of the post-industrial workforce is exacerbated by the waning of solidarities here, and people all too readily turn on each other. But this is “functional” only in a perverse sense: it is the product of no design or intent; a purely “irrational” outcome, albeit one which can in some ways prove useful to capital and state after the fact, insofar as it further disempowers their
potential antagonists.  

If we are now speaking of the subjects of “abjection” rather than “surplus population” here, how about the abject as a social subject? These developments signify, however, not the creation of a new form of social (or potentially, revolutionary) subject, but rather the problem of any class subject at all. In itself, that which is abjected would seem to be by definition unaffirmable, ununifiable, for it is not a positive existence of its own, but merely the negative of something else. Those who are abjected are not something other than the proletariat. More often than not they are workers, students etc. Only, they are workers, students etc who are vilified, cast beyond the pale of social respectability. These developments represent problems for the constitution of a unified class subject; indeed, they are direct expressions of the decomposition of the class. The abject is projected as a sort of limit-concept of affirmable social class, in an operation where that class is itself negatively defined against what has been abjected. “We are not like them” replaces “the workers united will never be defeated”. And as such, abjection can have a somewhat fractal quality: not applying uniformly to one social group, but across and between social groups, depending to some extent on where one stands in the social landscape. There is always someone more abject than you.

This is not something that should be valorised or romanticised, or projected as the positive basis for some future social subject. If it is a curse to be reduced to the proletarian, it is doubly so to be abjected. Neither surplus population nor the abject provide any ultimate answer to the problem of revolutionary agency, but both describe aspects of the problem, and it is with the problem that we must start. What seems clear is that whatever shape a future unity of the class could take, it is not one that is likely to be hegemonised by an advanced industrial worker; though it seems equally clear that no “abject” or “surplus” subject offers itself up as an obvious alternative. Nonetheless, the problem will continue to be confronted, as people in struggle strain to compose and extend some unity in order to push forwards. And the combinatory processes of struggle can be endlessly generative.

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1. This article is based on a talk given in Berlin in early 2014. Arguments in sections 2 and 3 draw on Aaron Benanav, *A Global History of Unemployment*, forthcoming from Verso.

2. While, in the low-income countries, this second sector is in fact the overwhelming majority, similar divisions and conflicts of interest are also in evidence.

3. Partly for that reason, the more precarious are often rendered as undeserving in one way or another: as upstart youth, illegal immigrants, and so on. See the section on the abject, below.


7. One should not treat the mutual capital–labour reproduction as if it captured a singular social ‘system’, valid at the level of each and every nation-state; the basic frame of analysis for such matters is necessarily global. But nor, of course, can we think in terms of an undifferentiated global level: individual national economies must be grasped differentially within a global frame. The post-war settlement was thus, of course, not some uniform global arrangement: it applied particularly to the Western industrialised countries, while some analogous arrangements may be perceived in Eastern Bloc countries (and, indeed, the pressure for such a settlement was partly given by the geopolitical polarisation between the two). But insofar as those places in which it applied represented the bulk of the industrialised world, it is reasonable to think of this ‘settlement’ as characterising the general nature of capitalist class relations in that epoch. The essential nature of this settlement was that the state would regulate the reproduction of the working class on whom capital depended, since individual capitalists – necessarily relating to that reproduction as an externality – were incapable of looking after it themselves.


10. The fact that this slowdown is taking place across the world – with, of course, local exceptions – is itself proof against the theory of a simple demand-shift from industry to services.

11. Not all of these sorts of labour are services. For example, apparel manufacture has always required very delicate sewing work. Since the invention of the sewing machine, it has proven difficult to further mechanise this work, and so apparel manufacture remains a large employer. Whether product or service however, one thing seems to be constant: because wages make up such a large part of the final cost of these commodities, these sectors have been employing overwhelmingly women, whose labour-power can be found on the labour-market at a below average cost. See ‘The Logic of Gender’ in Endnotes 3 for the relation between gender and differentiation in the price in labour-power.


13. The service sector share of employment is also lower in Japan, at 70 percent.

14. This is less true of the low-income countries, in which there are basically no social protections, and where over half of the labour force is often informal, with only a portion of this population ever experiencing the fluidity to move either into, or out of, the formal sector.

15. We have discussed this issue previously in relation to the English riots of 2011. See ‘A Rising Tide Lifts All Boats’, Endnotes 3, September 2013, pp. 118–19.

16. Marx himself even extends this category to orphans and the elderly!

17. Informality is usually distinguished from illegality. The global informal sector includes all those doing legal work, but without protections, or in firms consisting of five or fewer people. Thus, it does not include those doing illegal sex-work, or engaged in the drug-trade, etc.


19. Tyler, Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain (Zed Books 2013). Tyler has developed this as a general-purpose category of psycho-social theory, through a critical engagement with Georges Bataille and Julia Kristeva, distancing herself especially from the latter’s reactionary politics.

20. We also deployed the term ‘abject’ as a name for some partially analogous – but by no means identical – structures, in ‘The Logic of Gender’, in the same issue.

21. Indeed, from another perspective – that of a speculative proletarian unity – one may view such developments as a matter of pure dysfunction.