

The working class today: the new form of being of the class who lives from its labour¹

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ABSTRACT

Who constitutes the working class today? Does it still withhold the position of centrality in the social transformations? These are not simple subjects, and for decades their deconstruction has become a huge avalanche. The central thesis we seek here to develop is that the centre of social transformation, in the amplified destructive logic of contemporary capitalism, is still centrally rooted in the whole of the working class. From the very start we will refute two equivocal theories: nothing has changed within the workers' universe and, its opposite, the working class would not be able of radically transforming capital's society universe. It is curious that, as has increased the number of workers who live by selling their labour-power on a global scale, so many authors have waved farewell to the proletariat and have defended the notion of loss of centrality of the labour-category, or the end of human emancipation through labour. What I shall demonstrate here is an opposite path; I will attempt a critique of the critique in order to make clear what I have been calling the new morphology of labour and its potentialities. The current definition of the working class is a central issue. If the current working class is not identical to that existent in the mid-twentieth century neither is on the way to extinction nor ontologically lost its structuring sense in the everyday life of the social being, what is its current form of being?

KEYWORDS

Working class today, Centrality in social transformations, New morphology of labour

¹ Translated by Daila Eugenio.

Who constitutes the working class today? Does it still maintain its position of centrality in social transformations? These are not simple questions and for decades they have been subject to an avalanche of deconstructions.

The central thesis we seek here to develop is that the centre of social transformation, in the amplified destructive logic of contemporary capitalism, is still principally rooted in the whole of the working class. From the beginning, we will refute two equivocal theories: that nothing has changed within the workers' universe and, its opposite, that the working class is not capable of radically transforming capitalist society.

It is curious that, as the number of workers who live by selling their labour-power has increased on a global scale, so many authors have waved *farewell to the proletariat* and have defended the notion of the *loss of centrality of the category of labour*, or the end of human emancipation through labour.

What I shall demonstrate here is an opposite path. I will attempt a *critique of the critique* in order to make clear what I have been calling the *new morphology of labour* and its potentialities.

The definition of the working class today is a central issue. If the current working class is not identical to that which existed in the mid-twentieth century neither is it on the *way to extinction* nor has it *ontologically* lost its structuring sense in the everyday life of the social being. What then is its current *form of being*?

We know that both Marx and Engels regarded "working class" and "proletariat" as synonyms. Also, in the Europe of the mid-nineteenth century, workers that had inspired the reflections of both theorists had acquired bodily expression within the industrial proletariat, which enabled the shared and even undistinguished designation between working class and proletariat.

Our theoretical and political challenge is to understand therefore who is the *class-that-lives-from-labour*² today, and how it is formed.

We begin with the idea that it comprises *the whole of the male and female population who live by selling their labour power and who do not possess the means of production*, according to the Marxist definition.

² The "just a working-class man" (*nur arbeitenden Menschenklasse*), Marx's designation in the *1844 Manuscripts*. Marx, Karl. *Manuscriptos Económico-Filosóficos*, São Paulo: Boitempo, 1994.

Marx designated as *productive workers* those who formed the core of the working class – especially in *Chapter VI* (unpublished) and in numerous other passages in *Capital* where the idea of *productive labour* is elaborated, comprising the *productive workers who produce surplus-value; are paid money-capital; express a form of collective and social labour; and carry out both material and immaterial labour*³.

Hence, it becomes clear in our analysis that the working class today does not find itself restricted to direct manual labour, but incorporates the *totality of social labour*, anyone who sells their labour power as a commodity in exchange for a wage.

Therefore, it is still centrally composed of *productive workers producing surplus-value* who also *participate in the process of the valorization of capital* through the interaction between living labour and dead labour, between human labour and technological-scientific machinery.

This segment constitutes the central nucleus of the modern proletariat. The products made by Toyota, Nissan, General Motors, IBM, Microsoft, etc. result from the interaction between living and dead labour, making groundless the theses, from Jürgen Habermas⁴ to Robert Kurz⁵, that *abstract labour* has lost its structuring force in contemporary society.

If *abstract labour* (the use of physical and intellectual energy to produce commodities, as Marx described in *Capital*) has lost its structuring force in contemporary society, how are Toyota's cars produced?, Who creates Microsoft's software, General Motors' and Nissan's cars, Nike's shoes and McDonalds' hamburgers? – to mention just a few examples from prominent transnational corporations.

We advance here to a second important element: the working class also includes *unproductive workers*, again in Marx's understanding of the

³ Marx, Karl. *O Capital*, vol. 1, Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1971; Chapter VI (unpublished), in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 34, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1994. Also see Lukács, Georg. *Ontologia Dell'Essere Sociale*, vols. 1 and 2, Rome: Riuniti, 1981 and Mandel, Ernest. 'Marx, La Crise Actuelle et L'Avenir du Travail Humain', *Quatrième Internationale*, 2: 9–29, 1986.

⁴ Habermas, Jürgen. "Técnica e Ciência como 'Ideologia'" in *Os Pensadores*, São Paulo: Abril, 1975; The New Obscurity in *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989; *The Theory of Communicative Action vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, London: Polity Press, 1991; *The Theory of Communicative Action vol. 2: The Critique of Functionalist Reason*, London: Polity Press, 1992.

⁵ Kurz, Robert. *O Colapso da Modernização*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1992; *Os Últimos Combates*. Rio de Janeiro: Vozes, 1997.

term; that is, those whose forms of labour are used as services, both for public *use*, such as traditional public services; and for capital's *use*. *Unproductive labour* is labour that does not constitute itself as a living element in the process of the valorisation of capital and the creation of surplus value. This is why Marx differentiates it from productive labour, which participates *directly* in the process of the creation of surplus value.

As the real differences are blurred – it is enough to recall that in the sphere of production today the same work has at the same time a productive and unproductive dimension since it is done by the same worker – the amplified working class includes, therefore, the broad array of unproductive wage-earners, anti-value producers within the capitalist work process, but who experience situations clearly similar to those experienced by productive workers. They belong to what Marx called the “overhead costs of production” that are, however, completely vital to the survival of the capitalism and its social metabolism.

Given that all productive labour is waged (“exceptions” aside, due to the resurgence of slave labour) but not all wage labour is productive, a contemporary understanding of the working class must include *all wage-earners*.

Therefore, *the working class today is broader, more heterogeneous, more complex and more fragmented than the industrial proletariat of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries*.

An important question to our debate remains: does the modern proletariat, which executes *productive activities* (whether *material* or *immaterial* activities; made manually or in information technology work operating in the most advanced modern factories, exercising “intellectualized” activities), still have a central role in anti-capitalist struggles, exactly for creating *exchange-values* and *surplus-value*? Or conversely, does the amplified modern proletariat or the *class-that-lives-from-its-labour* not have any *necessarily* central role in its heterogeneity – including its participation/production/amplification of value, as well its concrete ideological-political reality?

Reformulating: in the conflicts led by workers all around the world, is it possible to detect a greater potential and role amongst the more skilled strata of the working class, in those living under ‘more stable’ conditions and who therefore participate to a greater extent in the process of value-creation? Or conversely, are the more fertile pole of actions found precisely amongst the most marginalized, sub-proletarianized strata?

We know that the more skilled, more intellectualized segments which advanced along with technological-information-digital development, given their central role in the creation of exchange-values, could be endowed, at least objectively, with greater potential for rebellion.

On the other hand, and paradoxically, these more skilled segments are experiencing a systematic process of manipulation and “involvement” (which are actually contemporary forms of fetishism and estrangement) within the workplace. In contrast, the broad array of precarious, part-time, temporary, etc., workers – the so-called *modern sub-proletariat* – along with the huge contingent of the unemployed, due to their greater distance from the process of value-creation, would have, at a material level, a less important role in anti-capitalist struggles. Yet the condition of dispossession leads them to daily confrontations with the destructive order, since they have nothing else to lose in capital’s universe of (un)sociability. Their subjectivity could be, therefore, more prone to lead to rebellion.

It is always worth remembering that the working class is a *condition of particularity*, a *form of being* carrying clear, intrinsic and non-eliminable relational elements of *objectivity* and *subjectivity*.

The working class for Marx is ontologically decisive due to its fundamental role in the process of value creation and class struggle. In the very materiality of the system and in the *subjective potentiality* its role becomes central. It will only lose this *potentiality* if and when *abstract labour* no longer plays a central role in the reproduction of capital.

In a broader sense, the working class thus includes all those selling their labour power in exchange for a wage such as the rural proletariat that sells its labour power to capital, for example, the so-called *bóias-frias* [day labourers] of Brazil’s ethanol and agro-industrial regions. Moreover, we may include the growing part-time industrial and service-sector proletariat, characterized by temporary employment contracts and precarious working conditions. The working class also embraces – in a decisive manner today – *unemployed workers*.

The issue of immigration is perhaps one of the most emblematic features of capitalism. Given the sharp rise in the *new informal proletariat*, of the manufacturing and service-sector sub-proletariat, new jobs are performed by immigrant labour, such as the *Gastarbeiter*s in Germany, the *lavoratori in nero* in Italy, the *chicanos* in the US, eastern European immigrants (Polish, Hungarian, Romanian, Albanian workers) in western

Europe, the *dekasegis* of Japan, the Bolivians/Latin-Americans and Africans in Brazil, Argentina, etc.

Our concept of the working class *excludes* managers of capital, who constitute a portion of the dominant class for the important role they play in the control, hierarchy, power and management of capital and in its processes of valorization; small-business owners; urban and rural propertied bourgeoisie that holds – even if on a small scale – the means of production. Also excluded are those who live by means of speculation and interest.

Therefore, a broader understanding of the working class today entails a comprehension of this heterogeneous, amplified, complex and fragmented set of social beings living by the sale of their labour power, wage earners deprived of the means of production.

Under Taylorism/Fordism during the twentieth century, workers were not homogeneous: there had always been male workers, female workers, young workers, skilled and unskilled workers, native and immigrant workers, etc., i.e. multiple variations within the working class. Clearly at that time there was also outsourcing (in general, such as in restaurants, cleaning and public transport). But in the last decades we have witnessed a huge intensification of this process that has qualitatively affected the structure of the working class, increasing and intensifying the already existing divergences.

Unlike Taylorism/Fordism (which, it is important to remember, still exists in many parts of the world, albeit in a hybrid or mixed form), under Toyotism or flexible accumulation processes, workers are internalized and encouraged to become *their own despots*, as I showed in my book *Adeus ao Trabalho? (Farewell to Work?)*⁶. They are oriented by notions of self-incrimination and self-punishment if their production does not reach the well-known “targets”. They work in *teams* or *production-cells*, and if one of them does not turn up to work, he/she is supposed to justify themselves to members of the team. This is how things work, for instance, in the ideal of Toyotism. Resistance, rebellion and denial are completely opposed by managers, regarded as acts against the “good performance of the company”.

If within the Taylorist/Fordist system, scientific management *elaborates* and the manual labourer *executes*, under Toyotism and *flexibilized lean-production* forms, *intellectual knowledge* is allowed to blossom and worker subjectivity is appropriated by capital.

⁶ Antunes, Ricardo. *Adeus ao Trabalho? Ensaio sobre as Metamorfoses e a Centralidade do Mundo do Trabalho*. São Paulo: Ed. Cortez, 2010.

This expansive and complex process within the *sectors at the cutting edge of the productive process* (which can by no means be generalized nowadays), results in more intelligent machines, which in turn have to be operated by “skilled” workers, more capable of operating computerized machines. Throughout this process, new smarter machines perform activities done before solely by humans, creating an interaction process between a distinctive living labour and a computerized dead labour.

This prompted Habermas to misleadingly say that *science has become the leading productive force*, making superfluous the labour theory of value. On the contrary, I believe in a new interaction between *living labour* and *dead labour*; there is a process of the technologification of science (in the concept of Mészáros⁷) which, however, cannot eliminate living labour in the process of value creation. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that, parallel to the rise of new forms of labour, there are new modalities of work in which the law of value obtains.

In fact, we are witnessing the growth and expansion of forms of the *creation of surplus value*, resulting from the articulation of highly advanced machinery (exemplified by communication and information technologies invading the commodity sphere), with capital demanding a more “skilled” and “competent” workforce.

Given the *new morphology of labour* and its huge range of *invisible workers*, *value-creating mechanisms* have been made effective, although under a *non-value appearance*, using new and old mechanisms of the intensification of work (if not through the very *self-exploration* of labour).

Our hypothesis thus goes beyond the loss of the legitimacy of the theory of value (expressed by Habermas, Kurz and Gorz⁸): it states that *labour invisibility is an apparent expression that conceals the real creation of surplus value within almost all spheres of the world of work where exploitation takes place*. Therefore, to the contrary of the postulations of detractors of the labour theory of value, there has been an important increase, empowerment and even execution of *surplus value* creation in contemporary capitalism.

Otherwise, why would there currently be 17-hour working days in the clothing industry of Sao Paulo, Brazil, performed by Bolivian or Peruvian (or other Latin-American) immigrant workers, usually informally hired and

⁷ Mészáros, István. *The Power of Ideology*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989; *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition*, London: Merlin Press, 1995.

⁸ Habermas, Op.Cit.; Kurz, Op.Cit.; Gorz, André. *Imaterial*, São Paulo: Annablume, 2005.

controlled by Korean or Chinese employers? Or African workers packing textile and clothing products in the Bom Retiro and Bras neighbourhoods in São Paulo? Those products are sold in the African market, created by an arduous and mainly manual labour, as documented by the workers themselves. Examples from the agribusiness sector abound. The average amount of sugarcane cut in the state of Sao Paulo by one worker is ten tons per day, whereas the average amount in the Northeastern region of Brazil can reach 18 tons per day.

In Japan, for instance, young workers migrating and immigrating to the big cities looking for jobs spend the night in glass capsules; as a result, I have called them *encapsulated workers*. Furthermore, there are the *cyber-refugees*: young workers in Tokyo who do not have money to rent rooms, so they use cybercafés to rest and look for work. The cybercafés in the outskirts of Tokyo have special prices for workers willing to spend their night searching for *contingent jobs* on the Internet.

Once the informalization of labour, in its polymorphic design, becomes more permanent and structural, it seems to increasingly assume the distinctive mark of capital accumulation in contemporary society.

There is a new working-class contingent booming: information and communication technology workers, composed of everything from software producers to call centre and telemarketing staff. These workers are part of the new morphology of labour, and have been designated the *cybertariat* (Huws⁹) or the *infoproletariat* (Antunes and Braga¹⁰).

As we know, the global privatization of telecommunications and the search for more profitability in these companies have unleashed the increasing practice of outsourcing, resulting in multiple new ways of making time and movement within the work process more precarious and intense.

It is worth remembering that labour within the information and communication technology sectors is contradictorily structured: it aligns twenty-first century technologies to twentieth-century work conditions. Similarly, it combines strategies of intense emulation and involvement, as in

⁹ Huws, Ursula 2003, *The Making of a Cybertariat (Virtual Work in a Real World)*. New York/London: Monthly Review Press/The Merlin Press, 2003.

¹⁰ Antunes, Ricardo e Braga, Ruy. *Infoproletários: degradação real do trabalho virtual*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2009. Also consult Vasapollo, Luciano. *O Trabalho Atípico e a Precariedade*, São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2005.

the Toyotised flexibility system, with Taylorist/Fordist management techniques over the prescribed workers.

Therefore, to the contrary of critiques of labour and of the law of value as the bases of the capitalist society, new modalities of labour, including immaterial labour, have arisen which are expressions of *living labour* that participate in value accumulation. Once science and labour are directly blended in the sphere of production, the *creative power* of labour can assume both the *dominant form* of *material labour* or the *tendential modality* of *immaterial labour*, since the very creation of advanced digital-computerized machinery results from the active interaction between the intellectual knowledge of labour and computerized machines. In this process, some of the predicates of the intellectual knowledge of labour are transferred to the new computerized machines generated by the process and thus, *objectify subjective activities* (Lojkine¹¹) or become “*organs of the human brain, created by the human hand*”¹², as Marx characterised in the *Grundrisse*, providing *new dimensions and aspects to the theory of value*. When the cognitive dimension of labour is aroused by production, it becomes a constitutive part of the globally existent *complex, combining and social labour*.

Thus, in our analysis, when the immaterial form of labour and production occurs, it does not lead to the extinction of the *law of value*, but adds *living labour clots within the logic of capital accumulation in its materiality, inserting them into the average social time of an increasingly complex work process*. Contrary to the breakdown of the law of value, it is therefore mandatory to unleash new value creating mechanisms, pertaining to the *informational sphere of the commodity form*¹³. It is worth remembering Toyota’s Takaoka plant, where the following slogan is found outside its premises: “*Yoi kangae, yoi shina*” (Good thoughts mean good products)¹⁴. And the boom of China and India during the last decades, attached to the enormous extra workforce and to the incorporation of information technologies, seems to invalidate the thesis of the loss of the significance of living labour in the sphere of value creation. It deepens the fragility of theses

¹¹ Lojkine, Jean. *A Revolução Informacional*, São Paulo: Cortez, 1995.

¹² Marx, Karl. *The Grundrisse*, Notebook VII. London: Penguin Books and New Left Review, 1993.

¹³ Tosel, André. ‘Centralité et Non-Centralité du Travail ou La Passion des Hommes Superflus’. In: Bidet, Jacques e Texier, Jacques (eds.). *La Crise du Travail, Actuel Marx Confrontation*. Paris: Press Universitaires de France, 1995; Vincent, Jean-Marie. ‘Les Automatismes Sociaux et le “General Intellect”’, *Paradigmes du Travail*, Futur Antérieur, 16: 121–30, 1993; ‘Flexibilité du Travail et Plasticité Humaine’, in Bidet and Texier, Op. Cit, 1995.

¹⁴ *Business Week*, November 18th 2003.

defending immateriality as a form of the *overcoming* or the *inadequacy* of the law of value.

Finally, the design of the *new morphology of labour* configures itself in a more complex way within the real world, globally speaking: at the *top* of the social pyramid we find highly skilled jobs in the digital computerized sphere; at the *bottom*, the structural expansion of precarious conditions and unemployment. In the *middle*, the hybrid form, the skilled labour capable of disappearing or eroding and thus becoming precarious and/or unemployed, due to (temporal and spatial) changes in the production plant. All these social segments are ruled by the growing informality of forms of being.

Thus, besides current diversities and transversalities related to the stable and precarious, male and female, young and old, white and black and Indians, skilled and unskilled, employed and unemployed native and immigrant workers – and so many other examples that constitute the new morphology of labour – immigrant workers best illustrate this global trend of a precarious labour structure.

It is worth adding a brief note for its symbolic meaning: in Portugal there is a precarious workers movement called ‘Precári@s Inflexíveis’ [Inflexible Precarious Workers]. In their *Manifesto*, this association states:

We are precarious in work and in life. We work without contracts or in short-term contracts. Temporary, uncertain jobs with no guarantees. We are call-centre workers, interns, unemployed ... immigrants, casual workers, student-workers ...

We are not represented in the statistics. Although we are more and more precarious, Governments conceal this. We live off temporary jobs. We can hardly provide for household costs. We can't take leave; we can't have children or be unwell. Not to mention the right to strike. Flexicurity? The ‘flexi’ is for us. The ‘security’ is for the bosses. ‘Modernization’ is thought and done by businessmen and Government, hand in hand. We are in the shadows, but we are not silent.

We won't stop fighting for fundamental rights alongside workers in Portugal or abroad. This struggle is not at all about union or government numbers. It is the struggle of workers and people like us. Things that ‘numbers’ will always ignore. We don't fit in these numbers. We won't let our conditions be forgotten.

And using the same force with which we are attacked by our bosses, we respond and reinvent the struggle. At the end, there are many more of us than of them. Precarious, yes, but inflexible.¹⁵

This is therefore the *new morphology of labour* today. Understating its *form of being*, its attitudes, rebellions and resistances is a path for a better perception of the current multiple and polysemous anti-capitalist struggles.

¹⁵ (Our translation) For the Manifesto in Portuguese see <http://www.precariosinflexiveis.org/p/manifesto-do-pi.html>.

