

Marx's concept of the working class and some trends in the development of capitalism

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ABSTRACT

My purpose here is not to present a new theoretical argument but to recover Marx's concept of working class¹ and show its pertinence to account for the most important tendencies in the present capitalist phase. Therefore, the first part of this article deals with Marx's concept of working class, which is not restricted to factory workers, though, at the same time, distinguishes them from other workers exploited by capital. The second part deals with some tendencies pointed out by Marx and his continuers—the decreasing rate of Rural and Agricultural Population and the absolute and/or relative increase of Proletarians, of the Non Productive Population and of the Surplus Population. Finally, I analyze these tendencies in the Argentinean case.

KEYWORDS

Marx, Concept of working class, Proletarians, Non-Productive Population and Surplus Population, Argentina

From different, and even opposed, theoretical perspectives, there is nowadays almost unanimous agreement that during the 1960s and 1970s capitalism went through important changes. The main and most widely circulated points of view state that there has been a deep change in society, and that this change implies the disappearance of social classes,

¹ There are several interpretations of Marx's theories, some of them opposing 'juvenile' and 'mature' writings or Capital and Grundrisse. We think that these are false oppositions.

particularly of the working class, which have been replaced by new social and political subjects.

These statements are not politically naïve, and must be considered within the historical context in which they emerged: no matter how conscious their authors were of their political implications, the assertion of the disappearance or lack of importance of the working class became an important part of the capitalist offensive led by the most concentrated capital (financial capital) in response both to the social and national liberation struggles around the world during the fifties and the sixties, and to the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. Thus, this offensive, which is clearly recognized in the policies implemented by governments such as those headed by Reagan in the USA, Thatcher in Great Britain and military dictatorships in South America (and, less evidently, in the fall of the Soviet Union), also had its “special forces” in the intellectual and academic world.

The capitalist offensive in the intellectual field, which contributed to isolate workers’ struggles from the rest of society, was displayed in two converging assertions: a) the working class disappears or, at least, loses economic, social and political weight and is replaced, in these fields, by “new social movements”; b) the Marxist definition of the working class is no longer applicable to the new society.

My purpose here is not to present a new theoretical argument, but to recover Marx’s concept of the working class² and show its pertinence to account for the most important tendencies in the present capitalist phase. Therefore, the first part of this article deals with Marx’s concept of the working class, which is not restricted to factory workers, though, at the same time, distinguishes them from other workers exploited by capital. The second part deals with some tendencies pointed out by Marx and later Marxists – the decreasing rate of rural and agricultural Population and the absolute and/or relative increase of proletarians, of the non-productive population and of the surplus population. Finally, I analyse these tendencies in the Argentinean case.

Marx’s concept of working class

The argument that sustains the disappearance or weakening of the working class in today’s capitalism requires a theoretical license: to restrict the working class only to industrial or factory workers. This reduction-ism has also been common among acknowledged Marxist intellectuals. Jürgen Kuczynski, for example, pointed out that “the modern working class is a product of the machine”: “the machine created the working class. The authentic modern workers, therefore, are those of the factories”.³ Although Kuczynski expanded his definition to include miners and building workers and then referred to factory workers as the “industrial proletariat”, his general idea was that the working class was directly linked to machines. This assertion distinguishes modern workers of the capitalist mode of production from pre-industrial, pre-capitalist workers;

² There are several interpretations of Marx’s theories, some of them opposing “juvenile” and “mature” writings or *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*. We believe these are false oppositions.

³ Kuczynski, Jürgen. *Evolución de la clase obrera*. Madrid: Guadarrama, 1967, pp. 50-51 and p. 59. (My own translation from the Spanish edition).

but it excludes all non-industrial workers and the relative surplus population, that has increased in number and relative weight along with the development of capitalism, as a result of the “general law of capitalist accumulation”.

According to Marx, productive activity is not only *production*, but also *distribution, exchange* (circulation) and *consumption* of commodities, including labour power.⁴ Although a great part of his analysis focuses on industrial workers, reducing the working class to them is only possible if we fail to follow Marx’s method, research and argument from general abstractions to the determined concrete. When we observe the multiple concrete historical situations it is highly likely to find differences between them and the “purity” of capitalist relations presented by Marx. But emphasizing these differences and presenting them as a proof of the incapability of Marx’s theory to explain reality is to ignore that Marx was presenting the general laws, the tendencies of capitalist society,⁵ and that, as he himself frequently pointed out, these tendencies show themselves modified, in a greater or lesser degree, when we analyze concrete situations.⁶ To what extent laws (tendencies) are modified in a concrete situation is, precisely, the main problem to tackle in every research project.

Let us now summarize Marx’s analysis of the working class.

The sphere of circulation: relationships between individual owners: workers as “sellers” of a specific commodity

Applying what he considered “the scientifically correct method” in *Capital*, Marx displayed his analysis from “determinant, abstract, general relations” to the “concrete” ones as “the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse”.⁷ The consideration of labour-power as a commodity, source of value, and of the worker as its possessor, “free” to sell it and “free” from any other relation with any conditions or means of production corresponds to this moment of his analysis.

Still remaining at the level of “sellers” and “buyers” of labour force it must be noticed that Marx himself considered intermediate situations between “pure” capitalist and non-capitalist relationships. In his analysis of the relationships between wage-earners and owners, he made countless references to wage relations where money is not directly involved and to combinations of monetary and non-monetary wage relations, to different

⁴ Marx, Karl. *Outline of the Critique of Political Economy (Grundrisse). 1. Production, Consumption, Distribution, Exchange (Circulation). The general relation of production to distribution, exchange, consumption.* <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch01.htm#2>

⁵ Marx, Karl. *Capital*; Volume I; Preface to the First German Edition. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965, p.8.

⁶ When discussing “the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation” Marx asserts that “Like all other laws it is modified in its working by many circumstances (...)” (Marx, *Ibid*, p.644). As well, when presenting the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, he devotes a chapter to the analysis of the influences that modify the law (Marx, Karl; *Capital*; Book III; Chapter XIV “Counteracting Influences”).

⁷ Marx, Karl. *Outline of the Critique of Political Economy (Grundrisse). 3. The Method of Political Economy;* <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch01.htm#2>

forms of coercion that set limits to free labour power trade, such as the “truck system” and “forms of servitude” under monetary forms,⁸ peonage and debt bondage as the form of relationship between capitalists and workers. He also refers to situations in which the worker is not completely deprived of his instruments of work, etc.

Workers considered as deprived of material conditions of existence

So far, we are still dealing with “personifications”,⁹ where the capitalist and the worker meet in the market of commodities as owners – one of capital, the other of labour-power. But we are still not dealing with social classes. We are still in the sphere of relationships established in the market, in the sphere of circulation, and, consequently, considering labour-power as a commodity. But

To be sure, the matter looks quite different if we consider capitalist production in the uninterrupted flow of its renewal, and if, in place of the individual capitalist and the individual worker, we view them in their totality, the capitalist class and the working-class confronting each other.¹⁰

So, if we aim to define the working class, we cannot just observe relationships established in the market, between individuals, between “owners” of commodities. In the capitalist system, the property laws of commodity production change into the laws of capitalist appropriation. As we are considering social classes and not individual histories of ascendant or descendent social mobility, we have to take into account that the capitalist system constantly reproduces “the complete separation of the labourers from all property in the means by which they can realise their labour”.¹¹ The need to obtain their means of living – under the form of a wage – in order to reproduce their life forces workers to give away their labour-power. And “individual consumption provides, on the one hand, the means for the maintenance and reproduction; on the other hand, it secures by the annihilation of the necessities of life, the continued re-appearance of the workman in the labour market”.¹²

The same shift from the property laws of commodity production to the laws of capitalist appropriation occurs in the analysis of the workers’ reproduction process: the distinction between “productive consumption” – the consumption of the labour-power in the working process – and “individual consumption” – reproduction of the worker’s life “takes quite another aspect, when we contemplate, not the single capitalist, and the single labourer, but the capitalist class and the labouring class, not an isolated process of production, but capitalist production in full swing, and on its actual social scale”.¹³ And

⁸ Marx, Karl. *Capital*; Volume I; chapter XV.7, p.457-458.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Chapter V.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.586.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.714.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.573-4. “The Roman slave was held by fetters: the wage-labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads”.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.572.

“the individual consumption of the labourer (...) forms therefore a factor of the production and reproduction of capital”.¹⁴

As a result, when we consider them as a class, *workers are not owners or free* in any sense, but, on the contrary, they are *owned by capital*, personified by the capitalist class, no matter if “the appearance of independence is kept up by means of the constant change of employers, and by the *fictio juris* of a contract”.¹⁵ And this situation is not restricted to active, employed workers, but it extends also to the surplus population, “that belongs to capital, quite as absolutely as if the latter has bred it at its own cost”.¹⁶ Furthermore, it belongs to capital even if an increasing part of this surplus population is never employed in the core of capitalist production by the most concentrated capital, or not employed at all, as it happens today more frequently than in Marx’s days. Marx points out that the same happens to the whole working family, even if they are not working in factories or workshops: women’s and children’s work in the household contributes to the reproduction of the labour-power appropriated by capital.¹⁷

In short, when we consider productive activity, productive relationships, what defines workers as a class is their position as *non-proprietors, non-owners of their material conditions of existence*, unable to reproduce their lives but as *capital’s appendage, attribute*, as living capital, submitted to the class that owns capital. This position is usually defined as non-ownership of the means of production, but very often these ones are reduced to “objects” – instruments, machines, tools, raw materials, etc.–, disregarding social relationships and human labour-force. “Material conditions of existence” are the *productive forces of society*¹⁸, that refer to a mode of production, of cooperation, a *mode of life*, “that depends on the material conditions of production”.¹⁹

Thus if we leave the narrow sphere of commodities circulation and the relationship between the individual worker and the individual capitalist, and we consider the capitalist reproduction process and the relationship between the working class and the capitalist class, we can see that Marx’s concept of working class *includes all those deprived of their material conditions of existence that are forced to sell their labour-power, including the surplus population* – formed by the unemployed, by those living on the dole, by many

¹⁴ Ibid., p.572.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.574.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.632.

¹⁷ “(...) the capitalist may safely leave its fulfillment [of the reproduction of the labour-power] to the labourer’s instincts of self-preservation and of propagation”. Ibid., p.572).

¹⁸ “These conditions of existence are, of course, only the productive forces and forms of intercourse at any particular time.” (Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich. *The German Ideology*; MECW; volume 5; Part I: Feuerbach. Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook. D. Proletarians and Communism. Individuals, Class, and Community. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01d.htm#5d7>

¹⁹ “This mode of production (...) is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part”. Ibid., <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#a2>

public servants whose wages are only hidden relief payments²⁰ and by workers employed in obsolete branches of economic activity.

Workers not included in Marx's definition

It is important to point out that, no matter how broad it might be, Marx's definition of working class does not include all workers producing value appropriated by capital. "Self-employed" workers may be submitted to capital in different ways, but only a part of them are members of the working class, that is, those who have no property of their means of existence. Many workers in this situation regard themselves as "self-employed" or "independent", but this false perception is only possible because they compare themselves with workers with steady jobs. As Marx pointed out, and has been quoted before in this paper, the constant change of employers creates the appearance of an independent worker. Workers can be really "self-employed" only if they own some kind of property of instruments or conditions besides their labour-power that allows them to reproduce their life without "selling" themselves to the capitalist class. "Self-employed" workers sell the product of their labour and consequently they are commodity producers. Considering them as "working class" (or eliminating the distinction between them and the working class) annuls the divisive line marked by the ownership of material conditions of existence. This does not mean that small owners are not exploited by mechanisms different from the wage form (i.e. taxes, excessive loaning interests or the monopoly of demand by big companies *vis-à-vis* the dispersion of the small producers' offer of their products).²¹ In the Marxist tradition the ensemble of those deprived of the material conditions of existence – the working class – and small owners exploited by capital have been named the *working and exploited masses* (Lenin) and the *subordinate classes* (Gramsci), a term used also by Eric Hobsbawm. However, the existence of different modes of value appropriation by capital and of transitional situations does not eliminate the specificity of the material basis of different class interests within the *working and exploited masses*: those deprived – the working class – or as small proprietors – peasants, artisans, etc.

*Proletarianisation Processes*²²

²⁰ Marx pointed out that one of the state machinery's functions was to serve as source of employment for the surplus population (Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*; Marx/Engels Collected Works (MECW), as compiled and printed by Progress Publishers of the Soviet Union in collaboration with Lawrence & Wishart (London) and International Publishers (New York); volume 11. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch04.htm>

²¹ There is a large bibliography on this subject, as, for example, my own book *Génesis, formación y crisis del capitalismo en el Chaco*. Salta: Edunsa, 2011.

²² "Proletarianization" refers to the process of deprivation of material conditions of existence that transforms a part of society into workers disposable for capital by means of wage relations, that is to say, by means of the appearance of a free meeting between commodity owners. It does not mean that this is a one way process.

The relation between the different social classes and capital is linked to the moment of capitalist development in a concrete society, to the proletarianization of social fractions that join the working class as being deprived of their material conditions of existence, and to the processes of repulsion of the surplus population. The so-called transitional situations and the existence of combinations with non-capitalist modes of production (slavery, serfdom) are not only due to their persistence even after the development of capitalist relations, but also because, in certain circumstances, capitalist development itself generates them. These are long-term and not lineal processes – capitalism can generate or renew non-capitalist (in the sense of *non wage*) forms of production. There is a large accumulation of knowledge about this in the Latin American scholarly literature.²³

The combination of different modes of production has existed throughout the whole history of capitalism, and the existence today of forms of appropriation of value produced by social fractions deprived of their material conditions of existence, but by no means free to sell their labour force, or only partially deprived and involved in wage relations, sets the problem of the inclusion or not of these fractions as working class, according to Marx's definition. Marcel van der Linden²⁴ criticizes Marx's concept of the working class as he considers that it is too narrow and only exists in a small part of the world. He proposes the concept of a "*class of subaltern workers*":

Every carrier of labor power whose labor power is sold (or hired out) to another person under economic (or non-economic) compulsion belongs to the class of subaltern workers, regardless of whether the carrier of labor power is himself or herself selling or hiring it out and, regardless of whether the carrier himself or herself owns means of production.

In his definition, these range from free workers to self-employed and slaves, all of them subdued to some kind of compulsion to transform their labour force into a commodity. We have already pointed out that Marx considered very different combinations of exploitation relations in his time, but he did not disregard the qualitative differences between: 1) workers that sell the product of their work, even if a part of the product's value is appropriated by capital through various mechanisms; 2) workers who cannot "sell" their labour force because they are not formally free people, 3) workers who do not "sell" a product, but sell their labour force, the only commodity that produces value. Van der Linden unifies in one concept only a variety of forms of exploitation that imply different objective contradictions and constitute the basis of different struggles.

²³ I.e. the classic book by Assadourian, Carlos, Cardoso, Ciro et al. *Modos de producción en América Latina*. Buenos Aires: Cuadernos de Pasado y Presente Nº 40, 1973. For Europe, see Dobb, Maurice. *Estudios sobre el desarrollo del capitalismo*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1971, pp. 56-61. Also Karl Kautsky's *Die Agrarfrage*, about German peasants going through the proletarianization process.

²⁴ van der Linden, Marcel. "Conceptualising the World Working Class". In: Kannan, K.P. and Rutten, Mario (eds). *Labour and Transformation in Asia. Critical Reflections and Empirical Studies*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003. Van der Linden, Marcel. *Workers of the World, Essays toward a Global Labor History*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2007.

As Marx pointed out in numerous occasions, especially in the chapter on primitive accumulation in *Capital*, throughout the history of capitalist accumulation, exploitation was based many times on non-wage compulsive relations. The fact that these types of relations exist today around the world highlights the capacity of capitalism to expand over non-capitalist territories. Nevertheless, these “intermediate situations” cannot hide the fact that wage relations tend to impose themselves all over the world, and that wage relations broadly prevail in the regions where capitalism first emerged (wage earners are about 90% of the economically active population).²⁵

Something similar happens with economic and extra-economic forms of coercion. Marx points out the existence of coercion in all the relations between classes in capitalism: “The Roman slave was held by fetters: the wage-labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads”. And not only by economic coercion. Non-economic coercion exists in developed capitalism.²⁶ “Direct force, outside economic conditions, is of course still used, but only exceptionally”²⁷ even though the existence of such coercion does not mean that it constitutes “the economic law of motion of modern society”.²⁸

Another example of non-free labour in developed capitalism is posed by Marx in reference to the situation of women and children, “every member of the workman’s family, without distinction of age or sex”, that work in modern industry “under the direct sway of capital”:

(...) now the capitalist buys children and young persons under age. Previously, the workman sold his own labour-power, which he disposed of nominally as a free agent. Now he sells wife and child. He has become a ‘slave-dealer’, with the subsequent ‘moral degradation’ and ‘intellectual desolation’.²⁹

In short, the combination of productive modes and the persistence of extra economic coercion lead us to the issue of the passage from the forms under which the working class presents itself in real, concrete situations, to the delimitation of the concept of working class; the passage from abstraction to the totality comprising many

²⁵ Wage relations prevail around the world, with few self-employed and family workers, few employers and many wage-earners (more than 60% of the economically active population); the exceptions are Asia and Subsaharan Africa. In East Asia (45%) and South East Asia and Pacific (38%) wage-earners are a little less than half the economically active population; in South Asia and Subsaharan Africa they are a minority (between 20 and 25%) (International Labour Organization; *Global Employment Trends. January 2008*; Geneva, 2008, p. 37, Figure 8 “Status of employment share in total employment, 2007 all regions (%)”).

²⁶ For example, when Marx refers to the prohibition to emigrate of mechanics of the English cotton districts demanded by manufacturers (Marx, Karl. *Capital*. Volume I; chapter XXIII, p.574). Marx also states that “as soon as (in the colonies, e.g.) adverse circumstances prevent the creation of an industrial reserve army and, with it, the absolute dependence of the working-class upon the capitalist class, capital along with its commonplace Sancho Panza, rebels against the ‘sacred’ law of supply and demand, and tries to check its inconvenient action by forcible means and State interference” (Marx, Karl. *Capital*; Volume I; chapter XXV, p.640).

²⁷ Ibid., p.737.

²⁸ Ibid., p.10.

²⁹ Ibid., p.396.

determinations and relations, the unity of the diverse.³⁰ If we define social classes by their position concerning the property of their income sources³¹, the analyses of a specific situation will allow us to know to what degree the life of a certain human ensemble depends, completely or in part, on “selling” its labour-power in order to obtain its means of life under the form of wages, to what degree wages adopt a monetary form and whether there is an element of extra-economic coercion.

Another issue to consider here is that the working class is not homogeneous. The classical approach to these differences has focused on the existence of fractions within the working class according to the capital that exploits them – i.e. producers of the means of production, producers of the means of consumption, industrial or commercial capital – and strata according to the conditions in which they reproduce their lives – i.e. the poor or rich strata of the working class.

The concept of working-class

Up to this point I have tried to conceptualize the “working class” within the limits of the relations established in productive activity, in the production and reproduction of material life, that is to say, considering the working class only as an attribute of capital, only as living capital. We have not reached Marx’s definition of the working class as a historical totality.

Marx stressed that considering the working class in such a way is incomplete:

The separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class; otherwise they are on hostile terms with each other as competitors. On the other hand, the class in its turn achieves an independent existence over against the individuals, so that the latter find their conditions of existence predestined, and hence have their position in life and their personal development assigned to them by their class, become subsumed under it. (...) We have already indicated several times how this subsuming of individuals under the class brings with it their subjection to all kinds of ideas, etc.³²

Therefore, it is in considering the processes of struggle, of social confrontations, that we may find the working class as a historical totality. By analyzing the processes of social confrontation we can discover which of the multiple relationships in which individuals are involved are playing the main role in a specific historical moment, and, therefore, which is the class interest that guides confrontation and whether the subjects involved are becoming a social class. Each individual is the result of multiple social

³⁰ Marx, Karl. *Outline of the Critique of Political Economy*, Op.Cit.

³¹ Marx, Karl. *Capital*; Book III, chapter LII; op. cit.; pp. 885-6.

³² Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich. *The German Ideology*; MECW, volume 5; Part I: “Feuerbach. Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook. D. Proletarians and Communism. Individuals, Class, and Community”; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01d.htm#p76>

relationships: an individual can be, simultaneously, a wage-earning worker exploited by his employer, and a landlord who rents rooms to other people and, occasionally in his free time, an odd-job self-employed worker; and also a member of a political party, a church or a club, and a neighbour in his neighbourhood. The class interest that moves him depends on which of these relations, and their context, is at stake in a specific confrontation.

We are now getting into the consideration of the forms of rebellion, which should not be limited to union and parliamentary forms, but should consider every means of struggle that appear in historical processes concerning the working class: from riot to insurrection, from strike to revolutionary war, from revolt to parliamentary confrontation, from barricade struggle to elections. Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé³³ made a great contribution to the knowledge of forms that, though considered “primitive” or “pre-political”, exist today in societies where capitalism is highly developed (i.e. riots in USA and Europe).

However, historical processes do not develop in a linear way and only in one possible direction. The element of will is crucial in historical processes, which are the results of the conflict between many individual wills that intersect and hamper one another, in an “infinite group of parallelograms of forces”³⁴, that give rise to the historical event, a process that does not respond to any individual will but contains them all.

Some left-wing authors, such as Antonio Negri, have opposed the determinism of certain Marxist trends and have properly emphasised the autonomy of the subaltern classes. But we must also remember that, although the historical process is not determined, there are not infinite alternatives: we make history in certain conditions that are the result of the historical process, which sets limits to the existence of human groups, their goals and interests.

Long term trends in capitalist development and their effects on the working class

We have so far considered Marx’s conceptual apparatus on class, indicating the nature of the relations, both economic and political, that define the working class: its condition as those deprived of the material conditions of existence who can only obtain their means of life under the form of a salary (although they do not always achieve it) and that, grasping consciousness of its situation, fights to modify it. Has the nature of these capitalist relations really changed?

³³ With classic books such as *Primitive Rebels* and *Bandits* by Eric Hobsbawm and *The crowd in History and Ideology and popular protest* by George Rudé.

³⁴ Engels, F. *Letter to Bloch*, London, September 21, 1890. http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_09_21.htm.

Let us set aside those academic trends who state that, as a result of “globalisation” and “technical progress” a “new society” has been born (such as the *information society* or *network society*, as Manuel Castells names it) or that social relations have ceased to exist (according to Alain Touraine). From the point of view of these trends, class analysis is irrelevant.

Based on some of Marx’s works, Negri considers that a qualitative change has taken place in capitalism since the 1960s and 1970s. The working class is not the same as before and neither is it the subject of processes of radical changes. Yet before considering these changes we must remember that Negri’s starting point is the restricted definition of the working class or proletariat that reduces it to industrial factory workers. When Hardt and Negri state that “In a previous era the category of proletariat centred on and was at times effectively subsumed under the *industrial working class*”³⁵, they are reducing the working class. Since the beginning of capitalism, the working class has comprised fractions and strata of workers that have largely exceeded the number of industrial workers.

Negri stresses the automatization of factories and the informatization of the social plane. Based on an excerpt in which Marx posed a hypothesis about the future development of labour in capitalism, Negri states that work becomes more “immaterial”, depending “mainly on the intellectual and scientific energies that constitute it”.³⁶ The “social worker” emerges, an interpreter of the labour cooperative functions of the social productive networks. The composition of the proletariat becomes social, but also more immaterial from the point of view of the substance of work, and mobile, polymorphic and flexible from the point of view of its forms. In Hardt and Negri’s words, “in conceptual terms we understand *proletariat* as a broad category that includes all those whose labour is directly or indirectly exploited by and subjected to capitalist norms of production and reproduction”.³⁷ Therefore, it includes wage earners and workers that do not receive a wage, factory and non-factory workers, poor and well-off workers. The new subject is the *multitude*: a multiplicity of singularities, a non- working class, capable of autonomous development.³⁸

Thus, as we noted before, the distinction between those deprived of their material conditions of existence that are exploited by capital by means of wage relations and those who keep the property of those conditions, even if capital manages to appropriate a part of the value produced by them, vanishes. And a variety of forms of exploitation, that imply different objective contradictions and constitute the basis of different struggles, disappear. We must insist on the capability of capital of appropriating value produced by different social classes, and not only by those deprived of the material conditions of existence, not only today, but throughout the whole history of capitalism.

³⁵ Hardt, Michael & Negri, Antonio. *Empire*. Cambridge – London: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 53.

³⁶ Negri, Antonio, *Guías. Cinco lecciones en torno a Imperio*. Buenos Aires, Paidós, 2004, p.75.

³⁷ Hardt & Negri. Op. Cit, p. 52.

³⁸ Negri. Op. Cit., p. 118.

Negri states that nothing remains outside the dominion of capital. And it is true. But following the hypotheses from the *Grundrisse*, he leaves aside the population law in capitalism discovered by Marx: capitalist accumulation produces an increasing relative surplus population, that, completely or partially deprived of its material conditions of existence and unable to fully reproduce its life by means of wage, can only live on public (i.e. unemployment benefits) or private charity. What Negri calls the “social worker” is a small portion of the deprived population and he does not pay much attention to the huge process of repulsion that is happening nowadays: unemployment, the most evident sign of the growth of surplus population, has never been bigger than today.³⁹

Marx and his followers have emphasized four trends that seem to be specific features of the present stage of capitalism, at least in some local cases: the decreasing rate of the rural and agricultural population – especially peasants – (for the first time in human history, the majority of the world population are urban inhabitants), and the absolute and/or relative increase of proletarians, of the non-productive population and of the surplus population. The first trend was noted by Marx in the third volume of *Capital* (chapters 37 and 47), by Lenin (*Development of Capitalism in Russia*) and Kautsky (*Die Agrarfrage*); the second and the fourth in the first volume of *Capital* (chapter 25) and the third in the same volume (chapter 15, section 6).

The surplus population becomes acute during the moments of crisis of the economic cycle. But, as a result of capital’s accumulation process, there are also two historical trends: a) the decrease of the relative weight of workers employed in modern industry and the increase of what Marx called “modern domestic slaves”⁴⁰ – a part of the non-productive population – and b) the increase of the mass of surplus population⁴¹, that exceeds capital’s need of a labour force, but fulfils the role of a disciplinary force over the working class.

An exercise of empirical verification: the working class in Argentina

The actual existence and importance of these features in capitalism as a whole must be confirmed by empirical research. We have been involved in such a project for the last thirty years in Argentina. Is this portion of world capitalism representative of the whole? We think that, to a great extent, it is. For more than a century capitalist relations have been broadly extended in Argentina and the most concentrated capital (financial capital) dominates all the spheres of economic activity, subordinating all existing productive forms. And due to its conditions as a dependant country, contradictions appear more acutely.

³⁹ International Labour Organization. *Global Employment Trends 2011. The challenge of a jobs recovery*; Geneva, 2011.

⁴⁰ Marx, Karl. *Capital*; Volume I; p. 447. Today these workers can be found under the census category “personal and social services”.

⁴¹ “The labouring population therefore produces, along with the accumulation of capital produced by it, the means by which itself is made relatively superfluous, is turned into a relative surplus population; and it does this to an always increasing extent” (Ibid., p. 631).

During the 1960s and 1970s the working class, and particularly the industrial proletariat, was considered the main social subject. This importance was confirmed by the national census data (72% of the economically active population were wage earners in 1960, 73.8% in 1970) and the industrial proletariat was the leader of great mass mobilisations with insurreccional features (*Cordobazo, Rosariazo, Viborazo*). Since 1976, after the military coup d'état, many features of Argentinean society have changed – i.e. markets were opened to international capital, industries that belonged to less concentrated capitals disappeared and work laws were modified – in a long term process that continued during the eighties and nineties, under elected governments. These changes fed the thesis of the disappearance, or at least the lack of importance, of the working class. This thesis was supported by a rather simple use of the national census data – wage earners had decreased to 71.5% of the economically active population in 1980 and to 64.6% in 1991 – that did not consider its growth in absolute terms –5,190,790 in 1960; 6,380,500 in 1970; 7,147,327 in 1980; and 7,980,327 in 1991.

Argentinean census data, nevertheless, allowed another approach.⁴² Relating occupational category, occupational group and activity we could distribute population identifying social classes (proletarians, small proprietors, bourgeoisie) rather than occupational categories (wage earners, employers, self-employed or family workers), which avoids reducing the working class either to industrial workers or to the census category “wage earners”. I will offer a few examples: 1) an important number of workers categorized by the census as “self-employed” are in fact “unskilled workers” or “maids”, deprived of any property except their labour force, sold to different employers, that presented the fiction of independent work; 2) A part of the census’ “wage earners” (teachers, doctors and other professionals) are, according to their social background or economic function, a part of a petty bourgeoisie that was going through a proletarianization process; 3) Activities considered by census as “Services” correspond in fact to productive and circulation activities.

As a result of these research projects, which can be consulted in www.pimsa.secyt.gov.ar, we can point out four trends:

1) The agricultural population (employed in agriculture, considered in its broadest sense) diminished from 1,351,869 (16.2%) in 1960 to 910,982 (5%) in 2001 – date of the last available data from national population census – and the rural population (countryside inhabitants) from 5,252,198 to 3,828,180.

2) The proletariat had its ups and downs and finally grew in number but remained almost unchanged in its relative weight: 4,447,935 (68.3%) in 1960 and 10,356,938 (69%) in 2001; but these figures do not consider the increasing process of proletarianization of a part of the

⁴² Iñigo Carrera, Nicolás & Podestá, Jorge. *Análisis de una relación de fuerzas sociales objetiva*. Buenos Aires: Cicso, 1985.

petty bourgeoisie, particularly professionals, teachers and technicians, engaged in salary relations – 31% in 1960, 58% in 2001.

3) The non-productive population increased from 2,343,500 (28,1%) in 1960 to 9,489,509 (51,9%) in 2001.

4) It is impossible to know the precise number of the surplus population, which includes the partially or completely unemployed, the population living on the dole, a part of civil servant and the part of wage earners and the self-employed occupied in obsolete branches of the economy. But we can find some clues of its growth: open, complete unemployment was, from the 1960s to the late 1980s, between 3 and 6% of the economically active population; during the 1990s and the first years of this century the lowest unemployment rate was about 12% and it reached its peak (about 22%) in 2002; the change in government policies – including support and subsidies to workers' cooperatives and an increase in public employment – lowered it to about 7%; so today's minimum is higher than the historical maximum previous to the 1990s: the expanding moments of the economic cycle cannot absorb the increasing part of the population deprived of its conditions of existence. And according to the most concentrated capitalist ideologues, 25 to 40% of public employment is redundant. Another structural change is indicated by the volume of the population that receives some kind of aid from the state, the *official pauperism*.

As regards the processes of social confrontations, our research results show that wage earners – working class and petty bourgeoisie going through a proletarianization process – were the main subject of social conflict and that unions were the main type of organization calling for social struggle and protest. According to PIMSA's data base, in which we have recorded every protest or struggle event published in the four main national newspapers since 1993, wage-earners performed 55.7% of the 7743 events between December 1993 and December 2001. And unions called for 37.2% of these events, followed by small employers' organisations (7.2%), organisations of the unemployed (7%) and students' organisations (6.8%); the rest called even less protest events.⁴³

Workers are, and never ceased to be, the main subject not only considering the number of events performed by them *vis-à-vis* the rest of participants, but also for their role in the most important events. The same can be stated for unions, by far the main type of organization calling for social struggle and protest, and for general strike as the form of struggle capable of mobilizing not only workers – employed and unemployed – but also small owners, the self-employed and the poor. Although the mobilization of the

⁴³ The importance of unions in Argentina's social protest is also demonstrated in Schuster, Federico et al. *Transformaciones de la protesta social en Argentina. 1989 – 2003*. Documento de Trabajo N° 48, IIGG-UBA, 2006.

“piqueteros” – mainly the unemployed – was a specific feature of social struggle in Argentina at the turn of the century, employed workers performed more events almost every year. But two important differences must be pointed out: since the beginning of the counterrevolutionary period that began in the mid-seventies, the industrial proletariat has not always been the leader in social struggles, as it had been during the previous period. And since the 1980s all confrontations occur within the institutional system, and even in events that take place beyond the institutional system, there is no attempt for a radical change of society, for a new mode of social organisation.

Are the trends pointed out in the case of Argentina present in today’s capitalism as a world system? New research would be necessary to answer this question. Global statistics are built on theoretical and methodological criteria that do not meet this need. So, as we did with the Argentine census information, it is necessary to re-elaborate them. And all the present efforts to record and analyse workers’ struggles and social conflicts should be redoubled, a task that largely exceeds the purpose of this article.