

## **The working class: a contemporary approach in the light of historical materialism**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Particularly in the last few years, I have been developing two study programs in parallel: one directed at gaining an understanding of certain particular forms of working-class formation in the peripheral conditions of a former slave-based colony (which took me back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>); and the other focused on an attempt to understand the current pattern of the class struggle in contemporary capitalist society, which means trying to get a clearer picture of the current profile of the working class, especially in Brazil's situation, as peripheral as ever. What has made it possible, and to a great extent complementary, for me to develop research programs with such widely separated time frames has been a reflection on the working class founded in the conceptual sphere. From that more strictly theoretical point of view, I have based myself on two considerations that I will endeavor to develop in the course of this article: it is necessary to get beyond the narrower concepts of working class and arrive at a broader concept; and, that effort, in my view, can only be successful if we take up, once more, Marx and Engels' original discussion of the working class, alongside the best elaborations of historical materialism in the critical tradition produced in the 20th century. In doing so, we should certainly not address them as if they were ready-made responses to the challenges of historical research, but rather a valid set of references which, provided they are duly updated and duly take into account contemporary complexity, will continue to be the best we have available.

### **KEYWORDS**

Working-class formation, Peripheral countries, 19th century, Brazil, Historical materialism

This article has been written, and it could hardly have been otherwise, on the basis of the author's own research experience. As a historian I have been studying the Brazilian working class, its organizations and forms of struggle for many years now. I see history as being much more than a mere study of the past, "the science of men in time with its incessant urge to join the study of the dead to that of the living", as Marc Bloch<sup>1</sup> would have it; or Josep Fontana's affirmation that all historical inquiries involve, in addition to a reflection on the past, a distinct way of understanding the present (which he defined as a "political economics") and of taking a stance in the face of the future (which he calls "social project").<sup>2</sup> That is why, particularly in the last few years, I have been developing two study programs in parallel: one directed at gaining an understanding of certain particular forms of working-class formation in the peripheral conditions of a former slave-based colony (which took me back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>); and the other focused on an attempt to understand the current pattern of the class struggle in contemporary capitalist society, which means trying to get a clearer picture of the current profile of the working class, especially in Brazil's situation, as peripheral as ever.

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### **The new morphology of the working class**

In order to understand the nature of the working class today we need to gain an understanding of labour (abstract/wage earning) as it is currently used by capital to ensure its own expanded reproduction.

In her recent theoretically ambitious and highly provocative book, Virgínia Fontes coined the term 'capital imperialism' to address global capitalism's configuration from the second half of the 20th century on.<sup>3</sup> This combination of the two terms is an attempt

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<sup>1</sup> Bloch, Marc. *Apologia da História; ou o ofício do historiador*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2001, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> Fontana, Josep. *História: análise do passado e projeto social*. Bauru, SP: Edusc, 1998, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Fontes, Virginia. *O Brasil e o capital-imperialismo: teoria e história*. Rio de Janeiro: Edufrj, 2010.

to achieve a double recuperation and consequently a double updating of these classic concepts of historical materialism. On the one hand, she seeks support for a comprehension of capital's contemporary dynamics in Marx, and sees it as centered on accumulation commanded by monetary capital (or interest-bearing capital) as it is analyzed in *Capital*. What was identified as potentially occurring at Marx's time has now become fully materialized, with a maximum concentration of capitals. On the other hand, her analysis strives to deepen and update the idea of Imperialism as it was put forward by Lenin, in order to account for the sheer scale of imperialist expansion in the post-war period whereby the exportation of goods and capitals were no longer the only forms of imperialist expansion and the notions of banking capital and industrial capital, which when fused were to give rise to financial capital, are no longer adequate for addressing the current forms of concentration "that stems from, and drives the growth of all forms of capital, pornographically entwined".<sup>4</sup>

In Fontes' analysis, one of the characteristics of capital-imperialist expansion is its tendency to directly oppose capitalist appropriation (not only of the means of production, but also of the "effective possibility of imposing or superimposing itself on any form of extraction of surplus-value") to humanity as a whole. The author proposes that we are living in a phase of tremendous expropriations, understood by her to be just as much "primary" expropriations (those which separate humans from the land driving them to sell their labour in the market to guarantee survival as consumers in the very same market) as "secondary" expropriations, which reverse even those hard-won "rights" conquered in the fray of earlier social struggles.<sup>5</sup>

This discussion conducted by Fontes is fundamental to enabling us to understand how, today, the erosion of stability in labour relations takes place within the sphere of the expropriation process currently in course. Strictly speaking, more workers are being produced, but not necessarily wage earners with formal employment in the terms in which we are used to thinking of the working class. There are more factories and factory workers than ever before, in absolute numbers at least (the percentage figures for the global scale are hard to come by), but the factories appear increasingly in the global periphery (Asia, Latin America) while at the heart, in the countries where development is more longstanding, in many of the countries there are fewer factories and fewer jobs in the secondary sector. The combination resulting from that process is: lower wages, higher unemployment rates, fewer legal guarantees in labour contracts, fewer rights, more "informality" in employment, and so on.

The population of the world today is around 7 billion people. Of these more than 3 billion are considered to be part of the economically active population; roughly 65% of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 198.

<sup>5</sup> Such considerations on the centrality of expropriations, albeit tracing out different pathways, are consistent with similar concern displayed in Harvey's portrayal of contemporary accumulation considered by him to be driven by "dispossession" or again with the emphasis Linebaugh places when highlighting the classic cycle: expropriation – exploitation – expropriation. See Harvey, David. *The new imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. Linebaugh, Peter. *The Magna Carta manifesto: liberties and commons for all*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

the population in the 15 or over age group.<sup>6</sup> Since 2007, the urban population has been bigger than the rural one. Data for the year 2004 (and therefore prior to the effects of the most recent manifestation of the capitalist crisis) show a level of 6.4% unemployment in the workforce. Among those in employment, the percentage of those working on their own account or doing unpaid family work characterized as “vulnerable employment”, is as high as 37.2% in the Middle East and North Africa, 31.7% in Latin America and the Caribbean and 18.7% in Europe and Central Asia, according to data for 2008. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), 165 million children around the world in the age group 5 to 14 are working, 74 million of them in hazardous activities.

In the case of Brazil, this situation presents itself in concrete terms in the form of an accentuation of the centuries-long social inequality. According to the 2010 census, Brazil has a population of 190,732,694 inhabitants;<sup>7</sup> 160,879,708 live in cities and a mere 29,852,986 in the rural areas. Data for 2007 show that there are 98,846,000 economically active individuals altogether and that 82.6% of them live in cities. Of the 90,786,000 with jobs only 18.3% are engaged in agricultural activities. This scenario is in glaring contrast to Brazil’s population profile just a few decades ago. In 1940 only 31.2% of the country’s 41,236,315 residents lived in the cities. It was in the 1960s that the urban population first surpassed the rural one. The 1970 census showed that, at that time, 55.9% of a population of 93,139,037 inhabited urban areas. This means it is essential to recognize that the Brazilian working class is highly concentrated in the urban milieu, but also, that such concentration came about at a dramatic speed in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These facts have strong implications for urban life in those big metropolitan areas that expanded so much in such a very short space of time, leading to all kinds of social contradictions associated to that phenomenon, and having many implications for class experience and class culture, given the enormous contingents of workers still strongly marked by their former rural lifestyles or those of still-living generations of their families. Furthermore, there are tremendous regional differences among those statistics and, indeed, among all other statistics on Brazil. In the short time available here we would be unable to address that aspect satisfactorily.

Among the 159,361,000 inhabitants aged 10 or over, 98,846,000 are, as mentioned above, economically active according to the statistics for 2007. Furthermore, among the latter, 8,060,000 were registered as unemployed (5,684,000 had worked at some time and another 2,375,000 were looking for their first jobs).

In the sphere of urban workers alone, two decades of production restructuring were sufficient to introduce a high degree of precariousness into the lives of the working population which, precisely because of its intense and recent concentration in metropolitan areas, tended to produce large [labour] contingents in excess of demand. The overall picture for the year 2007 shows that among the 74,207,000 people working

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<sup>6</sup> Here I am using the World Bank’s figures available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/>

<sup>7</sup> When no other comment accompanies them, the data presented are those of the Brazilian Geography and Statistics Institute (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* – IBGE) which can be accessed at: [www.ibge.gov.br](http://www.ibge.gov.br).

in the cities, 72.9% were employed, 20.4% self-employed, 2.5% working without pay and 4% were employers. Among the employed, 23.6% had no formal labour contract and if they are added to the self-employed it means that 44% of workers were working in vulnerable labour conditions. Another way of detecting the absence of workers' rights is to observe that 50.7% of the employed contributed to the Social Security system. Discounting the 4% in the category of employers (who generally speaking also contribute), it can be seen that the majority of workers do not do so and, accordingly, are excluded from their full social security rights and in the future, at best, they might be served only by social assistance services.

In regard to unemployment levels, the IBGE (the principal Brazilian statistical agency) data, which glaringly underestimate the total numbers of unemployed, register 6,0% of unemployment in the main metropolitan regions of the country in 2011. The highest rate recorded since 2003 has been 12% registered in 2004. Data published by the Dieese (a trade-union funded research institution) show that the situation is actually more serious and that there was 10.5% in 2011.<sup>8</sup>

By adding the approximately 40% of those employed without formal labour contracts or contributions to the Social Security schemes, that is without access to their labour rights, to the more than 10% unemployed we get a good idea of the extent of vulnerability present in labour relations and the fragmentation of the urban working-class contingent, which was the majority. Even more shocking is the existence of 1,234,000 children from 3 to 13 years old that were working in Brazil in 2007 (around 750 thousand in rural areas), the overwhelming majority of them for no pay.

Data on outsourcing and sub-contracting would have helped us to complete the picture of this process of fragmentation and intensification of vulnerability, but they are not to be found among the general statistics. We can, however, illustrate the issue with the example of the case of the National Iron and Steel Company (*Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional* - CNS) in the city of Volta Redonda, which was privatized in the early 1990s. Immediately prior to the privatization, in 1989, the company employed 23 thousand workers while today it employs a mere 8 thousand. What that means is that there are 9 thousand employees working for sub-contracted firms that provide services to the CNS, apart from those involved in other service provision contracts that completely externalize activities formerly undertaken inside the company itself.<sup>9</sup> So, even if we limit our observations to the sphere of employed workers with formal labour contracts, the ongoing degradation of workers' labour conditions is still a starkly apparent reality.

Reflecting on the overall aspects of the process of change in the class's way of being or "morphology", as he puts it, Ricardo Antunes put forward a proposal for broadening the very concept of the working class. The expression "*class-that-lives-from-*

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<sup>8</sup> According to information displayed on this site: <http://www.dieese.org.br/ped/metropolitana.xml#>.

<sup>9</sup> Data presented at the Fluminense Federal University by Edilson Gracioli, professor at the Federal University of Uberlandia, in March 2009.

*labour*”, which he set out,<sup>10</sup> was the target of an intense polemic (after all, do not all classes live off their work, even though some live off the “work” of exploiting others?). The importance of his contribution, however, goes beyond that polemic insofar as his aim was “*to emphasize the current meaning of the working class, its form of being*”, defending the analytical value of Marx’s concept of the working class in the contemporary context, in which, I consider him to have been successful. His critical efforts directed at those who have declared the extinction of the class (or of the analytic validity of the concept) required a prior definition of a much broader notion of the working class that would include:

all those who *sell their labour-power in exchange for a wage*, incorporating, in addition to the industrial proletariat and wage-earners in the service sector, the rural proletariat that sells its labour-power to capital. This notion includes: the *precarious proletariat*; the *modern sub-proletariat*; *part-time work*; the new proletariat of fast-food restaurants; (...)the tertiarised and precarious workers of *lyophilised enterprises* (...) *wage-earning workers* of the so-called ‘informal economy’ who are very often indirectly subordinated to capital; as well as unemployed workers.<sup>11</sup>

I am entirely in agreement with Antunes and his proposal to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Marx’s reflection based on a broadened definition of the working class. After all, even Marx had recourse to a fairly broad definition of class.

To that end, our initial observation regarding the concept of working class in Marx is of a terminological nature. In neo-Latin languages, there is a strong tendency to translate the German expression employed by Marx, *arbeiterklasse*, or its English language equivalent ‘working class’ by the phrase *classe operária* (*ouvrière*, *obrero*) where *operária* gives the idea of workers from the industrial sector. That gives the impression that the real revolutionary subject is the industrial factory worker, the productive worker, and it is she/he alone who suffers the real subsumption of capitalism stemming from the interaction with modern technology used in big industry.

Daniel Bensaïd perceives the problem associated to the use of restrictive vocabulary to refer to class:

Marx speaks generally of proletarians. In general, in the 19th century, people spoke of the working classes in the plural. The terms in German, “*Arbeiterklasse*”, and English, “working class”, stayed general enough, whereas the term “*classe ouvrière*”, current in French political vocabulary, entails a restrictive sociological connotation prone to ambiguity: it relates to the modern industrial proletariat, excluding employees in the services and commerce, although these undergo analogous conditions of exploitation, from the point of view of their relation to private ownership of the means of

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<sup>10</sup> Antunes, Ricardo. *The Meanings of Work: Essay on the Affirmation and Negation of Work*. Leiden: Brill, 2013

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

production, location in the division of labour or still more in terms of their status as wage-earners and the amount of their remuneration<sup>12</sup>.

Marx did not always make very precise terminological distinctions when referring to class, but there are two fundamental terms that we always come across, and almost always used as if they were synonymous, namely, proletariat and working class. We understand proletariat to mean those that own nothing, or rather, those that have no other way of surviving, in a marketable goods-based society than to sell, also as a form of marketable goods, their own labour.<sup>13</sup> The expression working class, in the texts of Marx and Engels, is almost always associated to the total set of those that sell their own labour, and almost always in exchange for a wage.

Defining the process of proletarianization as being the key to any understanding of the primitive accumulation of capital – “the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” –, Marx explains the formation of a class of workers “as free as birds” as stemming from the long violent expropriation movement marked by moments in which “great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled as free and 'unattached' proletarians on the labour-market”.<sup>14</sup> From expropriation to exploitation; there lies the pathway that historically led to class formation.

In referring to the working class in his critiques of political economy in which he explains the mechanisms of class exploitation in relation to the capital value process, Marx never limits the term to the industrial production workers only, not even by restrictive association to those submitted to real subsumption; nor does he limit the class to those associated to the production sector, which in turn was not defined as embracing industrial workers only. In some drafts of *Capital*, Marx defines formal subsumption and real subsumption of labour to capital. In associating the former to surplus value, Marx seeks to demonstrate that the process begins with direct subordination of the workers to the capitalists when the latter, in their condition of proprietors or owners of the means of production, begin to control the work time and the working conditions of those that have been reduced to the condition of proletarians. The next step, real subsumption, takes place as a result of the accumulation propitiated by the previous stage and is materialized “with

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<sup>12</sup> Bensaid, Daniel. *Os irredutíveis: teoremas da resistência para o tempo atual*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2008, p. 36. (English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bensaid/2004/12/resist.htm>)

<sup>13</sup> In the *1844 Manuscripts*, criticizing the way in which the “national economy” (his term for characterizing what was up until then the classic political economy) Marx likened the worker to little birds insofar as they only receive enough food to enable them to survive and he defined the proletarian by the things he lacked, one who “being without capital and rent, lives purely by labour, and by a one-sided, abstract labour, is considered by political economy only as a *worker*.” Marx, Karl. *Manuscritos econômico-filosóficos*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2004, p.30. (English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/wages.htm>)

<sup>14</sup> Marx, Karl. *O capital*, vol.1, Tomo II (capítulo XXIV). São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1984, p. 263. (English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch26.htm>)

labour on a large scale [and] the application of science and machinery to direct production”.<sup>15</sup>

In the same text, Marx makes a distinction between productive work (and workers) and unproductive work:

Since the direct purpose and the actual product of capitalist production is surplus value, only such labour is productive, and only such an exorter of labour capacity is a productive worker, as directly produces surplus value. Hence only such labour is productive as is consumed directly in the production process for the purpose of valorizing capital.<sup>16</sup>

Associating those two distinctions Marx goes on to state that with the development of real subsumption, “it is not the individual worker but rather a *socially combined labour capacity* that is more and more the *real executor* of the labour process as a whole”, so that it makes no sense to attempt to identify productive workers only among those that undertake direct manual labour.<sup>17</sup>

Taking that one step further, it is not the contents of the work being done nor the sector of the economy in which it takes place that will define whether the work and the worker are of a productive nature or not. In that regard Marx makes a point of exemplifying the productive work of individuals such as the artist or the teacher, although he does admit that in their case the subsumption to capital was still of the formal type:

A singer who sings like a bird is an unproductive worker. If she sells her singing for money, she is to that extent a wage labourer or a commodity dealer. But the same singer, when engaged by an entrepreneur who has her sing in order to make money, is a productive worker, for she directly *produces* capital. A schoolmaster who educates others is not a productive worker. But a schoolmaster who is engaged as a wage labourer in an institution along with others, in order through his labour to valorise the money of the entrepreneur of the *knowledge-mongering institution*, is a productive worker<sup>18</sup>.

If the productive nature of the work and the worker is not defined by the fact of employment in big industry (and, accordingly, not by real subsumption either), neither is the working class itself presented as being restricted to those undertaking productive work. On the contrary, it is the condition of wage-earning proletarian that defines it. In the same text, Marx points out that not all wage-earning workers are productive, but that even those engaged in professions that were formerly endowed with an aura of autonomy (such as doctors, lawyers and so on) were increasingly finding themselves reduced to

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<sup>15</sup> Marx, Karl. *O capital*, Livro I, Capítulo VI (Capítulo inédito). São Paulo: Ciências Humanas, 1978, p. 66. (English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/ch02a.htm#469a>)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 70. (English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/ch02b.htm>)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.71-72.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 76. Marx uses the same example of the schoolmaster to discuss productive work in *Capital* (addressing the issue of real and absolute surplus-value)). Marx, Karl. *O capital*, Vol. 1, Tomo II, Op. Cit., p. 105-106.



wage or salary-earning situations and “from the prostitute’s to the king’s” were coming under the rules that govern the price of wage-earning work.<sup>19</sup>

Here I will have recourse to an analysis made by Bensaïd who, commenting on the broad conception of class to be found in *Capital*, endeavored to show how, on the basis of a vision of the whole, of the general or amplified reproduction of capital as Marx defines it, there is no reason to restrict the definition of class to productive work alone. Putting it another way, there is no reason to seek to identify the working class only in the processes of capitalist production but rather, it should be understood that the formation of that class completes itself in the broader dimension of the general reproduction of capital in all spheres and spaces – in the work, in the conditions of reproduction of life itself, and in the broadest spaces of sociability in which the interests and visions of the world of the workers confront those of capital.

We do not thus see in Marx any reductive, normative or classificatory definition of classes, but a dynamic conception of their structural antagonism, at the level of production, circulation and reproduction of capital: classes are never defined only at the level of the production process (the faceoff between workers and employers in the enterprise), but determined by the reproduction of the whole when the struggle for wages, the division of labour, relations with the state apparatuses and the world market enter into play. From this it is clear that the productive character of labour that appears notably in Volume 2 of *Capital*, with respect to the circulation process, does not define the proletariat.<sup>20</sup>

If the question of classes is admittedly complex from the standpoint of economic relations, it becomes even more complex when we realize that in Marx it is not restricted to the economic dimension alone. In Marx and Engels’ views, capitalism presented itself endowed with new potential because in it lay the possibility of a dominated, exploited class’ assuming awareness of its exploitation. The theoretical elaboration of the two was a fruit of that phenomenon. Michael Lowy shows how the founding of historical materialism in the 1840s can be explained just as much by the relations the two thinkers established with workers’ movements of the time such as the English Chartist movement, the revolts of Silesian workers, the clandestine communist cells in Paris as by their overcoming the philosophical bases of German idealism, the economic bases of classical political economics and those of the earlier socialism.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the question of class took on a political dimension with transformational potential. If all the social conflicts in the past had revealed the class struggle to be an essential dimension of the historical process, in the present, the class was acquiring class consciousness, something

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>20</sup> Bensaïd, Daniel. Op. Cit., p. 35. (English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bensaïd/2004/12/resist.htm>). See also on this subject, Bensaïd, Daniel. *Marx o intempestivo: grandezas e misérias de uma aventura crítica (séculos XIX e XX)*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1999, p. 158.

<sup>21</sup> Löwy, Michel. *A teoria da revolução no jovem Marx*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2002.

that could not be defined in purely economic terms alone, but rather in its political dimension, as Marx remarked in his correspondence with Bolte:

On the other hand, however, every movement in which the working class comes out as a class against the ruling classes and attempts to force them by pressure from without is a political movement. For instance, the attempt in a particular factory or even a particular industry to force a shorter working day out of the capitalists by strikes, etc., is a purely economic movement. On the other hand the movement to force an eight-hour day, etc., law is a political movement. And in this way, out of the separate economic movements of the workers there grows up everywhere apolitical movement, that is to say a movement of the class, with the object of achieving its interests in a general form, in a form possessing a general social force of compulsion. If these movements presuppose a certain degree of previous organization, they are themselves equally a means of the development of this organization.<sup>22</sup>

Historical materialism's perception of the complexity of the class concept should mean that we should not content ourselves with adopting a single aspect of class as the means to understanding it because even its economic dimensions alone have a very broad outreach, embracing production, the circulation of goods, and the unequal division of the fruits of labour; that is to say, the expanded reproduction of capital, and Marx himself never restricted his definition of class to the economic dimension, quite the contrary, he placed much more value on its political role, which was something that it was only possible to define on the basis of the idea of a class consciousness whose development does not take place in isolation, but in the thick of class conflicts.

Bringing all those questions together, it is interesting to note how one of the best readers of Marx approached the task of delineating the formative process of both the working class and of its class consciousness over the period embracing the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that is to say, at a period when formal subsumption was predominant. I refer to E.P. Thompson in his masterly study of the formation of the working class in England.<sup>23</sup> That is why Thompson, in my view completely basing himself on Marx, declares that:

class, in its heuristic usage, is inseparable from the notion of 'class-struggle'. In my view, far too much theoretical attention (much of it plainly a-historical) has been paid to 'class', and far too little to 'class-struggle'. Indeed, class-struggle is the prior, as well as the more universal, concept. To put it bluntly: classes do not exist as separate entities, look around, find an enemy class, and then start to struggle. On the contrary, people find themselves in a society structured in determined ways (crucially, but not exclusively, in productive relations), they experience exploitation (or the need to maintain power over those whom they exploit), they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in the process of struggling

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<sup>22</sup> "Marx a Bolte, 23 de novembro de 1871". In Marx, K. e Engels, F. *Obras escolhidas*, vol. III. São Paulo: Alfa-Ômega, s.d., p. 266. (English version [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71\\_11\\_23.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71_11_23.htm))

<sup>23</sup> Thompson, E.P. *A formação da classe operária inglesa*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1987-1988, 3 vols.

they discover themselves as classes, they come to know this discovery as class-consciousness. Class and class-consciousness are always the last, not the first, stage in the real historical process.<sup>24</sup>

That is something that enables us to understand Marx and Engels' reflections from the 1840s on as being produced by, and, increasingly within, the movement of class formation and class consciousness itself, even though the class in formation at the time was highly differentiated, submitted to the most violent forms of exploitation, with no guarantees for its legal rights in regard to undertaking work and in the most degrading living conditions imaginable. So then, if the revolutionary potential of the class that Marx discovered at the time did not depend on the existence of great concentrations of wage-earning industrial workers, factory laborers, with formal labour contracts and guaranteed rights, why then should it do so now?

Before concluding this stage of the exposition I would like to recuperate another endeavour to capture the new configuration of class in the current state of capitalism made by Cuban philosopher Isabel Monal who made use of Gramsci's concept of subaltern classes/groups to propose a broadening of its scope that would enable it to capture groups/movements typified by their "disaggregation, the absence of mature political awareness, heterogeneity, multiplicity and so on".<sup>25</sup> In the same vein she states that "this expanded concept of the 'subaltern' would include exploited classes in general, the whole set of the oppressed and the marginalized that for the most part, play a role in social and civil society movements".<sup>26</sup> Monal feels that today the term "subaltern" is even more pertinent than in Gramsci's time, and its use would make it possible to go beyond the limits of the concept of class as defined by Marx, insofar as "the Gramscian category of 'subaltern' in that case would go beyond the social classes but at the same time include them, and would remedy the lack of such a concept in Marx".<sup>27</sup>

To my mind, Monal attributes to Marx a much more closed concept of the working class than he did in fact put forward and accordingly the suggestions I have made so far have been much more closely aligned with Antune's propositions when he defends the analytic validity of Marx's concept today. I also feel that she makes too little distinction among the ways in which Gramsci addresses the question of the subaltern classes of his day (to him the term arose as an expression of the United Front to be formed by factory workers and peasants), and the way he applies the term as a category that facilitates an understanding of class configurations in pre-capitalist societies. In any event, Monal's suggestion that an effort should be made to understand the current phase as one of exacerbated class heterogeneity or even heterogeneity among classes, and doing so by

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<sup>24</sup> Thompson, E.P. "Eighteenth-Century English society: class struggle without class?", *Social History*, Vol. 3, No. 2, may-1978, p. 148. On the uses of this notion in historical studies on eighteenth-century England, Thompson's greatest work in scope is gathered in *Customs in common. Studies in traditional popular culture*. New York: The New Press, 1993.

<sup>25</sup> Monal, Isabel. "Gramsci, a sociedade civil e os grupos subalternos". In: Coutinho, C.N. and Teixeira, A.P. (eds.), *Ler Gramsci, entender a realidade*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2003, p. 195

<sup>26</sup> Idem, p. 197.

<sup>27</sup> Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 197.

having recourse to Gramsci's concept of subaltern classes/group is inspiring. Labour historians have been doing something very similar.

### **Historians and the expanded concept of working class**

The working class's configuration in recent times seems to have enhanced the sensitivity of historians' ways of viewing the past, stimulating debates which, based on different theoretical emphases or empirical studies, have converged on the need for current understanding to embrace the greater complexity of labour relations and the working class profile in the various different historical situations which led to capitalism's implanting itself on a global scale.

Jairus Banaji, for example, researching means of production and addressing not only ancient and modern Oriental precapitalist situations, but also European historical development up until contemporary times, proposes a broadening of current understandings in regard to relations of production that would enable them to perceive and embrace various other facets of social relations and not just the forms of labour exploitation.<sup>28</sup> With that he intends to show that if "the accumulation of capital, that is, *capitalist* relations of production, can be based on forms of exploitation that are typically *precapitalist*, then clearly there is not ostensibly unique configuration of capital but a series of *distinct configurations*, forms of accumulation, implying other combinations."<sup>29</sup>

On the outskirts of capitalism, that question has, to some extent, already made its presence felt in many historical studies, albeit the rigidity of the more determinist Marxist referential generally adopted has led a good number of those historians to seek to situate southern hemisphere realities in the same evolutionary stages, namely ancient slave-based, feudal and then capitalist modes of production, that was supposed to be the key to understanding and explaining European history. In more recent approaches, understanding the ways in which forms of exploitation, tinged to some extent by mechanisms of compulsion, played a functional role in capital accumulation have obtained very positive results.<sup>30</sup> Such refinement in the researchers' approaches, however, have also produced interesting fruits from analysis focused on Europe and even on the very first industrial capitalist economy ever, in England. Alessandro Stanziani, for

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<sup>28</sup> Banaji, Jairus. *Theory as History: essays on modes of production and exploitation*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> See for example the studies on Indian *coolies* submitted to service provision contracts and legal sanctions for any breach of contract which virtually made them compulsory workers on the tea plantations of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century. Mohapatra, Prabhu. "Regulating informality". In Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi & Lucassen, Jan. (eds.), *Workers in the informal sector: studies in labour history, 1800-2000*. Delhi: Macmillian, 2005. Behal, Rana. "Power structure, discipline and labour in Assam Tea Plantations under colonial rule". *International Review of Social History*, 51, Supplement, 2006. In the case of the southern states of the United States, Latin America and the Caribbean, see also Dale Tomich's interesting discussion of what he calls the "second slavery" in the context of industrial capitalism's global expansion which altered the productivity demands in American plantations. Tomich, Dale. *Through the prism of slavery: labour, capital and world economy*. Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.

example has disseminated studies that demonstrate how the dominant idea of “free” labour in most of Europe up until the middle of the 19th century was one of service provision’ regulated by civil and criminal law and that the idea of “free” and “not free” that we hold today in regard to labour relations only came to be established as dominant ideas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>31</sup>

This has been one of the central discussions involving labour historians in various parts of the world and it has been generating a movement in recent years in favour of the construction of a Global Labour History. In the definition of one of the proposal’s main elaborators, it would have the following features:

As regards methodology, an ‘area of concern’ is involved, rather than a well-defined theoretical paradigm to which everyone most closely adhere. (...) As regards themes, Global Labour History focuses on the transnational – and indeed the transcontinental – study of labour relations and workers’ social movements in the broadest sense of the word.(...) The study of labour relations encompasses both free and unfree labour, both paid and unpaid. Workers’ social movements involve both formal organizations and informal activities. The study of both labour relations and social movements further requires that equally serious attention is devoted to ‘the other side’ (employers, public authorities). Labour relations involve not only the individual worker, but also his or her family where applicable. Gender relations play an important part both within family, and in labour relations involving individual family members. As regards the historical period studied, Global labour History places no limits on temporal perspective, although in practice the emphasis is usually on the study of the labour relations and workers’ social movements that emerged with the expansion of the world market from the fourteenth century<sup>32</sup>.

Within the movement, historians are making efforts to re-conceptualize class and in that they draw close to Monal’s discussion on the contemporary period. To me the richest example has been given by Van der Linden himself in his monumental work *Workers of the World*. Realizing that in the historical situations that have been the object of empirical studies in various parts of the world (and especially in the “Global South”) the boundaries among the different forms of labour – slave and free, under contract, self-employed or wage-earning, domestic or external, urban or rural – present themselves at once more fluid and more combined, Van der Linden seeks to redefine the working class. His perspective, like Banaji’s, is based on the propensity of other forms of work and not just that of the typical wage-earner, to be subordinated to the imperatives of the capitalist market and that includes typically “free” workers, slaves and workers submitted to service provision contracts imbued with greater or lesser degrees of compulsion. In his definition:

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<sup>31</sup> Stanziani, Alessandro. “Introduction: Labour Institutions in a Global perspective, from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century”. *International Review of Social History*, vol. 54, Part 3, December, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> van der Linden, Marcel. *Workers of the world: essays toward a global labour history*. Leiden: Brill, 2008, pp. 6-7.

Every carrier of labour power whose labour 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 labour power is him- or herself selling or hiring it out and, regardless of whether the carrier him- or herself owns means of production.<sup>33</sup>

Van der Linden warns that his definition is merely provisional and that each of its component elements requires further reflections on it, but nevertheless he does define what, to him, is the common class base of all the wide variety of subaltern workers: “the coerced commodification of their labour power”.<sup>34</sup>

In some of my research activities in recent years, sharing a complex problem with various other Brazilian historians<sup>35</sup>, I have studied historical situations where the frontiers separating slave labour from free labour seemed to be just as fluid as they are represented in Van der Linden’s definition. It was reading works like his that made me feel the need for a more consistent reflection on how to address, in conceptual terms, the process of working-class formation in the situation of the Latin American colonial periphery or up until a short time before, an entirely colonial situation as was the case with Brazil towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first factor to take into consideration in this kind of situation is the way in which the forms of exploitation and capitalist and “precapitalist” production relations combine.

In a way, that question appeared to Marx to be essential when he encountered the real working class movements taking place in countries on the European periphery in the 1880s. Marx was very clear in explaining that it was impossible to take the case of working-class formation in England as a universally valid model insofar as he stated that the “historical fatalism” of the conversion of the peasants into proletarians by separating them from the means of production (particularly from the land) only found its full expression in Western Europe, because it involved “the transformation of one form of private property into another form of private property”.<sup>36</sup> Marx was placed face to face with the question of whether, in Russia, the theorized role of the proletarian revolutionary subject would be at all valid in view of the widespread predominance of the peasant. His answer took into account the specificity of the Russian situation based on a collective form of peasant agriculture, very different from the peasant who was entitled to his own patch, as was the case analysed in the *18 Brumaire*, and furthermore, the Russian peasant was in contact with the first moments of socialist agitation in that country, connected to

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.34.

<sup>35</sup> Some examples may be found in Loner, Beatriz Ana. *Construção de classe: operários de Pelotas e Rio Grande (1888-1930)*. Pelotas: Unitrabalho/EdUFPel; Cruz, Maria Cecília Velasco e. "Tradições negras na formação de um sindicato: sociedade de resistência dos trabalhadores em trapiche e café, Rio de Janeiro, 1905-1930." *Afro-Ásia*, no. 24. Salvador, 2000; Reis, João José. “The revolution of the *ganhadores*: urban labour, ethnicity and the African strike of 1857 in Bahia, Brazil”. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 29, 1997. Mattos, Marcelo Badaró. *Escravidos e livres: experiências comuns na formação da classe trabalhadora carioca*. Rio de Janeiro: Bom Texto, 2008.

<sup>36</sup> "Marx to V. I Zasluchich in St. Petersburg (1881)", in Marx, K. & Engels, F. *Selected correspondence*, 2a. ed. Moscow: Progress, 1965, p. 339-340.

the International movement of the proletariat. In that context Marx and Engels envisioned the possibility that the Russian commune did, indeed, have revolutionary potential and in the preface of the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto* published in 1882 he commented that: “If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development.”<sup>37</sup>

The classic figures of critical social thinking at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century also considered the question insofar as they identified how the uneven and combined nature of capitalist development in its global expansion phase, imperialism, led to the parallel existence of archaic and modern forms of production organization that acquired specific features in relation to the process of capitalist industrial development in the first nations that underwent it like England.<sup>38</sup>

Working with the dichotomy “backward countries – advanced countries” as a means of addressing the differences between the centre and the periphery of a capitalist system that had already embarked on its imperialist phase and using the idea of “laws” to define Lenin’s theoretical postulate and his own, Trotsky presented the question in these terms:

The laws of history have nothing in common with a pedantic schematism. Unevenness, the most general law of the historic process, reveals itself most sharply and complexly in the destiny of the backward countries. Under the whip of external necessity their backward culture is compelled to make leaps. From the universal law of unevenness thus derives another law which, for the lack of a better name, we may call the law of *combined development* – by which we mean a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of the separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms<sup>39</sup>.

It was that same interpretive line that enabled Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui to perceive Latin American specificities and propose a political defense of the revolutionary potential of the indigenous element in the socialist struggles of the Andean countries in the 1920s. In Mariátegui’s view, the indigenous claims would be doomed to remain isolated and manipulated by various forms of populism for as long as they insisted in manifesting themselves in a manner restricted to ethnic, cultural or educational aspects demanding political and economic expression by means of their association to the question of the land. Recognizing the potential that could stem from a change in the

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<sup>37</sup> Marx, K. & Engels, F. "Prefácio à (segunda) edição russa de 1882". In: *Obras Escolhidas*, vol 1. Lisboa: Progresso/Avante, 1982, p. 98.(English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/preface.htm>)

<sup>38</sup> See in Lenin the idea of ‘uneven growth’, for example in *El imperialismo, fase superior del capitalismo*. Moscow: Editorial Progreso, 1982, p. 139.

<sup>39</sup> Trotsky, Leon. *História da revolução russa*. São Paulo: Sundermann, 2007, Tomo I, p. 21. (English version <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch01.htm>) For a recent discussion of the theory of uneven and combined development that includes considerations on its developments made by authors like Novak and Mandel, see van der Linden, Marcel. “The ‘Law’ of Uneven and Combined Development: Some Underdeveloped Thoughts”. *Historical Materialism*, 15, 2007, p. 145–165.

orientation of the movement so that it decisively embraced its “consanguinity” with international proletarian socialism, Mariátegui explained that:

Faith in the renaissance of the Indian is not pinned to the material process of ‘Westernizing’ the Quechua country. The soul of the Indian is not raised by the white man’s civilization or alphabet but by the myth, the idea, of the Socialist revolution. The hope of the Indian is absolutely revolutionary. That same myth, that same idea, are the decisive agents in the awakening of other ancient peoples or races in ruin: the Hindus, the Chinese, et cetera. Universal history today tends as never before to chart its course with a common quadrant. Why should the Inca people, who constructed the most highly-developed and harmonious communistic system, be the only ones unmoved by this worldwide emotion? The consanguinity of the Indian movement with world revolutionary currents is too evident to need documentation. I have said already that I reached an understanding and appreciation of the Indian through socialism.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, considering that capitalism operates expropriations and exploitations in distinctly different ways according to the former realities it confronts, then both Marx’s perspective regarding the Russian peasants, which inspired analysis that underscored the uneven and combined forms of peripheral capitalism and the valorisation of the indigenous element in Latin American social struggles present in Mariátegui’s discourse, far from addressing the specificities of the situations deemed to be peripheral in relation to the European/occidental capitalism as if they revealed absolute peculiarities, instead, comprehend them in the context of a much broader whole of the contradictory movement of history itself. This enables Mariátegui at one and the same time, to reject the Eurocentrism of the “civilizational” process and proclaim the universality of the emancipatory socialist project.

Also in relation to Latin America, it was with the so-called “dependency theory” in its earliest version in the 1960s that the study of the specific, but subordinated pathway of capitalist development in such peripheral spaces began to free itself more incisively from the temptation of reproducing the European model for the evolution of the modes of production. The best representative of that perspective was Ruy Mauro Marini.<sup>41</sup> In regard to the history of labour, Marini’s main suggestion, presented here in a highly synthetic form, was that the capitalist economies in the peripheral zones were submitted to a situation of unequal exchange regimes that obliged them to generate ever greater surplus values because most of it would be appropriated externally by the transnational companies and the centers of capitalism. That meant that labour inevitably had to be submitted to a situation of super-exploitation. The category was not thought up specifically to address each specific situation of labour exploitation, but instead sought to

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<sup>40</sup> Mariátegui, José Carlos. *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality*. 1928. (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/mariategui/works/1928/essay02.htm>)

<sup>41</sup> Mauro Marini, Ruy. “Dialética da dependência” (1973). In Traspadini, Roberta e Stedile, João Pedro (eds.), *Ruy Mauro Marini: vida e obra*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2005.



explain the combination of a variety of forms of exploitation in the overall set of capitalist social relations. According to him:

the problem posed by unequal exchange for Latin America is not exactly that of taking a stance against the transfer of value which it implies, but instead, to compensate for the losses of surplus value, and so, being incapable of preventing them in the market relations sphere, the reaction of the dependent economy is to compensate for them in the internal production sphere.<sup>42</sup>

Faced with this problem stemming from dependency, the solutions found by the peripheral economies of Latin America were to combine three forms of expanding the extraction of surplus value all commented on by Marx: increasing the intensity of work, extending the length of the working day and reducing the consumption capacity of the workers to levels below the standard necessary for the adequate reproduction of their labour power.

Thus in a capitalism-forming movement in the dependent periphery that would begin in the circulation to impose a production standard, Marin manages to situate both slavery and hybrid systems of labour exploitation (something between wage-earning and servitude, as in the case of the Brazilian version of the “company store” indentured system known as *Sistema de Barracão* adopted in rural areas) in agriculture producing for exportation, as being “one of the pathways by which Latin America arrives at capitalism”.<sup>43</sup>

It is fundamental to take these aspects into account if we are to think about the transition to capitalism in the Brazil of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century where agriculture dedicated to producing for exportation still based on slave labour, existed alongside the first steps of the industrialization process in urban environments where the tonic was the presence of enslaved workers and so-called ‘free’ workers all lumped together. I am not in a position in this work to go into the whole debate developing around the transition in Brazil and its two different faces. I will limit myself to thinking through the situation from the standpoint of the formation of the working class in the urban environment.

In a study concluded some years ago, I endeavoured to achieve an analysis of the formative process of the working class in the city of Rio de Janeiro, the largest urban centre at the time targeted by the study, capital of the country and the first place where any manufacturing development took place in Brazil, embracing the period 1850 to 1910. The guiding hypothesis for this study was:

Taking into account that enslaved and “free workers” shared common urban work environments; that collective protests from both groups coexisted in time and space, each group's demands sometimes being closer, sometimes farther from the others in form and content; that associative forms were often

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

shared and that identity discourses came up from comparisons between enslaved and “free” work, we worked with the hypothesis that: in the process of working-class formation in Rio de Janeiro – a period that stems from the second half of the nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth century – the existence of slavery and of slave struggles for freedom and the means by which the local ruling classes attempted to control their slaves and conduct the process of unslaving without further disturbances to their domination were decisive factors in shaping the new class of wage-workers<sup>44</sup>.

I believe that the respective book presents various elements that corroborate that hypothesis but in the light of the present debate I would like to raise some other questions of a broader conceptual and analytical nature which were not central concerns in this former work.

Clearly the formation of a working class in Brazil cannot be explained by completely endogenous factors. The emergence of the “labour question” as it was referred to by contemporaries, that is, how to solve the problem of having a regular supply of cheap of labour for export-orientated agriculture in expansion after the end of the African slave trade, had its origins in the ban on trafficking in slaves imposed by the English (which the relatively fragile local dominant landlord class managed to avoid for three decades). The arrival of European workers already expropriated by the expansion of capitalism in the rural areas of their countries of origin was the latest solution adopted at the time by the coffee growing plantations in their most dynamic region (namely the state of São Paulo).

It must be underscored that this solution was not arrived at immediately as a first option, nor did the emigration of European proletarians mean that in Brazil they formed a large mass of rural wage earners. In the years 1850-1860, there was heated discussion and some actual attempts in the direction of importing Chinese coolies in a simple substitution operation such as took place on Cuban plantations during the same period. It was the external conditions that made this latter alternative unfeasible. Local conditions of the class struggle (the slaves’ fight for freedom combined with the defense of abolitionism on the part of other social sectors) had a decisive influence on the option for immigration financed by the São Paulo coffee growers. In other regions, however, transitions that implied maintaining former slaves working in agriculture as before, by means of various forms of “service provision contracts” were implanted that ensured that they were not entirely “free” after all. Furthermore, the labour relations of the immigrants brought in for work in the coffee plantations were not predominantly of the wage-earner type as José de Souza Martins pointed out decades ago in his classic work on the settlers.<sup>45</sup> In regard to labour relations, the archaic and the modern were indeed combined in that peripheral transition process as we have seen from the beginning.

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<sup>44</sup> Badaró Mattos, Marcelo. *Escravidados e livres*, Op.Cit. p. 21.

<sup>45</sup> Souza Martins, José de. *O cativo da terra*. 9ª ed., São Paulo: Contexto, 2010.

What I really want to emphasize, however, is that there was also an endogenous base of proletarianization. In Rio de Janeiro in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the number of slaves went steadily down but in 1849, slaves and freedmen still made up 40% of the population of 266 thousand inhabitants. According to the available research reports, in the city's factories, at a time when the predominant system was still based on simple piece work and the big companies (with over 600 employees) were merely combinations of a set of smaller workshops, slaves were working side by side with supposedly "free" individuals. In the streets, there was another widely disseminated situation also found in other cities; a kind of slave-hire scheme known as "*escravidão de ganho*" whereby the slaves sold their labour force in the urban labour market and paid a fixed daily or weekly amount to their owners with many of them living entirely on their own account, that is, they met all the costs of their own reproduction as a labour force including food and, in many cases, even lodging.

What did it all signify? First, the enslaved workers had already been previously expropriated so their conversion to the condition of proletarians did not call for any new "coercion of the state" that would guarantee the existence of the "imperatives of the market" as Ellen Wood's thinking on Thompson's work identified in the case of England.<sup>46</sup> The coercion of the state, in the case of Brazil, was to come into play afterwards, to guarantee that those ex-slaves, already expropriated as they were, should remain available as proletarians even if it were only in the condition of unemployed or to engage in the worst paid forms of work. Corroborating this interpretation, the turn of the century from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> is clearly marked by the intense repression of supposed "idleness".

Given that slaves and "free" workers laboured side by side in the factories and that survival was subordinated to "market imperatives" in the case of slaves-for-hire, what we have then is a situation in which "capital appropriated surplus labour from workers still engaged in traditional forms of production",<sup>47</sup> even when such workers were still enslaved. As such, we can state that what we have is a case of slave labour formally subsumed to capital even if those subsumed were not entirely as "free as birds".<sup>48</sup>

Thus, in the perspective adopted in the discussion up to this point, the process of formation of the working class in 19<sup>th</sup> century Brazil would be completely explained in the sphere of Van der Linden's broad notion of "subaltern workers". From the moment the sale of labour power is subjected to and obeys the imperatives of capital (it makes no difference whether slaves are sold in person along with the labour power they possess, or if it is free workers that sell it, or those in hybrid situations like the slaves-for hire) we are in the presence of the very same class of workers. However, as we have seen, the working

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<sup>46</sup> Wood, Ellen. *The origin of capitalism: a longer view*. London: Verso, 2002, p. 65.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

<sup>48</sup> It should be realized that Marx's expression was heavy with irony because the proletarians were only "free" from any means of survival operated outside the confines of the market and in fact compelled to transform their labour power into a marketable item to sell in that same market.

class as proposed by Marx goes beyond the strictly economic aspect and involves a political aspect as well.

If then we include that political aspect, we can examine the following question: if enslaved workers were already (in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) living in situations marked to some extent by formal subsumption to capital and even in some cases to market imperatives, would it not be possible that they had developed class consciousness analogous to that of the English workers at the time of the industrial revolution?

The issue becomes increasingly complex because, after all, in my research and that of others we have found a series of indications that enslaved workers not only shared their experience of urban work and sociability with the so called “free” workers in Rio de Janeiro in the second half of the 19th century, but they also shared forms of organization, setting up “mutual” associations for example and even engaging in forms of struggle such as strikes.

Taking up the “uneven and combined” reference once more, it must be underscored that the crack of the “whip” constituted by material necessities that obliges the peripheral economies to “make leaps” combining archaic forms with modern ones, also brings with it the relative “privilege” of skipping certain stages and incorporating certain modern features without having necessarily passed through all the difficulties that preceded them. We should also remember that Trotsky’s concern in addressing this same issue was to explain how it was possible to form such an advanced proletariat capable of pioneering action in carrying the socialist revolution forward in a country like Russia, that was comparatively one of the most backward in the whole of Europe. What is meant by this, and here I quote Claudio Batalha, is that:

The universalizing of capitalism as the mode of production and the relations that it engenders also propitiated the universalizing of the structuring forms of the workers movement. While it is true that national and regional contexts varied considerably and, consequently, so did the way in which the workers movement responded to those contexts, it cannot be said that the organizational forms took on any particularly specific characters in the local regional or national scales.<sup>49</sup>

That means that the struggles of enslaved workers for their freedom during the second half of the 19th century when they found themselves associated to other social sectors, especially “free” workers, were marked by their sharing forms of organization and combat strategies typical of the working class that had “already formed” in Europe, leading us to think about a process of class consciousness formation also in course. The difference remains however, that the slaves’ struggle at the time is for freedom, in the sense of overcoming and putting an end to the legal statute that maintained slavery. The working class’s project of social emancipation is different because it not only questions

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<sup>49</sup> Batalha, Claudio H. M. “O movimento operário brasileiro e a inspiração internacional (1870-1920)”. Comunicação apresentada ao I Seminário Internacional de História do Trabalho/V Jornada Nacional de História do Trabalho, Florianópolis, 2010, p. 2. Available at: [www.labhstc.ufsc.br/sulglobal.htm](http://www.labhstc.ufsc.br/sulglobal.htm)

a given historical form of labour exploitation and social division, but also questions the existence of any society divided into classes and marked by the practices of exploiting labour. This was present as much in the perception of the continuities as in the affirmation of the novel nature of the emancipatory project associated to the first elaborations of the working class during the process of its formation in Brazil.<sup>50</sup>

So where do I want to get to with all of the above? In my view it is of fundamental importance that in addressing a peripheral situation of transition to capitalism such as Brazil's, we should take into account the fact that the processes that are the base and presuppositions for its constitution such as expropriation/proletarianization, which in turn are the basis and presuppositions for the formation of the working class, have their own specificities. Among those specificities is the aspect of the previous form of exploitation, which means that the values and traditions that undergo a re-reading in the light of the newly acquired class consciousness are also different. In the Brazilian case for example, if we try to identify the equivalent of the key idea of the "freeborn Englishman" that Thompson refers to as being one of the pillars on which the new consciousness was raised, we will encounter great difficulty.

Furthermore, in a very special sense, slaves engaged in a struggle for freedom are "the subjects of their own history",<sup>51</sup> and they, just as much as their struggle for freedom (this last being effectively an example of a value subjected to a re-reading and incorporated by the new class consciousness which was to form in the decades that followed) were to be fundamental actors in the process of forming the working class. However, the working class as a "social subject" is distinct from that, particularly because it has a distinct awareness of "class" as such.

### **Some final suggestions**

I will conclude by summarily pointing out a conceptual possibility that respects the distinctions, in the plane of collective consciousness, and accordingly, of its social projects, among different groups of workers subordinated to capital, because they are compulsorily submitted to the transformation of their labour power into the equivalent of marketable goods. The starting point is Van der Linden's definition of subaltern workers. The "subaltern" category appears in his proposal associated to a double, combined reference. On the one hand, more recently, the term has been used by the so-called Subaltern Studies that emerged as an initiative of the Indian historian Ranajit Guha to

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<sup>50</sup> I made a closer analysis of the discourse of Brazilian workers' leaders at the turn of the century from the 19th to the 20th century when they affirmed victory over "slavery in fact" but underscored the specificity of the struggle to put an end to the "slavery of the freemen". Mattos, Marcelo Badaró. *Escravidãos e livres*. Op.Cit., especially Chap.4.

<sup>51</sup> The expression "subjects of their own history" has been widely used in recent Brazilian historiography of slavery in an endeavor to emphasize the individual and collective actions of slaves in their process of adaptation/confrontation of slavery and their quest for freedom. See for example Chalhoub, Sidney. *Visões da liberdade: uma história das últimas décadas da escravidão na Corte*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1990.

define any population that is subordinated in terms of class, cast, age, sex, or occupation or in any other way.<sup>52</sup>

In turn, Subaltern Studies scholars, especially in their early days, adopted this category from the works of Antonio Gramsci. In the first part of this text, I showed the way that Isabel Monal makes use of Gramsci's concept of "subaltern classes" in her endeavour to address the current extent of heterogeneity among the social groups submitted to capitalist exploitation. I also remarked on the fact that in my view it is precisely because she starts off from a more restricted concept of the working class in capitalism than Marx's concept that Monal feels the need to go beyond it in order to be able to define the groups submitted to capitalism today, some of which Marx had, in fact, already suggested were part of the working class itself.

I also drew attention to the fact that the concept of subaltern classes in Gramsci can be applicable in more than one perspective. On the one hand, in referring to the subaltern classes in a context where he is addressing the subject of the complex capitalist societies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gramsci seems to be presenting it as the objective base which gave support to the proposal for a United Front of workers and peasants, considered essential for a revolution to occur in countries like Italy (as it was in Russia). It is a category that in this case, in his contemporary context, allows Gramsci, with far greater precision than would be permitted by employing the term "the masses", to discuss the process whereby class consciousness is raised from its basis in common sense and in which a messianic vision of the world fed by determinist readings of Marx are surpassed by the philosophy of praxis in its most elaborate manifestation.<sup>53</sup>

The concept of subaltern classes also serves Gramsci well in discussing the "spontaneous" and organized' facets of the movements conducted by those classes. Starting from an example in his personal experience during the revolutionary strikes in Turin at the end of the 1910s and beginning of the 1920s, Gramsci endeavors to demonstrate how the organization that emerges as the most conscious sector of the subaltern classes should depart from the spontaneous elements of its demonstration of revolt and follow a program of "intellectual and moral reform" (in this case a process of revolutionary consciousness enhancement) avoiding any repudiation of "spontaneity" but at the same time not allowing it to enable the struggles' innate tendency to fragmentation to triumph.<sup>54</sup>

It is precisely this discussion of the tendency of the subaltern classes to spontaneity and fragmentation, allied to the debate on forms of consciousness, which enables us to understand the broader dimension in regard to its historicity, that Gramsci attributes to the concept of subaltern classes, using it for example when referring to the Roman slaves and the medieval peasant submitted to the landlords. In that historical

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<sup>52</sup> Sen, Asok. "Subaltern Studies: class, capital and community". In: Guha, Ranajit (ed.), *Subaltern Studies V. Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987

<sup>53</sup> Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the prison notebooks*. London: The Electric Book, 1999, p. 623 and ss.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131 and ss.

dimension, what Gramsci proposes is a methodological pathway for analytic purposes, sometimes in the form of a study plan that seeks to salvage the “fragmented and episodic” history of those groups, attempting to identify any “tendency to unification” in them that is “continually interrupted by the activity of the ruling groups; it therefore can only be demonstrated when an historical cycle is completed and this cycle culminates in a success.”<sup>55</sup>

Taking up once more the central theme of the discussion that I proposed to develop at the outset, I made use of Gramsci to highlight the fact that both in the analysis he made of his own present, intimately bound up with the revolutionary social project he proposed, and more especially in his methodological notes for studies of the past, his ways of using the concept of subaltern classes can be highly pertinent for historical studies being conducted today. Mentioning once more the examples I gave earlier, by means of the subaltern classes concept it may well be possible to adequately address the class aspect of the process of the formal subsumption of labour, (wage-earning, but also, unfree and self-employed) to capital in peripheral situations (or even eventually in central ones) where various forms of labour exploitation prevail. At the same time, it is important not to lose sight of the complex pathways for defining the collective subjectivity of social classes, that is, including the diversity of social projects that may be generated by all those different forms of exploitation with strong attention to their tendency to unification, which can only actually be completed in historical movements in which the aspects of spontaneity and organization successfully complement one another. In other words, in certain historical situations such as those experienced by enslaved and “free” workers alike in certain areas of Latin America in the second half of the 19th century, we are not in the presence of a single class of subaltern workers but rather of subaltern classes that share in common their subordination to capital, but distinguish themselves from one another in their distinct forms of social consciousness whose tendency to unification may show itself at certain specific moments of social struggle, like the pro-abolition movements, and which may subsequently become fundamental references in the process of working-class formation. That aspect, however, opens the doorway to another discussion regarding the historical subject, but we lack the space to embark on it at this point.

Thus I have ended with more suggestions and provisional indications than ready-made conceptual responses, and it could not really have been otherwise, because what is involved is a set of questions that we are still in the process of formulating, ranging from the current fragmentation of the working class to the consciousness associated to the various pathways historically experienced in its formative processes.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 206-07.