

Crisis and Immiseration: Critical Theory Today

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THIS TOPSY-TURVY WORLD

The late 1960s saw an efflorescence of dissident Marxisms across Europe: *operaismo* in Italy, *situationnisme* in France, and what would become the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* in Germany. Marxian orthodoxy had entered into crisis after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. A 'new left' was now groping for new ideas, and a wave of worker–student revolts, erupting worldwide in 1968, seemed to require a critical theory of post-war capitalism adequate to the practical critique taking shape in the factories and on the streets. Just as a previous high-point of theoretical production in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917 had seen a revival of the critical spirit of Marx's writings, so too the new generation of dissident Marxists carried out their own 'return to Marx' aided by the discovery and distribution of many of his unpublished manuscripts.¹

Members of the Frankfurt School acted as an intellectual bridge between these two high

points of Marxian theorizing. In Germany, the work of Theodor Adorno – along with the writings of some of the more unorthodox associates of the Frankfurt School, such as Alfred Sohn-Rethel – had a major influence on emergent re-readings of Marx's mature writings.² This *Neue Marx-Lektüre* interpreted Marx's theory of value through his discussion of fetishism, not as a theory of the determination of prices, but rather as a theory of the determination of social labor *as* price. Here the dissidents drew on Sohn-Rethel's notion of 'real abstraction', in which the material life process is dominated by the abstract and impersonal social forms of value. On this view, Marx's late critique of political economy was not an attempt to improve upon the classical political economists, as Marxian orthodoxy had it. Instead, his critique showed how their inverted perspective corresponded to the real inversions of the 'perverted, topsy-turvy world' of capitalist society.³

These insights were not restricted to Adorno's students. In France, Guy Debord

echoed Adorno's conception of an inverted totality – 'the whole is false' – in his theory of the spectacle: 'In a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false'.⁴ Jacques Rancière and Lucio Colletti had similarly grasped the centrality of fetishism to Marx's theory of value, as had, in a more radical vein, Jacques Camatte and Fredy Perlman, whose translation of the dissident Russian economist Isaac Rubin introduced this interpretation of Marx's late works to an Anglophone audience.⁵ All of these thinkers may be situated as members of a broader tendency of the 1960s, in which Marx was re-read as a theorist of the alienation prevalent in both work and society, and hence as a critic not just of *exploitation* but also of *domination*.⁶ By this means, the European Marxist dissidents of the 1960s set out on a path – or, perhaps more accurately, on many paths – away from the official dogmas of the USSR and the communist parties.⁷

Drawing on Marx's early writings, the 1960s dissidents dreamed of a different kind of future from the one on offer in either the East or the West, a future in which the drudgery of working life would be reduced to a minimum in order to maximize free-time for the pursuit of both simple pleasures and their higher forms, such as the generation of scientific knowledge and the creation of art. Some thought it might be possible to overcome the distinction between work and leisure altogether, abolishing the separation between manual and mental labors that had hitherto been definitional of agrarian and industrial civilizations. Above all, the dissidents sought to overthrow the present conditions of social life in a way that would release a potential for human freedom and flourishing that was implicit in those conditions yet structurally obstructed.

Adorno's protestations notwithstanding, these ideas were certainly marked by the age in which they emerged. There are clear affinities between critical theory and the 1960s counterculture, with its revolt against 'consumerism', its holistic critiques of 'the

system', and its concern with the alienations of 'everyday life'. One can also identify, in the critique of domination, echoes of the various liberation movements of the day – of racial and sexual minorities, women, and colonial subjects. But above all, the critical theory of this era was marked by its appearance in the midst of rapid post-war growth and the technological revolutions that gave rise to an age of abundance. With the help of the Keynesian interventionist state, capitalism seemed to have finally freed itself from its crisis tendencies.⁸ This period witnessed an unprecedented decline in inequality, as increases in workers' real wages outpaced increases in the returns to capital in many countries. The 'great levelling' of incomes seemed to call into question orthodox Marxist accounts of crisis and immiseration, with important consequences for revolutionary theory.

Unlike the orthodox Marxists, who tended to deny that the rate of exploitation had fallen in developed countries – or else shifted their focus to supposedly more exploited workers elsewhere – the dissidents of the 1960s recognized that rising working-class living standards made it necessary to revise Marxian theory to accord with new realities. In doing so, they emphasized Marx's core concern with freedom, his critique of alienation and ideology, over the more 'economistic' aspects of his later writings, especially those that appeared to envisage a material (as opposed to merely spiritual) worsening of the conditions of the working class. For Debord, the shifts of post-war capitalism allowed for a more capacious definition of the proletariat as a revolutionary subject – as all those compelled to work for wages, be they high or low⁹ – as well as the content of that revolution – as a revolt against an 'abundance of commodity relations', rather than against poverty.¹⁰ Adorno took a more pessimistic view, but shared with Debord a central focus on *impersonal domination*: a critique not merely of the distribution of wealth, but also of its reign as an independent power over all social classes.¹¹

Rapid technical change in the post-war years led many of the dissidents to abandon the idea that capitalist social relations were a mere 'fetter' on increasingly socialized forces of production. This perspective was simply incompatible with the miseries of the assembly line described by Raniero Panzieri and Harry Braverman, as well as with the more practical critique of work enacted in periodic wildcat strikes.¹² While Marxist dissidents continued to embrace the notion that technical innovations had the potential to liberate human beings, by extending the 'realm of freedom' as against the 'realm of necessity', they saw that under capitalism, technologies had become the means of an ever worsening instrumental rationalization of social life.¹³ Indeed for Adorno, the capitalist mode of production, in solving the problem of distribution, had actually worsened the problem of domination: 'If the old pauperization theory has turned out not to literally be true, it has done so in the no less alarming sense that unfreedom, dependency upon an apparatus that has escaped the control of those who use it, has spread out universally over mankind'.¹⁴ For this reason, the Marxist dissidents turned away from the theory of crisis, traditionally understood as a fundamental contradiction between the *forces* and *relations* of production, and toward a theory of alienation, in which that contradiction was between the *potentiality* and *actuality* of wealth-creation under capitalism.¹⁵

Yet in retrospect, the dissidents were wrong to conclude that a few exceptional decades of growth had refuted 'the old pauperization theory'. The Marxists of the 1960s lived in an epoch marked by the superabundance of goods, representing a huge potential increase in the free-time of society – a potential which failed to realize itself since people continued to work long hours. In an era of extremely low unemployment rates and high rates of real wage growth, these theorists could scarcely imagine what was soon to follow: by the mid 1970s, the growing potential free-time of society would reveal itself not

as an expanding realm of leisure, but rather as a crisis of overproduction, accompanied by a dramatic rise in rates of unemployment and underemployment. These trends made, not for a revitalization and transformation of the labor movement, as the dissidents imagined might be possible, but rather its tendential dissolution.

Because so much of the dissidents' work was based on a rejection of the theory of capitalist crisis and immiseration, it is of limited use in explaining current trends within capitalist societies. Since 1973, the world economy has grown much more slowly than it had in the 1950s and 1960s. In the rich countries, high rates of unemployment persisted for decades – in the case of Europe – or fell off only insofar as workers could be incorporated into insecure, low-wage jobs – as in the United States and United Kingdom. In the 1990s and 2000s, European countries followed the Anglo-American path via the 'flexibilization' of labor. A low demand for labor has been accompanied, in almost all cases, by a stagnation of real wages and a fall in the labor-share of income. The situation outside of the high-income countries is, in most cases, substantially worse.

Globally, more people depend on selling their labor to survive than ever before, but under conditions of slowing global economic growth rates, economic development has become harder to achieve: the success of low-income countries like China has come at the expense of other poor countries. A still growing supply of labor thus faces a persistently low demand, which is substantially worse than that prevailing in high-income countries. Many people survive only by working informally: today, informal work accounts for one half of all non-agricultural work worldwide.¹⁶ Globally, too, labor shares of income have fallen.¹⁷ However, these decades have not only been marked by a return of misery, measured quantitatively in the stagnation of wages and qualitatively in growing employment insecurity and worsening working conditions.

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, economic stagnation has been accompanied by *deindustrialization*: factories continue to produce more output, yet they employ fewer workers, worsening the deficit of labor demand across the economy.¹⁸ In the United Kingdom and the United States, manufacturing employment fell, as a share of total employment, from 32 percent and 24 percent, respectively, in 1970 to less than 10 percent today. In Germany, manufacturing employment fell from 40 percent to 20 percent over the same period, and in France from 28 percent to 12 percent. The same tendency has unfolded across many poor countries, as well, which saw industrial employment shares fall ‘prematurely’, starting in the 1980s and 1990s, from surprising low peaks, typically of less than 20 percent of total employment, to around 15 percent of total employment.¹⁹ Many of the factories that formed an object of critique for the 1960s dissidents have shuttered their doors.

MISERY

These trends form the backdrop to our own ‘return to Marx’, which builds on the insights of the 1960s dissidents by bringing them into relation with Marx’s original theory of immiseration.²⁰ The key here is to recognize that Marx was a theorist of immiseration precisely *because* he was a theorist of deindustrialization. Marx saw the immiserating tendency of capitalism – which was, for him, as much qualitative as quantitative – as unfolding in a two-sided transformation of production. First, within the labor process, capital tended to supplement human labor with machinery to such a degree that labor became a mere ‘appendage’ to an objectively organized production process based on the technical application of scientific knowledge. Second, within the valorization process, this shift in production was reflected in a *decline in the demand for industrial labor*, which

issued in the expulsion of an increasingly ‘superfluous’ labor force from the factory. This latter transformation implies devastating human costs in a world in which most people survive by selling their capacity to labor: it becomes ever more difficult to sell that capacity as the demand for labor falls, with the result that workers find their individual and collective bargaining positions weakened. It is for this reason that, in a capitalist society, the ‘accumulation of wealth at one pole’, i.e. on the side of capital, must be ‘at the same time accumulation of misery ... at the opposite pole’, i.e. on the side of workers.²¹

The 1960s dissidents had revived attention only to the first of the two transformations described above: constant increases in labor productivity require an ongoing reorganization of the production process, along lines that increase the unfreedom of the workforce. At the time of capital’s emergence, industrial goods were produced by individual artisans, using tools specially produced for their trade. Under the pressures of competition, capitalists were led to both decompose and recompose the artisanal production process to make it amenable to the constant adjustments necessary to decrease costs of production. Accordingly, labor was supplemented with machines, and then with a complex system of machinery. The experience of the worker, in the course of this transformation, is that he or she was shunted from the center of production to its margins, becoming a ‘living appendage’ of the machine without an ‘atom of freedom’.²²

Here is the alienation of the worker within production, which the theorists of the 1960s identified.²³ For Marx, capitalist domination is embodied in the factory-form itself: once the workers’ labor process is decomposed and then reconstructed, ‘the interconnection between their various labors confronts them, in the realm of ideas, as a plan drawn up by the capitalist, and in practice, as his authority, as the powerful will of a being outside them, who subjects their activity to his purpose’.²⁴

Marx was critical of factory production in the dialectical sense that means of increasing human freedom (scientific insights) were inverted into means of domination (via their technical application in the capitalist production process).

Marx described this technical transformation of production, within any given workplace, as a rising 'technical composition' of capital: a greater quantity of means of production were set in motion by each worker.²⁵ This process not only occurs in each line of production; with the spread of factory production, it also extends across society. Many technologies migrate from old lines of production to new ones, as capitalists take advantage of whatever innovations might aid them in competition.²⁶ Over time, large sections of the productive apparatus adopt the factory-form. At the same time, society as a whole is reshaped: massive infrastructures lubricate flows of commodities, and also make the development of new commodities possible (e.g. via electrical grids, broadband networks, etc.). If the process stopped there, the result of a constant technological ratcheting up of production would only be a rising tension between the potentiality of capitalist society and its actuality, as 1960s dissidents claimed. But Marx argued that the ratcheting upwards of the technical composition tends to reflect itself also in a rising 'value composition' of capital, that is, in rising outlays on means of production relative to labor. This tendency leads to a situation in which the 'demand for labor ... falls progressively with the growth of total social capital'.²⁷ More workers are pushed out of older lines of production than are taken up into newer ones. The ensuing deindustrialization of the workforce is hindered only to the extent that some lines, particularly in the highly heterogeneous service sector, are resistant to the introduction of machinery.²⁸

Due to this second transformation, the growing free-time of society is not only something to be actualized in a future, socialist society. It is also actualized *within capitalist*

society – as 'enforced idleness' for many and as 'over-work' for the rest.²⁹ Workers thus find themselves caught in a performative contradiction: the working class 'produces both the accumulation of capital and the means by which it is itself made relatively superfluous; and it does this to an extent which is always increasing'.³⁰ The problem workers face under these conditions is that even if their labor is no longer needed, they cannot stop selling their capacity to labor. For no matter how bad labor-market conditions get, workers are compelled to earn wages in order to buy what they need to live. This compulsion is reproduced by the structure of the capital-labor relation, which ensures that they remain bound to wage labor by the 'invisible threads' of their dispossession.³¹

It is on this basis that Marx formulates his theory of the 'relative surplus population', which 'exists in all kinds of forms' and includes every worker 'during the time when he is only partially employed or wholly unemployed'.³² This surplus population is 'relative' because it is surplus relative to the needs of capital, not absolutely surplus to society's capacity to feed itself, in a Malthusian sense. Marx's argument regarding the surplus population has frequently been truncated by interpreters who focus on one of its forms, namely the 'industrial reserve army' or 'floating' surplus population, which is hired at the prevailing wage during economic booms and then fired during the busts.³³ On this theory, the expulsion of workers from production comes to function as a lever by which the rate of capital accumulation can be increased. However, Marx argues that, as this reserve army grows, so too do other forms of surplus population.

Many workers who are expelled from existing lines of production never find work again at the prevailing wage. These workers retain only a tenuous connection to the labor market. They become part of the 'stagnant' or 'consolidated' surplus population, which also becomes a 'self-expanding' section of the working class due to population growth. This stagnant surplus population works the

maximum hours for a minimum pay in 'special branches of capitalist exploitation' as well as in 'domestic industry'.³⁴ It is key to note that for Marx, even this population is part of the 'active labor army': surplus workers have to work regardless of a decline in the demand for their labor but find only 'extremely irregular employment'.³⁵ In a world such as Marx's – in which there is no unemployment insurance on offer – those who remain unemployed for so long that they lose their ability to work fall out of the relative surplus population and join the 'paupers', who survive only by begging their daily bread on the streets and in the poorhouses.

As capital transforms one sector after another in its effort to raise the productivity of labor, this tendency is reflected in a reduction in the demand of labor, issuing in the expansion of all forms of the surplus population. The growth of the surplus population also worsens the situation of the working class as a whole: when the labor market is slack, all workers find that they have less bargaining power, since the risks associated with losing one's job rise when and where there are many people already looking for work. For these reasons, immiseration is the 'absolute general law of capital accumulation'.³⁶

In spite of the name he gave this law, Marx did not distinguish between the relative and absolute dimensions of capitalism's immiserating tendency. He simply pointed out that in this context 'the situation of the worker, be his payment high or low, must grow worse'.³⁷ One clear implication is that, as the income of all of society grows, the share of it that goes to the working class will fall, since the demand for labor will stagnate or fall relative to its supply.³⁸ In periods of stagnation, such a relative decline in living standards must become absolute. However, other aspects of this process of immiseration are as much qualitative as quantitative. For instance Marx placed great emphasis on the declining job-security that accompanies the increasingly disposable quality of labor: 'the higher the productivity of labor,

the greater is the pressure of the workers on the means of employment, the more precarious therefore becomes the conditions of their existence'.³⁹ Growing insecurity in work, heightened competition for jobs, and more generally, the swallowing up of life either by work or by the effort to obtain work define the experience of large parts of the working class today – in spite of the fact that society as a whole continues to produce ever more material wealth, ever more efficiently. These facts condition class struggle in the present.

RECKONING

The above analysis gives rise to a paradox. In the late 1960s, workers' struggles were growing in intensity. Within those struggles, a minority of workers were practically enacting the critique of work – in the factories and in the streets – that the radical dissidents were describing in theory. One might have expected the return of the crisis tendencies of capitalism to have amplified both the practical and theoretical critiques of capitalist society: immiseration would then have been accompanied by a renewal of the labor movement as a revolutionary force. In reality, the opposite trends unfolded. The 1980s and 1990s saw the death of 'actually existing socialism', the capitulation of reformist workers' parties to the demands of capital, and a routing of organized labor – without another rank-and-file workers' movement rising in its place. Capitalism is now failing to deliver on its promises in the most basic economic sense, yet the era of a deep crisis of capitalism has been accompanied by an even deeper crisis in the practical opposition to capitalism.

These trends have pushed many pro-revolutionaries into a deep pessimism about the possibilities for human emancipation: perhaps the moment to realize philosophy has been *definitively* missed, as Adorno feared. The workers' movement has been on

the back foot now for more than 40 years. Even in countries where labor movements are of recent vintage, as in South Africa, South Korea, and Brazil, they are all now marching to the same neoliberal tune. Such a widespread reversal of fortune cannot be explained by the contingencies of class struggle in any one country. In order to explain the labor movement's tendential dissolution in the era of deindustrialization, we have to look back at the social bases of its expansion in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁰ The key point, for our account, is that it turned out that Marx was wrong about the tendencies of capital accumulation for the first 100 years after the publication of *Capital*.

Instead of deindustrializing, late nineteenth-century European economies continued to industrialize. Moreover, the second industrial revolution marked a shift in the character of capitalism, opening up an exceptional space of political possibilities that Marx did not anticipate. The increasing automation of the production process, which Marx expected, occurred alongside the massive expansion of employment in jobs assembling what had been produced, which Marx did not expect.⁴¹ The marginalization of the worker within production was thus incomplete; workers retained some 'atom of freedom' within work, which could also become the basis of their power within the workplace. Indeed, more and more industrial laborers were working with huge quantities of fixed capital, potentially giving them increased leverage at the point of production. Workers might be able to use this lever to overturn capitalist society, if they could figure out how to effectively unify themselves as a class acting on the basis of shared interests.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels suggested that the unification of the workers was being achieved automatically with the extension of factory production. Marx reiterated this point in *Capital*: in the course of capitalist development, the working class is not only 'constantly increasing in numbers'; it is also 'trained, united, and

organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production'.⁴² However, as we saw above, *Capital* also elaborated a theory of capitalist domination within the workplace, which suggested that the collectivization of workers in factories would have ambiguous consequences for workers' power. The factory-form not only makes it possible to steadily increase workers' productivity levels; it also makes possible a recomposition of the labor process in line with capital's needs for command and control.

For this reason, the expansion of the industrial workforce was unlikely to automatically generate a *real or essential unity* among workers, which would allow them to actually grasp the levers of power within factories in order to overturn capitalist society. The atomization of workers, their competition in the labor market, invaded the factory as well. Capital's domination over labor was reinforced in the organization and layout of factory production. Indeed, capitalists were able to take the divisions that cut through the labor market and import those into the workplace. Workers remained divided in terms of gender, language, religion, and regional customs. To these differences were added new ones as well: race and nationality, as well as emergent and constantly shifting hierarchies of skills and education. In this sense, the unity of workers remained, for the most part, a *unity-in-separation*: it was a unity mediated by capital; hence, it was not available as a ready-made weapon in the struggle for autonomy from capital.

Under these conditions, the project of achieving a real unity of the working class, as a class, could only be a political project: it was the project of the workers' movement. That movement was internally differentiated among anarchists, syndicalists, socialists, communists, and other tendencies with diverse orientations. However, these groups retained a common aim: to organize workers on the basis of an affirmation of their class position – their positive identity as workers, regardless of age, sex, religion, nationality,

race, and skill – so they could actually wield the power they implicitly held at the point of production. The project of the workers' movement was successful in many respects: it improved conditions of the sale of workers' labor-power, and even protected workers, to some extent, from consequences of the commodification of their capacity to labor. The labor movement also formed the background to the revolutionary upsurges of the 1917–23 period. However, this movement tended to create, not the real unity at which it aimed, but rather, a highly bureaucratized *ersatz* unity. Workers remained unified only in separation, but now with an additional separation between workers and their organizations, especially workers' unions and parties.

This movement could not have survived the shifts in production that reactivated the core contradictions of capitalist societies in the 1970s. Central to the organizing thrust of the workers' movement was a philosophy of history, which claimed that workers' real unity – which they were fighting to build in daily struggle – would eventually realize itself in the manner Marx and Engels described: 'the accumulation of capital' would be 'the multiplication of the proletariat'.⁴³ Industrialization was to be the driver of workers' incipient victory, since it brought with it growing numbers of industrial workers, growing unity among workers, and growing workers' power in production. The workers' movement thus defended and even encouraged proletarianization, the movement of peasants into the expanding factory system, as a means of increasing workers' power. It also encouraged the modernization of production, wherever possible.

Movement militants envisaged a soon-to-be-realized future in which the industrial working class would form a majority of the population, reshaping society according to its will. The onset of deindustrialization in the 1970s disproved this foundational perspective about the direction of history. The industrial working class, whether numerically expanding or contracting in any given

country, now everywhere represents a shrinking share of the total labor force. More and more workers thus find themselves standing outside the factory gates, looking in. These non-industrial workers largely lack power at the point of production. Their labor is increasingly superfluous to the needs of a vast scientific-technical production process. In this way, atomization – the unity-in-separation of capital – won out over the collectivizing tendencies of the factory, even where these were supplemented by workers' organizations.

Due to these ongoing transformations in the production process, workers tend less and less to identify their work as their primary link to the wider society. Many workers do not see themselves as shaping the world through their work, or as contributing something meaningful to the world by working. Based on their own experience, they do not come to believe that their lives would be radically improved if only they could collectively manage their workplaces. Outside of less mechanized sectors, such as health care and education, workers' autonomy – their self-management of the labor process – is no longer a recognizable goal. Only freedom from the burden of this sort of work, in the interests of life, would be worthwhile.

Indeed, in the formal and informal low-wage service sector, in particular, many workers would likely prefer to see their jobs disappear, and their workplaces razed to the ground, if they could find some way to survive without the wages their work affords. For this reason, such workers fail to see a positive identity and political project inhering in their class position. That is true, in spite of the fact that some of the divisions that fractured the workers' movement in an earlier period have seen their impacts reduced, such as divisions according to language or dialect, culture, religious denomination, and nation. Replacing many such divisions is this increasingly central one: between a relatively secure but shrinking sector of (often unionized) workers, and a highly insecure and growing sector of precarious workers. This

primary division maps, sometimes explosively, onto other divisions along lines of citizenship status, race, and gender.

If the categories of capitalist society – the worker, above all, but also the factory – once appeared to be categories with a possible emancipatory content, that is no longer the case. The ‘atom of freedom’ that these categories contained has been evacuated in a world where direct human labor has been replaced at the center of production by the technological application of scientific knowledge. Workers are therefore unable to affirm their class position within this society as the basis of an emancipatory project to come. They do not achieve their real unity within the expanding space of the factory. On the contrary, the remaining factories, which continue to employ a minority of workers, are merely a manifestation of what separates all workers: commodity production and market exchange. Workers are thus compelled to find their real unity elsewhere, as human beings, *beyond the terms of a society that makes work the primary social link*.

STRUGGLE

At this point, it is critical to reiterate that the decline of the classical workers’ movement has not meant the dissolution of the working class. On the contrary, more people than ever before must survive by selling their labor power or the simple products of their labor, but they do so in a context in which the demand for labor power is persistently slack. It is precisely for that reason that the contradictions of capitalist society are currently pressing with such intensity on working people, leading to immiseration and a concomitant expansion of poverty alongside wealth. By the same token, the working class, in its antagonistic struggle with capital, remains the only force capable of dissolving this society in an emancipatory direction.

However, the struggle of the working class unfolds differently today than it did in the past – beyond the end of the workers’ movement, beyond the edge of a world in which *worker* and *factory* were categories with emancipatory content. Today, few workers view their class position as the basis of a collective project of overturning society. In this context, struggles outside the workplace have often been the ones that gain traction within a wider sphere. In such struggles, workers frequently do not identify as workers. In order to sidestep antagonisms internal to their class, workers often grope toward some other position, *external to their existence as workers*, as a means of pushing forward their antagonisms with both capital and the state.

This shift necessitates a rethinking of the terms of class struggle, disconnecting it from any necessary identification with the struggle for better wages and working conditions within the workplace.⁴⁴ A reconstructed notion of class struggle might begin from the following propositions.⁴⁵ Starting from their atomization within capitalist society, that is, from their *unity-in-separation*, workers are periodically able to defend themselves against the onslaughts of capital – both in the workplace as well as in society more broadly – by forming a temporary but collective power. In order to do so, workers must invent new tactics, contents and forms of struggle, all of which are impossible to anticipate in advance.

In such struggles, workers’ power derives from their collective capacity to disrupt the flows of capitalist society, in workplaces or outside of them, whether by strike, occupation, riot, or blockade. As capitalist society has become more complex, possible points of disruption have multiplied: some are located in the sphere of production, but many others are located outside of that sphere – in distribution and consumption. At times, proletarians have been able to engage in disruptive activity in one of these spheres, building up their power on that basis, albeit temporarily. The key point is that, in doing so, workers are

forced to come together outside of the terms on which they are normally organized in capitalist society. They have to build connections between normally separated fractions of the working class, including between relatively securely employed and relatively precariously employed sections.

Expanding the purview of this sort of mass disruptive activity across society is the only way for workers to push their struggles forward. They therefore require collective organization, whether this is formal or informal, lasting or quickly dissipating. In any case, large-scale disruptive action is risky and is only possible given high levels of coordination, which has been achieved as yet only rarely and briefly. Such coordination is itself only possible when organizations are responsive to the needs of their members and therefore capable of sustaining the trust required to engage in this activity. In our definition, class struggle takes place wherever workers undertake mass disruptive action, under the purview of organizations forged for this purpose (typically in the course of the struggles themselves). These disruptive actions may be described as *self-organized workers' struggles*.

What is fundamental from the perspective of the emancipatory project of ending class society is the limit that atomized workers and segmented class fractions confront in the course of their self-organized struggles. Their fundamental limit is the impossibility of building collective power across sections of the class in the absence of a shared class identity and project. Italian autonomists described this limit of class power in terms of the decomposition and recomposition of the working class in different periods of the history of capitalist society. In their view, the technical transformation of the production process periodically caused older modes of workers' political organization to lose their viability and dissolve (the autonomists thought that these technical transformations were politically motivated, but we need not agree with them there). Workers then had to

recompose themselves politically, based on the new technical organization of production. On this basis, the 'craft worker' was succeeded by the 'mass worker', who was in turn succeeded, in some accounts, by the 'social worker' or the 'multitude'.⁴⁶ In our view, the onset of deindustrialization marks the end of this cycle. The class has been decomposed, fragmented, and segmented, without the possibility of a recomposition around a new workers' identity, however conceived.

Workers today thus face a *composition problem*, as the fundamental limit of their struggle. Workers' very existence as a class appears to be not a potential basis of power, but rather, the main obstacle to the extension of their power. In the course of their struggles, workers find that it is impossible to build a new world on the basis of the categories of the old world – on the basis of the unity-in-separation of the working class in present-day capitalist society. It is not that there are no more industrial workers, but rather, that the remainder of industrial workers can no longer present itself as the leading edge of the class, uniting the interests of all workers. Nor can the various surplus populations of the world, although growing in size, affirm their position as a positive pole of workers' activity, since they exist as a negation of the class and its power within capitalist society. The terms on which proletarians once united are no longer available, but unification remains a necessity for every struggle. For that reason, the problem of composition is today a revolutionary problem. Workers' confrontation with this fundamental limit of their struggle – or even: the formalization of that limit, its widespread recognition as a limit – will be coincident with the re-emergence of the communist movement.

In this context, class struggles today can already be found creatively inventing new categories, external to the categories of the capitalist mode of production, which anticipate but do not yet achieve the rebirth of a communist movement. The movement of movements, the black bloc, the *indignados*,

occupy, the 99 percent, *democracia real*, the movement for black lives, *nuit debout* and so on – these are the beyond-the-world-of-work categories of workers' struggle today. In generating these categories, workers sidestep the composition problem that hampers their activity: they attack this world as if from the outside, while of course remaining embedded within it. The problem is that their ideal-outside could only realize itself if it were able to launch an attack on the material bases of capitalist society. In the past, struggles had the potential to spill out of the factory, as a pathway to a revolution in all areas of social life. Today, struggles are confronted by their limited ability to break *into* zones of production – a rupture that remains a fundamental precondition of the abolition of class society and the advent of a communist era.

Of course, we are still far from a time when struggles will have achieved the requisite level of intensity to challenge the rule of capital, so the perspective we are giving here remains anticipatory. Nevertheless, if Marxism is a theory of *pure immanence*, it requires not only that we locate the sources of our critique within the contradictions of our society, but also that we locate our critique within the particular historical period in which we live, and in which those contradictions are developing. Just as the growing free time of society is not only a potential to be realized within a future world but is also actualized within capitalist society as overwork for some and underwork for others, so too the critique of this society cannot remain merely a potential in *our* theory – it must also be actualized within the theory and practice of the proletariat.

CRISIS

In this section and the next, we look at two further ways of specifying class struggle in the present. It may be objected, rightly, that most workers today fail to identify

the capital-relation as the source of their immiseration, even when engaged in self-organized struggle. When 'capitalism' is used to describe what must be overcome, this term frequently refers to corporations with an outsized influence on politics, rather than generalized commodity exchange. Workers are engaged in a limited critique of capitalism – mostly as *crony-capitalism*. They are thus responding to the appearance of capitalist crisis, rather than its essence. The question we must ask is: why does this essence (capitalist crisis) appear in this form (crony capitalism)?

The crisis of capitalism is, most fundamentally, that of the *disintegration of the capital-labor relation*. In the post-war era, decades of rising productivity eventually issued in widespread overproduction, which was reflected in persistent problems of low profitability centered in the manufacturing sector. Falling profits in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a decline in the rate at which surpluses were reinvested, leading to lower rates of capital accumulation and hence slower rates of economic growth. By the 1980s, stagnation had become the new norm, accompanied by ongoing deindustrialization. As we discussed above, huge quantities of excess labor have been ejected from their previous employments but have not easily found new employments (meanwhile, youth continue to enter an already oversupplied labor market). Here we must add that *similar problems have taken place on the side of capital*. Following Marx, we have elsewhere described this tendency as 'the production of surplus capital alongside surplus labor'.⁴⁷ Surplus capital cannot be invested without worsening the conditions of overproduction and hence putting further pressure on profitability.

The result is an overaccumulation of capital. In order to avoid the onset of a deep and lasting depression, which would issue in a slaughtering of capital values, states and central banks have undertaken concerted action to depress interest rates, lessening some of the pressure generated by falling rates of profit.

That has allowed the system to keep ticking over but at the expense of worsening already existing tendencies toward stagnation.⁴⁸ Here, the task of the state has been made easier by the fact that the underlying problem of overaccumulation has not been solved. That is, there remains a persistent excess supply of capital, weighing down long-term interest rates. Faced with a lack of opportunities for investment, giant pools of 'hot money' slosh around the world economy, generating cheap credit in the midst of an ongoing economic slowdown. Falling interest rates subsequently inflect the unfolding of capitalist crisis, in two ways.

First, low interest rates have made it possible for governments, firms, and households to respond to falling economic growth rates by taking on debt. Total debt-to-GDP ratios have soared over the past few decades. The capacity of entities across the economy to take on debt at low interest rates has smoothed the path of the crisis. Of course, worries about the ability of various borrowers to repay their loans reach ever greater heights as debt levels increase, since loans are made to borrowers on the promise of a future rise in income that will allow the borrowers to repay their loans. Such a rise in incomes has failed to appear. Yet, all the same, the supply of credit continues to outrun demand. What can lenders do but wring their hands?

Second, the same tendency has led to periodic inflations and then deflations of asset bubbles, generating financial crises that shake the capitalist system to its core. As it turns out, the financialization of capital has not been a boon to financial firms in any simple sense.⁴⁹ These firms earn returns based on the difference between the interest rates they charge on long-term loans and the interest rates they pay to their own short-term investors. As the gap between long- and short-term interest rates compresses, due to overaccumulation, financial firms have had to compensate by taking on greater risk. Institutional investors' appetites for risk has not risen to the same extent as financial firms

need to sell it, so financial firms have become adept innovators, offering up new financial 'instruments' to hide risk. The result is that financial firms typically earn rates of return that, while formerly normal, are now exceptionally high. Extremely risky bets, taken over and over, periodically issue in catastrophic losses, which in turn lead to crises.⁵⁰

The worst of the financial crises, so far, was of course that of 2008, which issued in a deep recession and a rapid rise in levels of un- and underemployment across much of the world. In response, governments in high-income countries took swift action to prevent the recession from becoming a depression. But in doing so, they found themselves caught in a double bind. On the one hand, governments had to bail out financial firms, transferring huge quantities of money to people who had essentially made a series of bad bets – transmuting those bets, retroactively, into good ones. Alongside other stopgap measures taken by governments, these bailouts were extremely expensive. On the other hand, by 2008, governments had already accumulated massive debts relative to GDP: since the 1970s, they have been spending huge quantities of money to keep their ailing economies ticking over.⁵¹

Given these constraints, governments were forced to undertake apparently irrational action. They bailed out the banks to the tune of trillions of dollars, but at the same time – in order to control exploding debt levels in the context of debt-to-GDP ratios that were already worryingly high – they imposed austerity on their citizens. Nor was this austerity limited to the worst off among the population: it affected public provisions of healthcare and education and resulted in mass layoffs of public employees. Why did governments pay off crooked bankers, while at the same time making people who had done nothing wrong suffer for the bankers' crimes? This move was completely sensible, from the perspective of a capitalist economy: the restoration of the rate of profit has to take precedence over all other concerns. However, working-class

people saw government action in a different light. The only apparent explanation of the fact that the government was bailing out the banks while imposing austerity on the population was that *the government had lost its capacity for rational action*: it had been captured by the bankers. Workers took to the street to demand that the state free itself from the stranglehold of crony capitalists: governments should bail out the people and impose austerity on the banks! Here, workers were responding to the form of appearance of capitalist crisis in our times as a financial crisis. To see the situation on different terms would require that workers tarry with the more fundamental crisis of capitalism, which has not only shifted but also severely limited state action.

A more fundamental critique of capitalism does have the potential to generalize itself today, either in the context of the ongoing stagnation of the economy, or else due to the onset of a deeper crisis, which may yet emerge as governments lose their capacity for concerted action. In either case, the limits to state action will reveal themselves. An awareness of those limits is already emerging along three lines. First, a public discussion of computerization and robotization – while mystifying the causes of the present crisis of the world of work – nevertheless proclaims that this crisis is insurmountable on the terms of capitalist economies. Second, there is a growing public awareness that, since the 1970s, the advanced capitalist economies have tended to stagnate to an ever-worsening degree, without a clear explanation as to why this is occurring. Third, and perhaps most importantly, there is a growing fear of the effects of global warming, which capitalist economies are unable to address in spite of the existential threat that it poses to humanity.

Under these conditions, it is possible to imagine that future struggles, if they achieve the requisite size and scope, will create the context for a new communist movement to appear. Such a movement would cease to look to the state to restore the conditions

of growth. Instead it would try to solve the coordination problem that limits struggles by linking together the fragments of the working class – union members, downwardly mobile graduates, upwardly constrained service workers, computer programmers, precarious youth, immigrants and refugees, and militants – into a broad-based attack on their own conditions of separation, that is, *on the very conditions of their existence as a class*. This problem remains apparently intractable on the basis of struggle as it is today. However in history, discontinuity is the rule rather than the exception: periods of reaction suddenly break out into new eras of revolutionary agitation, which seemed impossible a few years before.

POLITICS

Yet, it must be said, other directions for social struggle are also possible, and even more likely. In the present, highly atomized populations, racked by austerity, unemployment, and evictions, are awakening from inactivity and seeking redress *on the terms of their atomization*. Across diverse national contexts, a burning rage at politicians – for the manner in which they handled the crisis as well as its aftermath – did give rise to wave after wave of collective struggle, centered around anti-austerity demands and widespread anti-government sentiments, which in many ways sought to overcome atomization. Between 2010 and 2016, such extra-parliamentary movements unfolded in Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, Greece, Ireland, the United Kingdom, the United States, Quebec, Chile, Turkey, Brazil, Bosnia, the Ukraine, Hong Kong, and France. But these movements all dissipated within months, without substantially altering either the terms of the crisis or the forms of state response to it.⁵² As these movements ended, some of their dispersed forces regrouped themselves, entering the realm of politics that they

had formerly and stridently denounced as endemically corrupt.

As it turns out, the ongoing abandonment of politics as a site of constrained conflict created an unexpected opening for this 'political' turn within extra-parliamentary movements: the demobilization of society has made it easier for anyone mobilizing a part of the population to catapult his- or herself into the center of politics, even if doubts remain about whether one can achieve much of anything from that position. At the same time, new right-wing parties, pushed to the margins of contemporary society in previous decades, have once again begun to gain ground in parliaments, as the political center hollows out. To understand how a general disaffection with politics has given rise to dynamic but limited political experiments, we have to see how the long-term capitalist crisis has played out in the political realm.⁵³

The workers' movement, whose tendential dissolution we discussed above, gave birth to the first modern mass parties in the late nineteenth century. Organized from the ground up, with programs to guide them to victory, socialist parties threatened to make use of parliament not to change the laws of society, but rather to overturn society by socializing the means of production. It was in response to the threat generated by socialist parties that other political formations were forced to organize themselves on a mass-scale, appealing to populations of urban workers as well as their traditional constituencies. In this sense, the workers' movement was responsible for shaping the contours of modern parliamentary politics.⁵⁴ The threat posed by the workers' movement opened up a readable, strategic field not only for the left but equally for the center and right, with diverse characteristics across the differently constituted polities of Europe and the wider world (when and where these parliamentary formations were not overruled by outright dictatorships). The return of economic crisis tendencies in the 1970s then scrambled this strategic field for all political parties, transforming

an unfolding social crisis into a political one as well.⁵⁵

As economic growth rates fell and unemployment rates rose, it became clear that nobody would be able to prosper unless the conditions of capital accumulation were restored, so restoring those conditions increasingly became the main task for all parties. Politicians set about rolling back the welfare state and the regulatory apparatus based on the view that this rollback would lower costs for capital and revive the rate of profit, leading to renewed economic growth. The fact that even representatives of the workers' movement decided to carry out these reforms signaled the final emptying-out of that movement's potential. Across societies, differences between left and right were correspondingly reduced: those differences were now only a matter of the speed and severity of reforms one was willing to undertake to restore profitability. Yet, despite efforts to reform the economy in the interests of capital, economic stagnation continued to worsen, no matter how many periods of bootstrapping austerity the population was made to suffer. Because they were offered only endless sacrifice without reward, voters became increasingly skeptical of politicians' empty promises.⁵⁶

In this context, politics itself increasingly fell into disrepute. The system appeared to be 'rigged', either in the form of outright corruption, or because the parties posed no real alternatives to one another. People responded to this feeling both by reducing their allegiances to any one party and by registering protest votes against whoever happened to be in power. More and more politicians therefore realized that they needed to protect themselves from voters' rage, and so like their constituencies, politicians also withdrew from politics. Policies are increasingly developed and implemented in institutional spaces that are insulated from voters' oversight and influence. Politicians rule technocratically across the aisles, reforming laws in businesses' favor and then saving those

same businesses when they are threatened with collapse in the context of one or another financial crisis. Growing anti-political sentiments have left the established party system in most countries open to disruption: *que se vayan todos* and *no les votes* became the slogans of an anti-political era. These trends have also set up the conditions for the emergence of an anti-political politics.

Populism presents us with the paradox of anti-parliamentary sentiments invading parliament, with political platforms that call for throwing out all politicians. The premise of populist parties, of both left and right, is that economic stagnation is a symptom of crony-capitalist influence over venal parliaments. Restoring the conditions of growth remains the goal, but now it is thought to be possible only if the moneylenders are chased from the Temple. The problem these efforts face is that – giving ongoing economic stagnation, in an era in which profitability has been based, to an ever greater extent, on the accumulation of debt – some capitalists may recognize the need for systemic change but must reject out of hand all attempts at actual change, which threaten to unravel the precarious conditions of profitability (hence the laughable juxtaposition of businessmen publicly proposing basic guaranteed income policies while privately lobbying against efforts to claw back taxes from overseas tax havens).⁵⁷ The consequence has been that any real efforts at reforming the system appear, to capital, to represent an existential threat.

At critical moments, movements for reform have always had the potential to take on a systemic character, opening up space for revolutionary agitation and social transformation; however, in the present moment, *capitalist reproduction is so precarious that elites apparently cannot give up anything at all without endangering everything*. Every proposal for reform therefore appears as critical, as system-shaking. The populists of the left have confronted this impasse most directly, above all in negotiations around the Greek debt burden. Even the most meager

reforms were strenuously resisted. In this context, Syriza's empty threat to abandon the Euro was treated for what it was: brinkmanship. This situation has created openings for right-populists, as well, who have been more willing than left-populists to harness resentment in a destructive rage against international institutions, apparently without regard to the consequences. Indeed, the right populists appear willing to take drastic measures: exit from the EU, the Eurozone, NAFTA, and NATO and reversing globalization by tightening controls on the transnational movement of people, goods and even capital. It is not always clear whether these proposals are made in earnest, or whether they too are brinkmanship. But in any case we can be sure that beggar-thy-neighbor policies will have no purchase in an extremely low-growth world. There is no chance of restarting national-level accumulation.

In this context, the right-populists appear to have a more mobilizing narrative than their left-counterparts. Both attempt to read the unfolding contradictions of capital in terms of parasitic attacks on the national body, which will supposedly recover only if it can regain control over its political organs. Both are able to direct popular anger toward bankers, the personification of surplus capital. The right, however, have the strategic advantage of being able to target refugees and immigrants as well, as a personification of surplus labor. Excluding both of these figures appears, falsely, to be a way for the nation-state to make a comeback, to return to a better time, before the onset of the long crisis of the capital-labor relation in the early 1970s. The pre-crisis era is also nostalgically read, in a racist way, as a time when the body politic was more ethnically homogenous.

The populists will no doubt fail. They will not manage to bring back their golden age of post-war capitalism, even for those ethnic groups who feel the most nostalgia for that age. On the contrary, their policies will worsen the existing trends of stagnation and crisis. What we do not know is whether,

in failing, they will nonetheless be able to wreak enough havoc to the current institutions of liberal internationalism to set off a chain reaction of carnage, amid the further unfolding of the crisis. So far, financial crises have been prevented from turning over into outright depressions through the coordinated actions of states and central banks. It is possible that populism will weaken these institutions to such an extent that coordination will prove impossible, dropping us into an abyss the likes of which have not been seen since the 1930s. *The Frankfurt School looked into that abyss, finding there not the potential for a revolutionary unification of the class, but rather for its thorough-going liquidation. What we will find is anyone's guess.*

CONCLUSION

The dissident Marxists of the 1960s attempted to reactivate the critical spirit of Marx's work. If they sometimes adopted the term 'critical theory' as a euphemism for their Marxism, that was not simply a way for them to avoid McCarthyite repression. It was also a matter of distancing their project from the stale dogmatism to which Marxism had been reduced. Existing Marxist theory proved hardly adequate to the new realities of post-war capitalism. It specifically failed to explain the growing atomization of proletarians in advanced capitalist societies. In the context of a rapidly growing economy, workers were mostly willing to allow parties and unions to act for them – to accept rising wages as a reasonable substitute for collective self-emancipation. Marx's own writings offered little to those seeking to understand this colonization of proletarians' inner life, their desires and aspirations, by the commodity form.⁵⁸ In response, the 1960s dissidents drew on other critical traditions, including theorists like Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Freud, in an attempt to explain workers' subjective identification with the objective logics that dominated them.

In this way, the dissidents tried to adhere to Hegel's definition of philosophy – to grasp one's time in thought – or, as Marx had it in a letter to Ruge, to discover the new world through the critique of the old.⁵⁹ But the new world the dissidents set out to discover is now an *old* new world, marked by potentials that never came to fruition. In spite of what was seemingly in the offing in the late 1960s struggles, labor movements never reconstituted themselves along the lines the dissidents imagined they would. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, the mainstream of those movements – from which the dissidents had dissented – went into decline. What should be the goal of theory today, in an era of reawakening struggle but not yet of communist movement? We suggest that critical theory – or better, communist theory – has three tasks.

The primary task of theory is to examine class struggle not merely as possessing a theoretical framework, but as itself theoretically productive. Workers today face the problem of figuring out how to extend and intensify their self-organization and struggle in the absence of a shared class project. The paths that action will take are not knowable in advance; they have to be creatively constructed, as necessary preconditions for the re-emergence of a communist movement. Theory should therefore seek to give retrospective accounts of concrete struggles: of what they did, as well as of how participants in struggles understood what they were doing. The point here is not to cheerlead struggles but rather to *read* them, focusing on how they confront the composition problem and attempt to solve it via the haphazard construction of new categories, new tactics, and new organizational forms, which resonate across society. What do these struggles, in coming up against their limits, tell us about the shape of the communist movement to come?

The second task of theory is to examine the forms of the unfolding crisis of capitalist social relations, which provide the framework or context within which class struggle

takes place. We have argued that the breakdown of the capital–labor relation occurs in and through the generation of surplus populations alongside surplus capital. In examining the process of this breakdown, we must look not just for potential new proletarian unities, but also at the divisions *within* the proletariat that capitalist social relations both create and sustain, along lines, for example, of race, gender, nation, citizenship status, education level, and economic sector. What accounts for the structural reproduction of these intra-class divisions (which are not merely epiphenomenal to a shared class interest)? In an era of economic stagnation, divisions among workers have become all the more intense, since, in the context of worsening labor-market conditions, many workers with better-than-average wages and working conditions strive to protect their corners of the labor market, not only from the onslaughts of capitalist austerity but also from other proletarians.

The third task of theory is to gesture toward a communist future, a task which has become much more difficult after the end of the labor movement. The end of that movement was coincident with the evacuation of the emancipatory content of the categories of the capitalist world. Communism cannot be merely a re-constellation of those categories – the worker, the machine, and the factory – according to a new logic (i.e. the socialization of the means of production). Or to say the same thing another way: capitalist technology is not neutral, nor is the infrastructure that makes the use of that technology possible. Suburban divisions, electrical grids connected to coal-fired power plants: the material organization of social life today fits humanity into specific social grooves from which it must escape. How would an emancipated humanity use technology and design infrastructure? Without going into specific detail, it may nevertheless be possible to derive some principles of communist action in advance.⁶⁰ A communist future would have to sever the connection between *how*

much and what work one does and what one receives from the social store, in a way that does not generate new, structural forms of domination, whether personal or impersonal.

In suggesting these tasks for theory, we should not to be misunderstood as proclaiming a special role for theorists. In our view, theory is best thought of as a therapy for the despair that always accompanies lulls in class struggle, which often persist for years. It is a mode of explicit reflection on the theoretical production implicit in struggle, one that attends to the limits inherent in struggles, which, in their formalization as limits, may give birth to a communist movement. This despair does not always wait for lulls in struggle to appear. Militants frequently despair of struggles in their very unfolding. One observes a split between, on the one hand, the activists, who act without thinking, and the critical theorists, who think without acting. Theory should allow for a thinking in action, one which knows the limits of action, yet acts nevertheless.

Notes

- 1 Prominent figures in the earlier wave were Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukács, and Karl Korsch, but the later wave also rediscovered relatively unknown figures like Isaac Rubin and Evgeny Pashukanis.
- 2 For more detailed discussion of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* see 'Communisation and Value Form Theory', *Endnotes* 2, 2010, pp. 68–105.
- 3 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works, Volume 37: Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 3* (International Publishers, 1998), p. 817.
- 4 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Zone Books, 1994), § 9, p. 14 (translation amended).
- 5 Jacques Rancière, 'The concept of "critique" and the "critique of political economy"' *Economy and Society* 5(3), 1976, Lucio Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel* (Verso Books, 1973), Jacques Camatte, *Capital and Community* (Unpopular Books, 1988), Fredy Perlman, 'Introduction' to *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* by I. I. Rubin (Black and Red, 1972). This approach was later taken up in the anglophone world by groups around *Capital and Class* and *Open Marxism*.

- 6 See Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- 7 Universally opposed to Stalinism, the dissidents nevertheless took various positions on Bolshevism, with the more interesting among them turning for inspiration to councilist and anarchist alternatives to the main lines of socialist history.
- 8 For economic-historical accounts of this era, see Philip Armstrong, Andrew Glyn, and John Harrison, *Capitalism since 1945* (Basil Blackwell, 1991) and Robert Brenner, *Economics of Global Turbulence* (Verso Books, 2006). On Keynesianism more specifically, see Paul Mattick's classic work, *Marx and Keynes: The Limits of the Mixed Economy* (Porter Sargent, 1969), as well as Geoff Mann, *In the Long Run We Are All Dead* (Verso Books, 2017).
- 9 Debord defines the proletariat as those who 'have lost all power over the use of their own lives', while admitting that this encompasses almost everybody (Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, § 114, p. 84).
- 10 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, § 40, p. 28.
- 11 For Adorno the object of domination 'has long since ceased to be just the masses, they now include those in charge and their agents' (Theodor Adorno, 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society? The Fundamental Question of the Present Structure of Society', in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 116).
- 12 See Raniero Panzieri, 'The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx Versus the Objectivists' (1964), available at <https://libcom.org/library/capalist-use-machinery-raniero-panzieri>, and Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (Pluto Press, 1974). See also, Paul Romano and Ria Stone, 'The American Worker' (1947), available at <https://libcom.org/history/american-worker-paul-romano-ria-stone>
- 13 Adorno and Debord both saw state-managed capitalism as a point of convergence of East and West, following the path of bureaucratization toward a fully administered world.
- 14 Adorno, 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society', p. 116.
- 15 Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, p. 26.
- 16 Juan R. de Laiglesia and Johannes Jütting (eds.), *Is Informal Normal? Towards More and Better Jobs in Developing Countries* (OECD, 2009). See also ILO, *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture, Second Edition* (ILO, 2013).
- 17 See Loukas Karabarbounis and Brent Neiman, 'The Global Decline of the Labor Share', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129(1), 2013, 61–103.
- 18 For mainstream accounts, see Robert Rowthorn and Ramana Ramaswamy, 'Deindustrialization: Causes and Implications', *IMF Working Paper* 97/42, 1997, and Dani Rodrik, 'Premature Deindustrialization', *Journal of Economic Growth*, 21(1), 2016, 1–33.
- 19 Meanwhile, a large portion of the manufacturing production that remains takes place in small, informal enterprises, rather than large-scale factories using advanced technologies.
- 20 See Aaron Benanav and John Clegg, 'Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital', *Endnotes* 2, 2010, pp. 20–51.
- 21 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (Penguin Classics, 1976), p. 799.
- 22 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 548.
- 23 'Within the capitalist system ... all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of the machine, they distort the actual content of his labor by turning it into a torment; they alienate from him the intellectual potentialities of the labor process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as in independent power' (Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 799).
- 24 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 450.
- 25 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 762.
- 26 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, pp. 780–1.
- 27 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 781.
- 28 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 783fn. On the service sector, see Benanav and Clegg, 'Misery and Debt', as well as Jason E. Smith, 'Nowhere to Go: Automation, Then and Now', *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 1, 2017, available at <http://brooklynrail.org/2017/03/field-notes/Nowhere-to-Go>
- 29 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 789.
- 30 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 783.
- 31 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 719.
- 32 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 795.
- 33 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, pp. 784, 794.
- 34 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 796. Marx noted that in England in his own time there were more people working as domestic servants than in industry. See Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 574.
- 35 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 796.
- 36 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 799.
- 37 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 799.

- 38 The more orthodox Marxists of the 1960s (e.g. Hal Draper and Ernst Mandel) defended Marx from those who dismissed his 'pauperization thesis' by insisting that he only envisaged a 'relative pauperization', a concept that Adorno described as 'ludicrous' (Adorno, 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society', p. 112, see also his 1962 Seminar on Marx). Yet such attempts to reconcile Marx's predictions with post-war reality ended up distorting both. The truth is that post-war growth was inconsistent with *both* the relative *and* absolute interpretation of Marx's thesis, since the mid-century had actually witnessed a sharp rise in the share of national income going to the working class in the advanced countries. It was only in the last 40 years that relative (and at times absolute) forms of immiseration began to reappear.
- 39 Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 798.
- 40 This section is largely drawn from Endnotes, 'A History of Separation', in *Endnotes 4*, 2015. In that text, we also discuss the role played by the persistence of the old regime – that is, landed aristocracy and the peasantry – in the history of the European workers' movement; whereas, here, we leave that discussion out in the interests of space. Our account draws extensively from Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), G. M. Tamás, 'Telling the Truth about Class' in *Socialist Register 2006* (Monthly Review Press, 2006), and Loren Goldner, 'Communism is the Material Human Community: Amadeo Bordiga Today (1995)', available at <https://libcom.org/library/communism-is-the-material-human-community-amadeo-bordiga-today>
- 41 See Benanav and Clegg, 'Misery and Debt', pp. 33–7.
- 42 Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, p. 929.
- 43 In a footnote to this proposition, Marx defined the proletariat as he who valorizes capital and is 'thrown onto the street as soon as he becomes superfluous to the need for valorization', foreshadowing his analysis of the decline in the demand for labor, which he lays out some 15 pages later (Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, pp. 764fn, 781).
- 44 We should note that many theorists of the historical worker's movement also viewed class struggle as extending beyond the bounds of the factory. For Lenin this broadening was about the necessary role of party militants and their distinctively 'political' struggle. For Luxemburg, who was closer to our argument here, the 'mass strike' represented a synthetic outburst of class struggle, in the workplace and the street. Yet for Luxemburg, as for the council communists, these kinds of spontaneous mass actions spilled out of the space of the factory. Today it is more a question of spilling into the workplace. See V. I. Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (International Publishers, 1969), Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Mass Strike' in *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg* (Haymarket, 2007), and Anton Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils* (AK Press, 2002).
- 45 Our account here draws on Endnotes, 'Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture', in *Endnotes 3*, 2013.
- 46 See Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (Pluto Press, 2002).
- 47 Benanav and Clegg, 'Misery and Debt'. The quotation is from Marx, *Capital, Volume 3*, pp. 254–5.
- 48 See Anwar Shaikh, 'The First Great Depression of the 21st Century' in *Socialist Register 2011* (Monthly Review Press, 2011).
- 49 Robert Brenner, 'What Is Good for Goldman Sachs Is Good for America: The Origins of The Current Crisis' (2009), available at <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/issr/cstch/papers/BrennerCrisisTodayOctober2009.pdf>
- 50 See Brenner, 'What Is Good for Goldman Sachs Is Good for America'.
- 51 See Wolfgang Streeck, 'How Will Capitalism End?' *New Left Review* 87 (May–June 2014), p. 42ff.
- 52 See Endnotes, 'The Holding Pattern' *Endnotes 3*, 2013. See also Paul Mason, *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere* (Verso Books, 2012).
- 53 A proper analysis of this phenomenon would require significantly more work. An important reference for this work is Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (Verso Books, 2013).
- 54 Across Europe, the workers' movement was essential in pushing through an extension of the franchise to all men. These same movements played a role in retarding the extension of the vote to women. See Eley, *Forging Democracy*.
- 55 See Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (Verso Books, 2014).
- 56 In this context, elections were increasingly characterized by a politics of fear. Unable to promise a brighter future, political parties merely offered to protect voters from the imagined horrors that would be unleashed by the victory of the opposing party. That only went so far, since the livelihoods that politicians were supposedly protecting continued to get worse and worse.
- 57 Scott Santens, 'Why We Should All Have a Basic Income', *World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2017*.

- 58 The Marxist tradition also struggled to explain workers', at times, intense identification with their own oppressors, as in nationalism, or intense dis-identification with their fellow workers, as in racism.
- 59 Marx further writes, in the same letter to Ruge: 'We shall not say: Abandon your struggles, they are mere folly; let us provide you with true campaign-slogans. Instead, we shall simply show the world why it is struggling, and consciousness of this is a thing it must acquire whether it wishes or not'.
- Letter from Marx to Arnold Ruge, September 1843, available at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09-alt.htm
- 60 Automation will play a role in communization, to be sure, but it is difficult to imagine what that role will be in care work: will we become mere living appendages to intelligent machines, tending to our young and old, our distraught, our lovers, and our gardens? Or is the labor of care fundamental to our humanity?