

From the Materiality of Labor to the Political Strength of the Working Class

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At the beginning of the *Grundrisse* Marx discovers commodities as the objectified form of our general social relation. He immediately points out that the historical role of the capitalist mode of production is to engender, “for the first time”, through “personal independence founded on objective dependence”, “a system of general social metabolism, of universal relations, of universal needs and universal capacities”, as a condition for a following stage of “free individuality based on the universal development of individuals and on their subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth”.

By the beginning of the 1970s it seemed that the accumulation of capital was advancing in this direction, through the development of public education, public health, the centralization of capital as state property, the processes of national and social liberation, etc. All of these developments took form through the strength of the political and union organizations of the working class. It even seemed that superseding capitalism was just a matter of developing a revolutionary consciousness able to take power. Ten years later, all of these processes were pointing backwards: privatizations, deep differentiations in the selling of labor power, multiplied unemployment, the advance of finance over production, etc. All of these changes took shape through the retreat of the unions and the political parties of the working class, who visibly lost their power, or even worst, they just became neoliberals. So much so, that claiming that the point is to change the world without taking power could be seen as the non plus ultra of a revolutionary consciousness.

Such a reversion in the basis of the accumulation of capital is frequently explained as a matter of the capitalist class’ political will to discipline the working class, or even as a matter of its revenge upon the working class. But we must recall that it is not consciousness which determines social being, but concrete social being which determines, i.e. takes concrete shape in, consciousness. Therefore, from a materialist point of view, we must search for the roots of these changes in political power starting from the very materiality of the process of social production and its consequential modes of organization.

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Up to the 70s, the production of relative surplus value through the system of machinery hold at its core two processes of manual labor: the calibration of machinery and the assembly line. To this technical basis corresponded the production of relatively undifferentiated workers. Consequently, individual capitals profited from the reproduction of labor power in large scale through the direct action of the state.

But the production of relative surplus value through the system of machinery has the technical necessity to remove all manual labor from the flow of production. And by the early 80s computing matured to the point of allowing the substitution of manual skills through the automation of machinery and robotized assembly line. Consequently, capital's needs for labor power radically change: now, on the one hand, it needs workers bearing a constantly developed productive subjectivity related with intellectual labor and, on the other hand, workers with practically no skills to operate as appendix of the machinery and in manual labor. The new international division of labor is the main form in which the process of capital accumulation in its global unity developed this differentiation. In brief, the classical countries that produced the generality of the commodities they consumed left place to some countries specialized in complex labor, and other countries specialized in simple unskilled labor. From the old international division of labor only rest the countries specialized in the production of raw materials. Beyond these three broad types of countries, remain those that mainly became reservoirs of laboring surplus population. In the first type of countries, immigration became the source of cheap labor power for the processes of production that require it. Now, the access to education, health, housing, etc. ceased to be based on citizenship, to become an attribute of individual wages. Meanwhile the centralization of capital flowed beyond the range of national states.

Consequently, the development of the capitalist mode of production is currently taking a concrete form opposite to its general historical determination as the condition for the production of universal individuals bearing universal capacities and universal needs. This is a critical matter for the political organization of the working class. The central question is how to develop the mutual recognition as historical subjects between the workers that perform the more complex labor and those who perform unskilled labor, and, moreover, between both types of active workers and the increasing mass of consolidated relative laboring surplus population. This very same question crosses the national boundaries. Yet, these questions are far from being at the core of the political organizations of the working class today. On the contrary, we are witnessing a trend towards an increased antagonism between the members of the working class determined by capital in those three different ways, mediated at the same time through their international competition. The surge of nationalism, xenophobia, racism, warmongering, religion, are expressions in this sense.

In turn, the process of general overproduction currently suffered by the global accumulation of capital (once and again extended through the expansion of insolvent credit and the issuing of money to the point of creating the appearance that finance has become the true source of capital accumulation) deepens the antagonism.

Moreover, the working class faces a further technical transformation that will deepen the differentiation in the conditions for its reproduction. The production of relative surplus value points now to a greater elimination of manual workers and of workers as

appendixes of the machinery at the shop-floor, however cheap their labor power could be.

All this evidences confront us with a question that roots the revolutionary organization of the working class. A widespread point of view aims to base this organization on the conception of freedom as a natural condition inherent to human beings, which suffers from mutilation under capitalism. But let us return to our starting point: let us face the existence for the first time in history of a system of “personal independence founded on objective dependence” whose historical necessity is to engender the concrete material conditions for “free individuality based on the universal development of individuals”. Thus faced, it becomes evident that human freedom is not a natural condition but a historical form of social relation specifically inherent to this mode of production. It becomes evident that, as historical concrete human subjects, that is to say, as members of the working class, our freedom from personal dependency is the form taken by our submission to our objectified general social relation, to capital. As Marx puts it in *Capital*: “From a social point of view ... the working class, even when not directly engaged in the labor process, is just as much an appendage of capital as the ordinary instruments of labor. Even its individual consumption is ... a mere factor in the process of production”. But, at the same time, it becomes evident that capital is an objectified social relation that bears in itself the necessity to produce its own supersession into a society of free individuality based on the universal development of individuals. This contradiction is what determines the working class as a revolutionary subject. The political freedom of the working class to supersede the capitalist mode of production is the necessary concrete historical form taken by the development of its alienation in capital. In other words, from this contradiction arise the historical powers of the working class. But, at the same time, it is this same contradiction which takes concrete form in the antagonistic relations within the working class itself. In order to advance determining itself as a consciousness that points towards the “universal development of individuals”, the political organization of the working class as a revolutionary subject needs to start by recognizing itself in its contradictory determination of being a free action that carries in itself the movement of alienation. The recognition of this concrete determination of the working class’ subjectivity, is a necessary first step in the political organization of the working class able to engender its universal solidarity.

In brief: the political organization of the working class as a revolutionary subject is not a matter of the affirmation of abstract naturalized freedom. It is a matter of a freedom that affirms itself through the negation of its own alienated content and, therefore, a matter of the negation of the negation of freedom as it is historically determined as a specific social relation of the capitalist mode of production.