

Capital, Technology and Proletariat

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The origins of the proletariat must be sought in the historical period when feudal society organized itself around the economy and was transformed into capitalist society. This happened when the rule of capital, dominant in commodity circulation, invaded the sphere of production by means of an “industrial revolution”, in which the division of labor and technology would play leading roles. The commodity, that is, the product that is exchanged for money, had arisen at various moments throughout history, always in connection with commerce, but had never before occupied a central place in society, and its logic had therefore never previously determined the social order. Not until the 18th century—the century of the Enlightenment—did the moment arrive when the enormous demand generated by the military needs of the States give birth to a new system of production, the factory, with its corresponding one-sided technology based on science and mass production. The very fact that production became the production of commodities is fundamental because it implies a special commodity that adds value to the raw material: that commodity is labor. In short, it required the creation of a proletariat. Capital created its antagonist, the wage worker, under conditions that were established by a particular technology and by a certain course of development pursued by the State. The industrial proletariat is also the offspring of both of these factors. Concretely, it is as much the fruit of the steam engine, as it is of the regimentation of labor in accordance with the military-industrial model.

The changes ushered in during the modern era were preceded by a slow evolution of thought, during the course of which reason replaced religion and disenchanting the world. Secularized man descended from the heavens to the earth. The world, once it was viewed correctly, could be explained on its own terms, without spiritual guides. Science came to be accepted as the highest form of thought, displacing tradition and authority. A new faith emerged, the faith in progress, the belief that human betterment would be almost automatically achieved with the generalization of scientific knowledge and technological innovations. But progressivist reason was not content with the satisfaction of knowledge, but wanted to advance under the sign of domination. In addition to dominating the forces of nature and putting them at the service of the ruling interests, the doctrine of progress implied a goal, the complete demolition of the past, which was perceived as miserable backwardness, as opposed to the future, which was depicted as almost a paradise. Constant change, an elementary premise of science and technology, was raised to the status of a moral duty. To oppose change was to be against progress, to advocate poverty and ignorance. The balance of forces tilted in favor of the machine and rationalized organization,

because the rule over nature, in other words, progress, turned into servitude under science and technology. This instrumentalist mentality paved the way for capitalism and created favorable conditions for its development. In the new context imposed by the commodity, the worker was a piece of the industrial mechanism, the source of surplus value, and a slave of the machine. The production of commodities, and therefore labor, would be increasingly subordinated to rationalization and technological innovation. Real capitalist domination is impersonal, since its directors are always the mere executors, for good or ill, of rules they do not control. It consists in the power of things over people, or, more precisely, the power of abstraction over social and ecological reality, thanks to which the individual appears as the intermediary between things, as a secondary part of a mechanism, a plaything of alien laws, regardless of how this power is personified to its victims. This abstraction assumes a material form through eminently technical means. It becomes increasingly dependent on technology. Thus, although domination would be more and more disconnected from the concrete economic sphere in order to become increasingly technical in nature, technology itself, having grown up within the economic sphere, at the heart of the abstraction, would gradually be transformed into a futuristic fetish situated above classes. Scientific-technological criteria would be internalized, displacing ideological and political criteria in the management of private and public affairs. Finally, for the good of the economy and that of the dominant culture, science and technology would begin to assume the form of an ideology as guides for the organization of individual and collective existence.

During its first stage, the basic contradiction of capitalism was the contradiction between capital and wage labor, between the bourgeois class and the working class. The real domination of things over individuals, which is the essence of capitalism, initially assumed the appearance of personal or class exploitation. There appeared to be an absolute incompatibility between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat despite the fact that the class struggle took place within capitalism and the fact that capital and labor, as two poles of the same relation, together constitute a special community of interests. Actually, their radical antagonism was the result of the commodity's rapid penetration of society; the growth of capitalism outstripped the development of its corresponding juridical and political forms—for example, the right to vote, freedom of association and the right to strike. These forms, hamstrung by the remnants of the old regime that still affected the classes, were incapable of mitigating the conflict. This is why the workers movement began by demanding not just labor reforms, but also political rights, and faced with the insurmountable obstacles that stood in its way, it concluded that there was no other way to remove them except social revolution. As the historical forms that conformed to bourgeois needs were in the process of being established, the workers movement was split over the question of methods, and only remained united with regard to the question of its goals. Reformists and revolutionaries both claimed to be pursuing the same goals, even if the means they utilized were different. Nonetheless, the practices of reformism and Jacobinism led to the creation of the labor bureaucracy and its clientele, whose existence was made possible by the decline of skilled trades and their integration into the system. In a subsequent stage of political-economic development, the workers parties, trade union collaborationism, Fordism, etc., revealed that the contradiction between capital and labor was not as absolute as it had previously appeared to be. Social reforms did not pave the way for the workers' State or the workers' community, but gave rise to the development of a consumer society.

It is true that the revolutionary proletariat created communes, factory committees, unitary trade unions, workers councils, militias and collectives, which comprise the undefeated part of

its movement and its legacy to future revolutions. However, the debacle represented by the construction of a totalitarian State in Russia, the defeat of the Spanish Revolution and the inter-class anti-fascism of the postwar era led some to question the historic role of gravedigger of capitalism that was once attributed to the international working class. Facts such as massive participation in parliamentary elections, mass consumption and the entertainment industry revealed a population of wage laborers who identified with bourgeois morality. Other realities, such as automation or the expansion of the service sector, highlight the widening gap that has opened up between production and the proletariat; in all, the existence of a class society in the process of dissolution, a mass society. Just as the classes were a creation of immature capitalism, the masses are a creation of mature capitalism. They are the result of the decline of the working class in the face of the predominance of technology in production and managed consumption. Unlike classes, masses are incapable of emancipating themselves. They are composed of uprooted individuals, separated from any kind of solidarity or relation that is not mediated by propaganda or the spectacle. On the social plane, this means that all life has now become private life, indoctrinated, surveyed and compelled to consume. In mass society, technology is in command; man is the raw material of the machine, the instrument by which one social mechanism constructs another, yet more mechanistic social mechanism. The dominant values have become directly technical values, because technology is decisive both with regard to capital formation and the apparatus of power. The tendency for mass society to become a factory, a shopping mall, a jail and a laboratory at the same time, or, to put it another way, the will of the autonomous apparatus of power to become capable of determining life in accordance with the criteria that correspond to those four subsystems, reveals the real primary contradiction of capitalism, the contradiction that is generated by the clash between the technophile logic of the commodity and the social life over which it has seized control, including its biological environment. Exploitation does not cease at the end of the working day. All of life has been expropriated and, given the impact of this expropriation on the ecosystem, all of life is directly endangered. The contradiction reaches its climax by threatening the survival of the species. Capitalism, in its late stage, brings the era of instrumentalization to an end, the era when political, economic and moral ideals were supposed to lead to a technological utopia and, as a result, technology, or “dead labor”, embraces life in all its aspects, since the latter is unfolding in an increasingly more artificial environment. Cutting-edge technology is the human destiny under late capitalism. In such a regime, there is no other hope besides continuing on the course of technological innovation, although along the way, due to the demands of the apparatus of power—whether one calls it the technocratic oligarchy or simply the megamachine—all human qualities will disappear and the planet will be destroyed.

The revolts of the sixties and seventies did not fail to point out the limitations of the old workers movement and to define the revolution as a subversive transformation of our entire way of life. The situationist definition, “the proletarian is someone who has no power over his life and knows it”, transferred the class struggle to the terrain of everyday life, which to some extent clashed with the SI’s councilist workerism, as opposed to the more coherent combatant communities or fraternities of the American radicals. In Europe, however, the industrial proletariat still occupied the center of production, and the new class consciousness came into conflict with the old. Young radicals often found themselves in conflict with the old militants in the factories. The workerist ideal became entirely obsolete in the midst of the widespread emergence of lifestyles that demanded freedoms of every kind, free experimentation and the abolition of all social prejudices and conventions. The last waves of the workers movement in response to the crisis of

the modernization process were still capable of creating the illusion of a reprise, or a second offensive, of a kind of “workers autonomy”, but this was the part of the movement that suffered the most decisive defeat, while the movement as a whole had the potential to go much further. As long as the rebellion in the factories went hand in hand with the rebellion of everyday life, there was a degree of rediscovery and autonomy, but this conjunction was fleeting. The bitter taste of defeat during the following years undermined the unrealistic optimism of the previous years. Institutionalization, subsidies and electoral mechanisms had transformed the workerist bureaucracy into a reactionary factor of the first order, which the minor skirmishes mounted by the radical workers were unable to prevent. With rare exceptions, the latter remained on the same terrain; the struggles over wages, working hours or job security, however legitimate they may have been, however violent they were and however many assemblies arose from their struggles, did not transgress the limits of capital, and therefore did not undermine the political-trade union clientelism, nor did they contribute to the decolonization of everyday life. They did not fight against capitalism, but against a specific form of capitalism, one that was undergoing a process of self-liquidation. Furthermore, the subsequent capitalist offensive of the eighties liberalized customs, generalized consumption and put an end to the radical outbreaks in the factories. Automation displaced the mass of wage workers towards construction, distribution and tourism. The trade union pact restored a model of vertical negotiation and obscured the class consciousness of revolts. Repression took care of the rest. The struggle at the workplace was definitively separated from the struggle for an untrammelled life without capitalist catastrophes. The idea of revolution was completely discredited and relegated to the museum of utopias. The persistent residual workerism was increasingly caught between the contemplation of a consumerist mass of wage workers, docile and manipulable, and the dream of an abstract working class, the bearer of universal ideals of emancipation. From then on, it barricaded itself in its ghetto and survived in the form of sects, with their dogmas, their symbols and their rituals; it ceased to be a simple ideology born from an insufficient social analysis and practice, in order to accommodate itself to the space reserved for it by the technological era.

The consideration of labor as the element that is common to all of society, as its organizational principle, as advocated by the supporters of the proletarian revolution, amounts to presenting socialism as a regime of workers in pursuit of social reform by evolutionary processes that have been liberated from the capitalists. Under this perspective—which is that of progress, or that of the bourgeoisie—socialism is nothing but a corrected version of capitalism, and the workers movement is an agent of modernization. This journey does not require a lot of packing and the workerist bureaucrats chose it with their eyes open: real capitalism was effectively the only socialism that was possible, whether it is called the “Welfare State” or the “highly developed” society. According to this view, the danger is not integration but exclusion, not having too much capitalism but too little. If in the past, socialism was often presented as the coherence of capitalism, now that another more “human” (and more Keynesian) version is thought to be possible, capitalism has proven to be the coherence of socialism. Anti-capitalism, if it does not want to be trapped in a contradiction, must mount a profound response to the forces of production and the laws of the market. Production and distribution of commodities will not cease to be production and distribution of commodities just because production and distribution fall into the hands of the workers, and should this take place, it will reproduce in one form or another precisely what it sought to destroy: bosses, private property, industry, market, the State. Labor, which, once embedded in a

fully developed society of consumption can no longer constitute a community of the oppressed, is even less capable of serving as the basis for any kind of free society. Only life can be that basis.

To abolish capitalism without abolishing the proletariat would be equivalent to reproducing another form of capitalism and, as a corollary, another ruling class, and another State. To abolish the proletariat without rejecting the ideology of progress leads to the same results. If you want to bring the reign of the commodity to an end, you need to abolish labor as well as the technology associated with its existence; in short, you must free individuals from the condition of being workers, you must free them from the objectivized social relation that transforms them into wage workers, accessories to the machine and slaves of consumption. The suppression of labor must take place first of all in production, but not by means of the collective appropriation of the means of production, or by way of automation, but by the dismantling of the urban-factory system and the abandonment of the centralizing machinery. And at the same time, this process must be carried out in circulation as well, but not only by means of the abolition of money and the market, but with the elimination of technologized leisure, that new form of labor. A life emancipated from labor is not a life of leisure; among other things, it is a life in which productive activity, the “metabolism with nature”, obeys the satisfaction of needs and does not determine social functioning, it does not alter “universal fraternity” in the least way (that is, it does not impede the reproduction of free social relations). The revolution aspires to nothing but breaking the chains of labor—especially those of technology—in order to facilitate the reappropriation of life on the part of individuals, by way of the free construction of all the moments of their lives. By putting an end to the constrictions of separate power and autonomous technology, by putting an end to artificialization, by putting an end to the manipulation of needs, eroticism, desires and dreams, life will be freed from barriers and impositions, and will be at its own disposal: it will escape from the sphere of labor and consumption, that is, of harmful phenomena and submission. The relations between man and machine, between humanity and nature, or, more precisely, between individuals and things, will have to be reinvented, and society will have to be reconstructed morally and with regard to the requirements of mutual coexistence, without hierarchies, with the aid of a multifaceted technology based in agriculture, the arts and the satisfaction of real needs and authentic desires. To restore equilibrium to the land, to reduce the size of the cities and to establish new relations with the environment that are not based on domination. To build free communities. Paradoxically, although tradition must regulate the rhythms of social life, this does not mean returning to one or another moment of the past, but making a clean slate of the present.

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