

## THE METAMORPHOSES AND CENTRALITY OF LABOUR TODAY \*

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This text explores some of the meanings and dimensions of the changes taking place in the labour world, as well as looking at the consequences, theoretical and empirical, entailed by these transformations, such as the relevance and pertinence of the category of labour in the contemporary world.

### I

As a result of the transformations and metamorphoses of the last decades, in particular in the developed capitalist countries and with significant repercussions in third world countries with intermediary industrialisation, labour presents a multiple process. On the one hand, we see a *de-proletarianisation* of industrial labour in the capitalist developed countries. In other words there has been a reduction of the traditional industrial labour class. In parallel, on the other hand there is a significant *underproletarianisation* of labour occurring in the diverse forms of partial, precarious, casual, subcontracted labour attached to the manufacturing industries, to the informal economy and to the private sector. Therefore, one can see a significant *heterogeneity, complexity and fragmentation* of labour.

Empirical evidence from various research studies has not supported the thesis of the suppression or elimination of the working class under capitalism, especially in view of the increase of multiple forms of casual or precarious labour. This is not to mention the fact that substantial parts of the *class-that-makes-a-living-from-labour* is strongly rooted in intermediary industrialised countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Russia, India, Korea, among others, where this class performs central activities in the production process. Instead of 'farewell to proletariat' (Gorz, 1982) we have a large

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## Centrality of Labour

differentiated spectrum of groups and segments making up the *class-that-makes-a-living-from-labour*. (see Antunes, 1995)

In the 1980s capitalism displayed profound transformations in the world of labour, its insertion in the productive structure, its forms of unionism and political representation. The modifications were so intensive that we can even claim that the *class-that-makes-a-living-from-labour* experienced the sharpest crisis of this century, not only affecting its *material* side but having profound repercussions on its *subjectivity* and the intimate interrelationship of these levels; it affected its way of being.

A decade of big technological development, automation and organisational mutations invaded the manufacturing universe, penetrating and developing in the labour and capital production relations. We live in the world of production, an assemblage of experiments which are more or less intensive, more or less consolidated, more or less present, more or less biased, more or less embryonic. Fordism and Taylorism are no longer alone and they combine with other productive processes (neo-fordism and neo-taylorism), in certain cases being substituted, as in 'Toyotism' in Japan. New labour processes emerge where the chronometer and production in series are replaced by flexibility of production, by new patterns seeking productivity, by new forms of adapting production to the logic of the market. Modes of industrial de-concentration are experimented with in the search for new patterns of management of the labour force of which 'total quality processes' are visible expressions not only in the Japanese world but also in several developed capitalist countries and in the industrialised third world. Toyotism mixes or even replaces the Taylorism and Fordism patterns. (Murray, 1983; Sabel and Piore, 1984; Clarke, 1991; Annunziato, 1989; Harvey, 1992; Coriat, 1992a, 1992b; Gounet, 1991 and 1992; Amin, 1996) We are in the midst of transitory forms of production with acute implications for labour rights. These are de-regulated, they are made flexible in order to give capital the necessary resources for its new phase.

These transformations, already present or arriving in due course, to a greater or lesser extent (depending on various conditions of economic, social, political, cultural, gender and ethnic order) in different countries deeply penetrate the traditional industrial labour force and carry with them metamorphoses in labour. The crisis also strongly affects the universe of consciousness, the workers' subjectivity, its forms of representation of which

the workers' unions are an expression. (Beynon, 1995; McIlroy, 1997; Wood, 1997; Fumagalli, 1996; Antunes, 1995) Which consequences are the most evident and which deserve a bigger reflection? Is the *class-that-makes-a-living-from-labour* disappearing?

As we said initially, we are in the presence of a multiple process: on the one hand we observe a de-proletarianisation of industrial manufacturing and manual labour, i.e., a reduction of the traditional industrial working class, especially, but not only, in the developed capitalist countries. It is also possible to see a significant process of intensive underproletarianisation present in the expansion of partial, precarious, casual and temporary labour that characterises the 'dual society' of developed capitalism. It has given effect to a substantial amount of labour subcontracting in several productive sectors as well as to an extension of salaries to the service sector. This heterogeneity of labour is expressed through the increasing incorporation of female workers. In short there has been a de-proletarianisation of manual, industrial and manufacturing labour; a heterogeneity, underproletarianisation and precariousness of labour: overall, a reduction of the traditional industrial labour force and an increase of the *class-that-makes-a-living-from-labour*.

The following are some examples of this multiple process present in the labour world. We start with the question about underproletarianisation of manual and industrial manufacturing labour. For instance, in the case of France; in 1962 the work force in manufacturing was 7,488,000. In 1975 this number reached 8,118,000, but in 1989 it was reduced to 7,121,000. While in 1962 this represented 39% of the active population, in 1989 this index fell to 29%. (Bihl, 1990; 1991, 87,108)

We could say that 'in the important western European industrialised countries, the number of effective workers active in industry represented about 40% of the active population in the beginning of the 1940s. Today its proportion is situated around 30%. It is foreseen that it will be reduced to 20% or 25% in the beginning of the next century.' (Gorz, 1990b; 1990) This data is evidence of a clear reduction of the manual and industrial manufacturing proletariat in the countries of developed capitalism, whether as a consequence of recession, or especially as a result of automation, robotics and the multiple processes of flexibility. (Antunes, 1995; Beynon, 1995)

## Centrality of Labour

In parallel, there is in the trend to de-proletarianisation a significant expansion of heterogeneity and complexity of the *class-that-makes-a-living-from-labour*, resulting from the underproletarianisation of labour existent in the precarious or casual forms of labour. To illustrate this point, in the period 1982 to 1988 in France, there was a reduction of 501,000 full-time jobs but an increase of 111,000 part-time jobs. (Bihr, 1990; 1991, 88-9) That is, while various western developed capitalist countries saw their full-time jobs decreasing, they were seeing, simultaneously, an increase of forms of underproletarianisation through the expansion of partial, precarious, casual and temporary forms of labour.

Gorz adds that approximately 35% to 50% of the British, German, French and American active population are unemployed or developing precarious, partial jobs, giving expression to what is currently called the 'dual society'. (Gorz, 1990a and 1990)

In the increased underproletarianisation of the labour force, a significant segment is composed of women. Of the 111,000 part-time jobs created in France between 1982 and 1988, 83% have been taken up by the female labour force. (Bihr, 1990; 1991, 89 ) It can be said that the female labour force represents, on average, 40% or more of the whole labour force. (See Beynon, 1995, for the case of the United Kingdom.)

In the same way, we have an intensive process of 'salarisation' of the services sector as noted in the claim that in the '...research on structure and tendencies in the development of the highly industrialised western societies we find more frequently its characterisation as "service society". This is in relation to the absolute growth connected to the "service sector".' (Offe & Berger, 1991, 11. Translated by M. Brandao.)

Meanwhile, there are other important consequences resulting from the 'technological revolution'. Along with the quantitative reduction of the traditional labour force there is a qualitative alteration in the way labour is done. The reduction of the *variable* dimension of capital resulting from the growth of its *constant* dimension - in other words, the replacement of *living labour* by *dead labour* - offers (as a tendency) the possibility of conversion of the worker into a *supervisor and regulator of the production process*, according to Marx in the *Grundrisse*. (Marx, 1974) However, by reading

this work we can see that for Marx it was impossible for this tendency to become effective due to the need to extract surplus value under capitalism.

Therefore, there is a possibility raised by Marx under the technological impact on the labour process, which is characterised by the intellectualisation of labour in the process of creation of values carried out of *combined social labour*. This allowed Marx to say:

Since with the development of the real subsumption of labour under capital or the specifically capitalist mode of production it is not the individual worker but rather a socially combined labour capacity that is more and more the real executor of the labour process as a whole, and since the different labour capacities which cooperate together to form the productive machine as a whole contribute in very different ways to the direct process by which the commodity, or, more appropriate here, the product, is formed, one working more with his hands, another more with his brain, one as a manager, engineer or technician, etc., another as an overlooker, the third directly as a manual worker, or even a mere assistant, more and more of the functions of labour capacity are included under the direct concept of productive labour, and their repositories under the concept of productive workers, workers directly exploited by capital and altogether subordinated to its valorisation and production process. If one considers the total worker constituting the workshop, his combined activity is directly realised materially in a total product which is at the same time a total quantity of commodities, and in this connection it is a matter of complete indifference whether the function of the individual worker, who is only a constituent element of this total worker, stand close to direct manual labour or is far away from it. (Marx, 1994, 443-4)

That is evident even today, according to Mészáros:

The understanding of the development and self-reproduction of the capitalist mode of production is quite impossible without the concept of the *total social capital*... Similarly, it is quite impossible to understand the manifold and thorny problems of nationally varying as well as socially stratified labour without constantly keeping in mind the necessary framework of a proper assessment: namely the irreconcilable antagonism between *total social capital* and the *totality* of labour. (Mészáros, 1995, 891)

It is obvious that this antagonism becomes particularised in relation to the local socioeconomic circumstances, the insertion of each country in the

## Centrality of Labour

global structure of production of capital and the relative maturity of the global social-historic development. (Mészáros, 1995, 891)

For all this, to speak of the end of labour under capitalism seems to lack a more solid foundation, empirical and analytical. It is evident when we verify that two-thirds of the labour force are found in the industrialised and intermediary Third World, including China, and where these tendencies have a particular rhythm.

In fact, what seems to occur is a quantitative change (reduction in the number of traditional workers) and a qualitative alteration that is bipolar. The worker becomes more qualified in certain branches, a *supervisor and regulator of the production process*. At the other extreme of the bipolarisation, we can see that the worker becomes intensively disqualified in various branches and diminished in others, as in the case of the miners and metalworkers. Therefore, there is a metamorphosis in the labour universe which varies from branch to branch, sector to sector, etc., which is the configuration of a contradictory process that increases skills in certain branches and de-skills more in others. (Lojkine, 1990, 1995; and Freyssenet, 1989) Hence, the labour world has become more complex, heterogeneous and fragmented.

On one side, we can see an effective process of intellectualisation of manual labour. On the other side, and in an opposite sense, a de-qualification and an underproletarianisation expressed in precarious, informal, and temporary labour. It is possible to say that the first tendency would be more coherent and compatible with technological advance; the second has in modern capitalism constantly displayed its destructive logic, showing that neither the labour force will disappear so quickly and fundamentally, nor is it possible to visualise, under the prevalence of the logic of capital, the elimination of the *class-that-makes-a-living-from-labour*.

## II

The indications referred to above, in a synthetic manner, allow us in the second part of this paper to address some of the current theses by critics of the 'work or labour society', as well as offering an analytic sketch for the understanding of this problematic. What crisis of the 'work society' is at issue? Is there uniformity as to the designing of this critical analysis?

Contrary to those authors who claim that labour has become less central in contemporary society, the current trend towards either a greater intellectualisation of industrial labour or the incrementation of qualified labour, or towards de-qualification or underproletarianisation, does not allow one to infer the end of the centrality of labour in a society based on the production of marketable goods. Although there has been a quantitative reduction in industrial production (with qualitative repercussions), abstract labour performs a decisive role in the creation of exchange values. The reduction of real labour time in the production process, as well as the reduction of direct manual labour and the expansion of more intellectualised labour, do not deny the law of value when one considers the labour totality, the *socially combined labour capacity*, the *collective worker* as an expression of multiple combined activities.

When we speak of the crisis of the work society it is absolutely necessary to specify which dimensions we are talking about: if it is a crisis of abstract labour society (Robert Kurz, 1991) or if it is also about the labour crisis in its concrete dimension as a structural element of the social interchange between men and nature (Offe 1989; Gorz, 1982, 1990, 1990a; Habermas, 1989; among others). In the first case, the crisis of abstract labour society, there is a differentiation which seems decisive and that, in general, has been neglected. The essential question here is: Is contemporary society moving permanently by the logic of capital, by the system of production of market goods? If the answer is affirmative, the crisis of abstract labour can only be understood as a reduction of *living labour* and an increase of *dead labour*.

The alternative critique that minimises, and in some cases denies, the prevalence and centrality of the logic of capital in contemporary society is, for many writers, the basis of their denial of the central role of labour: denial of labour in its *abstract* dimension as the source of exchange values, i.e., abstract labour is no longer decisive today, as much as in its *concrete* dimension, once it would not have major relevance in the structure of an emancipated society and in a life full of meaning. Either by its qualification as a 'services society', 'post-industrial' and 'post-capitalist', our contemporary society, 'less capitalist' and more 'contractual' or even more 'consensual', would not be centrally directed by the logic of capital. Habermas provides a balanced version of this thesis:

## Centrality of Labour

The utopian idea of a society based on social labor has lost its persuasive power...above all because that utopia has lost its point of reference in reality: the power of abstract labor to create structure and give form to society. Claus Offe has compiled convincing 'indications of the objectively decreasing power of matters of labor, production, and earnings to determine the constitution and development of society as a whole'. (Habermas, 1989, 53)

After referring favourably to Gorz's work, Habermas adds, '...the utopian core, liberation from alienated labor, took a different form. Emancipated living conditions worthy of human beings are no longer to emerge directly from the revolutionizing of labor conditions, that is, from the transformation of alienated labor into self-directed activity.' (1989, 54) Although Habermas is referring to the abstract dimension of labour, it is evident in this interpretative line that labour no longer has a structural potential, either as abstract labour in the universe of contemporary society or as a foundation of a 'work society utopia' as concrete labour. Indeed, he says, '...the utopian accents have moved from the concept of labor to the concept of communication.' (1989, 68; See also Méda, 1995, 220) We believe that without the precise and decisive incorporation of the distinction between *abstract* and *concrete labour* in the *effective* bid of farewell to labour (e.g., Habermas'), a strong analytical mistake is made because such a train of thought as that followed above considers in only one way a phenomenon that has a double dimension.

It does not seem plausible to conceive human society without social labour as a creator of use value and the form of interchange between social being and nature. If it is possible to see *beyond capital* and to visualise the elimination of the abstract labour society - this naturally articulated with the end of 'capital's order of social metabolic reproduction' (Mészáros, 1995, 39,71) - it is something ontologically distinct to suppose or conceive the end of labour as *useful activity*, as a *vital activity*, as a foundational element, a *protoform* of human activity. In other words, it is one thing to conceive, together with the elimination of capital, the end of abstract labour, of estranged labour. It is another very distinct thing to conceive the elimination of concrete labour that socially creates useful things in the human universe and, in doing so, transforms its own creator. Once labour lacks this double dimension it remains identified as synonymous with abstract labour, estranged labour and fetishism. In consequence of this occurrence, the better hypothesis is to imagine a society of meaningful 'free time' coexisting with the existent estranged labour forms.

Our thesis is that despite the heterogeneity, complexity and fragmentation of the working class, the possibility of an effective human emancipation can still achieve real social viability from the revolts and rebellions that centrally originate in the labour world; a simultaneous emancipation process *of* labour, *in* labour or *by* labour does not exclude nor suppress other important forms of rebellion and contestation. However, in a society that produces commodities and exchange values, labour revolts still have a statute of centrality. The whole large group of salaried workers that makes up the service sector, plus the subcontracted and informal workers, the domestic workers, the unemployed and the sub-employed, added to the workers directly producing and acting as a class, will constitute the social segment with the greatest potential to oppose capital. Obviously, this possibility depends on the socioeconomic particularities of each country, on its insertion in the international division of labour, as well as on the subjectivity of social beings living from labour and their political, ideological and cultural values.

Therefore, contrary to the affirmation of the end of labour or of the working class, there is another more pertinent point of enormous significance to us. In the world's ongoing conflicts initiated by workers and by those in socially excluded segments, is it possible to detect greater potentiality and even greater centrality inside the more qualified stratum of the working class, i.e., among those who live in a more 'stable' situation and that consequently have a greater level of participation in the process of value creation? Or, on the contrary, is the more fertile base for action to be found exactly within those social segments which are more excluded, within the more underproletarianised stratum?

It is known that those social segments, which are more qualified and intellectualised, evolve together with technological development, and exercise a central role in the process of creating exchange values, could be endowed, at least objectively, with greater potentiality to oppose capital. However, these more qualified sectors are those that have often subjectively experienced greater involvement with and subordination to capital, of which the attempts at workforce manipulation by strategies such as Toyotism are the best expression. Conversely, the enormous group of precarious, partial and temporary workers that we call the sub-proletariat, together with the large segment of unemployed, would have a less relevant role in the anti-

## Centrality of Labour

capitalist struggles due to their greater distance (or even exclusion) from the process of value creation and also the material sphere in general. Nevertheless, their condition of being de-possessed and excluded places these segments potentially as subjects capable of assuming more daring actions, since these social segments have nothing else to lose in capitalism. Their subjectivity could be more prone to rebelliousness.

The recent strikes and social explosions witnessed by capitalist countries, especially in the 1990s, often combine elements of these two poles of 'dual society' and constitute important examples of these new confrontations. One should note, for example, the Los Angeles explosion, the Chiapas rebellion, the emergence of the MST (Landless Rural Workers' Movement) in Brazil, or the various workers' strikes, like the public workers' strike in November-December 1995 in France, the long strike by dockworkers in Liverpool (Sept. 1995-Feb. 1998), or the strike by two million metalworkers in South Korea in 1997, or even the strike in the USA by 185,000 Teamsters uniting part-time and full-time workers against United Parcel Service in August 1997. (Petras, 1997; Dussel, 1995; Soon, 1997; Levrero, 1997)

Capitalism, in any of its contemporary variants from the Swedish to the Japanese experience, from the German to North American experience, not to mention the Third World, despite their differences, was not able to eliminate the multiple forms and manifestations of *estrangement* (*Entfremdung* or 'alienation' as it is currently denominated). In many cases, however, it was given inclusively an intensified process and a greater interiorisation in the sense there was a reduction of the most explicitly despotic dimension intrinsic to Fordism, in favour of 'manipulatory involvement' of the Toyotism era or the Japanese model. (Antunes, 1995, 91-2) If estrangement is understood as the existence of social barriers to the development of individuality, human omnilaterality and emancipated individuality, contemporary capitalism has simultaneously, by means of technological development, raised the potentialities of human capacities and intensified the social phenomenon of estrangement. In this sense, the development of human capacities has not necessarily produced the development of subjectivity in a full sense, but, on the contrary, 'it can demean and disfigure the human character...[since at the same time technological development may provoke]...directly an increase of human capacities...[but may also]...in this process, sacrifice individuals (and even entire classes)'. (Lukács, 1981, 562)

The existence of big pockets of poverty in the heart of the 'First World', which is the product of brutal social exclusion, explosive structural unemployment rates and the elimination of various professions inside the labour world, in the context of technological advance exclusively oriented to the creation of exchange values, is only one of the more direct and explicit examples of the obstacles under capitalism to an emancipated and meaningful life for the working class and social being. In this way it is evident that estrangement is an exclusively social-historic phenomenon, i.e., that in each moment of history it is always present in various forms and for that reason can never be considered as *condition humaine*, like a natural feature of social being. (Lukács, 1981, 559)

We know that in contemporary times various manifestations of estrangement reach beyond the sphere of production and are more intensive in the sphere of consumption, the sphere of life outside labour. To a considerable extent they make free time also subject to the values of the commodity production system. The social being must not only have the resources to live, but must constantly be induced to want to 'live for having' or to dream about new products, making for an enormous 'reduction of the necessities' of the workers. (Heller, 1978, 64-5)

We believe – contrary to those who defend the loss of sense and meaning of the social phenomenon of estrangement – that the current changes in the labour process, despite some alterations which have been experienced, did not eliminate the conditions which generate the successive actions in the labour world against the various manifestations of estrangement and fetishism.

Therefore, contrary to the formulations that envisage the end of social struggles between classes, it is possible to recognise in contemporary society the persistence of antagonisms between *total social capital* and the *totality of labour*, even though they are particularised by the various elements that characterise the region, country, economy, society, its insertion in the global structure, etc. (Mészáros, 1995, 891) Given the universalised and globalised character of capital, it has become necessary to learn the particularities and singularities in the conflict between social classes, as much in developed countries as in those not directly in the core of the system, such as India, Brazil, South Korea etc. However, that is beyond the limits of this text.

## Centrality of Labour

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## Centrality of Labour

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