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Globalising the Working-Class Concept

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The "working class" concept, which originated in 19th-century Europe, has been questioned more and more in the past decades. This criticism comes partly from scholars who are interested in Asia, Africa and Latin America. They point out that the borderlines between "free" wage labour, self-employment and unfree labour are not clear-cut and that the opposition between urban and rural labour should not be made absolute.¹ Jan Breman has already defended this view since the 1970s in his studies of contemporary Gujarat. In addition, Nandini Gooptu has demonstrated in her research of the urban poor in Uttar Pradesh that it is plausible that this view is also true of the early twentieth century.² Criticism has also been expressed in part by historians of the early modern North Atlantic region. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker made a fragmentary picture of how a multiform proletariat of "hewers of wood and drawers of water" developed, with various sites of struggle: "the commons, the plantation, the ship, and the factory." They made it seem likely that slaves and maroons from Africa, indentured labourers from Europe, native Americans, and "free" wage earners and artisans constituted a complex but also socially and culturally interconnected amorphous "multitude," which was also regarded as one whole (a "many-headed Hydra") by those in power. Linebaugh and Rediker referred to the 1791 rebellion of Haitian slaves as "the first successful workers' revolt in modern history." They suggested that this revolution contributed to the segmentation of that rebellious "multitude" afterwards: "What was left behind was national and partial: the *English* working class, the *black* Haitian, the *Irish* diaspora."³ The narrow nineteenth-century concept of the proletariat we find in Marx and others was a result of this segmentation.

The question I will address in the following pages is what a new concept of the working class might look like that would take into account the insights offered by Breman, Gooptu, Linebaugh and others. In order to find an answer to this question, I will start off with a constructive critique of Marx' concept of the working class. I use Marx as a starting point for two reasons: he is still an important source of inspiration

¹ V.L. Allen was one of the first to initiate this discussion in "The Meaning of the Working Class in Africa", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 10, 2 (1972), 169-189. See also Charles Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America. Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), especially chapters 1 and 6.

² Jan Breman, *Patronage and Exploitation. Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat* (Berkeley [etc.]: University of California Press, 1974); *idem*, *Of Peasants, Migrants and Paupers. Rural Labour Circulation and Capitalist Production in West India* (New Delhi [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 1985); *idem*, *Beyond Patronage and Exploitation. Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat* (New Delhi [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 1993); *idem*, *Footloose Labour. Working in India's Informal Economy* (Cambridge [etc.]: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge [etc.]: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra. Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 327, 319, 286.

for scholars around the world and in spite of several weaknesses his analysis is still the best we have.

1. *The Complexity of Labour Power Commodification*

The opening sentences of Marx' *Capital* are famous: "The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an 'immense collection of commodities'; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity." ⁴Marx regarded the capitalist mode of production as the consequence of the commodification of (i) labour power, (ii) means of production and raw materials, and (iii) labour products. The first element is crucial in this context. Marx made the assumption that labour power can be commodified in only one way that is "truly" capitalist, namely via free wage labour, in which the worker "as a free individual can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity" and "has no other commodity for sale."⁵ He emphasized that "labour-power can appear on the market as a commodity only if, and so far as, its possessor, the individual whose labour-power it is, offers it for sale or sells it as a commodity." ⁶

The narrow concept of the working class is based on this idea. If only the labour power of free wage labourers is commodified, the "real" working class in capitalism can only consist of such workers. Marx' hypothesis has, as far as I know, never been supported by proper reasoning. It probably seemed self-evident for a long time, because it seemed to correspond to the process by which a proletariat was formed in the North Atlantic region. Nevertheless, Marx' hypothesis is based on two dubious assumptions, namely that labour power should be offered for sale by the person who is the *carrier* and *possessor* of this labour power and that the person who sells the labour power offers it *exclusively*.⁷ Why should that be so? Why can the labour power not be sold by someone other than the carrier? Why can the person who offers (his or her own, or someone else's) labour power for sale not sell it conditionally, together with means of production? And why can a slave not perform hired labour for a third party to the benefit of his owner? If we only look at the distinction between a "carrier" and an "possessor" of labour power as such, we can already distinguish four types of labour commodification, namely *autonomous* commodification, in which the carrier of labour power is also its possessor and *heteronomous* commodification, in which the carrier of labour power is not its possessor; in both cases, the carrier's labour power can be offered by the carrier him- or herself or by another person (Table 1).

⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I. Trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 125.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁷ The term "selling" is not really appropriate in the case of wage labour, because it is always a *temporary* sale, and usually we would not refer to such a transaction as "selling," but as "hiring out." This seems a futile difference but the theoretical implications can be great. See Franz Oppenheimer, *Die soziale Frage und der Sozialismus. Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit der marxistischen Theorie* (Jena: Verlag von Gustav Fischer, 1912), 119-122; Michael Eldred and Marnie Hanlon, "Reconstructing Value-Form Analysis", *Capital and Class*, No. 13 (Spring 1981), 24-60, 44; Anders Lundkvist, "Kritik af Marx' løn-teori", *Kurasje*, No. 37 (December 1985), 15-46, 16-18; Michael Burkhardt, "Kritik der Marxschen Mehrwerttheorie", *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftswissenschaften*, 46 (1995), 121-137, 125-127; and Peter Ruben, "Ist die Arbeitskraft eine Ware? Ein Beitrag zu einer marxistischen Marxkritik", in Heinz Eidam and Wolfdietrich Schmied-Kowarzik (eds), *Kritische Philosophie gesellschaftlicher Praxis* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1995), 167-183.

Table 1: Some Forms of Labour Commodification

	Autonomous (the carrier is the possessor)	Heteronomous (the carrier is not the possessor)
The carrier sells his or her own labour power	Free wage labour (Marx) Sharecropping Labour by self-employed artisans	Wage labour by slaves
The carrier does not sell his or her own labour power	Subcontracted wage labour	Labour by chattel slaves Wage labour by children

It seems to be a reasonable assumption that labour commodification has many forms of which the free wage labourer is only one example.⁸ I will explore these multiple forms below both by pointing at the transitional forms between Marx' subaltern classes, and also by uncovering some false implicit assumptions. I hope this deconstruction will prepare the ground for a new conceptualization.

2. Gradual transitions

In addition to capitalists and landlords, the Marxian tradition distinguishes five subaltern classes or semi-classes in capitalism in addition: the free wage labourers, who only own their own labour power and sell this; the petite bourgeoisie, consisting of small commodity producers and distributors; the self-employed, who own their labour power and means of production and sell their labour products or services (the "self-employing labourer is his own wage labourer, his own means of production appear to him as capital. As his own capitalist he employs himself as his own wage labourer"⁹); the slaves, who neither own their labour power nor their tools and are sold (in slavery "the worker is nothing but a living labour-machine, which therefore has a value for others, or rather is a value."¹⁰); and the lumpenproletarians, who are not sold and do not sell anything. The last group usually remains outside the analysis and is mainly used as a residual category.

The class struggle is waged mainly between capitalists, landlords and wage earners. The other classes are historically less important; they "decay and finally disappear in the face of modern industry."¹¹

? Slavery is "an anomaly opposite the bourgeois system itself", which is "possible at individual points within the bourgeois system of production", but "only

⁸ John Hicks already came to the conclusion that there are several forms of labour power commodification: "Either the labourer may be sold outright, which is slavery; or his services only may be hired, which is wage-payment." John Hicks, *A Theory of Economic History* (Oxford, 1969), 123. A first elaboration of this view can be found in Götz Rohwer, "Kapitalismus und 'freie Lohnarbeit'. Überlegungen zur Kritik eines Vorurteils", in: Hamburger Stiftung zur Förderung von Wissenschaft und Kultur (ed.), *"Deutsche Wirtschaft". Zwangsarbeit von KZ-Häftlingen für Industrie und Behörden* (Hamburg, VSA-Verlag, 1991), 171-185.

⁹ Karl Marx, "Ökonomische Manuskripte 1863-1867", in *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*. Second Edition, vol. II/4.1 (Berlin: Dietz, 1988), 111.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*. Translated with a Foreword by Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 465.

¹¹ "Manifesto of the Communist Party", in: Karl Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848. Political Writings*, vol. 1. Trans. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 77.

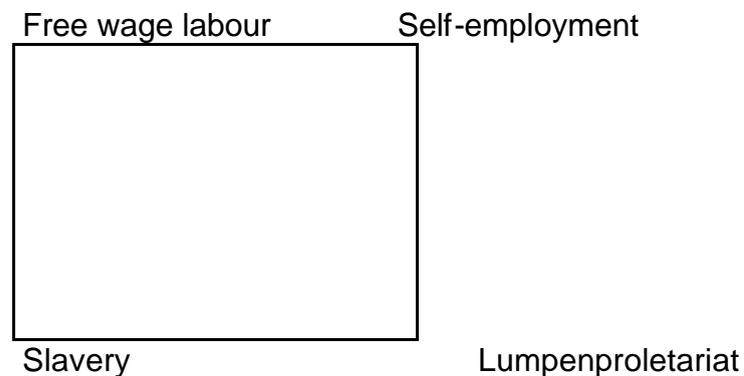
because it does not exist at other points.”¹²

? Self-employed workers are “anomalies” which exist in “small family-based agriculture (in connection with cottage industry).”¹³

? The petite bourgeoisie, “the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and *rentiers*, the handicraftsmen and peasants — all these sink gradually into the proletariat.”¹⁴

? The lumpenproletariat is the “dangerous class”, the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society,”¹⁵ which includes “vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes”.¹⁶

According to this Marxian scheme, there is a gap between the free wage labourers and the other subaltern groups. But does this scheme at all match historical reality? Do Marx' free wage labourers really exist? I would argue that there is an almost endless variety of producers in capitalism and that the intermediate forms between the different categories are vague and fluid.



It is perhaps useful to look more closely at some of these intermediate forms; between wage labour and slavery; between wage labour and self-employment; between slavery and self-employment; and between wage labour, slavery and self-

¹² *Grundrisse*, p. 464.

¹³ Karl Marx, *Theorien über den Mehrwert*, in: *Marx-Engels Werke*, vol. 26/3, p. 414.

¹⁴ "Manifesto of the Communist Party", in: Karl Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848. Political Writings*, vol. 1. Trans. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 75.

¹⁵ "Manifesto of the Communist Party", in: Karl Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848. Political Writings*, vol. 1. Trans. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 77. On Marx' conceptualization of small commodity producers see also the appendix in Christine Jaeger, *Artisanat et capitalisme: l'envers de la roue de l'histoire* (Paris: Payot, 1982), 297-314.

¹⁶ *Capital*, I, 797. Compare *The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850*: "a mass sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat, a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds, living on the crumbs of society, people without a definite trade, vagabonds, *gens sans feu et sans aveu*." Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. I (Moscow, 1951), p. 142. See also Peter Hayes, "Utopia and the Lumpenproletariat: Marx's Reasoning in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*", *Review of Politics*, 1988, 445-465.

Different views on the position of prostitutes in the class system can be found in Marx' writings. When he discusses the relative surplus population in *Capital*, he regards prostitutes as an important part of the "actual lumpenproletariat" (*Capital*, I, 797) Elsewhere, especially in the *Theories of Surplus Value*, Marx says that prostitutes, if they work for a brothel keeper, perform unproductive wage labour, like actors or musicians, and thus are, by implication, part of the proletariat in the narrow sense of the word. (*Marx-Engels Werke* [MEW], vol. 26/1, 136, 157) This shows once again how the ways in which social class is defined is full of false considerations, which often remain implicit, precisely because they are their moralistic and characteristic of their time. This is probably what Resnick and Wolff refer to as the "discursive device" inspired by "an urgent polemical intent". Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff, *Knowledge and Class. A Marxian Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 161-162.

employment on the one hand, and the lumpenproletariat on the other.

Intermediate forms between wage labour and slavery. There are various labour relations in which the wage earner is physically forced to do his or her work, whereas the wages are paid or have to be handed over to a third person. Child labour, in which case the parents or guardians of the child receive the wages, is a good example. Young Japanese girls who were hired out as *geishas* in exchange for a sum of money were an example of this.¹⁷

Many instances are known of slaves who performed wage labour for their masters. In Buenos Aires at the end of the eighteenth century, for example, this phenomenon was so common that many slave owners were completely dependent on the wages of their slaves. The notarial accounts of the time suggest that “in long labor contracts, wages, minus estimated living expenses, were commonly paid directly to slave owners by employers of hired slave labor.”¹⁸ It is perhaps useful to distinguish three varieties:

? The slave owner compels the slave to do wage labour for another employer and collects all or part of the wages. Often, “the slave-owners and slave employers arranged the rate of hire over the slave’s head”, but “the situation of a slave actively seeking and negotiating his or her own hire” occurred as well.¹⁹

? The slave owner pays his or her slaves in cash for an extra effort, either by means of “bonuses, either as gifts or as incentives”, or as a “payment made for extra work in task systems or for working overtime.”²⁰

? The slave works voluntarily for his wages, for an employer or for a fellow slave. The Blue Mountain estate in Jamaica in the late eighteenth century is an example of the latter case: “The slaves paid each other wages. Sunday work on the provision grounds, for example, could earn 1s.8d per day plus breakfast”.²¹

Of course, especially this last variety considerably blurs the distinction between a wage earner and a slave.

Conversely, wage labourers are often less free than the classical view suggests. Employers have often restricted their employees’ freedom to leave in case of labour scarcity. An employee can be tied to an employer in many ways:

? Debt bondage is a method that occurred on all continents, from the Scottish coal mines in the eighteenth century to contemporary agriculture in Latin America and South Asia.²²

¹⁷ J. Mark Ramseyer, “Indentured Prostitution in Imperial Japan: Credible Commitments in the Commercial Sex Industry”, *The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization*, 7 (1991), 89-116, here 101.

¹⁸ Lyman L. Johnson, “The Competition of Slave and Free Labor in Artisanal Production: Buenos Aires, 1770-1815”, in: Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *Free and Unfree Labour: The Debate Continues* (Berne [etc.]: Peter Lang Academic Publishers, 1997), 265-280, here 273.

¹⁹ O. Nigel Bolland, “Proto-Proletarians? Slave Wages in the Americas”, in: Mary Turner (ed.), *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves: The Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas* (Kingston [etc.]: Ian Randle [etc.], 1995), 123-147, 128.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

²¹ Mary Turner, “Chattel Slaves into Wage Slaves: A Jamaican Case Study”, in: Turner, *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves*, 33-47, here 39.

²² T.S. Ashton, “The Coal-Miners of the Eighteenth Century”, *The Economic Journal: Economic History Series*, No. 3 (January 1928), 307-334, here 308.

? Indentured labour is of course closely related to debt bondage. The Indian, Javanese and Chinese coolies who were employed in South Africa, Latin America or other parts of Asia are a well-known example of this.²³

? The mobility of workers could also be limited by means of certificates of leave. Without these means of identification, workers could not be hired by any employer. It was a characteristic feature of this practice that the employer took possession of the certificate at the start of the employment and gave it back to the worker only when he or she had, in the employer's view, satisfied all his or her obligations.²⁴

? Physical compulsion was another option for employers. Sometimes employers went as far as locking up their wage-earning employees to prevent them from being "tempted" by their business rivals. In the Japanese textile industry of the 1920s, female workers were locked up in dormitories for that reason. Sometimes, they were not allowed to leave the premises for more than four months.²⁵

? Social security provisions and other special benefits offered a less aggressive way of binding employees. Around about 1900, Argentinian companies, for example, created mutual aid and friendly societies which were run by the company and designed to make the workers dependent on the firm.²⁶ Garden plots which were provided by the company could have the same effect, because they made a supplement to the wages possible, either because the home-made vegetables, poultry, etc. reduced the living expenses, or because this garden produce was bought up by the employer.²⁷

? Finally, the connections between an employer and an employee outside the immediate employment relationship could have a binding effect. (I will expand on this below.)

Intermediate forms between wage labour and self-employment. In the classical view, the labourer only disposes of his or her own labour power, but not of other means of production. There were many exceptions to this rule.

? One example is the labourer who takes his or her own tools to the workshop, as was and still is common in many places. Already in the 1880s, the German economist August Sartorius von Waltershausen observed in the United States that "Unlike their European counterparts, American factory workers commonly own their own tools. [...] Tools often constitute a sizable proportion of a worker's wealth."²⁸

? A second possibility is that workers have to borrow their means of production from the employer. In that case, they pay a deposit and are formally independent. The rickshaw pullers in Changsha, Hunan Province, China, around 1918 are an

²³ See the review in Lydia Potts, @.

²⁴ See the example of Cuban cigar makers in the 1850s in Joan Casanovas, *Bread, or Bullets! Urban Labor and Spanish Colonialism in Cuba, 1850-1898* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), 60.

²⁵ John E. Orchard, *Japan's Economic Position: The Progress of Industrialization* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1930), 343.

²⁶ Ruth Thompson, "Trade Union Organisation: Some Forgotten Aspects", in: Jeremy Adelman (ed.), *Essays in Argentine Labour History, 1870-1930* (Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 1992), 160-176, here 161.

²⁷ The buying up of produce by the employer occurred according to Jane L. Parpart, *Labor and Capital on the African Copperbelt* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 42, in the copper mines of Northern Rhodesia in the 1930s.

²⁸ August Sartorius von Waltershausen, *The Workers' Movement in the United States, 1879-1885*. Eds. David Montgomery and Marcel van der Linden (New York [etc.]: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 216.

example of this. Their rickshaws were the property of "garages" (*che-zhan*) and had to be hired every day. The garage owner paid the rickshaw tax and the puller had to make a deposit of ten Mexican (silver) dollars. "Each cart had a number and was assigned to a certain puller who was always responsible for it. If the rickshaw was broken and laid up for repairs, the daily rent still had to be paid."²⁹ The puller's income consisted of the difference between his earnings and his payments to the garage owner.

? It also happened that an employee was allowed to keep part of his labour product (output) and sell it independently. Silver miners in Pachuca (Mexico) in the mid-eighteenth century received a sum of money (wages) for a specified basic amount of silver ore and everything they produced in excess of that was divided in two parts: "from his half, the pickman gave a certain proportion to the porters, timber-men and to the other mine workers who had helped him."³⁰ We know that similar arrangements existed in agriculture, in Java and in many other places.³¹

Intermediate forms between slavery and self-employment. The case of Simon Gray, a slave from the south of the United States, who served as the chief boatman of the Natchez lumber company from 1845 until 1862, shows how complicated capitalist reality could be. Gray's crews usually numbered between ten and twenty men and were made up of both African-American slaves and white rivermen. "Some of the slaves were the property of the company, while others, like Gray himself, were hired from their owners by the firm. The white crewmen, on the other hand, were employed by the Negro, who kept their records, paid their expenses, lent them money, and sometimes paid their wages. Consequently, they looked upon Gray as their employer." Gray and his men were often away from home for two to three weeks. During these trips, Gray performed a great many managerial tasks. "In addition to making deliveries he also solicited orders for the mill, quoted prices, extended credit to customers, and collected money owed to the lumber company."³² Thus, this case shows a slave who functioned as a manager, free wage labourers who were employed by a slave, and other slaves who had to obey this employer. Not all of the slaves were owned by the Natchez Co., but some, including Gray, were hired from other slave owners. This situation is, no doubt, unusual from a historical point of view. In another situation, slaves worked as sharecroppers. In Jamaica in the late eighteenth century, the situation sometimes occurred "that the 'better sort' of slaves had established grounds and were using the 'poorer sort' to work them in return for

²⁹ Angus W. McDonald, Jr., *The Urban Origins of Rural Revolution: Elites and the Masses in Hunan Province, China, 1911-1927* (Berkeley [etc.]: University of California Press, 1978), 147. Nowadays, a very similar arrangement still exists in the case of *jeepney* drivers and taxi drivers in Manila. See Michael Pinches, "'All that we have is our muscle and sweat'. The Rise of Wage Labour in a Manila Squatter Community", in: Michael Pinches and Salim Lakha (eds.), *Wage Labour and Social Change: The Proletariat in Asia and the Pacific* (Monash University, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1987), 103-136, here 118.

³⁰ Cuauhtemoc Velasco Avila, "Labour Relations in Mining: Real del Monte and Pachuca, 1824-74", in: Thomas Greaves and William Culver (eds.), *Miners and Mining in the Americas* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 47-67, here 57.

³¹ See for instance Gillian Hart, *Power, Labor, and Livelihood: Processes of Change in Rural Java* (Berkeley [etc.]: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 180-182; Frans Hüsken, "Landlords, Sharecroppers and Agricultural Labourers: Changing Labour Relations in Rural Java", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 9 (1979), pp. 140-151.

³² John Hebron Moore, "Simon Gray, Riverman: A Slave Who Was Almost Free", *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 49 (December 1962), pp. 472-84; reprinted in: James E. Newton and Ronald L. Lewis (eds.), *The Other Slaves: Mechanics, Artisans and Craftsmen* (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1978), pp. 157-67, here 158-59.

the share of the produce."³³

Intermediate forms between wage labour/slavery/self-employment and lumpenproletariat. The transition from the three main forms (slavery etc.) to the "non-class" of the lumpenproletariat is also gradual. V.L. Allen claimed that "In societies in which bare subsistence is the norm for a high proportion of all the working class, and where men, women, and children are compelled to seek alternative means of subsistence, as distinct from their traditional ones, the *lumpenproletariat* is barely distinguishable from much of the rest of the working class."³⁴

? "Respectable" workers who were destitute also felt compelled to steal.

Organized looting of food by workers was "a nation-wide phenomenon" in the United States by 1932.³⁵ Such looting reappeared in Italy in the early 1970s.³⁶

? Scavenging also occurred frequently in hard times and could even become customary law. Louis Adamic noted in 1935 that "[e]ver since anyone in the Pennsylvania anthracite field can remember, it has been customary for miners and their families to go with sacks or pails to the culm dumps surrounding their bleak towns and pick coal from among the rock and slate thrown out in the breaking and cleaning processes at the big collieries. The pickers usually were the poorer families."³⁷

? Theft, embezzlement and pilfering have traditionally been "normal" activities for some groups of workers. It is common among dockers in many countries to steal part of a shipment, but in factories and offices, such thefts by lower employees also occur frequently.³⁸

³³ Mary Turner, "Chattel Slaves into Wage Slaves: A Jamaican Case Study", in: Turner, *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves*, pp. 33-47, here 34.

³⁴ V.L. Allen, "The Meaning of the Working Class in Africa", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 10, 2 (1972), pp. 169-189, here 188.

³⁵ Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years. A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (Boston, 1960), p. 422.

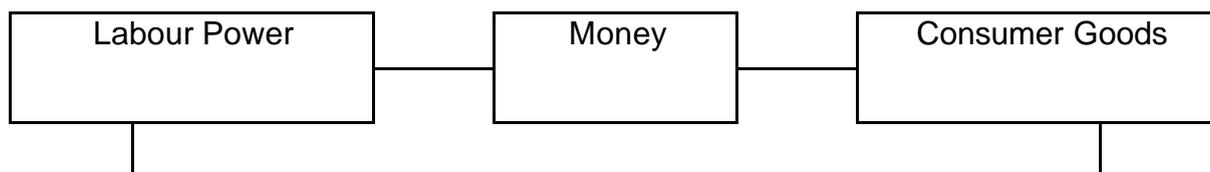
³⁶ Yann Collonges and Pierre Georges Randal, *Les autoréductions. Grèves d'usagers et luttes de classes en France et en Italie (1972-1976)* (Paris: 10/18, 1976), Ch. 4.

³⁷ Louis Adamic, "The Great 'Bootleg' Coal Industry", *The Nation*, 40 (1935), p. 46. A description of concurrent developments in Upper Silesia appears in: Lothar Machtan, "Die 'Elendsschächte' in Oberschlesien: Bergmännische Selbsthilfe-Initiativen zur Überwindung von Arbeitslosigkeit um 1930", *Jahrbuch Arbeiterbewegung — Geschichte und Theorie 1982* (Frankfurt/Main: EVA, 1982), pp. 141-155.

³⁸ Jason Ditton, "Perks, Pilferage, and the Fiddle: The Historical Structure of Invisible Wages", *Theory and Society*, 4 (1977), 39-71. Case studies include: Gerald Mars, "Dock Pilferage: A Case Study in Occupational Theft", in: Paul Rock and Mary McIntosh (eds), *Deviance and Social Control* (London, 1974), 209-228 Michael Grüttner, "Working-Class Crime and the Labour Movement: Pilfering in the Hamburg Docks, 1888-1923", in: Richard J. Evans (ed.), *The German Working Class 1888-1933. The Politics of Everyday Life* (London and Totowa: Croom Helm and Barnes & Noble, 1982), 54-79; Peter d'Sena, "Perquisites and Casual Labour on the London Wharfside in the Eighteenth Century", *London Journal*, 14 (1989), 130-147; Adrian J. Randall, "Peculiar Perquisites and Pernicious Practices. Embezzlement in the West of England Woollen Industry, c. 1750-1840", *International Review of Social History*, 35 (1990), 193-219; Anna Green, "Spelling, Go-Slows, Gliding Away and Theft: Informal Control over Work on the New Zealand Waterfront, 1915-1951", *Labour History*, No. 63 (1992), 100-114; Ines Smyth and Mies Grijns, "Unjuk Rasa or Conscious Protest? Resistance Strategies of Indonesian Women Workers", *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 29, 4 (1997), pp. 13-22, here 21. William Freund reveals the possibility of a smooth transition to theft as a collective act in "Theft and Social Protest Among the Tin Miners of Northern Nigeria", *Radical History Review*, No. 26 (1982), pp. 68-86.

3. Implicit assumptions

The classical view does not only make sharp distinctions between phenomena that are no fixed entities in reality, but it also makes implicit assumptions that need to be scrutinized. A number of these assumptions arise from the idea that workers exchange their labour power with an employer for money and then buy food products with that money. By consuming these goods, they reproduce their labour power, which they can then sell again to the employer. Thus, on the level of circulation, there is a cyclical process, which is shown in the following diagram:



This concept of circulation is an abstraction of many elements and suggests a complex, isolated process. In the first place, it suggests that the consumption of the wages earned by the employee does not require labour. The purchase of consumer goods and the effort to make them suitable for consumption (for instance selling and preparing food, or hiring and cleaning a living space) are not taken into account. Feminists however have pointed out for decades that wage labour cannot exist without subsistence labour.³⁹ Sporadically, there are employees who reproduce their labour power without subsistence labour, but these are people with a very high income: "The real proletarian fully reproducing himself through the wage for his labour is at the most the Yupi (Young Urban Professional), who as an upwardly mobile executive of a multinational firm buys a sandwich for lunch and meets his Yupi wife (perhaps a stock-broker or university professor) in the evening in a restaurant for dinner, while a domestic servant cleans the rented apartment. The normal wage labourer however is reproduced by a housewife or actively participates in subsistence production."⁴⁰ In most cases, subsistence labour is done by one or more women in the household, the wife or wives and sometimes the daughters of the *paterfamilias*. It is also possible that the wage earner himself employs one or more wage earners who do the domestic work. Many white working-class families in South Africa in the early twentieth century, for instance, had a black domestic servant, who, among other things, was responsible for "the making of fires, cleaning stoves, sweeping, washing dishes, preparing morning and afternoon tea, keeping the yard clean, and doing such routine garden work as weeding and watering."⁴¹

Secondly, the diagram seems to suggest that the relationship between employer and employee is limited to the exchange of money for labour power. Possible ties between both parties outside the circulation process are not taken into consideration. But, of course, these ties can exist. The employer can bind the employee economically, for instance by providing accommodation owned by the company or by

³⁹ The literature on this theme is so enormous that I will limit myself to the mention of one representative work: Sylvia Walby, *Patriarchy at Work. Patriarchal and Capitalist Relations in Employment* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986).

⁴⁰ Hans-Dieter Evers, "Schattenwirtschaft, Subsistenzproduktion und informeller Sektor", in: Klaus Heinemann (ed.), *Soziologie wirtschaftlichen Handelns* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1987), 353-366, here 360.

⁴¹ Charles van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*. Vol. 2: New Nineveh (Harlow: Longman, 1982), 30-31.

making it obligatory for the employee to buy consumer goods that the employer offers for sale with the income earned as wages (the so-called truck system).⁴² But the relationship between the employer and the employee need not be economic, for instance if both are related or belong to the same religious community. Instances of company housing and other similar forms of material bonds can be found especially, but certainly not exclusively, in large companies, for example the United Fruit Company, which housed its *campesinos* in Central America on the plantations, or the steel firm Krupp in Germany.⁴³ Non-economic bonds are probably relatively more common in small companies.

Thirdly, the cyclical diagram suggests that an employee has only one employer and that he or she is only involved in one labour relation at a time. This phenomenon did indeed occur frequently and is common among artisans and skilled labourers, but this is not the case for a large part of the world population dependent on wages, neither in the past, nor at present. People with several jobs are quite common in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The same was true for Europe in the decades before the rise of the welfare state. It is again true for contemporary Russia, where at least around 15 to 20 percent of the employed population had supplementary employment in the mid-1990s.⁴⁴ It is of course also perfectly possible that the employee has different kinds of income. André Gunder Frank has rightly spoken of "fluidity in owner-worker relations." He gives the example of "a single worker who is simultaneously (i) owner of his own land and house, (ii) sharecropper on another's land (sometimes for half, sometimes for a third of the crop), (iii) tenant on a third person's land, (iv) wage labourer during harvest time on one of these lands, and (v) independent trader of his own home-made commodities."⁴⁵ The relative importance of the different sources of income can change repeatedly in the course of time, as Adam Smith already knew.⁴⁶

Fourthly, the circulation model focuses on the relationship between one employee and his or her employer. But it is perfectly possible that labourers are employed as a *group* by an employer. Sometimes this is done by means of a subcontractor who recruits workers in the surrounding area and subsequently hands them over to an employer. In the Shanghai textile industry of the early twentieth century, for example, there was the *pao-kung* system in which the subcontractor "hired" girls from neighbouring villages for three years from their parents and then "hired them out" to

⁴² On the truck system see for example: George W. Hilton, *The Truck System Including a History of the British Truck Acts, 1465-1960* (Cambridge, 1960).

⁴³ Studies on company housing include: S.C. Aggarwal, *Industrial Housing in India* (New Delhi, 1952); A. Graham Tipple, "Colonial Housing Policy and the 'African Towns' of the Copperbelt: The Beginnings of Self-Help", *African Urban Studies*, 11 (1981), 65-85; Joseph Melling, "Employers, Industrial Housing and the Evolution of Company Welfare Politics in Britain's Heavy Industries: West Scotland, 1870-1920", *International Review of Social History*, 26 (1981), 255-301; Michael Honhart, "Company Housing as Urban Planning in Germany, 1870-1940", *Central European History*, 23 (1990), 3-21; Mark Crinson, "Abadan: Planning and Architecture under the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company", *Planning Perspectives*, 12 (1997), 341-359;

⁴⁴ Stephen Hussey, "Low Pay, Underemployment and Multiple Occupations: Men's Work in the Inter-war Countryside", *Rural History*, 8 (1997), pp. 217-235; Eduard V. Klopov, "Secondary Employment as a Form of Social and Labor Mobility", *Sociological Research*, 37, 2 (March-April 1998), pp. 64-87.

⁴⁵ André Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil*. Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), pp. 271-272.

⁴⁶ "In years of plenty, servants frequently leave their masters, and trust their subsistence to what they can make by their own industry. [...] In years of scarcity, the difficulty and uncertainty of subsistence make all such people eager to return to service." Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (London: Everyman's Library, 1991), p. 74.

British and Japanese cotton mills in the city during that period.⁴⁷ In another arrangement, the subcontractor supervises the workers recruited by him and is thus working for his client as well. This was, for example, the case in many Indian and Chinese coal mines.⁴⁸ It could also happen that a group of labourers hired themselves out to an employer without the mediation of a subcontractor, as in the case of harvest workers operating in the European part of Russia in the nineteenth century, who were organized in *artels* ("cooperatives").⁴⁹

Fifthly and finally, according to the model, the cycle is broken when a labourer does no longer offer his labour power for sale and stops working. This suggests that strikes are a form of collective action that is associated especially with free wage labourers and also that this is the only possible form of action. But if we look at the ways in which protest is expressed and pressure is exerted by the different groups of subaltern workers (i.e. the slaves, the self-employed, the lumpenproletarians, and the "free" wage labourers), these appear to overlap considerably. In the past, all kinds of subaltern workers went on strike. The sharecropping silver miners in Chihuahua, for instance, protested as early as the 1730s against the termination of their work contacts by the owners of the mine by entrenching themselves in the nearby hills. "There they built a makeshift stone parapet, unfurled a banner proclaiming their defiance, and vowed to storm the villa of San Felipe, kill San Juan y Santa Cruz, and burn his house to the ground. For the next several weeks they refused to budge from their mountain redoubt, where they passed time by composing and singing songs of protest."⁵⁰ The miners returned only after mediation by a priest sent by the bishop. Slaves regularly went on strike too. On plantations in the British Caribbean in the early nineteenth century, for example, there were one-sided walkouts. "The rebellions in Demerara in 1829 and Jamaica in 1831 both began as versions of the modern work strike, coupled with other acts of defiance, but not with killing. Only when the local militia retaliated with force, assuming that this was another armed uprising, did such an occurrence actually take place."⁵¹ Conversely, free wage labourers used action methods which are usually associated with other groups of subaltern workers, such as lynching, rioting, arson, and bombing.⁵²

⁴⁷ Jean Chesneaux, *Chinese Labor Movement 1919-1927*. Trans. H.M. Wright (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), p. 57.

⁴⁸ Dilip Simeon, *The Politics of Labour Under Late Colonialism: Workers, Unions and the State in Chota Nagpur, 1928-1939* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), pp. 25-26; Tim Wright. "A Method of Evading Management' — Contract Labor in Chinese Coal Mines before 1937", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23 (1981), pp. 656-678.

⁴⁹ Timothy Mixer, "The Hiring Market as Workers' Turf: Migrant Agricultural Workers and the Mobilization of Collective Action in the Steppe Grainbelt of European Russia, 1853-1913", in: Esther Kingston-Mann and Timothy Mixer (eds), *Peasant Economy, Culture, and Politics of European Russia, 1800-1921* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 294-340.

⁵⁰ Cheryl English Martin, *Governance and Society in Colonial Mexico: Chihuahua in the Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 51.

⁵¹ Monica Schuler, "Akan Slave Rebellions in the British Carribean", *Savacou*, 1, 1 (June 1970). Reprinted in: Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd (eds), *Caribbean Slave Society and Economy: A Student Reader* (Kingston and London, 1991), pp. 373-386, here 382-383.

⁵² Rightly, Cloward and Fox Piven remark: "[...] some forms of protest are more or less universally available. Arson, whether in the fields of the preindustrial world or in the streets of the urbanized world, requires technological rather than organization resources, and not much of the former, either. Riots require little more by way of organization than numbers, propinquity, and some communication. Most patterns of human settlement, whether the preindustrial village or modern metropolis, supply these structural requirements." Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, "Collective Protest: A Critique of Resource-Mobilization Theory", in: Stanford M. Lyman (ed.), *Social Movements: Critiques, Concepts, Case-Studies* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1995), 137-167, here 148.

4. Towards new concepts

The reflections above show that the boundaries between the "free" wage labourers and other kinds of subaltern workers in capitalist society are vague and gradual. In the first place, there are extensive and complicated grey areas full of transitional locations between the "free" wage labourers and the slaves, the self-employed and the lumpenproletarians. Secondly, almost all subaltern workers belong to households that combine several modes of labour.⁵³ Thirdly, individual subaltern workers can also combine different modes of labour, both synchronically and diachronically. And finally, the distinction between the different kinds of subaltern workers is not clear-cut. The implications are far-reaching. Apparently, there is a large class of people within capitalism, whose labour power is commodified in various ways. In this context, I refer to this class as *subaltern workers*. They make up a very varied group, which includes chattel slaves, sharecroppers, small artisans and wage earners. It is the historic dynamics of this "multitude" that we should try to understand.

The first question that catches our attention is what all these different subaltern workers have in common. Where is the dividing line, the *fundamentum divisionis*, between them and the other party, of those who have more power? Taking Cornelius Castoriadis' idiom as a first guide, we could say that all subaltern workers are in a state of "instituted heteronomy." For this Greek-French philosopher, instituted heteronomy is the opposite of social autonomy; it manifests itself as "a mass of conditions of privation and oppression, as a solidified global, material and institutional structure of the economy, of power and of ideology, as induction, mystification, manipulation and violence." Instituted heteronomy expresses and sanctions "an antagonistic division of society and, concurrent with this, the power of one determined social category over the whole. [...] In this way, the capitalist economy – production, distribution, market, etc. – is alienating inasmuch as it goes along with the division of society into proletariat and capitalists."⁵⁴ We can become a bit more specific when we follow an indication by philosopher Gerald Cohen. He has argued that "lack of means of production is not as essential to proletarian status as is traditionally maintained. It is better to say that *a proletarian must sell his labour power in order to obtain his means of life*. He may own means of production, but he cannot use them to support himself save by contracting with a capitalist."⁵⁵ Following Marx, Cohen understands the phrase "must sell his labour power" in this context as economic compulsion, but if we also include physical compulsion, we come close to a clear demarcation.

Every carrier of labour power whose labour power is sold or hired out to another person under economic or non-economic compulsion belongs to the class of subaltern workers, regardless of whether the carrier of labour power is him- or herself selling or hiring it out and, regardless of whether the carrier him- or herself owns means of production. In a sense, this brings us back to the pre-Marxian concept of the "labouring classes." All aspects of this provisional definition require further research.⁵⁶

⁵³ For a full argumentation see my "Introduction" and "Conclusion" in Jan Kok (ed.), *Rebellious Families. Household Strategies and Collective Action in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2002), 1-23 and 230-242.

⁵⁴ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 109.

⁵⁵ G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford [etc.]: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 72.

⁵⁶ The concept of "economic compulsion," for example, deserves further consideration because it

Another question follows from the above. How can we conceptualise the internal differentiation of the subaltern class? As is well-known, the classical analysis focused on power in the production process. That process of production is of course characterised by a combination of three elements: “purposeful activity, that is work itself, the object on which that work is performed, and the instruments of that work.”⁵⁷ The product of labour is the fourth element of this analysis. Together these elements define the most important dimensions of the classical analyses that should be retained in a modified approach:

- i The relationship between the employee and his or her *labour power* (is the employee in control of his or her body, or is it the employer or a third party?);
- ii The relationship between the employee and his or her *means of production* (to what extent does the employee own his or her objects and instruments of work and to what extent are these objects and instruments owned by the employer or by a third party?);
- iii The relationship between the employee and his or her *labour product* (to what extent does the output of his or her effort belong to the employee and to what extent does it belong to the employer or to a third party?).

The observations in this paper seem to suggest that, beside the classical dimensions, three additional dimensions are relevant:

- iv The relationship between the employee and the other members of his or her *household* (what kind of social and economic dependencies do exist between the employee and the other household members?);
- v The relationship between the employee and his or her *employer outside the immediate production process* (to what extent is the employee through debts, housing, etc. tied to the employer?);
- vi The relationship between the employee and *other employees* within the labour relationship (what kind of social and economic dependencies do exist between the employee and his or her immediate colleagues?).⁵⁸

These six dimensions should allow us to develop a subtle range of variations with which we can describe the class position of an *individual* employee *vis-à-vis* one employer.⁵⁹ If an employee combines several jobs, then we have to carry out several

involves an important collective dimension. Even if every individual proletarian can, in theory, escape his fate by upward mobility, there can still be collective compulsion and lack of freedom, because “each [proletarian] is free only on condition that the others do not exercise their similarly conditional freedom.” G.A. Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom. Themes from Marx* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 263.

⁵⁷ Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 284. See also Karl August Wittfogel, “Geopolitik, geographischer Materialismus und Marxismus”, *Unter dem Banner des Marxismus*, 3 (1929), 17-51, 485-522, 699-735, here 506-522, and Etienne Balibar, “Sur les concepts fondamentaux du matérialisme historique”, in: Louis Althusser *et al.*, *Lire le Capital*. Vol. II (Paris: Maspéro, 1968), pp. 79-226, here 98.

⁵⁸ Naturally, dimensions may overlap. In the service sector, for instance, the means of labour and the labour product can be identical and in subcontracting the work team may consist of household members.

⁵⁹ Looking at subaltern workers as instituted heteronomy, we might say that the degree of heteronomy is larger as the employee has less power over (i) his or her own labour capacity, (ii) means of labour, (iii) labour product, (iv) the fellow members of his or her own household, (v) the relationship with the employer outside the immediate labour process, and (vi) possible fellow workers in the labour process.

of these class determinations. Moreover, because an employee usually belongs to a larger unit (household), it seems advisable to extend the analysis further and include the class positions of the other household members. This may lead to interesting incongruencies if one household unites diverging class positions.⁶⁰ Finally, these analyses should as much as possible be done longitudinally, because all household members can change their “jobs” during the course of their lives – that is, if they have a certain degree of freedom.⁶¹

A new typology could further differentiate the varieties distinguished in Table 1. We could, for example, distinguish three kinds of selling transactions of labour power according to whether they exclusively concern labour power, or also part of the means of production or all means of production. We should also take into account how the labour is paid. Immanuel Wallerstein once suggested a rudimentary typology, consisting of two main groups: those who must relinquish all the value that they produce and those who must relinquish part of that value. Both these groups can be subdivided further into those who receive either nothing, or goods, or money, or goods plus money in return. In this way, a matrix can be formed with eight categories, only one of which consists of “typical” wage laborers.⁶² We could incorporate this suggestion too.⁶³

But in whatever way we will tackle this, to me several warnings seem justified. In the first place, we should resist the temptation of an empirically empty “Grand Theory” (C. Wright Mills); instead, we need to create typologies on the basis of detailed empirical knowledge. Secondly, we should not study the different kinds of subaltern

In this sense women generally have less autonomy than men and the autonomy of wage earners is larger than the autonomy of slaves, but smaller than the autonomy of self-employed workers.

⁶⁰ For a discussion of the problem of “cross-class families” see: Brian Graetz, “The Class Location of Families: A Refined Classification and Analysis”, *Sociology*, 25 (1991), 101-118. Graetz proposes a “generic model for the joint classification of family class locations”.

⁶¹ For subjective reasons, not everybody changes his or her type of labour relationship easily. When the US-American social scientist Bakke lived in the working-class neighbourhood of Greenwich (London) in the early 1930s, he observed an “unwillingness to launch out into some sort of independent enterprise”. He explained this by “the inability of one who has been born and bred in the tradition of a wage-earner to visualize himself as an independent worker, his own boss.” This “lack of imagination” resulted from the wage earner’s work socialization: “The work routine, the regularity and simplicity of the routine outside working hours, the plodding necessities of the household economy – all of these enforce a discipline which trains for stability as a wage-earner but not for the independence and adaptability and personality necessary for success in an independent enterprise.” E. Wight Bakke, *The Unemployed Man: A Social Study* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1935), 126-127.

⁶² Immanuel Wallerstein, “Class Conflict in the Capitalist World-Economy”, in: Wallerstein, *The Capitalist World-Economy* (Cambridge [etc.] and Paris: Cambridge University Press and Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1979), 283-293, here 289-290. Wallerstein’s approach as such is certainly not suitable for our purpose as his category “proletarian” is reduced to “the most general and therefore the most abstract determinant of class – the appropriation of surplus product – and is imposed from without upon the most diverse social relations. Classes are defined in relation to the products of labor rather than by their relation to one another in the processes of social production and reproduction. It is as if people’s relations to things rather than to one another were decisive.” Dale Tomich, “World of Capital / Worlds of Labor: A Global Perspective”, in: John R. Hall (ed.), *Reworking Class* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 287-311, here 290.

⁶³ The work of political economists Robert W. Cox and Jeffrey Harrod might also prove stimulating. See Cox’ programmatic article, “Approaches to a Futurology of Industrial Relations”, *International Institute of Labour Studies Bulletin* (1971), No. 8, 139-164, and the elaboration of their work in two books: Cox, *Production, Power and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), and Harrod, *Power, Production, and the Unprotected Worker* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

workers separately, but consider the connections between them as much as possible. Sidney Mintz, for example, has cautioned us not to define "slave" and "proletarian" in isolation: "[These] two vast categories of toiler were actually intimately linked by the world economy that had, as it were, given birth to them both, in their modern form." We should take into account such links, since "a purely definitional approach leaves something to be desired."⁶⁴ In the third place, we should not regard subalterns as isolated individuals, because, in reality, they had better be analyzed as concrete human beings, who are part of families, systems of kinship, and other social and cultural networks. And finally, we should not look at subalterns primarily from the point of view of the nation state (as in "the Indian working class," etc.); it is better to regard the "national" aspect as something which has to be put into context and explained in itself. Breman and others made us face a broad and complex issue.

(translated by Stijn van der Putte)

⁶⁴ Sidney W. Mintz, "Was the Plantation Slave a Proletarian?", *Review*, 2, 1 (Summer 1978), 81-98, here 97-98.