

and being deprived of the means of subsistence, there would in fact no longer be any social compulsion to sell labour-power.²⁸ Without such compulsion, there would be no labour market, reserve army of labour, or devalorization of labour-power. Yet the labour theory of value sends its kind regards to liberal-communist ingénuus. The unconditional right to existence is as incompatible with really existing capitalism as participatory democracy was with 'really existing socialism'. In the profane world, universal income takes the form of a minimum income and state-aided exclusion. Thus Van Parijs's elucubrations do not even possess the merit of setting us dreaming. They veer towards the reactionary utopia of a market communism based on mixed ownership, without it being known who decides to invest, with what priorities, and according to which labour process.

Who Exploits Whom?

In the 1950s, Alan Touraine's sociology of labour accorded greater importance to group consciousness than to class consciousness. The fashionable theme of the day was social integration. With individuals no longer expressing their demands as producers but as 'consumers', the notion of class was becoming obsolete. In *La nouvelle classe ouvrière*, Serge Mallet, who never regarded the working class as a 'sociological community', criticized Touraine for confusing the condition of the working class as a sociological notion with the working class as a politico-historical concept. He highlighted the internal mutations in the working class (massification of unskilled workers, expansion of white-collar wage-earners), as opposed to its extinction. These recurrent polemics correspond to real social changes and more directly ideological developments (the promotion of individualism and apologies for competition go together with the disintegration or repression of class solidarities), obliging us to update the analysis of social movements.

If we must hit upon a definition of classes at any price, we should search (and search hard) for it in Lenin, rather than Marx:

Classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organisation of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social income of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it.²⁹

This didactic definition, certainly the least bad of those available, articulates three criteria:

- (a) position *vis-à-vis* the means of production (into which Lenin introduces the juridical definition of property – *laus*);
- (b) location in the division and organization of labour;
- (c) the nature (wage or otherwise), but also the size (amount), of income.

The fact that class involves 'large groups of people' should, moreover, cut short sterile sociological exercises on borderline cases or individual cases. The dynamic of class relations is not a principle of sectional classification.

Subjecting the empirical data of the official statistics to a critical interpretation in class terms makes it possible to test its conceptual relevance. According to the French census of 1975, nearly 83 per cent of the active population were at the time wage-earners (compared with 76 per cent in 1968). In the context of a general expansion of the wage-earning class, senior and middle managers and white-collar workers experienced the highest growth rates, together with significant changes in these same categories. From 1968 to 1975, the number of manual workers increased by 510,000 overall, and that of senior managers by 464,000, that of 'middle managers' by 759,000, and that of employees by 944,000. These crude statistics do not, however, allow a direct interpretation in class terms: for example, foremen are counted as workers, and technicians as middle managers. On the other hand, they do allow us to register an overall progression in workers and employees greater than that of senior and middle managers. Out of the total active population, the proportion of workers in the strict sense went from 33 per cent (in 1954) to 37.8 per cent in 1968, and then 37.7 per cent in 1975, while their numbers increased by half a million in this period.

With a total of 3,100,000, the category of office workers increased more rapidly than that of business employees, but it contains the staff of a number of public or nationalized enterprises, including 77,000 postal workers. Business employees account for 737,000 wage-earners, a majority of them women. According to Lenin's problematic, the overwhelming majority of these employees: (a) are not owners of their own instruments of labour; (b) occupy a subaltern position in the division of labour, exercise no authority and, in a significant number of cases, perform manual labour; and (c) have a wage income inferior to that of skilled workers. Accordingly, once we abandon the symbolic and ideologically charged image of a class identified, depending on the epoch, with the

profile of the miner, railwayman or steelworker, they belong in their great majority to the proletariat.

'Middle managers' experienced a rapid growth after 1954: from 6 per cent to 14 per cent in 1975, with 2.8 million wage-earners. The statistical rubric they come under groups four basic categories: 'teachers and artistic professions'; technicians, who differ from middle administrative managers by virtue of the fact that their role is invariably a productive one, and they receive a wage close to that of skilled workers; 'medical, and social intermediaries'; and, finally, 'middle administrative managers', who perform an organizational function, directing and supervising employees in administration, banks and business (their organizational role is attested by a sizeable gap of around 20 per cent between their average salary and that of the totality of the category 'middle managers').

Analysis of the socioprofessional census of 1975 allows us to draw the following conclusions:

1. The bourgeoisie proper represents around 5 per cent of the active population (industrialists, large shopkeepers, a fraction of farmers and the liberal professions, the clerical and military hierarchy, the largest portion of 'senior administrative managers').
2. The traditional petty bourgeoisie (self-employed farmers, artisans, small shopkeepers, liberal and artistic professions) still represents about 15 per cent of the active population.
3. The 'new petty bourgeoisie' represents between 8 and 12 per cent, depending upon whether, in addition to a proportion of senior and middle administrative managers, we include journalists and advertising agents, liberal professions that have become salaried, higher and secondary education teachers, and primary-school teachers (which, incidentally, is highly debatable).

At all events, the proletariat (industrial workers and employees in business, banking and insurance, public services, and agricultural wage-earners) constitutes two-thirds (65–70 per cent) of the active population (from which the census excludes 'housewives' and young people still in education).

The 1982 census registers the initial general effects of the crisis. Comparison with earlier censuses is, however, complicated by alterations of nomenclature. Nevertheless, it is clear that the overall share of the wage-earning class in the active population continued to grow, reaching 84.9 per cent as against 82.7 in 1975 and 71.8 in 1962. The proportion of industrial workers, which had begun to decline from 1975 (35.7 against

35.9 per cent in 1968), fell to 33.1 per cent. In absolute terms, this category still progressed by 0.5 per cent between 1975 and 1982, and its rate of growth settled at an average of 10.2 per cent between 1962 and 1982. This average masks a deep disparity between skilled workers, whose number continued to augment (+ 10.2 per cent), and that of unskilled or semi-skilled workers, which declined (- 11.6 per cent). The rate of growth in the category of 'employees' during the seven-year period 1975-82 was 21 per cent (95 per cent since 1962). In absolute terms, they totalled 4.6 million (compared with 7.8 million workers). But the socioprofessional breakdown suppresses the effects of unemployment: a net loss of 700,000 industrial jobs and an actual drop in the number of active workers. At the other pole, the share of middle and senior managers in the active population went up from 8.7 per cent in 1954 to 21.5 in 1982. However, in line with our interpretation of the 1975 census, they cannot be said to constitute a homogeneous class under the catch-all term 'petty bourgeoisie'. In fact, a portion belongs to the higher layers of the proletariat, and another to the bourgeoisie, with the remainder constituting a new petty bourgeoisie or 'service petty bourgeoisie', whose expansion since 1975 has not amounted to an explosion.

So what we are witnessing is a relative erosion of the proletariat and decline in industrial workers in favour of the new petty bourgeoisie, without this as yet amounting to a qualitative mutation. On the other hand, processes of differentiation within the proletariat are impairing solidarity and clouding class consciousness. They result from a decentralization of production units, a flexible reorganization of labour, and an increased individualization of social relations, accompanied by growing social mobility for a section of skilled workers. At the level of reproduction, the halt in urban growth (from the 1982 census, towns with fewer than twenty thousand inhabitants are undergoing above-average growth), exclusion from production and extended education, the privatization and consumption of leisure - these are undermining class identification among the new generations. Are we witnessing the end of the 'culture of exclusion'? The rate of unionization has fallen spectacularly, but the phenomenon is too uneven on a European scale not to be attributable to nationally specific factors. The percentage of those stating that they felt they belonged to a social class fell from 66 per cent in 1976 to 56 per cent in 1987: among workers, the sense of belonging to the world of labour went from 76 per cent in 1976 to 50 per cent in 1987; among the young, the decline is even more pronounced. Explicable by the growing weight of unemployment, a non-linear decline in strike activity was evident from 1976 to 1977, with a recovery in 1986-89 and a new recovery in 1993.

The problem is not a sociological one. What we must instead attend to is the question of the political reversibility of these tendencies - in other words, the relation between social changes, struggles, and effects at the level of consciousness.

Whereas Marx starts from production in order to ground reproduction, most sociological analyses attempt to determine classes through consumption and distribution groups. As a result of status and wage differentials, workers would thus themselves tend to become exploiters. At whose expense? This line of reasoning inevitably leads to tackling the subject of classes from the preferential angle of income, and to investigating *who exploits whom* among waged workers. Baudelot and Establet have pushed this logic to its furthest extent.³⁰

In *La Petite Bourgeoisie en France*,³¹ they observed (together with Jacques Malemort) that the wage scale disclosed poles and points of crystallization (between a pole inferior to x and a pole superior to $3x$, with a trough between the two). They revealed the inequality between the rate of growth in the wages of the first group, the foremost beneficiary of the growth in the national product; in particular, they discovered that managerial wages did not fluctuate as the wage-earner aged, and that junior managers were gaining access to shareholding. They concluded that the wage of engineers, technicians and managers represented not only the time socially necessary for the reproduction of their own labour-power, but also a share of surplus-value ceded by the bosses in exchange for their loyal service organizing labour. They thus ended up with a calculation of what a fair wage, corresponding to the reproduction of labour-power, might be. Forgetting that value continues to conceal itself behind price fluctuations, they assessed the 'fair price of labour-power' at $x + x/10$ francs, and drew the logical conclusion that the 40 per cent of wage-earners receiving in excess of that were benefiting from a retrocession of surplus-value, and belonged to a new petty bourgeoisie, subdivided into public servants, engineers-technicians and managers in the private sector, the former tied to state hierarchy and the latter to factory despotism.

This approach was scientifically debatable inasmuch as it assumed the legitimacy of quantification in price terms (wage) of the average value of labour-power and individual calculation of the rate of exploitation. In *Qui travaille pour qui?*, Baudelot and Establet refined their proposals by introducing the method of the 'labour equivalent' - in other words, calculation of the quantity of labour embodied in a product, an identical monetary value embodying a different quantity of labour depending on the productivity of the branches concerned. They thus identified three

major consumers: households, firms and the state. Households consume consumption goods and accumulate property. Firms consume raw material and accumulate capital. The state consumes raw material and accumulates capital.

In the structure of household consumption, expenditure on food by the different social categories (except the liberal professions) is equivalent. More generally, if social needs were the same, budgets would be comparable. Yet the structure of consumption varies, the most divergent budget headings being those of culture, holidays, domestic equipment, and housing.³² There are thus dividing lines between lifestyles, as a result of the level of resources (culture really represents a budget heading only among the wealthy classes), and the division between mental and manual labour (manual workers seeking relaxation more). The family remains the privileged site of arbitration between these consumer choices. Hence its transformation and reinforcement. With days off and modern forms of leisure, socialization was allegedly decreasing in all social milieux, and the loosening of social solidarities would give birth to an 'atomized population of families'.

What were the consequences of these tendencies from the standpoint of class?

Either relations of production are understood as the totality of components that characterize someone's labour in the overall system of production. At base, obviously, there is the fundamental relation (the extraction of surplus-value, the capitalist form of human exploitation). But all the other relations that result from this, and make it possible, form part of them: the amount of resources, the way in which income is obtained, the status that is threatened or developed by capitalism, the material or intellectual nature of the work. If the concept of relations of production is used in this way, it is clear that only it can explain visible lifestyles and budgets. But a major consequence follows: there are as many social classes as there are budgets and relations of production – that is to say, so many groups with definite needs and distinct material interests. Alternatively, we can preserve the old distinction between owner of the means of production and owners of labour-power, with an evident gain in simplicity (two classes), Manicheism and political simplicity. But we are obliged to deny the collective interest, evident in budgets as in work, of thousands of people who are neither bourgeois nor proletarian.³³

Where, our authors ask, is the dividing line between what is necessary (simple renewal of labour-power) and what is superfluous located? In their summarizing table, everyone, with the exception of the industrial worker and the agricultural wage-labourer, 'overconsumes'.³⁴ They thus end up with four sociological 'clumps':

- (a) industrialists, well-off inactive population, small shopkeepers, fairly wealthy non-workers;
- (b) salaried middle strata (managers and employees);
- (c) proletarians (unskilled and semi-skilled workers, skilled workers, agricultural wage-labourers, poor non-workers);
- (d) self-employed farmers (who approximate to (c) as regards consumption and (a) as regards property).

Abandoning critical class theory for a descriptive sociology of consumption ends up blurring the lines of force, in favour of a mosaic of infinitely divisible groups.

Farewell to the Red Proletariat?

In his *Farewell to the Working Class*, André Gorz attributes the 'crisis of Marxism' not to some ideological collapse, but to changes in the working class: at issue, in the first instance, is a crisis of the working-class movement itself. From the Crash to the war, capitalism survived – not unscathed, but it survived. Why? Because the development of the productive forces, subject to its own norms and needs, is increasingly incompatible with the socialist transformation for which it was supposed to lay the foundations. The contradiction between the daily lot of a proletariat maimed by labour and its emancipatory vocation is resolved by registering its impotence. Capitalism has supposedly ended up 'produc[ing] a working class which, on the whole, is unable to take command of the means of production', so that 'its transcendence in the name of a different rationality can only come from areas of society which embody or prefigure the dissolution of all social classes, including the working class itself'.³⁵

We are back with the old contradiction: how, being nothing, to become everything? By taking this nothingness to a conclusion, replies Gorz.

For this, we must take our leave of the great subject of the revolutionary epic according to Saint Marx. The concept of class in his work was generated not by the experience of a militant, but out of an abstract historical imperative: 'only [consciousness of their class] mission will make it possible to discover the true being of the proletarians'. What flesh-and-blood proletarians happen to imagine or believe is of little consequence. The only thing that counts is their ontological fate: become what you are! In short, the being of the proletariat transcends the proletarians.³⁶ This philosophical hypostasis resulted from a dubious mixture of Christianity, Hegelianism and scientism. It allowed a self-proclaimed vanguard to play

the intermediary between what the class was and what it should be. Since no one is in a position to settle the questions that divide it (especially not the actual proletariat, alienated and crippled as it is by work), the last word was reserved for a ventriloquist history, invested with the power to condemn or acquit.

For Marx, labour is at the heart of the emancipatory process. General abstract labour uproots the artisan or the independent small producer from their narrow individuality and projects them into the universal. Appropriating everything through collective labour would make it possible to 'become everything' – except that appropriation and development do not necessarily coincide. Just as the vanguard usurped the being of a scattered, mute class, so the bureaucracy presented itself as the embodiment of Prometheus unbound. These delegations and substitutions might have derived from the development of a capitalism that was still too weak to allow the working class to display its full potential. Unfortunately, notes Gorz, contrary to the hopes formerly invested in the 'new working class', technological progress leads not to the formation of an overwhelmingly skilled and cultivated proletariat, but to new forms of differentiation and polarization that recompose the mass of those who are unskilled, excluded and insecure in various respects: the ascendancy of professional workers was a mere 'parenthesis'. If the weight of the proletariat in society has increased in accordance with Marx's forecasts, it has not released proletarians from their impotence as individuals and as a group: the collective worker has remained external to actual proletarians. Finally, remarks Gorz, Marxist theory has never clarified who exactly performs collective appropriation; what it consists in; who exercises the emancipatory power conquered by the working class, and where; which political mediations might guarantee the voluntary character of social co-operation; and what the relationship is between individual workers and the collective worker, proletarians and the proletariat. The result is confusion between the statist institutionalization of the collective worker and the collective appropriation of the means of production by the associated producers.

Gorz passes without due caution from these legitimate queries to the critique of an imaginary militancy. The militant spirit, according to him, consists in a specifically religious belief in the great reversal of nothing into everything, enjoining workers to lose themselves as individuals to find themselves again as a class: 'The class as a unit is the imaginary subject who performs the reappropriation of the system; but it is a subject external and transcendent to any individual and all existing proletarians.'³⁷ That the class became a robotic fetish of this sort, in whose name the bureauc-

racies demanded pious allegiance, is a fact. To impute it to Marx, who consistently denounced society-as-person, history-as-person, and all mythical personifications and incarnations – in other words, any transcendence in which irreducible inter-individuality vanishes – is unserious. Carried away by his own momentum, Gorz ends up condemning the 'power of the proletariat [as] the symmetrical inverse of the power of capital': the bourgeois is alienated by 'his' capital and the proletarian by the proletariat.³⁸ The confiscation of power by the bureaucracy, however, constitutes a social and historical *coup de force* attested by the Stalinist counter-revolution's millions of victims.

The whole ambiguity of *Farewell to the Working Class* lies here. It raises real problems about the emancipatory capacities of the working class, in the concrete conditions of its alienation. But it constantly mixes this examination with an ideological overinterpretation that is one-sided, to say the least. We no longer really know which has contributed more to the blossoming of dictatorships in the name of the proletariat: the social conditions of exploitation or the genealogy of the concept.

The consummate proletarian, says Gorz, is a pure supplier of abstract general labour. Everything he consumes is bought; everything he produces is sold. The absence of any visible link between consumption and production has as its inevitable consequence an indifference towards concrete labour. And the worker becomes the spectator of a labour he no longer performs. The prophetic conclusion of Volume One of *Capital* evaporates in this stupor: 'The negation of capital's negation of the worker has not taken place.'³⁹ Yet the controversial chapter does not promise emancipation exclusively in the sphere of production. Breaking the iron logic of capital, says Marx, involves not the formal dialectic of oppression and emancipation through labour, but a political irruption.

The critique then proceeds to strategy, and from Marx to Lenin. Gorz anticipates this change of terrain. He clearly hears this summons of the political. But he conceives it solely in familiar statist forms: 'The project of popular or socialist power is confused with a political project in which the state is everything and society nothing.' This, in its Stalinist and social-democratic modalities, was indeed the response of the majority working-class movement throughout the century. And if it is not the only conceivable one, it derives from the very evolution of capitalism. With the establishment of clientelistic relations to the parties, the attenuation of political mediations, and the growing autonomy of the state, 'the line separating state monopoly capitalism from state capitalism [is] narrow'.⁴⁰ Unable to demonstrate its practical cultural capacity, Marx endowed the

proletariat with an imaginary ontological capacity to negate its own oppression.

In his *Critique of Economic Reason*, Gorz returns to the transformation of the proletariat and its social practice. The segmentation and disintegration of the working class, insecurity, deskilling, and job insecurity prevail over reprofessionalization:

At the very point when a privileged fraction of the working class seems to be in a position to acquire multiple skills, to achieve workplace autonomy and continually widen their capacities for action – all of which are things that were ideals of the worker self-management currents within the labour movement – the meaning of this ideal is thus radically altered by the conditions in which it seems destined to be fulfilled. It is not *the working class* which is achieving these possibilities of self-organization and increasing technological power; it is a small core of privileged workers who are integrating into new-style enterprises at the expense of a mass of people who are marginalized and whose job security is destroyed . . .⁴¹

Stimulated by the crisis, competition rages among workers, and disrupts solidarity. Work's loss of material substance deprives them of the promised reappropriation of their confiscated creativity. In short, work has changed; and so have the workers.

In thirty years, observes Gorz, the annual individual duration of full-time work has decreased by 23 per cent. Work is no longer the main source of social identity and class membership: 'We are leaving the work-based society behind, but we are exiting backwards from it and walking backwards into a civilization of free time.' The conclusion dictates itself:

It no longer makes sense to expect the pressure of needs engendered by work to lead to a socialist transformation of society, or for such a transformation to be effected by the working class alone. The class antagonism between labour and capital still exists, but it now has superimposed upon it antagonisms which are not of the order of workplace struggles and relations of exploitation, and thus are not covered by traditional class analysis. It is not through identification with their work and their work role that modern wage-earners feel themselves justified in making demands for power which have the potential to change society. It is as citizens, residents, parents, teachers, students or as unemployed; it is their experience outside work that leads them to call capitalism into question.⁴²

Since the late 1970s, the number of the industrial working class has undergone an absolute decline. But this decrease appears to be an overall erosion of the proletariat as a result of an optical illusion (not without a

whiff of workerism), which reduces the working class to the active, symbolic core workers of a given epoch. The proletariat has neither the same composition, nor the same image, as in 1848 (apart from the Silesian weavers, the proletarians evoked in the *Communist Manifesto* are predominantly artisans or craft workers from small Parisian workshops⁴³); under the Commune (following the boom and industrialization of the Second Empire); in June 1936; or May 1968. It is successively represented by craft workers, miners and railwaymen (from Zola to Nizan), steelworkers (Renoir, Vaillant, Visconti), and so on. And history does not stop there. But the destruction of the iron and steel industry or shipbuilding does not signify the disappearance of the proletariat. Rather, it heralds new mutations.

The weakening of workers' identification with work poses a real problem. But Gorz risks an excessive generalization from various types of service or supervisory work that lack any intelligent grasp on the material and its transformation. From this he draws the falsely innovative conclusion that contestation of capitalist exploitation has now been relocated outside of the enterprise, as if it had hitherto been confined there. If the relation of exploitation is rooted in production, the whole logic of *Capital* demonstrates that it is not reducible to it. It structures the field of reproduction in its entirety. The working-class movement did not first of all constitute itself as a movement within the enterprise (if only because it was legally excluded from it by divine right), but as a social, civic, urban and cultural movement. Its confinement to the workplace and the restriction of trade-union practice to negotiations over labour-power were the result of a protracted and conflictual process, the establishment of the welfare state, the growing dissociation between politico-electoral representation and the institutionalization of union rights in the enterprise. The crisis of the nation-state and the representative system's loss of legitimacy contribute just as much as the metamorphoses of the wage relation to weakening trade-union practices, and prompting the relocation of conflict on to the territorial (urban), civic (immigration), ecological, or cultural levels.

Insisting on the proletariat's loss of subversive charge, Gorz adopts certain arguments that he contested at the beginning of the 1960s. At the time, the critical potential of the class had been wrecked – in the view of numerous sociologists – by relative affluence, social integration, and a fascination with 'things'. Now the same is supposedly true by virtue of deprivation and exclusion. Discussion of the obstacles to the development of bonds of solidarity and a critical collective consciousness is doubtless required. But we must beware linear extrapolations that are too quickly

shot of political events and their unforeseen advent. A year before May '68, France was allegedly 'bored'...

Gorz rejects the postulate according to which the contradiction between the emancipatory power of the proletariat and its crippling subservience to work is automatically overcome by growing social polarization, with numerical development, concentration, and raised consciousness proceeding in tandem. According to this optimistic perspective, controlling production and recapturing a sense of purpose in work would restore the alienated workers to themselves. The divisions provoked and maintained by competition in the ranks of the class might counter this tendency, but not cancel it.

Ernest Mandel resolves the problem by invoking the asymmetrical destinies of the exploiting and exploited classes:

In spite of all the inherent segmentations of the working class – all the constantly recurring phenomena of division along craft, national, sex, generational, etc. lines – there are no inbuilt structural obstacles to the overall class solidarity of workers under capitalism. There are only different levels of consciousness which make the conquest of that overall class solidarity more or less difficult, more or less uneven in time and space. The same is not true of bourgeois class solidarity. In periods of prosperity when their struggles are essentially for larger or smaller shares of an increasing mass of profits, class solidarity easily asserts itself among capitalists. In periods of crisis, however, competition has to take a much more savage form, since for each individual capitalist it is no longer a question of getting more or less profit, but one of his survival as a capitalist. . . . Of course, what I have just said applies to inter-capitalist competition, not to the class struggle between Capital and Labour as such, in which, by contrast, the graver the socio-political crisis, the more sharply ruling-class solidarity will assert itself. But the fundamental asymmetry of economic class solidarity within, respectively, the capital-owning and the wage-earning class has to be stressed. . . . Competition among wage-earners . . . is imposed upon them from outside, not structurally inherent in the very nature of that class. On the contrary, wage-earners normally and instinctively strive towards collective cooperation and solidarity.⁴⁴

If this tendency does indeed recurrently manifest itself, the counter-tendency to fragmentation is equally constant. The asymmetry invoked by Mandel attaches to natural competition between capitalists, and artificial competition between wage-earners ('imposed from outside'). This is to underestimate the coherence of the mode of production in which capital, as a living fetish, imposes its law on the whole of society, and inseparably maintains competition between owners and wage-earners thrown on to the labour market. Reducing sometimes antagonistic social differences to

mere 'uneven levels of consciousness' disposes of the difficulty. Mandel thus ends up trusting in time, the great restorer and leveller in the face of eternity, to iron out these inequalities, imposing solidarity in conformity with the postulated ontology of the proletariat.

Gorz queries the bases of this triumphant march of the historical subject. Taylorism, the division and scientific organization of labour, has supposedly irrevocably done away with workers conscious of their practical sovereignty. The idea of the class and the associated producers as subjects was, according to him, merely a projection of the specific consciousness of craft workers, possessed of a culture, an ethic and a tradition. The working class that then aspired to power was not a deracinated, ignorant mass of poor wretches, but a potentially hegemonic stratum in society. Syndicalism was the advanced expression of this working class, demanding the mine for the miners and the factory for the workers, confident of its own ability to manage production as well as society. The point of production was consequently perceived as the privileged site for constructing the new power, the factory being no mere economic unit dissociated from the centres of decision-making.

Conversely, in gigantic factories the very idea of the workers' council has become a kind of anachronism. Employers' hierarchy has replaced working-class hierarchy. The only conceivable counter-power (of control or veto) has been reduced to subsidiary issues: hence the assimilation of the velleities of self-organization and self-management by trade-union structures that are themselves institutionalized and subordinate. The acknowledged material impossibility of working-class power creates the space for a trade-union power that has been integrated, a mere social replica of parliamentary delegation. Bureaucracy has become the central figure of society, privileged instrument and component of a subjectless power. The era of unskilled workers and fragmented labour sounds the death knell of the working-class culture and humanism of labour that were the great utopia of the socialist and revolutionary-sindicalist movement in the early twentieth century. Work has lost its meaning as creative activity, shaping matter and mastering nature, acquired in the course of the nineteenth century. Dematerialized, it no longer constitutes the activity via which human beings realize their being by exercising power over matter.

Hence the need 'to find a new utopia'⁴⁵ – abandoning the basic presuppositions of the 'industrialist utopia' according to which the inflexibility and social constraints of the machine could be abolished, with autonomous personal activity and social labour converging to the point where

they became one. Promethean legacy of the Enlightenment, the Marxist utopia was 'the consummate form of rationalization: the total triumph of Reason and the triumph of total Reason; scientific domination of Nature and reflexive scientific mastery of the process of this domination'. Henceforth, 'the dualization of society will be checked, and then reversed, not by the unattainable utopia of an all-absorbing, full-time job for everyone, but by formulae for redistributing work which will reduce the amount of work *everyone* does, without for all that de-skilling or compartmentalizing it'.⁴⁶ Gorz concludes from this that hopes of emancipation through and in work are obsolete. If the labour of production is now disjoined from sensory experience, and restricted to a declining minority, 'who is there who can transform work into a fulfilling *poiesis*? Surely not the immense majority of the wage-earning classes.' There will be an exit from the vicious circle only when we give up conceiving work as the essential socializing factor, and consider it as one simple factor among numerous others. The conclusion follows naturally: 'The aspiration to all-round personal development in autonomous activities does not, therefore, *presuppose* a prior transformation of work . . . the old notion of work is no longer valid, the subject assumes a critical distance not only from the product of his work but from that work itself.'⁴⁷

This candid break with Marx's problematic leads into a search for new emancipatory subjects and new strategies. What is now at issue is not so much emancipating ourselves in work as liberating ourselves from work, beginning by reconquering the sphere of free time. According to Gorz:

The central conflict over the extent and limits of economic rationality . . . used to be conducted, culturally and politically, at the level of workplace struggles; it has gradually spread to other areas of social life . . . The question as to the 'subject' that will decide the central conflict, and in practice carry out the socialist transformation, cannot, consequently, be answered by means of traditional class analysis.

This new subject (for Gorz's approach does not avoid the old problematic of the subject) nevertheless has difficulty escaping limbo. It is evoked as 'a multidimensional social movement that can no longer be defined in terms of class antagonism. . . . This movement is essentially a struggle for collective and individual rights to self-determination.'⁴⁸

As for its strategic consequences, radical innovation leads, via novel paths, to some old tunes. Incapable of taking on the state and controlling work, this polymorphous and rhizomatic subject is summoned to develop its counter-culture, with a hegemonic vocation, in free time. In *Farewell to the Working Class*, Gorz had argued that power could be taken only by a

class that was already *de facto* dominant. Such is indeed the strategic enigma of the proletarian revolution. Whereas the conquest of economic and cultural power precedes the conquest of political power for the bourgeoisie, for the proletariat the conquest of political power would have to initiate social and cultural transformation.

This is an obsessive leitmotiv: how, being nothing, to become at least something? In the 1960s, Lucien Goldmann responded with a 'revolutionary reformism' of Austro-Marxist inspiration. Still insurmountable because of the minority status of the proletariat, the contradiction would be resolved by historical development itself. A socially majoritarian and increasingly cultivated proletariat could progressively extend its self-managerial counter-powers, and establish its hegemony prior to the conquest of political power proper. As the political majority caught up with the social majority, this last act could be peaceful and electoral. The intervening thirty years have scarcely confirmed such optimism. The social homogenization and cultural autonomy heralded by the affluent postwar years have not withstood the effects of the crisis. How can we imagine emancipation in leisure when work remains alienated and alienating? How can a collective, creative culture develop when the cultural sphere itself is increasingly subject to commodity production? How can state domination be escaped when the dominant ideology is imposed mainly through the fantastical universe of general commodity production? If querying the emancipatory capacities of the proletariat is (to say the least) current, how can we have credence in those of the 'non-class' formed by the deprived and excluded?

To claim that this new, post-industrial proletariat does 'not find any source of potential power in social labour' is to attribute to marginality virtues that it does not possess. After the encirclement of the towns by the countryside, that of the sphere of production by the fluctuating world of precariousness? Defining this new proletariat as a 'non-force' dedicated 'to conquering not 'power', which is inherently corrupting, but increasing 'areas of autonomy', is to make impotence a virtue and seek to surpass productivism (which is certainly open to criticism) in a troubling 'free subjectivity'. 'Only the non-class of non-producers is capable of such [a constitutive] act,' writes Gorz, '[f]or it alone embodies what lies beyond productivism: the rejection of the accumulation ethic and the dissolution of all classes.'⁴⁹

In 1980, before the crisis had produced its social and moral effects, Gorz could still retain the illusions of the previous period. A decade later, it was no longer possible to believe in the emancipatory virtues of this forced exclusion that would make the *déclassés* or 'underclass' the new

champions of a better world. Under the pretext of embracing the cause of the worst-off, this ideology of non-work, centred on the primacy of individual sovereignty, is actually the new guise of a utopia of the distraught middle classes (reviving the 'thought of a revolutionary bourgeoisie'), for whom 'real life' begins outside work. Gorz went so far as to accuse women's movements of reinforcing capitalist rationality by seeking to 'free women from non-economically oriented activities'.⁵⁰ For him, the real objective is not to liberate women from non-market domestic activities, but to extend the non-economic rationality of such activities beyond the home. Blithely ignoring the fact that these domestic activities, which are themselves alienated, are the reverse side and complement of alienated wage-labour, this proposal anticipated propositions on community business and new personalized services, which are set to become props of insecurity.

In another respect, well before the dismemberment of the bureaucratic dictatorships, Gorz rightly put his finger on the fact that the individual could not wholly coincide with his or her social being. To suppose that individual existence is 'integrally' socializable is to set in motion the repressive machinery of 'socialist morality' as a universal passion for order: 'In this context [the totalitarian states], individual consciousness reveals itself sub rosa as the sole possible foundation of morality. Moral consciousness always arises through an act of rebellion ... a revolt against ... "objective morality".'⁵¹ Yet the solution does not consist in planning some peaceful cohabitation between an autonomous society and an untouchable state, between a liberated sphere of free time and an alienated sphere of work, whose impossibility has been demonstrated by all historical experience, often with bloody results. Instead, it consists in the refusal of any artificially decreed assimilation of society and state, individual and class.

Marx and Lenin referred to the withering away or extinction – not the abolition – of the state. This withering away is conceivable only as a process, the time in which nothing, in effect, becomes everything (if it ever does). As long as relative scarcity and the division of labour persist, the state will inevitably re-enter through the back window. Its positive disappearance cannot be decreed. It involves a form of dual power prolonging the revolutionary event in a process of extinction–construction, in which society would control the state and progressively appropriate the functions that no longer need to be delegated. Such an approach invites us to consider the institutional architecture of power and the relative autonomy of the sphere of law, rather than assuming that both would naturally

ensue from might dictating right (courtesy of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat').

Rather than embarking on this path, Gorz registers the impossibility of abolishing necessity. The extension of free time would thus coexist with a compulsory, alienated labour that would still have to be performed. The sphere of necessity would include the activities required to produce what is socially necessary. Hence the untranscendable function of the political:

A disjuncture between the sphere of necessity and the area of autonomy, an objectification of the operational necessities of communal life in the form of laws, prohibitions and obligations, the existence of a system of law distinct from mere usage and of a state distinct from society – these are the very preconditions of a sphere in which autonomous individuals may freely cooperate for their own ends.⁵²

Thus formulated, the indicated disjuncture is simply the exact obverse of some fantastic restoration of the unity between the public and the private. Outside any historical dynamic, it works out an armed peace between the heteronomy of the state and the autonomy of civil society. Resigned to suffering the antinomy between freedom and necessity, it is content to demand a clearly defined and codified necessity. Having been proudly invited to change utopias, we are reduced to a tepid utopia (prosaically juridical and statist) – a tattered utopia for times of crisis, refuge of a new, salaried and consumerist petty bourgeoisie, trapped between the bureaucratic hammer and the liberal anvil.

Gorz criticizes Marx for building his theory on sand – on a *philosophical* conception of the proletariat lacking any solid relation with its reality. This criticism is not unfounded. Seeking to transcend German philosophy, which was powerless to transform reality, the young Marx initially sought a solution in a speculative alliance between philosophy and the proletariat, between suffering humanity and thinking humanity. The proletarian class was then in the process of being formed. According to Marx, it was a class that possessed a 'universal character' ('a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society'); was the victim of injustice pure and simple, not of some particular injustice; and was the vehicle of both a dissolution of capitalist society and a total recovery of humanity.⁵³ What this involves is indeed a philosophical presentation of the proletariat, predating the 'critique of political economy'. The following year, the revolt of the Silesian weavers was likewise presented by Marx as the material manifestation of the proletarian essence.

Following Engels's investigations of the actual proletariat (the working classes in England), the critique of political economy worked out the concrete configuration of the proletariat (as commodified labour-power) in its overall relations to capital. Rather than meticulously retracing this path, if only to demarcate himself from it, Gorz inopportunely takes the quickest route. He summons to the rescue the 'non-class of non-producers' whose mission, *qua* negation of the negation, is closely akin to that of the young Marx's 'philosophical' proletariat! Who better than those excluded and deprived of everything, including their own labour, could today represent a nascent class that is universal in character, the victim of utter injustice, and the vehicle of a reconquest of humanity through the dissolution of society? Summoned to explode a programmed, one-dimensional society, this new subject is, rather, the symptom of a mythical regression compared with the patient determination of classes in and through the reproduction of capital.

The relation of exploitation is at the heart of class relations. For Marx, the concepts of necessary labour and surplus labour are retrospectively determined by the metabolism of competition and the process as a whole. Analytical Marxist authors *individualize exploitation* by relating it to the consumption of each actor. For Jon Elster, '[b]eing exploited means, fundamentally, working more hours than are needed to produce the goods one consumes'. For André de Francisco, individuals enter into class relations to maximize their private interests: 'I shall refer to classes as a precise set of relations between individuals . . . I am proposing an individualist theory of classes as preliminary to a classist theory of society.'⁵⁴

For Marx, by contrast, the relation of exploitation is – and cannot but be – from the outset a *social relation*, not an individual relation. The rate of exploitation (s/v) expresses a class relation illustrated by the analysis of co-operation and the division of labour: co-operation gives rise to an economy of time due to the spatial simultaneity of productive tasks; one day of one hundred hours from ten workers is more productive than ten successive days of ten hours; the combined productive power is superior to the sum of individual powers. The bar of the relation (s/v) represents the mobile front line between necessary labour and surplus labour around which conflict is structured. This relation of exploitation presupposes the process of reproduction as a whole, and hence the class struggle. Outside the global determination of the labour-time socially necessary for the reproduction of labour-power, the notion of individual exploitation is theoretically flimsy.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx condemns the reduction of individuals to

the status of serial exemplars of a formal class, and philosophical representations of classes as preceding the individuals who comprise them. In the *Grundrisse*, he symmetrically rejects the Robinsonades of classical political economy and the reduction of classes to a sum of individual relations: 'The individual and isolated hunter and fisherman, with whom Smith and Ricardo begin, belongs among the unimaginative conceits of the eighteenth-century Robinsonades.'⁵⁵ Finally, in the three volumes of *Capital*, the reciprocal determination of individuals and classes is understood according to the dynamic totality of social relations. The struggle to limit the working day sets the 'global capitalist' (that is, the class of capitalists) and the 'global worker' (or labouring class) against one another. As soon as the worker is separated from the means of production, 'this [class] relation does . . . exist, because the conditions for the realization of labour-power, i.e. means of subsistence and means of production, are separated, as the property of another, from the possessor of labour-power'.⁵⁶ Finally, 'each individual capitalist, just like the totality of all capitalists in each particular sphere of production, participates in the *exploitation of the entire working class by capital as a whole*', and 'the average rate of profit depends on the level of exploitation of labour as a whole by capital as a whole'.⁵⁷ That is why – the competition that divides it notwithstanding – the bourgeoisie constitutes a veritable 'freemasonry' *vis-à-vis* the 'working class as a whole'.

Exploitation through the extortion of surplus-value involves the splitting of the commodity into use-value and exchange-value, as well as the splitting of labour into concrete labour and abstract labour:

The *common factor* in the exchange relation, or in the exchange-value of the commodity, is therefore its value . . . A use-value, or useful article, therefore, has value only because abstract human labour is objectified or materialized in it. How, then, is the magnitude of this value to be measured? By means of the quantity of the 'value-forming substance', the labour, contained in the article. This quantity is measured by its duration, and the labour-time is itself measured on the particular scale of hours, days etc. It might seem that if the value of a commodity is determined by the quantity of labour expended to produce it, it would be the more valuable the more unskilful and lazy the worker who produced it, because he would need more time to complete the article. However, the labour that forms the substance of value is *equal human labour, the expenditure of identical human labour-power*. The total labour-power of society, which is manifested in the values of the world of commodities, counts here as *one homogeneous mass of human labour-power*, although composed of innumerable individual units of labour-power. Each of these units is *the same as any other*, to the extent that it has the *character of a socially average unit of labour-power* and acts

as such, i.e. only needs, in order to produce a commodity, the *labour time* which is necessary on average, or in other words is *socially necessary*.⁵⁸

Without this concept of abstract labour, the labour theory of value would result in the absurdity that time wasted dawdling and idling creates value. The expenditure of labour-power is not individual in the first instance. It presupposes 'average' labour-power, 'identical' labour-power, 'socially necessary' labour. This average is not established exclusively in the sphere of production. It in turn presupposes the metabolism of competition, the establishment of an average profit rate, and the historical recognition of needs imposed by class struggle (which are not restricted to immediate consumption needs, but extend to reproduction needs, including factors of education, culture and environment common to several generations).

Abstract labour is thus historically determined by the system of needs – in other words, by the universality of lack. The equality of different kinds of labour assumes abstraction from their actual inequality. Their reduction to their common character as 'expenditure of labour-power' is a consequence of exchange. Marx insists on this in Part 2, Chapter 6:

natural needs, such as food, clothing, fuel and housing vary according to the climatic and other physical peculiarities of [a] country. On the other hand, the number and extent of . . . so-called necessary requirements, as also the manner in which they are satisfied, are themselves products of history, and depend therefore to a great extent on the level of civilization attained by a country; in particular they depend on the conditions in which, and consequently on the habits and expectations with which, the class of free workers has been formed. In contrast, therefore, with the case of other commodities, the determination of the value of labour-power contains a historical and moral element. Nevertheless, in a given country at a given period, the average amount of the means of subsistence necessary for the worker is a known *datum* . . . the sum of means of subsistence necessary for the production of labour-power must include the means necessary for the worker's replacements, i.e. his children, in order that this race of peculiar commodity-owners may perpetuate its presence on the market.⁵⁹

If labour-power 'contains a historical and moral element', and if its reproduction includes generational succession, the determination of the labour-time that is socially necessary for this reproduction presupposes . . . the class struggle!

Capital, a social relation, is thus the unity of a relation of domination and a relation of competition. At the level of production, the rate of surplus-value s/v expresses the class relation independently of the relation of competition. At the level of (re)production as a whole, the rate of

profit ($s/c+v$) expresses the relation of exploitation mediated by the relation of competition. Pierre Salama and Tran Hai Hac emphasize the conceptual difference between surplus-value and profit, which is often misconstrued in the so-called 'transformation' controversy:

Thus, just as the level of the class relation is structured by the existence of the rate of exploitation, the inter-capitalist relation is structured by the formation of the general rate of profit, which is the form in which the rate of exploitation is imposed on individual capitalists in competition. In this sense, the general profit rate is a transformed form of exchange-value previously defined at the level of capital-in-general. The development of exchange-value from the level of capital-in-general to the level of competing capitals is known as the transformation of exchange-value into production price. This is nothing other than the transition from the analysis of capital at one level of abstraction to another. Transformation signifies that the struggle for profit engaged in by capitalists is restricted to the sum of surplus-value extracted from the class of workers: the capitalists cannot share more than has been extracted in the class relation. In other words, the transformation of exchange-value into production price expresses the division of the surplus-value extracted at the level of capital-in-general between competing capitals.⁶⁰

The sum and forms of redistribution of surplus-value are subordinate to its extraction. Accordingly, exploitation cannot be determined by the individual allocation of consumption goods compared with individual labour-time.

Notes

1. Vilfredo Pareto insisted on social mobility and the 'circulation of elites' capable of eliminating cultural barriers between classes. Roberto Michels defended his iron law of oligarchy. Karl Renner deduced from unproductive labour the idea of a 'service class'. At the same time, Talcott Parsons developed an analytical theory of social stratification. The very use of the word 'class' varies, with peaks of frequency before 1914, between the wars (1924–28, 1933–34, 1938–39), or after the Second World War (1953–58, 1970–72). Contrariwise, the expression 'middle classes' was particularly prized on the eve of the Second World War, in the 1950s, and again after 1981. See Hélène Desbrousses, 'Définition des classes et rapports d'hégémonie', in *Classes et catégories sociales*, Érides, Paris 1985. See also Larry Portis, *Les Classes sociales en France*, Éditions ouvrières, Paris 1988.
2. See Andrés de Francisco, 'Que hay de teorico en la "teoria" marxista de las clases', *Zona Abierta*, nos 59/60, Madrid 1992.
3. John Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1982; Roemer, ed., *Analytical Marxism*, Cambridge University Press/Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Cambridge and Paris 1986; Erik Olin Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State*, New Left Books, London 1978; *Classes*, Verso, London 1985; and *Intergating Inequality*, Verso, London and New York 1994.