Lumpen: Vagrancies of a Concept from Marx to Fanon (and on)

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Literature in the Graduate School of Duke University

2019
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation, *Lumpen: Vagrancies of a Concept from Marx to Fanon (and on)*, tracks the concept of the lumpenproletariat from its coinage by Karl Marx through its reworking by Franz Fanon, the Black Panthers and others in the context of the colonial liberation and Black Power movements, and onwards into contemporary debates about populism, identity, politics, and the end of work. From its origins an unstable concept, the lumpenproletariat raises a series of interrelated questions about the relation of class to interest, interest to identity, and identity to politics. Succinctly, the dissertation asks: what happens to the Marxian project when the future of productive labor seems in doubt, both as a source of capital valorization and as a foundation for political action?

Contemporary engagement with the category of the lumpenproletariat has typically focused on the latter as a symbol of the irreducible autonomy of the political, ignoring the concept’s empirical referent. Separately, a growing body of literature has grappled with the increase of economically redundant surplus populations produced, in part, by technological automation, a phenomenon obliquely reflected in recent philosophical fascination with, for instance, bare life, necropolitics and the abject. Such work has however rarely considered the political ramifications of such transformations. What we would need, then, is a theoretical framework capable of grasping both aspects
of this twofold problematic—the determinacy of dispossession, the indeterminacy of its political expression.

The beginnings of such a framework can be found, I argue, in the writings on the lumpenproletariat in the work of Frantz Fanon, James Boggs, and the Black Panthers. Developing their scattered insights, I argue that the lumpenproletariat names both the tendential production of an economically redundant surplus population and the lack of any automatic correlation between this (or any) social condition and political subjectivation. This gap between economic and political, structure and subject, becomes then the space for the creative articulation of a collective subject as a properly political project. This is precisely the task of a socialist politics today.

Whether in terms of its objective position at the point of production or its subjective consciousness of the need for revolution, the decline of the industrial proletariat has often been figured as synonymous with that of socialist politics. In contrast, my dissertation suggestions that a recuperation of the rich and half-forgotten legacy of the lumpenproletariat emerging out of the Black radical tradition can help provide a model for constructing a powerful socialist movement in the present.
Dedication

To Attila, always, and to Geraldine and Frans-Willem, for getting me started.
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1. Introduction

1.1 The Trumpen Proletariat

In a July 2016 *Wall Street Journal* editorial, columnist Daniel Henninger coined a term to describe the voter base of then-presidential candidate Donald Trump—the Trumpen proletariat. Punning on the Marxist category of the lumpenproletariat, the conservative pundit was less concerned with the details of Marxian class analysis than with the pejorative connotations of the concept, which he associated with the “relentless moral contempt and superiority” he accused liberals of displaying towards Trump supporters. While Henninger conceded that economic anxiety might play some role in Trump’s appeal, the primary factor, he asserted, was the libidinal resentment Middle America felt towards the condescending “cultural elites” epitomized by Hillary Clinton. If anything, then, Henninger’s play on words suggested a persistent gap between the economic indices of class identity and the latter’s social and cultural dimensions.

The term had broader purchase than Henninger may have intended, however. For the original Marxian category had denoted an economic underclass subject to chronic under- and unemployment, a topic of newfound relevance in the context of the 2016 election cycle. Indeed, both the astounding rise of Trump and the surprisingly strong showing of democratic socialist Bernie Sanders brought renewed attention to questions of economic inequality, class and capitalism. Suddenly, journalists and commentators across the political spectrum were eager to discuss the plight of
(formerly) working-class communities subject to the vicissitudes of automation, globalization and deindustrialization—topics rarely before considered in the mainstream media.

Many of these commentators noted a seeming discrepancy. While white working-class communities disproportionally benefited from policies associated with Trump’s Democratic rival Hillary Clinton, they nevertheless continued to support the Republican candidate by wide margins. Why, such pundits asked, would these working-class voters act against their "objective" material interests?¹

Answers to this question were various. Some challenged the very premises behind it, arguing that the majority of Trump supporters were not really working class at all. Others argued that it was the fault of the Democrats who, abandoning their focus on working-class issues, had ceded the terrain of economic populism to the political right. Still others pointed to the role of religion, the mediations of cultural identity, or the mystifications of false consciousness in distorting workers’ perception of their “real” interests. Meanwhile others argued that white male workers were not primarily motivated by economic interest at all, but by resentment towards the partial yet powerful advances made by other social groups in recent decades, particularly women.

and people of color. And some argued that white workers in fact did have a material interest in the type of ethno-nationalist politics advocated by Trump—which, by restricting access to economic and other opportunities along race lines, maintained their position of relative privilege. At stake in these heated debates, then, were a whole series of intertwined questions about the relation of class to interest, of interest to identity, and of identity to politics.

In fact, these types of questions had haunted the concept of the Lumpen from its origins. As this dissertation will show, the lumpenproletariat had first emerged in Marx and Engels precisely in order to name (and contain) a certain volatility or malleability of “interests.” Marx had initially predicated his social theory on the notion of an innate correspondence between what he considered the objective interests of the working classes and the formation of a collective political subject, the proletariat. Rather than a straight arrow connecting a determinate social position to a particular political expression, however, the path between “objective conditions” and subjective identification had proven winding, thorny, and forked. Defying Marx’s hope, working-class people did not automatically adhere to his definition of the revolutionary subject; those who failed to do so, he named the “lumpen.” On a first level, then, the

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lumpenproletariat was deployed to contain the threatening indeterminacy of political identities—the ability to construct the latter along multiple contending and contradictory lines.

On a second level, however, the lumpenproletariat names a quite determinate social position—that of destitution combined with exclusion from the wage relationship. This involves a winding, thorny path of another sort, namely that leading from the violent dispossession Marx had associated with “primitive accumulation” towards subsequent integration into the wage relationship. While these discrete processes are often presented as two halves of the same whole, entry into the capital-wage relation is neither the sole nor even the most likely outcome of expropriation. Another outcome is unwaged work, whether in terms of those forms of work that socialist feminists have theorized under the rubric of reproductive labor, or of the slave labor that historically underwrote the accumulation of capital while confounding the formal categories of political economy.

But yet another possibility—let us say, unwaged nonwork—is the condition of the lumpenproletariat. A violent dispossession without subsequent integration of any sort, the lumpenproletariat names a non-relation to the relations of production, a position of pure externality and abjection. Due to both historical and structural features of capital accumulation, this social position has traditionally been gendered, raced, and relegated to the underdeveloped periphery of the (post-)colony. As the Black Panthers
were only the first to argue, however, lumpenproletarianization is today tendential in character, as the progress of technological automation excludes an ever-growing portion of the global population from reliable access to waged work.

It is the combination of these two dimensions of the lumpenproletariat—the determinacy of dispossession, the indeterminacy of its political expression—that defines the conditions of possibility, I will argue, for any emancipatory political project in the present. As the continued dispossession of rural peoples from their lands and lifeways in the Global South combines with the faltering of the reproduction of the capital-labor relationship in the overdeveloped countries, societies across the world will be forced to grapple with the growth of surplus populations tendentially excluded from the circuits of capitalist production and consumption—a population “surplus” not in some absolute, Malthusian sense, but rather relative to the needs of capital.

In and of itself, the tendential growth of such an economically redundant lumpenproletariat, it must be stressed, possesses no determinate political trajectory. Indeed, it had been a category error of a certain mechanistic Marxism to attempt to bypass the essential indeterminacy of the political by rendering the emergence of a collective political subject immanent to the relations of production. But while capitalism possesses certain objective tendencies, the emergence of its gravediggers does not.
Instead, the lumpenproletariat signals both the tendential production of an economically redundant surplus population and the inherent volatility and malleability of this or any political subject.

Contemporary engagements with the category of the lumpenproletariat (such as there have been) have at best grasped one half of this necessarily double dynamic. The seminal analyses of Peter Stallybrass and Ernesto Laclau, for instance, rightly focus on the lumpenproletariat as a symbol of the irreducible autonomy of the political, yet utterly ignore the concept’s empirical referent. Separately, a growing body of economic literature has grappled with the increase of economically redundant surplus populations produced, in part, by technological automation (a phenomenon obliquely reflected in recent philosophical fascination with, for instance, bare life, necropolitics and the abject). Such work has however rarely considered the properly political ramifications of these transformations.

In contrast, this project argues that we must approach the concept of the lumpenproletariat with a necessarily double vision. For the lumpenproletariat names both the protean malleability of political subjectivation and the rigid determinacy of economic deprivation. In the former sense, we have all always been lumpenproletarian; in the latter, we are today increasingly becoming so.

The term “lumpenproletariat” had first been coined by Karl Marx in the context of the European revolutions of 1848, a series of powerful if short-lived uprisings that
shook governments across the continent. Marx and Engel’s *Communist Manifesto* had been published just days before the revolution first broke out in France, granting their predictions of “the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions” a seemingly prophetic quality. For Marx, however, it was a question of science, not prophesy, for he had based his analysis precisely on what he considered the “objective interests” of the working classes. (These last, as the closing lines of the *Manifesto* famously concluded, having a whole world to win and nothing to lose but their chains.)

At first, the events of 1848 had seemed to confirm the validity of Marx’s analysis. Soon, however, the tides began to change. By June, hopes of a socialist revolution had been defeated in a pitched street battle, one which saw the workers of Paris quite literally divided, as some took to the barricades to defend the revolution while others sided with the forces of reaction. The course of events seemed thus to threaten, not just the immediate path of the revolution, but also the coherence of Marx’s theoretical project, suggesting that the contours of political consciousness might not be so straightforwardly determined by material interest as he had thought.

In response, Marx attempted to maintain his original hypothesis by arguing that the counter-revolutionary workers were not in fact workers at all. Instead, they belonged to the lumpenproletariat, a hastily-concocted class category that was also a sort of classless class, or anti-class, composed of all those who did not find a productive position within the emerging capitalist economy: “rag pickers, knife grinders, tinkers,
and beggars, but also prostitutes, prisoners, landlords and financial speculators (75). All of these, Marx argued, formed the political base of the counter-revolutionary Louis-Napoleon, a right-wing populist whose mass appeal would otherwise challenge the straightforward ascription of revolutionary consciousness to the working classes. The lumpenproletariat was devised, then, as means of suturing base and superstructure, closing a divide which threatened to split apart the political and economic halves of the Marxian project.

If this conceptual rescue maneuver resolved some immediate problems, however, it soon engendered others. For one thing, it created a persistent (if perplexing) bias within the Marxist tradition against the under- and unemployed, creating a false divide between the deserving and undeserving poor. But it also contradicted Marx’s own subsequent economic writings, which seemed at times to predict a tendential descent into mass pauperdom and immiseration—and even to ascribe a revolutionary outcome to that process. Confusingly, the destitute and unemployed, who had earlier been figured as counter-revolutionary, were here depicted as quite radical. These problems were only compounded in the 20th century, as the industrial proletariat of Western Europe disappointed revolutionary hopes, while powerful revolutions elsewhere in the world were led by classes other than the proletariat (and primarily the peasantry).
From Lenin to Luxemburg to Mao, Marxist theorists and tacticians were forced to improvise in order to make sense of these developments. But it was the Martinican-born writer and revolutionary Frantz Fanon who first did so by dusting off Marx’s derogatory category of the lumpenproletariat and repurposing it for new use. Reversing Marx’s charge, Fanon argued that the revolutionary impetus had passed, in a colonial context characterized by persistent underdevelopment, to the lumpenproletariat—that is, to expropriated (ex-)peasants who, unable to find stable employment in either town or country, were forced into a precarious and peripatetic oscillation between the two.

Fanon’s re-working of Marx’s theory sent shockwaves around the world. In the United States, his analysis would dramatically impact the thinking of Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver and other leaders of the emerging Black Panther Party. Where Fanon had restricted the scope of his analysis to the colonized countries, Newton and Cleaver came to believe that his revalorization of the lumpenproletariat applied equally to the Black community in the United States, who were likewise deprived of access to the land and, except in extraordinary circumstances, to steady industrial employment. But while the Lumpen condition had historically been the condition of Black and colonized peoples, the progress of technological development, the Panthers believed, would relegate ever increasing numbers to this social position—both Black and white, both in America and worldwide. As Huey Newton put it in a 1970 speech at Boston College:

In this country the Black Panther Party, taking careful note of the dialectical method, taking careful note of the social trends and the ever-changing nature of
things, sees that while the lumpen proletarians are the minority and the
proletarians are the majority, technology is developing at such a rapid rate that
automation will progress to cybernation, and cybernation probably to
technocracy. […] if the ruling circle remains in power the proletarian working
class will definitely be on the decline because they will be unemployables and
therefore swell the ranks of the lumpens, who are the present unemployables.
Every worker is in jeopardy because of the ruling circle, which is why we say
that the lumpen proletarians have the potential for revolution, will probably
carry out the revolution, and in the near future will be the popular majority (166).

From the vantage point of the present-day United States, the Panther’s
predictions of mass technological unemployment might at first glance seem off base. At
the time of writing, the official US unemployment rate is at a historic low of 3.7%—the
lowest it has been, in fact, in the almost 50 years since Newton delivered his speech.
True, a mere decade ago the global financial crisis sent unemployment rates soaring
both domestically and worldwide. Since then, however, the markets have rebounded,
with the Dow Jones and S&P 500 (despite recent turbulence) continuing a now decade-
long bull run, the longest in post-war history.

Beneath the surface, however, lurks another story. It is one of progressive
deindustrialization, beginning in the United States in the 1960s and since spreading to
all the advanced capitalist counties (and, increasingly, the advancing ones). As others
have pointed out, “deindustrialization” might be something of a misnomer here, for
industrial output has continued to increase. What has plummeted is industrial
employment, which has fallen by more than 50% as a share of total employment in all
high-GPD countries (and by almost 75% in the United States). International competition plays a role in this, as manufacturing jobs increasingly shift to the developing world. But even there—with the possible exception of China—industrial employment has stagnated or declined relative to total population, as manufacturers adopt labor-saving innovations in a bid to undercut their competitors. Both domestically and across the world, then, technological automation, fueled by intra-capitalist competition, has indeed continued to shrink the ranks of the industrial proletariat, exactly as Newton predicted.

In much of the Global North, the decline of the industrial proletariat has not (yet) led to mass unemployment, in part because the uneven flows of global finance capital continue both to prop up and rely on mass consumption in the overdeveloped countries. Instead, it has led to an increasingly bifurcated workforce divided between a technocratic elite and an ever-expanding low-wage service sector. Not coincidentally, such “services” have historically been the forms of labor most resistant to technological innovation (which is also to say, the least productive, both in mainstream economic terms and in those of Marxian value-theory). Yet they, too, are increasingly threatened by automation, to the extent that predictions of a jobless future are rapidly entering the mainstream.

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3 See Endnotes Vol. 2, “Misery and Debt.”
4 On this point see Yanis Varoufakis’ *The Global Minotaur* (Verso: 2011)
What remains a prediction for the Global North, meanwhile, is already a reality for vast portions of the Global South. As Mike Davis compellingly describes in his *Planet of Slums*, the astonishing explosion of Third World mega-cities has not followed the pattern established by 19th-century metropolises like London or Paris, where peasants displaced by the mechanization of agriculture found employment in new job sectors. Instead, 21st-century urbanization has grown decoupled from employment, so that an ever-increasing number of ex-peasants, displaced from rural areas, cannot be assimilated into urban centers devoid of job—and, often, economic—growth. Already today the United Nations estimates that more than one billion people live in the slums and shantytowns surrounding the mega-cities of the Global South, the vast majority of them consigned to the informal economy. As the sociologist Jan Breman has written of the poor of India;

A point of no return is reached when a reserve army waiting to be incorporated into the labour process becomes stigmatized as a permanently redundant mass, an excessive burden that cannot be included, now or in the future, in economy and society. This metamorphosis is, in my opinion at least, the real crisis of world capitalism.5

This dissertation tracks the concept of the lumpenproletariat from its coinage by Marx and Engels through its reworking by Franz Fanon, the Black Panthers and others in the context of the colonial liberation and Black Power movements, and onwards into

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contemporary debates about populism, identity politics, and the future of work. From its origins an unstable concept, the lumpenproletariat raises a number of related questions about the possibility of an emancipatory political project in the present: is social class a primary determinant of political action? Are interests objectively determined, or subjectively constructed? What role does de-industrialization and technological unemployment play in shifting political blocs and cultural mores? How do we articulate the relation of various systems of oppression—including race, class and gender—in the context of global transformations in production, reproduction and non-production?

For the purposes of this dissertation, such questions can best be synthesized as follows: What happens to the Marxian project when the future of productive labor seems in doubt, both as a source of capital valorization and as a foundation for political action? Whether in terms of its objective position at the point of production or its subjective consciousness of the need for revolution, the decline of the industrial proletariat has often been figured as synonymous with that of Marxism. My argument, however, is that a recuperation of the rich and half-forgotten legacy of the lumpenproletariat emerging out of the Marxist and Black radical traditions can help provide a model for constructing a powerful socialist movement in the present.

1.2 Outline of Chapters

This study is divided into three broad sections. The first chapter, “Messes and Masses in Marx,” begins by examining the fissure traversing the concept of "the people,"
as it developed in the aftermath of the two great revolutions (French and Industrial) that ushered in the 19th century. On the one hand, emergent social democratic forces propounded a new understanding of “the people” as collective sovereign subject; on the other, the tremendous dislocations and immiseration engendered by the onset of industrial capitalism produced a quite different conception of the people as a frighteningly heterogenous mass, mob, or multitude. Confusingly, then, “the people” seemed at once to signal the one and the many, the whole and the part, the most exalted political subject and the most excluded or debased.

Working from key passages in Flaubert, Hugo and Tocqueville, I show how this conceptual doubleness plagued political discourse in the period of the French Second Republic and contributed to near-universal confusion about the course of the 1848 Revolution and, especially, the counter-revolution. Such confusion grew particularly acute in the period of the June Days Uprising, when a portion of the Parisian population took up arms against the fledging Republic. For a staunch Republican such as Victor Hugo, this posed a seemingly intractable problem: were "the people” to be found on the side of the impoverished masses on the barricades, or that of the Republican government?

Marx intended his own political analysis to cut through this conceptual confusion, replacing the false problematic of “the people” with the actual opposition of bourgeoisie and proletariat. Indeed, for Marx, the whole realm of the overt struggle
between political factions was merely a distorting veil obscuring the “real” class interests lying underneath. Yet despite Marx’s claim to have found the key to decode this the enigma of history, his 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte in fact narrates the continued failure of appearances to resolve into essences, of parties to dissolve into classes, and of classes to act as they "should."

This latent crisis comes to a head with the Bonapartist coup d’état, with the populist dictator drawing supporters from across the social, political and economic spectrum, scrambling the categories of Marx’s class analysis and challenging the assumption of an innate correspondence between class position and political expression. Indeed, Bonaparte III threatens to utterly invert Marx’s conception of the relation of base and superstructure, acting back upon social classes and constructing his own “base.”

Drawing on the analysis of Peter Stallybrass, I argue that the category of the lumpenproletariat represents Marx’s attempt to contain this threatened inversion by grounding a surprisingly protean superstructure in a putative new social class. In a sense, however, Marx is able to find or assemble a coherent class which can form the base of the Napoleonic superstructure only by cutting his own earlier analysis apart and pasting it back together. The resulting lumpenproletariat is a curious bricolage defined less by its relation to production than by its lack of a productive position in the emerging capitalist economy. As Marx memorably describes it:

Alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves,
swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaus*, brothel keepers, porters, *literati*, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars—in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la bohème*. (18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire, 75)

If this diverse and bewildering miscellany manages to salvage Marx’s conviction in the innate radicality of the proletariat, it does so only by creating an untenable division between the deserving workers and the undeserving poor. In doing so, however, I argue that Marx reproduces the same fissure his analysis set out to suture, as the proletariat fractures along the very lines that had haunted the Republican discourse of the people. That is, just as “the people” had bifurcated into two incommensurate halves—an increasingly abstract notion of popular sovereignty and a concretely heterogeneous multitude—so too “the proletariat” risks becoming no more than an ideal type, with the concrete tensions, contradictions and incoherencies of the actual population consigned to the phenomenal realms of the Lumpen.

In the final section of the chapter, I contrast Marx’s writings on the lumpen with the so-called "fragment on machines" from his later *Grundrisse*, as well as related passages from volumes I and III of *Capital*. At least on one reading, such passages suggest that capital’s "moving contradiction" ultimately culminates in something like full automation, mass unemployment and the end of work. I trace a certain tension in Marx’s thinking here, for if on the one hand he excoriates the lumpenproletariat as a counter-revolutionary class (or anti-class) on the other he seems to suggest an ongoing
"lumpenproletarianization" of the entire working class, and indeed to ascribe a revolutionary character to this process.

My second chapter, “O.K. We Are Lumpen. Right On,” explores the remarkable reversal through which the lumpenproletariat, initially an emblem of the failure of class consciousness, was reworked as a revolutionary rallying-cry in the context of the decolonial and Black Power movements. I begin with an analysis of the production of three audio recordings through which the Black Panthers attempted to “seize the time.” The first, Elaine Brown’s debut album of that title, became the soundtrack to the Panther movement. It also gave its name to party chairman Bobby Seale’s political memoir, compiled from audio recordings made inside the San Francisco Country Jail. Finally, Seize the Time was the name of the new record label on which the Panthers released the sole single of their revolutionary house funk band, The Lumpen. From there, I work backwards to trace the historical lineages that allowed the Panthers to reclaim Marx’s pejorative category.

To answer this question, I first turn to W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction* to examine both the attraction and the aversion that Marxism had historically exerted over the Black freedom struggle. On the one hand, Marx’s attention to the social relations undergirding racialization provided Du Bois with important tools to demystify the latter, allowing him to interpret the Civil War and the post-war Reconstruction as a tale of class struggle leading to a “Dictatorship of the Black Proletariat,” as he originally
titled one of his chapters on the post-war governments. On the other hand, orthodox Marxism proved unable to explain the ongoing centrality of unwaged labor to capitalist production and, relatedly, the persistence of social antagonisms other than the straightforward opposition of bourgeoisie and proletariat. For if Reconstruction represented a dictatorship of the Black proletariat, its defeat was in large part a product of the white one, again suggesting that the determinants of political consciousness must be sought in more complex terms than those of unmediated economic interest.

*Black Reconstruction* was, in this sense, Du Bois’ *18th Brumaire*—a tale of social classes internally riven and fissured. But where Marx had tried to restrict such fissures to the wageless and workless, Du Bois instead suggests that it is the wage itself which exerts a counter-revolutionary pull, both in terms of the literal wage relation and the psychological “wages of whiteness.” Indeed, in his telling, access to waged work becomes the fulcrum around which determinative struggles will be organized, as a previously economically redundant white underclass violently transfers its condition of marginalization to emancipated ex-slaves. Implicitly, then, Du Bois begins to torque Marx’s theory to explore the possibility of revolution in a context where the wage relation remains exceptional, while the most radical actors are those for whom waged work is only rarely and intermittently in reach.

From Du Bois I move to Frantz Fanon, who makes this argument explicit in his *Wretched of the Earth*. Writing from Algeria, Fanon argued that the third-world
proletariat could not function as a revolutionary class, because capital’s combined and uneven development meant waged workers comprised only a tiny fraction of the colonial population, one fully integrated into the status quo. Taking heart from peasant-led socialist movements in China, Cuba, and Vietnam, Fanon pointed instead to the revolutionary role of the peasantry. Above all, however, he located the seeds of radical possibility in landless ex-peasants who were forcibly displaced from their lifeways without being absorbed into colonial capitalism. For Fanon, it was in fact “the lumpenproletariat, this cohort of starving men, divorced from tribe and clan, [which] constitutes one of the most spontaneously and radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people” (64).

I then turn to the US-American context to trace how Fanon’s revalorization of the lumpenproletariat was picked up and expanded in the Black Power era. I begin with the work of James Boggs—a union militant and former comrade of C. L. R. James who broke with the latter due to sharp disagreements about the centrality of the Civil Rights struggle and, relatedly, the impact of automation on the labor movement. For Boggs, technological transformations had already created the material conditions for what Marx called communism (material abundance and a dramatic reduction in necessary labor) without, however, producing the immaterial ones (class consciousness and political revolution). In these circumstances, Boggs argued, the locus of revolutionary activity
had passed from the exploited to the excluded, or from workers’ struggle to Black struggle.

Finally, I return to the Black Panthers who, in a series of little-known writings on the lumpenproletariat, provided a synthesis of Marx, Fanon and Boggs. Extending Fanon’s argument from the colony to the metropole, Panthers Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver argued that the industrial working class has been pacified in the colonizing countries as well as in the colonized. From Boggs, meanwhile, they took the notion that technological automation would lead to an ever-increasing diminishment of waged work. They thus predicted a tendential process of lumpenproletarianization in which more and more (ex-) workers would be reduced to the position of exteriority already characteristic of the Black underclass. This conceptual synthesis allowed them to ascribe a universalism to the Black liberation struggle, rendering the Black lumpenproletariat the revolutionary vanguard of a broader, multi-racial proletariat in the process of becoming lumpen.

Three important ramifications follow, I argue, from this new conception of the lumpenproletariat. First, by freeing Marxism of its exclusive pre-occupation with the wage relationship, it allows for a more expansive understanding of struggles outside the factory. Second, and relatedly, it signals the irreducible contingency of the political. Where in Marx the factory floor had been a sort of crucible which forged, not just commodities, but class subjectivities, here that linkage is at the very least called into
question, reopening political identity formation as at least partially malleable and open to contestation. Finally, it points towards the necessity of conceiving a socialist strategy for a world beyond work—one defined, for the vast majority, not by exploitation, but by increasing social, political and economic marginalization.

My third and final chapter begins by considering a spate of recent science fiction films in which such a world without work is presented as a grim reality. Movies such as District 9 director Neill Blomkamp’s 2013 Elysium and Bong Joon-Ho’s Snowpiercer (also 2013) depict societies where the progress of technological development has rendered the vast majority of the population superfluous to the survival of the wealthy, who dwell in high-tech heavens quite literally floating in the aether (Elysium) or else in the far-off first-class compartments of a heavily allegorized train (Snowpiercer). These films have been criticized by some on the left for painting a false or distorted picture of capitalist production, insofar as they depict economic inequality shorn of class exploitation. In contrast, I argue that this is precisely their strength. Drawing on my analysis of Boggs, the Black Panthers and Marx’s “fragment on machines,” I argue that the films explore the possibility of revolution in a quite plausible scenario that Marx had in fact already predicted, one where “labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth.” (Grundrisse.)

I then examine two contemporary theories that pick up and develop Marx’s predictions, seemingly in opposite directions—on the one hand the Empire trilogy of
Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, and on the other the work of the Endnotes collectives and others associated with so-called communization theory. In Hardt and Negri’s reading, the process predicted by Marx in his “fragment on machines” has already come to pass. Rather than entailing the elimination of value-producing labor, however, they argue that this process has rendered all human activity (and indeed human life itself) “productive beyond measure.” This conceptual move in turn grounds their thinking on the multitude, for such boundless productivity escapes not only measurement but, increasingly, capitalist control, becoming something like the self-production of a collective political subject—in Hardt & Negri’s terms, “an internally different, multiple social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity[...] but on what it has in common” (Multitude, 100).

Endnotes, meanwhile, return to the same passages in Marx as Hardt and Negri but arrive at quite different conclusions. For them, the general law of capital accumulation is a self-undermining one in which workers are tendentially expelled from the wage relation. Rather than a boundlessly productive multitude, they read this process as producing a progressively redundant "surplus population." This line of thinking is quite close to that of Boggs and the Black Panthers, whom Endnotes inexplicably fail to reference. Unlike the Panthers, however, they cannot imagine any possibility of organizing this unemployed surplus population, instead seeing in the latter only the "tendential disappearance of the previous revolutionary horizon."
Formally, the position taken by Endnotes is the exact inverse of that of Hardt and Negri. In fact, however, both theories rely on the same underlying assumption of a direct correspondence between productive labor and revolutionary possibility, while pursuing it to opposite conclusions. If Hardt and Negri have to contort the labor theory of value in order to preserve an “orthodox” revolutionary subject, in other words, then Endnotes end up jettisoning the revolutionary subject in order to preserve the orthodox theory of value. What both frameworks inherit, unquestioned, from Marxian orthodoxy is precisely the aspect of the latter that is most questionable—that is, the assumption of a more or less direct correspondence between structure and subject, labor productivity and political subjectivity.

As I hope to have established, however, the disjunct between these two dimensions of the Marxian project has plagued the latter from its inception, with the concept of the lumpenproletariat emerging as an attempt to forestall a definitive split. Rather than attempting to close this gap, I argue that we should consider it precisely the space of politics, rejecting economic (over-)determinism in both its optimistic and its pessimist variants. At once an emblem of political vacillation and of increasing externalization to the circuits of capital valorization, the lumpenproletariat, I argue, can help us to grasp the very autonomy of the political that it was first deployed in order to contain. In place of a seamless equation between “objective interests” and their unmediated social or political expression, the lumpen could then be said to “represent”
the world-making potentialities of representation itself, as it acts back upon and fashions social subjects out of a set of interests that are, if not totally malleable, then at least open to multiple competing articulations.

In some ways, this line of thinking brings me close to that of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, to whom I turn in the last section of the chapter. The two post-Marxists rightly reject what Mouffe calls “the essentialist perspective” according to which political identities are the unmediated expression of social agents’ position within the relations of production. For Laclau and Mouffe, political identities emerge instead out of a struggle over the construction of “the people,” which is never an empirical category but rather the discursive articulation of a series of unfulfilled demands around a structuring antagonism between an “us” and an “enemy.” The selection of this antagonism is, for them, entirely contingent, so that “the people” may be constructed along progressive lines (for instance, in terms of “the 99% vs the 1%”) or regressive ones (for instance, “real Americans vs. foreigners”).

This framework has much to recommend it. But if Laclau and Mouffe rightly reject an overly essentializing conception of the relation of identity and interest, they bend the stick too far in the opposite direction, rendering political identities purely contingent. While they state that an antagonistic politics must appeal to a feeling of powerlessness vis à vis the powerful, their account is curiously devoid of any analysis of the material relations in which “power” is embedded, rendering the sources of such
social antagonism seemingly arbitrary. Antagonisms, however, do not emerge out of the aether, and while interests may be malleable, they are not *purely* discursive; they have a material dimension, one grounded in concrete social relations, even if the latter can lend themselves to various articulations. If a certain Marxian economism had rendered the political a mere after-effect of the economic, in other words, here the terms are simply inverted, making the economic nothing more than a spectral-after effect of the political.

This, then, is the second “cut” the lumpenproletariat can make into contemporary debates. For while the Lumpen signals the gap between the constitution of political subjects and their position within capitalist relations of production, it also names a quite determinate process through which an increasing percentage of the workforce finds itself tendentially expelled from a productive position within the latter entirely. Even absent the many competing tendencies and counter-tendencies that complicate Marx’s analysis of increasing immiseration, this does not lead straightforwardly to mass unemployment. (Outside of exceptional moments of crisis, people will of necessity find some means to employ themselves.) But it does lead to a generalized proliferation of low-wage, low-productivity employment and, especially in the Global South, to the specific forms of labor Marx had associated with the lumpenproletariat: street vendors, rag pickers, rickshaw drivers, prostitutes, migrant workers, informal petty businesses, etc. In contrast to the role of the industrial proletariat, whose exploitation was central to capital accumulation, the activities of this
growing surplus population occur on the margins of an itself faltering process of capital valorization.

_Pace_ Laclau and Mouffe, it is simply impossible to understand the emergence of global populisms both left and right without an analysis of this dynamic. We would thus need to rewrite their insight into the discursive articulation of the political in terms of a simultaneous determinacy/indeterminacy, or as the indeterminate _political_ outcome of an overdetermined _material_ process. Lumpenproletarianization, as we have seen, names the non-coincident simultaneity of the two: political uncertainty alongside ever-more certain economic redundancy.

This is a different dualism—and dynamism—than that contained within the proletariat as the self-identical subject-object which produces everything, yet possesses nothing. Tendentially at least, the lumpenproletariat neither produces nor possesses anything. It is non-identical. There are no guarantees, no neat dialectical inversions to underwrite its pretensions to political power. The only promissory note it possesses is a negative one: that of increasing exclusion from the sites of production—if not indeed of reproduction—of ever-growing misery and debt.

What remains of the dialectic, however, is the reality that the crisis of the wage-labor relation symptomized by the lumpenproletarian condition is a crisis for capital as well. Indeed, the historical weakness of the labor movement today coincides—only seemingly paradoxically—with that of the capitalist world-system, which increasingly
struggles to realize profits even as it produces an over-abundance of material wealth. If
this renders the traditional, transitional demands of the socialist movement (wage
increases, full employment, etc.) ever-more difficult to operationalize, it also brings the
material preconditions for socialism closer than ever.

In my conclusion, I explore both risks and opportunities for socialist strategy in
this strange conjuncture, extrapolating some broad strategic and tactical implications
from our prior analysis of the lumpenproletariat. Positioning the Lumpen as one
element in a broader network of social relations of production, reproduction and non-
production, I argue that this more expansive definition of the dispossessed represents
the raw or source material from which to conceive the contingent articulation of a
collective subject as a properly political project. Rather than rejecting the threatening
malleability of social subjects, this formulation instead embraces the fractured,
multifarious and internally-divided terrain of the social as the very precondition for
political subjectivation. Within this framework, the latter then appears, not as the project
of appealing to individual or group “interests,” or even of revealing to subjects an
“objective interest” the truth of which is occluded to them, but instead as the creative
construction of identities and interests that cannot be supposed to precede this very act
of articulation.

Political organizing, from this perspective, emerges as a form of world-building.
But worlds do not emerge ex nihilo; there are material coordinates which structure their
conditions of (im)possibility. In closing, I argue that two potential worlds confront us today. One, a world of checkpoints and borders, attempts to restrict access to social wealth along the lines of race, class, ethnicity and citizenship. The other, a world we have scarcely begun to imagine, will genuinely socialize social wealth (of which there is more than enough today to provide for everyone, despite the limits of an increasingly dire ecological crisis). Nothing ensures the victory of one world over the other. But a recuperation of the thinking on the lumpenproletariat emerging out of the Black radical tradition, I argue, can provide us with some tools to help bring the latter one about.
2. Messes and Masses in Marx: Origins of the Lumpenproletariat

2.1 People and Populace

"Oh, what a mess we are in! We ought to have set fire to every corner of Europe!"

So Deslauriers exclaims to Frédéric towards the end of Flaubert’s *L’Éducation sentimentale* (398). It is the aftermath of 1848, that "springtime of the peoples,” when the conflagration sparked by the February Revolution had indeed raced across the continent like a wildfire. From Sicily to Saxony, despots trembled—and many toppled. Everywhere absolutism seemed on the wane and the combined, if confused, forces of republicanism, nationalism and socialism in the ascendant.

Alas, this brief moment of possibility would be as dazzling as it was short lived. Within six months, the flare-up had been beaten back; within a year, the last faintly flickering embers of revolution were all but extinguished. Across the continent, hard-won freedoms—of speech, press, suffrage, assembly—were quickly rescinded; of the fledgling republics proudly proclaimed in the “spring of nations,” all but one were soon destroyed. This last, the French, would shortly return a pro-monarchist majority to the new Assembly—the seemingly capricious people having overthrown the monarchy only in order to vote in favor of its restoration!

This paradox—the populace expressing its will only in its self-abnegation—would have dramatic consequences for the concept of the people, that strange discovery or invention of the (first) French Revolution. At least in its Rousseauian variant, "the
people" had been supposed to be not only sovereign, but singular and indivisible. Yet what the revolutions of 1848 and their aftermath had seemed to show was less a single, sovereign will than a multiplicity of wills, less people than peoples—both in terms of the competing claims to sovereignty of overlapping and entangled "nations"; and in terms of residual caste divisions and the emergent ones of class; and more generally in the confusions, divisions and antagonisms traversing the body—or bodies—politically.

Indeed, the multiplication of such fissures threatened to return the sovereign people to that other great discovery or invention of the eighteenth century, the population. This last might be thought of as the inverse of the people, or its dialectical corollary—the very equalizing impulse which engendered popular sovereignty itself risking, in its leveling of social distinctions, the disintegration of the social body into an endlessly atomized mass.¹ Alongside the people as sovereign, and singular, we would then have the population as the theoretically endless proliferation of subaltern differences. Flaubert again: "The people is an eternal minor, and it will always remain (in the hierarchy of social elements) the lowest rank, since it is number, mass, the unlimited."²

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¹ C.f. Jonsson 2008, p. 10: "It is a strange turn of history. At the very moment when sovereignty is transferred to the people, the people loses its essence. Its character as a dense and organic community evaporates, and the people makes itself known only as a series of abstract units added up according to arithmetic principles."
² Flaubert 1988, 314: "Le peuple est un éternel mineur, et il sera toujours (dans la hiérarchie des éléments sociaux) au dernier rang, puisqu'il est le nombre, le masse, l'illimité" (my translation).
Number, mass, the unlimited. We can contrast this vertiginous bad infinity to the old, medieval image of the body politic, which had conceived the cooperative harmony of society as a function of its hierarchical organization. King, parliament, knights, peasants—head, heart, arms, feet—all combined to form a whole which functioned properly insofar as every element knew and played its proper part. Christine de Pizan's 1407 Book of the Body Politic presents only the best-known version of the metaphor: "For just as the human body is not whole, but defective and deformed when it lacks any of its members, so the body politic cannot be perfect, whole, nor healthy if all the estates of which we speak are not well joined and united together" (90). To be well joined and well united meant to accept one's place in an unquestioned social hierarchy. Paradoxically then, the pre-modern understanding of organic social unity had been predicated on intense social division.

Precisely in abolishing the old caste hierarchies, the revolutions—not only political, but theological and theoretical—which ushered in the rule of the people thus threatened the very organicity on which such sovereignty had been predicated. If the prince had represented the head of the body politic, in other words, what remained of the latter when this head was figuratively (and sometimes literally) severed? That would seem to leave us either with a headless body, or else a body upon which heads continually sprout and multiply, as each separate subset of the (former) totality assumed
the functions previously reserved for a single member. This, incidentally, is exactly how Foucault describes the problem of the population:

What we are dealing with in this new technology of power is not exactly society (or at least not the social body, as defined by the jurists), nor is it the individual body. It is a new body, a multiple body, a body with so many heads that, while they might not be infinite in number, they cannot necessarily be counted (Society Must Be Defended, 245).

On the one hand, the people as sovereign; on the other, as a monstrous, many-headed hydra—this uncanny doubling suggests that the question of popular sovereignty was not merely a problem of suffrage, but rather of "representation" in a much broader sense of the term. It is only in this light that we can understand the decision of the Republican government to stage an open competition for the most suitable "Symbolic Figure of the Republic" as one of its first acts following the February Revolution. On the face of it, an art exhibition would scarcely seem a high priority for a regime seeking to consolidate its power in the immediate aftermath of insurrection. Given the conceptual difficulties haunting the notion of the people, however, we begin to understand how this question of aesthetic representation could seem as urgent as the more transparently political and economic crises confronting the fledgling regime.

The whole arc of the competition perfectly encapsulated these conceptual difficulties. Initially, the provisional government had planned to select three finalists from amongst the preliminary sketches—which, in the newfound spirit of Republican equality, were to be submitted anonymously in a free and open competition. Having opened the contest to the masses, however, the jury found itself overwhelmed by
sheer volume of submissions, and was forced to increase the number of finalists to twenty. These last were then invited to submit finished, large-scale versions of their initial drafts, being paid an indemnity of 500 francs in order to do so. When the time came to select a final winner, however, the jury, unhappy with the completed paintings, declared none of them fit to "represent" the Republic and abruptly cancelled the whole affair.\footnote{My synopsis draws on the definitive account of Albert Boime, "The Second Republic's Contest for the Figure of the Republic," \textit{Art Bulletin} 53 (1971), 68-83.}

What explains the outrage with which the jury, critics and the broader public greeted the final paintings? If the historical record is to believed, it was the eclecticism of the finished works, their discordant amalgamation of symbols, attributes and details, to which the people objected. Despite or alongside this bewildering mish-mash of elements, however, the final entries also exhibited a surprising uniformity. No instruction had been given to the artists beyond that of depicting a "symbolic figure," and yet all of them, without exception, chose to depict the Republic as a woman, draped in the robes of antiquity, either standing or seated on a throne, and surrounded by symbols (sword, olive branch, flag, wreath, laurel, etc.) intended to denote both beneficence and power.

In converging on this particular allegorical image the artists were not, of course, creating an icon \textit{ex nihilo}. On the one hand they drew on classical Roman representations...
of the goddesses of victory and liberty, ones which had already been revived in the period of the First Republic; on the other, on a whole iconological tradition depicting the virtues, vices and passions in allegorical and highly moralizing terms (of which the popular emblem books of the 16th and 17th centuries are but the best-known example).\(^4\)

In his *Recollections* of 1848, Alexis de Tocqueville notes the mania for such allegories which overtook the whole of France in these early days of the revolution:

> The Champs de Mars was to be filled with representations of all manner of allegorical personages, virtues, political institutions and even public services. France, Germany and Italy hand in hand; Equality, Liberty and Fraternity also hand in hand; Agriculture, Trade, the Army, the Navy, and above all a colossal figure of the Republic (*Recollections*, 127).

It was precisely this resort to allegory, however, which risked obscuring the relation of the "symbolic figure of the Republic" to the people she ostensibly figured. Was the image intended to symbolically incorporate the populace—as in that older allegory, the body politic, but stripped now of the divisions and delineations which the latter had contained? Or was she the embodiment of a "general will" somehow distilled from the people yet distinct from them and floating, as it were, above them? It was this tension between ideality and reality which rendered the images so incoherent and doubtless contributed to the dismayed reaction of critics and public.

Indeed, it is hard not to read the ill-fated contest as itself a meta-allegory of its own failure. It is not just that the trajectory of the competition mirrored that of the

republic itself—with initial, near-universal enthusiasm giving way to confusion, dissension and, ultimately, dissolution. It is also that the diremption between people and population—universal and particular, the sublime sovereign and the endlessly atomized mass—seems so perfectly reproduced by the chasm separating the ideal "symbol of the Republic" in its seeming serene abstraction from its endless material iterations, each minutely different from the others and yet all in essence the same, producing a dizzying array of variations on a theme without ever congealing into a coherent whole, an endless parade, as one observer called it, of

red republics, green republics, yellow republics; republics surrounded by the symbols of '89: broken chains, equilateral triangles, fasces, tablets; republics in evening gowns, dressing gowns, in floral patterns; republics in military costume... (Quoted in Boime, 74, translation mine).

In The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty, Eric Santner argues that, in the transfer of sovereignty from the monarch to "the people," the latter inherit a strange duality from the former. Just as the king had always possessed two bodies—the mortal, precarious and perishable body natural and the immortal, immutable and transcendent body politic—so too the people become at once the transcendent locus of sovereign authority and the contingent, residual, perishable flesh. Absent a singular body to incarnate and in some sense contain this duality, however, these two aspects threaten to rupture—the people as sovereign authority receding into the ineffable realms of the noumenal while the people as mass, as multitude, proliferate seemingly endlessly.
Flaubert, ever attentive to the ironies of history, captures this diremption in his dry depiction of the seizure of the Louvre during the February Revolution:

Suddenly the 'Marseillaise' rang out. Hussonnet and Frédéric leaned over the banisters. It was the people. They swept up the staircase in a bewildering flood of bare heads, helmets, red caps, bayonets, and shoulders, surging forward so violently that some disappeared in the swarming mass as they went up and up, like a spring-tide pushing back a river, driven by an irresistible impulse, with a continuous roar. [...]

Pushed along in spite of themselves, they entered a room where a red velvet canopy was stretched across the ceiling. On the throne beneath, there sat a proletarian with a black beard, his shirt half-open, grinning like a stupid ape. Others clambered up to the platform to sit in his place.

"What a myth!" said Hussonnet. "There's the sovereign people for you!" (313).

There are at least two dichotomies at work in this passage. On a first level, we see the tension between the "the one" and "the many" presented by means of the ironic juxtaposition of the seething horde and the throne of sovereignty. Though "the people" might possess a sort of collective social body—one depicted here and elsewhere by Flaubert in terms of the natural sublime—only a single literal body can occupy the seat of power, with the grinning proletarian "ape" standing in as a bathetic substitute for, and mockery of, the "symbolic figure of the Republic." Indeed, Flaubert so enjoys lambasting the latter that he repeats the joke twice. Just a few pages later, he describes a "prostitute posing as a statue of Liberty, motionless and terrifying, with her eyes wide open," again transforming allegory into satire (314). Elsewhere, in a more direct thrust, he satirizes the artist Pellerin's allegorical painting depicting "the Republic, or Progress, or Civilization, in the form of Christ driving a locomotive through a virgin forest" (324).
But there is a second dichotomy at work here, for if the people is a collective social body, it is not an all-encompassing one. "Hussonnet and Frédéric leaned over the banisters. It was the people." If the people are down below, where—and what—is Frédéric? Here as elsewhere, Flaubert's protagonist is presented as an individuated observer of "the people"—at times elated by the latter, at times indifferent, but always at a degree of removal from the vast, undifferentiated mass. Others have noted how the individual bourgeois subject constituted itself in this period precisely by gazing on a multifarious other, whether we think of Henry Mayhew's elaborate taxonomy of the London Labour and the London Poor or of popular novelists like Eugène Sue who purported to reveal the "mysteries" of the Parisian underworld to a titillated bourgeois audience.5 What Flaubert captures, then, is the increasing tendency for the collective (proletarian) people to be figured as the contrary of the individual (bourgeois) subject.

This was not entirely a new development. Already at the time of the first French Revolution, "the people" had referred both to the whole of French society and specifically to the Third Estate, so that the term would seem, confusingly, to designate a set of which it was also a single part. In the decades following, and especially after 1830, the Third Estate would fissure in it turn, with its bourgeois half ascending to dominance under the July Monarchy. Thus by 1848, even an untlited commoner such as Frédéric

5 The seminal, strange, inarguably masterful and as equally inarguably flawed account here is no doubt Louis Chevalier's Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses à Paris pendant la première moitié du XIXe siècle.
could see himself as something quite distinct from "the people"—which, along with related terms like "popular," "populace," etc., was increasingly used to refer more narrowly to the working (and unworking) poor. Yet the newer referent never entirely eclipses the older, so that these two usages of the people—as narrow social class and expansive social totality—continue to oscillate and interpenetrate confusingly. Thus, for instance, in the immediate aftermath of 1848 Tocqueville can remark on:

the uniquely and exclusively popular character of the recent revolution, and the omnipotence it had given the so-called people, that is to say, the classes who work with their hands, over all other classes (Recollections, 70).

We thus begin to glimpse the contours of a quite dizzying dialectic in which "the people" split apart in a two-fold sense. On the one hand, there is a split between ideality and materiality, the people as abstract sovereign and the people as actual, heterogeneous social subjects. But there is also a split within the latter category, as the subset of social subjects broadly referred to as “the people” continually shifts and shrinks.

This process culminates in the June Days Uprising of 1848, in many ways the defining traumatic scene of the ill-fated Republic. At stake was a conflict over two competing visions that had been in tension almost from the moment the monarchy was overthrown—on the one hand that of a "democratic republic" guaranteeing merely political (but not social or economic) liberties; on the other, that of a "democratic and social republic" which would address not just political freedom but also economic inequality. Concretely, the question was whether the new regime would simply institute universal suffrage while preserving the rights of property, or whether there would be
some further attempt to redistribute the latter—as had been the case in the French Revolution, for instance, when the feudal tithes had been abolished and a portion of the demesnes reapportioned to the peasantry.

In the first flush of victory following the events of February, Parisian radicals successfully advocated for this latter vision, forcing the provisional government to create "national workshops" which guaranteed work and wages to the many under- and unemployed. This was—no doubt rightfully—claimed as a great victory for the people. But it turned out that the people did not want it, at least in terms of the representatives they returned to the Assembly in the elections of April, the first held under universal male suffrage in more than half a century. This led to a curious split: in Paris, the increasingly radicalized popular classes made demands of the new Assembly in the name of "the people," only to be rebuffed by elected representatives who appealed to the same authority.

These tensions came to a head in June, when the Executive Committee decreed that the national workshops be shuttered, ordering the ousted workers to either enlist in the army, sign up for work gangs that would be shipped off to the provinces, or else

6 In fact, it was a partial victory at best. The radical proposal was for "social workshops" which would appropriate shuttered industries and run them as worker-managed cooperatives. Within the provisional government, this was the position espoused by Louis Blanc. The Minister for Public works, however, with whom the final decision rested, opted for the model of "charity workshops" which would provide the unemployed with work and public funds while leaving property relations untouched (See Agulhon’s *The Republican Experiment*, pp. 36-37).
quite simply return to the streets. In the event, the workers chose the latter option, albeit not in the manner that the government had intended. Dispersing to the popular quarters of Paris, they threw up barricades across the entire city, taking up arms to defend their vision of a social republic which would guarantee, not just the negative liberties of speech, assembly, etc., but also the positive freedom of a "right to work."  

The ensuing three-day street battle, which came to be known as the June Days Uprising, was by far the bloodiest of the Second Republic. It also marked the beginning of the latter’s decline, for with the defeat of the insurgents, all hopes of a democratic and social republic were put to rest, and the long counter-reaction that would culminate in the coup of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte had begun.

So much, at least, seems clear in hindsight. At the time, however, the June Days Uprising caused confusion and consternation across the political spectrum. Overnight, the people of Paris had risen up—against a government ostensibly by and for the people! So on which side of the barricade, as it were, were the people to be found? Here is Victor Hugo, in a tortured and tortuous passage of Les Misérables, struggling to make sense of the conundrum:

7 It would seem ironic that this slogan, today associated with union busting and neoliberal reaction, had at that time been the rallying-cry for something like a federally-guaranteed universal jobs program. In point of fact these divergent visions (negative and positive) of the “right to work” had co-existed and conflicted since the early 18th century, when mass unemployment caused some to demand the abolition of monopolies, including labor monopolies (le droit de travailler) and others to advocate for government support of the jobless (le droit au travail). For an overview of these debates, see Joseph J. Spengler’s, “Right to Work: A Backwards Glance.”
It sometimes happens that, even contrary to principles, even contrary to liberty, equality, and fraternity, even contrary to the universal vote, even contrary to the government by all for all, from the depths of its anguish, of its discouragements and its destitutions, of its fevers, of its distresses, of its miasmas, of its ignorances, of its darkness, that great and despairing body, the rabble, protests against, and the populace wages battle against, the people (731).

The populace wages battle against the people. It is an extraordinary statement, the culmination of that gradual disaggregation of the people's two bodies explored across the preceding pages. On the one hand, the sublimely sovereign people has here produced (one might almost say, excreted) an unabsorbable excess—dark, destitute, despairing and diseased. This excess is then figured as a sort of anti-people—a pole of pure negativity, one which acts contrary not just to "principles" but to that very universality of which it is ostensibly a part. And yet precisely in its sheer excessiveness the rabble threatens to utterly eclipse the people, who come to seem wan and ineffable in comparison to this visceral, material, hungering, raging, "great and despairing body."

Hugo himself must have found something unsatisfactory about this formulation, for just a few paragraphs later, after many hesitations and equivocations, he corrects himself, transforming the war of the populace against the people into the inner battle of a divided and self-conflicted subject:

June 1848, let us hasten to say, was an exceptional fact, and almost impossible of classification in the philosophy of history. All the words which we have just uttered, must be discarded, when it becomes a question of this extraordinary revolt, in which one feels the holy anxiety of toil claiming its rights. It was

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8 On the relation of the “diptych” people/populace to the emergence of Marx and Engel’s concept of the lumpenproletariat, see Huard 1988, esp. pp. 5-6
necessary to combat it, and this was a duty, for it attacked the republic. But what was June 1848, at bottom? A revolt of the people against itself (732).

And what does *Sentimental Education* have to say about the conflict? Very little.

Unlike the principle episodes of the February Revolution, which are described in detail, the June Days Uprising is almost entirely missing from the novel. Indeed, Flaubert absents his protagonist from Paris for the entirety of the insurrection, relieving himself of the obligation to depict events at all. This is curious. We know that Flaubert was deeply concerned with the verisimilitude of his depiction of the 1848 Revolution, combing through the archives to ensure that his narrative was faithful to the historical record. Here, however, his pen falters. It is almost as if there is something about the June Days that makes them unrepresentable, even for so avid an observer as Flaubert.

And yet the narrative is not entirely silent on the subject. Returning to Paris, Frédéric visits his acquaintance Dussardier—one of the few working-class characters in the novel and perhaps the only sympathetic one of any class—who has been wounded during the course of the revolt. In answer to Frédéric’s inquiry, Dussardier then recounts the events leading to his injury. This gives Flaubert the opportunity to describe the uprising retroactively. It also entails a change of focus; where the February Revolution had been witnessed through the eyes of the passively observing bourgeois subject, the June Days will be narrated not by an observer but a participant, not by a member of the bourgeoisie but of the “popular” classes.
Given his social, political and class position, one would expect to find Dussardier positioned atop the barricades with the insurgent workers. Such, however, is not the case. Instead, Flaubert places him with the predominantly bourgeois militias of the National Guard who, heeding the call of the Assembly, take up arms against the rebellious proletarians. Wounded in the ensuing battle, he becomes a hero of the regime for his "brave exploit," although the nature of the latter is ambiguous:

The previous Saturday a boy wrapped in a tricolour flag had shouted to the National Guards from the top of a barricade: 'Are you going to fire on your brothers?' As they moved forward, Dussardier had dropped his musket, pushed the others away, leapt up on to the barricade, felled the young rebel with a well-directed kick, and snatched the flag from him. He had been found under the debris, his thigh pierced by a copper slug. They had had to cut away the flesh round the wound to remove the bullet (362).

Taking up arms against the "rebels," Dussardier nevertheless risks his life to save them. For all Flaubert's mockery of the Republican penchant for overdrawn allegory, this charged tableau is itself highly symbolic. It is as if Dussardier is stretching himself apart in order to suture the split sides of the social body, sacrificing his own body, Christ-like, in order to reestablish the cohesion and coherence of the people.

And yet he makes this attempt, inexplicably, from the side of reaction! Is it simple spite, or sheer perversity, that causes Flaubert to place the working-class Dussardier on the "wrong" side of the barricades—one might almost say, on the wrong side of history? A few paragraphs later, Flaubert allows Dussardier himself to voice his doubts:
He even confessed to Frédéric the scruples which were preying on his conscience. Perhaps he ought to have gone over to the other side and joined the smocks; for after all, they had been promised a great many things which had not been given to them. Their conquerors hated the Republic; and then, they had been savagely treated! No doubt they were in the wrong, but not entirely; and the good fellow was tormented by the idea that he might have been fighting against a just cause (363).^9

What Dussardier’s vacillations and hesitations suggest is yet another fissure. We have already seen how the whole history of the Republic tended to split “the people” into two poles: on the one hand, ideality and materiality; on the other, and relatedly—although these are not quite yet the words for it—bourgeoisie and proletariat.

But is this second body itself a cohesive whole? Does the proletariat, so to speak, act as a body? And is it a material body, or merely an ideal one? In placing Dussardier on the wrong side of the barricades, Flaubert problematizes this proletarian body, cutting across the straightforward equation of political and class position. Dussardier, in all his self-confliction, becomes then the symbol of the indeterminacy of the political, the non-transparency of the subject and, shall we say, the messiness of the masses—the symbol, in other words, of the lumpenproletariat.

2.2 Masses and Classes

The democrats concede that a privileged class confronts them, but they, along with all the rest of the nation, form the people. What they represent is the people’s rights; what interests them is the people’s interests. Accordingly, when a struggle is impending, they do not need to examine the interests and positions of the different classes.[...] They have merely to give the signal and the people, with all

^9 The original French is stronger here, for it has Dussardier “tortured” by the idea that he might have fought, not just against a just cause, but against justice itself: “Le brave garçon était torturé par cette idée qu’il pouvait avoir combattu la justice.”
its inexhaustible resources, will fall upon the oppressors (The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, 54).

With these scathing words, Marx signals his radical departure from the Republican imaginary, displacing the problem of the people onto a quite different conceptual and political terrain, that of the proletariat. It is, in many ways, a revolutionary rupture. In effect, Marx cuts into the debate over the Napoleonic coup in order to suggest that his contemporaries have made the wrong cut. They have gotten so far as to grasp that history is a question of struggle, of antagonism. But they draw the lines of this antagonism falsely. It is not a question of a battle between a unified people and its oppressor; the real antagonism, the true line of demarcation lies not between the people and its oppressors but within it, within the people or between the people, who reveal themselves to be divided into two opposed and antagonistic camps.

This is not an entirely unprecedented intervention. From Hugo to Flaubert to Tocqueville, we have already seen how "the people" had indeed begun to split, with the term increasingly associated with the insurrectionary impulses of the urban underclass. But where Marx perceives within this fissure a heroic struggle between a parasitic bourgeoisie and a productive class, the proletariat, for others these stakes and terms are not so clear. For Hugo, for instance, the threatening tension is not between bourgeoisie and proletariat, but rather between "people" and "populace." And though this latter term contains some of what Marx intends by proletariat ("the holy anxiety of toil claiming its rights") it also includes a great deal that he does not: anguish, indigence, despair, disease and criminality.

In fact this ambiguity was contained, at the time, within the very term "proletariat" itself. The word had first been used in ancient Rome to describe the underclass of landless
freemen who, possessing neither property nor wealth, could only contribute their children (proles) towards the needs of the state, in the form of military service. Unlike the modern proletariat, the Roman proletarii were not wage workers; while they initially began to develop into something like a petit bourgeois class of artisans and small traders, the increasing use of slavery in the period of Roman imperial expansion destroyed the basis of their economic independence. Rendered superfluous to the needs of the elite and deprived of the means to support themselves, they became dependent on the (limited) largesse of the state—the world’s first welfare recipients in the form of the infamous "bread and circuses."

With the decline of the Roman Empire the term fell into disuse, only to be resurrected from the late 14th century onwards, in the context of the early enclosures, to describe that dispossessed "rabble that live in poverty from hand to mouth" (Draper 2286). As the open-field system of medieval agriculture gave way to full private property in land, large sections of the rural population found themselves expelled from their traditional land- and life-ways, without however finding employment in the cities, being reduced instead to pauperdom and vagabondage. Neither gentry nor peasantry, craftsmen nor tradesmen, the early-modern proletariat was in many ways less a class than a catch-all term for those who fell into the cracks between classes in a society transitioning from feudalism to capitalism.

As Nicholas Thoborn notes:

From the fourteenth century up until Marx’s era, ‘proletarian’ was a derogatory term akin to ‘rabble’ and ‘knave’. In Samuel Johnson’s 1755 Dictionary for example, the proletariat was described as ‘mean, wretched, vile, or vulgar’, and later, in the 1838 Histoire des classes ouvrières et des classes bourgeoises, Granier de Cassagnac described it as a sub-human class formed of a cross between robbers and prostitutes (439).

Remarkably, then, the term "proletariat" initially possessed a meaning much closer to Hugo’s "populace”—a disparate rabble, deprived of both property and employment, and
reduced to the most desperate means of survival. It was only in the early- to mid-nineteenth century that the term began to be used to describe the then-nascent class of industrial wage workers. In his classic study, Hal Draper suggests that the modern signification first emerged in common parlance in the Parisian workers' clubs of the 1830s, "not only after an identifiable class of wage-workers arose but particularly after this class began to be conscious of its position, i.e. after the revolution of 1830" (2286). Written examples of the term in this new sense are initially few; Draper traces the first unambiguous written usage of "proletariat" in its modern sense to 1842, only a few years before the 1848 Revolution.

At the time of Marx's writing, then, "the proletariat" was itself a confused and contested category, referring at once to a new class of industrial wage workers and simultaneously, in an older designation, to the unemployed, destitute and dispossessed. While the new meaning of the term was value-neutral, if not indeed laudatory, the older and more established signification was decidedly derisory—less a sociological category than a moralizing judgment levelled against the ill, the idle, the criminal and the crazed.

If Marx was to replace the problematic of the people with that of the proletariat, in other words, he first had to wrestle with and against the negative connotations of the latter term. Anticipating Althusser by more than a century, we might then say that Marx has to engage here in something like a "class struggle in theory"—or rather, a struggle over the theorization of social classes, one in which the very terms, concepts and categories are at once the field of battle and its stakes.

It in this context that Marx intervenes by attempting to siphon the old image of the proletariat as seething rabble into a new category, which he coins expressly for this
purpose. Henceforth, he will refer to the beggars, thieves and prostitutes—Hugo's populace—not as the proletariat, but the *lumpenproletariat*.

It is a curious coinage and, as far as we know, one of Marx's own minting, which takes an already contested category and appends to it an equally ambiguous prefix. "Lumpen" is often taken to refer to the German for "rag" or "scrap," leading early English translators to render Marx's coinage as the "rag-and-tatter proletariat." Draper however argues that the word more likely derives from the related *Lump* (pl. *Lumpen, Lumpe*), meaning "knave" or "ragamuffin"—a common term of disparagement at the time, referring not only to the poor but to undesirable elements in general (2285). Between the descriptive "rag" and the more moralizing "ragamuffin" lies, in effect, the whole terrain of contestation—indeed, it is the implicit link between the two that Marx is here attempting to sever. By funneling the "knave" connotations of the old understanding into his new portmanteau, Marx hopes to free the proletariat of its earlier, derogatory associations.

What must be stressed is the fundamental ambiguity of this maneuver. On the one hand, Marx rescues the proletariat from the confines of its bourgeois conceptualization. He does so, however, less by directly confronting or rejecting the latter than by channeling its condescension and censure in a new direction—if the noble workers are no longer knaves and rascals, that is, the ignoble thieves and prostitutes are. Whether in doing so he does not merely repeat the (itself bourgeois) distinction between the virtuous and undeserving poor is a question we shall have reason to return to.
In the meantime, let us return to Marx's claim to have found the key—class struggle—to decode the riddle of the short-lived Second Republic, if not indeed the hieroglyph of history. This key is something like a process of ideological demystification, or the replacement of a false problematic by a real one. On the one hand there is the apparent, superficial, or perhaps we should say superstructural problem (the problem of the republic, with its categories of "people" and "oppressor") and on the other there is the real, essential, or material problem (the problem of class struggle, with its categories "bourgeoisie" and "proletariat"). The trick then becomes to discern the real problem within its mystified external form. Or as Marx puts it, in perhaps the most oft-cited passage of the *18th Brumaire*:

> Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations. The single individual, who derives them through tradition and upbringing, may imagine that they form the real motives and the starting point of his activity. [...] [But just] as in private life one differentiates between what a man thinks and says of himself and what he really is and does, so in historical struggles one must distinguish still more the phrases and fancies of parties from their real interests, their conception of themselves from their reality (47).

To distinguish the phrases and fancies of parties from their real interests—this then is the task that Marx sets himself across the *18th Brumaire*. It is not such an easy task as it might seem. It might be a question of hermeneutics, of uncovering, or of discerning the face of an actor beneath the mask of the character s/he plays. Yet it would be a strange hermeneutics, for the text to be interpreted has no author, while the actors continually confound themselves with the subjects of their own performances.
We can see this strange, self-confounding theatricality at work from the first, famous lines of the *18th Brumaire*. "Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce." For Marx, the whole history of the Second Republic is in some sense a bathetic repetition of the First: "Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre," and of course the "little" Louis Bonaparte for his uncle, the great (15). He is by no means the only observer to note this seemingly theatrical or iterative quality. Tocqueville, ever an astute observer of events (and one who, as a member of the Assembly, was able to witness those of February at close hand) likewise notes that:

> The men of the first revolution were still alive in everybody's mind, their deeds and their words fresh in the memory. And everything I saw that day was plainly stamped with the imprint of such memories; the whole time I had the feeling that we had staged a play about the French Revolution, rather than that we were continuing it (53).

There is however a subtle but crucial distinction between these two passages. For Tocqueville, the imitative or theatrical quality of this second revolution is contrasted against the authenticity of the first, which is in some sense the genuine article—the real, if not indeed (in a Lacanian sense) the Real. For Marx, however, no such opposition between reality and artificiality is possible, for both revolutions are presented in theatrical terms—that is, as stage productions, albeit of different genres. Indeed, if the Second Republic has pilfered its symbols from the First, he goes on to note that the French Revolution had likewise borrowed its "names, battle cries and costumes" from
ancient Rome, so that in place of the opposition real/theatrical we would seem to have a
double repetition. What accounts, then, for the distinction between the two?

For Marx, it can only be that, though the form of the drama remains identical, the
content has radically changed. The French Revolution, he notes, had cleared a path for
the development of modern capitalism, sweeping away the old feudal institutions and
establishing the unique conditions of land, labor and industry under which free
competition could emerge and thrive. Despite appearances, the revolution's participants
were thus not noble *citoyens* fighting a perfidious oppressor, but rather an emergent
bourgeoisie fighting an outdated social class, the aristocracy. That they did not conceive
of themselves and their struggles in these terms hardly matters—remember, we must
distinguish the "phrases and fancies of parties" from their "real interests." Indeed, in a
sort of Hegelian ruse of reason, such self-deception was, he argues, a necessary
condition for their success:

But unheroic as bourgeois society is, it nevertheless took heroism, sacrifice,
terror, civil wars and battles of peoples to bring it into being. And in the
classically austere traditions of the Roman republic its gladiators found the ideals
and the art forms, the self-deceptions that they needed in order to conceal from
themselves the bourgeois limitations of the content of their struggles (16).

The adoption of the old "ideals and art forms" may have masked the actors'
underlying interests, but this masquerade served, for Marx, a progressive function. In
contrast, the repetition of the same Republican imagery in the context of 1848 is farcical
precisely because the underlying interests of the actors have, unbeknownst to them,
dramatically changed. The bourgeoisie, having played its revolutionary part, has long since
ascended to political and economic dominance, so that its re-adoption of the old Republican regalia no longer serves its underlying needs. The Republicans may fancy themselves heroic defenders of "the people." The reality, however, is quite different—at least for those who are able to pierce the veil of "sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life" with which such bourgeois subjects occlude their true class interests from themselves.

We thus begin to see the extraordinary promise of Marx's theoretical intervention, which purports to read or reveal the hidden signification of surface events in terms of their esoteric logic—to translate form into content, ideals into interest, superstructure to base. This crisp hermeneutic maneuver seems to cut across the perplexities that so mystify bourgeois Republicans such as Hugo, revealing the hidden economic levers which power the theater of politics and, ultimately, drop the curtain on the Second Republic. It is not without reason that Engels here credits Marx with having found, not only the "key to an understanding of the history of the Second French Republic," but indeed "the great law of motion" of history itself (13). If this is a highly ambitious claim, it is also a powerful interpretative schema. Soon, however, cracks will begin to show.

For the entire success of Marx's interpretation of the Second Republic will depend on his ability to equate political figures, factions and events with social classes—to discern beneath the "phrases and fancies" of parties their "real interests." Piercing the veil of these parties' deceptions and self-deceptions, however, will itself prove deceptively difficult. Ultimately, the 18th Brumaire will find itself unable to fully penetrate this obfuscatory exterior, as the mask of the political increasingly seems to take on a life of its own.

We already catch intimations of this problem early in the work. Shortly after the famous passage on base and superstructure cited previously, Marx attempts to classify the
political parties elected to the 1849 Legislative Assembly in terms of their "real interests."

On the far right is the pro-monarchy Party of Order, itself divided into two factions supporting rival claimants to the throne, a division Marx decodes in terms of a split between the old aristocracy and the new captains of finance and industry. In the center is the Republican party—for Marx, the representatives of the great bulk of the bourgeoisie.

Finally, there are the center-left Social Democrats. These last defend the Republic and some of its social and economic gains against the attacks of the political Right, but much more tepidly than Marx would like. Marx attributes this timidity to the party's peculiar class character. The social democrats, he claims, represent a "transitional class," the petite bourgeoisie. These last are caught between the two great extremes of labor and capital without fully belonging to either—an intermediate position which, for Marx, explains their political vacillation. Unable to align clearly with either bourgeoisie or proletariat, such representatives of small-time shopkeepers seek merely to mitigate or moderate the class struggle through mild, palliative measures.

On the face of it, this would seem a compelling example of the illuminating possibilities of class analysis, "decoding" a political party's apparent ideology in terms of the underlying interests that it serves. And yet Marx immediately finds himself obliged to append the following:

[One must not] imagine that the democratic representatives are all shopkeepers or enthusiastic champions of shopkeepers. According to their education and their individual position they may be as far apart as heaven from earth. What makes them representatives of the petty bourgeoisie is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in life, that they are consequently driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social position drive the latter practically (50-51).
This passage introduces the first hint of a strange inversion that will subsequently threaten the entire work. Only a few pages before, Marx had defined membership in a class as a question of objective material interest, regardless of subjective ideology: it does not matter whether one thinks of oneself as bourgeois; beneath the surface, class position forms and shapes the interests that one’s political position more or less consciously reflects. Here, however, this relationship is suddenly reversed: not only can one hold positions that do not reflect one’s “real” class position, but the latter can in some sense be shaped and determined by the former. (“What makes them representatives of the petty bourgeoisie is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in life.”) The mystifying “phrases and fancies,” “ideals and art forms” of the Marxian superstructure seem here to be taking on a life of their own, acting back upon the base and threatening to reverse the flow of representation.¹⁰

As Peter Stallybrass has convincingly argued in his seminal analysis of The 18th Brumaire, this threat explodes into the open with the coup d’état of Louis Bonaparte, which risks a veritable crisis of representation for Marx’s interpretative framework.¹¹ In a

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¹¹ My account here and over the next pages of the emergence of the lumpenproletariat in the 18th Brumaire is deeply indebted to that of Stallybrass, who himself synthesizes a number of contemporaneous inquiries into the curious status of representation in Marx’s text (see for instance Mehlman 1977 and Petrey 1988). As Stallybrass notes, the 18th Brumaire emerged as a newly important work for many on the Left in the 1980s precisely because the rise of Reagan and Thatcher challenged the notion of ‘bourgeois’ politics as merely epiphenomenal; far from a superstructural expression of an underlying base, “Politics appeared now both as the languages and practices that defined the ideological and as the field within which the economic was
sense, Marx is here a victim of his own success. His account of the "farcical" fate of the 1848 Revolution had thus far relied on a tight equation between the various political parties and the class interests that they represent. On the basis of this correlation, he had argued that the Assembly's trajectory under the Second Republic was an ironic inversion of the First. Whereas during the French Revolution, the more timid and less progressive party had been consistently "thrust aside by its bolder ally," in the aftermath of 1848 this process is upended: the petty-bourgeois social democrats drop their proletarian allies after the June Days, only to be subsequently abandoned by the bourgeois Republicans, who in turn will be shunted aside by the aristocratic Party of Order, which will then dominate the Assembly up until Louis-Napoleon's coup d'état. It is a concise and compelling schema, one which seems to capture the whole arc of the ill-fated Republic in precise class terms.

Marx has so well accounted for the interests of the varied classes in this analysis, however, that by the time he arrives at the Bonapartist coup there are, as it were, none left over to assign to the pretender. Aristocracy, industry and finance are on the side of the Party of Order; the middle classes are represented by the Republicans; the petite bourgeoisie by the Social Democrats; the proletarians vanquished and without articulated" (69). Where Stallybrass reads the lumpenproletariat exclusively as the emblem of the autonomy of the political, however, I have attempted to hold on to a double referent, insisting that the term denotes both the indeterminacy of political articulation and a quite determinate position of tendential externality to the wage labor relation. On this point see my critical engagement with the work of Ernesto Laclau in my final chapter.
parliamentary representation. Each class would thus seem to be fully accounted for. Yet Louis-Napoléon sweeps to power without the endorsement of any of these parties while drawing supporters from all of them, blurring Marx’s distinctions and seeming to confound clear class categorization.

For Marx, this represents a two-fold threat. On a first level, it undermines his claims to greater acumen and perspicacity than his bourgeois contemporaries. In his preface to the 18th Brumaire, he had accused Victor Hugo (whose book on Bonaparte was one of only two he singled out as worthy even of mention) of succumbing to a baffled subjectivism in his account of the coup d’état; without an analysis of the underlying class dynamics that facilitate Bonaparte’s rise, Marx argues, Hugo can grasp the latter only as “a bolt from the blue,” rather than as the product of determinate social and historical forces (8). Here however Marx risks the same accusation, for though his class analysis has masterfully accounted for all the parties in the Assembly, it cannot seem to account for the coup which overthrows it.

On a second and graver level, however, the lack of a class subject whom Louis-Napoléon can be clearly said to represent would seem to undermine Marx’s broader wager that the political is no more than a distorted mirror of the economic, a smoky glass of "sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life" through which the "real" (class) interests can be discerned, if darkly. For if Bonaparte is able to assemble his own "base" from an admixture of Marx’s classes, this would seem to suggest, not just a
certain autonomy of the political vis à vis the economic, but also the possibility that the former might in some sense act back upon the latter, intensifying the inversion through which the superstructure takes on a life of its own.

To counter this threat, Marx must therefore go in search of a class subject whom he can ascribe to Louis-Napoléon, in order to ground a superstructure which otherwise threatens to float off into the ether. His first stab at finding such a base for Bonaparte is the peasantry—but, as Stallybrass notes, he picks up this possibility only as quickly to qualify it (80). The self-sufficiency of the peasants, he decides, prevents them from establishing the social bonds necessary for class formation; instead they merely aggregate as a sort of Hegelian bad infinity, "much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes." He continues:

In so far as millions of [peasant] families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not form a class. They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interest in their own name, whether through a parliament or through a convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented [Sie können sich nicht vertreten, sie müssen vertreten werden] (124).

Here we begin to see the problematic of the one and the many—people and populace—that had so haunted the Republic loom up once again. Marx's conception of class struggle had been intended to cut through the static binary of abstract, undifferentiated unity ("the people") and sheer heterogeneity ("populace"), replacing this
false dichotomy with the real, material struggle of opposing social classes. Now, however, this same opposition has reappeared precisely upon the very terrain—social class—that had been intended to supersede it, with the unity of "the peasants" appearing almost as illusory as that of "the people." A "vast mass" formed by "simple addition of homologus magnitudes," the peasantry are at once a class and not—a culture without community, identical yet non-identical, possessing a set of mutual "interests" but no shared "bond."

The hesitations and vacillations of this passage will contribute to a whole subsequent debate around classes "in" and "for" themselves—a Hegelian distinction Marx himself does not quite make. What he does seem to suggest, obliquely, is that economic classes have no existence—or only a half-existence—absent their political organization. Now, insofar as the whole thrust of the 18th Brumaire had been to present the political as a distorting mask or veil of underlying economic interests, this might appear perplexing. But in this regard, at least, Marx remains a good Hegelian—it is only in and through the veil of the apparent (the political), he now seems to suggest, that the essence (class) can appear.

In other words, Marx now begins to argue that there can be no "class" without class struggle—that, in the absence of some political articulation that can cohere a

12 For a short overview of this debate, see Andrew 1983.
collectivity through "organization," "community" and "bonds," the very existence of the class as a structural or economic category is at best an academic distinction, and at worst a false one.

And yet, for Marx, the peasantry as a class is defined on an economic level precisely by its lack of political articulation. And it is into this structural gap that Louis Bonaparte will step, as it were, to provide the missing link. If he can then be said to "represent" the peasants, it will be in a very different sense than that of the other figures and parties Marx has analyzed. This difference will be something more than (self-) deception. The peasants are "incapable of enforcing their class interest in their own name," he writes. But this had been true of the other classes as well—the captains of finance and industry have had to advance their interests in the name of the deposed monarch, the middle strata of the bourgeoisie (and, for that matter, the proletariat) in that of "the people." Rather, what proves unique about the peasantry is that the name which "represents" them—Bonaparte—does not enforce their class interests at all. Instead, Marx argues, it both acts against their interests and engenders new ones, as the extrativist rent-seeking practices of the Bonapartist regime displace the indebted peasants from their smallholdings, creating a dispossessed mass in turn dependent on the "alms" of the newly engorged state bureaucracy:

Besides the mortgage which capital imposes on it, the small holding is burdened by taxes. Taxes are the source of life for the bureaucracy, the army, the priests and the court, in short, for the whole apparatus of the executive power. Strong government and heavy taxes are identical. By its very nature, small-holding property forms a suitable basis for an all-powerful and innumerable
bureaucracy. It creates a uniform level of relationships and persons over the whole surface of the land. Hence it also permits of uniform action from a supreme center on all points of this uniform mass. It annihilates the aristocratic intermediate grades between the mass of the people [Volksmasse] and the state power [Staatsgewalt]. On all sides, therefore, it calls forth the direct interference of this state power and the interposition of its immediate organs. Finally, it produces an unemployed surplus population for which there is no place either on the land or in the towns, and which accordingly reaches out for state offices as a sort of respectable alms, and provokes the creation of state posts (129).

Something extraordinary is at work within this passage. Recall that, for Marx, the self-mystifications of the bourgeois Republicans had been explained by their stubborn adherence to a pseudo-antagonism—that between "the oppressors" and an abstract, undifferentiated "people." Scornfully, he had dismissed this division as a false problem, obscuring the real antagonism of social classes. Now, however, Louis-Napoleon seems to really enact what for Marx had been a falsity. Abolishing all of the "intermediate" gradations and striations of class society, Bonaparte smooths the surface of the social body, creating an abstract uniformity of "relationships and persons" and establishing a direct and immediate connection between his individual rule and this vast, undifferentiated Volksmasse. Remarkably, then, we are right back where we started; beneath the struggle of social classes, or through them, reemerges the very problematic of "the people" and "oppressor" which this struggle was intended to replace!

This torsion and tension of the text, this irruption of the repressed Republican problematic in new guise, this assumption of autonomy through which the obscuring mask of the political takes on a life of its own—this is the secret scandal at the center of the 18th Brumaire. Purporting to cut through the false lines of the Republican imaginary,
Marx inadvertently finds himself caught within them. In the process—and almost, as it were, despite himself—he begins to advance a quite different conception of class formation than that with which he began the work. No longer does class appear as the uniquely determinate basis of an ephemeral superstructure, but rather as the at least partially indeterminate product of social, political and economic struggles which jointly act upon and condition one another. If this conception loses some of the confidence of the earlier analysis, it gains a sharper eye for the contingency and malleability of social subjects, the susceptibility of both "interests" and "identity" to political articulation.

No sooner does this new conception begin to emerge, however, than Marx immediately moves to foreclose it. He does so by attempting to confine the contingency of "identity" and "interest" to a single class—a class which will then be defined, as it were, by its very indeterminacy, its mutability and malleability. Discarding his earlier hypothesis, Marx now argues that the true base of Bonaparte’s regime—but also its false pedestal, uncanny double, and in some sense its ultimate outcome—is not the peasantry but the lumpenproletariat.

### 2.3 The Tatters of a People

This Bonaparte, who constitutes himself chief of the lumpenproletariat, who here alone rediscovers in mass form the interests which he personally pursues, who recognizes in this scum, offal, refuse of all classes the only class upon which he can base himself unconditionally, is the real Bonaparte, the Bonaparte sans phrase (75).
The real Bonaparte, the Bonaparte *sans phrase*, the one without phrases or fancies, is the chief or prince or president of the lumpenproletariat. But what exactly does that mean? When last we left the lumpen, it was less a social class than a catch-all category—Marx’s attempt to separate the longstanding negative connotations of the "proletariat" from the positive contents he wished to ascribe to the term. By channeling its unseemly association with thieves, vagabonds and prostitutes into a new portmanteau, Marx hoped to cleanse a newly heroicized proletarian subject of such residual dross. Yet now this ragged residue has risen up and, apparently, determined the destiny of all of France. How has the lumpenproletariat gone from a rhetorical rescue-maneuver to a new and seemingly powerful class category?

To understand the origins of this transmigration, we must return to the scene which had so traumatized Victor Hugo, that of the June Days insurrection in the early days of the Republic. This "exceptional fact," we will recall, had seen a portion of the Parisian population rise up against the government ostensibly by and for it—a "revolt of the people against itself" which shook the novelist’s faith in the very coherence and self-consistency of the concept. In its place emerged the populace, a muddled multitude as infinite as it was incomprehensible, vast, jumbled, raving, inarticulate, an uneasy assemblage metonymically figured, for Hugo, by the pell-mell construction of the barricade on which it fought:

The Saint-Antoine barricade was tremendous; it was three stories high, and seven hundred feet wide. [...] It might be asked: Who built this? It might also be
said: Who destroyed this? It was the improvisation of the ebulition. Hold! take this door! this grating! this penthouse! this chimney-piece! this broken brazier! this cracked pot! Give all! cast away all! Push this roll, dig, dismantle, overturn, ruin everything! It was the collaboration of the pavement, the block of stone, the beam, the bar of iron, the rag, the scrap, the broken pane, the unseated chair, the cabbage-stalk, the tatter, the rag, and the malediction. It was grand and it was petty. It was the abyss parodied on the public place by hubbub. The mass beside the atom; the strip of ruined wall and the broken bowl,—threatening fraternization of every sort of rubbish. [...] One there beheld in a pell-mell full of despair, the rafters of roofs, bits of garret windows with their figured paper, window sashes with their glass planted there in the ruins awaiting the cannon, wrecks of chimneys, cupboards, tables, benches, howling topsyturveydom, and those thousand poverty-stricken things, the very refuse of the mendicant, which contain at the same time fury and nothingness. One would have said that it was the tatters of a people (732).

Here Hugo’s description of these sundry broken and discarded objects begins to slip over into a taxonomy of their erstwhile owners, so that we are no longer sure whether "the tatters of a people" refers to the paltry possessions of the inhabitants of the faubourg or rather to the erosion of the concept of the people itself. Within this topsyturvy, worn and tattered people we hear already the echo of Marx’s lumpen, rag-and-tatter proletariat—with one key difference. Where Hugo places his bewildering miscellany atop the barricades, Marx locates it, as we will see, within the ranks of the soldiers marching upon them.

For this was, in fact, a deeply traumatic scene for Marx as well, if for quite different reasons than for Hugo. Marx and Engels’ Communist Manifesto, published just days before the 1848 Revolution broke out, had famously prophesied a coming insurrection of the proletariat, and the events of February had at first seemed to justify these predictions. However bitterly Marx would subsequently polemicize against the
"farcical" nature of the whole affair, his own hopes had thus initially been immense; indeed, the whole retroactive labor of transforming tragedy into farce might be read, in part, as a tonic for his own despair, assigning to the seeming catastrophe an ultimately progressive function. As Etienne Balibar notes:

Marx had entirely shared the conviction that a general crisis of capitalism was imminent. This was to create a situation in which the proletariat, taking the lead for all the dominated classes in all (the) countries (of Europe), would establish a radical democracy which would itself lead, in short order, to the abolition of classes and to communism. The intensity and enthusiasm of the insurrections of the 'springtime of peoples' and the 'social republic' could not but seem to him to be the execution of that program (8).

The defeat of the June Days insurrection dashed these early hopes, breaking the strength of the radicalized Parisian workers and with them the possibility of any furthering of the revolution. At the time of the uprising, however, its outcome was anything but certain. In Paris, the forces at the government's disposal were few: the army had withdrawn from the city following the victory of February; the municipal police force was both deeply unpopular and largely ineffective; and the citizen militia, the National Guard, though primarily bourgeois in composition and thus loyal to the government, had been both partially democratized and partly disbanded.13

By far the most significant fighting force remaining in the city was the "Mobile Guard," a new militia that had been created by an edict of the provisional government in February. This was however precisely the force whose loyalties were most uncertain.

13 C.f. Agulhon, p. 41 and Traugott pp. 690-691
Unlike the volunteer sections of the National Guard, the new garde nationale mobile was salaried. As a result, it was not the bourgeoisie who flocked to it but the Parisian under- and unemployed seeking recourse from the growing economic crisis; in this regard, it played a similar "social relief" function as the national workshops and drew on the same segments of the population. Thus, when the government shuttered the workshops and the poor of Paris took to the streets in protest, the question on everyone's lips was with which side the Mobile Guard would align. Would they side with their compatriots upon the barricades—or with the government, which supplied their paychecks? The Comtesse d'Agoult provides but one example of this pervasive uncertainty in her account of the period:

The Mobile Guard, with a strength of fifteen to sixteen thousand men, inspired not the slightest confidence. They were the children of the faubourgs. Could they be made to march against the people? Would they fire on their parents, their brothers? It was known, moreover, that the workers were counting on them, that they were riven with factions (Quoted in Traugott, 691).\textsuperscript{14}

The countess here raises the very question which Flaubert had had his nameless rebel pose to Dussardier from across the barricades: Allez-vous tirer contre vos frères? Are you going to fire upon your brothers? For Marx and Engels, anxiously awaiting news of events from across the border, this question was of paramount importance. At first,

\textsuperscript{14} Compare with Tocqueville's Recollections: "The various exclamations which we could hear from the battalions of the Garde Mobile left us full of doubts and anxieties about the intentions of these young men, or rather children, who, more than anybody else at that time, held our destinies in their hands" (130).
there seemed cause for optimism. The first dispatches they received from Paris reported, incorrectly, that several sections of the Mobile Guard had gone over to the side of the insurgents, and Engels excitedly repeated this claim in an article of June 27th. The next day, however, as more accurate information reached Cologne, he was forced to check his enthusiasm. The children of the faubourgs, it appeared, could indeed be made to march against the people, for they had remained loyal to the regime and had fired upon their brothers on the barricades.

Remarkably, we thus see the same crisis of conscience that had afflicted Victor Hugo appear here in a different register. Marx and Engels had no trouble with what to Hugo seemed so mysterious, namely, that "the people" could take up arms against itself, for in place of a unified people they perceived a polarizing antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat. Here, however, that same antagonism has reappeared on the side of the proletariat and, as it were, within it. For if both the rebels on the barricades and the soldiers firing upon them are drawn from the same social class, then this would seem to complicate the straightforward equation of proletarian class position and political revolution. The quite literal dividing line of the barricade has not served to separate bourgeois from proletarian; rather, it has seemed only to divide and confuse the latter, so that we are left less with rival opposing classes than with two groups of proletarians firing across the barricades at each-other.
In response, Marx and Engels attempt to suture the threatening fissure of their social subject. And they do so just as Victor Hugo had done, by creating a sort of obverse or anti-subject to at once register and contain the threat. But where, for the bourgeois novelist, the "tatters of a people" are to be found upon the barricade of Saint-Antoine, Marx and Engels invert the formula: their rag-and-tatter lumpen are located not with the insurgents on the barricades but with the counter-insurgent troops that fire upon them.

Already, in an article of June 28th, Engels tries out this tentative solution, suggesting that the guardsmen who remained loyal to the regime were not true proletarians, while "those detachments of the Mobile Guard that consisted of real workers changed sides" (Quoted in Traugott, 693). By the time Marx composed his reflections on the events for the January 1850 issue of the Neue Rheinische Zeitung (subsequently published as the first chapter of Class Struggles in France) this provisional hypothesis had hardened into a firm division. The real working class, he now argues, is aligned with the insurrection, while those who side against it are merely lumpenproletarian—not true workers but rather beggars, thieves and vagabonds. And yet, however hard Marx tries to maintain this border between the proletarian insurgents and their lumpenproletarian opponents, the demarcation continually threatens to collapse around him. The crucial passage deserves to be quoted at length:

The February Revolution had cast the army out of Paris. The National Guard, *i.e.*, the bourgeoisie in its different grades, formed the sole power. Alone, however, it did not feel itself a match for the proletariat.[...]. There consequently remained but one way out: to set one part of the proletariat against the other.
For this purpose the Provisional Government formed 24 battalions of Mobile Guards, each of a thousand men, out of young men from 15 to 20 years. They belonged for the most part to the lumpenproletariat, which, in all big towns form a mass strictly differentiated from the industrial proletariat, a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds, people without a definite trade, vagabonds, gens sans feu et sans aveu, with differences according to the degree of civilization of the nation to which they belong, but never renouncing their lazzaroni character; at the youthful age at which the Provisional Government recruited them, thoroughly malleable, capable of the most heroic deeds and the most exalted sacrifices, as of the basest banditry and the dirtiest corruption. The Provisional Government paid them 1 franc 50 centimes a day, i.e., it bought them. It gave them their own uniform, i.e., it made them outwardly distinct from the blouse of the workers. They had assigned to them as leaders, partly officers from the standing army; partly they themselves elected young sons of the bourgeoisie whose rhodomontades about death for the fatherland and devotion to the republic captivated them.

And so the Paris proletariat was confronted with an army, drawn from its own midst, of 24,000 young, strong and foolhardy men. It gave cheers for the Mobile Guard on its marches through Paris. It recognized in it its champions of the barricades. It regarded it as the proletarian guard in opposition to the bourgeois National Guard. Its error was pardonable (Marx 1964, 50-51).

This error, this misrecognition, was not, as we have seen, limited to the Paris proletariat; Marx and Engels, too, had at first also hoped the Mobile Guard might serve as a proletarian vanguard. But is it, in fact, that the workers have misrecognized the Mobile Guard, or that the latter misrecognize themselves? For Marx names here all of the fault lines that might fissure the solidity and solidarity of the proletarian subject, the signs and symptoms of what will only subsequently be called false consciousness. After all, the working classes might, like the Mobile Guard, be bought off—granted a sufficient piece of the pie to dull their sharp dialectical edge. They might be given uniforms and other "distinctions" to separate them visually from their peers, creating new markers and modes of identification that threaten their proletarian identity. They
might be swayed by competing discourses—nationalistic, militaristic—that vie for their loyalty and affiliation. They might be misled.

In the face of this threatening malleability of the proletarian subject, Marx repurposes the category of the lumpenproletariat to contain the risk. Just as it had absorbed all the negative, bourgeois connotations of the term proletariat, here it absorbs all the negative implications of the Mobile Guard’s political vacillation. And yet this demarcation itself vacillates. Indeed, just as Hugo had viewed the June Days as both a battle of "the populace against the people" and as a "revolt of the people against itself," so too Marx has difficulty determining whether the proletarian wheat can be so easily distinguished from the lumpenproletarian chaff. On the one hand the lumpenproletariat are to be "a mass strictly differentiated from the industrial proletariat"; on the other they are "drawn from its own midst." And if the barricades draw a visual line to delineate the "real workers" from the "thieves," "criminals" and "people without a definite trade," they also, as Marx says, "set one part of the proletariat against the other."

In fact, the historian Mark Traugott has done substantial archival research investigating the validity of what he calls Marx and Engel's "riff-raff thesis." Comparing the birthplace and prior employment records of the Mobile Guardsmen with those of the June Days insurgents, he finds that both groups contained a fairly representative cross-section of the Parisian working class. It is true that the Mobile Guard contained relatively few (former) members of the industrial proletariat, instead leaning towards
the trades, services, and small-scale artisanal production. However, this is *equally* true of
the guardsmen’s opponents across the barricades. Indeed, it was not the nascent class of
industrial workers that formed the core of the insurrection, but rather the downwardly-
mobile craft producers they were in the process of displacing—so that, if any of the
conflicts’ participants can be said to be lumpenproletarian, then, in a sense, they all are.15
Flaubert’s delivery man Dussardier, and not the iconic factory worker, would thus seem
more emblematic of the June Days Uprising, both in terms of his vocation and his
political vacillation.

However ultimately inaccurate, the hypothesis that the Mobile Guard was
comprised of beggars, thieves and vagabonds at least possessed some degree of
plausibility. This seems slightly more dubious, however, as a foundation for the
Bonapartist coup d’état, with the *gens sans feu et sans aveu* as the rather murky class
formation which will find its representative in the new regime. As we have seen above,
Marx arrives at this hypothesis at the very moment when his political taxonomy
threatens to break down. His seamless equation between political parties and economic
interests has so well accounted for the latter that there seem none left over to assign to
the pretender. Marx’s first attempt to find or fabricate a clear class interest for

15 As Traugott notes, this “dovetails nicely with the mounting body of evidence that artisans—especially
those in what might termed the ‘decaying artisanal sectors’—and not, typically, the more highly
proletarianized workers who are in the process of replacing them, are the most significant social base in the
political movements of societies undergoing the industrial capitalist transformation (704).
Bonaparte—in the peasantry—has itself collapsed into incoherence. And so at last he has recourse to this curious category of the lumpen.

In effect, Marx here repeats the rescue maneuver he had practiced in relation to the June Days Uprising on an expanded scale, deploying the concept of the lumpen to salvage his broader class theory from the threat of inversion or collapse. The rag-and-tatter proletariat has already served as a means to rescue the cohesion of the proletariat proper. Now it will rescue Marx’s larger postulate, that political parties are the superstructural expression of underlying economic interests.

Yet the proposition that the lumpen form the base to Bonaparte almost immediately runs into conceptual problems. The first, and by no means most intractable of these is that the homeless, destitute and criminal would scarcely seem an adequate foundation for the new regime. After all, the coup d’état which overthrew the Second Republic had itself been legitimated by popular plebiscite, with Louis-Napoleon receiving the support of some seven million French voters. Whatever the extent of mid-19th-century destitution, there cannot conceivably be seven million voting vagabonds in all of France. And so Marx finds himself obliged, as it were, to expand the category of the lumpenproletariat almost ad infinitum:

On the pretext of founding a benevolent society, the lumpenproletariat of Paris had been organized into secret sections, each section being led by a Bonapartist agent, with a Bonapartist general at the head of the whole. Alongside decayed roués with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, maquereaus, brothel keepers, porters,
literati, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars—in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la bohème* (75).

The first thing to note about this passage is its resort to the language of intrigue, secrecy and sensationalism more characteristic of *feuilleton* fiction than of Marx's more typically dispassionate class analysis. Earlier in the work Marx had chastised those who resorted to conspiracy theories to explain the "riddle" of how "their nation was taken unawares" (21). Here he himself seems to succumb to the temptation, suggesting that mysterious agents have organized the urban underworld into a secret "society of December 10th" merely awaiting Bonaparte's signal to fall upon the hapless nation—a picturesque plotline taken straight out of Eugène Sue.

The second thing to note, however, is the dramatic expansion of the category of the lumpenproletariat. For if this alarming miscellany contains familiar characters, it also introduces new ones. The association with vagabonds and criminals is repeated but, like a gathering storm accruing force, the lumpenproletariat now manages to attract new elements. In addition to the unemployed, we thus find a laundry list of "lumpen" employment categories: porters, ragpickers, knife grinders, organ grinders, tinkers, etc. But we also find figures who are strangely classless (mountebanks, the somewhat startling inclusion of the *literati*) or declassed ("ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie"). Ultimately, this strange new class will climb higher still to encompass the so-called "finance aristocracy”—rentiers, bankers and financial speculators who represent, for Marx, "nothing but the rebirth of the lumpenproletariat at the heights of bourgeois society."

Thus the lumpenproletariat, which had earlier been the obverse of the working class, becomes here a strangely universal underbelly—the "scum, offal, refuse of *all classes*"
(75, my emphasis). It is as if Marx is scrambling to concoct a class subject grand enough to ground the Napoleonic superstructure—a proliferating category whose pell-mell construction mirrors his own growing unease.

Prostitutes, porters, literati, financiers—what unites this diverse assemblage of personages? As Peter Stallybrass points out, it seems as if Marx here has recourse to a very different economic division than that of bourgeoisie and proletariat, one which traces its origins to Adam Smith: that between productive and unproductive labor. The industrial bourgeoisie, like the industrial proletariat, *produces* something, or at the very least contributes to its conditions of production. In contrast, financial speculators—like prostitutes, porters and poetic scribblers—are economically unproductive. In other words, the esoteric link connecting these seemingly unrelated social groupings is, as Marx puts it, that "like Bonaparte, all its members felt the need of benefiting themselves at the expense of the labouring nation" (75).

If this salvages Marx's conception of the relation of base and superstructure, it does so only by confounding his earlier class categories. In a sense, Marx is able to find or assemble a coherent "class" which can form the base of the Napoleonic superstructure only by cutting his own class analysis apart and pasting it back together. In the process, however, his analysis of the unbridled antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat becomes confounded with another opposition, itself bourgeois in origins: that between the virtuous and hard-working (of all classes) and the idle social parasite (ditto). On the one side, we would then have both the hard-working proletarian and the hard-working businessman; ranged against them, the lazy porter, the loafing jailbird and the leeching financial
speculator, who together form a strangely *declassé* lumpen mass feeding off the entirety of the social body.

Yet even this last-ditch attempt to forestall the threatened inversion of base and superstructure fails to make good on its promise. For if such debased lumpen elements are in one sense presented as the *origins* of the Bonapartist coup, they are also depicted, in another sense, as its ultimate *outcome*. In his analysis of the peasantry Marx had argued, we will recall, that the policies pursued by Bonaparte—financialization, heavy taxation and strong state centralization—together conspired to destroy the economic self-sufficiency of the peasants, eliminating those "intermediary grades" which once stood between "the mass of the people and the state power." This smoothing of the social body possessed several effects, but the last and most significant of these was to create the very surplus population on which the regime's continuance depends. As Marx argues:

> Finally, it [heavy taxation] produces an unemployed surplus population for which there is no place either on the land or in the towns, and which accordingly reaches out for state offices as a sort of respectable alms, and provokes the creation of state posts.[...]
>
> And an enormous bureaucracy, well-gallooned and well-fed, is the "idée napoléonienne" which is most congenial of all to the second Bonaparte. How could it be otherwise, seeing that alongside the actual classes of society he is forced to create an artificial caste, for which the maintenance of his regime becomes a bread-and-butter question? (129).

Almost imperceptibly, the lumpenproletariat has shifted away from forming the foundation of the regime to becoming an "artificial caste" *created* by the despot. Yet this is extraordinary. For Marx had had recourse to the category of the lumpenproletariat precisely in order to ward off the threatenening inversion of base and superstructure—preserving his thesis that political parties were merely the expression of underlying class interests by concocting a new, amalgamated base for Bonaparte out of this "scum, offal,
refuse of all classes." Now however—and almost, as it were, despite himself—this relationship is once again inverted, for it seems as if Louis-Napoléon himself produces the very unproductive class on which the continuation of his rule depends! The lumpen, which should be at the origin of his regime, is instead its ultimate end; the superstructure, which should express underlying interests, instead refashions and reforms them.

"Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life." In the 18th Brumaire, Marx had set out to cut through the confusion surrounding the Republican discourse of "the people" with his own illuminating class analysis, one which purported to clear up the whole mess by discerning the economic interests underlying such surface phenomena. In his conception of base and superstructure, the political had been presented as virtually synonymous with the theatrical—the illusory "costumes," "ideals" and "art forms" beneath which social actors mask their underlying interests, even or especially from themselves.

By the end of the Brumaire, however, Marx's ability to detect the face of the actors beneath the obscuring mask of the political has grown increasingly strained, while the masks have gradually taken on a life of their own. Because of this, the lumpenproletariat becomes a curious golem figure—a disguise without an underlying visage, a semblance made real. Thus, as Marx writes, it is less a class than an "artificial caste" (129) composed of "remplaçants, of substitutes, just as the second Bonaparte is himself only the remplaçant, a substitute for Napoleon" (130). Yet however much he wants to dismiss such substitutions as false appearance—a matter of mere "hallucinations," "ghosts," "parody" and "empty
phrases”—it is in fact the persistence of the illusory, the hyperreality of the superstructure, which ultimately haunts his own analysis. He writes:

An old crafty roué, he [Bonaparte] conceives the historical life of the nations and their performances of state as comedy in the most vulgar sense, as a maquerade where the grand costumes, words and postures merely serve to mask the pettiest knavery. Thus on his expedition to Strasbourg, where a trained Swiss vulture had played the part of the Napoleonic eagle. For his irruption into Boulogne he puts some London lackeys into French uniforms. They represent the army. In his society of December 10, he assembles ten thousand rascally fellows [Lumpenkerls], who are to play the part of the people, as Nick Bottom that of the lion (76).

In a sense, Bonaparte becomes here the diabolical mirror of Marx himself. After all, Marx too conceives of the "performances of state" as a mere "masquerade," one whose illusory "costumes, words and postures" serve to mask underlying petty or pecuniary interests. Indeed, one might say that, alone of all the actors in the historical drama, Louis-Napoleon grasps the truth that Marx proclaims. Unlike those who take their roles too seriously, he knows that the theater of politics is, precisely, theater. Yet far from serving a demystifying function, for Bonaparte an understanding of the constructed, artificial nature of the political becomes the very precondition of its successful performance:

At a moment when the bourgeoisie itself played the most complete comedy, but in the most serious manner in the world, without infringing any of the pedantic conditions of French dramatic etiquette, and was itself half deceived, half convinced of the solemnity of its own performance of state, the adventurer, who took the comedy as plain comedy, was bound to win (76).

Here, the theatricality that was once safely contained within the generic categories of tragedy and farce explodes outwards. For where the farcical nature of the Second Republic had consisted in the fact that the actors confounded themselves with the subjects of their own performance, Bonaparte avoids such an amateur error. To "take the comedy as plain comedy" is to embrace the political as, precisely, performative—an operative illusion, an acting-out that alters that which it portrays.

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It is no longer a question of a reality more or less poorly reflected in appearance; instead the apparent acts back upon and structures the reality it performs. The lumpenproletariat becomes then the name for this semblance made real—the debased base which Bonaparte shapes for himself out of a social fabric considerably more malleable than Marx had hoped.

As Peter Stallybrass notes, it is thus as if Marx had here begun "to think of bourgeois politics in a quite new way: not as the distorted mirror of social relations but as at least one of the fields in which classes are fashioned" (70). And yet he does so in the very work that had set out to prove the opposite! Indeed, the Brumaire seems almost to contain two antithetical conceptions of class formation, or of the relation of the economic and the political. On the one hand, Marx explicitly advances the hypothesis that economic relations have the status of objective conditions, whereas the political is merely a subjective, distorting veil. On the other hand—and almost, as it were, despite himself—he begins, at least implicitly, to explore a quite different theory, one where "economic, political, and ideological conditions jointly structure the realm of struggles that have as their effect the organization, disorganization or reorganization of classes" (Przeworski, 343).

In these rival conceptions of "class" we begin to glimpse the antinomies around which subsequent socialist history will repeatedly polarize: that of economism and voluntarism, structure and subject, or, in a slightly less dated terminology, of "economic" and "political" Marxism. Such debates will frequently focus on their participants’
putative faithfulness or infidelity to the original, their adherence to an ostensible Marxian orthodoxy (even or especially where the doxa must be radically rewritten to fit such a claim). Yet what the 18th Brumaire in fact shows us is the simultaneity yet non-coincidence of these two positions within Marx himself, the uneasy juxtaposition of two radically incommensurable yet seemingly equally essential postulates. As Perry Anderson writes:

The nature of the relationships between structure and subject[...] has always constituted one of the most central and fundamental problems of historical materialism as an account of the development of human civilization. We can see this immediately if we reflect on the permanent oscillation, the potential disjuncture in Marx’s own writings between his ascription of the primary motor of historical change to the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production, on the one hand—think of the famous 1859 ‘Introduction’ to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy; and to the class struggle, on the other hand—think of The Communist Manifesto. The first refers essentially to a structural, or more properly inter-structural, reality: the order of what contemporary sociology would call system integration (or for Marx, latent disintegration). The second refers to the subjective forces contending and colliding for mastery over social forms and historical processes: the realm of what contemporary sociology would call social integration (that is equally disintegration or reintegration). How are these two distinct types of causality, or principles of explanation, to be articulated in the theory of historical materialism? On this score classical Marxism, even at the height of its powers, provided no coherent answer (Anderson 1983, 33).

Perhaps nowhere in Marx’s writings does this latent gap between structure and subject appear so clearly as in the Brumaire, precisely because it is the text that promises to demonstrate their seamless correspondence—and this not in the language of high-theoretical abstraction, but of empirical observation. As the two axes threaten to diverge, the lumpenproletariat emerges, simultaneously, as both a name for this "potential disjuncture" and its proposed resolution—suturing base and superstructure through the invention of a new class category defined, not by is position within production, but by its
constitutional lack of productivity. The threatening amorphousness of social subjects, the contingency of their political articulation or interpellation, will then be safely quarantined, as it were, beyond the gates of the factory—which can thus remain a site for the forging, not just of capitalist commodities, but of socialist subjectivities. In this manner, Marx can preserve the tidy inversion through which those who produce everything but possess nothing will one day reverse the terms. Like the Hegelian rabble, Marx’s lumpen is the unemployable excess which must be excreted in order to ensure that this dialectic works.

2.4 Afterlives of the Lumpen

All this might provide some semblance of a conclusion, had Marx ceased to write in the aftermath of the failed revolutions of 1848. But, of course, he did not. The enormous challenge which this failure presented to his theory of historical development prompted Marx to retreat from direct political intervention into the long years of study that would culminate in the 1867 publication of Volume One of Capital. And here, his conception of this unemployable excess would look quite different.

Most of Marx’s direct statements on the lumpenproletariat are found in the political writings surrounding the 1848 Revolutions, from the Communist Manifesto, which appeared in February 1848, through the Eighteenth Brumaire, published in 1852. We can thus date his reflections on the topic quite precisely—as Hal Draper notes, more than half of all references to the lumpenproletariat by either Marx or Engels occur within this narrow four-year period.
It was, in many ways, a pivotal moment. On the one hand, it succeeds Marx’s "conversion" from the Utopian socialism of his youth to the historical materialism of his maturation—which is also to say, his discovery of the proletariat as the agent or instrument of history. In this period, Marx’s faith in a revolution both imminent and immanent to capital hinges upon that contradiction wherein the universalization of the interests of the bourgeoisie engender a class, the proletariat, that has no particular interest at all. The proletariat—as the Manifesto famously puts it—knows no culture, law or country; if it possesses no property (Eigentum) it also has no qualities (Eigenschaften) and it is precisely this pure negativity that makes it, in a neat dialectical inversion, the bearer of pure universality.

No sooner does Marx arrive at this position, however, than it is almost immediately thrown into crisis by the failure of the Parisian proletariat to play its world-historical part. As Etienne Balibar notes, the epistemological break so crucial to Althusser, which the latter dates to 1845, might ultimately be less significant than this second, political rupture, which threatens Marx’s entire conception of the proletariat as universal class (Balibar 2014, 5-9). The emergence of the lumpenproletariat, as we have seen, both registers this crisis and attempts to avert it—deflecting the threatened particularization of the proletarian subject onto a new class category comprised, in a sense, of an endless procession of particulars.
Marx himself must have found something unsatisfactory about this formulation, however. For it is precisely at this juncture that he returns to the critique of political economy which he had abandoned in the heady days of 1848. And starting with the draft notebooks of the *Grundrisse*, he will begin to toy with a quite different conception of a contradiction intrinsic to capitalism, namely that of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (TRPF). Balibar suggests that we read this last as Marx’s long-delayed response to the enormous check of 1848, his attempt to "gain revenge upon victorious capitalism" by "laying bare its secret mechanisms[...] and demonstrating its inevitable collapse" (9). If the TRPF manages to rescue a theory of revolution from the failures of 1848, however, it does so only by modifying it in ways that substantially complicate our understanding of both the proletariat and the lumpenproletariat.

The notion that the capitalist system possessed a long-term trend towards falling profits was not original to Marx; indeed, it was a widely-shared assumption across the 19th century (and well into the 20th; both Keynes and Schumpeter, for instance, ascribed to versions of the theory). What Marx alone managed, however, in his elaborate, immanent critique of political economy, was to provide a causal explanation of this trend that was as simple as it was powerful.

Indeed, while a full account of the tendencies and counter-tendencies of the TRPF would occupy a large portion of Volume Three of *Capital*, Marx’s basic thesis was straightforward. The dynamics of inter-capitalist competition, he argued, led individual
capitalists to continually reduce labor time through the use of technological innovations so as to diminish labor costs and undercut their competitors. Yet since, for Marx, the value of a commodity is determined by the average labor time socially necessary for its production, the very labor-saving processes that led to short-term super-profits would cause a long-term *fall* in profits for the capitalist system as a whole. On the one hand, increasing productivity would lead to an ever greater abundance of use-values; on the other, this growing mass of commodities would contain less and less exchange value. Or as Marx had already put it in the *Grundrisse*:

> Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. [...] On the one side, then, it calls to life all the powers of science and of nature, as of social combination and of social intercourse, in order to make the creation of wealth independent (relatively) of the labour time employed on it. On the other side, it wants to use labour time as the measuring rod for the giant social forces thereby created, and to confine them within the limits required to maintain the already created value as value. Forces of production and social relations—two different sides of the development of the social individual—appear to capital as mere means, and are merely means for it to produce on its limited foundation. In fact, however, they are the material conditions to blow this foundation sky-high (706).

Insofar as it remains predicated on the notion of a growing negativity contained within and fissuring the universalization of capitalist exchange relations, this new conception of capital’s "moving contradiction" shares similarities with that of the *Manifesto* and the other early, political writings. The emphasis, however, has dramatically shifted. In the earlier texts, that contradiction had been framed in terms of a collective subject who, producing everything, possesses nothing. Here, the subject has
all but disappeared, effaced both literally and figuratively by forms of automation that seem to proceed, as it were, automatically:

The progressive tendency for the general rate of profit to fall is thus simply the expression, peculiar to the capitalist mode of production, of the progressive development of the social productivity of labor. This does not mean that the rate of profit may not fall temporarily for other reasons as well, but it does prove that it is a self-evident necessity, deriving from the nature of the capitalist mode of production itself, that as it advances the general average rate of surplus-value must be expressed in a falling general rate of profit. (Capital Vol. III, 319)

But if the intrinsic mechanisms of capital accumulation engender their own breakdown and supersession, what role is left for the proletariat to play? It seems almost as if the revolutionary nul point (the moment of pure negativity which, in a dialectical inversion, passes over into unlimited plenitude) has here shifted from the proletariat onto its product, the commodity. For it is the progressive diminution of value embedded in the latter, and not the progressive political development of the former, which now becomes the fulcrum of revolutionary rupture. True, it isn't impossible to fit class struggle back into this framework—Marx still maintains that the level of labor unrest can hasten or impede the tendential fall in the rate of profit. But neither is it strictly necessary, for this struggle, which previously played a central role in the unfolding drama, is here relegated to the realms of the epiphenomenal, those "other reasons," that can impact the general law, but cannot ultimately impede its inexorable progress. It now seems less like capitalism produces its own gravedigger than that it is its own gravedigger; or, as Marx puts it in Volume III of Capital, "the real barrier of capitalist production is capital itself." (358)
If Marx has managed to rescue a theory of revolution from the failures of 1848, in other words, he has done so only by wresting it out of the hands of the proletariat. Indeed, as Etienne Balibar also notes, the word "proletariat" scarcely appears in *Capital* at all, replaced by the more neutral "working class," an effacement we may take as symptomatic of the broader displacement of historical agency from subject onto object (Balibar 1994, 124-125). Recall Anderson’s remarks on "the permanent oscillation, the potential disjuncture" in Marx’s writing between the structural contradictions intrinsic to capital and the structuring role of the class struggle; here, we are firmly in the former camp. Structure has eclipsed subject, the battle between bourgeoisie and proletariat has been upstaged by the dynamics of *intra*-capitalist competition and, if there is any subject left to speak of, it is ironically the capitalist—who, in a sort of Hegelian ruse of reason, inadvertently sows the seeds of his own destruction.

This is not to say the proletariat entirely vanishes from the pages of *Capital*. In fact, the term makes a sudden reappearance in the final pages of Volume I, after an absence of some 700 pages, in the chapter on "The General Law of of Capitalist Accumulation." Here, however, it assumes a significance quite different than that which Marx had earlier accorded it. In contrast to the stirring lines of the *Manifesto*, which celebrate the proletariat’s growing strength, concentration and organization, the proletariat of *Capital* is strangely diffuse, insecure and infeebled. As Marx writes:

The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore also the greater the absolute mass of the proletariat and
the productivity of its labor, the greater is the industrial reserve army. [...] But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour-army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour. The more extensive, finally, the pauperized sections of the working class and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation (798).

Like the Manifesto, Chapter 25 of Capital predicts a tendential process of proletarianization—but, remarkably, now in the older sense of the term. In the earlier writings, Marx had treated the growth of capitalism as coextensive with that of the wage relation, entailing the subsumption of an increasing proportion of the population to waged work. True, the Manifesto had also contained passages predicting increasing immiseration—but this was the immiseration of an ever-expanding industrial workforce. Now however Marx seems to reverse course, treating the expansion of capital accumulation as engendering a growing number of non-workers, and this both absolutely and in relative terms. Indeed, the expulsion of the proletariat from the factory is now coded as "the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation."

On the one hand, of course, this absolute general law is merely the obverse of the tendential fall in the rate of profit, for a diminution in the socially average labor time embedded in commodities would require the diminishment of laborers as its logical corollary. And yet this development renders the role of capitalism’s erstwhile gravediggers ever-more opaque. For the political potential of the proletariat—if there is one—seems no longer to concern its productivity but its non-productivity, its tendential externality to the circuits of capital accumulation.
Marx’s revised theory of capitalist crisis, in other words, seems to locate revolutionary potential exactly where he had previously sought to quarantine the threat of counter-revolution—in that excessive "surplus population" deprived of access both to the means of production and to the wage relation. Indeed, in contrast to the firmer demarcation of the early writings, Marx here begins to reincorporate such unemployable elements into a more expansive definition of the proletariat. And yet this recuperative gesture provokes immediate ambivalence. Indeed, just as with the irruption of the lumpenproletariat in the 18th Brumaire, the advent of this surplus population is announced in Capital by a confounding of clear class categories, as the bourgeois-proletarian binary scatters into an increasingly diverse and uneasy miscellany.

Thus, in the beginning of section four of Chapter 25, Marx attempts a taxonomy of the various forms of the surplus population, confidently stating that the latter can be contained within three categories: "we can identify three forms which it always possesses: the floating, the latent, and the stagnant" (794, emphasis mine). For Marx, the "latent" surplus population refers to those not yet fully integrated into capitalist production, primarily that portion of the peasantry on the verge of expulsion from the land, while the "stagnant" and the "floating" correspond, roughly, to our modern notions of under- and unemployment.

After elaborating on these three forms of the surplus population, however, Marx suddenly and inexpicably adds a fourth—the paupers—which seems to undercut his
clear taxonomy, at once dwelling beneath the other three and cutting across them. And this fourth category then splits apart and proliferates in turn:

The lowest sediment of the relative surplus population finally dwells in the sphere of pauperism. [...] This layer of society consists of three categories. First, those able to work. One need only glance superficially at the statistics of English pauperism to find that the quantity of paupers increases with every crisis of trade, and diminishes with every revival. Second, orphans and pauper children. These are candidates for the industrial reserve army, and at times of great prosperity, such as the year 1860, for instance, they are enrolled in the active army of labourers speedily and in large numbers. Third, the demoralised, the ragged, and those unable to work, chiefly people who succumb to their incapacity for adaptation, an incapacity which results from the division of labour; people who have lived beyond the worker’s normal life-span; and the victims of industry, whose number increases with the growth of dangerous machinery, of mines, chemical works, etc., the mutilated, the sickly, the widows, etc. (797).

From three categories we have moved to four, and the fourth category has in turn split into three sub-categories, and the third sub-category has then exploded into a dizzying array of discrete sub-sub-categories—the ill, the aged, the disabled, widows, those incapable of adapting to changing employment conditions, as well as the more ambiguous "demoralized" and "ragged," the latter in turn recalling the rag-and-tatter lumpenproletariat in its very etymology. And yet, even here, Marx is careful to quarantine these "demoralized" proletarians from the dangerously subversive lumpen. In the ellipsis omitted from the above quotation, Marx spells out this demarcation:

"Apart from vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes, in short the actual lumpenproletariat," he writes, "this layer of society consists of three categories. . . ."

What are we to make of this remarkable elision? In the political writings surrounding 1848, the lumpenproletariat had emerged as a structural explanation for a
subjective failing, accounting for the counter-revolutionary poor by restricting their ranks to the realms of the unemployed. Here, the unemployed have been recuperated as a radical political category—but dirempted from the lumpen-proletariat, which persists as a politically dubious element but loses the structural account.

As a result, the lumpenproletariat begins to shift here from a social class to something rather like a moral judgment. (If not an outright tautology—"backwards" social elements whose backwardness is explained by their, well, backwardness.) "Paupers" and "beggars," for instance, are now recuperated into a more expansive definition of the proletariat, while "criminals" and "prostitutes" are not. Yet the distinction between pauper and prostitute—like that between thief and beggar—seems less one of social class than of differing responses to a shared social condition. Why should those "demoralised" ex-workers who go a-begging remain proletarian, while those who resort to thieving become lumpen?

Surveying Marx’s scattered and contradictory comments on the lumpenproletariat across the chasm separating the early from the late writings, we are left with more questions than answers. Is the lumpenproletariat a discrete social class or the "scum, offal, refuse of all classes"? Is it distinct from the proletariat proper or merely another name for proletarians behaving improperly? Does it figure the autonomy of the political—the gap between objective class position and subjective self-conception that
will only subsequently be called false consciousness? Or is it the principle of pure heterogeneity as such, the unassimilable element which shatters stable binaries?

Or are the lumpen simply synonymous with the unemployed? And if so, what are we to make of the rival prognostications of the early and late Marx around the ultimate trajectory of waged work? Are lumpenproletarians merely residual, pre-capitalist elements unable to master the transition from agriculture to manufacture, or from manufacture to industry? Or does lumpenization portend the future for vast masses of humanity, who will tendentially find themselves expelled from the labor force entirely?

Given these persistent questions, it is all the more remarkable that subsequent generations of socialists would treat Marx’s self-conflicting depiction of the lumpen as a stable social referent. Across the margins of the Marxist corpus, references (often passing) to the lumpenproletariat proliferate. Yet while most of these will operate as if the nature of the lumpenproletariat were self-evident, in fact they repeat the same tensions and ambivalences found in Marx himself.

Thus Bukharin, for instance, will view the lumpenproletariat as synonymous with the poorest of the poor, while Rosa Luxemburg will employ Marx’s alternating conception of the lumpen as comprised of “degenerate” elements of all classes.16 Trotsky

16 “The Lumpenproletariat element[...] is not merely a special section, a sort of social wastage which grows enormously when the walls of the social order are falling down, but rather an integral part of the social whole. Events in Germany – and more or less in other countries – have shown how easily all sections of
sidesteps sociological definition but repeat Marx’s broader rescue maneuver, attributing the failure of the workers’ movements in the face of rising fascism, in part, to the negative influence of lumpen elements. Indeed, the label of lumpenproletarian will more often than not be applied to any group of (poor) people whose actions the writer disagrees with or dislikes—to wildly varying effect. If the labor left will throw the epithet at scabs and strikebreakers, in Germany the rightward-drifting Social-Democratic Party will apply the term to those who defy party and labor leadership by engaging in militant actions, including strikes. The ”official” definition in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, meanwhile, more or less attempts to synthesize all these positions:

declased strata in an antagonistic society (including vagrants, beggars, and criminal elements). The lumpenproletariat has become particularly widespread under capitalism. It is recruited from various classes and is incapable of organized political struggle. It constitutes, along with the petit bourgeois strata, the social basis of anarchism. The bourgeoisie makes use of the lumpenproletariat as strikebreakers, as participants in fascist pogrom bands, and in other ways. The lumpenproletariat disappears with the abolition of the capitalist system. (Great Soviet Encyclopedia, Vol. 15, p. 179)

bourgeois society are subject to such degeneration. The gradations between commercial profiteering, fictitious deals, adulteration of foodstuffs, cheating, official embezzlement, theft, burglary and robbery, flow into one another in such fashion that the boundary line between honorable citizenry and the penitentiary has disappeared” (Luxemburg 1940, 49-50).
17 ”Through the fascist agency, capitalism sets in motion the masses of the crazed petty bourgeoisie, and bands of the declased and demoralized lumpenproletariat; all the countless human beings whom finance capital itself has brought to desperation and frenzy” (Trotsky, 7).

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In a sense, the only remarkable aspect of this dictionary definition is how faithfully it reproduces the aporias of Marx's own account. Thus the lumpenproletariat is at once incapable of political organization and responsible for political reaction; a specific class or "strata" and an amalgamation of "various classes"; utterly distinct from the proletariat and yet comprised of scabbing workers; etc.

The association of the lumpenproletariat with anarchism, meanwhile, has its origins in the fierce polemics between Marx and Bakunin within, and over the fate of, the First International. These debates focused primarily on the internal organization of the International itself, and secondarily on the role of the conquest of political power in social struggle. Yet a third but by no means insignificant point of contention concerned the question of social subjects, of the true bearer of revolutionary potentiality. As Bakunin writes:

To me the flower of the proletariat is not, as it is to the Marxists, the upper layer, the aristocracy of labor, those who are the most cultured, who earn more and live more comfortably than all the other workers. [...] By virtue of its relative well-being and semi-bourgeois position, this upper layer of workers is unfortunately only too deeply saturated with all the political and social prejudices and all the narrow aspirations and pretensions of the bourgeoisie. [...] By the flower of the proletariat, I mean above all that great mass, those millions of the uncultivated, the disinherited, the miserable, the illiterates [...] ordinarily designated by Marx and Engels in the picturesque and contemptuous phrase Lumpenproletariat (47-48).

In Bakunin's castigation of the aristocracy of labor we glimpse already the inklings of a latent crisis that will greatly preoccupy 20th-century Marxism—namely the possibility that the labor struggle, far from provoking a revolutionary rupture with the
capitalist system, may merely serve to integrate the working class within it. This possibility, already visible in Lenin’s tirades against economism and the limits of "trade union consciousness," will metastatize in the works of the later Frankfurt School, and especially Marcuse, for whom the incorporation of the proletariat into a totalizing consumer capitalism will be a given. While such pessimism may be a product, in part, of the unique conditions of the post-war "boom" (les trentes glorieuses, as the French will call it) it nevertheless points towards a broader political problem. For if the impetus for, and horizon of, the labor struggle is the amelioration of the workers’ conditions of existence—concretely, higher wages, shorter hours, and so forth—then this struggle, if successful, would seem to lead to reconciliation with the status quo, rather than its revolutionary overthrow.

The properly Marxist retort would be, of course, that such struggles can only ever be momentarily successful—that no real amelioration of the condition of the proletariat is conceivable under capitalism, and indeed that it is precisely this ultimate incompatibility which both necessitates and ensures the latter's supersession. (As Marx writes in the Manifesto: "Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers.") Here too, however, a latent crisis lingers, for if an upwardly-

19 Perhaps the most definitive account of the crisis of confidence in the proletariat in relation to the paths taken by post-war Marxism can be found in Perry Anderson’s Considerations on Western Marxism.
mobile proletariat risks losing its relish for revolution, a downwardly-mobile one would seem to lose that purchase on production which, in the orthodox account, at least, is both the lever of and catalyst for revolution.

This, indeed, is the objection made by the Russian Bolshevik Nikolai Bukharin against the lumpenproletariat, in perhaps the most elaborate treatment of the topic of the inter-war period. If mere—or sheer—immiseration were the sole condition of revolutionary potentiality, Bukharin notes, then "the lumpenproletariat would have to be considered as the most revolutionary class, as the power capable of realizing the transition to a higher form of society." Such, however, is not the case, for immiseration concerns merely the distribution of wealth, not its generation. The true revolutionary class, Bukharin argues, must not just be economically impoverished but economically productive—and productive within quite specific social and historical circumstances. Indeed, he enumerates six preconditions that "must be present in a class in order to enable it to accomplish a transformation of society," going so far as to present these in a table:

20 But see also the council communist Paul Mattick’s highly pertinent "The Scum of Humanity" (1935).
Table 1: Bukharin’s Taxonomy of Social Classes\textsuperscript{21}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class properties</th>
<th>Peasantry</th>
<th>Lumpenproletariat</th>
<th>Proletariat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Economic Exploitation</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Political Oppression</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Poverty</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Productivity</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Freedom from private property</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Condition of union in production, and common labor</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bukharin’s table presents a concise version of what will become a Marxian orthodoxy—namely, the notion that, while other classes, groupings and social blocs can play a supporting role in revolutionary politics, only the industrial proletariat, narrowly conceived, can play the part of protagonist. The rational for this reduction of revolutionary potentiality is itself overdetermined; beneath Bukharin’s seemingly straightforward schema runs a whole series of explicit and implicit arguments and assumptions—about the disciplining function of the factory, its strategic centrality to production, the (uniquely?) social nature of workplace struggle, the politicizing effects

\textsuperscript{21} Bukharin 289.
of immiseration (and the depoliticizing effects of private property) as well as the

equation, arguably metaphorical, between the transformation of raw materials and that of
the broader social structure. (As Bukharin writes: “A class which is not the bearer of a
new mode of production cannot "transform" society.”)

There is, of course, something compelling in all of this. It is true that the labor

conditions of the industrial proletariat are conducive to the forging of social bonds; that
“freedom” from private property eliminates one potential source of self-interest in

upholding the status quo; that economic exploitation creates both a potential motivation

for revolting and a potentially powerful means for doing so, etc.

Nevertheless, the risk in drawing the lines of the revolutionary subject so

narrowly is that it misses out on the actual movement of history—the complex and
contradictory processes through which individual and collective social subjects are
articulated, agitated and motivated to act. Seeking to preserve a direct and unmediated

equation between class position and political potentiality, Bukharin's table occludes the
need for revolutionary strategy. Indeed, it is hard not to read within it a reduction of
strategy to tactics, and to one tactic at that—the strike. Peasants and lumpenproletarians
cannot strike—that, succinctly, captures the objection at the core of Bukharin's schema.
Elsewhere Trotsky spells this out explicitly: "Only the workers can conduct a strike.
Artisans ruined by the factory, peasants whose water the factory is poisoning, or
lumpenproletarians in search of plunder can smash machines, set fire to a factory, or murder its owner.”

But there would seem no *prima facie* reason to divorce the strike as tactic from arson, machine-smashing, peasant revolts, food riots and other forms of resistance through which the poor and dispossessed rise up against their oppressors. Nor is there any unmediated path leading directly from the shopfloor strike to mass-scale social revolution. Quite the contrary—the great revolutions of the nineteenth century, as we have seen, were largely led by “artisans ruined by the factory,” while those of the twentieth would be, as Zygmunt Bauman aptly put it, “peasant revolutions in everything but their self-definitions” (1).

Indeed, the great dilemma of the Russian Revolution would lie in the failure of the (western) proletariat to play its world-historical part; its great innovation—what Gramsci called its “revolution against Capital”—in its willingness to jettison this theoretical centrality when it conflicted with the actual opportunities of the concrete historical conjuncture. In this regard, however, we might say that the theorization of the Third International lagged behind its political praxis. Ironically, Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy was converging on an exclusionary focus on the revolutionary potential of the industrial proletariat at the exact moment when its own historical development was suggesting, if anything, the opposite.
Such a narrow emphasis on industrial waged work would seem to find its writ of authority in Marx. Yet, as we have seen, Marx’s writings in fact contained considerably more ambivalence, both about the relation of class position to revolutionary potentiality and around the ultimate trajectory of wage labor. Indeed, Marx’s scattered and inchoate reflections on the lumpenproletariat prefigure what one might term the two great “failures” (subjective and objective, political and economic, social and structural) of the twentieth-century proletariat. On the one hand, there is the “subjective” failure of the proletariat to adopt the political perspective to which its class position is supposed to correspond—the problem of what will come to be called “false consciousness.” On the other, there is the “objective” failure of the industrial proletariat to achieve that position of absolute numerical predominance which Marx, at least on one reading, prophesied—a problem already registered in Trotsky’s notion of “uneven development,” and which has only grown greater as employment in manufacturing (both absolutely and relatively, both in the overdeveloped countries and worldwide) has continued to decline.

To these twin crises the theorists of twentieth-century Marxism have struggled to respond. Yet if Marx’s own intermittent wrestling with the question of the lumpenproletariat prefigured the persistence of these problems, it also contained the hint of a possible path forward. On the one hand, his writings surrounding the 1848 revolutions begin to explore a new conception of revolutionary consciousness as a
process and product of struggle—opening up the cohering of an anti-capitalist bloc, not as a historic inevitability, but as a contingent possibility. On the other, scattered passages across the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* start to flesh out the contours of a heterogeneous (post?) proletarian subject no longer defined by its relation to production. Taken together, these twin aspects of the lumpenproletarian problematic begin to lay the groundwork for a more expansive theory of revolutionary possibility. A Marxism beyond both class reductivism and productivism—one better able to confront the contingencies of political articulation, the multiplicity of social subjects, and the perils and possibilities of a world without work. In its hints and intimations, the rag-and-tatter lumpen wove a rich if unfinished tapestry; it would be almost a century after Marx, however, before those threads were picked back up.
3. “OK. We are Lumpen. Right on”: The Lumpenproletariat and the Black Radical Tradition

3.1 Seize the Time

In the fall of 1970, a 45 rpm single was released on the record label Seize the Time. On the A-side, a funky, percussive dance track demanded “Free Bobby Now!” On the flip-side, the slow, soulful “No More” prophesied a world beyond war and poverty. Neither number made it to the charts. Outside the San Francisco Bay Area—indeed, outside the Bay Area counter-culture—the record would not have been easily obtainable. Radio stations refused to play it, declaring the music too radical for the airwaves, while in-store inquiries would have left all but the savviest of record clerks scratching their heads.

Seize the Time was the short-lived record label of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. The single was both the first and last recording put out by the label, which took its name from the 1969 debut album of Elaine Brown—poet, singer, activist and Black Panther Party member. Brown’s Seize the Time had quickly become something of a soundtrack to the movement, with Black Panther chief of staff David Hilliard proclaiming the fifth track of the album the Party’s national anthem, going so far as to order that all members obtain copies and memorize the lyrics. And Brown’s album would also lend its name to Bobby Seale’s 1971 political memoir, compiled from recordings in the San Francisco County Jail, where the Panther co-founder and party
chairman was being held on fresh charges in the aftermath of the trial of the Chicago Seven.

Clearly, *Seize the Time* had itself seized something essential about the political moment. Yet those expecting a riotous celebration of Black Power militancy would be in for a surprise. Recorded with avant-garde jazz great Horace Tapscott, Brown’s album was less overtly militant than quietly meditative—a collection of somber yet impassioned ballads, set to sparse piano accompaniment, in the classical chanson tradition of Edith Piaf. The melodic content of the album contrasted starkly with the image on its cover (a woodcut of a woman holding an AK-47) as well as with its conditions of production—Brown and Tapscott recorded under near-continual police harassment and surveillance, in a studio recently raided by the FBI.

No one quite knew what to make of this disjuncture. “This isn’t an album of sweet, or passionately crooned love songs,” one contemporary review proclaimed. “She wants to tell it straight, to wake up her own Black people—and all people—to the power they have, and to exercise it.” But in fact the album contained a number of love songs passionately crooned. (“He feels like a man, like a very good man, as he places his hand in mine,” Brown belted in one track.) Even the ostensible Black Panther anthem, “The Meeting,” struck many listeners as anything but. Describing the strange feeling of déjà vu that overcame her when she first met Eldridge Cleaver, Brown’s “anthem” skirted a
fine line between political and personal, public and deeply private. As the same reviewer then confessed:

The song entitled the Black Panther National Anthem seems a misnomer both in style and content. I would judge it unsuitable to serve that purpose even though it is a good song. A national anthem should, to me, be a song for group singing and it should be a collective statement—not that of an individual (“Record Review: Seize the Time,” 3).

However unsuitable Brown’s anthemic “misnomer,” it was in its own way characteristic of the times. For while the fervor of the Black Power period produced no shortage of “songs for group singing” and “collective statements,” many of the key works of the era would in fact be those of individuals. From the Autobiography of Malcolm X to that of Assata Shakur, Black radicals would time and again turn to the personal, the autobiographical and the confessional, even as they sought to describe or invoke a collective political subject.¹ Indeed, perhaps no other era had seen such a proliferation of pamphlets, manifestos and communiqués issued by, for, or in the name of “the People” alongside so many intimate testimonies of individual persons.

Bobby Seale’s own version of Seize the Time certainly qualified as an intimate testimony, in more ways than one. Beginning with an account of Seale’s early childhood and subsequent political development, the work served as a “testimony” in the sense of an awakening or conversion narrative, following a template established by Malcolm X

¹ For an examination of the role of autobiography in the Black Power movements, see Margo V. Perkins, Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties (University Press of Mississippi, 2000)
and Eldridge Cleaver. But it represented something like a testimony in a juridical sense as well. Composed from jail, *Seize the Time* set out to correct the record on the trumped-up charges then facing Seale—and, by extension, the whole Black Panther Party. Seale’s attempts to represent himself in the trial of the Chicago Seven had culminated, infamously, in the judge ordering that he be gagged and bound to his chair for the duration of the proceedings. Quite literally deprived of the ability to testify in court, he thus turned to memoir to provide the public with an unstifled account of his experience.

But if Seale’s *Seize the Time* contained a powerful indictment of capitalism, imperialism and white supremacy, its register—like that of Brown’s eponymous album—was simultaneously intimate and deeply personal. In part, no doubt, this was a product of its conditions of production. The written work had been compiled from a series of tape recordings that were made of Seale, in prison, by the journalist and activist Art Goldberg, granting the final product a loose, informal, conversational tone. Here, again, there were parallels with Elaine Brown’s *Seize the Time*. For just like the latter, Seale’s “book” was in fact an audio recording, produced as a creative collaboration between two participants, and recorded under conditions of continual police surveillance.

What, then, was the “time” that both Brown and Seale set out to seize? The majority of Seale’s memoir was devoted to a history of the Party, of Seale himself, and of Black Panther Minister of Defense Huey Newton—“the baddest motherfucker ever to
set foot in history” (xii). But in a short coda to the book, itself titled “Seize the Time,” Seale suddenly shifted registers—moving from past to present, and from retrospective analysis to a powerful call to action. As he wrote:

> We must all start seeing ourselves beginning to seize the time. We must start coming forth with our energies, our thoughts, our intellects and our abilities to begin to see what is right and what must be done, so the suffering will stop, and the phrase “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” begins to make some sense (428).

Formally, then, the structure of Seale’s *Seize the Time* echoed that of Elaine Brown’s iteration, with predominately introspective reflections interspersed, in a dramatic change of address, with urgent, outward-facing exhortations. Indeed, Brown had made that very shift in the titular song of her album, which urged its listeners “To seize the time/ The time is now/ Oh, seize the time/ And you know how.”

> “Seizing the time” was, on a first level, then, a call to action, with Brown and Seale’s shifts in rhetoric and register itself mimicking the transformation they sought to invoke in their readers or listeners, who they hoped would now move from the role of passive audience to active participant. But this was no call for spontaneous and uncoordinated revolt; as Seale further exhorted his readers, “we must use organized and practical techniques,” ones he argued that the Black Panther Party had successfully established. (429) Indeed, “seizing the time” meant developing an accurate read, not just of the balance of forces in an ever-changing political conjuncture, but of the tactics and strategies necessary to decisively shift them. As he wrote:
Huey P. Newton seized the time when he moved and put the Black Panther Party into motion. Other brothers and sisters in the Party are continually seizing the time. The time is now to wage relentless revolutionary struggle against the fascist, avaricious, demagogic ruling class and their low-life, sadistic pigs. Power to the People! Seize the Time! (429).

To readers familiar with Brown’s album, the structure of Seale’s exhortation (“seized the time… the time is now”) could not help but immediately recall the catchy refrain from the album’s titular track. Indeed, Seale’s voice here answers, in a sort of call-and-response pattern, to the appeal sent out by Brown—echoing and amplifying it while exhorting others to join in the chorus. In this manner, both Brown’s and Seale’s “individual statements” begin to blend together into a “song for group singing,” weaving together collective and individual.

Nevertheless it was, perhaps, the jarring contrast between the Panther’s militant political message and Brown’s meditative, introspective ballads that caused the Party to change direction for their next foray into musical production. Eschewing Brown’s folk aesthetic, the 1970 single released on their Seize the Time label embraced the more bracing sounds of soul and funk.² It was a calculated decision. Having heard four rank-and-file members singing rhythm and blues at a festival, Panther Minister of Culture Emory Douglas convinced the Party’s central committee to fund the group as an

experiment in using popular music as a tool for political education and cadre recruitment. As one of the band members later recalled:

> We wanted to take the model that was popular and recognizable to the people in the community, particularly the black community, and that is along the model of say a group like the Temptations, but also with a strong rhythm such as a James Brown [...] So we tried to use all of those aspects, the music, the visual, the steps, the choreography, and all these various modes to try to get across these messages to the people in a way that was entertaining too, but at the same time hopefully inspirational and educational (Party Music, 33).

The experiment proved successful. Deprived of access to the airwaves, the Panther’s revolutionary house funk band was nevertheless a huge hit in live performances at rallies, community centers and college campuses. Douglas began advertising their single in the Black Panther and, by the time the group left the Bay Area for their cross-country Revolutionary Tour, audiences were showing up to shows ready to sing along to the compulsively catch refrain of “Bobby Must Be Set Free!” This last, with its soaring horn riffs, pulsing bass line and call-and-response techniques, itself added another layer to the dialectic of individual and collective, as crowds enthusiastically united to demand the decarceration of a leader whose freedom now stood in, metonymically, for the broader goal of Black liberation.

Supported by an interracial back-up band, the group travelled across the country, introducing the Black Panther’s ideology of revolutionary intercommunalism to audiences from L.A. to D.C., San Francisco to St. Paul. In addition to original compositions, their hour-long choreographed set included creative remixes of contemporary chart-toppers by bands like the Temptations, the Impressions and Sly and
the Family Stone—with the original lyrics reworked to express the Panther’s line. At times the group played to warm up crowds for speeches by party leaders; at other times they were themselves the headline act, or else shared the bill with bands like the Grateful Dead or legendary R&B singer Carla Thomas. Invariably, however, they began their sets in the same fashion:

“Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters. The Black Panther Party very proudly presents, [drum roll] . . .

“The Lumpen!”
Figure 1: Figure 1: Seize the Time Benefit Announcement, The Black Panther Community News Service, Saturday October 10, 1970

3 (Milo Guthrie Papers, Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University)
3.2 The Dark Proletariat

It is a startling announcement. When last we left the Lumpen, it had been something like the inexorable excess of the proletarian subject, if not its counter-revolutionary counterpart. Here the term has been recuperated as an unabashed celebration of “the brothers on the block,” as band member Michael Torrence put it, “the disenfranchised, angry underclass in the ghetto.” What explains the dramatic reversal through which the lumpenproletariat, initially an emblem of political failure and confusion, became reworked as a revolutionary rallying-cry?

To answer this question, we must first address the complex interplay of attraction and aversion that had long characterized the relationship of “Marxism and the Negro Problem,” as W. E. B. Du Bois put it in a 1933 article of that title. For those, like Du Bois, who sought to theorize the color line, Marxism had offered both extraordinary promise and tremendous pitfalls. On the one hand, the “living and persistent truth [of] the class struggle,” as Du Bois recognized, offered significant insights into the economic underpinnings of racialized oppression and enslavement in its historical forging within the crucible of New World agrarian capitalism (“Marxism and the Negro Problem,” 103). On the other hand, Marxism had had very little to say about race itself, and only slightly more about slavery. True, Marx himself had been a staunch opponent of the latter, considering abolitionism one of the most important emancipatory struggles of the 19th century. But he tended to view slavery as a vestigial remnant of pre-capitalist social
formations, or else as a sort of historical aberration from the normal course of capitalist development, thus failing to recognize the centrality of slave production to the emergent capitalist world-system. Race meanwhile—like religion, nationality, or ethnicity—remained one of those superstructural “veils” which the progressive development of the capitalist mode of production would in good order strip away (although in the meantime, admittedly, it had proven surprisingly persistent).

In truth, the constitutional colorblindness of classical Marxism was in one sense equal parts curse and blessing. However inattentive to the specificities of racial oppression—and indeed, perhaps, because of this—Marxism’s insistence on a universalizing class struggle meant, on a practical level, that the Communist Party (and, later, its Trotskyite splinters) was one of the few spaces of interracial solidarity in the race-stratified America of the early 20th century. On a theoretical level, meanwhile, Marx’s exclusive emphasis on the structuring role of the relations of production was,

4 There is a copious scholarly literature attempting to grapple with the problem which New World slavery poses to the orthodox Marxian analysis of capitalist political economy. For foundational texts in these debates, see Williams 1994; Genovese 1965; and Hindess and Hirst 1975. While it is impossible to summarize those debates here, suffice it to say that none of them fully resolved the conceptual problems plaguing the Marxist account of unwaged labor we will explore across the next pages (though Williams in particular created extraordinarily promising and provocative starting points). Subsequently neglected during the period of the “linguistic turn” in historiography, the question of the relation of capitalism and slavery has recently re-emerged in the work of the so-called “New Historians of Capitalism,” of which the best-known exemplars are Beckert 2014, Johnson 2013, and Baptist 2014. Such new historians have summoned a wealth of historical and empirical evidence, and Beckert in particular has argued forcefully for the centrality to emerging industrial capitalism of the slave production of cotton. In contrast to their precursors, however, they have proven less interested in the formal theorization of capitalism as such. On a conceptual level, the challenge which slave labor poses to a robust theorization of capitalism thus remains unresolved.
paradoxically, the very “blind spot” which arguably allowed him to demystify
racialization. Precisely in viewing race as the superstructural expression of an
underlying (class) relation, that is, Marx was able to reject the biologizing discourses of
race widely dominant in the 19th century, instead comprehending the latter as a product
of social relations. And yet the very emphasis on the economic “base” that allowed Marx
to denaturalize race and racism also caused him to dismiss the latter’s ongoing
significance in the forging of political identities and collective social bodies.

We can see both sides of this equation at work in one of the rare passages where
Marx addresses race specifically, towards the beginning of his (1849) Wage Labour and
Capital. Criticizing the tautological equation of black skin and social inferiority, he
writes:

What is a Negro slave? A man of the black race. The one explanation is worthy of
the other.

A Negro is a Negro. Only under certain conditions does he become a slave. A
cotton-spinning machine is a machine for spinning cotton. Only under certain
conditions does it become capital. Torn away from these conditions, it is as little
capital as gold itself is money, or sugar is the price of sugar (211).

In a context where racialization “collapsed colour with status and identified
slavery as inherent in bodies, not a product of law and a system of labour,” as Catherine
Hall has put it, Marx’s emphasis on the specific social “conditions” undergirding racial
slavery opened the door to an understanding of Blackness as a contingent historical
construct—an insight that Du Bois would himself pick up on and develop in Black
Reconstruction (Hall 29). And yet Marx developed this insight only as a passing analogy

to help clarify his real concern, commodity fetishism, which then occupied the remainder of his analysis.

In the immediate slippage from the cotton-picking slave to the cotton-spinning jenny—in this merely glancing insertion of unwaged labor into an essay entitled, after all, *Wage Labour and Capital*—we witness both the clarifying force of Marx’s analytical framework and its persistent blind spots. In essence, these were two—an inattentiveness to the structuring reality of race, on the one hand, and on the other a denial of the centrality of slave labor to capitalist production. Translated into more abstract Marxian terms, we might say that these corresponded to a pair of problems already encountered in the first chapter, namely, the broad devaluation of (what Marx dismissed as) the superstructure, on the one hand, and on the other the conceptual prioritization of the industrial proletariat (narrowly conceived) over and against other forms of labor, social classes, and social struggles—in particular those of the unwaged.

Now, insofar as these were precisely the problems which had prompted Marx to coin the concept of the lumpenproletariat—and which had persistently plagued his own account of that self-contradicting category—it is perhaps unsurprising that the rag-and-tatter Lumpen would ultimately be reclaimed by Black radicals in search of a more expansive theoretical framework within and beyond the Marxist tradition. For the lumpenproletariat named precisely that stubborn refusal of the supposed
“superstructure” to dissolve into the base of which race would become the most marked symptom.

When something like a lumpenproletariat first emerges in Du Bois, however, it is not Black workers but poor whites that it describes. For, in the antebellum South, it was these latter who formed an economically redundant “surplus population” largely superfluous to the system of plantation capitalism. Indeed, Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction* ultimately traces the process through which this white underclass violently transferred its condition of lumpenization to newly emancipated slaves—in the process subverting the possibility of interracial class unity and reestablishing the color line as the defining social antagonism of the American polity. It is here, accordingly, that our story starts.

*Black Reconstruction in America*, first published in 1935, set out to reckon with a then-dominant historiography which denied the central role that both slavery and (ex-)slaves played in the American Civil War and the post-war Reconstruction. At the time of its publication, history departments dominated by Southern apologists had successfully propagated the notion that the Civil War had been fought over virtually everything other than slavery—while the radical Republican governments of the post-war Reconstruction, in which Black people had played a seminal part, had been an unmitigated disaster. With searing invective and a irrefutable historical evidence, Du Bois set about destroying this false narrative. Slaves liberated themselves, and then set
about constructing a new society—this was the straightforward yet deeply provocative message at the heart of his 800-page magnum opus.

*Black Reconstruction* served as more than a corrective to the historical narrative, however. It also represented a systematic attempt to apply the categories of Marxian class analysis to the US-American context. In his youth a proponent of the middle-class ideology of racial uplift, with its emphasis on the efforts of the “talented tenth,” in his maturity Du Bois increasingly gravitated towards socialism. By the 1930s he was reading deeply in Marxism and Marx, whose *Das Kapital* he taught in a graduate seminar in the very period he was writing *Black Reconstruction*. Accordingly, the Marxian conception of capitalist class struggle became the foundation upon which Du Bois constructed his account of the Civil War and the post-war Reconstruction. Indeed, the latter became, in Du Bois’ telling, not only a story of class struggle, but “one of the most extraordinary experiments of Marxism that the world, before the Russian revolution, had seen.” (358)

In this trans-Atlantic transmigration of the dialectic, however, the categories of Marx’s class analysis had to be substantially revised. For the protagonists of Du Bois’ class struggle re-write were not industrial wage workers, but the enslaved field hands, domestics and artisans of the US-American South. In one sense, Du Bois’ description of their actions adhered quite faithfully to an orthodox Marxian sequence of class struggle. The mass desertion and resistance of enslaved workers, represented, he argued, a “general strike” of Black labor. This strike, which dealt the death-blow to the confederate
cause, in turn contained the seeds of a socialist revolution within and against the (bourgeois) Republic and the beginnings of a “Dictatorship of the Black Proletariat,” as he originally titled one of his chapters on the Reconstruction governments.

What was highly unorthodox, however, was Du Bois’ ascription of this sequence to slave workers, and indeed his insistence that the latter were workers at all. For in describing slave workers as a “Black proletariat,” Du Bois was fundamentally transforming the definition of this latter category—both expanding it to include forms of labor quite definitively excluded by Marx, and also torqueing it so that the universalism of class struggle began to assume a different hue, encompassing “that dark and vast sea of human labor in China and India, the South Seas and all Africa; in the West Indies and Central America and in the United States” (15). He continued:

Here is the real modern labor problem. Here is the kernel of the problem of Religion and Democracy, of Humanity. Words and futile gestures avail nothing. Out of the exploitation of the dark proletariat comes the Surplus Value filched from human beasts which, in cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed Power veil and conceal. The emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown and black (16).

Into the space of a few lines, Du Bois compresses a complex argument. The persistence of the color line, he suggests, divides the oppressed between the waged (white) workers of “cultured lands” and the “dark Proletariat” of the global South. These last—despite geographic distance and vast differences of language, religion, and culture—possess a “common destiny,” as Du Bois puts it, one imposed on them by a shared experience of racialization (15). While this shared experience may be, in its
essence, an economic one, it is one defined precisely by the absence or insufficiency of
the wage relation—either by forced labor, indentured servitude, or outright slavery, that
is, or else by merely nominal wages below the bare level of social reproduction. It is
these low-wage and no-wage workers crammed beneath the color line, Du Bois asserts,
and not the waged industrial proletariat of the orthodox Marxian account, who comprise
both the “basic majority of workers” and “the real modern labor problem.”

In asserting that this “dark Proletariat” was productive of surplus value, Du Bois
was putting his finger directly on a conundrum within the orthodox Marxian account of
value production. For Marx had defined surplus value, quite precisely, as the distinction
between the exchange-value and the use-value of the commodity labor power—that is,
as the difference between the value paid to the laborer in the form of wages and the
value produced by labor (for the capitalist) over and above this amount. Central to the
very definition of surplus value, then, was the assumption of a “free” contract between
nominally equal parties, a point on which Marx was quite explicit:

Labour-power can appear on the market as a commodity only if, and in so far as,
its possessor, the individual whose labour-power it is, offers it for sale or sells it
as a commodity. In order that its possessor may sell it as a commodity, he must
have it at his disposal, he must be the free proprietor of his own labour-capacity,
hence of his person (Capital Vol. I, 271).

But, of course, slaves were not the “free proprietors” of the commodity labor-
power—rather, they were the commodity. So could the slave—could any unwaged
worker—produce surplus value? To this question orthodox Marxism, at least upon the
standard reading, seemed to return a resounding “No.” All class societies, including
slave societies, relied on the appropriation of a social surplus. But slavery, in this
version, entailed the direct appropriation of surplus labor, as opposed to capitalism’s
more mediated appropriation of surplus value, which required the extension of exchange
relations to all aspects of social life—and above all to the life of the laborer.

Marx had constructed his very definition of the capitalist mode of production, in
other words, in explicit contradistinction to that of slavery, which made it inherently
difficult to think the ongoing centrality of slave production to the capitalist world-
system. As a result, the status of New World slavery oscillated uncertainly in his
analysis—at times, a merely residual remnant of pre-capitalist social formations, at
others an avowed feature of the emerging world market, but one that remained,
somehow, external to capitalist relations of production even as it entered into them.5

The exception to this, perhaps, was one cryptic quotation from Volume One of
Capital where, towards the end of the famous section on “so-called primitive
accumulation,” Marx penned the following, intriguing sentences:

While the cotton industry introduced child-slavery into England, in the United
States it gave the impulse for the transformation of the earlier, more or less
patriarchal slavery into a system of commercial exploitation. In fact the veiled
slavery of the wage-labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the
New World as its pedestal (925).

As Walter Johnson notes in his own gloss on this passage, most readers have
interpreted Marx’s metaphor of the veil and the pedestal as describing a historical,

5 See for instance Capital Vol. II, 189-190
temporal sequence progressing from (pre-modern) slavery to (modern) capitalism (Johnson 2004). This would certainly seem to fit with the rest of the chapter, which narrates the “secret” bloody pre-history of capitalist production in so-called “primitive” or “originary” [ursprüngliche] accumulation. In fact, however, the relationship Marx describes here is one of contemporaneity, the metaphor not temporal but spatial: while the cotton industry introduced “veiled slavery” in England, it simultaneously transformed “unqualified slavery” in the New World.

What would it mean for slave labor to be the “pedestal” upon which free wage labor stands veiled? It is an intriguing metaphor. For, as we saw in the last chapter, Marx typically resorted to the imagery of veils, shrouds and shadows to denote those superstructural ephemera which occluded the true nature of the capitalist “real.” The image of the pedestal, meanwhile, figuratively invokes the notion of foundation contained within that other metaphor, superstructure and base. It is almost as if, extraordinarily, Marx is here suggesting that wage labor is itself the superstructural obfuscation of an underlying social condition—that the “secret” of primitive accumulation (“conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force”) comprises not only capitalism’s shameful pre-history, but also its occluded present (874).

This might seem an implausible or exaggerated interpretation of Marx. It is not so of Du Bois, however, who appropriates Marx’s metaphor and twists it precisely in this direction. “Out of the exploitation of the dark proletariat comes the Surplus Value
filched from human beasts which, in cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed Power "veil and conceal" (emphasis mine). For Du Bois, it is the wage relationship itself that comes to obscure the stark reality of exploitation, pitting (high-) waged workers against their low-wage and no-wage peers. Indeed, on his reading, both the literal wage relation and the psychological wages of whiteness become the superstructural veil that occludes white workers’ understanding of their own exploitation and precludes their identification with that “vast mass of human labor,” the dark proletariat.

For if Black Reconstruction is a tale of class struggle, it is as much one of struggles within social classes as between them—of splits and fissures other than the straightforward opposition of bourgeoisie and proletariat. This is not to say that the latter antagonism is not clearly manifest. On the contrary, those two great categories of the Marxian dialectic provided Du Bois with the powerful framework through which “to conceive of the emancipation of the laboring class in half the nation as a revolution comparable to the upheavals in France in the past, and in Russia, Spain, India and China today” (708).

6 In fact, Marx himself was quite conflicted on the relative clarity or nebulousness of wage labor as a category. On the one hand he insisted that it was only under the most developed conditions of capitalist production—only where the forces and relations of production coincide—that the category of “labour, labour as such, labour pure and simple” could appear clearly as a “practical truth,” as he put it in the Grundrisse. (105) On the other hand, something about such “purely” capitalist exploitation remained stubbornly obscure, requiring that explanatory “descent” from the sphere of circulation to that of production which comprised the better part of Volume I of Capital. Even there, with some 800 pages of explication, the mediated nature of capitalist exploitation seemed to resist elucidation, so that Marx would time and again turn to the direct and unmediated exploitation of enslavement, as we have seen, to explain and clarify (if only by analogy) the mystifications of wage labor.
What Marx did not provide Du Bois, however, was the tools to adequately theorize the counter-revolution. For if Reconstruction represented a dictatorship of the Black proletariat, its defeat was in large part a product of the white one. It was thus in more ways than one that the Reconstruction-era experiment in radical Republicanism could be termed “comparable to the upheavals in France in the past.” For the cross-class alliance of wealthy planters and poor whites that ultimately put an end to it yet again complicated the straightforward ascription of revolutionary consciousness to the working classes, once more suggesting that the determinants of political identification must be sought in more complex terms than those of unmediated economic interest.

If 1865 was Du Bois’ 1848, in other words, then Black Reconstruction was, in a sense, his 18th Brumaire—a tale of revolution gone awry, of classes fissured and sundered. But where the Marx of the Brumaire had seen such cracks (within the proletariat, at least) as intolerable truths to be suppressed or sublimated into that sad sub-category, the lumpenproletariat, Du Bois was able to confront this reality more unflinchingly. “The proletariat,” he wrote, “is usually envisaged as united, but their real interests were represented in America by four sets of people: the freed Negro, the Southern poor white, and the Northern skilled and common laborer.” He continued: “These groups never came to see their common interests” (216).

Central to Du Bois’ account of these internal class fissures was the role of Southern white workers increasingly threatened by economic redundancy and
dispossession—lumpenproletarianization, though this is not a term Du Bois will use for it. As others have noted, the position of poor Southern whites had shifted dramatically across the first half of the 19th century. Just as the *proletarii* of Roman antiquity (nominally free men deprived of wealth and property) had found themselves supplanted by the expansion of slave labor in the imperial period, so too white workers were increasingly unable to compete with the dramatic expansion and intensification of slave labor in the aftermath of the cotton boom—the period of the “second slavery,” as the historian Dale W. Tomich has termed it (Tomich ix). As a result poor Southern whites descended into cyclical unemployment and abject poverty—becoming, as Du Bois described them, an “idle and lawless rabble who live[...] in a condition little removed from absolute barbarism” (26).

Emancipation created new opportunities for this white underclass as well, transforming their condition of economic redundancy into one of newfound economic competitiveness. It did so, however, only by placing them into direct competition with Black workers suddenly vying for jobs and resources from a position of at least notional equality. This opened up divergent possibilities. On the one hand, poor Southern whites could unite with Black workers, leveraging their collective power against an enfeebled planter class. On the other, they could ally with the planters, creating a white united

7 For a contemporary (and fascinating) analysis of the role of poor whites in the antebellum and Reconstruction South, see Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge UP, 2017)
front and enforcing a monopoly on (skilled) labor and (living) wages by attempting to thrust Black workers into the position of economic precariousness from which they themselves had just emerged. As Du Bois poignantly describes, white workers ultimately chose the latter option.

It was not only the proletariat which was so fissured, however. Indeed, the deep and persistent divisions between the capitalist classes North and South had been both a cause of the Civil War and one of its lasting consequences. As Du Bois wrote of the post-war Reconstruction:

If, now, the new Northern capitalists and the Southern planter class had been united into one new capitalist class, their only problem would have been to deal with a new laboring class composed of blacks and whites and to admit to their ranks those of either class who had or could get any amount of new capital.

But both capitalists and laborers were split in two; there was hatred and jealousy in the ranks of this new prospective capitalist class, and race prejudice and fear in the ranks of the laborers (609-610).

If the capitalist class had been united. But neither they nor the proletariat were.

This two-fold split, on the part of both labor and capital, supplanted the stable bourgeois-proletarian binary with a shifting and unstable fault line, one in which the rival factions could be composed of any number of possible “combinations”:

The real economic battle, then, lay finally in a series of attempted compromises between planters, carpetbaggers, scalawags, poor white laborers and Negroes. First, the planters moved toward the political control of Negroes to fix their economic control. […] The combination was frustrated because the carpetbaggers offered the Negroes better terms; offered them the right to vote and to hold office and some economic freedom. […]

Here again, as in the case of slavery, there was a combination in which the poor whites seemed excluded, unless they made common cause with the blacks. This
union of black and white labor never got a real start. [...] The final move which rearranged all these combinations and led to the catastrophe of 1876, was a combination of planters and poor whites in defiance of their economic interests.

Du Bois’ interpretation of these shifting “compromises” and “combinations” is inspired. His analysis of the vacillations of Northern business, in particular, remains virtually unsurpassed for its insights into a class faction whose opposition to its Southern counterpart forces it into an uneasy alliance with Black labor — only to totally reverse course at the precise moment when the latter becomes the greater threat to its position, wealth and property. The “dictatorship of the Black proletariat” Du Bois describes might thus more accurately be termed an uneasy marriage of Black labor and Northern capital.

Rather than a united proletarian insurgency confronting a unified capitalist class, in other words, the post-war period saw one fraction of the proletariat supported by one faction of the bourgeoisie — both against another faction and, apparently, its own interests. Reconstruction, in this telling, becomes the unstable and contradictory result of a rare moment of possibility, one where a section of the ruling class is forced, temporarily, to act against its own aims in order the better to ensure them.

As an exegesis of the economic “interests” underlying political events and alliances, this nuanced and insightful interpretation rivals the best of Marx. At the same time, this analysis significantly complicates Marx’s conception of social class, even as it draws its strength from out of this interpretive framework. For if, on Du Bois’ telling, the
sheer number of class actors has multiplied, so too, in a sense, have their “interests.”

Indeed, time and again Du Bois resorts to the idea of a cohesive bourgeoisie or proletarian united by common interest, not as a verifiable fact, but as a sort of historical counter-factual: “If, now, the new Northern capitalists and the Southern planter class had been united into one new capitalist class” (609); “If the workers had been inspired by the sentiment against slavery which animated the English workers, results might have been different” (102); “If at any time the white and black labor vote united” (441); “How this interaction of former land monopolists, white peasant and Negro peasant would have worked itself out if uncomplicated by other interests, is a question” (609).

What, then, are these “other interests” which confound the cohesion of social classes? Race, one could certainly answer. But it would be a mistake to conceive of race, in Du Bois’ telling, as something conceptually distinct from social class—a non-economic externality intervening into and complicating the otherwise “pure” process of class formation from some putative outside. To the contrary, race emerges, for Du Bois, not beyond social classes but within them—as a fault line fissuring the internal cohesion of class subjects, and particularly the proletariat. For, by proffering concessions and privileges to white workers and withholding them from Black ones, the post-war plantation aristocracy was able to secure the allegiance of white workers on the basis of shared “interest” over and against the possibility of interracial working-class solidarity.

As Du Bois put it in a famous passage:
It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capita as the colored schools (700-701).

This passage (like Du Bois’ work more generally) would be of great significance to subsequent scholars of white identity formation—perhaps most notably David Roediger, whose *Wages of Whiteness* would famously take its title from it. But while it is often assumed that the “wages” of which Du Bois speaks must be something distinct from or even opposed to economic interest, Du Bois himself is rather ambiguous on this question, with his description admixing seemingly extra-economic categories (respect, courtesy) with more directly or indirectly economic ones (employment, education).

His description of the “public and psychological wage” as a form of compensation, meanwhile, only heightens this ambiguity, for the latter term can be interpreted in two conflicting senses. In its vulgar psychological sense, we might think of “compensation” as a form of replacement or substitution for a missing object, in which case cross-class

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8 Drawing on the seminal analysis of Du Bois, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and others, the field of whiteness studies began to coalesce in the early 1990s, primarily around two distinct but related poles: labor historians (Saxton 1990; Roediger 1991; Allen 2012) and critical legal theorists (Harris 1993; Haney Lopez 1996). While the former continued to expand upon Du Bois’ notion of the wages of whiteness, legal scholar Cheryl Harris advanced a compelling formulation of whiteness as property. On differences between Allen and Roediger’s theorization of whiteness, see note 9, below.
white supremacy would be something quite other than economic interest—a sham, or surrogate, and a poor one at that. On the other hand, “compensation” might be taken to refer to direct remuneration, in which case whiteness might be thought of, quite literally, as a form of currency. (A notion that is difficult to dismiss, even or especially today, when the median wealth of white American households stands at $130,000, and of Black ones, just over $10,000.)

It is significant that Du Bois chooses to frame this question in the language of “interest.” For the proletariat, we might recall, was quite famously supposed to have no interest at all—nothing to lose but its chains, and a whole world to win. And it was precisely in holding no vested stake in maintaining the status quo that the proletariat’s position of “disinterested interest” could be said to represent or prefigure the post-capitalist whole. True, the precise process through which such total negativity was to be converted to unbridled plenitude had always remained rather poorly defined. (Nor, as

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9 The question of whether white workers have a greater interest in building a multiracial proletarian movement or in maintaining cross-class white supremacy has been a topic of at times fierce debate within the field of whiteness studies. In his critique of *Wages of Whiteness*, for instance, Theodore Allen accuses Roediger of suggesting that white privilege has served the interest of white workers, arguing that the task for Marxists is to show that “white supremacist has not served the interests of the laboring class European-Americans.” Whether or not this is an accurate description of Roediger’s position remains in question; Roediger both addresses the critique and complicates it in his more recent *Class, Race and Marxism* (see Allen 2001 and Roediger 2017, 47-72). From our perspective, however, it is the question itself that seems wrongly posed. Rather than assuming a singular, static, or objective set of “interests” that could be measured, as it were, on a scale (10 points towards white supremacy, say, and 12 towards proletarian internationalism) our analysis has instead suggested that “interests” themselves are at least partially discursively constructed. It is thus not a question of ascertaining where group x’s interests “really” lie, but of discerning the practices and processes that can successfully forge a group’s conception of its collective interests.
we have seen, had Marx managed to reconcile this philosophical emphasis on utter paucity with his rather contradictory suspicion of lumpen pauperdom.) But theoretically, at least, it was the proletariat’s complete immiseration that provided the philosophical justification for its uniquely revolutionary role in ushering in universal plenitude.

The problem, as Du Bois realized, was that “pure negativity” is a theoretical zero point that reality rarely, if ever touches. And the moment that any group of proletarians managed to climb above this hypothetical nul point, they quite decidedly did possess more things to lose than just their chains. Things like schools, homes and jobs, yes, but also things like respect and courtesy, or the right to vote, or simply the legal status of freedom that Marx had scornfully dismissed as vögelfrei (the worker “free” only to sell her blood, sweat and tears, if s/he was able) but that was nevertheless an infinite improvement over chattel slavery. Assuming some group of workers did come to win such perhaps objectively paltry, but no doubt infinitely precious “wages” over and against another group, there was no guarantee that their hatred and animosity would be directed upwards, towards those who lorded over them, rather than downwards, towards those who seemed to threaten their position of relative privilege.

Another way of putting this is that the generalization of competition is a defining feature of capitalist production, one which extends to every member of every class—including workers. In this sense everyone, under capitalism, has an “interest,” and is
structurally compelled to defend it. And while it is true that the weak and oppressed
will often find themselves obliged to band together in order to better their odds in this
battle of each against all, there is no guarantee that their “combinations” will take the
particular form of proletarian internationalism. To the contrary—as Du Bois perceived
quite clearly—any number of such combinations were theoretically possible. And, on
the basis of the historical record, at least, it was by no means clear that the Marxian
variant was always (if ever) the most probable.

And yet, even as Du Bois insisted that there was nothing inevitable about
working-class solidarity, he nevertheless continued to grant the latter a conceptual
priority somewhat at odds with his own analysis of the historical record. He writes:

The theory of laboring class unity rests upon the assumption that laborers,
despite internal jealousies, will unite because of their opposition to exploitation
by the capitalists. […]

Most persons do not realize how far this failed to work in the South, and it failed
to work because the theory of race was supplemented by a carefully planned and
slowly evolved method, which drove such a wedge between the white and black
workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers
with practically identical interests who hate and fear each-other so deeply and
persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common
interest (700).

It is worth attending to Du Bois’ language quite closely here. For even as he
starkly proclaims the failure of “the theory of laboring class unity” in the face of
America’s racist history, he nevertheless continues to insist that Black and white workers
do possess a “common interest,” and a “practically identical” one at that. Indeed, Du
Bois is quite clear that the white workers’ seemingly intractable allegiance to whiteness
is responsible, not just for the plight of poor Blacks, but ultimately for the “plight of the white working class” itself (30). Thus while, in reality, the laborers have never managed to transcend “internal jealousies” so as to “unite because of their opposition to exploitation by the capitalists,” Du Bois expresses no doubt that it would be in their best interests to do so. Socialism remains “the path out” for workers Black and white; racism the “flaming sword,” as he poetically puts it, which bars the exit towards this Eden (706-707).

It is for this reason that I interpret Du Bois’ magnum opus as, in the last resort, a Marxist one. Or perhaps one could better say it is a Marxism of the last resort, one which holds to the idea of a unified proletariat, not as actuality but virtuality—as a contingent and precarious possibility to be fought for. A tarnished and uncertain Marxism, to be sure, shorn of all the optimism of its 19th-century forebears. But then, in one way or another, is this not true of all the Marxisms of the 20th century?

Du Bois nowhere makes direct reference to the lumpenproletariat. Nevertheless, his work provides a vital starting point for us to begin exploring the Black radical recuperation of the concept, and for at least three reasons.

First, *Black Reconstruction* directly raises and grapples with the core problem that had caused Marx to coin the category in the first place—namely, the failure of the working classes to either automatically adhere to revolutionary politics, or to cohere into a single, indivisible bloc. Marx, as we have seen, attempted various maneuvers to deflect
or defer this problem; Du Bois, with the perspicacity of posterity and the personal
experience of being a Black man in America, was able to confront it more unflinchingly.
While he did not codify his nuanced analysis of the forces fracturing the proletariat into
a systematic revision of Marx’s theorization of social classes, he did begin to lay the
groundwork for such a project, one which could perhaps succinctly be described as
dwelling at the intersection of subjective contingency and objective antagonism. As in
Marx, the exploitative relation of proletariat and bourgeoisie remains for Du Bois the
structuring antagonism undergirding capitalism’s proliferation and generalization of
conflictual difference. Unlike in Marx, however, there is for him no guarantee that
proletarians will construe this antagonism as the primary one among their more myriad
struggles, nor that they will construct their social and political identities upon that basis.
Accordingly, there emerges a great gap between “objective” interest and interest
subjectively conceived.

Marx, as we have seen, had tried to foreclose this gap by grafting the threatening
mutability of class consciousness onto the wageless and the workless—who became, in
his account, also the faithless and the feckless. But this is the second area where Du Bois’
work serves as an important entry point into the reevaluation of the lumpen. For his
analysis of the “wages of whiteness” suggests, if anything, quite opposite conclusions
from those of Marx. In his account, it is not wagelessness, but rather the wage relation
itself, which threatens to shatter proletarian solidarity—splitting off the narrower ranks
of industrial waged workers from the broader masses of the dispossessed. Thus where, for Marx, waged work possessed a salutary disciplining effect—in contrast to the undisciplined waywardness of the lumpen rabble—for Du Bois the wage relation serves rather to tame and pacify the proletariat, granting them a real or imagined interest in maintaining the existing order.

Du Bois is by no means the first theorist to point out this possibility. We see a similar logic at work, for instance, in Lenin’s analysis of the role of imperialism in dividing the working classes and engendering an “aristocracy of labor”—a phrase that itself originates in the Marx-Bakunin debates over, among other things, the lumpenproletariat. But Du Bois is perhaps the first to fully elucidate the logic of racialization that undergirds this widening fissure between waged (white) workers and the vast masses of the “dark proletariat.” At least implicitly, then, he begins to lay the groundwork for the dramatic inversion through which the lumpenproletariat will assume, for thinkers within the Black radical tradition, the status of revolutionary subject over and against an industrial proletariat actually or apparently integrated into the status quo.

Finally, Du Bois’ work begins to point towards wagelessness, not as an exceptional status, but rather as something like the capitalist norm to which the “normal” wage relationship remains, if anything, the exception. In his analysis of US capitalism, the waged workers of the industrial North, far from representing (even
tendentially) a universal class, emerge as one particular subject position in a complex articulation equally encompassing both the enslaved workers of the plantation system and the economically redundant surplus population largely comprised, in the antebellum South, of poor whites. Refusing the diremption of industrial metropole from agricultural colony that had characterized Marx’s analysis of the capitalist mode of production, this more expansive understanding of the totality of capitalist social relations forces us to situate waged work in relation to these two forms of wagelessness which, taken together, challenge the empirical and conceptual preeminence typically granted to wage labor.

In Du Bois’ telling, wagelessness then becomes something like the *ne plus ultra* of abjection around which determinative struggles will be organized. Central to these struggles, as we have seen, would be the actions of Southern whites continuously threatened by economic redundancy and dispossession. However much the category of the lumpenproletariat would subsequently come to be recoded (and then reclaimed) as a *Black* category, it is thus noteworthy that the original lumpenproletariat of the US-American South was, quite definitively, a white one. Indeed, if there is any group that fulfills Marx’s prediction of lumpen waywardness and duplicity, it is these wageless whites who, refusing proletarian solidarity, violently transferred their abject condition to Du Bois’ “dark proletariat.”
For Du Bois, this is a cataclysm of global proportions, shattering proletarian solidarity and (re-)establishing the color line as the defining antagonism of the 20th century. The renewed racialization of the basic categories—and indeed, the very possibility—of employment would have long-lasting implications, suggesting that the revolutionary impetus might have passed from industrial waged workers to those for whom the wage relationship remained only rarely and intermittently in reach. It would be in 1961, from Algeria, that this implication was next taken up.

3.3 Les Damnés de la Terre

If there is one figure who is today associated with the category of the lumpenproletariat, it is no doubt the Martinican writer, philosopher and revolutionary Frantz Fanon. It was Fanon who first picked up the tattered concept from the scrapheap to which Marx had consigned it and who reexamined its utility in light of his experience of (de)colonization and racialization. And it was Fanon who dared to ascribe the Lumpen a key role in the revolutionary process, setting off a firestorm that would scandalize many sections of the global Left—and excite and inspire others.

In moving from Du Bois to Fanon, I am suggesting an implicit connection that goes somewhat against the scholarly grain. In general, comparisons of the two authors deal almost exclusively with their earliest major works—*The Souls of Black Folks* and *Black Skin, White Masks*, respectively—exploring commonalities and differences among their
phenomenologically-inflected writings on double consciousness. While that comparison may be thought-provoking, it ignores the subsequent political and intellectual trajectories of both authors, as each moved from relatively introspective reflections on subjectivity and identity towards a greater emphasis on external contestation and political struggle. (In this regard Fanon’s neglected “middle” work, *Studies on a Dying Colonialism*, could be read as a sort of bridge, or fulcrum, in which the problems of alienated consciousness explored in *Black Skins, White Masks* begin to find their resolution in the lived experience of revolution.)

In contrast, my own analysis begins with the works of both writers’ maturation, seeking to establish a connection between Du Bois’ “dark proletariat” and Fanon’s eponymous wretches. In drawing this parallel, I do not mean to suggest a direct Du Boisian influence on Fanon’s reworking of the Lumpen. While there is certainly an indirect link, at the very least, in terms of the enormous impact of Du Bois on Fanon’s mentor Césaire and other writers of Négritude, there is nothing to suggest that Fanon himself ever read *Black Reconstruction*. Yet neither can the convergence of the two concepts be said to be merely coincidental. Rather, as I hope to show, they emerge as related responses to a shared problematic—one we might refer to beneath the broad rubric of “Black Marxism,” as Cedric Robinson has termed it, if by that we understand

both the attraction exerted on the Black struggle by the Marxist tradition as well as the latter’s real limitations and contradictions.¹¹

The basic facts of Fanon’s biography are by now well known.¹² Born in Martinique to a middle-class family, he joined the Free French during the Second World War to fight for the liberation of Europe. There his encounters with unabashed racism shocked and radicalized him. The assimilationist policies (and pedagogy) of French colonialism had encouraged the young Fanon to think of French values of universal, and of himself as French. But in mainland France the complex racial and class hierarchies of his childhood were replaced by an indiscriminate anti-Black racism which collapsed these gradations into a totalizing color line.

Returning to Martinique to complete his secondary education, Fanon went to work on the parliamentary campaign of his friend and mentor Aimé Césaire, who was elected to the National Assembly on the Communist ticket. Fanon’s abortive homecoming did not last long, however. Returning again to France, he completed a degree in psychiatry at the university of Lyon, where he wrote Black Skins, White Masks—initially as an attempted (and rejected) doctoral dissertation. The work, which

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¹¹ Despite its title, Robinson’s Black Marxism ultimately argues for a nascent “Black radical tradition” gradually freeing itself from the hindering fetters of a restrictive Marxist tradition. My own emphasis is slightly different, seeing Black radicals such as Du Bois and Fanon as reworking and expanding the Marxian tradition rather than abandoning it entirely. In this sense, I would like to hold on to both sides of the equation, exploring an emancipatory theory that is at once “Marxist” and “Black.”

¹² The definitive account is David Macey’s Frantz Fanon: A Biography (Verso, 2012).
tried to steer a path beyond the dichotomy of assimilationism and négritude with which
Fanon was then grappling, also reflected the growing influence on his thinking of
phenomenology, Marxism and existentialism, and particularly the writings on anti-
Semitism of Jean-Paul Sartre. While the book would subsequently have an enormous
global impact, its initial publication met with little success.

After completing his medical residency under the Marxist psychiatrist and
Catalonian expatriate François Tosquelles—along with Sartre and Césaire, perhaps his
third great personal and intellectual influence—Fanon secured an appointment to the
Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital, 30 miles south of Algiers. The Algerian Revolution,
which broke out within months of his arrival, would revolutionize Fanon’s own life.
Immediately drawn to the struggle, he organized his colleagues to provide psychiatric
care, medical aid and shelter to injured FLN fighters. By 1957 Fanon had openly
declared his support for the Revolution, leaving his medical position and settling in
Tunis, where he rapidly rose within the ranks of the Algerian government-in-exile. It
was from Tunisia that he wrote L’An cinq de la révolution algérienne (subsequently
published in English as Studies in a Dying Colonialism) and later, racing against the
leukemia which would shortly claim his life, his third and final work, The Wretched of the
Earth. He died in December 1961, at the age of thirty six.

That The Wretched of the Earth showed Fanon to be a great revolutionary thinker
was, from the moment of its publication, never in doubt. Whether it showed him to be a
great Marxist thinker was (and remains) a source of contention and controversy. As with all left-leaning intellectuals of the 20th century, the question of Fanon’s relation to “Marxism” in the abstract cannot be divorced from his concrete relation to the official upholders of Marxian orthodoxy—that is, to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and, in Fanon’s case, the *Parti communiste français* (PCF).

If I have suggested that Fanon, like Du Bois, traced a path towards increasing engagement with Marxism, the historical and political conditions that shaped his trajectory nevertheless looked very different. For the Du Bois of the 1930s, the Russian Revolution could still operate as a beacon. For Fanon, two decades later, this allure had begun to wear thin, particularly after Krushchev’s secret speech cracked the lid on the atrocities of Stalin. Despite the relative thaw within the USSR, meanwhile, the French Communist Party remained irredeemably stultified and Stalinist—even or especially in comparison to other Western communist parties, like the Italian, that had begun to chart a more innovative course. Finally, and perhaps most damnably, there was the PCF’s appalling response to the outbreak of the Algerian Revolution; breaking with the Third International’s emphasis on supporting colonial liberation struggles—and their own past support of the Việt Minh—the PCF positioned itself unabashedly on the side of French chauvinism and counter-revolution.

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13 For a summary of these debates, see Wallerstein 1979.
But while these concrete failures of “official” state and party socialism outraged Fanon, they did not forestall his increasing engagement with Marxism. If anything, his estrangement from Communist Party orthodoxy allowed Fanon the theoretical distance to critically reevaluate the Marxian tradition in light of his experience of Black and decolonial struggle. In this regard, Fanon’s outsider status functioned differently from the dilemma described by Perry Anderson, who argued that the Stalinization of the official Communist Parties had left Western Marxists with an untenable choice: either remain loyal to the Party at the price of silence about its conduct (the path taken, for instance, by Lukacs and Althusser) or else retain one’s intellectual freedom at the price of being utterly divorced from any meaningful social struggle (Anderson 1976, 45).

For Black Marxists such as Fanon, however, this dichotomy simply did not hold. By the 1950s, there were new subjects and new struggles in which to root oneself, ones over which the Soviet Union and its satellite parties could claim no exclusive monopoly—struggles such as those in Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, China, Guinea, Ghana, Mali, the Congo and Kenya, to name but a few. 14 These new revolutionary movements emanating from the Global South seemed to many at the time to embrace the strengths of the Marxist (and, often, Marxist-Leninist) tradition without the evident weaknesses of

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14 For the importance of sub-Saharan African revolutions for the late Fanon, see his notebooks on his travels through West Africa, published posthumously in an English-language essay collection titled Toward the African Revolution (Grove Press, 1964).
actually-existing state socialism. And, in turn, they seemed to demand a reviewal and renewal of that tradition, one which Fanon boldly set out to provide.

In reading Fanon's final work as a Marxist one, then, I in no way mean to deny its heterodoxy vis à vis the gatekeepers of orthodox Marxism. Rather, I want to suggest that it was precisely in breaking with the latter that Fanon remained truest to the living core of the Marxist tradition beneath the hardening Stalinist shell. Marxism, if it is to mean anything, must derive its tenets, tactics and political programs from the lived experience of material struggle. By the mid-20th century, however this relationship seemed to be reversed, with the orthodox Communist parties applying an invariant and inflexible theory to struggles and situations where this latter quite simply did not apply. In this context, to break with “Marxism” was, in a sense, the precise precondition for remaining faithful to it. Or as Fanon's friend and mentor Aimé Cesaire put it, in his own remarkable 1956 letter of resignation from the French Communist Party:

I believe I have said enough to make clear that it is neither Marxism nor communism that I am renouncing, and that it is the usage some have made of Marxism and Communism that I condemn. That what I want is that Marxism and communism be placed in the service of black peoples, and not black peoples in the service of Marxism and communism (149).

For Fanon, placing Marxism in the service of Black people meant reexamining its foundational concepts and categories from the perspective of Black and decolonial struggle and tweaking or twisting them as necessary in order to fit with this change of perspective. For if Marxism was to serve the needs of Third World liberation then it
would, as Fanon put it towards the beginning of *The Wretched of the Earth*, need to be “slightly stretched.” Here is the passage in full:

Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to. In the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect: you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. This is why a Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched when it comes to addressing the colonial issue (5).

On first glance Fanon’s “slight” stretching of the Marxian paradigm might seem to be anything but. Where Marx had derived superstructural phenomena from the underlying relations of production, Fanon now argues that this relationship has been reversed: in the colonies whiteness has become a source of wealth and, in a sense, a form of it. His formulation might thus seem to imply a firm diremption between a purely “capitalist context” where Marxian class analysis retains its clarifying force and a “colonial context” where it would need to be dramatically inverted, amended or supplemented.

In reality, however, Fanon meant precisely to challenge such a polar dichotomization, suggesting a deeper continuum between differing modes of production. He continues:

It is not just the concept of the precapitalist society, so effectively studied by Marx, which needs to be reexamined here. The serf is essentially different from the knight, but a reference to divine right is needed to justify this difference in status. In the colonies the foreigner imposed himself using his cannons and machines. Despite the success of his pacification, the colonist always remains a foreigner. It is not the factories, the estates or the bank account which primarily characterize the “ruling class.” The ruling species is first and foremost the outsider from elsewhere, different from the indigenous population, “the others” (5).
If Fanon finds something of interest in Marx’s study of pre-capitalist modes of production, it is because Marx there emphasizes extra-economic domination as a necessary counterpart to economic exploitation. The history of all hitherto existing societies may have been one of class struggle. But in pre-capitalist social formations, Marx had argued, such struggles were inevitably masked or mediated by extra-economic phenomena; it was only under capitalism, he claimed, that economic exploitation was shorn of these illusions to appear in “pure” class form. (As Althusser would later put it, it is only under capitalism that the economy is both determinant and dominant.) The transparent clarity of capitalist class relations was then for Marx a precondition for the “ever expanding union of the workers,” their self-conscious self-organization as a political subject.

Fanon’s experience and analysis of racialization and colonization challenged this dichotomous periodization, however, suggesting that capitalist social relations continued to depend on the invention and perpetuation of extra-economic hierarchies. If this undermined the firm demarcation Marx had placed between the capitalist mode of production and other, pre-capitalist forms, it also rendered Marx’s analysis of the latter newly relevant. It is for this reason that Fanon argues for a reexamination of these ostensibly outmoded pre-capitalist social formations.

At the same time, Fanon points to a key distinction between the static hierarchies of the colonial world and those of the feudal mode of production he chooses as his
counterpoint. Under feudalism, the “essential difference” between serf and knight had relied upon a whole theological and cosmological architecture to justify and undergird it. The prince’s (or peasant’s) place within the feudal system had been underwritten by divine authority, and further strengthened by an elaborate chain of reciprocal rights and obligations. The difference between colonizer and colonized, in contrast, possesses no such grand metaphysical substrate, no undergirding architectonic to justify the production and perpetuation of racial difference save that of race itself. Thus while colonizer and colonized remain separated by a chasm as vast as that between serf and knight, the logic of this new “essential difference” is merely self-referential—the semantic equivalent of “a knight is a knight because he’s a knight.” For Fanon colonization was, in this sense, fundamentally tautological, deriving its force and legitimation only from itself.

The result, curiously, is that colonial race relations begin to assume, for Fanon, something of the very lucidity and transparency he had rejected in Marx’s conception of capitalist relations of social class. In Marx, it had been the bourgeoisie who had replaced “exploitation veiled by religious and political illusions” with “naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” (Manifesto). For Fanon it is instead the colonist whose brutality is so directly and shamelessly exposed. He denies the notion that class exploitation can appear as nakedly as Marx had imagined—suggesting that, at least in the colonies, it must continue to assume the veiled form of “essential difference.” And yet for Fanon
this veil, stripped of all theological or theoretical legitimation, becomes itself paradoxically de-veiled, paradoxically naked. As he writes: “The colonial regime owes its legitimacy to force and at no time does it ever endeavor to cover up this nature of things” (42, emphasis added).

The upshot of this unveiled veil, this naked mystification, is that the self-assured self-transparency that Marx had assigned to the proletariat begins to be transferred, here, to the colonized subject. Re-reading Fanon’s first chapter, “On Violence,” today, it is no longer his endorsement of armed struggle that scandalizes. Instead, what seems astonishing is his assurance that the colonized inevitably possess—or will come to possess—a clear and accurate conception, not just of the sources of their oppression, but of the strategies and tactics necessary to combat them. Time and again he speaks of the colonized as possessed of an almost superhuman self-awareness, self-assurance and collective self-coherence. “The colonized hurl themselves with whatever weapons they possess against the impregnable citadel of colonialism” (38). “The colonized peoples are perfectly aware of these imperatives which dominate international politics” (39). “This threatening atmosphere of violence and missiles in no way frightens or disorients the colonized” (4). “[The colonized] has always known that his dealings with the colonist would take place in a field of combat” (43). “Any attempt at mystification [of the colonized] in the long term becomes virtually impossible” (52).
The triumphant conviction with which Fanon here speaks of the colonized subject echoes Marx’s paeans to the proletariat at their most grandiloquent—which is to say, in the Manifesto and the other writings surrounding the revolutions of 1848. Like Marx, the intensity of his conviction seems to mirror that of the revolutionary conjuncture in which he is writing. Whether this triumphalism is proscriptive or descriptive, reflective of the revolutionary realities as Fanon perceives them or rather merely rhetorical, is, in a sense, immaterial. Revolution, as the decidedly counter-revolutionary writer and critic Jean-François de La Harpe was only the first to note, does not merely upend the old social relations; it is also a discursive transformation in which “all the basic words of language have been overturned.” The force of Fanon’s valorization of “the colonized,” like Marx’s of the proletariat or the even earlier invocation of “the people,” is that of a revolutionary rupture in which the intensification of political discourse both reflects the emergence of a new social subject and, in a very real sense, engenders it.

And yet no sooner does Fanon proclaim the revolutionary unity of the colonized then, in a pendulous, dialectical reversal, his thought swings back to expose the divisions fissuring the very subject whose single-mindedness he had only just proclaimed. If his first chapter, “On Violence,” propounded a vision of unmediated

15 De La Harpe, L’Esprit de la Révolution, ou Commentaire Historique sur la Langue révolutionnaire, quoted and translated in Brewer 2008, p. 113. See also Lynn Hunt’s fascinating “The Rhetoric of Revolution in France.”
revolutionary unity, then the second, “Grandeur and Weakness of Spontaneity,” represents something like the negation or sublation of this concept, the fragmentation of the one into the many. It is a transition startling in its suddenness, abruptly marked by the chapter’s opening lines: “These reflections on violence have made us realize the frequent discrepancy between the cadres of the nationalist party and the masses, and the way they are out of step with each other” (63).

This “discrepancy” is initially categorized by Fanon as a divide between the rebellious masses and those union or party leaders who, triangulating between the vicissitudes of the direct conjuncture and the necessities of long-term struggle, work to restrain the immediate demands of the multitude. But this apparent critique of vanguardism quickly transforms into another, only tangentially related critique. The real problem, Fanon suddenly states, is that such party elites are overly attached to the party form to the neglect of the chaotic content of colonial society, which is always a “protean, unbalanced reality” (64). And this excessive formalism is in turn due to the unquestioned application of the organizational form of the party itself—which, as a Western import, is ill-suited to the unique conditions of the colonies. Political parties, he then adds, have traditionally addressed and applied themselves primarily to urban populations, whereas colonial society remains predominately rural. And “the great mistake, the inherent flaw of most of the political parties in the underdeveloped world,” Fanon writes, finally, has been their focus, not just on the urban population, but on the
urban proletariat specifically—“a tiny section of the population which represents barely more than one percent” (64).

This is a series of arguments dazzling in their rapidity. From the revolutionary unity of the colonized we have shifted to an emphasis on division and duality—an abrupt transition marked only by the caesura between Fanon’s first and second chapters. But this new dualism in turn adopts and casts off any number of guises in quick succession, producing a shifting and unstable fault line. Indeed, in the course of a scant two pages Fanon riffs through and then discards at least five separate pairs of binary oppositions: cadre and masses; form and content; foreign and native; urban and rural; proletariat and… what?

The orthodox opposition should of course be that of bourgeoisie and proletariat. But here, in yet another dialectical negation or sublation, Fanon now argues that the colonial proletariat is itself bourgeois. Indeed, the categorial mistake of the nationalist parties, he asserts, is to have addressed their call to anti-colonial resistance, through a sort of error of misrecognition, towards that fraction of the population which most benefited from the status quo. He continues:

However, although this proletariat understood the party propaganda and read its publications, it was much less prepared to respond to any slogans taking up the unrelenting struggle for national liberation. It has been said many times that in colonial territories the proletariat is the kernel of the colonized people most pampered by the colonial regime. The embryonic urban proletariat is relatively privileged. In the capitalist countries, the proletariat has nothing to lose and possibly everything to gain. In the colonized countries, the proletariat has everything to lose. It represents in fact that fraction of the colonized who are indispensable for running the colonial machine: tram drivers, taxi drivers,
miners, dockers, interpreters, and nurses, etc. These elements make up the most loyal clientele of the nationalist parties and by the privileged position they occupy in the colonial system represent the “bourgeois” fraction of the colonized population (64).

In the context of widespread exclusion from the wage relationship, Fanon suggests, the opposition between bourgeois and proletariat has been supplanted by a new one—namely, that between those integrated into the colonial status quo and those external to it. The bourgeois/proletarian binary is thus at once transcended and contained within the first half of a new axis of inclusion/exclusion. If both bourgeoisie and proletariat have been integrated into and benefit from colonial capitalism, however, who then is excluded from it?

In his first stab at a taxonomy of the excluded, Fanon turns his attention towards the peasantry. Just like the colonial proletariat, he argues, the colonial peasantry play a quite different role than did their European counterparts in the bourgeois (and proletarian) revolutions of the 19th century. Having won smallholdings which isolated and individualized them, the peasant classes of 19th-century France, for instance, had posed a check on the more insurrectionary impulses of the urban population, which operated as a dense collective force. But in the colonies, Fanon argues, the situation is the exact opposite: “It is within the burgeoning proletariat that we find individualistic behavior,” he writes, whereas the peasantry remained tied to traditional, communal lifeways that the atomizing forces of capitalist social relations have not yet managed to disrupt (66).
Marx had typically posited the most progressive social classes as those that stood at the forefront of capitalist development. In contrast, Fanon argued that it was not despite their underdevelopment, but rather because of it that anti-colonial sentiment survived intact amongst the peasants of the rural villages, where “the memory of the precolonial period is still very much alive” (69). As a result the, colonial peasantry represented “a coherent people who survive in a kind of petrified state, but keep intact their moral values and their attachment to the nation” (66, 79). And yet the very backwardness that preserved such revolutionary sentiment simultaneously prevented the rural peasantry from effectively challenging the rule of colonial capitalism, whose power was concentrated in urban areas over which the peasantry had little purchase. In effect, the very exclusion which undergirded the peasantry’s revolutionary impulses, Fanon argued, effectively blocked their ability to enact them.

It was in this context—and searching, as it were, for a social subject capable of assuming the revolutionary mission abandoned by the colonial proletariat—that Fanon now turned towards the long-neglected and dejected category of the lumpenproletariat. If the peasantry lacked the ability to carry out the revolution, and the proletariat the inclination, then the solution, Fanon now argued, would be found in those vast masses who, expelled from the former class position, were not yet able to find a productive place within the latter. As he wrote:

In fact the insurrection, which starts in the rural areas, is introduced into the towns by that fraction of the peasantry blocked at the urban periphery, those
who still have not found a single bone to gnaw in the colonial system. These men, forced off the family land by the growing population in the countryside and by colonial expropriation, circle the towns tirelessly, hoping that one day or another they will be let in. It is among these masses, in the people of the shanty towns and in the lumpenproletariat that the insurrection will find its urban spearhead. The lumpenproletariat, this cohort of starving men, divorced from tribe and clan, constitutes one of the most spontaneously and radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people (64).

It is an extraordinary—and provocative—inversion. The lumpenproletariat, which had long operated as a sort of shorthand for counter-revolutionary elements, has here been recuperated, not just as a revolutionary element, but as the single most “radically revolutionary force.”

Needless to say, this thesis provoked immense controversy among contemporary Marxists.16 If on one level this response was predictable, on another it remains surprising. Of the three elements Fanon identified as crucial to anti-colonial struggle, two were uncontroversial; the centrality of the party was of course canonical, and the revolutionary role of the peasantry—once considered a rank heresy—had, in the aftermath of the Chinese Revolution, become practically an established orthodoxy (Cf. Worsley 1972, 207). The Communist movement had thus proven capable (if often reluctantly) of accepting non-proletarian classes as revolutionary actors, including not just the peasantry but, in the anti-colonial context, the nationalist bourgeoisie (a thesis

16 For an overview of this response, see Wallerstein 1979, 250-268
which, however, Fanon rejected). Yet despite this, Fanon’s revalorization of the lumpenproletariat proved difficult for many to accept.

The audacity of Fanon’s revalorization of Marx’s derogatory category should not, however, obscure the commonalities between their respective formulations. Just as in Marx, the lumpenproletariat has emerged, for Fanon, in the context of immense turbulence, contestation and uncertainty, one where the lines of political demarcation refuse to remain clearly drawn. In Marx this confusion manifested itself in the unstable divisions traversing the body politic; for Fanon, as we have seen, it manifests in the shifting fault lines of a series of binary oppositions that continually assume (and as quickly cast off) ever-changing forms. In both cases, however, the lumpenproletariat might be said to signal the irruption of a threatening lability or instability of the political, alongside the stubborn persistence of heterogenous social forces that fail to firmly resolve themselves into clear class camps.

Furthermore, Fanon, like Marx, is here grappling with the discomfiting realization that the oppressed and exploited will not always or invariably side against their oppressors. Where Marx had tried to confine this threat to those excluded from the

17 While contemporaneous Marxist critiques often focused on Fanon’s alleged "spontaneism" and his rejection of the revolutionary role of the nationalist bourgeoisie, in this regard Fanon was arguably more Leninist than the Marxist-Leninists. His rejection of the so-called "two-stage theory" in which socialist revolution in the peripheral countries must always and inevitably be preceded by a bourgeois-nationalist revolution was predicated on the belief (and who could doubt this today?) that a bourgeois revolution would merely replace colonial with semi-colonial imperialism and a European capitalist elite with a colonial one.
wage relation, however, Fanon reverses the formulation, rendering the wage itself the source of counter-revolutionary co-optation. Like Du Bois, then, he inverts the classical prioritization of the struggles of waged workers over and against those consigned to wagelessness.

Thus, however dramatic a departure it might seem at first glance, Fanon’s inversion marked less of a rupture with Marxian class theory than its creative adaptation for changing social and historical circumstances. Writing from 19th-century Europe, Marx had been able to imagine the industrial proletariat as a tendentially universal class, in relation to which the so-called lumpenproletariat appeared merely marginal or liminal—a few unfortunate elements that had been unable to navigate the transition from a residual feudal economy to emerging industrial capitalism. For Fanon, in contrast, from the perspective of the colonized countries in the middle of the 20th century, this relationship appeared dramatically transformed—it was the wage relationship that now seemed merely marginal, while the ranks of the under- and unemployed swelled continuously.

If this shift required a change of perspective, it also allowed Fanon to import much of Marx’s analysis virtually wholesale, merely transferring his conceptual framework from the proletariat to the lumpenproletariat. The latter then inherit, not just the proletariat’s revolutionary potentiality, but also its tendential universality. As Fanon writes:
The formation of a lumpenproletariat is a phenomenon which is governed by its own logic, and neither the overzealousness of the missionaries nor decrees from the central authorities can stop its growth. However hard it is kicked or stoned it continues to gnaw at the roots of the tree like a pack of rats (81).

Fanon rightly notes a real phenomenon, what Peter Worsley has elsewhere termed “one of the major features of the contemporary Third World,” namely “the explosive growth of urban populations composed of immigrants from the countryside and the smaller towns who are not established proletarians either in terms of occupation [...] or of political culture” (208). Unlike the equally explosive growth of European metropolises across the 19th century, which had occurred in the context of successive industrial revolutions, the expansion of this colonial lumpenproletariat occurred in a context where urbanization had grown decoupled from industrialization. Extrapolating from these trends, Fanon assigned a tendential universality to the slum dwellers of the favelas, barriadas and bidonvilles, whose numbers would continue to expand, he predicted, through a process “governed by its own logic.”

Where Marx had seen such tendential universality as virtually synonymous with revolutionary subjectivity, however, Fanon renders this linkage much more tenuous. If the lumpenproletariat becomes for him a—or the—potential revolutionary subject, they also inherit some of the vacillation and uncertainty that Marx had associated with the category. As he writes:

Colonialism also finds ample material in the lumpenproletariat for its machinations. In fact, any national liberation movement should give this lumpenproletariat maximum attention. It will always respond to the call of revolt, but if the insurrection thinks it can afford to ignore it, then this famished
underclass will pitch itself into armed struggle and take part in the conflict, this time on the side of the oppressor. The oppressor, who never misses an opportunity to let the blacks tear at each other’s throats, is only too willing to exploit those characteristic flaws of the lumpenproletariat, namely its lack of political consciousness and ignorance (87).

Paradoxically, then, Fanon remains truest to Marx’s analysis at the precise moment where he breaks most dramatically from it. Even as he challenges Marx’s denigration of the lumpenproletariat, that is, he fully accepts his description of the latter’s waywardness and volatility, rendering the colonial lumpenproletariat an unstable social class whose ultimate allegiance is uncertain. His analysis thus dwells at the curious intersection of determinacy and indeterminacy. On the one hand, Fanon renders the relentless growth of the lumpenproletariat the result of a seemingly inexorable process. On the other, the political outcome of this process remains contingent and contested—as this swollen surplus population, ripe for revolt, seeks around for the object of its allegiance.

We might read the shifting fault lines of Fanon’s ever-morphing series of binary oppositions as the signal of this protean nature of the political—the ability to weave quite different patterns out of the amorphous material provided by the rag-and-tatter Lumpen.18 Indeed, Fanon’s third chapter, “The Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness,” points precisely towards the risks of such malleability, exploring the

18 Fanon here brushes on an insight we will return to later, when consider the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe—namely, the capacity to cohere political subjects around various potential antagonisms or oppositions, the determination of which is not preordained. (See Chapter 3)
ways in which the decolonization struggle can be diverted by an over-emphasis on
national or tribal identity — one which fails to challenge the real bases of economic
exploitation, both between classes and between nations. Here too, as in Du Bois, class
struggle is granted a certain ontic prioritization over and above other social
antagonisms — one which fails to translate, however, into any automatic precedence
within the phenomenal realms of the political.

If the energies of the lumpenproletariat are successfully channeled towards
revolution, however, Fanon leaves no doubt as to the outcome. Once organized, the
Lumpen “give the liberation struggle all they have got,” rescuing decolonization from
the jaws of defeat (87). Paradoxically, then, the very element that represented the
scrambling of social classes, the subverting of the wage relationship and the ultimate
instability of the political also possessed the capacity to restore sense to the disordered
march of history. As Fanon writes:

The lumpenproletariat constitutes a serious threat to the “security” of the town
and signifies the irreversible rot and the gangrene eating into the heart of
colonial domination. So the pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed, and the petty
criminals, when approached, give the liberation struggle all they have got,
devoting themselves to the cause like valiant workers. […] These jobless, these
species of subhumans, redeem themselves in their own eyes and before history.
The prostitutes too, the domestics at two thousand francs a month, the hopeless
cases, all those men and women who fluctuate between madness and suicide, are
restored to sanity, return to action and take their vital place in the great march of
a nation on the move (87).

The lumpenproletariat, that false semblance of a social class, had first been
deployed by Marx to contain the threatening theatricality of the political — the refusal of
class actors to play their proper parts. (The Lumpen, as Marx had scornfully put it, were then “to play the part of the people, as Nick Bottom that of the lion.”) (76) Here, however, such theatricality has been reclaimed as the sign of the articulation of a collective political subject whose successful performance cannot be preordained. “When approached,” Fanon writes, the lumpenproletariat devote themselves to the cause “like valiant workers” (comme de robustes travailleurs). The Lumpen are not “real” workers, just as the real workers are not valiant. But in their successful simulation of this revolutionary rôle, they assume the mantle let slip by an industrial proletariat whose position at the point of production has failed to underwrite its political performance.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon reworked Marxian theory to make sense of the possibility of revolution in a context quite different from that on which Marx had focused, displacing his frame of reference from the 19th to the 20th century, and from the Parisian metropole to the Francophone colonies. These shifts, both spatial and temporal, required theoretical transformations as well. For in the colonies class antagonism could not be divorced from racial oppression, while the wage relation that Marx had envisioned as tendential in nature remained, for the vast majority, perpetually out of reach. In this context, Fanon dared to “stretch” Marx’s analysis by repurposing his ragged category of the lumpenproletariat as a new revolutionary rallying-cry for the displaced, declassed and dispossessed. “This cohort of starving men, divorced from tribe and clan” would then become the force to upend history.
Fanon confined this dramatic revision of Marxian theory to the colonized countries. It would not be long, however, before others extended it to the colonizing.

3.4 From Boggs to the Black Panthers

Marxists have continued to think of a mass of workers always remaining as the base of an industrialized society. They have never once faced the fact that capitalist society could develop to the point of not needing a mass of workers. But this is the dilemma of our time in the United States, and as of now only the United States. The question before Americans is whether to be for the technological revolutions of automation, despite all the people who will be displaced, or to be opposed to this advance, sticking with the old workers who are resisting the new machinery, as workers have done traditionally since the invention of the spinning jenny (Boggs 104).

At almost the exact moment that Fanon was arguing that the progress of capitalist development had eliminated the revolutionary role of the industrial proletariat in the colonies, the African-American writer, union militant and civil rights activist James Boggs was applying a similar argument to the United States. His *American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker’s Notebook*, published in 1963, sent shock waves through Black radical, Marxist and labor circles, deepening a growing debate over both the significance of the civil rights struggle and the implications of technological automation for the future of the worker’s movement.

Born in Alabama in 1919, Boggs moved to Detroit at the age of eighteen, where he secured a job at a Chrysler assembly factory, taking advantage of wartime labor shortages that broke open industrial employment categories previously largely restricted to whites. Joining Chrysler Local 7 of the UAW, he grew active in the overlapping circles of Detroit’s labor, civil rights and radical political milieus, eventually
gravitating towards the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party. It was through the latter that he came into contact with C. L. R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya and his future wife and lifelong collaborator, Grace Lee Boggs. He joined with all three in their new Johnson-Forest Tendency and, later, the Correspondence Publishing Committee—a small Marxist collective that broke with the broader Trotskyist movement over a number of issues, including its theory that the Soviet Union was a state capitalist society, its rejection of the Leninist vanguard party, and the priority it granted to the struggles of women, young people and African Americans.

In addition to its focus on Black struggle, it was the group’s emphasis on the self-activity of the working class (over and against bureaucratic union and party structures) that appealed to Boggs, who had witnessed the gradual reining-in of shop floor militancy under the top-down leadership of UAW president Walter Reuther. But Boggs extended this argument further than the Correspondence group—and C. L. R. James, its intellectual leader—were willing to take it. In his eyes, the pacification of the worker’s movement could not solely be attributed to bureaucratic mismanagement or subjective errors; there were structural changes undergirding the gradual weakening of the power of labor, ones Boggs came to believe had objectively transformed the revolutionary role of the industrial proletariat, at least in the United States. “To think dialectically,” he explained, “is to recognize that reality is constantly changing and that new contradictions are constantly being created as the old ones are negated” (17). For Boggs,
the contradiction between labor and capital was in the process of being negated—
replaced by new contradictions predicated, not on exploitation at the point of
production, but rather on social exclusion.

Boggs first made this case clearly in a position paper titled “State of a Nation—
1962,” which he circulated amongst the membership of Correspondence. Intended to
provoke discussion within the organization, it in fact precipitated the latter’s split—and,
ultimately, its demise—as James and other more orthodox Marxist members refused to
countenance Boggs’ rejection of the uniquely revolutionary role of the industrial
working class. Following this schism, Boggs revised the document into his first
published book, *The American Revolution*, which appeared in a special double issue of
*Monthly Review* in the summer of 1963, and as a paperback that September. The work
had an immediate impact, establishing Boggs’ reputation as a major thinker and
intervening in several seemingly quite different debates simultaneously—over
automation and cybernation, the future of the labor movement, and the significance of
the civil rights struggle.

Boggs’ great merit was, in fact, to weave all of these strands together, writing
from his perspective as a decades-long labor veteran, civil rights activist, highly
unorthodox Marxist and Black radical. He began his analysis with an account of the

19 For a comprehensive account of the Boggs-James debates, see Ward 2011.
UAW from his perspective as a rank-and-file militant. For Boggs, the high point of the union’s history had been in the late 1930s and ’40s, when workers exerted enormous control at the point of production, while wartime labor shortages brought women, Black workers, southerners, and “professors, artists and radicals” together in the factory, creating a “social melting pot in the plant” virtually unprecedented in US history. In both its power over the levers of production and its forging of a dense collective body—across divisions of race, gender and geography—that was the closest the American proletariat had ever come, Boggs believed, to social revolution.

Yet the post-war path of the UAW and the other CIO unions failed to live up to this promise. Rather than continuing to extend their power over the operation of the factory, union leadership traded shop floor control for immediate increases in wages and benefits. The results of this myopic focus on short-term gains, Boggs argued, were two-fold. On the one hand, workers won such substantial material improvements within the existing system as to significantly temper their insurrectionary impulses. On the other, these improvements were won at the cost of ever-diminished power within the factory, granting workers less and less leverage at the point of production. The result was an industrial labor force that was both subjectively less interested in waging revolution, and objectively less capable of carrying it out.

These were not simply errors of judgment that could be addressed through a change in labor leadership, however. For the window of time when workers had
possessed a chance to assume control over the production process, Boggs argued, was rapidly closing. Automation—in many cases facilitated by labor unions that had staked their success to that of the business—was rapidly displacing labor, transforming the latter not just quantitatively but qualitatively. Qualitatively, Boggs argued, the workforce of the semi-automated factory was increasingly bifurcating into two incommensurable halves. On the one side, there emerged a technocratic, managerial elite who designed and managed the machines; on the other, a deskilled and increasingly marginalized workforce that merely serviced them—pencil pushers and button pushers, to put it pithily. Quantitatively, the ranks of the deskilled manufacturing workers dropped precipitously with the adoption of each new labor-saving innovation, while the growth of the new professional-managerial classes was insufficient, Boggs believed, to offset industrial job loss. The result was an increasingly autogenetic production process that no longer depended on labor for the production of social wealth. Or, as Boggs poetically put it: “Here is one of the greatest contradictions of capitalism itself. Today the capitalists have to feed these untouchables instead of being fed by them” (97).

Boggs did not provide a deep account of the forces driving automation. Indeed, his book virtually assumed as given the fact that labor was being progressively rendered redundant—a foundation for further analysis, rather than a phenomenon to be analyzed.
Where he was clearer, as a workplace witness to the process, was in his examination of the demoralizing effects of automation on the remaining workforce. He writes:

No one understands better than a worker the humiliation and sense of personal degradation that is involved when some big shot is coming through the shop and the superintendent tells him to “look busy” in order to prove that there is useful work going on. That is what our whole society is like today. By all kinds of gimmicks—including war work, which may end up killing off those for whom jobs are being created, and a host of government agencies set up to study the problems of “full employment”—the American government is now trying to make work when we are already on the threshold of a workless society (110).

A “workless society”—or rather, one where the development of the productive forces has overcome the division between work and leisure—had long been a dream of the socialist movement. Yet the curious reality, Boggs claimed, was that the material conditions for such a society of communist abundance had been achieved only in the United States, under unbridled capitalism—without, however, the corresponding transformations in social relationships, social consciousness and economic and political conditions. The paradoxical result was a social structure that still demanded everyone participate in “productive” work even as it had eliminated both the need and the possibility for everyone to do so. In this context, Boggs argued, the growth of a redundant surplus population was all but inevitable:

Growing in numbers all the time, these displaced persons have to be maintained, becoming a tremendous drain on the whole working population and creating a growing antagonism between those who have jobs and those who do not. [...] And it is this antagonism, brought to a climax by automation, which will create one of the deepest crises for capitalism in our age. In this crisis one section of the population will be pitted against another, not only the employed against the unemployed but those who propose that the unemployed be allowed to starve to death rather than continue as such a drain on the public against those who
cannot stand by and see society degenerate into such barbarism. On both sides there will be members of all strata of the population (102-103, emphasis mine).

For Boggs, the advent of mass automation had qualitatively transformed the nature of social struggle, scrambling social classes and replacing the antagonism between labor and capital with a new contradiction between those who could still find a productive position within industrial capitalism and those who have been “displaced.” Remarkably, then, he has arrived independently at an analysis almost identical to that formulated by Fanon, here transposed from the context of colonial underdevelopment to the overdeveloped industrial heartland. Like Fanon, Boggs then argues that the revolutionary impetus has passed, in this context, from the exploited to the excluded—“a revolutionary force or army of outsiders and rejects who are totally alienated from this society” (112).

It is only here, almost at the end of his short book, that Boggs takes up the question of Black struggle specifically. In the work that would represent his rupture with the main currents of American Marxism and his full embrace of an unabashed Black radicalism—both theoretically and practically—Boggs had nevertheless devoted a good three quarters of his writing to a quite orthodox analysis of the forces and relations of production, albeit one that reached highly unorthodox conclusions. It is on the basis of this materialist analysis that he then makes the case that Black workers, the “last hired and first fired,” today function as a revolutionary vanguard within American society, if not the revolutionary subject tout court.
Boggs’ shift away from the labor movement towards that of civil rights should thus be read less as an abandonment of class struggle than an argument that the revolutionary impetus had passed, in this context, from one class—or class fragment—to another. Yet it is worth attending to his language quite closely here:

American Marxists have tended to fall into the trap of thinking of the Negroes as Negroes, i.e., in race terms, when in fact the Negroes have been and are today the most oppressed and submerged sections of the workers, on whom has fallen most sharply the burden of unemployment due to automation. The Negroes have more economic grievances than any other section of American society. But in a country with the material abundance of the United States, economic grievances alone could not impart to their struggles all their revolutionary impact. The strength of the Negro cause and its power to shake up the social structure of the nation come from the fact that in the Negro struggle all the questions of human rights and human relationships are posed. At the same time the American Negroes are most conscious of, and best able to time their actions in relation to, the crises and weaknesses of American capitalism, both at home and abroad (137).

At first, Boggs makes his case for centrality and radicality of Black struggle in quite narrow class terms. African Americans are “the most oppressed and submerged section of the workers,” whereas white industrial workers represent a sort of aristocracy of labor—a theory of white working-class embourgeoisement we have seen emerge time and again in the tradition we have traced since Du Bois. Accordingly, Boggs argues, the revolutionary impetus has here passed from the white industrial proletariat to something like the Black lumpenproletariat. (Though Boggs, again like Du Bois, does not use this term.)

At the same time, Boggs is careful not to reduce the question of race purely to class. In the pages preceding the paragraph just quoted, he had meticulously traced how
racialization had functioned to divide the working classes in the context of the emergence of American agrarian and industrial capitalism. Despite this, however, Boggs continued to insist that there was an additional, indelibly extra-economic element to racial oppression. And, in a remarkable twist, it was precisely this non- or extra-economic element—this *surplus* of oppression, over and beyond the causal factors undergirding the Marxist account of class exploitation—that he now argued granted the civil rights struggle both its revolutionary aspect and its universality. For “in the Negro struggle,” as he puts it, “all the questions of human rights and human relationships are posed.”

Recall that, for Boggs, it had been the narrow-minded focus on wages and benefits that had at least partially explained the failures of the American labor movement in the aftermath of its 1930s militancy. In a society of technological abundance, Boggs believed, the question of material wealth was no longer the sole or primary motor force of social change. True, there were pressing issues of inequitable distribution of resources—both between sections of the American population and even more gravely, as Boggs recognized, between the over- and under-developed world. But the deeper and more urgent issue, he believed, was the fact that social conditions, social relations and social consciousness had lagged behind ever-increasing material wealth.

In this gap between the development of the forces and relations of production, Boggs argued, the civil rights struggle assumed its central importance. For it was in this
latter that the question of social relations was posed most sharply. Indeed, it was precisely the extra-economic elements of racial oppression that permitted the Black struggle to surpass the limits of trade union consciousness, allowing a perception of the broader social whole inside of which the question of material distribution was contained. It was for this reason, Boggs argued, that “the goal of the classless society is precisely what has been and is today at the heart of the Negro struggle” (137). For the participants in this struggle had gone beyond the question of immediate economic interest to realize that what Black (non-)workers lacked and needed, in order to achieve their goal of liberation—and, with it, the transformation of the broader society—was political power. Indeed, in a remarkable usage of the term that precedes Stokely Carmichael’s more famous one by the better part of three years, Boggs ends his book with a proclamation of the revolutionary significance of Black Power:

The struggle for black political power is a revolutionary struggle because, unlike the struggle for white power, it is the climax of a ceaseless struggle on the part of Negroes for human rights. Moreover, it comes in a period in the United States when the struggle for human relations rather than for material goods has become the chief task of human beings. The tragedy is that all Americans cannot recognize this and join in this struggle. But the very fact that most white Americans do not recognize it and are in fact opposed to it is what makes it a revolutionary struggle. Because it takes two sides to struggle, the revolution and the counterrevolution (139).

Boggs’ prophetic appeal for “black political power” appeared in 1963—the same year as the English-language publication of The Wretched of the Earth. Like Boggs’ American Revolution, Fanon’s book would have an enormous impact on the emergence of Black Power, becoming “the Bible of the Black liberation movement,” as Black Panther
Eldridge Cleaver would term it (Van Deburg 60). Indeed, in Bobby Seale’s telling, it was Fanon who provided him and Huey Newton with the inspiration for forming the Black Panther Party in the first place. As Seale wrote in *Seize the Time*:

Huey understood the meaning of what Fanon was saying about organizing the lumpen proletariat first, because Fanon explicitly pointed out that if you didn’t organize the lumpen proletariat, if the organization didn’t relate to the lumpen proletariat and give a base for organizing the brother who’s pimping, the brother who’s hustling, the unemployed, the downtrodden, the brother who’s robbing banks, who’s not politically conscious—that’s what lumpen proletariat means—that if you didn’t relate to those cats, the power structure would organize these cats against you (31).

But if the Panthers initially related to the lumpenproletariat as a means of organizing the Black urban underclass, they would ultimately advance a theory of tendential lumpen-proletarianization with profound implications for all sectors and segments of the population. Synthesizing Fanon and Boggs, their analysis reworked the Lumpen, which had first emerged as a split or schism in the working classes, as the latter’s destiny and potential reconciliation.

Founded by Seale and Newton in October 1966, the Black Panther Party emerged out of two related shifts in the ongoing Black Freedom struggle—on the one hand, a geographic shift as the locus of energy moved from the US South towards the West and North, and on the other, a shift away from both the tactics and the objectives of the Civil Rights Movement. The latter had made powerful advances towards formal civic and juridical equality for African Americans in the overtly segregationist South, overturning the last Jim Crow laws by 1965. For Black people in the urban centers of the West and
North, however, little changed. There, the methods of discrimination were subtler but no less effective, while the wartime jobs that had first attracted Black migration had disappeared from the inner cities along with their white inhabitants—leaving Black communities confined to redlined neighborhoods, deprived of economic and educational opportunities, and subjected to chronic police harassment. The question facing Seale, Newton and others in the emerging Black Power movement was thus: "how would black people in America win not only formal citizenship rights, but actual economic and political power?" (Bloom & Martin, 12).

It was in this context that Newton, Seale and Cleaver imported Fanon’s analysis of the revolutionary potentiality of the lumpenproletariat and themselves gave it a “slight stretch.” For where Fanon had reserved the lumpen label for the slums and shantytowns of the colonized countries, the Panthers now extended it to the redlined and disinvested ghettos in the decaying urban centers of the United States.

Initially, this move was grounded by their conviction that African Americans experienced a variety of “internal colonialism” analogous to the more overt forms of colonization analyzed by Fanon. Despite the commonalities, however, the Panthers came to realize that the lumpenproletariat of the industrial heartland differed in significant ways from that of the colonial periphery. For where Fanon’s analysis had applied to ex-peasants displaced from the countryside by colonial expropriation and the mechanization of agriculture, the Panthers were concerned with ex-workers displaced
from the factory through the effects of automation and cybernation that Boggs had so
compellingly described. As Eldridge Cleaver put it in his 1970 pamphlet “On the
Ideology of the Black Panther Party”:

O.K. We are Lumpen. Right on. The Lumpenproletariat are all those who have
no secure relationship or vested interest in the means of production and the
institutions of capitalist society. That part of the "Industrial Reserve Army" held
perpetually in reserve; who have never worked and never will; who can't find a
job; who are unskilled and unfit; who have been displaced by machines,
automation, and cybernation, and were never "retained or invested with new
skills"; all those on Welfare or receiving State Aid (7).

Synthesizing Fanon and Boggs, Cleaver’s analysis begins to point, here, towards
an understanding of capitalist development as engendering a progressive generalization
of economic redundancy. Fanon, the first to name this phenomenon one of lumpen-
proletarianization, had imagined it as unique to the underdeveloped colonies; Boggs,
meanwhile, had restricted it to the overdeveloped United States. As the Panthers drew
on both analyses, a picture began to emerge of the production of superfluous surplus
populations as something like a general law of capital accumulation, occurring at all
“stages” in the growth of capitalism as well as in all regions of a global economy in
which combined and uneven development merely distributed the impacts of such
technological unemployment unequally.

Read backwards from its point of highest development—and through the lens of
the Black freedom struggle—the history of capitalism thus began to seem one of
increasing economic redundancy rather than of tendential proletarianization. Or
perhaps one would have to tease apart two related but distinct senses of the latter term.
For “proletarianization” had historically referred, first, to processes of dispossession that had violently divorced people from the means to sustain themselves—hence the historical association of the concept with forms of criminality, pauperdom and prostitution. It was only subsequently that the dispossessed could be integrated into the ranks of the industrial proletariat more narrowly conceived. Yet—as the analysis of Du Bois, Fanon and Boggs has compellingly shown—there was nothing inevitable about the transition from this first form of proletarianization to the second. As Cleaver put it in a subsequent pamphlet:

It is clear that the basic condition of the dispossessed people, those who are cut off from technology, is not the proletarian condition described by Marx, but the Lumpen condition. The proletarian condition is that of those who have lifted themselves out of the Lumpen condition. When workers become permanently unemployed, displaced by the streamlining of production, they revert back to their basic Lumpen condition (1971, 10).

Cleaver’s revalorization of the abject category of the Lumpen, like Fanon’s, thus in one sense restored the concept of the proletariat to its original, more expansive signification. It was for this reason that he was able to insist that “even though we are Lumpen, we are still members of the Proletariat, a category which theoretically cuts across national boundaries but which in practice leaves something to be desired” (1970, 7). Cleaver continued:

In both the Mother Country and the Black Colony, the Working Class is the Right Wing of the Proletariat, and the Lumpenproletariat is the Left Wing. Within the Working Class itself, we have a major contradiction between the Unemployed and the Employed. And we definitely have a major contradiction between the Working Class and the Lumpen (8).
In Cleaver’s reformulation, the proletariat was restored as expansive category encompassing the broad masses of the dispossessed—both working and non-working, Black and white. Yet there were real differences between these subject positions. For white workers had won a stable position within the capitalist status quo, one Black workers accessed only intermittently. For this reason, Cleaver argued not only that the white working class had ceded its position as revolutionary vanguard to the lumpenproletariat, but also that the distinction between working class and Lumpen was posed more sharply within the white community than in the “Black Colony,” where the “leveling effect” of racial discrimination and the perpetual precarity of access to the wage relation produced a more consistently revolutionary consciousness amongst both Black workers and the Black lumpenproletariat (6).

Both aspects of this argument (the fractures in the multi-racial working class, the persistence of racial unity across class lines) should be familiar on the basis of our previous analysis. Rather than a series of stable fault lines, however, the Panthers argued that these fractures within the proletariat were the product of a particular historical moment that was now in the process of passing away. Due to the centuries-long legacies of racialization and colonization, the burden of the lumpenproletarian condition had historically fallen most heavily on colonized peoples as well as on Black, Brown and indigenous Americans subjected to “internal colonization.” Extending the analysis developed by Boggs and others, however, the Panthers came to believe that the
progress of technological development would soon reduce an ever-increasing portion of the population—both Black and White, both in the underdeveloped colonial countries and the overdeveloped industrial ones—to the lumpenproletarian condition previously reserved for a minority. As Huey Newton put it in a November 1970 speech at Boston College:

In this country the Black Panther Party, taking careful note of the dialectical method, taking careful note of the social trends and the ever-changing nature of things, sees that while the lumpen proletarians are the minority and the proletarians are the majority, technology is developing at such a rapid rate that automation will progress to cybernation, and cybernation probably to technocracy. [...] If the ruling circle remains in power the proletarian working class will definitely be on the decline because they will be unemployables and therefore swell the ranks of the lumpens, who are the present unemployables. Every worker is in jeopardy because of the ruling circle, which is why we say that the lumpen proletarians have the potential for revolution, will probably carry out the revolution, and in the near future will be the popular majority (166).

In suggesting that the lumpenproletariat represented, as it were, an increasingly majoritarian minority, Newton was asserting his continuity with what he considered to be the tradition of dialectical materialism established by Marx. In the latter’s lifetime, he noted, the industrial proletariat had represented only a tiny portion of the population—even in England, the most developed capitalist economy of his day. Yet Marx, “taking careful note of the social trends,” had extrapolated from these latter to predict a tendential increase in industrial employment—a prediction that had proven accurate, at least in the advanced capitalist countries, for the better part of a hundred years.

“The Black Panther Party is a Marxist-Leninist party,” Newton asserted, “because we follow the dialectical method” (164). Yet most contemporary Marxists, he
argued, had betrayed this method precisely by sticking to Marx’s word as holy writ. In clinging to the specific class analysis formulated in, and for, the social conditions of 19th-century England, that is, they remained “tied to a rhetoric that does not apply to the present set of conditions” (165). In his own time, Newton believed, the core contradiction was moving beyond that of wage labor and capital to a new and intensified antagonism—on the one hand, a concentration of wealth and technology in a production process increasingly voided of human labor; on the other, masses of people increasingly ejected from employment and confined to a position of relative externality.

Thus, through the development of capitalism’s own unfolding contradictions, the marginal position long occupied by Black and colonized peoples—both within the circuits of capital valorization and, indeed, in most Marxist analysis—ironically prefigured the destiny of the vast majority of humanity. This tendential universality not only rendered the Black lumpenproletariat the revolutionary standard bearer of a broader proletariat in the process of becoming-lumpen; it also allowed the latter, Newton argued, to overcome the stubbornly persistent fractures (between waged and unwaged, Black and white) that had long haunted the history of the proletariat. As he put it in a 1971 speech at Yale:

The working class will be narrowed down, the class of unemployables will grow because it will take more and more skills to operate those machines and fewer people. And as these people become unemployables, they will become more and more alienated; even socialist compromises will not be enough. You will then find an integration between, say, the black unemployable and the white racist hard hat who is not regularly employed and mad at the blacks who he thinks threaten his job. We hope that he will join forces with those people who are
already unemployable, but whether he does or not, his material existence will have changed. The proletarian will become the lumpen proletarian. It is this future change—the increase of the lumpen proletariat and the decrease of the proletariat—which makes us say that the lumpen proletariat is the majority and carries the revolutionary banner (193).

Remarkably, the lumpenproletariat, which had first been deployed by Marx to explain and contain the threat of intra-class conflict, has here been repurposed as the key to its successful resolution. For the divergent interests that had divided sections of the working (and non-working) classes from each-other will be overcome, Newton claims, as they all come to experience a shared condition of generalized wagelessness. The levelling effect of lumpenproletarianization would then create the material conditions to make the abolition of all such divisions and distinctions possible, uniting people across class and race lines in their shared experience of tendential externality to the production process.

At its weakest, this aspect of Newton’s analysis in fact repeats the very lacunae in Marx that the Black Panthers had set out to resolve. Marx too, as we have seen, had at times resorted to a notion of demography as destiny, predicting the tendential unification of the proletariat precisely in and through the latter’s tendential immiseration. Structural position within (or outside) the relations of production would then equate with the production of political subjects, allowing one to “read off” an individual or group’s political identification from their relation to the material base. But if there is one lesson that the legacy of the Black radical struggle within and against the limits of Marxian analysis should have taught us, it is precisely the contingency of
political identity formation—the lack of any automatic or unmediated correlation between structural position and political identity.

Newton does not quite succumb to such determinism, however, acknowledging that the “white racist hard hat’s” change of heart cannot be guaranteed by a change in his material conditions. Instead, he simply suggests that these material transformations open up new possibilities for the reconfiguration and, perhaps, reconciliation of the fault lines fissuring the (lumpen)proletarian social body, even as they foreclose many of the traditional tactics and strategies of the worker’s movement. New possibilities for political organizing, then, around what Eldridge Cleaver would elsewhere call “the basic demand of the Lumpen,” which is also “the ultimate revolutionary demand”—“to be cut in on consumption despite being blocked out of production” (11). He continued:

The point is that the Lumpen, humanity itself, has been robbed of its social heritage by the concentration and centralization of technology. The holding of the means of production as private property is illegitimate because it certifies the usurpation of technology and its concentration and centralization in the hands of the ruling class, the bourgeoisie. Once the Lumpen understand this, that technology belongs to the people, that our modern technology is the heritage of all humanity, then they will move to expropriate the expropriators, to abolish the usurpation, and take control of the machines, technology, in their own hands (11).

With the intervention of the Black Panthers, the line of inquiry we have traced to Du Bois has come full circle. Like subsequent Black radicals seeking a place within the Marxist tradition, Du Bois had been forced to wrestle with a twofold problematic—the persistence of antagonisms other than the straightforward one of bourgeoisie and proletariat, on the one hand, and on the other the troubling reality that wagelessness,
and not the wage relation, remained the structuring social condition for many Black people. Following in his footsteps, Fanon had unearthed the previously pejorative category of the lumpenproletariat as a means of making sense of these two related problems, ushering in a dramatic theoretical transformation of Marx’s theory. In Fanon’s formulation, however, the lumpen remained something of a colonial exception to the “normal” course of capitalist development. It is only with James Boggs and, especially, the Black Panthers, that this line of thinking begins to act back upon the theory it was initially intended merely to supplement, with the exceptional status of the Black lumpenproletariat now prefiguring that of the social whole. The Lumpen, that chaotic residual element of Marx’s dialectical schema, that stubborn remainder of an object which had refused to pass over into its concept, has here reemerged as the emblem of both the contingency of political identity formation and the determinacy of processes of technological automation that tendentially expel labor from the point of production. It is the confluence of these two factors, their analysis suggests, that marks the next stage in the development of capitalism’s moving contradiction.
4. Planet of Slums: Futures of the Lumpenproletariat

4.1 Wretched of the Berth

“The point is that the Lumpen, humanity itself, has been robbed of its social heritage by the concentration and centralization of technology,” Eldridge Cleaver wrote in 1971. “Once the Lumpen understand this, that technology belongs to the people, that our modern technology is the heritage of all humanity, then they will move to expropriate the expropriators, to abolish the usurpation, and take control of the machines, technology, in their own hands” (11).

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the series of global protests, riots and revolutions that it engendered, a spate of recent sci-fi films have grappled with the questions Cleaver had already raised up decades earlier. Neil Blomkamp’s Elysium and Bong Joon-ho’s Snowpiercer, both released in 2013, depict worlds in which the concentration of technology has proceeded towards a stark dichotomization. In Elysium, automation has rendered the vast majority of the population superfluous to the survival of the wealthy, who dwell in a high-tech heaven quite literally floating in the aether, while Snowpiercer depicts a similarly dramatic dualism through the class compartments of a heavily allegorized train. In both cases, class stratification has given way to a near-Manichean polarization between wealth and poverty, technological abundance and its lack, and both films in turn raise the question: how, in this context, to “expropriate the expropriators,” “abolish the usurpation,” and “take control of the machines and
technology?” But the film’s audacity in framing these questions is not matched by that of their answers, which in fact fail to resolve the underlying problems that they pose. In both their promise and their limitations, then, Snowpiercer and Elysium provide a starting-point for our exploration of the possibility of a Lumpen politics today.

Much ink has already been spilt about Snowpiercer, Bong Joon-ho’s gripping cinematization of a French graphic novel in which the world has descended into a new Ice Age and the sole survivors are trapped on a giant train hurtling around the earth. The train—the eponymous Snowpiercer—is organized horizontally, not in the sense of anarchist consensus practices but quite literally: Wilford, the train’s inventor, conductor and despotic overlord, occupies the engine compartment, followed by the first and economy class passengers and, in the far reaches of the caboose, the tightly-packed and utterly miserable denizens of the train’s third class—the wretched of the berth.

This spatialization of social relations is hardly novel; think of how Balzac captures the rungs of French society in the successive stories of the Maison Vauquer. (The wealthiest residents occupying the ground floor, the poorest shoved up in the attic.) Here, however, Bong inverts the axis of this spatial metaphor and expands it, stretching the conceit to such great lengths that it can scarcely be called metaphor—the train, after all, encompasses the whole earth. If the film invites allegory, in other words, it also explodes it: where Balzac’s hotel remained a hyper-condensation of a set of class
relations which transcended it, Bong's train is not a synecdoche for class society—it is class society.

And yet, as others have indicated, Bong’s vision of class society is a strange one, approximating contemporary capitalism in its broad outlines but breaking down in its particulars. For one thing, class position here is utterly static, determined by the ticket one had purchased (or one's parents had purchased) upon initially boarding the train. If class mobility under capitalism had always been less real than mythic, *Snowpiercer* abolishes the myth entirely, rendering the train's hedonistic first-class partiers a sort of hereditary post-industrial aristocracy.

At the back of the train, meanwhile, the third-class compartment dwellers likewise lack any possibility of class mobility. The descendants of those ticketless poor who managed to force their way on board in the aftermath of the global snowpocalypse that wiped out the rest of humanity, these “tailers,” as they are called, are a reviled and scorned sub-population, packed into bunks, heavily policed, and fed on a diet of mysterious black gelatin bars.

If the tailers represent something like a hereditary class of proles, however, they differ from the classical proletariat in at least one sense—no one in the train’s third-class compartment seems to *work*. True, the apparatchiks of the upper classes occasionally come through in search of a concert pianist, and then there's the case of those disappearing children whose services are mysteriously required at the front. By and
large, though, the third-class passengers serve no real purpose on the train, which is depicted as a (largely) self-sufficient and auto-regenerative system—literally, a self-oiling machine. When social production has been fully automated, what remains for the erstwhile workers? Neither producing goods nor performing services, they pass their days in plotting revolution.

At first glance, the effacement of laboring bodies from *Snowpiercer*’s closed-circuit economy might seem no more than a reflection of bourgeois ideology, which invariably seeks to dissociate the phantasmagoria of capitalist consumption from the factory floor of capitalist production. In this reading, *Snowpiercer*’s fantastical, fully-automated ecosystem would represent the impossible dream/fetish of a self-valorizing capital—commodities breeding more commodities without having to pass through the blood, sweat and toil of that tiresome labor process. (A dream represented, in a different vein, by the ongoing search for a slave-free chocolate.) The bourgeois gaze, in other words, can examine class as a structure but not as an interrelation; can contemplate poverty with dispassion but cannot confront its own implication in a system which demands the other’s poverty as the source of one’s own wealth. As Jason Read put it in a critical review of the film:

As is so often the case in American popular culture, or even in the media, inequality is much more easy to imagine and discuss than exploitation. It is easier to imagine a world divided into rich and poor than a world in which the rich live off of the productive activity of the world. Thus, to butcher a phrase that has been quoted all too often, it is easier to imagine some dystopian tyranny than it is to come to grips with actually existing capitalism (Read, “Hijacking a Train”).
Yet *Snowpiercer* does not so much depict a world without work as it does one where agricultural and industrial production have been automated, leaving job seekers scrambling for the few remaining sources of employment: in civil service, the military, the performing arts, and predominantly in service work. If this sounds quite familiar, it should. For it mirrors a pattern that has unfolded over the past several decades across all the core capitalist countries, where manufacturing employment has fallen more than 50% as a percentage of total employment even as productivity and output continue to rise.\(^1\) And while these job losses had once been at least partially offset by gains in the so-called developing world, recent data indicates that manufacturing employment peaked across much of the Global South by the mid-to-late nineties and has since suffered a steep decline. (Kenny 2014)

Deindustrialization—understood, not as a decline in industrial output, but as a decline in industrial employment—is thus today a world-wide phenomenon, a result of the ever-intensifying automation of labor brought about by the third industrial revolution. Nor is this pattern limited to heavy industry: computerization, which had already begun streamlining factory production from the 1950s, has now spread to that tertiary or service sector which was once viewed as the natural replacement for

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\(^1\) See Endnotes 2, p 21-22. Despite the widespread perception that factory jobs are leaving the US for China, meanwhile, a recent McKinsey Institute study found that only 20% of US manufacturing job losses can be attributed to offshoring, the other 80% being the product of increased efficiency. (Manyika 2014)
industrial job loss. In the dominant countries, what remains today is service work in a
narrower sense—health care, home care, education, janitorial and clerical work, food
service... in other words, those forms of labor most resistant to automation (though even
here the latter is advancing rapidly). In the under-developed countries, meanwhile, the
ongoing displacement of rural populations has grown decoupled from steady
employment of any sort, producing what Mike Davis has aptly termed a “surplus
humanity” inhabiting a “planet of slums” (174).

Considered from this perspective, Snowpiercer’s vision of a seamlessly automated
production process seems less a distorted depiction of capitalist production than the
registering of a seismic shift in the reproduction of the capital-labor relation, if not
indeed the latter’s tendential supersession. As Read himself goes on to note:

On an automated train almost the entire population is surplus, and an arbitrary
line separates those unproductively languishing in the cramped rear, and those
reveling in the hedonistic excess of first class. There are of course a few workers,
making protein bars, teaching kids, doing security, and making sushi, but much
of the train, rich and poor, live a life without work. The train is thus a
predominantly service economy, but overall it is a world in which a small elite
governs over a fundamentally expendable population.[...] Viewed this way the
film’s effacement of labor brings it closer to a picture of the present (Read).

Snowpiercer thus explores the possibility of societal transformation in a world
where exploitation at the point of production has been eclipsed by the nigh-absolute
externalization of a residual surplus population—a scenario not too distant from our
own. But how, in this context, to envision revolution? The proletariat’s capacity to
overthrow the existing order had rested, in part, on its capacity to withhold value-
producing labor. But the train’s third-class Lumpen do not produce a social surplus; instead they are the social surplus, in quite a different sense—a superfluous addendum, mere hangers-on. Having no power over the point of production, their only hope is to storm the barriers that separate them from the train’s anterior compartments of technological plenitude. This, as the rear cars’ resident guru Gilliam (John Hurt) informs the tailers, has been attempted many times, without success. Under his mentorship, however—and with the aid of a series of cryptic notes sent back from a mysterious benefactor up ahead—a new leader Curtis (Chris Evans) spearheads a rebellion that breaks out of the third class compartments and heads towards the front.

*Snowpiercer* might seem here to slide into the generic conventions of the action film, in which a band of scrappy underdogs battle their way through a series of adversaries. In fact, however, the unfolding action sequences serve largely to provide Bong an opportunity to explore the elaborate social hierarchies of the train, as the protagonists move from the squalor and immiseration of the rear through the progressive rungs of the cars’ class system. As the compartments increase in opulence, the train’s system of social control gradually shifts from coercion to consent; where the back of the train had been heavily policed and militarized, in the front the population is pacified through a regular regimen of drugs, sex and self-care (there is a sauna car, a club car, a brothel). Bong is too savvy, however, to render this distinction absolute. As they fight through the train, the rebels discover that the guns of their guards are empty.
(the bullets having all been spent quashing prior uprisings) so that their continued
complaisance had in fact been predicated on their belief in the power of the state. In the
train’s crèche car, meanwhile, where the ruling-class children are inculcated with the
state ideology (“rumble rumble rattle rattle, the engine is eternal,” as they happily sing)
the smarmy school-mum hides a gun—and this one does have bullets. Consent and
coercion intermingle, producing a shared vision of the social order as static and eternal.

Key to this vision, as the tailers gradually learn as they traverse the train, is the
notion of equilibrium. Midway through their journey, they stop in the train’s aquarium
car for a lunch of sushi—the first solid food many of the tailers have ever experienced.
They are very lucky in their timing, according to their first-class captive Minister Mason
(marvelously played by Tilda Swinton), for sushi is only served twice a year, in July and
January. “Why, not enough fish?” one of the tailers asks, to which Mason answers that
“enough” is not the criterion. Balance is. “This aquarium is a closed ecological system,”
she informs them, “and the number of individual units must be very closely, precisely
controlled in order to maintain the proper, sustainable balance.”

As the film approaches its dramatic finale, this earlier scene comes to assume a
more ominous cast. For what’s good for the fish also goes for the fishermen, as Curtis
learns when he finally makes it to the engine compartment. There, the operator Mr.
Wilford (Ed Harris) informs him that the entire train, like the aquarium, is a closed
ecosystem in a precarious state of equilibrium that must be constantly safeguarded. “We
must always strive for balance,” he enjoins. “Air, water, food supply, population must always be kept in balance.” Indeed, just like the fish population, the number of individual units of the human population must be continually monitored and carefully controlled. Generally, this can be managed through mild, habitual measures. “For optimal balance, however,” Wilford adds ominously, “there have been times when more radical measures have been required, when the population needed to be reduced rather… drastically.” Periodic rebellions, he then reveals, are all part of the plan—a regular culling that reduces the population back down to more manageable numbers while restoring order and discipline to the suitably cowed survivors. Curtis’ uprising was to have been only another one of these, carefully plotted with the aid of the rear compartment’s leader Gilliam, who Wilford claims had been in cahoots with him all along. Things got a bit out of hand, for the rebellion made it further than Wilford had planned. But this only proves that Curtis is suited to be the aging Wilford’s replacement as the train’s conductor—a job he then offers to the conflicted leader of the rebellion.

While Curtis mulls over this devil’s bargain, one of his fellow rebels bursts into the engine compartment and rips open a wall panel, revealing the secret of the missing children stolen from the rear. The train’s inner mechanisms have slowly been breaking down and, without a means to manufacture replacement parts, Wilford has resorted to using small children as literal cogs in the machine. Enraged, Curtis sacrifices his arm to save the child, then conspires with the train’s security expert to blow the doors of the car
wide open, triggering an avalanche that derails the entire train. In the film’s final shot, the rescued child and a young woman—apparently, the crash’s sole survivors—wander out into the snowy tundra. Turning from the wreckage, they stare in wonder at a distant polar bear, both a sign of the survival of life on the frozen planet and, perhaps, of their own impending death.

If *Snowpiercer*’s science fictional locomotive had represented the totality of human social relations, then the explosion which derails it would seem to leave the fate of the latter in grave doubt. For if the train encompasses everything, then what exactly is left for the “outside”? Here, Bong’s optimism about the possibility of a Lumpen revolution is matched only by his pessimism about its final outcome—which, in a twist on the old dictum, envisions the end of capitalism only by means of the end of the world.

In *Snowpiercer*, the exploitation of the many may not be needed to reproduce an almost fully automated luxury economy. Yet the hierarchical inequities of the latter are depicted as absolute and immutable, the potential of radical redistribution itself radically foreclosed by the insistence that a more equitable allocation of the train’s resources is utterly impossible. Curiously, Bong here welds a neo-Marxian critique of class inequality onto a neo-Malthusian discourse of material finitude, wherein an absolutely insufficient food supply confronts an absolutely excessive surplus population. In doing so, the film forgets Marx’s own trenchant critique of Malthus,
namely that laws of human (over)population do not exist absolutely or in the abstract; instead, human beings are only ever “surplus” relative to historically specific social forms.²

Neglecting this lesson, the film falls into a technological pessimism that seems strangely at odds with its own internal logic. *Snowpiercer* figures the population pressures of the rear compartments as an absolute threat to the train’s continuation. Even on the film’s own terms, however, the aggregate impact of this immiserated population is extremely low; it is not their consumption but that of the decadent first classes which would need to be constrained in order for “balance” to be maintained. If the train’s closed system does not permit everyone the hedonistic lifestyles of these latter, neither would it seem to prohibit universal moderation, as the extremes of both front and tail converge on the middle position of, for instance, the economy compartments. For all its inventiveness and creativity, however, *Snowpiercer* quite literally cannot imagine this outcome. Forget universal plenitude; the film can’t even conceive of the drab, dreary sameness which the capitalist social imaginary often figures as the sole alternative to its own excesses! Instead, the only classless society the film can conceive is a negative a—the universality of (near) starvation. Thus, by rendering inequality seemingly intrinsic to the train’s forces of production, *Snowpiercer* paints itself

² See *Capital* Vol. I, p. 784: “Every particular historical mode of production has its own special laws of population, which are historically valid within that particular sphere. An abstract law of population exists only for plants and animals, and even then only in the absence of any historical intervention by man.”
into a collapsist corner wherein the only solution to the ills of industrial capitalism is an end, not just to capitalism, but to industrial production itself. In a sad update on Marx, we would then have the social equality of universal immiseration without, however, its dialectical conversion into unbridled plenitude.

In a seeming riposte, the film *Elysium*, likewise released in 2013, plays out a similar scenario to quite different ends. The follow-up to South African director Neill Blomkamp’s widely heralded debut *District 9*, *Elysium* supplements the earlier film’s critique of racism and xenophobia with a new emphasis on economic inequality. The year is 2154 and the world has become one giant, overpopulated network of slums and favelas. The wealthy, meanwhile, have retreated to Elysium—an automated space station orbiting the earth. Here, their every need is catered to by robots and machines that take care of every need—including illnesses, which are cured with the click of a button. The impoverished residents of the planet below try desperately to break into this ethereal paradise, especially the ill who can find no earthly cure. Alas, immigration is impossible, Elysium’s technological abundance restricted to those who can afford it.

Like *Snowpiercer*, then, *Elysium* projects the polarization of wealth and poverty to a rhetorical extreme—the two are, quite literally, worlds apart—and then invites us to explore the rebellious attempts of an immiserated surplus population to overthrow this unjust order. Where both films use captivating production design to immerse viewers into this near-Manichean duality, however, *Elysium* largely eschews *Snowpiercer*’s Alice-
in-Wonderland whimsy for an oddly unfantastic verisimilitude. The earth scenes, which ostensibly take place in a blighted dystopian future Los Angeles, were in fact filmed in a landfill on the outskirts of present-day Mexico City—and while distant shots of crumbling skyscrapers were digitally added, the majority of the footage is unaltered. The scenes of Elysium, meanwhile, resemble nothing more than the wealthy gated subdivisions of today’s Los Angeles. Presented as a vision of a far-off future, Elysium’s uneven geography of wealth and poverty in fact depicts the world exactly as it is now. As Matt Damon told the BBC, "It was embarrassing for all of us during filming, because half the movie executives actually do live in Beverly Hills. We’re already living in Elysium. We’re aware of it.” (Jones)

The film follows the attempts of Damon’s character, Max, to escape the planet of slums and reach the hi-tech heavens. This, it turns out, is no easy task. He cannot possibly afford a ticket between the two celestial bodies, and while Max has managed to secure one of the planet’s rare remaining jobs in heavy industry, this does not grant him the revolutionary purchase once attributed to the classical proletariat. On an overpopulated planet, after all, the few remaining workers are fungible, and their work no longer props up the rich, whose automated consumer economy has grown divorced from such production.

Instead, Max’s break for the stars is driven by pure desperation. After a (preventable) workplace accident exposes him to lethal radiation, he is essentially left for
dead. With days to live, and his only hope of survival that of reaching the healing machines on Elysium, he approaches the kingpin of an interplanetary smuggling outfit for which he used to work. The latter promises him a one-way ticket to the stars if he can steal crucial information from the CEO of Armadyne, an armaments company that produces both the robots that police the earthly population as well as the entire command and weapons system for Elysium.

In a separate storyline, on Elysium, the satellite’s defense secretary Jessica Delacourt (Jodi Foster) plots to overthrow the democratically-elected President Patel (Faran Tahir). The cause of the rift is their disagreement over the growing refugee crisis that threatens Elysium’s meticulously manicured shores. Patel, a center-left technocrat, wants to greet illegal refugee ships with humanitarian aid; Delacourt mercilessly orders that they be shot down. In one of the films more trenchant critical moves, however, these positions are presented as flip sides of the same coin—neither figure actually wants to redistribute Elysium’s precious resources to the clamoring earthly hordes, it is just that Patel is unwilling to confront the consequences of this choice. Frustrated by his pusillanimity, Delacourt contracts with the CEO of Armadyne to produce an override to Elysium’s central command system, one that will allow her to seize control of the starship.

We can see where this is going. Armadyne produces the command override; Max kidnapsthe CEO, suddenly finds himself in possession of the keys to the kingdom and
sets off for the stars; while Delacourt desperately tries to hunt him down. From here, *Elysium* descends into the extended series of fight scenes that dominate the second half of the film. Unlike *Snowpiercer*, however, which employs its action sequences as a plot device in order to unfurl progressive layers of its social world, *Elysium* largely loses track of its social critique in what becomes just another standard-issue action movie. In the climactic scene, a dying Matt Damon cuts into Elysium’s central computer system and uses the override to hack the hardware, transforming earth’s billions of immiserated inhabitants into full-fledged citizens of Elysium with a single keystroke. The robots, who are programmed to provide assistance to all Elysian “citizens,” are thus miraculously rewired to serve the needs of all, immediately resolving the interplanetary disparities between want and plenty. In the film’s final shot, the robots descend towards the earth, bringing precious life-saving technology to all its inhabitants.

On the surface, *Elysium’s* techno-utopianism would seem the exact antithesis of *Snowpiercer’s* technological pessimism. Where the latter figures technology as the root of all social inequality, in *Elysium* advanced technology instead roots out social ills as quickly and painlessly as its miraculous Med-Bays cure cancer. Indeed, so far does the film stretch this conceit that it becomes almost baffling as to why there was ever any issue in the first place; if Elysium’s technological resources had all along been sufficient to feed, clothe and cure the entire planet without problem, what possible reason did its
guardians have for so jealously hoarding them? Where Snowpiercer had exaggerated the material limits of the world it constructed, Elysium seems to ignore them entirely.3

Beneath the surface, however, the seemingly antithetical positions taken by the two films in fact partake of a common logic. For what both Elysium and Snowpiercer presuppose is a quasi-deterministic correspondence between technology and its social effects, one which eliminates the very need for (and indeed, the possibility of) politics. In Elysium, it is abundance that is hard-wired into the system; in Snowpiercer, it is material scarcity. In both cases, however, the film’s social and political outcomes are essentially predetermined by the construction of their respective worlds’ productive forces. In this sense it is not just Curtis’ doomed rebellion that assumes the aura of inevitability associated with Greek tragedy; Elysium’s ostensibly happier ending is as equally scripted—its resolution as much the product of an “iron law” of technological development which cannot be contravened.

Even as they challenge the emphasis in orthodox Marxism on the revolutionary role of the industrial proletariat, that is, both films reproduce the very element of the Marxist tradition that should be the most questionable, namely that of a seamless equation between the forces and relations of production, or between the development of

3 Translated to our own world, these two positions could of course be synthesized: it is both true that we are dramatically over-extending our planet’s finite resources and that we possess enough of them to end world hunger tomorrow, such that the reason for the persistence of the latter cannot be attributed to mere material scarcity.
technology and its social effects—falling victim to the age-old error of “economism,” to use the term first popularized by Lenin in his critique of Karl Kautsky. In this, the films forget one of the two essential lessons that we have argued adhere to the category of the lumpenproletariat. For the latter does not merely signal a position of exteriority beyond the gates of the factory; it also names the irreducible contingency of the political—the lack of any automatic or inevitable correlation between a determinate set of economic relations and any particular political outcome.

Forgetting this, Snowpiercer and Elysium sidestep the crucial question of tactics and strategy—of how exactly to cohere a collective political subject under the punishing social conditions that the two films frame. In Elysium, both the chaotic incoherence of the earthly masses and their position of interplanetary exteriority would seem to render the pursuit of an emancipatory political project difficult, if not impossible. The burning question would then become how, under these circumstances, to cohere a collective political subject capable of effectively challenging the polarization of wealth and poverty that the film so compellingly depicts. But this question is utterly evaded, less through the antics of the film’s irradiated, self-sacrificing hero, than via the miraculous intervention of the machines, which provide a narrative resolution the characters themselves are unable to proffer—quite literally, a deus ex machina.

In Snowpiercer, the god in the machine is more diabolical, but no less deterministic. Here, collective social struggle is not impossible, but its successful
outcome is. Insofar as both revolution and counter-revolution are hard-wired into the system, their outcomes are pre-programmed in such a way as to preclude the possibility of any genuinely emancipatory project. As in the must vulgar of vulgar Marxisms, the political is here no more than an ephemeral expression of the technological, but stripped even of that messianism which had ascribed the latter a progressive function.

_Snowpiercer_ and _Elysium_ thus marry a compelling and prescient analysis of the shifting contours of present-day social inequality with an utter inability to envision the means to overcome it—papering over this paucity with magical thinking, on the one hand, and with near-nihilism on the other. In a sense, however, this conceptual impasse is itself prescient. For it prefigures the exact blockages encountered by two of the most dynamic and widely discussed strands of contemporary (post-)Marxist theory—namely, autonomist Marxism, on the one hand, and on the other the various left-communist currents generally grouped together under the rubric of “communization.”

Despite parallel origins in the Italian and French ultra-left, the tenor of these two traditions would seem worlds apart. Autonomism, especially in the contemporary version popularized by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, is filled with a boundless revolutionary optimism, celebrating the unbridled productivity of an inherently anti-capitalist “multitude.” In contrast, the grim prognostications of the Endnotes collective—the most well-known of the contemporary communizing currents—are considerably more dire, describing the collapse of an erstwhile revolutionary subject
without being able to pinpoint any obvious successor. Yet, as I will argue in the next section, the shared underpinning of these seemingly diametrically opposed positions is a deep technological determinism, one which insists on maintaining the (false) correlation between revolutionary subjectivity and value-producing labor. Thus where Hardt and Negri preserve the possibility of a revolutionary subject only by utterly distorting Marxian value theory, Endnotes maintain the rigors of the latter but are forced to jettison all hope of revolution. The theorization of the Lumpen emerging out of the Black Radical tradition, I argue, can help us cut through both sides of this false dilemma, preserving the positive aspects of Marx’s economic analysis while freeing the revolutionary subject from the fetters of productivism.

4.2 Misery and Multitude

The various theoretical tendencies that typically go by the name of “autonomist Marxism” have their origins in operaismo, or workerism, a theoretical and political current that emerged in Italy from the early to mid 1960s. Both inspired by the first translations of the previously unpublished writings of Marx (in particular the Grundrisse) and frustrated by what they considered the stultifications of the official labor unions and the Italian communist and socialist parties (with which they nevertheless

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4 English-language accounts of Italian autonomism, initially few, have happily proliferated in recent years. The most authoritative is no doubt Steve Wright’s Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism (Pluto Press: 2002). But see also Palazzo 2014 and Erdem and Bloois 2014.
maintained a fraught relationship), early workerists such Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti sought to reinvigorate Marxist theory through a renewed engagement with the concrete experience of workers and workplace struggles. In this they drew on the experiments in worker (self-)inquiry pioneered by James and Grace Lee Boggs and others members of the erstwhile Johnson-Forrest Tendency, but with one key difference. Where the Boggs’ investigations had led them to conclude that the revolutionary impetus had passed away from the industrial working class, Panzieri and Tronti arrived at dramatically opposite conclusions. “A new era in the class struggle is beginning,” Tronti triumphantly announced in the first issue of the newspaper Classe operaia.

“Capital’s power appears to be stable and solid, the balance of forces appears to be weighted against the workers. And yet precisely at the points where capital’s power appears most dominant, we see how deeply it is penetrated by this menace, this threat of the working class.”

Tronti’s polemical rejection of the notion of working-class embourgeoisement then widely prevalent in other areas of the (post-)Marxist left was predicated, in part, on the unique trajectory of Italian post-war capitalism. As labor militancy was declining elsewhere in the Western world, in Italy it was heating up. The entrance of new demographics into the factory—particularly younger, unskilled migrants from the

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5 Tronti 1971, 89, translated in Mezzadra 2009. In addition to the work of Steve Wright, the following synopsis draws on Mezzadra’s account.
underdeveloped South—had dramatically transformed the composition of the workforce, producing something of the creative foment that James Boggs had associated, in the United States, with the cross-class, multi-racial workforce of the wartime era over two decades earlier. Along with these social changes came a resurgence of workplace struggle, often rejecting both the leadership and the tactics of the union establishment in favor of absenteeism, sabotage and wildcat strikes.

The contrapuntal course charted by Italian labor struggles relative to those of the other advanced capitalist countries pointed to the need for detailed investigation into the concrete economic, political, and cultural conditions that structured workplace militancy. Operaismo’s early workplace investigations promised to do exactly that, replacing static conceptions of the industrial working class as a fixed social datum with an understanding of class identities as the dynamic product—or, better, process—of social struggles. Indeed, Tronti’s new notion of “class composition” had the great merit of grasping the coherence of collective class subjects as the complex outcome of social struggles (composition), which would then reach their limits in the face of capitalist counter-attack (decomposition), necessitating the emergence of new tactics and strategies that could “recompose” the class.

Unfortunately, Tronti combined this dynamic, dialectical understanding of social subjectification with a curiously static, invariant postulate: namely, that such forms of worker struggle always and everywhere preceded and engendered capitalist
(re)structuring, rendering class struggle the real motor force of capitalist development. This notion, heralded as a “Copernican revolution” in Marxist theory, indeed reversed the terms of those vulgar Marxisms that had viewed social struggles as mechanistically determined by the development of the forces of production. Precisely in and through this reversal, however, Tronti’s formulation maintained the same mechanism in inverted form: instead of the productive forces unilaterally determining social struggle, it was now social struggles that unilaterally created transformations in production. The result was a curiously deterministic spontaneism, one which sacrificed much of the nuance of operaismo’s inquiries into the specific conditions of Italian labor struggles in the over-hasty hypostatization of such “struggle” as a timeless law of history. 6

The notion that “struggle” preceded and engendered the development of both classes and capital nevertheless quickly became a shared tenet of virtually all strands of (post-)workerist thought. But where Tronti ultimately renewed his efforts inside the Communist Party, believing that such spontaneous struggle required a political supplement, Antonio Negri and other operaistas associated with the extra-parliamentary group Potere operaio rejected this position, on the assumption that a revolutionary

6 C.f. Kurz 2017: “It is quite paradoxical: the “class struggle” must therefore exist prior to and independently of classes; it is elevated to the status of a constitutive metaphysical principle, thus taking the place of the fetishist constitution. This “principle” is positivized and ontologized, exactly like the old “objective social laws”, but precisely in a subjectivized guise, which only occupies the other pole of the real capitalist metaphysics.”
rupture led by the “mass worker” was imminent. In the event, this prediction failed to come to pass, as the worker’s movement proved unwilling or unable to shift from contractual labor struggles to mass-scale revolution, while the political initiative shifted toward the so-called “new social movements” (of women, students, the unemployed, etc.). Taking stock of these changes, Negri began to argue, starting from the mid 1970s, that they signaled a radical recomposition of the class. If workplace struggles had declined, this seeming weakness was, paradoxically, only a sign of strength. For the intensity and militancy of worker struggle, Negri now argued, had forced capital to abandon the factory, breaking the law of value and extending the antagonist relation between class and capital across the entirety of the “social factory.” Exploitation was now everywhere—and so, ipso facto, was resistance.

On one level, this optimistic interpretation of the political conjuncture was again a product of the contrapuntal rhythm of Italian social struggles, which continued to intensify throughout the 1970s even as they elsewhere entered into a steep decline. On another level, such optimism was a shared feature of many (ultra-)left forces of the period, who almost universally overestimated the imminence of revolutionary rupture at the precise moment when a revanchist capitalism was in fact launching its successful counter-attack. Yet while such “left errors” were hardly unique to the Italian context, there were specific aspects of the autonomist Marxist tradition that rendered it particularly susceptible to such a dramatic misreading of the balance of forces. For if
capital restructuring was always and everywhere only a passive reaction to class struggle, then the crisis of the Keynesian welfare state and the restoration of unbridled capitalism could itself be interpreted as further proof of the growing might and militancy of the class. It was thus less that Negri and other autonomists failed to register the signs of crisis (stagflation, automation, the defeat of the unions, etc.) than that these latter were invariably recoded as signals of strength. Within the framework of this rather invariant and mechanistic triumphalism, victories were victories, and defeats were victories too.

The dissonance between a worsening political context and such invariant affirmationism only grew greater as the ‘70s drew to a close, as a sudden crackdown on the Italian social movements put an end to the decade-long cycle of struggle initiated by the 1969 “hot autumn.” Exiled in Paris, Negri’s writings remained defiantly optimistic—yet increasingly divorced from any relation to the actual balance of forces on the ground, prompting criticism even from other autonomists.7 In a sense, these serenely untroubled meditations on the constituent power of what Negri increasingly called the multitude merely awaited the return of a political moment that would correspond to his

7 A good English-language account of such critiques can be found in Steve Wright’s, “The limits of Negri’s class analysis: Italian autonomist theory in the seventies,” Reconstruction, no. 8 (1996). Wright quotes Sergio Bologna: “There have been many small (or big) battles, but in their course the political composition of the class has changed substantially in the factories, and certainly not in the direction indicated by Negri. Not only that, but the opposite of that greater unity of which he talks has taken place. […] We are not at year one, we are not back at the reawakening of the ‘new left’ of the sixties: we are not even at the redefinition of a social figure different to the mass worker.”
prognostications, retroactively reconfirming such intransient optimism. After the long grim years of capitalist retrenchment, such an opportune moment finally arrived with the alter-globalization movement of the late 1990s, which overlapped with the publication of the first volume of Negri and Michael Hardt’s *Empire* tetralogy, rendering the latter both an overnight bestseller and something of a bible to the burgeoning movement.

A great deal has already been written about *Empire* and its successors, and the eclectic and itself multitudinous range of topics covered across the now four volumes of Hardt and Negri’s collective work render it impossible to provide any comprehensive overview here. Instead, I want to narrow in on a specific feature of their account of the Manichean struggle between a diffuse and intangible “empire” and a boundless multitude—namely, the latter’s equally boundless productivity. While the concept of the multitude has often been considered a radical rupture with Marxian orthodoxy—to be censured or celebrated, depending on one’s political perspective—I will argue that it in fact remains entirely orthodox in terms of the very aspect of the Marxist tradition that should be the most questionable, namely the notion of a direct correspondence between economic productivity and revolutionary subjectivity.

For if struggle is now everywhere, so too is production, which for Hardt and Negri has broken through the bounds of the erstwhile law of value in the generalization of “value” across the entirety of the social field. As they write:
Exploitation under the hegemony of immaterial labor is no longer primarily the expropriation of value measured by individual or collective labor time but rather the capture of value that is produced by cooperative labor and that becomes increasingly common through its circulation in social networks. The central forms of productive cooperation are no longer created by the capitalist as part of the project to organize labor but rather emerge from the productive energies of labor itself. (*Multitude*, 113).

Central to Hardt and Negri’s argument here are two related claims. First, they advance a conceptual claim that Marxian value-theory had only ever applied to the production of material goods, rendering it incapable of grasping those forms of “immaterial labor” that leave no tangible trace, but instead produce “knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects and so forth” (*Commonwealth*, viii). On this basis, they then propound a second claim: whereas material production had been characteristic of an earlier era, today the hegemonic form of value production is immaterial.

Much critical attention has focused on this second, periodizing hypothesis, challenging the notion that the immaterial production of the “knowledge economy” is supplanting the production of material goods.\(^8\) In fact, however, it is the very distinction between the two that is—from the perspective of Marxian value-theory—utterly untenable. For not only does Marx nowhere imply that materiality is a prerequisite for the production of surplus value, he in fact explicitly argues the opposite. It had been

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\(^8\) This was, for instance, a central topic of the heated public debate between Chris Harman and Michael Hardt at the 2003 World Social Forum in Porto Allegre.
Adam Smith, not Marx, who suggested that productive labor must leave some material trace, whereas services were unproductive because they “generally perish in the very instant of their performance” (Smith 430). Directly refuting Smith, Marx had argued that productivity had nothing whatsoever to do with materiality. So-called “immaterial” labor could be productive of surplus value, and material labor unproductive; indeed seemingly identical forms of labor could be productive or unproductive depending on the concrete social relations in which they were embedded. As Marx wrote:

An actor for example, or even a clown, according to this definition, is a productive labourer if he works in the service of a capitalist (an entrepreneur) to whom he returns more labour than he receives from him in the form of wages; while a jobbing tailor who comes to the capitalist’s house and patches his trousers for him, is an unproductive labourer. The former’s labour is exchanged with capital, the latter’s with revenue (Theories of Surplus-Value, 157).

One would not need to harp on the falseness of the distinction drawn by Hardt and Negri had they not used it as the basis for their entire argument that the law of value has been supplanted, replaced by the boundless generation of an incalculable “value” across the totality of the social sphere. As others have noted, this is only the first of a number of inaccuracies in their engagement with Marxian value theory, which consistently conflates the categories of value and profit as well as those of profit, rent and interest (see for instance Caffentzis 2005, Callinicos 2001, Rigi 2015 and Carchedi 2011, 220-244). In addition to these theoretical errors, there is an evident predictive or analytical weakness. At its best, Marxian value-theory had allowed for insight into the inner workings of political economy occluded by bourgeois economists, and particularly
into the complex and contradictory nature of capitalist crisis. But Hardt and Negri have no real mechanism to account for the latter within their analysis, which suggests a perpetually generative value being perpetually captured by capital. The result is a curiously flattened framework that loses the dialectical dynamism of the best of recent Marxian political economy (evident in, for instance, the work of David Harvey, Robert Brenner and Ruth Wilson Gilmore) in the static opposition of the ever-same.

But if others have explored the evident weaknesses of Hardt and Negri’s reworking of Marxian value theory, they have less often remarked their motivation for this curious maneuver. Quite explicitly, they are motivated by a desire to avoid the narrow equation of revolutionary potentiality with the industrial working class, a restrictive definition which, they rightly note, effaces the reality and centrality of extra-workplace struggles. As they write:

Working class is fundamentally a restricted concept based on exclusions. In its most limited conception, the working class refers only to industrial labor and thus excludes all other classes. At its most broad, the working class refers to all waged laborers, and thus excluded the various unwaged classes. […] The working class is thought to be the primary productive class, and thus the only subject that can act effectively against capital. The other exploited classes might also struggle against capital but only subordinated to the leadership of the working class (Multitude, 106).

Rejecting this narrow emphasis on the uniquely revolutionary role of the industrial proletariat, Hardt and Negri insist on what they term an “equal opportunity of resistance” (107). But a curious slippage in fact occurs here. For even as they are motivated by the desire to transcend the limits of such a blinkered and restrictive
definition of political subjectivity, Negri and Hardt prove incapable of envisioning a revolutionary struggle that is not grounded in the category of economic production. Thus, far from escaping a narrow emphasis on productivity, they are in fact forced to dramatically expand the latter category, rendering all struggles and all subjects boundlessly productive.

Rather than emerging from an analysis of the changing dynamics of capitalist accumulation, in other words, the motivation for this radical reworking of Marxian value theory is principally tactical—if all members of all social movements are shown to be value-producing, then their struggles can be granted the same strategic centrality that more narrowly economistic Marxisms had restricted to those of the industrial working class. In doing so, however, Hardt and Negri do not so much transcend the limitations of this narrow framework as generalize it, overcoming an exclusionary focus on the industrial working classes only by incorporating everyone into the latter category. Like the Marxists of the Second International, they thus place their hope in a tendential process transforming everyone into value-producing workers—no longer in the sense of an ever-growing expansion of the industrial workforce (a prediction that by now has proven untenable) but through the largely rhetorical extension of “productivity” to the entirety of the human social field.

Paradoxically, then, it is at their most expansive that Hardt and Negri reveal their blinkeredness, their inability to conceive of revolutionary possibility in anything
other than the terms of a narrow productivism. If such a move manages to incorporate a multiplicity of social forces into a more expansive understanding of the multitude, it does so only be eliminating their social specificity, reducing all struggles to struggles over production. As they write:

> It is easy to see now why from the perspective of capital and the global power structure all of these classes are so dangerous. If they were simply excluded from the circuits of global production, they would be no great threat. If they were merely passive victims of injustice, oppression and exploitation, they would not be so dangerous. They are dangerous rather because not only the immaterial and the industrial workers but also the agricultural workers and even the poor and the migrants are included as active subjects of biopolitical production. (*Multitude*, 137)

The notion that certain struggles are “merely” predicated on exclusion, injustice and oppression has long been used to denigrate the importance of efforts centering race, gender, sexuality, etc., in contrast to the supposed dialectical verve and vigor of struggles predicated on exploitation at the point of production.\(^9\) However much Hardt and Negri may seem to reject such a maneuver, they do not challenge the terms of this distinction between (powerful) exploitation and (powerless) exclusion, with all the inherently racial and gendered dynamics that this binary presupposes (between activity and passivity, etc.).

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\(^9\) For instance, Zizek: “What the series race-gender-class obfuscates is the different logic of the political space in the case of class: while anti-racist and anti-sexist struggle are guided by the striving for the full recognition of the other, the class struggle aims at overcoming and subduing, annihilating even, the other.” (Zizek 2006, 360) Or Ellen Meiksens Wood: “At any rate, capitalist exploitation can in principle be conducted without any consideration for colour, race, creed, gender, any dependence upon extra-economic inequality or difference; and more than that, the development of capitalism has created ideological pressures against such inequalities and differences to a degree with no precedent in pre-capitalist societies.” (Wood 1995, 265)
While their more “inclusive” definition of production is intended to incorporate race- and gender-based struggles, however, Hardt and Negri’s reworking of Marxian value theory has an even stronger intended target—the poor. Indeed, the very section of *Multitude* where they outline the concept’s definition is entitled “Dangerous Classes,” in a veiled allusion to one of the early English-language translations of the term “lumpenproletariat.” Hardt and Negri only reference the latter term in passing. But it is clear that they are working to recuperate Marx’s derogatory category from the dust heap to which it has long been consigned. “Communists and socialists have generally reasoned that since the poor are excluded from the capitalist production process,” they write, “they must also be excluded from any central role in political organizing” (130). This exclusion no longer holds, however, for under the hegemony of immaterial labor, they argue, the unemployed not only produce surplus value, they also “embody the ontological condition of productive life itself” (133).

Almost despite themselves, Hardt and Negri thus register the emergence of a growing surplus population tendentially excluded from the wage relation, along with the real challenge that this raises for orthodox Marxism. Rather than challenging the premises of the equation between productivity and politics, however, they instead painstakingly work to reincorporate the lumpenproletariat back within the vectors of capital valorization. In doing so, Hardt and Negri revert to the very productivism their theory might seem at first glance to challenge, viewing the progressive development of
“production” as itself producing the very collective subject capable of overcoming the rule of capital. Thus they write:

Just as the multitude produces in common, just as it produces the common, it can produce political decisions. In fact, to the extent that the distinction between economic production and political rule is breaking down, the common production of the multitude itself produces the political organization of society. What the multitude produces is not just goods or services; the multitude also and most importantly produces cooperation, communication, forms of life and social relationships. The economic production of the multitude, in other words, is not only a model for political decision-making but also tends itself to become political decision-making (Multitude, 339).

As we have seen, autonomism had first emerged as a subject-centered critique of those forms of economism which viewed the development of the productive forces as the solution to all problems of revolutionary strategy, instead emphasizing the driving force of social struggle. Remarkably, however, the apparent focus on subjective struggle in autonomism finally converts, in the Empire tetralogy, to its opposite, as all questions of politics, tactics and strategy are transcended through “the economic production of the multitude.” “Production,” as in the most vulgar of economisms, here produces, not just commodities, but revolutionary subjectivities, eliminating any need for mediation, representation or political articulation.

Thus, even as they dramatically break with Marxian value theory—or rather, precisely because of this—Hardt and Negri remain entirely faithful to that aspect of the Marxist tradition that our analysis of the lumpenproletariat has most called into doubt, namely that of the unmediated equation between revolutionary subjectivity and economic productivity. The benefit of value theory, however, does not lie in its ability to
predict the emergence of a revolutionary subject, which inevitably requires a political supplement; instead, its utility resides in detecting the shifting economic terrain upon which such a contingent political project must be built. As the Black Panthers and others have argued, that terrain is today shifting, not towards boundless productivity, but rather towards increasing exclusion from the site of production. Thus, rather than converting all the excluded and oppressed into “productive” subjects, what is needed is a theory that could grasp the revolutionary potentiality of non-production, as well as the tactics and strategies necessary for knitting together social struggles whose successful cohesion cannot be presupposed by the supposedly homogenizing force of the (social) factory.

On first glance, the work of the Endnotes collective and related communizing currents would seem to offer useful tools for such a task. While Hardt and Negri break with the labor theory of value in order to preserve the revolutionary subject, however, the position arrived at by Endnotes is exactly the inverse. Preserving a more orthodox understanding of Marxian value-theory, Endnotes correctly detect a tendential diminishment in value-producing labor inherent to capitalist production, linking this tendency to the present-day growth of surplus populations redundant to the needs of an increasingly automated production process. Yet Endnotes cannot conceive of any new revolutionary possibility in this conjuncture, instead perceiving in it only the collapse of an earlier cycle of struggle. Here too, the reworking of the concept of the Lumpen
emerging out of the Black Radical tradition can serve as a vital corrective, allowing us to conceive of a political subject who is radically unproductive.

In its contemporary sense, the concept of “communization” emerged out of the French ultra-left in the late 1960s and 1970s—in the aftermath of the abortive revolution of May ’68, but also in the twilight period of what the gauchistes considered the terminal eclipse of both the official communist and socialist parties and of the workers’ movement. For Gilles Dauvé, who first coined the term, the efforts of these latter had not managed to effectively challenge the continued dominance of capital. Even in the Soviet Union, where private ownership of the means of production had been abolished, virtually all the trappings of capitalist social relations (money, wages, compulsory alienated labor) persisted. Indeed, in the communist countries state ownership had merely managed the properly capitalist tasks that private industry had paradoxically proven unable to accomplish—increasing the productivity, efficiency and intensity of labor through processes of technological development virtually indistinguishable from those which Marx had categorized as entailing the real subsumption of labor to capital.

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10 Interestingly, the term appears in English as early as 1849 in the journal of the British Owenite Goodwyn Barmby (also credited with introducing the term “communism” to English) and would subsequently be employed by other British socialists throughout the 19th century in a sense not terribly different from its modern usage. (See for instance William Morris, “The Policy of Abstention from Parliamentary Action.”)

11 For a critical exegesis of the concept of real subsumption, written both within and against the usages of the term by the autonomist Marxist and communizing currents explored here, see “The History of Subsumption” in *Endnotes* 2, pp. 130-152
Meanwhile communism—the final abolition of class society—persisted only as a perpetually-deferred horizon. As Dauvé wrote:

> Whatever the situation may have been fifty or a hundred years ago, the present revolutionary movement does not aim to bring about the conditions of communism: these have been fully created by capitalism. Our objective is no longer to further promote the development of productive forces (Dauvé 2015, 14).

On a first level, then, the concept of “communization” entailed a rejection of the traditional, transitional measures that Marxism-Leninism had posited as occurring between the initial socialist revolution and the final ushering-in of full communism with its abolition of social classes and withering away of the state. Rather than the long-term aim or product of an extended revolutionary sequence, communization, as the journal *Théorie communiste* succinctly put it, posited “the abolition of the state, of exchange, of the division of labor, [and] of all forms of property” as the imminent content of revolutionary struggle (“Communization in the Present Tense,” 41).

With their rejection of the politics of transition and opposition to the mediations of state and party, the currents that cohered around the concept of “communization” drew on the half-forgotten legacy of the inter-war European ultra-left, and in particular the thinking of Dutch and German council communism. But where the latter had rejected vanguardism in favor of unmediated worker self-activity, the communizers distinguished themselves by also rejecting struggles based around an affirmative workers’ identity. Indeed, in their eyes, the council communists had ultimately committed the same error as the Leninists they opposed. While they might disagree over
the *form* that worker (self-)organization should take, the various strands of the socialist movement had been united in seeking the continued expansion of the industrial proletariat—the tendential construction of a “workers’ world.” In this vision, socialism entailed the transformation of society into one giant self-managed (or centrally-planned) factory, merely liberated from the parasitic predation of the boss.

This, the communizers argued, was to fundamentally misunderstand Marx’s critique of capital, locating exploitation in the figure of the capitalist rather than in the very form of capitalist production. But if, as they believed, domination was inherent to the value-form itself—and with it to the production process—then revolutionaries could not simply assume control of the factory system and run it along socialist lines, for the system was itself capitalist through and through. Likewise, the industrial proletariat was merely one term within the capital-labor dialectic, its growth internal to and co-extensive with that of capitalism. Thus any affirmative workers’ politics remained internal to the capitalist system; the point was not to affirm value-producing labor, but to abolish it.

“Communization” thus signaled the immanence, not just of the abolition of the state, private property, etc., but of that of the proletariat itself: “the direct self-abolition of the working class, since anything short of this leaves capital with its obliging partner, ready to continue the dance of accumulation” (Endnotes 2011, 26). What remained a question, however—in a repetition of the tension between voluntarism and determinism
which, as we have seen, had plagued the history of Marxism from its outset—was whether the extirpation of the proletariat was a political project to be accomplished, or whether it instead represented the inevitable outcome of a determinate developmental process. In the hands of some of the more insurrectionary currents that took up the concept of communization, such proletarian self-negation became an act of will—a rejection, both of the identity of “worker,” and (somehow?) of participation in the capital-labor relation, in favor of rather vaguely-defined “whatever singularities” and new “forms of life.”

For the contemporary collective Endnotes, however—most responsible for introducing communization theory to the Anglosphere—the abolition of the working classes is less a political task than a tendential trajectory intrinsic to capital accumulation. In a series of articles published in their austere, eponymous journal, Endnotes explore what they consider the long-term tendency of capital to expel labor from the point of production, engendering an inherent crisis in the reproduction of the capital-labor relation. Through a close read of Marxian value-theory, they here revive the long-unfashionable hypothesis of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (TRPF). On its simplest level, this latter expresses the core contradiction that individual capitals are

12 Most notably the French journal *Tiqqun*, which gained some notoriety when one of its founders was arrested and charged with terrorism, and the related collective The Invisible Committee, whose tract *The Coming Insurrection* received a sales boost after it was singled out for criticism by the American conservative commentator Glenn Beck.
continually spurred to reduce labor costs even as labor remains the sole measure and source of value (not wealth) for capitalism as a whole, thus undermining the long-term conditions of their own accumulation.\textsuperscript{13} While other dynamics complicate this seemingly straightforward self-sabotaging dynamic (for instance, increasing the productivity of labor also decreases the cost of the latter’s reproduction, partially offsetting the rising organic composition of capital) these counter-tendencies, they believed, ultimately merely repeat the same contradiction on a more concrete level. Capital thus tendentially works towards its dissolution, undermining the source of its own continued valorization.

The TRPF was long a source of embarrassment to many Marxists, who considered the golden years of post-war capitalist prosperity to have disproved the theory in practice (while the Japanese economist Nobuo Okishio had ostensibly done so in theory). Rather than tendentially expelling labor from the point of production, post-war capitalism had initially seemed capable of boundlessly absorbing it, while global profit rates hit record highs. Starting with the crisis of accumulation of the 1970s, however, interest in the theory began to revive, with new attempts at its development and elucidation by figures such as Anwar Shaikh and Ernest Mandel.

\textsuperscript{13} “With productivity increases it takes less labour-time to produce the same commodity, and the individual capital thus gains an advantage over other capitals, but in time these same productivity gains become generalized, wiping out the initial gain, and leading to a lower value of the commodity, since its production now requires less socially necessary labour-time. (Endnotes 2, 14)
What Endnotes added to this debate—in addition to the updated perspective of the post-2008 period—was a shift in emphasis from the TRPF to another, related theory. Drawing on a different set of passages in Marx, in particular Chapter 25 of Volume I of *Capital*, they argue that the generalization of labor-saving technologies within and across lines of production causes a tendential decline in the demand for labor which, if left unchecked by other tendencies, would tend to produce an ever-increasing “consolidated surplus population, absolutely redundant to the needs of capital” (*Endnotes* 2, 30). The tendential growth of such a relative surplus population had even been termed by Marx, they noted, “the absolute general law of capital accumulation.”

On one level, this “absolute general law” is no more than the obverse of the TRPF—the same dynamic viewed through the lens of labor, that is, rather than that of capital. And like the TRPF, it had been viewed with derision by many mid-twentieth-century theorists, who considered the post-war increase in both the size and living standards of the working classes to have definitively refuted this so-called “immiseration thesis.” Rather than a tendential descent into poverty and immiseration, the development of post-war capitalism appeared to have engendered an increasing standard of living for an increasing portion of the population, generating a very different set of fears about the pacification and bourgeoisification of the working class.

In reviving Marx’s writings on surplus populations, Endnotes proposes to historicize the post-war boom as the exception that proved the rule. In Marx’s own time,
they note, “the rising industries of the early second Industrial Revolution—such as chemicals, railways, telegraph etc.—were not able to compensate for declining employment in the industries of the first Industrial Revolution” (34). Marx’s predictions of tendential unemployment would thus have proven correct, they argue, were it not for the emergence of new industries that were both labor and capital absorbent from the 1890s onwards. At the base of these new industries lay the transformation of erstwhile mass consumer services into individual consumer goods (for instance, the replacement of mass transit by personal automobiles) which, with the aid of heavy state subsidies, proved capable of creating an expanding market for both capital and labor. Starting from the 1960s, however, the automation and computerization of these same industries began to throw off labor, and this time new lines like microelectronics were unable to absorb the slack. From this point onwards, Endnotes argue, the secular trend towards increasing immiseration that Marx had first identified resumed its relentless course, as the “double moulinet” of the reproduction of the capital-labor relation began to break down, generating idle (ex-)workers who could not find productive employment opportunities, alongside idle capital that could not find possibilities for productive investment—surplus capital and surplus populations.

Whether this tendential process could again be forestalled by the kinds of counter-tendencies that had reversed its course for the better part of half a century is a possibility that Endnotes leaves unexplored. (There is here both a parallel to and
contrast with the work of Ernest Mandel, who likewise identified a tendency intrinsic to
the capitalist mode of production towards faltering profits and employment, and
likewise situated its reemergence in the early 1970s, but unlike Endnotes left open the
possibility that this trend could be reversed.)\footnote{This is no great consolation, since one of the principle mechanisms Mandel identified as being capable of reversing the TRPF was world war. It is notable that the latter is entirely missing from Endnotes’ account, which describes an expanding capital-labor relation from the 1890s through the 1960s with nary a word on what is, to date, its greatest crisis, that of the 1930s. (Another difference is that Mandel associates the restoration of profit rates in the 1890s with the intensification of imperialism, rather than state subsidies and the expansion of consumer goods). Ignoring Mandel, Endnotes lean heavily on the work of Robert Brenner, especially the foreword to the Spanish-language translation of *Economics of Global Turbulence*, “What is Good for Goldman Sachs is good for America.” While Brenner provides a phenomenal empirical account of the crisis of capitalist profitability since the 1970s, however, he departs from Marxist value-theory in rejecting the TRPF, making him a curious bedfellow for Endnotes here. On the ways Mandel both resonates with and challenges the tenets of communization theory, see Alberto Toscano, “Limits to Periodization,” in *Viewpoint Magazine*.}
The important thing, for our purposes, is that Endnotes locate the possibility of an affirmative workers’ politics within this period—in their telling, a historical aberration—of both rising employment and increasing profitability, one which they argue has now conclusively come to a close.

From this perspective, a politics that began from and affirmed the position of the productive laborer was less an outright error than a residual vestige of an earlier era of development, understandable within its historical context but reflective of a moment that has now definitely passed.

Like the Black Panthers, then, who they inexplicably fail to reference, Endnotes believed that the development of capitalism’s moving contradiction had put paid to the
erstwhile hegemony of the industrial wage worker. As they write in language eerily reminiscent of *Elysium*:

As production occupies a diminishing proportion of the proletarian population—a proportion which is itself rendered increasingly precarious as it potentially competes on the labour market with a growing mass of surplus workers—and as this disintegration of the reproductive circuits of capital and proletariat gathers pace, the horizon of the overcoming of this relation perhaps appears apocalyptic: capital gradually deserts a world in crisis, bequeathing it to its superfluous offspring (*Endnotes* 2, 19).

But if *Endnotes* set out to explore the possibility of a communist politics in a world deserted by capital, as in *Elysium* the conceptual thinness of their (non-)solution to this conundrum disappoints in comparison to the rigor and severity of their diagnosis. For while they insist that, even or especially in the context of a break down in the reproduction of the capital-labor relationship, “the proletariat cannot but struggle,” their account leaves no real openings for new forms of struggle, even as it seeks to definitely foreclose the old ones. (19) Indeed, in their less bleak moments (one would be hard pressed to call them ‘optimistic’) *Endnotes* merely repeat the dubious dialectical reversal through which total immiseration converts, via a flick of the wand, to unbridled plenitude. In their bleaker moments, meanwhile, they deny even this latter possibility:

This doesn’t mean, however, that the surplus population is going to become a new revolutionary subject. On the contrary, the growth of surplus populations undermines the consistency of the revolutionary subject, as such. It is no longer possible to see capital as a mode of production with a future, integrating more and more people into it through “development,” i.e. industrialization. Instead, the industrial working
class is shrinking, almost everywhere. The workers’ movement, which previously organized itself around the hegemonic figure of the semi-skilled worker, can no longer provide consistency to the class. Nor can any other subject present itself as the bearer of an affirmable future (Endnotes 3, 4).

In an ironic inversion of the stirring lines of the Manifesto, the continued progress of the productive forces does not lead, in this telling, to the “ever expanding union of the workers,” but to its opposite: as capital expels labor from the point of production, the erstwhile unity of the semi-skilled worker is replaced by the atomization and vacillation of the fragmented surplus population. And yet the canny reader will detect a conceptual slippage here. For the foundational gesture of communization theory, let us recall, had been to critique “the hegemonic figure of the semi-skilled worker” as, in a sense, a false hegemony. Indeed, the error of all hitherto-existing communist, socialist and labor parties had ostensibly been that they affirmed the identity of the waged industrial proletariat, when the point all along had been to abolish it. Yet now, at the very moment when the identity of the industrial worker is—Endnotes argues—in the process of being abolished, it is suddenly retrofitted as the very revolutionary subject whose tendential disappearance signals the vanishing of political possibility!

So is the “collective worker” a false chimera, or the one true revolutionary subject? Curiously, the answer that Endnotes seems to provide to this question is “both.”
Even as they dismiss what they call the “metaphysics of the collective subject” as an illusion, that is, it is one that they themselves cannot help but (half-)believe in. On the one hand, Endnotes rightly reject the notion that political identification can be directly discerned from one’s material position or “objective interests,” instead pointing to the construction of a collective subject as a political project. As they write:

At the heart of the workerist vision lay a mythic figure: the collective worker—the class in-and-for-itself, the class as unified and knowing its unity, born within the space of the factory. The collective worker was presupposed in workers’ organising and posited through that organizing effort. But, to a large extent, the collective worker did not exist outside of the movement’s attempts to construct it (Endnotes 4, 98, emphasis in original).

This recognition of the creative construction of the identity of the collective worker, of the gap between “objective” class position and “subjective” class identity, would seem to open the door for a theory of the political, or of “representation” in the broadest sense of the term—as a form of mediation that actively constitutes collective identities. Endnotes continually verges on such a hypothesis, however, only to immediately veer away from it. The trouble is that they have inherited two seemingly contradictory, if not self-cancelling presuppositions from their theoretical predecessors. From Théorie communiste and related communizing currents, they gain a deep suspicion of any notion of unmediated organicity; from the broader left communist tradition out of which communization theory emerges, however, they also inherit a militant rejection of parties and union leadership—which is to say, a deep suspicion of the mediations of the political. The result is a curious double bind: political identities can
neither be automatically produced nor can they be politically mediated. Endnotes themselves are quite explicit about this double disavowal:

Indeed, the real unity of the class lies neither in some organic unity given by the development of the forces of production, nor the mediated unity achieved by the unions and parties. Rather, that unity has and always will be forged in self-organised struggle, when workers overcome their atomization by creatively constructing a new basis for collective activity. In the previous issue of *Endnotes*, we tried to find a way to describe that unity without appeal to a pre-existing metaphysical entity, the collective worker. We showed how a historically specific form of struggle emerges out of the historical specificity of class relations in capitalist society (determined by the unity-in-separation of the exploited) (*Endnotes* 4, 165).

But this notion of the unmediated self-activity of the workers’ movement, however true to Endnotes’ council communist antecedents, cannot actually transcend the duality it sets out to overcome. In place of “organic unity” Endnotes here propose something like organic *autopoiesis*, a “form of struggle” that emerges (automatically?) out of “the historical specificity of class relations.” With no ability to account for this emergence as anything other than the logical corollary of a specific configuration of productive forces, however, Endnotes’ notion of unmediated self-organization merely appears as a hedged and cagey version of the vulgar determinism they ostensibly reject, “organic unity” with an additional step attached: *development of the forces of production* » *self-activity* » *collective subject*. If the insertion of this middle term is not to be a mediation, then it will simply collapse back into a deterministic correlation between productive forces and revolutionary subjectivity.
This, ultimately, is precisely what occurs in Endnotes’ account, and why they finally fall prey to the very “metaphysics of the collective worker” that they had attempted to banish. With no ability to account for the emergence of a political subject other than through their periodization of the development of the productive forces, the transformations they so compellingly document in the latter come to stand in as an account of the former’s inevitable decline. As they write:

What has changed in this period is that the diverse fractions of the working class no longer shape themselves into a workers’ movement. [Note the unmediated reflexivity of that “shape themselves.”] There are a number of reasons for this transformation, all of which have followed from the “restructuring” of the class relation in the 1970s. As the profit rate declined after 1973, a surplus of workers and capital swelled into existence. […] Everywhere, the working class is less homogenous—it is stratified across high- and low-income occupations; its work is more precarious; and it switches jobs more frequently. […] For these reasons, we cannot follow the autonomists in supposing that an “objective” recomposition of the class will find its correlate in a new “subjective” affirmation of class identity (159).

Here we see, finally, how the stern and pessimistic prognostications of the Endnotes collective converge on the seemingly antithetical optimism of Hardt and Negri. For the shared presumption of these otherwise very different theoretical paradigms is a deep technological determinism, one which seeks to detect a direct correlation between the development of the productive forces and the production of a revolutionary subject (or, in Hardt and Negri’s case, the reverse). Thus where Endnotes rightly note the fragmentation and tendential evacuation of waged work, they can see in the latter only the equally tendential disappearance of a collective political subject whose cohesion had been keyed to that of the factory. Hardt and Negri, meanwhile, preserve
revolutionary subjectivity only by utterly distorting the objective dynamics of capitalist
development, falling into a flattened conception of boundless productivity (and
profitability) that loses the analytic specificity of Marxian value theory.

What the work of both Endnotes and Hardt and Negri show, then, is the perils of
seeking to preserve a direct correspondence between labor productivity and
revolutionary subjectivity, or let us say between the “objective” and “subjective”
moments of the Marxist tradition. Yet both moments, taken separately, retain their
utility. *Pace* Hardt and Negri, Marx’s conception of surplus value remains highly useful
for its predictive abilities—predictive not in terms of the automatic emergence of a
revolutionary subject, but of the concrete conditions in which the contingent
construction of the latter must be attempted. The reflections on revolutionary tactics and
strategy emerging out of the Marxist tradition, meanwhile, remain essential to the
accomplishment of this political task.

Yet the analysis of both Endnotes and *Empire* is curiously devoid of tactics and
strategy, of many reflections or suggestions as to “what is to be done.” This is true even
of those passages in *Assembly*, the most recent volume of Hardt and Negri’s collective
*oeuvre*, that explicitly set out to address the strategic vacuum others have identified in
their earlier efforts.\(^{15}\) For the section titled “Strategy and Tactics” merely repeats a

\(^{15}\) See for instance Bencivenni, 32: “Those who expect to find in Multitude a concrete answer to “what is to
be done” will be disappointed. Even though the volume offers some examples of new strategies and forms
of resistance as evidence of the multitude’s growth, Hardt and Negri absolve themselves from concrete
maneuver familiar from their first three volumes: revolutionary strategy will emerge, seemingly ex nihilo, out of the productive processes and practices of the multitude, though it is now conceded that there is a limited tactical role for leadership. Endnotes offers an equally resolute anti-strategism, characteristically cast in more mournful tones. “The impossibility of solving the coordination problem,” they write, “must be theorized within struggle.[…] In the meantime, what we seek is not premature answers or forced resolutions, but rather a therapy against despair” (Endnotes 3, 248).

What Endnotes here call the “coordination problem” is the properly political question of how to cohere a collective subject whose revolutionary unity cannot be presupposed. Yet their and Hardt and Negri’s shared hostility to any form of representation, mediation or political articulation leaves them inherently incapable of conceiving of any answer to this question, which must instead receive its resolution through the unmediated self-activity of the base. The economism to which they both fall prey is a natural outgrowth of this rejection of mediation, producing what one might term a militantly anti-political Marxism. If this leaves the status and purpose of their own theories somewhat in doubt (why pen a political treatise if political strategy must emerge from an imminent disruptive force?) it also leaves the most pressing political suggestions about how to carry on a global revolution. As they warn in their introduction, they did not write this book to propose a concrete political program or solution.
questions unanswered, providing no real guideposts or frameworks for socialist strategy.

The thinking on the lumpenproletariat emerging out of the Black Radical Tradition, I have tried to suggest, can help overcome both elements of this false impasse. On the one hand, the explicit recognition of radically non-productive political subjects in Fanon, Boggs and the Black Panthers can counteract both the political pessimism of Endnotes as well as the impulse in Hardt and Negri to transform everyone into a productive worker in order to salvage radical subjectivity. By severing the link between value production and revolutionary potentiality, we can confront transformations in the capitalist world economy more unflinchingly, able to witness the tendential expulsion of labor from the factory without seeing in the latter only the collapse of the revolutionary horizon. On the other hand, the Black Radical recognition of the contingency of political identity formation points towards the need for precisely those forms of mediation and political articulation that both communization theory and autonomism reject. The point, then, would not be to replace one revolutionary subject with another—the industrial proletariat with the lumpenproletariat, conceived as a singular, immutable force automatically produced by a set of material and social relations—but rather to conceive of the conditions of possibility for the contingent construction of such a subject as a properly political project.
In fleeting moments, the writers of *Endnotes* and *Empire* recognize this. “The multitude needs a political project to bring it into being,” Hardt and Negri admit at one point, contravening their own claims of revolutionary immanence (212). Endnotes, too, as we have seen, continually verge on a theory of the contingent articulation of political subjects only as quickly to turn away from it. In one of the more interesting of these fleeting moments, they discuss the contingency of workers’ “interests,” which as they rightly note cannot be immediately read off one’s determinate relationship to a material base, but instead involve an element of identity construction. The passage is intriguing enough to quote in full:

> Individual workers had to recognize the union as acting in their interests, in a broad sense, even when their own, particular interests were not being served by the union’s bargaining strategies. This is a feature of all routinised, demand-based struggle: insofar as a collective wants to make demands, and in that sense, to engage in a sort of bargaining, the members of that collective must either share an immediate interest, or else they must be capable of forming an identity to plug gaps among their overlapping interests (paradoxically introducing a non-utilitarian element into a demands-based struggle). It is because workers’ organisations had to partly redefine interests in order to meet them that they were forced to rely on “non-utilitarian forms of collective action,” based on “collective identities.” Indeed, the capacity for demand-making in a given struggle may be grasped as structurally linked with its capacity to draw upon an existing—or forge a new—collective identity; demand-making and composition are two sides of the same coin (*Endnotes* 4, 122).

In this recognition of the instability and malleability of “interests,” Endnotes approach one of the two key lessons of the lumpenproletariat, that of the contingent construction of popular political identities. In the final section of this chapter, we will consider the work of the contemporary post-Marxists who have done the most to advance the theoretical analysis of such identity construction, notably focusing on the
structuring role of the demand. Beginning with their joint work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have explored the construction of popular political identities for the better part of three decades, developing a theoretical framework with great relevance to the possibility of a Lumpen politics. But where Hardt and Negri over-emphasize the relation of such a subject to transformations in the material base, Laclau and Mouffe ultimately bend the stick too far in the opposite direction—producing what one might term a “superstructuralism” that risks ignoring materiality entirely. Here, too, I argue, the thinking on the lumpenproletariat emerging out of Fanon, Boggs and the Black Panthers can serve as a vital corrective. For if the Lumpen names the irreducible indeterminacy of the political, it also describes a quite determinate material position of externality to the wage-labor relation, one which increasingly defines the conditions of possibility for any socialist strategy today.

4.3 Towards A Lumpen Populism

In a thoughtful exegesis of Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, Argentine political theorist Ernesto Laclau lays out what he considers the key distinction between his own theoretical position and Agamben’s formulation of “bare life.” For Agamben, the originary political relationship is that of the ban, which constitutes the political community through the expulsion of a subject created by the law as external to it. This indeterminate zone of inclusion/exclusion is for Agamben characteristic of “bare life,” a
concept which should be understood to denote, not mere biological existence or some Hobbesian state of nature, but rather a state of exception itself produced by sovereign power. As Agamben puts it: “The life of the bandit, like that of the sacred man, is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and the city. It is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, physis and nomos, exclusion and inclusion” (105).

Starting from this quotation, Laclau begins to tease out his points of disagreement with Agamben. Exclusion from the law of the city, he points out, does not automatically entail the position of bare life associated with the *homo sacer*, whose unique conditions Agamben tends to hypostasize and extend to other, quite different social (or asocial) subjects. For it is not the case that “the bandit,” for instance, is a naked individuality, isolated and defenseless, and subject only to the violence and predation of those inside the city. To the contrary: bandits prey upon the urban citizenry, possess their own forms of community, and are governed by the laws and customs of the latter—which, while radically different from those of the city, nevertheless possess their own internal logic. What is at stake, then, is not mere exclusion or abjection but instead the confrontation of two radically different logics—an irreducible antagonism that cannot be subsumed beneath any singular meta-principle of law or sovereignty.

To illustrate the uneasy co-existence of such mutually exclusive logics, Laclau then turns to a figure which should by now be familiar. Invoking Fanon, he cites the
latter’s description of the colonial lumpenproletariat as illustrative of this principle of radical antagonism. (“The Lumpenproletariat, once it is constituted, brings all its forces to endanger the ‘security’ of the town, and is the sign of the irrevocable decay, the gangrene ever present at the heart of colonial domination.”) Such antagonism is, for Laclau, the very stuff and essence of the political, making the lumpenproletariat something like the emblem, here, of the theory of hegemony that he and the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe have collectively and separately elaborated for the better part of the past three decades.

That theory received its first formulation in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe’s 1985 magnum opus that began to outline their understanding of the discursive articulation of political subjects. Rejecting many of the central shibboleth’s of the socialist left—above all that of the working class’s innate radicality—the work engendered enormous controversy, garnering both high praise and fierce criticism. In the first of the book’s four sections, its authors explored some of the lacunae within the classical Marxist conception of the revolutionary role of the proletariat that this dissertation has also addressed. Far from leading to the increasing homogenization and radicalization of social strata, the progress of capitalist development seemed to produce

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16 Quoted in Laclau, p. 234. Laclau relies on the old Constance Farrington translation, where I have used the more recent translation of Richard Philcox. The standard English-language text for more than three decades, Farrington’s translation is unfortunately riddled with errors and inconsistencies. For a comparison of the two translations, see Gibson 2007.
a proliferation of heterogenous social subjects whose unification did not emerge automatically out of their relation to the relations of production, producing a crisis for the Marxism of the Second International.\textsuperscript{17}

Laclau and Mouffe trace the origins of a theory of hegemony to this time period, as it became clear that the unification of the working class would require a political supplement. In Western Europe, they suggest, this first took the form of theories of the structuring role of the party, which would step in to grant the class a coherency that the unmediated working of the base did not. In Tsarist Russia, too, the concept of the party emerged as of central importance. But here the structuring gap it had to cover was even greater, for it was not just the proletariat which had neglected to play its world-historical part but also the bourgeoisie, insofar as the latter had failed to carry out the bourgeois-democratic revolution assigned to it by a certain understanding of historical stagism. In the thinkers of Russian Social Democracy and, later, in Lenin and Trotsky, the concept of hegemony emerged to fill this gap, as the party’s political leadership assumed the goal, not only of cohering the proletariat, but of consolidating an alliance of multiple classes, defined by different antagonisms, around the completion of the bourgeoisie’s neglected historical task.

\textsuperscript{17} Where Laclau and Mouffe begin their analysis with the Marxism of the Second International, however, I have tried to suggest that this “crisis” has its origins in tensions in Marx himself.
Mouffe and Laclau then turn to the work of Antonio Gramsci, whose expansion of the concept of hegemony becomes the foundation for the elaboration of their own theory. Where Lenin had confined his writings on a hegemonic “class alliance” to the underdeveloped social conditions of largely agrarian and feudal Russia, Gramsci extended the concept to the over-developed West. Here, of course, it began to look quite different: in Russia the challenge was a weak and ineffective bourgeoisie; in Western Europe, one which had successfully solidified its dominance over other social classes within the context of an increasingly stabilized capitalism. For Gramsci, however, the commonality was the necessity for compromises and alliances between multiple classes and forces in order to ensure continued rule.

Gramsci stressed the importance of culture and civil society to this process, pointing to the role of ideas, institutions and social relations in securing the hegemony of the dominant class and the consent of the dominated. In Laclau and Mouffe’s reading, the great merit of this formulation was to have broken with economic and class reductionism, depicting hegemony as a product of ideology, understood as “an organic and relational whole, embodied in institutions and apparatuses, which welds together a historic bloc around a number of basic articulatory principles” (57). Unfortunately, they argue, Gramsci’s formulation remained wedded to a vestigial class reductionism, insofar his conception of hegemony was ultimately underwritten by a concept of social classes defined by their relation to the economic base.
In the second half of the book, Mouffe and Laclau attempt to free the concept of hegemony from what they consider this essentialist remnant. The manner in which they do so is complex (and, arguably, needlessly abstruse), admixing elements of Gramsci with Althusserian structuralism, Husserlian phenomenology, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Derridean deconstruction and Saussurean linguistics. While it is impossible to provide a full account here of this diverse and somewhat eclectic assemblage, it is this last element which provides the real foundation for their discursive rewriting of Gramsci’s theory. In their telling, “the concept of hegemony supposes a theoretical field dominated by the category of articulation,” understood as a discursive practice consisting of “the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning” (79, 98). The social field, here, is conceived of as entirely constructed through discourse—which, following Saussure, they view as system of differences without positive terms. Because this system is only ever partially stabilized, it is open to competing articulations. Within this framework, hegemony emerges as the attempt to discursively articulate social identities through an articulatory force that is itself discursive in character.

As my attempt at a summary of this formulation shows, there is a perpetual risk, in the work Laclau and Mouffe, of ascending into ethereal abstraction, if not outright tautology. At its best, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy poses a provocative challenge: how can we conceive of cohering political subjects whose individual and collective identification cannot be supposed to precede this very act of articulation? At its weakest,
however, the work largely fails to answer its own question, receding into an austere formalism that seems intended, less to tackle problems of socialist strategy, then to avoid accusations of that gravest of post-structural sins, essentialism. The result, formally rigorous, can come to seem like little more than a series of elaborate hedges. (“The hegemonic subject, as the subject of any articulatory practice, must be partially exterior to what it articulates—otherwise, there would not be any articulation at all. On the other hand, however, such exteriority cannot be conceived as that existing between two ontological levels. Consequently, it would seem that the solution is to reintroduce our distinction between discourse and general field of discursivity. No doubt this is so, but…”) (121). The closest the work comes to a programmatic politics, meanwhile, is in the call for a “radical and plural democracy” advanced in the book’s final section—a proposal which seems curiously at odds with the preceding analysis. Pluralism, the “struggle for a maximum autonomisation of spheres,” is here advanced as the ultimate emancipatory aim of what the authors do not hesitate to call “a radically libertarian conception of politics” (167). Yet this would seem to suggest that the goal is the progressive dis-articulation of social subjects and social struggles, rather undercutting the book’s central message. If struggles and subjects are to be left to their own, autonomous devices, what need is there to speak of any hegemony?

These weaknesses of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy are substantially rectified in the authors’ subsequent refinement of their theoretical paradigm, however, and
particularly in the thinking on populism which receives its fullest elaboration in Laclau’s 2005 *On Populist Reason* and the even more recent writings of Chantal Mouffe. In *On Populist Reason*, Laclau fleshes out his Saussurean structuralist model much more convincingly that in the earlier work, appending a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework in order to explain hegemony as the mutual contamination of universal and particular. Succinctly, his argument runs as follows. The coherence of a social totality relies on a discursive outside in order to constitute itself as a social whole. (Laclau cites Freud here; one might as equally think of René Girard’s work on the “scapegoat mechanism.”) By excluding a single element from within a system of differences, all other differences are transformed into a chain of equivalences *vis à vis* the excluded element. Since the latter is itself, however, merely another particular difference, its assumption of that universal otherness which constitutes the social bond is itself inevitably incomplete, producing what Laclau terms a “failed totality” (69-71).

The chain of equivalences produced by such a partial externalization remains “weak”, however, unless and until one of the links assumes the role of something like

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18 In an interesting article, Mark Anthony Wenman argues we should not collapse “Laclau and Mouffe” into a single entity, suggesting that there are in fact substantial differences between their two positions. He attributes to Laclau a residual Marxist emphasis on the category of totality, in contrast to Mouffe’s de-centered emphasis on radical democratic pluralism, convincingly arguing that the third chapter of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* reflects Laclau’s position, and the fourth and final chapter, that of Mouffe. Insofar as it is this last chapter that I find particularly dissatisfying, that would seem to put me firmly in the camp of Laclau over that of Mouffe, at least were we to accept Wenman’s periodization. Notably, however, Mouffe’s most recent work on populism has in fact re-converged with that of Laclau—suggesting that the divorce of their ideas, if there was one, was only temporary. (See Wenman 2003 and Mouffe 2018)
the general equivalent. Because the basic unit of politics is for Laclau the demand, this
mediating element can only be one particular demand which, partially emptying itself of
content, knits together a series of heterogenous and incommensurable demands by itself
becoming the (empty) signifier of their universality. (Laclau makes a passing nod, here,
to Marx’s description in the first section of Volume 1 of Capital of the transition from the
general form of value to the money form.) Hegemony, then, would involve the
construction of a popular identity through two related moments of articulation: first,
through the extrusion of a single element that transforms a series of differences into a
chain of equivalences; and second, through the emptying-out of the content of one
element in this equivalential chain, which can then stand in for and hegemonize all the
others.

Notably, it is not the case, for Laclau, that the discursive construction of even
such a partial or failed totality will invariably prove successful. A stable social formation
may attempt to reject such equivalential logic entirely, preferring to address social needs
solely through the logic of differences. Laclau’s paradigmatic examples here are the
Keynesian welfare state and the neoliberalism of Reagan and Thatcher, both of which he
reads, despite their very different (post-)political content, as attempting to overcome
social antagonism by addressing every demand separately, thus rendering difference
itself the only legitimate equivalent uniting the broader society. “Since it would be
unable to differentiate itself from anything else,” he writes, such a society “could not totalize itself, could not create a ‘people’” (78).

We can now begin to trace the contours of Laclau’s compelling redefinition of populism, which for him is virtually synonymous with the political. Where “institutionalist” forms of totalization attempt to suture the social whole by extending difference across the entire social field, “populist” totalizations instead create a line of division within the latter, cohering a people around an antagonist frontier. As Laclau himself recognizes, the distinction here is rather like that drawn by Rancière between the police and politics, where the first term designates the attempt to fix the social order through a static “distribution of the sensible” and the second, the disruption of the latter through the unrecognized demand of a “part with no part.” With one key difference however: where for Rancière any disruption of the logic of the police is inherently emancipatory, in Laclau’s formulation populism possesses neither an inherently emancipatory nor an inherently reactionary function. Precisely because the terms around which the antagonistic frontier will be constructed are entirely contingent, “the people” can be articulated as a progressive or a reactionary one. Politics, we might say, is precisely the battle over the terms of this antagonistic frontier, which is to say a battle over the constitution of the people.

19 See Rancière 2010, 27-44

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We now have almost all of the terms that we need to revisit Laclau’s fascination with the Lumpen, which returns in the central pages of *On Populist Reason*. For if the frontier dividing antagonistic camps is itself contingent, then this implies the persistence of a remainder not fully circumscribed by the antagonist field. In fact, then, there would be two different outsides: on a first level, there is the excluded element whose externalization is the precondition for the coherence of the social whole, which is to say for the antagonistic construction of a people wholly defined through this antagonism. But there would have to be an “outside” to this entire discursive terrain as well, something not fully captured by either the positive or negative terms of this antagonism. Otherwise the result would be, not a failed totality, but a full one, in which the antagonistic articulation wholly coincided with its referent—leading either to the static assertion of a binary opposition, or to the Hegelian-Marxist maneuver in which one term finally negates, sublates and supersedes the other, both of which Laclau rejects.

The un-representable remainder which cannot be fully stabilized within the terms of any antagonism becomes then the very condition for the volatility and malleability of the latter, its openness to reformulation and contestation—which is to say, the precondition for the political as such. (The latter being, for Laclau, virtually synonymous with the creative reconstruction of a “people.”) It is for this reason that Laclau can consider the lumpenproletariat, here interpreted as the undialectical
remainder of an object that does not pass over into its concept, as the very stuff and essence of the political. As he writes:

Any kind of underdog, even in the extreme and purely hypothetical case in which it is exclusively a class defined by its location within the relations of production, has to have something of the nature of the *lumpenproletariat* if it is going to be an antagonistic subject. […] It is as the essential undecidability between ‘empty’ and ‘floating’—which we can now reformulate as the undecidability between the homogenous and the heterogeneous or, in our example, between the proletariat and the *lumpenproletariat*—that the political game is going to take place. This game, which Gramsci called ‘war of position,’ is, strictly speaking, a logic of displacement of political frontiers, in the sense I have defined (152-153).

We are now in a position to assess the relevance of Laclau and Mouffe’s most developed theorization to our own understanding of a Lumpen politics, with which there are a number of obvious parallels. (While I have focused in the last pages on Laclau’s theory of populism, Mouffe’s most recent writing, especially in her 2018 *For a Left Populism*, largely converges with the conception outlined above.) In contrast to more mechanistic and deterministic understandings of the political, their fully developed paradigm makes several laudable theoretical advances. First, it breaks with any notion of identities or interests as static or given, instead pointing to the consolidation of political subjects (whether individual or collective) as the product of political articulation. Second, in contrast to the anti-representationalism of, for instance, Hardt and Negri, Laclau and Mouffe acknowledge and embrace the role of mediation and representation, including that of leaders and parties, without however falling into the opposite error of vanguardism. (Instead, the constitutive gap between representative
and represented emerges as, precisely, the space of politics.) Third, where more mechanistic Marxisms (and post-Marxisms) view social homogenization as a precondition for the construction of collective political subjects, their formulation has the tremendous merit of conceiving heterogeneity as the very condition of possibility for the successful articulation of a “people.” Finally, the terms and terrain for the production of the latter are opened as a site of contestation. Rather than the mere reflection of an underlying social antagonism, that is, politics appears here as a meta-antagonistic struggle over the determination of where and how the lines of such antagonisms are drawn.

Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical framework, which gradually coalesced over the course of the past three decades, has also proven particularly well-suited to explain certain contours of its own time period. This is no doubt true of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, which both registered and reflected on the crisis of the socialist project as the traditional terms of the latter grew increasingly incapable of hegemonizing the proliferating sites and sources of social antagonism. But it is even more true of Mouffe and Laclau’s subsequent writing, which has shown itself eerily prescient of the (re-)emergence of a volatile, malleable and contested populist politics whose amorphous nature has been difficult for other theorists to pin down. The paradigmatic example of the old communist militant who now votes for the Front National (or in the US, of the Trump-voting union household) is but one sign of this political volatility, as well as of
the return of an antagonistic politics that the post-political 1990s had attempted to
declare null and void. Small wonder, then, that Laclau and Mouffe have emerged as
intellectual figureheads for the new Left populist movements attempting to hegemonize
social struggle under these changing conditions—most notably the Spanish political
party Podemos, which credits their theoretical framework as its inspiration and has
recently published a book-length dialogue with Chantal Mouffe (Errojón and Mouffe
2016).

At the same time, a closer examination of this very era also begins to indicate
the limitations of Laclau and Mouffe’s analysis. On a purely formal level, their depiction
of “institutionalist” totalizations as attempting to eliminate the antagonistic frontier by
reducing all social positions to an endless chain of differences without common
equivalent is compelling. Equally compelling is their description of the resurgence of
populisms Left and Right as a revenge of the political, which begins to connect
unfulfilled demands and cathect them onto an equivalential link defined through
opposition to an excluded element, with the precise terms of this antagonism being fluid
and subject to contestation. All this is good as far as it goes.

By attempting to capture such social antagonisms entirely within the terms of a
Lacanian-inflected discourse theory, however, Laclau and Mouffe themselves exclude as
many elements as they capture. For their description of the passage from one
hegemonizing “discourse” to another is curiously empty of content. Institutional
totalizations break down as unfulfilled demands proliferate—but there is no account in their work of the forces or conditions that render institutions capable or incapable of fulfilling such demands. Take the collapse of the Keynesian welfare state that, in many ways, provides the backdrop to and spur for their theoretical efforts. That the latter ceased to meet the demands of a restive populace is virtually assumed by Mouffe and Laclau as a given. But what is missing, here, is any description of the concrete conditions that contributed to this failure (stagflation, unemployment, the crisis of the Bretton Woods system, the collapse of the gold standard) still less an analysis of what could have been done differently. By collapsing the distinction between discursive and non-discursive, political and economic, they leave no room for the existence of external constraints (“objective” or otherwise) operating on the articulation of hegemonic totalizations, and thus no causal explanation for the crisis of one articulation and the emergence of another. (In this there is in fact a parallel between Laclau and Mouffe’s “hegemonic formation” and the framework it was explicitly intended to replace, namely that of the Althusserian “mode of production,” which likewise struggled to account for the transition between social formations.)

Further, if Mouffe and Laclau struggle to account for the transition from one institutional totalization to another, there is also no real mechanism internal to their theoretical framework that would allow one to identity the differences between hegemonic formations. It is certainly intriguing to render the Keynesian welfare state
formally commensurate with the neoliberal state that superseded it, pointing towards perhaps hitherto unexamined parallels between their attempts to eliminate antagonism through the universalization of atomized difference. Yet this description cannot account for how these institutional logics in fact manage difference quite, well, differently. As in Rancière, there is a risk here of reifying governance as the (itself undifferentiated) management of difference, and likewise of fetishizing resistance qua resistance. (That is, by collapsing the distinction between “unfulfilled demands” and “emancipatory politics,” their framework virtually prohibits the possibility that an emancipatory political movement could take power. In the very moment of doing so, it would cease to be emancipatory.)

Just as Mouffe and Laclau cannot distinguish between different forms of institutional totalization, they struggle to differentiate between competing articulations of populist hegemony as well. This is all the more remarkable insofar as Laclau castigates Rancière on this precise point, arguing that the construction of a “people” around an unfulfilled demand is not inherently emancipatory, but can instead assume egalitarian or totalitarian forms (Laclau 2006, 246). While this is so, however, the formal logic of his system does not establish criteria which would allow one to distinguish which populisms are progressive, and which reactionary. The final section of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy had tried to do so in terms of a principle of “pluralism” which refused to dominate other demands and other subjects, but as we have seen this runs
contrary to Laclau and Mouffe’s entire definition of antagonism, articulation and hegemony.

The point is not to suggest that Mouffe and Laclau cannot themselves distinguish between Left and Right populisms, or between neoliberalism and social democracy. Clearly, they can and do. Despite their claims to have created a comprehensive theory of the social, however, the point is that there is nothing internal to their framework that would allow them to make this distinction, which must instead be imported from an “outside,” the very existence of which their theoretical framework ostensibly precludes. Let us imagine two antagonistic frontiers, each of which attempts to construct a people: “ethnic Germans vs. Ausländer,” say, and “Algerians vs. colonizers.” Formally, there is nothing to establish that the one antagonism is reactionary and the other progressive; indeed on a purely discursive level the two are commensurate. To make a determination of their political character, we would need to bring in an analysis of the concrete histories of Algeria and Germany, their differential positions within unequal global distributions of wealth and power, the vacillating function of nationalism in these quite different contexts as it relates to the historical and ongoing realities of racism, capitalism and colonialism, as well as a robust understanding of those last three categories—everything, in other words, that Laclau and Mouffe’s stringent conceptual formalism strictly rejects.
Is this not merely to correct Laclau and Mouffe by fitting back into their framework the “residual essentialism” they had attempted to excise from Gramsci? Not quite. The *Prison Notebooks* are unfinished and inconsistent, and my goal here is not to determine whether or not Laclau and Mouffe’s attribution of essentialism to Gramsci is correct. But if they find themselves obliged to distance their analysis from even this most boldly unorthodox of Marxist thinkers, it is because there are elements of the Marxist model that, as our preceding analysis has shown, carry with them persistent problems. In attempting to avoid these latter, there is no question that Laclau and Mouffe have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. What we would need, however, is a method to rescue the baby (succinctly, an analysis of the historical and ongoing conditions of capital accumulation as real forces operating on the articulation of political projects and political subjects) without letting all the bathwater back in (that is, the notion of interests and identities as entirely objectively determined, the ontological privileging of the industrial proletariat, etc.).

This, then, is the second “cut” that the concept of the lumpenproletariat can make into contemporary debates. For if the Lumpen signals the volatility and malleability of political identities, as Laclau rightly notes, it also names a quite determinate non-relation to the relations of production, one missing from his and Mouffe’s account. To complete their partial analysis of a lumpenproletarian populism, we would thus have to bring back in that “outside” of discourse theory that, as we have
seen, their framework explicitly banishes but implicitly continues to rely upon. Indeed, we might suggest that it is capitalism itself which operates within their theoretical paradigm as the unrepresentable remainder undergirding their analysis of political antagonism.

This is not, however, to return us to a vulgar base-superstructure model, the fear of which so clearly haunts Mouffe and Laclau’s overly insistent anti-essentialism. The point would not then be to replace the proletariat with the Lumpen as a homogenous, cohesive and coherent revolutionary subject intrinsically produced by the development of the forces and relations of production, repeating the terms of an old mechanistic wager while merely swapping out one identical subject-object for another. The lumpenproletariat, definitionally, is radically heterogenous, politically volatile and internally fractured; if this forbids any faith in the innately revolutionary role of this (or any) population, it reopens the urgency of the political as a realm of contestation and political subject formation, very much along the lines explored by Laclau and Mouffe, while granting to their theory a more robust material foundation.

Let us sum up our argument so far. This chapter has explored the attempts of several contemporary Marxist and post-Marxist theories to make sense of the changing contours of the political present, arguing that each has grasped, at best, one half of a necessarily double dynamic. Where the authors of *Endnotes* and *Empire* rightly grasp that a fundamental shift has occurred in the production of surplus-value, they remain
attached to a productivist framework that keys labor productivity to revolutionary subjectivity. As a result, their only options are either to distort the labor theory of value in order to preserve the notion of a productive subject (*Empire*), or else to view the disappearance of the latter as synonymous with the collapse of revolutionary possibility (*Endnotes*). Laclau and Mouffe, who rightly divorce the possibility of radical political subjectivity from any innate correspondence with labor productivity, are able to confront these transformations more unflinchingly. Ultimately, however, they bend the stick too far in the opposite direction, creating a political theory that, despite its many merits, is divorced from the material and social realities of the capitalist mode of production entirely.

What we would need, then, is a theoretical framework capable of grasping both the contingency of political identity formation and the complex and mediated relation of the latter to the changing contours of capital accumulation—and especially to the tendential expulsion of labor from the factory which our preceding analysis has suggested is a defining feature of the contemporary economic landscape. My argument has been that the radical reworking of the concept of the lumpenproletariat emerging out of the Black Radical tradition is uniquely suited to make this intervention. In the thinking of Fanon, Boggs and the Black Panthers, the Lumpen comes to name the possibility of a revolutionary subject whose objective position is one of radical exclusion from the sites of production. At its best, however, the Black radical reconception of the
Lumpen breaks with any notion of unmediated revolutionary subjectivity, instead pointing to the lumpenproletariat as a heterogenous, fractured field of social relations whose successful political articulation requires mediation. It is the confluence of these two factors—the determinacy of dispossession, the indeterminacy of its political expression—which, I have argued, defines the conditions of possibility of any emancipatory political project in the present.
5. Conclusion

The preceding analysis has traced the concept of the lumpenproletariat from its origins in Marx and Engels, through its reworking by Fanon, the Black Panthers and others, and onwards into contemporary debates around identity, politics, and the end(s) of work. In and through this analysis, a relatively comprehensive theory—and, as I hope to show, practice—of the lumpenproletariat has begun to emerge. In different ways, this theoretical framework draws on all the interlocutors I have engaged with over the preceding chapters, and in particular the Black Panthers, whose radical revalorization of the Lumpen stands at the center of this project. But this theory—or at least, its synthesis from divergent strands of thought—is also partially my own. In these final pages, I would like to summarize what I consider the essential elements of my argument, before turning towards their political ramifications.

The Lumpen, as I have hoped to suggest, is the name of two distinct processes. On the one hand, it names a non-relation to the forces and relations of production—that is, a relative externality or marginality to the circuits of capital accumulation, as well as a tendential process through which an increasing percentage of the global population is consigned to this position of wagelessness and dispossession. On the other, it also names a certain lability or volatility of the political, the failure of this or any subject position to automatically produce any particular political outcome. It is in the gap between these
two dimensions—the determinacy of dispossession, the indeterminacy of its political expression—that dwells the perils and the possibility of a Lumpen politics.

In terms of the first of these dimensions, we could say that the lumpenproletariat displaces the centrality of industrial waged labor in two senses—one structural, the other temporal. (Or one synchronic and the other diachronic, if we could appropriate the terminology of structuralism without, however, all of its theoretical underpinnings.) Structurally, our analysis has shown that Marx’s emphasis on the centrality of wage labor to capital accumulation requires substantial supplementation. While wage labor is both peculiar to and essential for the capitalist mode of production, its tendency is not towards universalization. Instead, we might conceive of waged work as one term in a semiotic square, of which the contrary is “unwaged work” and “unwaged non-work” the contradictory.

This more complex articulation would situate value-producing wage labor as merely one element in a broader network of social relations of production, reproduction and non-production. Within this framework, dispossession from direct control over the means of production can be seen as the shared condition of all those we might term “proletarians” in an older, more expansive sense of the term. This shared condition does not in itself produce proletarian unity, either across the various categories comprising structural “solutions” to the (lumpen)proletarian condition or, indeed, within them. For a radical politics of the lumpenproletariat, however, this more expansive concept of the
dispossessed, with all its internal fractions and differentiations, would represent the raw or source material out of which to conceive the contingent articulation of a collective political subject.

**Figure 2: Semiotic Square of Capitalist Social Relations**

The mapping of this more expansive conception of capitalist social relations onto the terms of a semiotic square is not quite neat; under the category of “unwaged work,” for instance, we would have to include two quite distinct problematics. On the one hand, the category would include the vital but invisibilized work of (re)producing labor...
power that Marxist and socialist feminists have theorized under the rubric of “reproductive labor.” Such labor, technically “valueless,” is as particular to and necessary for capital accumulation as value-producing waged work; indeed, the diremption of these two halves of a formerly unified process of social (re)production—as well as the partial externalization of costs that this separation entails—is one of the defining features of capitalist production.1

On the other hand, the rubric of “unwaged work” would also have to include the historical centrality to capital accumulation of slave labor, a category that itself confounds the most basic distinction of political economy, namely that between labor and capital.2 While this category overlaps with and complicates that of reproductive labor—as witnessed in recent compelling scholarship on reproductive slavery—the two are nevertheless conceptually distinct (see Morgan 2004 and Weinbaum 2019). In placing them together, I do not mean to suggest any obvious unity, other than that of the relative neglect that these two structuring features of capitalist production have long been accorded by Marxian value theory.


2 As Walter Johnson has recently put it in the pages of the Boston Review: “Let us begin with the most basic distinction in political economy: the distinction between capital and labor. Enslaved people were both. Their double economic aspect could not be separated and graphed on the axes of a Cartesian grid; their interests could not be balanced against one another or subordinated to one another in an effort to secure social order. They were both” (Johnson 2017).
Beneath the rubric of “waged non-work,” meanwhile, would fall a category to which Marx had granted a great deal of analytical attention, namely that of “unproductive labor” — that is, forms of remunerated employment that are not, however, productive of surplus value. For Marx, this included any wage labor employed towards non-capitalist production (for instance, public sector workers or domestic servants) as well as those aspects of capitalist employment that do not directly partake of the production process (such as sales, finance, circulation, and supervision). To these forms of labor — many of them socially necessary, if technically value-less — we would have to append those utterly unnecessary forms of labor that the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber has recently termed “bullshit jobs” (Graeber 2013 and 2018). While Graeber’s formulation is impressionistic, several studies have argued that an increasing proportion of waged employment is today unproductive in a technical sense (Mandel 1999, Moseley 1983). Careful attention should be given to this phenomenon, not in order to discern who is the “valuable” political subject — as we have shown, there is no direct relation between the production of surplus value and revolutionary subjectivity — but rather so as to grasp the shifting contours of contemporary capital accumulation that will inevitably shape and inform socialist strategy.

Under the category of “unwaged non-work,” finally, we encounter the lumpenproletariat in its pure form — an intrinsic excess, an unproductive externality
tendentially produced by capital that, theoretically at least, neither possesses nor
produces anything. In one sense, of course, this is something of a hypothetical null point;
as Aaron Benanav has pointed out, outside of exceptional circumstances (famine, war,
etc.) human beings will find some means to sustain themselves (Benanav 2017). The
means by which the lumpenproletariat will do so, however, occur on the margins of an
itself faltering process of capital accumulation, contributing neither to the production of
surplus-value nor even to the reproduction of labor-power—insofar as the surplus
population thus maintained and reproduced is itself redundant to the needs of capital
valorization. This population is “surplus,” it must be stressed, not in any absolute or
Malthusian sense, but only relative to the needs of an inhumane, irrational and
increasingly untenable system that demands the performance of waged work as the
precondition for access to social wealth even as it increasingly eliminates both the need
for and the possibility of value-producing labor.

If we follow the analysis of James Boggs, the Black Panthers, and others, then this
position of relative externality is today tendential in character. Contrary to those who
celebrate the hegemony of immaterial labor, we might then suggest that value-
producing labor is becoming “immaterial” in an entirely different sense—that is,
increasingly redundant, both to the production of social wealth, and to the lived
experience of a growing portion of the world’s inhabitants. On one level, this brings the
old dreams of utopian socialism à la Morris or Fourier closer than ever: objectively, it is
today entirely possible to imagine a world without work, or at least one where most work has become play. Subjectively, of course, that world remains farther away than ever, as the increasing automation of production leads, not to social abundance and the decline of alienated labor, but rather to the intensified polarization of wealth and poverty.

Schematically, and at a high level of abstraction, the above analysis has sketched out the contours of a more expansive understanding of the totality of capitalist social relations, wherein the lumpenproletariat names both a particular subject position and the broader tendency of the social whole. Yet in addition to this non-relation to the relations of production, we have also argued that the lumpenproletariat names the lack of any automatic or unmediated equation between economic and political, or between this abjected subject position and any particular political expression. The point, then, would not be to replace the industrial proletariat as identical subject-object with a new (unmediated) political subject, mechanistically derived from its objective position of tendential exteriority to the factory. Instead, the task of cohering a collective subject out of the fractured, multifarious and internally-divided terrain traversed by the lumpenproletarian condition emerges as a properly political project.

A persistent anti-political bias has long plagued the Marxist tradition. This is often attributed to the failures of a degraded or “vulgar” Marxism, a charge that has its origins in the various critiques leveled by Lenin, Lukács, Karl Korsch and others against
the economism of the Second International. But this hostility to political mediation can in fact be traced, as my first chapter has illustrated, to certain tensions within Marx’s own thought; and it extends, as my third chapter has demonstrated, to contemporary frameworks that would otherwise seem to have little enough in common with the Marxism of Bernstein or Kautsky, such as that of Hardt and Negri.

Curiously, this anti-political bias is frequently shared by those contemporary left tendencies that “orthodox” Marxism typically posits as its agonistic rivals, namely proponents of so-called “identity politics.” When used pejoratively, the latter term is generally invoked to castigate theoretical frameworks that draw an overly-simplified line between a given social identity and a set of politics. In fact, however, Marxists are guilty of this error as often as those that they chastise, with the argument becoming one over which identity (whether class, race, gender, or some combination of all three) is most essential to the formation of an emancipatory politics. Frequently, such arguments devolve into debates over which of these social categories is the most oppressed or exploited, thus repeating the dialectical inversion that wagers the subjective capacity for universal emancipation on an objective condition of utter immiseration. (To this some in the Marxist camp will append an untenable distinction between mere “identities” based on social oppression and a putatively non-identitarian class relation predicated on economic exploitation, thus ignoring both the historical and ongoing centrality of race
and gender to capital accumulation and the necessarily identitarian element of class subjectivation.)

From the perspective of this project, however, all of these positions can be seen to succumb to the same basic category error. For it is simply not the case that one can derive a particular political position from any “objective” identity or social relation, at least not straightforwardly. One must distinguish here between different layers or levels of analysis, or between the conditions of possibility governing a social *structure* and those of a social *subject*. Certain strands of Marxism (and, as we have seen, not only Marxism) have tried to collapse the distinction between the two, attempting to derive the latter from the imminent dynamics of the former. But a thousand layers of mediation intervene between one’s (individual or collective) position within a thick web of social relations and the construction of coherent interests and identities—and this space is, precisely, the site of representation, which is to say, of politics.

Despite the anti-political bias of much of mainstream Marxism, the Marxist tradition does provide some important resources to begin wrestling with the question of political identity formation, whether one thinks of the groundbreaking work of E. P. Thompson on the active *making* of the English working class; or (though how they would shudder to be lumped together) the thinking on the relative autonomy of the political in the work of Althusser and Poulantzas; or the rich trove of insights into the workings of hegemony that can be found scattered across the unfinished writings of
Gramsci, and that have been picked up on and developed by his various inheritors, including Laclau, Mouffe and Stuart Hall.

This dissertation has suggested that the reworking of the concept of the lumpenproletariat emerging out of the Black radical tradition, however, provides a particularly rich starting point from which to rethink the relation of class to interest, interest to identity and identity to politics. Beginning from the 18th Brumaire, we explored how Marxism has long had to grapple with the contingency of political subject formation. But where Marx attempted to control this problem by relegating it to the lumpenproletarian margins, it is in Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction* that the question of the political articulation of social subjects is first explored in full. In his masterful analysis of the shifting fault lines of the post-war period, Du Bois explores the possibility that social subjects may come to construe their identities, interests and belonging along divergent lines. Rather than rejecting the threatening malleability of social subjects, this reformulation instead embraces the contingency of the articulation of identities and interests as, precisely, a terrain of contestation.

However, where Du Bois depicts this question of articulation as one of various possible “alliances” between relatively stable social groups (poor white Southerners, Northern labor, Northern businessmen, etc.) we would have to extend his insight one step further: the contingency of the articulation of collective political subjects dwells not just between groups but within them, so that the very constitution of the social category
of the “white worker,” for instance, would itself have to be seen as the product of a certain hegemonic articulation. From this perspective, all politics is identity politics, if by that we mean the battle to determine the specific contours and content of a collective identity which cannot be presupposed to precede this very act of articulation.

Labor organizing—at least, effective organizing—has in fact always recognized this, though here the theorization has frequently lagged behind the on-the-ground practice. Anyone who has been involved in a union organizing drive can tell you that one cannot rely on any unmediated notion of workers’ “interests” to predict the outcome of a big boss fight; indeed, to do so would be suicidal. Instead, the union organizers are engaged in a battle for the allegiance of the (other) workers, which is to say for the very terms around which the latter will construct their identities and interests and connect or cathect them with those of others. And though it might be tempting to frame this fight within the language of “false consciousness”—of revealing to said workers the “real” interests which management (or ideology, or religion, or neoliberalism) attempts to conceal from them—this framework itself obscures as much as it reveals. Workers may hope to get a raise from forming a union, but they may as equally hope to get one from siding with the boss, and no accounting system can predict which will be more likely to “really” advance one’s individual economic interest, narrowly conceived. More crucially, individuals rarely (if ever) conceive of their interests in such narrowly economic terms. Social identities, like social struggles,
necessarily entail an extra-economic element, and this is true not only of the passage beyond sectorial class interests that Lenin posited as a necessary precursor to socialist politics; even the emergence of such limited “trade-union consciousness” requires the articulation of a whole host of values, beliefs and assumptions (about the moral dignity of labor, the value of equity, etc.) that cannot be derived automatically from a relation of material exploitation. Workplace struggle is thus not just a struggle against exploitation but for workers to conceive of their work, identities, interests and relationships in these terms.

From this perspective, the theoretical understanding of “interests” undergirding most labor and community organizing models would have to be substantially rewritten. For interests can neither be collapsed into an individual’s self-described desires and preferences, nor ascribed to some putative realm of objectivity ostensibly undergirding these. Instead, they must themselves be viewed as both the terrain of ideological struggle and the latter’s only-ever provisional outcome, as various forces continually compete and contend over the lines around which individual and group identities will be drawn. Rather than merely identifying interests, that is to say, the organizer must be seen as in fact articulating them, which is to say at least partially shaping and crafting them. (The successful articulation of the latter must have some connection to individual’s and group’s lived experiences, of course, or else they would be able to find no purchase. But the terms and content around which social subjects can be articulated
are quite various, with no ontological guarantee underwriting any particular variant’s ultimate success or failure.) Likewise, “community organizing” should be seen, not as a process happening within a stable community, but instead as a creative act which, precisely through the articulation of a structuring antagonism, organizes a community into being.

One consequence of this understanding of organizing, it should go without saying, is that it requires organizers. In contrast to those frameworks which derive the emergence of a collective subject out of the imminent unfolding of an unmediated process, the theory of a lumpenproletarian politics recognizes, requires and affirms the need for mediation. Historically, the name for the latter within the Marxist tradition has been the Party, but this need not be so; it could as easily be the union, the neighborhood assembly, the community organization, or some as yet undreamed-of structure; what is important is the function, and not the form. An anxiety around such mediation has long haunted some sectors of the anarchist-influenced Left, which perceive it as virtually synonymous with authoritarianism. But the constitutive gap in which mediation operates should be seen as opening up the realm of emancipatory political possibility, rather than foreclosing it. The alternative to mediation would be a seamless, self-identical social structure unfissured by internal division or differentiation; it is this latter vision, in fact, which is totalitarian.
If we accept the necessity of such mediation, we can confront the tendential decline of the industrial proletariat with greater equanimity. For it is only if the revolutionary role of the latter is seen as emerging out of an imminent social ontology that its disappearance can be figured as synonymous with the collapse of political possibility. If, instead, we relinquish this conception, the problem posed by the eclipse of value-producing labor emerges rather as one of socialist strategy—or perhaps even merely of tactics. In the heyday of the Fordist factory, the influence exerted by the semi-skilled craftsman over the point of production provided an important site for the antagonistic articulation of a collective subject—a point of leverage, a target, and a set of tools. Even then, the universality of that particular struggle was over-exaggerated, as witnessed in the difficulties figures like Du Bois and Fanon had in wedging the struggles they analyzed into this framework. But, at least sometimes and in some places, the tactics and strategies of industrial labor organizing proved remarkably effective, both at winning material gains and in hegemonizing the broader field of social struggle. The question facing us today is, what set of tactics and strategies will prove appropriate to our changed conjuncture?

Here one must immediately clarify that the eclipse of the hegemony of industrial labor does not mean an end to workplace struggle. To the contrary, there are encouraging signs that the labor movement, after decades of decline, is today experiencing a dramatic resurgence. It is doing so however—at least in the
overdeveloped countries—on the dramatically transformed terrain of the post-industrial economy, where the erstwhile predominance of heavy industry has been eclipsed by other sectors, of which we can isolate four of particular strategic significance: healthcare; education; retail and food service; and logistics.

With the partial exception of logistics, these are all in some sense “services,” a category whose conceptual nebulosity leaves something to be desired. Often theorized in terms of the intangibility of their product in contrast to the durability of material goods, services are perhaps better defined, as the economist Fiona Tregenna has noted, in terms of a compression of the space-time of production and consumption (Tregenna 2011, 290). Where for manufactured goods the “moments” of production, circulation and consumption are separated by great spatial and temporal lags (gaps in which, as any reading of *Capital* will tell you, a great deal can go wrong from the perspective of capital valorization), services, whether they involve health screenings, hamburgers or haircuts, are typically produced, circulated and consumed in the same place, and at the same time.

This compression of the space-time of production, circulation and consumption has two implications with important consequences for socialist tactics and strategy. First, it suggests that services are highly resistant to both offshoring and automation, helping to explain the relative resiliency of these labor sectors even as the industrial workforce continues to decline. (Shoes can be mass produced in highly automated
factories for distant markets; haircuts and healthcare cannot.) Second, it suggests that the productivity of much service-sector labor remains extremely low. Insofar as most services are precisely those forms of labor most resistant to automation, that is, they will tend to be productive of only absolute, not relative surplus-value, where they are productive of value at all. The result is that the dominant labor sectors of the post-industrial service economy are typically either low-value or no-value from the perspective of capital valorization.

We have stated that there is no direct relation between the production of surplus value and the radicality of social subjects or social struggles. Why then does it matter that the sectors involved in a resurgent labor movement tend today to be only marginally productive of surplus value—or, in the case of public-sector healthcare and education, instead reproductive of labor power? For this reason: the victories of the industrial proletariat at the height of its strength and militancy had been predicated on increasing productivity, high profitability and continued growth; the labor of the industrial workforce was directly responsible for the profits of the bosses with whom workers negotiated, and those profits were high enough that the bosses could afford to concede to workers a piece of an ever-increasing pie. In contrast, labor struggle today

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3 Of course, "services" is a bourgeois economic category that in and of itself tells us nothing about the production of surplus-value, which is not dependent on the type of activity or the nature of the finished product (material or immaterial, etc.), but rather on the specific social relations in which such activity is inscribed. (A haircut, for instance, would be productive of surplus value if performed by a waged worker; unproductive if performed by a self-employed hairdresser or a domestic servant.)
occurs in the context of a weak and faltering rate of profit, and from workers whose relation to the latter is itself often weak, indirect, or nonexistent.

The result is, simultaneously, a tactical strength and a weakness. On the one hand, the resistance of service work to automation or relocation makes it difficult for employers to escape workplace struggle—granting healthcare, education, retail and food service workers an advantage over, say, Detroit autoworkers whose militancy was undercut by the ability of auto manufacturers to relocate production to the US and Global South. Today in 46 out of 50 US states, the largest private employer is either a hospital, a university, or WalMart, and none of these institutions are likely to go anywhere. Further, educational and hospital systems possess additional advantages for labor organizing insofar as they both (1) contain a plethora of different types of employment that cut across the lines of class, race and gender and (2) connect to broader constituencies beyond the workplace, allowing one to conceive of the demands of, say, nurses or educators assuming a more universal role that can successfully hegemonize a broader field of social struggle.

At the same time, the weak, indirect, or non-existent relation of much service-sector labor to capital valorization poses a challenge for the realization of such workers’ demands. In the United States, the razor-thin profit margins of, for example, fast food

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4 See Sauter 2018. The exceptions are just as interesting, including a casino, an airport and a supermarket consortium. Only in one state—Washington—is the largest private employer a manufacturer (Boeing).
service—combined with a franchise system that leaves corporations in control of setting prices but individual franchisees tasked with managing labor unrest—renders it extremely difficult for fast food workers to win wage increases directly from their employers. Even the Fight for $15, which has done much to revive the US labor movement while extending it into new sectors, has primarily won its victories, not from employers, but through successfully lobbying city and state governments to pass minimum wage increases. For many healthcare and education workers, meanwhile, the employer is the government, meaning their ability to win wage and funding gains will be dependent either (optimistically) on taxation or (pessimistically) on student and medical debt.

What this suggests—in addition to the challenging tendency, under conditions of faltering profitability, for social struggles to appear today as a zero-sum game—is the renewed importance, for contemporary socialist strategy, of a political orientation towards the state. The anti-statist orientation of much classical Marxism—merging seamlessly into contemporary globalization discourses, with their frequent over-exaggeration of the eclipse of the state form—has rendered many on the socialist left suspicious of electoral politics. But it makes little sense to negatively juxtapose electoralism against “movement building” or “labor organizing” when the success or failure of our most compelling movements, unions and community organizations today depends in large part on the action or inaction of the state. Instead, a successful socialist
strategy will have to chart a course towards winning governing power in a way that simultaneously strengthens unions and movements, while remaining carefully attentive to the contradictions of governance in an era of capitalist crisis.

The above sketches out an admittedly abbreviated analysis as to some possibilities and limitations of labor organizing in the transformed conditions of the post-industrial service economy. But what of those whose relation to wage labor remains rare, intermittent, precarious, or non-existent? How, that is, to organize those whose non-relation to the relations of production we have argued is today tendential in character, the lumpenproletariat proper?

In his brief but provocative Riot, Strike, Riot, Joshua Clover argues that, in our era of declining capitalist profitability and increasing surplus populations, the labor strike has been replaced as hegemonic tactic by the return of an older form of social struggle, the riot. Having lost their leverage over the point of production, lumpenproletarians might then find their rebellious purchase, in this telling, in the realm of circulation, which is to say in the streets. Clover’s framing is suggestive and indeed seems to capture something epochal about the reemergence of militant struggles oriented towards the street or the square, whether one thinks here of Ferguson, Tottingham, Clichy-sous-Bois, the Occupy movement, Spain’s Indignados, the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, or Cairo’s Tahrir Square.
Of course, this same period has also witnessed a renewed upsurge of labor struggles, somewhat problematizing Clover’s periodization. (Might it not instead be the case that both riots and strikes surge in periods of heightened militancy?) But the juxtaposition of “strike” and “riot” in fact conceals a deeper problem. For while the strike is indeed a tactic, it is one (of many) employed by an organization whose structure knits together moments of struggle across space and time—that is, the labor union. If the riot is a tactic, however, who is its tactician? What its organizational form? Riots, definitionally, are fleeting, and even movements like Occupy that attempted to prolong the temporary seizure of streets and squares came up against the problem of effective organization. Thus, in the juxtaposition of strike and riot, the issue lies less with the choice of tactic than with what Clover’s fellow-travelers in the Endnotes collective have termed the “problem of coordination.” Unless we are to attribute the structuring role of the latter to some immanent force, or to pure spontaneism, the challenge of a properly lumpenproletarian politics emerges less as one of tactics than of the organizational form that can articulate such tactics as one aspect of a broader strategy.

Here, it seems to me, it is perhaps more fruitful to think of the organization of the lumpenproletariat in articulation with that of other sectors of the dispossessed, including those sections of the working classes with a resource base sufficient to support the struggles of more properly lumpenproletarian strata. As one example we could point to the strategy pursued by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), whose
Fight for $15 has leveraged the financial resources provided by its strong base of organized public-sector workers in New York and California to fund the struggles of low wage workers in less union-dense areas, particularly the US South. (Though it remains to be seen what impact the Janus ruling, which effectively imposed “right-to-work” rules on public-sector unions, will have on the long-term financial viability of this strategy.) One could also point to other so-called “alt-labor” institutions (worker centers, associations of non-union employees and/or non-NLRA workers, etc.) as well as residents councils, neighborhood centers and other community-based organizing models. Perhaps the most pertinent example, in a US context, are the free breakfast programs and other social provisions (schools, clinics) which the Black Panthers organized in communities across the country, and which FBI head J. Edgar Hoover famously called “the greatest threat to internal security of the country.”

As these examples show, the organizational challenge posed by (and for) the lumpenproletariat is, in part, a formal one—a question of what shapes and boundaries can give structure to social struggles where capitalist relations of production can no longer be presumed to provide a stable container for the articulation of a collective subject (if and where they ever could). Without denying the complexities of this challenge, I have tried here to outline a few possible solutions. These have however remained perfunctory and, of necessity, particular to the US context. On a high level of abstraction, the dynamics of capital accumulation possess a degree of universality, one
which I have suggested is leading today to the tendential production of both economically redundant surplus populations and economically unproductive surplus capital (the latter expressing itself in the ceaseless busts and bubbles of financial speculation). But while these twin tendencies are indeed global, if uneven, responses to them will of necessity be local, such that the choice of tactics, strategies and organizational forms will in part be determined by highly contingent historical, cultural and political conditions.

What remains valid between and across local difference is the need to articulate social struggles around a structuring antagonism that can cohere a collective political subject in opposition to an excluded “other.” And here—again schematically and at a high degree of abstraction—we can say that the choices facing us today are two. On the one hand, right-wing populisms will attempt to respond to the crisis of the faltering capital-labor relation by restricting access to social wealth on the basis of an opposition between “citizen” and “stranger.” This is a world of checkpoints and borders, defined by the near-Manichean opposition of technological abundance and its lack.

On the other hand, the task of a radical lumpenproletarian politics will be to instead cohere a people around a structuring opposition between the rich and the rest of us. The precise terms of this more emancipatory antagonism will vary depending on the context; in one place it might take the form of “the 99%” vs. “the 1%,” in another, say,
“la gente” vs. “la casta.” Here, again, what is important is the form and not the terms. Rejecting the walls and borders of authoritarian ethno-nationalisms, the demand of such a radical lumpen politics must be to truly socialize social wealth, of which there is more than enough today to ensure a good life for all of us. This is a world of freedom and possibility, the contours of which we have scarcely begun to imagine.

Unlike the emancipatory struggles of an earlier era, however, those of the present will have to relinquish the metaphysics of labor that undergirded so much of classical socialist thought. Indeed, critics of political economy have been almost as likely as its apologists to enshrine the “value” of labor as an essentially moral one, in the process fetishizing one of the most pernicious aspects of the capitalist mode of production, its obsessive compulsion to increase productivity, to accumulate endlessly. In contrast, we should recall the suggestive and often overlooked insistence of Marx that “to be a productive laborer is […] not a piece of luck, but a misfortune” (Capital I, 644). Today, happily, the misfortune of productive labor is coming to a close. In its place, let us hope to rediscover the joys of the unproductive, freed at long last from the structural compulsion to produce. As Eldridge Cleaver had already put it in his 1971 pamphlet, On Lumpen Ideology: “The only satisfactory, revolutionary demand is for the restoration of the hegemony of the people over technology and equality in distribution and consumption. The point is not equality in Production, which is the Marxist view and basic error, but equality in distribution and consumption” (11).
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