

Struggle without Classes

Why There Is No Resurgence of the Proletariat in the Currently Unfolding Capitalist Crisis

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Norbert Trenkle (2006).

From Class Struggle to Declassing.

While living and working conditions continue to grow more precarious, affecting greater and greater segments of the population even in countries that have emerged victorious on the world market, widespread talk of a return of class society and of class struggle suggest the (re)birth of a new historical conjuncture. Given the rapid growth in social polarization, such talk can, at first glance, seem quite plausible. However, as is usually the case, resorting to the past modes of interpretation and explanation leads not to clarification, but only to greater confusion. Despite initial appearances, categories of class opposition cannot provide a basis for any adequate conception of the extreme growth in social inequality, nor are the oppositions and conflicts between social interest groups resulting from such inequality simply recurrences of what, measured by their real historical content, were once accurately conceived as instances of class struggle.

The great social conflict that, in the form of class struggle, decisively shaped capitalist society throughout the historical period of its formation and establishment was, as is well known, the conflict of Value between capital and labor. What is at stake in the structural logic of the commodity in its process of historical formation, when considered from its objectified side, are the opposed interests corresponding to two of capitalism's functional categories: the opposition between the representatives of capital, who command and organize the process of production with the valorization of capital as their end, and the wage workers, who by their labor "create" the surplus value necessary for this process. Taken for itself, this is a purely immanent conflict arising from within the common system of relations presupposed by modern commodity production, a conflict that revolves around the manner of value production (working conditions, working hours, and the like) and the distribution of the mass of value (wages, profits, benefits, and the like). As such it is a conflict impossible to overcome as long as the capitalist mode of production, which is based on the valorization of value as a self-propelling end in itself, continues to exist. This, however, in no way means that such a conflict must always express itself as class opposition. The objectified opposition of capital and labor only developed into class opposition because a generalized social mega-subject was constituted on its foundation, and under very particular historical conditions: in the course of the struggle for their interests and for social recognition, the wage workforce developed a collective identity and a consciousness as a working class. It was the constitution of such a subject that first enabled those who sell their labor power as a commodity to shift themselves

into a position from which they could endow their struggle with the necessary continuity and strength, even in the face of setbacks and defeats¹

Now, if over the course of the second half of the twentieth century the class struggle has increasingly lost the dynamic and force that had placed its stamp on the whole of society, this was not of course because capitalism had suddenly dispensed with the production of surplus value. The objective opposition between capital and labor, as, at the same time, categorical functions within capitalism itself, has remained and remains still, even if its concrete shape has changed over the course of the development of capitalism, as will be shown more extensively below. The working class nonetheless loses its character as collective subject to the extent that wage workers now become citizens with equal rights and thus, precisely speaking, commodity subjects absorbed into the universe of bourgeois society, and the sale of labor power becomes a generalized mode of existence. With this, the revolutionary nimbus of the working class, which had been a significant part of the cement holding its identity together, dissolved, revealing its feet of clay. For even if the idea that class struggle has an antagonistic character and thus points beyond capitalist society can in retrospect be revealed to be an illusion, it nonetheless played a thoroughly important role in class constitution, and furnished the working class with the consciousness required for it to act with its eyes trained on the horizon of a far-reaching social mission.

Ultimately, however, the opposition of capital and labor in its subjective form also emerged from its cocoon, revealing itself to be, no less than in its objective manifestation, an immanent conflict between social and economic interests internal to capitalism². Despite occasional rhetorical reenactments of times past, the conduct of labor struggles today is no longer premised on the irreconcilability between the interests of the sellers of labor power and those of capital. Quite the opposite: the emphasis is always placed on their compatibility, whether in the name of productivity, of local competitiveness, or of the purchasing power of internal, domestic demand. Criticism is not leveled at capital but rather at excessively high profits, unnecessary plant closures (or relocations) or, in a more ideologically charged version, at greedy bankers pitting the parasitical needs of Wall Street against the “real” economy of Main Street³. Those transformed into commodity subjects, workers no less than anyone else, have long since considered it only natural and self-evident that profits must be made, capital valorized, productivity increased, and growth ensured at whatever cost. They know that their (however precarious) well-being in this society — and they can scarcely imagine any other — depends on precisely this.

¹ On the constitution and role of collective subjects in bourgeois society, see Ernst Lohoff, “Die Verzauberung der Welt,” *Krisis* 29 (Münster: 2005) 13- 60; on the importance of class opposition in the process of development of capitalism, see Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 314 and following

² To be sure, this process of emergence was by no means devoid of contradiction, not least because the conviction of the participants that class struggle was in fact a conflict with the potential to explode the system itself persisted for a considerable time, and particular historical situations even invested class struggle with a dynamic which might possibly have been able to break through the objectified, structural development. To this extent, the subjective moments are not reducible to nor simply identical with the objective development.

³ It is tragic to see how the crisis process and the increasingly fierce competition for lower prices on the world market that accompanied it reinforce this affirmative attitude in an extreme manner, and how in the mostly hopeless struggles against closures — as in the case of AEG in Nuremberg — the primary argument is that the management's economic calculations are mistaken.

The development of the struggle between labor and capital into what more and more resembles their effective identity on the subjective level can be attributed to the systematic establishment of a fully generalized commodity society, one that has successfully invested the functional logic of capitalism with what appears to be the irrevocability of a natural law. But there is more to it than just this. At its basis also lie quite specific changes in the relationship of capital to labor, changes that had already been introduced in the Fordist era and that were brought to completion at an accelerated rate after Fordism came to an end. These changes in no way led to the suspension of the functional opposition of labor and capital, but rather to a state of affairs in which this functional opposition itself could no longer serve as ground for the constitution of any renewed class subjectivity whatsoever. There is thus, despite — or even because of — the extreme exacerbation of social inequality, no reclassing of society taking place today; we are rather dealing with a general process of declassing, a process which is expressed in at least four trends⁴.

First, since as early as the final phase of Fordism, the labor directly applied to the product has been reduced in favor of more capitalintensive technologies of automated oversight and control and of pre- and post-production functions. This has meant not only the melting away of the actual working class in the sense of the valueproducing industrial workforce and the massive upsurge of the most diverse and non-traditional categories of wage labor (in circulation, in the state apparatus, and in the various “service sectors,” and so on), categories that become impossible to ascribe in any meaningful way to a given class⁵. To this has been added the integration of a substantial part of the command function of capital directly within the various activities of labor, thereby shifting the contradiction between labor and capital in its immediacy to a point within individuals themselves (a process euphemistically configured as “personal responsibility,” “job enrichment,” “horizontal hierarchies,” and so on). This tendency has been further exacerbated under the pressure of crisis-induced hypercompetition and in the course of a general precarization of working conditions. This is most apparent in the many small-scale freelancers and “entreployees,” whose welfare as well as whose woe now becomes purely a matter of taking on, under their own direction and at their own risk, the outsourced job functions of this or that company. But even within the enterprises themselves there is an increasing tendency to turn employees into “managers,” both of themselves and of their respective working areas (as, for example, through the establishment of so-called “profit centers”). And, in the end, this tendency even generates the cynical ideology for administering the unemployed in which praise of “self-management” and “personal responsibility” are all the more obtrusively propagated, and thus the clearer it becomes that the labor market cannot even come close to reintegrating all those whom it has spat out like so many “self-managing” bits of refuse.

⁴ I take the term “declassing” (Deklassierung) from Franz Schandl, but my interpretation goes beyond his. Schandl writes: “social regression can no longer be described primarily with respect to the social positioning of classes. What is at stake is not the determination of class identity, but de-classing, which means that people are literally falling out of their social structures. So, for example, they are losing (as in permanently out of) work, but still remain the monadic subjects of work or labor as such; they have no money but must remain the subjects of money. De-classing effects not only the so-called proletariat, but is all-encompassing. Despite the exacerbation of social contradictions, class-contradictions are being defused” (Franz Schandl, “Desinteresse und Deklassierung,” *Streifzüge* 3 [Vienna: 2002] 12).

⁵ Accordingly, a large part of the industrial sociological discussion of the 1960s and 1970s revolved around the question “does a working class still exist?” On the left, it was in the first instance André Gorz who, with his book *Abchied vom Proletariat*, opened a crack in the discourse that was shaped by the myth of class struggle. See André Gorz, *Abchied vom Proletariat* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1980).

Second, and as an extension of the above, the practice of constantly changing jobs and the resulting alternation among a huge variety of activities has, increasingly since the end of Fordism, become the norm — a norm that has substantially contributed to the dissolution of any given individual's identification with specific productive functions. Individuals' relationships to their position in the process of production thus ceased to be in any way anchored in their biography or environment, and empirically became closer to what it, according to its concept, already was: an external relationship⁶. In the process the categorical imperative of flexibility now demands obedience more and more adamantly. It is well known that today there is no worse sin against the law of capitalism than continuing to adhere to a single function or activity of labor. This is not only preached by the priests of the market, but also results from the objectified compulsions of the global race to the bottom. Whoever wants to survive must be prepared perpetually to switch between the categories of wage labor and selfemployment, and to identify with neither — although, of course, even this brings no guarantee.

Third, the new hierarchies and divisions cut across the categories of capitalist function rather than overlapping with them. Specifically, they are not determined by the opposition between wage labor and capital, for the social differential is just as steep within the category of wage labor as it is in society as a whole. This applies in the first instance to the businesses themselves, in which (shrinking) core workforces with (at least for the moment) permanent jobs, even with collective bargaining agreements, carry out the same work alongside a growing number of part-time and agency workers under completely different conditions. However, the differences between sectors, branches of production, and regional locations are even greater, and ultimately there are huge discrepancies with respect to income, working conditions, and status depending on one's position in the hierarchy of the global chains of valorization.

Fourth, declassing ultimately means that more and more people worldwide are falling through the grid of the functional categories, because there is no longer a place for them in the system of commodity production that can productively exploit less and less labor power. They are forced to find out that they cannot only be replaced at any time, but that they are also to a growing extent becoming superfluous in the capitalist sense. Being privileged means managing to cling to some function or other, or to switch between different functions, without coming crashing down. But since these functions are themselves becoming precarious or wholly obsolete, such a balancing act is becoming increasingly more difficult. Because the objectified functional structures are disintegrating, more and more people are also falling through their grid. How many this effect varies according to the position of a country or region in global competition, but the threat of falling into social nothingness looms over everyone. The trend is clear and unambiguous: across the world a growing segment of new underclasses has emerged, which have nothing to do with the old proletariat and which neither objectively (by their function or position within the process of production) nor subjectively (by virtue of their consciousness) constitute a new social collective (something like a "precariat"). Their relationship to the capitalist process of valorization is in the

⁶ "The capitalist individual is no longer a class-individual, the 'aggregate of social relations' [Marx] shapes itself by and in the individual in a more complicated and more manifold manner. Its attitude cannot be attributed to the process of production, even if the investigation of circulation and consumption, even of reproduction, is extended. The concept of class melts away in our fingers. It is a concept that conceives less and less. People's communicative behaviour cannot be reduced to their class situation, its analysis cannot even be focused on this situation" (Franz Schandl, "Kommunismus oder Klassenkampf," *Streifzettel* 3 (Vienna: 2002) 9).

first instance a purely negative one: they are no longer required. But this forces us to formulate anew the question of the possible constitution of new emancipatory social movements.

Attempts to Save the Dead Subject

The resurrected left-wing discourse of class struggle hardly makes a contribution to the clarification of this question. While it is true that it has in some respects learned from social upheavals and transformations, and undergone a few alterations in its argumentation, it has ultimately not succeeded in freeing itself of the fundamental metaphysical patterns of traditional class-struggle Marxism. These patterns are perennially reproduced, even if the subjects to which appeals are made (or rather, which desire attempts to summon up) have changed. In the last issue of *Krisis* I attempted to show this above all in the examination of Hardt and Negri and John Holloway⁷. But here attention should in the first instance be directed toward approaches with a less obviously metaphysical leaning, since their arguments proceed more in the mode of sociology, and concentrate more strongly on the analysis of the objective aspect of social development. In course it will be shown that it is precisely the empirical results of these investigations that refute the paradigm of class that has been applied. In the attempt to save class analysis by means of all sorts of extensions they become entangled in contradictions and aporias which clearly indicate that this rescue attempt is condemned to failure and that only abandoning the traditional Marxist construct can open a glimpse of a renewed perspective of emancipatory action.

Let us first hear the Gramscian class theorist Frank Deppe. The “working class,” he argues in the journal *Fantômas*,

has by no means disappeared, capitalism is still based on the exploitation of wage labor and the natural, social and political conditions of production and appropriation of surplus value. Between 1970 and 2000 the number of workers dependent on wage labor nearly doubled, and comprises about half of the entire global population. This can be explained in the first instance by development in China and other parts of Asia, where large parts of the rural population were “set free” as a result of industrialization. In the developed capitalist countries the proportion of the of Value population engaged in wage labor has now reached 90% and more⁸.

What is immediately striking about this argument is that it operates with a concept of the working class that swings back and forth between at least two different meanings. At first Deppe seems to classify among the working class only those wage workers who produce surplus value in the strict sense, whose surplus labor is skimmed off directly for the valorization of capital. However, this concept of class slides seamlessly into a completely different one, one which comprises all the “workers dependent on wage labor” and thus “half of the entire global population” and in the capitalist urban centers even almost the entire population (namely over 90 percent).

In this argumentative vacillation, the class theorist’s entire dilemma is expressed. If the category of the working class is interpreted in the first sense (which corresponds to Marx’s theory, to which Deppe explicitly refers), then it must be conceded that what is at stake is a global minority

⁷ See Norbert Trenkle, “Die metaphysischen Mucken des Klassenkampfes,” *Krisis* 29 (Münster: 2005) 143-59.

⁸ Frank Deppe, “Der postmoderne Fürst. Arbeiterklasse und Arbeiterbewegung im 21. Jahrhundert,” *Fantômas* 4 (Hamburg: 2003) 11.

which is losing its significance to an ever-greater extent the further the processes of rationalization in the valueproducing sectors advance, and the more labor is made superfluous in immediate production. In the second meaning, however, that is to say the expansion of the category of the working class to all “workers dependent on wage-labor,” it becomes a non-concept, for it no longer has any power to discriminate at all. It is then just another word for the general mode of existence and life in capitalist society, which mediates its connectedness simply by means of labor and commodity production, which for the huge majority of people presents itself as the compulsion to sell their labor power in order to survive. While this universal compulsion is an essential characteristic of capitalist society, it is by no means suitable for the determination of the working class, because all people are in principle subject to it, regardless of their positions in the social hierarchy their social status and life situation.

The aporias of the newer theory of class also become clear in the writings of the historian Marcel van der Linden, whose concept of class is even broader than that of Deppe. For him, “every bearer of labor power, whose labor power is sold or hired to another person under economic or non-economic compulsion, belongs to the working class. Whether the labor power is offered by the worker herself or himself, and whether she or he owns her or his own means of production, is irrelevant.”⁹ With this definition, van der Linden wants to account for the fact that in globalized commodity society there has emerged a gargantuan multitude of differentiated and hierarchized working conditions that do not (any longer) fit the classical schema of wage labor. Among these he counts different transitional forms between slavery, wage labor, self-employment, and subcontracting, but also the unpaid subsistence and reproductive labor of women. Van der Linden accordingly no longer speaks of the class of “free wage workers,” but chooses the broader concept of “subaltern workers.”¹⁰ But this, however, does not solve the problem, but rather goes one step further than Deppe by inflating the concept of class so that it becomes a metacategory which fundamentally encompasses capitalist society in its entirety.

It lies within the very logic of this metacategory that it is completely devoid of shape. It presents the paradox of a concept of capitalist totality, but precisely this totality slips through its hands. For on one hand it indirectly accounts for the fact that labor is the comprehensive principle — or more accurately, the principle of mediation — of bourgeois society. On the other hand, it is precisely this that is hidden by the fixation on the category of class. Traditional Marxism had always considered the mediation of the social context by labor as the transhistorical constant of all societies, and failed to recognize that what is at stake is the historically specific essential characteristic of the capitalist formation, which is inextricably linked to generalized commodity production and the valorization of value as if an end in itself¹¹. What seemed to Marxism to be specific to capitalism was rather the particular way in which surplus labor is skimmed off in the form of surplus value, the mediation via the market and private ownership of the means of production — characteristics which can all be brought together in the concept of class domination or of the class opposition between the capitalist class and the working class. This perspective was certainly ideologically compatible with the struggle of a particular segment of commodity owners for recognition within bourgeois society. But whoever wants to bring it up to date and to account

⁹ Marcel van der Linden, “Das vielköpfige Ungeheuer. Zum Begriff der WeltarbeiterInnenklasse,” *Fantômas* 4 (Hamburg: 2003) 34.

¹⁰ Van der Linden, “Ungeheuer” 31-33

¹¹ On this see Postone, *Time* particularly 148-57.

for the gargantuan discrepancy in working conditions under the conditions of the globalization of the capital relation will necessary fall into irresolvable contradictions.

The idea, however, that class opposition characterizes the essence of capitalism rather than presenting a derived relationship is so deeply anchored in people's heads that it obscures the view of the formal context of society even where it reveals itself to be analytically unsuitable at every turn¹². The very attempts to found this idea more precisely make this clear. An example of this is provided by van der Linden's attempt at least to begin to delineate his concept of class, which evidently even he finds unsatisfactory, when he asks himself "what all these completely different subalterns actually have in common," only to answer "that all subaltern workers live in the status of 'institutionalized heteronomy.'"¹³ What is to be understood by this he explains with a reference to Cornelius Castoriadis: "Institutionalized heteronomy expresses an 'antagonistic division of society and with it the domination of a particular social category over the whole [...] The capitalist economy thus alienates us to the extent that it coincides with the division into proletarians and capitalists.'"¹⁴

It is immediately striking that Castoriadis derives "institutionalized heteronomy" immediately from the class position of the workers. This definition, abbreviated as it is, logically corresponded to the traditional Marxist theory of class with its fixation on the good old proletariat. But what remains of this theory if, like van der Linden, one extends the concept of class to infinity and subsumes more or less the whole of humanity under it? Van der Linden implicitly says nothing other than that alienation is a universal feature of bourgeois society. But at the same time he cannot provide a plausible theoretical justification of this claim, because he does not set himself free from the paradigm of traditional Marxism. Even here the attempt to save this paradigm by extending it uncovers its aporias and limitations, which the historical process had initially obscured. That alienation or fetishism cannot be directly attributed to class domination, but are essential characteristics of a society that is blindly mediated by commodity production and labor, had, as is well known, already been shown by Marx. It is quite possible that to the workers' movement in its struggle for recognition within bourgeois society, this might have appeared as idle speculation. But today there stands in the way of this insight nothing more than an anachronistic refusal to let go of the paradigm of the theory of class that repeatedly disclaims itself.

The "Class" as Positive Totality

However, the protagonists of the more recent discourse of class do not acknowledge this self-disclaimer. It is true that they cannot help but implicitly recognize the emptying that results from the inflation of the concept of class, but that does not lead to a change of perspective in their critique of capitalism, but rather ensnares them in all kinds of evasive maneuvers and attempts to blur their own tracks. Above all, the shifting of the focus of investigation onto the empirical level enables the masterpiece at once to dispose of and to retain the fixation on the class opposition as essence of capitalism and center of gravity of all radical critique ("principal contradiction"): retain because the concept of class is elevated to the metalevel of the social relation, where it ekes out a living as an abstraction, devoid of content, which can be immunized against critique precisely because of this character; and dispose of because it no longer plays any real role in the empirical

¹² On the critique of this idea in general see Postone, 314 and following

¹³ "Ungeheuer" 33.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

analyses, but only presents a diffuse, presupposed instance of invocation — which as such, however, shapes the perspective of investigation and colors the results in a particular way.

It sounds a little like unconscious self-irony when van der Linden ends his essay with the remark “But it remains to warn against every empirically empty grand theory.”¹⁵ For this is precisely what distinguishes his approach and that of all more recent protagonists of the discourse of class: their theory remains empirically empty and their empiricism remains theoretically naked; they uphold the myth of class struggle, although no subject or a movement can any longer be found in social reality to which the class struggle could be affixed without great strain. When Deppe and van der Linden describe the social hierarchies and inequalities that are formed and sharpened in the context of global crisis capitalism, it is in some respects empirically illuminating, but by setting the headline “Fragmentation of the Working Class” at the top, a highly unfortunate turn of phrase enters the room. What is assumed is always a fundamental unity which is presupposed by all those fragmentations, even if it is not possible adequately to explain in what this unity is supposed to consist. The bridging of the oppositions of interest and the positions of competition with respect to an anticapitalist formation nonetheless appears as fundamentally prearranged.

Deppe even expands this construct to the extent that he speaks, referring to Gramsci, of a “new bloc of subalterns,” which alongside the “working class” is supposed also to encompass all other social movements of the last years (“landless peasants’ protests in Brazil, the uprising in Chiapas, [...] global mass-demonstrations against war and the threat of war”). This bloc, he concedes, “has not yet, however, articulated itself as a bloc, because it lacks an alternative programme and the capacity to act against neoliberalism, through which the fractions of this bloc could be welded together.”¹⁶ The “bloc,” that is, already exists “in itself,” but has not yet “articulated itself politically” as such. It is no accident that this is reminiscent of the violent construction of “ascribed class-consciousness,” if admittedly in a sort of shrunken version which — in contrast with Lukács — does not do without a metaphysical foundation because Deppe is critically beyond such things, but because he carries it around with him unacknowledged¹⁷. It is only because he implicitly carries the corresponding ascription through to its conclusion and thus presupposes something like a fundamental objective congruence (of interests) of all parties that he can reduce the problem to the superficial question of an “alternative programme” that he imagines could weld together the different “factions” of that bloc.

The almost incidental manner in which the fragmentations produced by capitalism are downgraded to a sort of secondary or derivative problem with respect to the presupposed “class” indicates a further aporia, which results from the frantic adherence to the paradigm of traditional Marxism. For traditional Marxism, the working class represented by its nature the standpoint of social universality — which was thought to be identical with the standpoint of labor. It was thus supposed to inherit the legacy of the bourgeoisie, which at the times of the bourgeois revolutions was supposed to have claimed this standpoint for itself, but then to have betrayed it for the sake of the selfish private interest of profit. The revolutionary aim accordingly consisted in the creation of a social totality — a totality, namely, that was mediated through labor in a conscious manner. As Moishe Postone has shown in extensive detail, this idea amounted, in two senses, to an ideologically distorted projection of the conditions of capitalism. On one hand, it is a contradiction

¹⁵ “Ungeheuer” 34.

¹⁶ Deppe, “Fürst” 11.

¹⁷ For my critique, see Trenkle, “Die metaphysischen Mucken.”

in itself to desire consciously to shape mediation through labor (and thus through the commodity), because labor is by its nature self-referential and self-directed — that is, it follows its own reified laws, which it forces onto people as if it were a natural law. On the other hand, the constitution of the social context as totality is also an historically quite specific characteristic of capitalist society, which in contrast with all other societies is mediated through a single principle, and for that reason naturally cannot be the vanishing point of emancipation: “The capitalist social formation, according to Marx, is unique inasmuch as it is constituted by a qualitatively homogeneous social ‘substance’; hence, it exists as a social totality. Other social formations are not so totalized: their fundamental social relations are not qualitatively homogeneous. They cannot be grasped by the concept of ‘substance,’ cannot be unfolded from a single structuring principle, and do not display an immanent, necessary historical logic.”¹⁸ It follows as a consequence of this insight “that the historical negation of capitalism would not involve the realization, but the abolition, of the totality.”¹⁹ Now it is true that the more recent discourse of class claims to offer a critique of the false identifications of traditional Marxism, but it undoes this work itself by its continued fixation on class and its inflation to a metacategory, the tendency of which is to encompass society as a whole. The appeal to totality — and the unconscious affirmation of the form of capitalist mediation that is contained within it — of traditional Marxism is thus surpassed, and at the same time reduced to absurdity. For if almost all people are ascribed to “the class” (or to the “bloc of subalterns,” or whatever), the social universality that traditional Marxism depicted as still on the horizon would already be potentially realized. But with this the theoretically justified standpoint of critique is also lost. For the totality constituted on capitalist terms could not then be criticized, but would only have to acquire consciousness of itself. Only a few say this as explicitly as Hardt and Negri, who already see communism everywhere peeking through from under the thin cover of capitalism; but this is in no way just an isolated quirk, but rather the logical consequence of the theoretical approach that they fundamentally share with all the discourse of class in its entirety.

This discourse certainly believes that it goes beyond traditional Marxism, because it has freed itself from the idea of a unified subject and instead permanently evokes the heterogeneity of the putative working class. But in this it fundamentally only reflects the inner disjointedness of commodity society, which as asocial sociality, by definition, disintegrates into countless particularities.²⁰ If this fragmented totality is immediately identified with the working class and appealed to positively, then the criteria necessary in order adequately to address the destructive capacities that are increasingly set free in the process of disintegration of bourgeois subjectivity are ultimately missing. This holds for racist and sexist violence as much as for antisemitic delusion and the ethnic and religious fundamentalisms that are gaining currency. From the perspective of class they cannot be decoded as inherent forms of expression of subjectivity in commodity society that present independent moments of the dynamic of capitalist crisis, because the fixation on the “fragmented class-subject” would otherwise be called into question. It is basically for this reason that they are always treated as external appearances, as a sort of disturbing factor that might be able to split the class context, but are not of essential concern. It thus ultimately remains a matter of personal taste to decide whether or not reactionary movements, be they ethno-nationalistic currents (in Spain, for example) or the so-called Second Intifada, can be included in the great consensus of anticapitalist struggles. The partition between the elements of the more recent discourse of class

¹⁸ *Time* 79

¹⁹ *ibid.*; see also 156-57

²⁰ For more on the term “asocial sociality,” see 185n3 in this volume.

and the regressive decayed forms of traditional Marxism is thus extremely thin for the reason that the theoretical foundation is at heart the same.

No More Making of the Working Class

In contrast to the attempts to save the working class by overexpanding its objective determinations are those whose arguments proceed primarily from the subjective side. According to these approaches, class is not defined by position in the process of production and valorization, but always constitutes itself anew and is subject to permanent changes which are an essential result of the dynamic of class struggles. Such a perspective has the initial advantage of drawing attention to the active moments in social conflict, their process character, and the possibilities for subjective development that are contained within it, because the category of class is kept open and not codified in a definition. But the appearance of openness is deceptive. It is fundamentally limited by an axiom that is always placed in front of all specific analyses in advance, and that restricts their perspective. For it can be seen how self-evidently class struggle is presupposed as a transhistorically valid principle, from which class can then in turn be derived: “Always already present in all social relations, class struggle precedes the historical classes,” so the editorial of the issue of the journal *Fantômas* that has already been cited many times in this chapter.²¹ But with this the argument becomes circular. Both the concept of class and that of class struggle are defined completely arbitrarily. All social conflicts can in principle be ennobled to class struggles without differentiation, and all participants to class subjects. In this manner, the subjectivist concept of class attains in principle the same result as its objective counterpart. It is thus no wonder that these former theoretical rivals are increasingly becoming reconciled with one another and living together in peace (as, for example, is the case in that issue of *Fantômas*). For wherever all conceptual stringency is lost and the “class” can simply be anything and everything, the old differences no longer play any sort of decisive role.

What is problematic here is primarily that the concept of class struggle, once it is dissolved from the historically specific context of the workers’ movement, the only context in which it made any sense, can very easily be short-circuited with a completely nonspecific concept of struggle, which corresponds more to the “war of all against all” (Hobbes) than a struggle against the conditions and impositions of capitalism. Once again, this is particularly apparent in Hardt and Negri, who transfigure even the individualized daily struggle for existence to a form of expression of class struggle, and no longer have any sort of criteria to distance themselves from outbreaks of regressive violence or even fundamentalist movements. Class struggle thus becomes an abstract and ultimately affirmative empty formula which encompasses the permanent internal state of war of capitalist society and its disintegration in crisis no less than the endeavors to oppose precisely this. Now it is true that many proponents of the subjectivist standpoint of class for good reasons do not wish to pursue this consequence to its end, but in this they end up with a fairly considerable burden of justification. For their levitating, decontextualized concept of class struggle has no conceptual set of tools available that could distinguish between the mere action of bourgeois subjectivity in its ugliest facets (whether individual or collective) and the attempts to overcome precisely this (e.g., in grassroots social movements). To save the concept of class struggle, all kinds of argumentative bolt-ons are necessary (the recourse to discourse theory, for example), which only show how little it can itself contribute to the analytical clarification of social development.

²¹ Redaktion *Fantômas*, “Klasse Arbeit,” *Fantômas* 4 (Hamburg: 2003) 4.

One of the most important witnesses for the case of the subjectivist theorists of class is the English social historian E.P. Thompson, who always emphasized the active moment in the emergence of the working class. In the preface to his most important historical study, which has the programmatic title *The Making of the English Working Class*, he writes “Making, because it is a study in an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning. The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.”²² However, Thompson’s analyses refer — as he himself always insists — to processes in a highly specific historical situation: the capitalist drive to assert itself during the last third of the eighteenth and the first third of the nineteenth century in England. But this situation is evidently different from today’s in a fundamental way. It was shaped by the repression and destruction of the comparatively heterogeneous pre- and proto-capitalist living and working conditions under the ever stronger pressure of standardization of the capitalist mode of production and of life; and this means not least by the massive creation of doubly free wage workers who were compelled to sell their labor power in order to survive. In Thompson’s investigations he concentrated on the revolts and the struggles of resistance that were provoked by this process, and showed how during the course of them (and also by the experience of defeats) something like a class consciousness first began to take shape.

But while it was important to emphasize the significance of these subjective processes that had been ignored by orthodox Marxism, it was just as important that the insights gained by this process not be deleted from their historical context if they were not to become abstract in the bad sense. While the formation of a class consciousness is in no way the automatic result of the process of establishment of the valorization of capital, this subjective unification in a working class nonetheless corresponds to the simultaneous objective process of subordination of all social relations under the principle of unity of abstract labor and commodity production. The two moments devour one another in a dialectical relationship. Thompson himself emphasizes: “the class experience is largely defined by the productive relations into which men are born — or enter involuntarily. Classconsciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, classconsciousness does not.”²³

If we transpose this claim onto the current situation, it must be acknowledged straight away that the objectively predefined context within which social experiences are made and social struggles are pursued is fundamentally different from that epoch. We are not standing today at the beginning of the process of establishment of capitalism; the main trend is not by a long way that of the extermination of noncapitalist modes of life by means of the steamroller of valorization (although this is still happening in some parts of the world). We are rather facing a situation in which the commodity-producing system has generalized itself the world over and at the same time entered a fundamental process of crisis, because it undermines its own foundations by the increasing displacement of living labor power. This development, however, which is expressed in the increasing precarization of living and working conditions and in the fact that worldwide more and more people are being made surplus to the requirements of and excluded from the valorization of capital, is directly opposed to that of the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the current direction of development of the basic logic of capitalism that has become an end in itself can be

²² E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Pantheon, 1963) 9.

²³ Thompson, *English Working Class* 9-10.

found not the formation of a (new) working class, but the increasing destruction of a society which is based on the universalized compulsion to sell oneself. People, that is to say, are not being forced into a unified social form; rather, the form of unity in which they live and by means of which they are constituted is disintegrating, and they are thus falling through its structures. However, it is possible to speak of a unification in this context to the extent that the process which I described above under the concept of declassing is a universal one. But in itself, this contains nothing of consequence. Quite the opposite: capitalist fragmentation is only the intensification of the logic of capital in the stage of its decomposition. This is true not only objectively, as exemplified by the exacerbated competition between locations, a quandary that from the beginning imposes limits upon the struggle between particular interests (for example against factory closure or wage cuts), although this does not fundamentally mean that these struggles have lost their immanent justification. At the same time, the exacerbated pressure of the struggle for existence has also made an essential contribution to the atomization and decline in solidarity and the broad-reaching establishment of the capitalist subjectivity of competition and delimitation.

This development is also expressed in the subjective forms of operation and modes of action. The movements of social resistance at the start of the nineteenth century emerged against the background of a repression of non- and proto-capitalist living conditions that were incompatible with the industrial-capitalist mode of production. In the light of this collective experience and of the tremendous imposition that was daily factory labor and the selfishness of capitalist competition, cultural patterns of interpretation and forms of practical solidarity were developed in resistance, which ultimately led to the formation of the consciousness of belonging to a class with a common fate. However, because today such a process of constitution is no longer and cannot any longer take place, the beginnings of anticapitalist resistance are overlaid and pushed back by processes of collectivization that are determined by regressive forms from the core stock of commodity-society subjectivity.²⁴ This is true for the formation of sects and gangs just as for the antisemitic delusion, for the racist and religious forms of identity politics of all shades no less than for outbreaks of violence for its own sake. There is no new working class emerging here; what is rather taking place is the action of people who have been formed into subjects of labor and the commodity but who can no longer ordinarily function as such.²⁵ However, the fragmentation of crisis capitalism does not only set free the regressive moments of the subject form; the emancipatory impulses, ideas, and aspirations which had attached themselves to the struggle of the working class for recognition within bourgeois society have also lost their context and have to a certain extent begun to float free. The historical class struggle draws its comparative coherence from its focus on the opposition of the interests of capital and labor, an opposition which developed an integrating dynamic in the phase of the rise of capitalism. The resistance against the

²⁴ For a more extensive discussion of this, see Lohoff, "Die Verzauberung."

²⁵ It is thus absurd when Karl Heinz Roth, for example, in explicit reference to Thompson, claims to recognize the precursors of a possible new proletarian class subjectivity of all places in the rampantly spreading neoreligious revival movements. In this context he describes the fundamentalist pentecostal communities as "the largest social selforganizing community of the new underclasses in the world, which in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa alone has 100 million members" (65), in order to proceed in the following terms: "As we know from E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, the millenarian sects were an important constitutive moment in the process in which the English working class and its radical movements came to find themselves. We thus do not necessarily need to grow despondent at the ambiguous messages which find their way to us from the lowest segments of the global underclasses" (69). See Karl Heinz Roth, *Der Zustand der Welt. Gegenperspektiven* (Hamburg: Verlag, 2005).

current wave of precarization and impoverishment, in contrast, continually exposes itself to the danger of itself reproducing the centrifugal tendencies of the unfolding capitalist crisis. It is thus faced with the difficult task of formulating and pursuing social conflicts in such a way that they counteract the intensified logic of competition and exclusion and the identity-political tendencies that accompany it. This will ultimately only succeed if different struggles and conflicts can be linked together across all borders without false proclamations of unity or hierarchies. This linking, however, cannot be derived from presupposed objective or subjective determinations (class standpoint or class struggle). It can only emerge from the conscious cooperation of such social movements that aspire to the abolition of domination in all its facets, and not only as an abstract, distant goal, but also within their own structures and relationships.

Blueprints for such movements cannot be drafted at the drawing board. Theory is unable to do anything other than formulate fundamental considerations in this direction. If we have anything to learn from Thompson's investigations, it is the significance of practical experiences for the constitution of social movements. For this reason it is important to turn our attention to those processes within which resistance to capitalist impositions turns away from hierarchical, populist, and authoritarian attempts to draw people together, and where struggles between interests are linked to the establishment of self-organized structures. While such movements (as for example the Zapatistas, the autonomous currents of the Piqueteros, and other grass-roots movements) are in many respects contradictory — and we must on no account attempt to transfigure them romantically — they are also in a minority on a world scale, and always under the threat of marginalization and cooptation.²⁶ However, here can be found approaches and moments which point to the perspective of a liberation from the totality of commodity society. The future belongs not to class struggle, but to an emancipatory struggle without classes.

²⁶ On this see Marco Fernandes, "Piqueteros oder Wenn Arbeitslosigkeit adelt," *Krisis* 30 (Münster: 2006).