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Class, Surplus and Exploitation. The Laclau-Mouffeian Interpretation of Marxism

Clase, excedente y explotación. La interpretación laclau-mouffeana del marxismo

Classe, excedente e exploração. A interpretação do Laclau e Mouffe do marxismo

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Abstract

The post-Marxist stance against class politics unearths significant political demands often neglected by Marxism. However, in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's approach, this step forward is followed by two steps back. They deny that class struggle against capitalist exploitation has any political significance for the masses or any essential link with the socialist-democratic project. But they do so at the cost of misrepresenting Marxian theory and underestimating the global phenomenon of labour exploitation. This *faux pas* is due to two misconceptions at the core of the Laclau-Mouffeian critique: an ambiguity in the use they make of the economic concept of surplus, and an incorrect identification of working-class and productive workers. With Laclau and Mouffe, I share the firm conviction in the necessity of a post-Marxian theory. Nevertheless, post-Marxism will be just as robust as our Marxist bedrocks.

Keywords: class; surplus; exploitation; Ernesto Laclau; Chantal Mouffe; post-Marxism.

Resumen

La crítica post-marxista a la política de la lucha de clases trae a colación demandas sociales usualmente ignoradas por el marxismo. Sin embargo, en el planteamiento de Ernesto Laclau y de Chantal Mouffe, este paso adelante es seguido por dos pasos atrás. Ellos niegan que la lucha de clases en contra de la explotación capitalista tenga alguna significación política para las masas o que guarde algún vínculo esencial con el proyecto socialista democrático. Pero esta afirmación la basan en una tergiversación de la teoría marxiana a partir de la cual subestiman el fenómeno

global de la explotación del trabajo. Este paso en falso se debe a que debajo de la crítica laclau-mouffeana subyacen dos concepciones erróneas: una ambigüedad en el uso del concepto de excedente económico y una incorrecta identificación entre la clase trabajadora y los trabajadores productivos. Con Laclau y Mouffe comparto la convicción de la necesidad de una teoría post-marxista. Sin embargo, el post-marxismo sólo será tan robusto como nuestras bases teóricas marxistas lo permitan.

Palabras clave: clase; excedente; explotación; Ernesto Laclau; Chantal Mouffe; posmarxismo.

Resumo

A crítica pós-marxista da política da luta de classes traz à tona demandas sociais geralmente ignoradas pelo marxismo. No entanto, na abordagem de Ernesto Laclau e Chantal Mouffe, esse avanço é seguido por dois passos para trás. Eles negam que a luta de classes contra à exploração capitalista tenha qualquer significado político para as massas ou que tenha qualquer vínculo essencial com o projeto socialista democrático. Mas essa afirmação é baseada em uma deturpação da teoria marxista, a partir da qual eles subestimam o fenômeno global da exploração do trabalho. Esse passo em falso é devido a que sob crítica laclau-mouffeana aparecem dois equívocos: uma ambigüidade no uso do conceito de excedente econômico e uma identificação incorreta entre a classe trabalhadora e os trabalhadores produtivos. Com Laclau e Mouffe, compartilho a convicção da necessidade de uma teoria pós-marxista. No entanto, o pós-marxismo poderá ser tão robusto quanto nossos fundamentos teóricos marxistas o permitirem.

Palavras-chave: classe; excedente; exploração; Ernesto Laclau; Chantal Mouffe; pós-marxismo.

*What is familiar and well known as such is not really known for the very reason
that it is familiar and well known.*

Hegel

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe criticise two Marxist theses. First, they disprove the prognosis about the historical tendency of capitalism towards mass proletarianisation. Secondly, they reject that the formation of the working class is consistent with an essential political interest in socialism. From their perspective, the forecast about proletarianisation would have to be discarded based on one of the peculiarities of late capitalism: the emergence of the middle classes. On the other hand, the presumption of a socialist class interest would only be sustained under the assumption of an economic essentialism constitutive of workers' subjectivity.

The rejection of the mass proletarianisation thesis follows both from a restricted interpretation of the Marxist concept of *exploitation* and a questionable classification of social classes that rests on the criterion of the division of labour. Laclau and Mouffe assume that Marx's concept of the proletariat has the defect of being ambiguous. Marx would be referring, on the one hand, to all wage

earners, and, on the other, to manual or industrial workers. "The very concept of working-class in Marx covers two distinct relations with their own laws of motion: the wage relation established through the sale of labour-power – which turns the worker into a proletarian; and that resulting from the worker's location in the labour process – which makes him a manual worker".¹ As we will see, this ambivalence is typical of the Laclau-Mouffean interpretation of the Marxist concept of class. In any case, Laclau and Mouffe believe that Marx ultimately favours identifying the working class "resulting from the worker's location in the labour process".

Concerning the Marxist notion of exploitation, Laclau and Mouffe's approach is somewhat meagre. However, on the few occasions in which the concept comes up, it is easy to infer that its formulation rests on an interpretation that: a) restricts the phenomenon of exploitation to the case of *productive labour*, and b) understands exploitation as absorption of the economic surplus, but in a way that distorts the precise sense of the Marxian concept of surplus-product (*Mehrprodukt*), and confuses it with another concept correlative to the rarer Marxian term of excess-product (*überschüssige Produkt*). This misunderstanding of the specificity of exploitation is what would serve later as a basis for Laclau and Mouffe to say that a "structural dislocation (...) emerges between 'masses' and 'classes', given that the line separating the former from the dominant sectors is not juxtaposed with class exploitation".²

Laclau and Mouffe do not deny the existence of a working-class struggle against exploitation. However, they reject the hypothesis that this struggle is mobilised by an essential interest in socialism. Although the working class has an interest in "preventing capitalist absorption of the economic surplus", this does not imply, they say, "(a) that the worker is a *homo oeconomicus* who tries to maximise the economic surplus just as much as the capitalist; or (b) that he is a spontaneously cooperative being, who aspires to the social distribution of his labour product".³ Here we can see the peculiar understanding that Laclau and Mouffe have of the economic surplus concept. They take that concept in an opposed sense to that formulated by Marx. In return, we will see that for Marx, it is a question of *suppressing* the surplus altogether if by this we mean the surplus-product. In any case, it is due to this approach that Laclau and Mouffe maintain that the proletarian struggle against capital may be oppositional, but it cannot be antagonistic nor anti-capitalist in the strict sense.

So, the class position is not a mass position, nor is their struggle against capital antagonistic, nor does it have an immanent interest in socialism. These are undoubtedly three great reasons for rejecting the priority that Marxism gives to class politics. Nevertheless, I believe that this consequence is entirely invalid, as I hope to demonstrate in what follows.

Class and Economic Interest

According to Laclau and Mouffe, Marxism conceived social class as a subject position completely defined by strictly economic interests, i.e., constituted by criteria of productive efficiency. These criteria are two: 1) the reduction of the cost-benefit rate; and 2) the increase in the economic surplus

¹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 81.

² *Ibid.*, 56.

³ *Ibid.*, 84.

(understood as the quantity of product that exceeds the direct producers' margin of needs).⁴ Both in the case of the cost-benefit rate reduction as in the economic surplus increase, the efficiency criterion has to do with the development of the productive force or with the conscious objective of producing more with less. In Marx's words: "by increasing the productive force of labour, we mean in general an alteration in the labour process whereby the socially required labour-time for the production of a commodity is shortened. In this way, a smaller quantity of labour acquires the power to produce a larger quantity of use-value".⁵

Conversely, we can discover the specific content of class interests within the framework of the social production relationships. In this regard, Laclau and Mouffe draw attention to the Marxian characterisation of labour-power as a commodity. They argue that this characterisation serves to make the working class position coincide with the economic interest in developing productive forces. In their eyes, if labour-power is purchased in the market, like any other commodity, it might appear that that would be enough to consume the use-value offered by the labour market productively. However, this explanation would ignore the deployment of all the machinery of capital that is arranged *ex professo* to extract labour from workers. Be that as it may, for Marxism (in this Laclau-Mouffeian version), the workers' struggle against capital would not follow from resistance to integration into the production process as such. On the contrary, from an economic point of view, opposition to capital would be the foreseen result of the proactive agreement of the working class with the criteria of productive efficiency:

At the conceptual level, "worker" means just "seller of labour-power". In that case, however, I am unable to define any kind of antagonism. To assert that there is an inherent antagonism because the capitalist extracts surplus-value from the worker is clearly insufficient, because in order to have antagonism it is necessary that the worker resists such extraction. But if the worker is conceptually defined as "seller of labour-power", it is clear that I can analyze this category as much as I like, and I will still be unable to deduce from it logically the notion of resistance.⁶

Such a paraphrase of the Marxian reasoning could perhaps find some textual basis in the passages of *Capital* devoted to the historical tendency of capitalist accumulation. According to the popular version of this doctrine, the historical mission of capitalism would be to develop the productive social force to the point where the social relations of production and distribution become necessary burdens to be discharged by revolutionary action. Just at the moment when occurs the "transformation of the real functioning capitalist into a mere conductor, administrator of foreign capital, and the owner of capital into mere owners, mere money capitalists".⁷ In this sense, the capitalist class will experience

⁴ In "Post-Marxism without Apologies", Laclau and Mouffe clarify that this second criterion (an instance of "the 'homo oeconomicus' of classical political economy") is a further assumption that is introduced for argument's sake. "However, this idea that the worker is a profit-maximizer in the same way as the capitalist has been correctly rejected by all Marxist theorists". Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies", *New Left Review* 116 (1987): 103. We shall see that what is incompatible with Marxist theory is not the assumption of 'homo oeconomicus' but the restricted interpretation that this means profit-maximizer.

⁵ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Erster Band* (Berlin: Dietz, 1991), 283. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from *Capital* are my own.

⁶ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 149.

⁷ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Dritter Band* (Berlin: Dietz, 2004), 428.

"the same fate as the feudal lords in the advent of bourgeois society: their demands, rendered superfluous at the same time as their services, have been transformed into simple privileges, anachronistic and irrational, and that is what that hastened its ruin".⁸

Laclau and Mouffe's objection to this argument is that it obviates the efforts of capital to overcome workers' resistance. "The evolution of the productive forces becomes unintelligible if this need of the capitalist to exercise his domination at the very heart of the labour process is not understood".⁹ So, for them, the class conflict is, in Marxism, an *ex post facto* convulsion that has nothing to do with the development of the productive forces. "It is not surprising that the 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* depicts the outcome of the historical process exclusively in terms of the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production; nor is it surprising that class struggle is entirely absent from this account".¹⁰ Nevertheless, here Laclau and Mouffe raise against Marxism a thesis explicitly defended by Marx himself, namely, that capital develops productive power, either to make an extraordinary profit, to increase the degree of exploitation, or to overcome the workers' resistance, but in no way for the sake of the development of the productive force itself (as if it were something "neutral", in the words of Laclau and Mouffe). The first volume of *Capital*, the fifth section of chapter XIII, "Machinery and Large-Scale Industry", is entitled precisely "The Struggle between Worker and Machine" ("*Kampf zwischen Arbeiter und Maschine*"). At the beginning of the eighth paragraph, it can be read, for example:

However, the machinery does not only act as an overpowering competitor, always on the move to make the wage worker "superfluous". This hostile power is loudly and tendentially proclaimed and handled by capital. It becomes the most potent weapon of war for suppressing the periodic workers' uprisings, strikes, etc., against the autocracy of capital. According to Gaskell, the steam engine became an antagonist of "human power", which enabled the capitalist to crush the rising demands of the workers who threatened to drive the incipient factory system into crisis. One could write a whole history of the inventions since 1830, which capital uses as a means of war against workers revolts.¹¹

So, we can say that, for Marx, class interest is not only defined by efficiency criteria (from which the capitalist class is perceived as a social burden), but is also articulated from the resistance struggle against the efforts of capital to exercise its domination over the working class. What is more: class struggle is at the core of the development of productive power.

Productive Workers and Wage Labourers

⁸ Karl Marx, *El capital. Tomo III. Vol. 6* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno editores, 2016), 317.

⁹ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 78.

¹⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies", 91.

¹¹ Marx, *Das Kapital. Ester Band*, 391-392.

One of the distinguishing features of the so-called primitive accumulation is creating a special labour-power market or, technically said, the commodity market's polarisation (*Polarisation des Warenmarkts*). For Marx, this polarisation is the historical condition of converting money and commodities into capital. However, this conversion also presupposes that capital uses the labour-power productively. Perhaps this is why Laclau and Mouffe understand that Marx tends to identify the working class with manual-industrial workers. In my opinion, this impression is mistaken, but it is not without a theoretical basis since it is congruent with the objective preeminence that productive labour has in the formation of capital.

A self-employed worker, let us say a craftswoman, brings her products to the market. She has added living labour to the past labour objectified in the means of production and, thus, has undoubtedly increased the material wealth. However, we cannot account for this increase as an added value above the value represented by the money invested. That is because the magnitude of value correlative to the increase in material wealth exceeds the cost of the means of production but cannot exceed the cost represented by the reproduction of the craftswoman's life. That is true regardless of how loose or narrow her living conditions are. In any case, the craftswoman fully covers her costs of reproduction with her work. Therefore, if she were to obtain a profit after the sale of her product (that allowed her to expand the scale of his business, i.e., to spend her money as capital), she only could have done it by selling her product above its value. In contrast, according to Marx, the proletarian class is composed of free workers "in the double sense that they are neither included in the means of production – as in the case of slaves – nor do the means of production belong to them".¹² These free workers are "sellers of their own labour-power".¹³ In this sense, they are wage-labourers (*Lohnarbeiter*) thrown "as totally free proletarians into the labour market".¹⁴

Capital pays the proletarian for the use of his or her labour-power for a specified time. According to Marx, the value of this labour-power is equivalent to the cost of its reproduction. However, it happens here that the proletarian objectifies a quantity of labour equivalent to a value magnitude that exceeds the worker's reproduction cost. Consequently, if in the case of the craftswoman, the cost of reproduction X was equal to the added value Y , in the case of the proletarian, we have that $Y > X$. In this way, a magnitude of value appears above that represented by money invested, and in this regard, it is called *surplus-value*. Nevertheless, this surplus-value is part of the total value of the commodity, no more and no less. In other words, the surplus-value is not obtained by selling the product above its value. This surplus-value can subsequently serve the capitalist to increase the scale of his business, i.e., by converting the surplus-value into capital.

Capital here absorbs labour for its own reproduction on a larger scale of capital accumulation. But this service can only be provided by productive work, namely, work that increases the magnitude of socially available wealth. As Marx would say, "the capitalist throws less value into circulation in the form of money than he extracts from it because he throws into it more value in the form of commodities than he has withdrawn from it in that same form".¹⁵ Productive labour is the material condition for converting money and commodities into capital. In this sense, Nicos Poulantzas

¹² *Ibid.*, 642.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 643.

¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Zweiter Band* (Berlin: Dietz, 2008), 109.

is correct when he says that "productive labour, in the capitalist mode of production, is labour that produces surplus-value while directly reproducing the material elements that serve as the substratum of the relation of exploitation: labour that is directly involved in material production by producing use-values that increase material wealth".¹⁶ Thus, although the craftswoman's work may be broadly called productive, it is not productive from the capitalist's point of view. However, *if labour is not productive in the broader sense, neither could it be so for the bourgeois point of view.*

Capital formation thus requires the productive employment of the labour-power. But this in no way implies that the proletarian class essentially distinguishes itself by carrying on its shoulders the productive load of social work. In this respect, I would like to draw attention to the fact that Marx himself counts unproductive workers as members of the wage-labourers class as a whole. Regarding the work carried out by a merchant, Marx explains:

To simplify matters, let us assume (...) that this agent who buys and sells is also someone who sells his labour. He spends his labour-power and labour-time in these operations C – M and M – C. And so he lives off it, like someone else, e.g. from spinning or making pills. It performs a necessary function because the reproductive process itself includes unproductive functions. He works as well as any other, but the content of his work creates neither value nor product. (...) Even more. Let us assume that he is a mere wage labourer [*Lohnarbeiter*], possibly better paid. Whatever his payment, as a wage labourer, he works part of his time for free. He may receive the value product of eight hours of work every day and function for ten. The two hours of his surplus-labour [*Mehrarbeit*] produce no value just as his eight hours of necessary work.¹⁷

On the one hand, although labour-power's productive employment is a material condition for capital accumulation, unproductive employment is a condition for the realisation of value. It is an unproductive but necessary function. Then, the centrality that productive work may have from the point of view of production is further qualified from the point of view of capital reproduction. Here, productive labour does not exclude unproductive labour as a necessary function. However, on the other hand, no criterion allows the theoretical exclusion of the unproductive segment of the wage-earning population from the proletarian class as a whole. Both the productive and the unproductive worker sell their labour power and are, in that sense, exploited. In short: there is no ambiguity in Marx's concept of the working class, as Laclau and Mouffe suppose. Finally, there is no tendency to identify the working class with the narrow universe of productive workers.

This clarification becomes relevant when we consider that Laclau and Mouffe's rejection of the proletarianisation thesis is consistent with the criterion of class distinction based on the division of labour. According to them, "whereas the wage form has become generalized in advanced capitalism, the class of industrial workers has declined in numbers and importance".¹⁸ From what we have

¹⁶ Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (London: NLB, 1975), 216.

¹⁷ Marx, *Das Kapital. Zweiter Band*, 121-122.

¹⁸ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 81.

seen, the Marxian proletarianisation prognosis is valid precisely because the wage form has become generalised in advanced capitalism.

According to their interpretation, for Marx, the distinction between wage labourers and industrial workers is not apparent. And it is not, they say, because the Marxian conception of labour-power as a commodity tends to downplay relationships in the work process that are not consistent with the economic interest in the development of productive power. However, we have just seen that Marx has a precise concept for the unproductive wage labourer according to his role in the process of reproduction, which implies that the difference between wage labourer (in general) and the industrial worker (in particular) is theoretically given.

The forecast about the historical trend of capitalist accumulation was undoubtedly that the polarisation of society into classes would be sharper. Nevertheless, Laclau and Mouffe decide to understand this as a prediction about future massive employment of wage labourers in productive branches. However, by reading the Marxian argument a little more closely, the first and most essential effect of capitalist accumulation is the separation of the masses of workers from their means of production. "The so-called original accumulation is nothing but the historical process of separation between the producer and the means of production".¹⁹ This process also gives rise to the creation of the proletariat, i.e., the emergence of a particular labour-power market or a class of wage labourers. As we already saw, that is precisely the definition that Marx offers for the proletariat. So much so that he comes to refer to the proletariat explicitly by the name of "the class of wage labourers" (*die Klasse der Lohnarbeiter*).²⁰

Furthermore, the Marxian prediction related explicitly to the productive employment of wage labour is somewhat more subtle. On this question, I would like to highlight three points. First, as Laclau and Mouffe themselves maintain, Marx also detects that "it is a necessity of the capitalist mode of production that the number of wage-labourers increases in an absolute way".²¹ However, a peculiarity of capitalist accumulation is that this wage-labour population grows on a more considerable proportion than the technical capacity of capital to assimilate it. Thus, "the working-class population always grows faster than the valorization of capital".²² In this way, an industrial reserve army emerges at the same time as a surplus population. Second, there is indeed an increase in the productive employment of the wage-labour population, but one that grows in decreasing proportion concerning the increase in the mass of the means of production. Marx called the increase in the technical composition of capital (which, in some instances, may be correlated to an increase in the organic composition). Third, that the Laclau-Mouffeian interpretation of the Marxian law of capitalist accumulation misses another, less famous prediction regarding the increase in the use of unproductive labour: according to Marx, any mode of production requires devoting a part of social labour to unproductive but necessary functions, such as accounting and warehousing. However, only in the capitalist mode of production do these costs increase significantly, either because the labour dedicated to buying and selling is added, either because capitalist accounting reaches a notable social scale, or because storage has to deal with a monstrous pile of commodities. "These forms appear

¹⁹ Marx, *Das Kapital. Ester Band*, 643.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 662.

²¹ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 260.

²² Marx, *Das Kapital. Ester Band*, 579.

as huge costs of circulation".²³ Laclau and Mouffe, therefore, miss that "this part of the capital is withdrawn from the production process and belongs to the costs of circulation, as deductions from the total yield. (Including the worker himself, who is exclusively used on this function)".²⁴

Despite this, Laclau insists on interpreting the Marxian concept of the proletarian class as referring to the narrow universe of productive wage labourers. He says that "the association of the term 'proletariat' with the industrial working class took a long time to be established";²⁵ and that, before Marx, the term "proletariat" was used to refer to rather heterogeneous social strata, lacking any stable social ascription, such as the poor or immigrants. However, as soon as (according to Laclau) Marx managed to restrict the term to the industrial proletariat, the population not contained in that universe ended up being identified with the *lumpenproletariat*. Thus, "its distance from the productive process becomes the trademark of the lumpenproletariat".²⁶ In this way, Laclau reinforces his interpretation that the Marxist social division into classes is a criterion based on the division of labour. Therefore, in the Laclausian interpretation, "for Marx this extension of the category [of lumpenproletariat] is not a marginal one (...) for it refers to the whole question of the relationship between productive and unproductive labour".²⁷

There are still a couple of aspects that I cannot leave without comment. First, Laclau says that "the extension of the notion of lumpenproletariat to the whole variety of those sectors which are not engaged in production" is something "incipiently operating in Marx's later work".²⁸ However, this is simply not true. And it would be enough to review the restricted definition of the lumpenproletariat as the lowest segment of the relative overpopulation and constituted by "vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes, in short, the lumpenproletariat properly said".²⁹ Secondly, Laclau includes unproductive workers in such a universe due to their supposed exclusion from the Marxian category of the proletariat. I believe that I have offered enough elements to argue that unproductive workers are indeed included in the proletariat as long as they are waged labourers. So, in short, Marx in no way identifies the proletarian class with the class of productive workers. And if Laclau and Mouffe subscribe to the thesis that "the wage form has become generalized in advanced capitalism", then they unwittingly agree with the Marxian prognosis about the proletarianisation process.

Economic Surplus vis-à-vis Surplus-Product

Laclau and Mouffe's erroneous interpretation of the objective reference of the concept of the proletarian class is the elementary premise of the subsequent conclusion about the existence of a "structural dislocation (...) between 'masses' and 'classes', given that the line separating the former from the dominant sectors is not juxtaposed with class exploitation".³⁰ As I look forward to demonstrate, for Laclau and Mouffe exploitation is a phenomenon that only takes place in the

²³ Marx, *Das Kapital. Zweiter Band*, 125.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

²⁵ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 143.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

²⁹ Marx, *Das Kapital. Ester Band*, 578.

³⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 56.

sphere of productive work. That can be inferred from their unique formulation of the historical trend of capitalist accumulation (which we have just discussed) and the concepts of exploitation and economic surplus with which they work. I will now elaborate on these two concepts.

According to their version of the Marxist approach, the worker has an "interest in preventing capitalist absorption of the economic surplus"³¹ And such interest has a link with the socialist project to the extent that we suppose that "the worker is a homo *oeconomicus* who tries to maximize the economic surplus just as much as the capitalist".³² However, this formulation is at odds with the Marxian concept of surplus-product and the position that the working class can take on the matter from Marx's argument.

Marx historically locates the origin of commodity exchange in the ancient world's interstices (*intermundia* or *metakosmia*). In this scenario, only the excess of production becomes a commodity. The "old forms of production", says Marx, were "preferably oriented towards immediate self-consumption" and in that sense "only transformed into commodities the excess products".³³ The German term from which I translate "excess products" is *Ueberschuß des Produkts*. Further down, Marx says that capitalist production "destroys all forms of production based on the producers' self-employment or simply on the sale as a commodity of the excess product".³⁴ And here, the German term from which I translate "excess product" is *überschüssigen Produkt*. David Fernbach also translates in the same way.³⁵ And I think this is the right choice. Because, although we could translate both terms as "surplus product", we take the risk of losing the technical meaning that this latter term (*Mehrprodukt*) has for Marx.

I bring this up because it is not *prima facie* quite clear, in this context, in what sense Laclau and Mouffe use the term "economic surplus". Are they referring to "surplus-product" or "excess product" (or maybe even to "surplus-value")? And what is ultimately the precise meaning of "surplus-product"? How is it different from "excess product"?

Let us go back to basics. Marx calls *necessary labour-time* to the time during which a worker produces the necessary use-values for their reproduction. At the same time, he calls *necessary labour* to the amount of work spent during that time.³⁶ It might seem, at first glance, that both concepts are only applicable in the case of productive work for self-consumption. However, in the context of a market economy, the necessary labour-time can also be conceived as the time during which the worker produces a mass of commodities whose value is equivalent to the quantity of money necessary to reproduce both his existence and to replenish the means of production (in the case of a self-employed worker). "Since [the worker] produces in a regime based on the social division of labour, he produces his food not directly, but, in the form of a particular commodity, of yarn, for example, a value equal to the value of his livelihoods, or to the money with which he buys it".³⁷ However, the concept of necessary labour-time is also applicable to unproductive work. Let us say that the worker, in this case, provides a service and, therefore, neither produces product nor value. This fact does not prevent him from receiving payment for his services. In this sense, the price of his

³¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ Marx, *Das Kapital. Zweiter Band*, 38.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ See Karl Marx, *Capital. Volume 2* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 120.

³⁶ See Marx, *Das Kapital. Ester Band*, 195.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

services does not represent a value but a social cost. "Society does not appropriate by this means any excess product [*überschüssiges Produkt*] or value".³⁸ In any case, the labour-time during which the worker renders his services and receives the amount of money necessary to reproduce his existence counts as necessary labour-time.

When the working day has the same length as the necessary labour-time, we can call the remaining time of the day, as Marx does, excess time or leisure time (respectively, *überschüssige Zeit* and *Mußzeit*).³⁹ With the development of the productive force, the necessary labour-time must be reduced, and, in that proportion, the excess time must be increased. Now, this excess time is the condition for the worker to work for others over the work he carries for himself. However, according to Marx, the worker will only spend his excess time working for others (i.e., he will spend it as excess labour) under the pressure of external coercion.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, from the moment that this coercive force appears onstage, excess labour will turn into surplus-labour.⁴¹ The excess of time devoted to this surplus labour will turn into surplus labour-time, and the excess product will turn into surplus-product.

Nota bene: 1) Since we have seen that the craftswoman can bring her products to the market, we can say that her private work is socially productive. However, this does not mean that she works for others. The craftswoman works strictly within the margins of the necessary labour-time. Instead, "working for others" means spending excess time producing something exclusively for the benefit of a third party; 2) If excess time is spent on surplus labour, the working day can only be extended. However, as soon as the working day is extended, the excess time ceases to exist. Thus, the ground or condition for the thing disappears when the thing appears as something actual. As Hegel would say: "the thing's movement of being posited – on the one hand through its conditions, and on the other hand through its ground – is only the disappearance of the appearance of mediation";⁴² 3) Consequently, the meaning of the excess product also changes within this dialectic. First, the excess product represents an amount of use-values that exceeds the worker's margin of needs. We can suppose that this excess appears due to an increase in the productive force or an extraordinary extension of the working day. In any case, as soon as the excess product takes the form of surplus-product, we must recognize that this "excess" of use-value has not already been produced during the excess time. Quite the contrary, under these conditions, "the worker can only buy the license to work for his own existence by performing surplus labour for others";⁴³ 4) We can take this transfiguration of the excess product into surplus-product, and of the excess time into surplus labour-time, as an index of the increase in intensity and extension of the market economy brought about by the expansion of the capitalist mode of production. Thus, "the same circumstances which produce the basic condition of capitalist production – the existence of a wage-labour class– are supposed to achieve the transition of all commodity production into capitalist commodity production. (...).

³⁸ Marx, *Das Kapital. Zweiter Band*, 122.

³⁹ See Marx, *Das Kapital. Ester Band*, 459.

⁴⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 463.

⁴¹ Nancy Holmstrom has emphasised that for surplus labour to be a feature of exploitation, a coercive force must be recognized. According to her, there are "four features of exploitation: that it is a production of a surplus, appropriated from the producers, uncompensated for, and forced", "Exploitation". *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 7 (1977): 370. The experience of this coercive force has a peculiarity in the case of the wage-labourers class: "Persons who have no access to the means of production other than their own capacity to labor do not need to be forced to work by chains or by laws", *ibid.*, 357. We will deal in more detail with the concept of exploitation in the next section.

⁴² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969), 121.

⁴³ Marx, *Das Kapital. Ester Band*, 462.

[The capitalist production] first generalises commodity production, then gradually transforms all commodity production into capitalistic production".⁴⁴ So, if we can locate the origin of commodity exchange in the *intermundia* between communities – otherwise economically autonomous – we can reasonably say that we are talking about *barter* and that what such communities exchange is their excess product, but not surplus-product. In contrast, wage-labourers do not sell their excess product. They sell their labour-power to perform surplus-labour so they can work for themselves.

Back when Laclau and Mouffe spoke about the assumption (which, by the way, they do not support) that "the worker is a homo *oeconomicus* who tries to maximise the economic surplus as much as the capitalist" and that it is in the interest of the working class to prevent the "capitalist absorption of the economic surplus", what were they talking about concretely? I think it is important to remember that Laclau and Mouffe relate both assumptions with Marxism. So we can only understand the concept of "economic surplus" in a Marxist sense. Now, as we have seen, the economic surplus can mean either excess product or surplus-product. (It could also mean surplus-value, but since surplus-value is a form of surplus-product, we do not need to explore this possibility).

Suppose we take the term "economic surplus" in a sense given by the concept of excess product. In that case, we are implying that the working day is equal to the necessary working time (i.e., that the excess product is not obtained by external coercion). As Laclau and Mouffe presume a capitalist society, we must assume a fully functioning market economy. In this scenario, the worker does not produce for self-consumption but instead produces commodities. Then, the worker flings a mass of use-values whose market value is equivalent to the quantity of money necessary to reproduce his or her existence. Therefore, if an excess product is obtained at the end of the working day (which exceeds the margin of needs of the worker), this can only happen, either by an extraordinary extension of the working day or by a development of the productive force. Let us say that the excess product is obtained by an extraordinary or contingent extension of the working day. In this case, the worker will maximise the economic surplus by working voluntarily over the necessary labour time. Alternatively, he or she will try to maximise the surplus by developing the productive force of labour (that is, by keeping the same working day or even reducing it.) Given Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of what the labour-power commodity means to Marxism, it is perhaps correct to assume that they have this second possibility in mind. In any case, since the excess product is also a commodity, we can say that excess product must result in excess money in terms of its market value. Consequently, when Laclau and Mouffe say that it is in the worker's interest to avoid the absorption of the economic surplus, they are saying that the worker seeks to prevent the capitalist from keeping this excess money.

Therefore, the working class keeps in its hands the money-form of the excess product (after a period of class struggle, we can guess). And, what do the workers do with it? If the class, as an economic agent, acts primarily out of self-interest, we can foresee that this excess money will be spent either to expand the working class' scope of needs or to expand the scale of business. However, as soon as money is spent in either of these two ways, it would no longer make sense to refer to it as surplus. Furthermore, this is not the conclusion that Laclau and Mouffe want to draw; they want

⁴⁴ Marx, *Das Kapital, Zweiter Band*, 38.

to criticise the essential interest in socialism that Marxism attributes to class formation. Moreover, they say that this requires adding another hypothesis: "that [the worker] is a spontaneously cooperative being, who aspires to the social distribution of his labour product".⁴⁵ It does not matter if this distribution is made *in specie* or the form of money as a social interest grant. If the working class distributes the excess product, it makes perfect sense to continue calling it an economic surplus.

This interpretation of the economic surplus as the excess product has the advantage of being consistent with Laclau and Mouffe's argument. However, the downside is that such an interpretation does not suit the social relations of production as conceived by Marx. Let us remember that, in the context of capitalist production, the wage-labouring class buys with surplus labour the licence to perform its necessary labour time. In that sense, its primary interest is to minimise the surplus labour time, i.e., minimise the economic surplus (understood here as surplus-product). In this way, the working class accomplishes to reduce the cost-benefit rate. If we want to coordinate the premises of Laclau and Mouffe with those of Marx, we would have to concede that the working class seeks to work against its interest (seeking to extend the surplus labour-time, i.e., to increase the cost-benefit rate) and then fight in the interest of the rest of society, but in detriment of itself. By *lex parsimoniae*, it is more reasonable to simply assume that the working class seeks, in its own interest, to minimise the economic surplus. Also, that is actually what Marx states. Said in plain terms: the working class does not seek to prevent the absorption of the surplus by the capitalist class. Instead, it looks to avoid producing that surplus in the first place. And, contrary to what Laclau and Mouffe expect, this (self) interest is precisely what links the working class with the socialist project, as we will see later.

In conclusion, if the concept of economic surplus has a Marxist meaning and does not contradict Laclau and Mouffe's argument, then it can only mean excess product. But if this is the case, then Laclau and Mouffe's criticism does not correspond to the capitalist relations of production, as Marx conceives them, and it turns out to be inconsequential.

Exploitation

This production relationship, in which a worker performs surplus labour for the benefit of a third party as a condition for carrying out the necessary work on his or her behalf, is what is called *exploitation* in Marxist terms. But we can suspect that if the Laclau-Mouffean concept of the economic surplus is not identifiable with that of surplus-product, then Laclau and Mouffe will have a positively different concept of exploitation. And it is not difficult to perceive that, for them, exploitation would have to refer to the appropriation by the capitalist of the excess product. Here the distinctive characteristic of exploitation is the appropriation of the mass of use-values that exceed the direct producers' margin of needs (regardless of whether that mass acquires the subsequent money-form). Instead, for Marxism, the essential feature of exploitation is the appropriation of excess time and its consequent transfiguration into surplus labour-time.

Laclau and Mouffe understand economic surplus as the excess product, and this can also be seen in the fact that the alleged socialist interest of the working class is related to "the social distribution of

⁴⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 84.

[the] labour product".⁴⁶ As the absorption of this excess product by the capitalist class is the hallmark of exploitation, then for Laclau and Mouffe, unproductive work by definition cannot be exploited, even if it develops during surplus labour-time. So, suppose it is true that "whereas the wage form has become generalized in advanced capitalism, the class of industrial workers has declined in numbers and importance".⁴⁷ In that case, we can understand that Laclau and Mouffe defend the existence of a "structural dislocation [emerging] between 'masses' and 'classes', given that the line separating the former from the dominant sectors is not juxtaposed with class exploitation".⁴⁸

However, when we take the concept of exploitation in the Marxist sense of surplus-labour extraction, we can start from the same premise – the generalisation of the wage form – and reach the opposite conclusion, namely: the coincidence between the (wage-labour) masses and classes, since the dividing line between masses and dominant sectors coincides with class exploitation, i.e., with the appropriation of excess time from the masses and its subsequent transfiguration into surplus labour-time.

On the other hand, we can see that it is only natural for Laclau and Mouffe to stress the distribution of the economic surplus as one of the key problems for a socialist project. Whereas for Marxism it is, on the contrary, a question of suppressing the surplus altogether. So we can understand that for them the link between socialism and democracy is not obvious at all. From their perspective, if it is not the capitalist class who decides over the economic surplus, it could be the state – but not necessarily a democratic one. That is why they say that "the articulation between socialism and democracy, far from being an axiom, is a political project; that is, it is the result of a long and complex hegemonic construction".⁴⁹ However, for Marxism, the main problem with leaning too much on distribution issues is that it opens the door to the possibility of authoritarian economic management, since it does not eliminate the class division of society. As Michal Polák says: "the concept of 'appropriation of the fruit of labour' of others is unsatisfactory because it would allow the 'elimination' of exploitation by the simple means of redistributing the surplus product [...]. Exploitation results from the fact that the surplus product has been produced in the first place. It is 'too late' to do anything about this when the time for redistribution comes around".⁵⁰

To the Laclau-Mouffean version of Marxist theory, it may be that coercion is necessary for the capitalist class to be able to appropriate the excess product. However, such coercion is not necessary for that economic surplus to be produced by the working class in the first place, because the labour class' interest in reducing the cost-benefit rate coincides with the interest in increasing productivity, contrary to what Marx argues. In the interpretation of Laclau and Mouffe, the increase in productivity is merely a technical and neutral data for Marxism. As Javier Waiman has emphasised regarding Laclau: "The ownership of the means of production, the appropriation of the economic surplus, the division of labour and the degree of development of the productive forces are neutral and technical elements, unrelated to any type of political determination, for the class struggle, present in every society".⁵¹ Then, the productive efficiency of the working class is not explained by exploitation;

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁹ Laclau and Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies", 101.

⁵⁰ Michal Polák, *Class, Surplus, and the Division of Labour* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 96.

⁵¹ Javier Waiman, "¿Qué Marx(ismo) el del posmarxismo? Sobre la presencia de Marx en la obra de Laclau", in *Pensar lo social. Pluralismo teórico en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2018), 245-246. The translation is mine.

instead, the working class is exploited based on its alleged tendency to increase productivity.

I have already pointed out that the reformulation of the Marxian theory about the development of the productive force as a technical and neutral datum does not find support in *Capital*. We saw that, for Marx, a large part of the technical impulse of productivity is constituted precisely by the animosity that the capitalist class has towards the working class. I also pointed out that, contrary to what Laclau and Mouffe suggest, the economic interest of the working class in reducing the cost-benefit rate is not consistent with the alleged interest in maximising the economic surplus. On the contrary, following the law of parsimony, I said that we have to avoid unnecessarily assumptions and that the goal of minimising the economic surplus (and with it the surplus labour-time) could also be attributed to the working class, as long as this is congruent with the socialist project. In support of this, I will show some textual evidence later. What I now find relevant is to highlight Marx's position on the maximisation of the economic surplus.

In *Capital*, Marx polemicised against two theories that seek to explain the origin of surplus-labour (which is the condition of existence of the surplus-product and, consequently, also of surplus-value). In the first place, Marx discards the "mystical" notion of supposed natural productivity of labour, according to which "an inherent quality of human labour is to produce a surplus-product".⁵² Against this mystical theory, Marx refutes that, to produce a surplus, a minimum development of the productive force is necessary – a development that reduces the labour time required and frees up time for possible additional productive employment: "If the worker needs all of his time to maintain himself and to produce the food necessary for his family, he has no time to work for free for third parties. Without a certain degree of productivity in work, there is no such available time for the worker; without such excess time, no surplus-labour".⁵³ However, secondly, Marx here immediately opposes the (let us call it) *productivist* theory which holds that the increase in labour productivity is sufficient to yield an excess of product. (And here we could locate Laclau and Mouffe's interpretation). This increase may be due both to the benignity of natural conditions and the industry's development. In any case, such conditions are limited to "provide the possibility, never the reality of surplus-labour, neither of surplus-value or surplus-product".⁵⁴

So, we can speak of a natural and technical foundation of surplus-labour, but "only in the very general sense that there is no absolute natural obstacle that prevents one man from removing from himself the necessary labour for his own existence and rolling it onto another".⁵⁵ However, for surplus-labour to fully become real, "external coercion is required".⁵⁶ Thus, while for Laclau and Mouffe, the economic surplus is a direct effect of the increase in productivity, and exploitation is an open possibility based on this technical data, for Marx, surplus labour is the direct effect of external coercion given a certain increase in productivity.

Finally, from the Laclau-Mouffean point of view, the class struggle is at best an opposition struggle, but not an antagonistic one. Opposition is a reciprocal action between two agents whose result is the mutual cancellation of the consequences of such interaction. In this relationship, each agent has a well-defined identity and purpose or a positive or full identity. Laclau and Mouffe explain

⁵² Marx, *Das Kapital. Ester Band*, 462-463.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 459.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 462.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 459-460.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 463.

this using Kant's words: "in every real opposition both predicates must be positive, but in such a manner that in their union within the same subject the consequences reciprocally annul each other. Thus, in the case of those things which are considered each the negative of the other, when they combine in the same subject, the result is zero".⁵⁷

In this sense, for Laclau and Mouffe, the class confrontation around the excess product must be considered as an opposition struggle, first, because it is a confrontation between two agents due precisely to the positivity of their identity and purpose. Both the working class and the capitalist class want to maximise the surplus, and both want to monopolise it completely. In either case, the portion of the surplus gained by one is lost by the other. So, second, the effect of one overrides that of the other. It is, therefore, a zero-sum game: an oppositional struggle.

On the other hand, Laclau and Mouffe reserve the concept of antagonism for the negative effect that the action of one agent may have on the identity of another. And they put as an example: "it is because a peasant cannot be a peasant that an antagonism exists with the landowner expelling him from his land".⁵⁸ The identity of the peasant, they say, is not complete. However, neither is the identity of the force of the landlord that antagonises him: its objective being is a symbol of the non-being of the peasant. In contrast, the interests of the working class are indeed opposed to those of the capitalist class. That can only be so because workers do not undermine the positive identity of the capitalist class. In other words, it is because the working class is totally itself that there is no antagonism with the capitalist class, against which it simply opposes.

Incidentally, in "Post-Marxism without Apologies", Laclau and Mouffe offer a rather odd qualification. They again say that we cannot derive the notion of an antagonistic relationship from the concept of labour-power alone, because the resistance from the extraction of surplus-value is not contained in that concept as an analytical feature. But they say that we can do this if we add the aforementioned assumption of the surplus maximisation interest:

[I]f the worker resists the extraction of his or her surplus-value by the capitalist does the relation become antagonistic, but such resistance cannot be logically deduced from the category "seller of labour power". It is only if we add a further assumption, such as the 'homo oeconomicus' of classical political economy, that the relation becomes antagonistic, since it then becomes a zero-sum game between worker and capitalist.⁵⁹

Here, Laclau and Mouffe forget that they already had the conceptual basis for an entirely different (and much more robust, although equally wrong) conclusion: that we cannot establish an antagonistic relationship even with that further assumption.

Thus, the struggle for the distribution of the surplus product takes place precisely because classes exist, and not because the proletarian class symbolises the non-being of the capitalist class. In this sense, they say, the labour movement that emerges from the mid-nineteenth century in Europe is "a product of capitalism; but this labour movement tends to call less and less into question capitalist

⁵⁷ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 148.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵⁹ Laclau and Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies", 103.

relations of production as such – these having by then solidly implanted – and concentrates on the struggle for the transformation of relations in production”.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the strategy proposed by Marxism is not the maximisation of the surplus but its minimisation. In this sense, the class struggle suppresses the material base thanks to which the capitalist class exists. Thus, the reduction of surplus-labour time becomes the symbol of the not-being of the capitalist class. As Laclau and Mouffe would say: it is because the capitalist cannot be a capitalist that an antagonism exists with the working class that tends to suppress surplus-labour.⁶¹

Now it is time to bring the textual evidence in this regard. We can read in *Capital* that, if the working day shrunk to necessary labour-time, “the surplus-labour would disappear, which is impossible under the regime of capital. The abolition of the capitalist mode of production makes it possible to limit the working day to necessary labour”.⁶² However, if such an abolition is to take place, the surplus product also disappears. Here Marx expresses no interest in maximising the economic surplus. On the contrary, by eliminating surplus labour-time, the working day would be reduced in absolute terms, but the necessary labour-time would be extended in relative terms. “On the one hand, because the worker’s living conditions would be richer and their demands would be greater. On the other hand, part of the current surplus-labour would count as necessary labour, namely the labour necessary to obtain a social reserve and accumulation fund”.⁶³

Conclusions

At the beginning of this text, I pointed out that two of Laclau and Mouffe’s main criticisms of Marxism are: 1) the refutation of the mass proletarianisation prognosis, and 2) the rejection of the thesis that the formation of the working class is consistent with an essential interest in socialism. We are now in a better position to assess both issues.

Concerning the first question, Laclau and Mouffe take the Marxian statement about mass proletarianisation as a prediction relative to the future productive employment of the wage-labouring masses. (Incidentally, for them, this prediction is the foundation of political prognosis about future class unity, but we are not concerned with this here since it is a derivative question). Their criticism consists in contrasting this prognosis with the emergence of the middle classes, among which are mostly unproductive wage labourers. For quite dubious reasons, Laclau even goes so far as to include this subset of the wage-labour class within the universe of the lumpenproletariat (which, according to him, is composed of unproductive workers, wage earners or not).

Regardless of the excessively free use of the concept of the lumpenproletariat (a use that Laclau wrongly attributes to Marx himself), Laclau and Mouffe overlook the fact that Marx conceptualises the working class based on the essential feature of the sale of its labour-power, which includes its

⁶⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 157.

⁶¹ In “Post-Marxism without Apologies”, they also reject that “the antagonism is inherent in the very form of the wage-labour-capital relation, to the extent that this form is based on the appropriation by capital of the worker’s surplus labour”, 103. But they do so because, again, they do not find any analytical implication from which we can derive any sign of worker’s resistance to “the extraction of his or her surplus-value”, *ibidem*. Leaving aside that they conflate surplus labour with surplus-value, we should ask why they expect an *a priori* proof of this resistance? For in *Capital* we only find a theoretical expression of the historical features of the capitalist mode of production.

⁶² Marx, *Das Kapital*. Ester Band, 474–475.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

extended employment during surplus labour-time (exploitation). In this sense, the working class's characteristic is not its occupation in productive branches, but the fact that free-wage labourers constitute it, in the double sense mentioned above. Given that Laclau and Mouffe subscribe to the generalisation of the wage form, they should also subscribe to both the diagnosis of mass proletarianisation and the thesis that exploitation is, consequently, a phenomenon that affects the masses and not only the subset of productive workers. Because the distinctive feature of exploitation is not, as we have seen, the appropriation of economic surplus, but the conversion of excess time into surplus labour-time. And this conversion is what the wage form facilitates.⁶⁴

Concerning the second question, we have seen that the socialist interest is linked, by Laclau and Mouffe, with the social distribution of the economic surplus. For them, Marxism would maintain that the working class has a socialist interest only insofar as it supposes, not only that the worker is someone spontaneously cooperative, but that he or she is also a *homo oeconomicus* interested in maximising the economic surplus. According to Laclau and Mouffe, this conclusion logically follows from the conceptualization of the labour-power as a commodity. Under this categorization, the worker's economic interest in reducing the cost-benefit rate coincides with the interest in increasing productivity in general, and with the maximisation of the economic surplus in particular.

We have already seen that this interpretation lacks textual basis and, what is more, raises against Marxism an objection explicitly formulated by Marx himself: that the development of the productive forces takes place mainly as a coercive mechanism of capital against the working class. On the other hand, we have argued that the economic interest of the working class in reducing the cost-benefit rate is consistent, from the Marxist point of view, with the interest in minimising or even suppressing the economic surplus, if by that we understand the reduction of the surplus labour-time. Moreover, there is no first-hand textual evidence to interpret that Marx considered that the working class bears an interest in increasing the economic surplus. The only way to save the Laclau-Mouffean interpretation is to suppose that it refers to the Marxian concept of excess-product (*überschüssigen Produkt*). But if this is the case, then Laclau and Mouffe are thinking from Marxism, but outside the capitalist production relationships.

⁶⁴ The rejection of the mass proletarianization prediction is inconsistent due to two more errors. I will only mention them here briefly. The first is a simple misinterpretation: Marx highlights the proletarianisation tendency implicit in capital accumulation, but does not make any prediction properly said. In this sense, it is like Sciss, the mathematician in the novel of Stanislaw Lem, *The Investigation*, who says: "Yes. Only I'm not predicting, I'm drawing conclusions". The second error is methodological, and it is an error that William Hackett took as a paradigm of what he called the *interminable fallacy*. It consists of the excessive use of the same story to explain significantly different phenomena. "A familiar example is that omnipresent cliché of modern European historiography, the 'rise of the middle class'". William Hackett, *Historian's Fallacies. Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1970), 150. And this endless story is the same one that Laclau and Mouffe use to disprove the tendency of capitalism to polarise society into antagonistic classes.

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