

The Privilege of Servitude: The New Service Proletariat in the Digital Age, *written by* Ricardo Antunes

Q2/Q1

 The corrections made in this section will be reviewed by journal production editor.

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Ricardo Antunes remains a relatively little-known author in the mainstream European sociological landscape, even though he is unquestionably one of the most incisive observers of the ‘cataclysm’ afflicting wage labour in this latest phase of the capitalist mode of production. In *The Privilege of Servitude*, the Brazilian sociologist masterfully analyses the process of (further) fragmentation and precarisation of labour, the consequent new class formation and the further segmentation and ‘heterogenisation’ of the workforce within the process of (ongoing) restructuring of the capitalist system. Antunes uses, in this instance, the expression ‘class-that-lives-from-labour’ to respond to and deconstruct André Gorz’s nebulous, indeterminate and indeterminant construct of the ‘non-class of non-workers’.

Specifically, Antunes observes how Taylorism-Fordism has ceased to be the principal model of productive organisation and is beginning to merge with more flexible forms of accumulation, and he focuses on the ‘infoproletariat’ of services in the digital age and on the intense and globally extensive process of the ‘uberisation’ of labour – that is, the unbounded combination of informability, flexibility, precariousness and thus hyper-exploitation. His analysis centres on service workers – in call centres and telemarketing, the software industry and information technologies, hotel services and fast-food chains, e-commerce and so forth – and posits a growing distance separating them from the modes of intellectual work which characterise the so-called middle classes.

Moreover, the Brazilian sociologist engages with the Marxian theme of the value-production process within the circulation of commodities and the activities incorporating immaterial labour. To this end, he revisits Volume II of *Capital* and takes as his premise that industrial capital transcends strictly material production, as becomes evident in his characterisation of the transport industry – and other branches such as storage, warehousing, communications and so forth.

Finally, he offers a historical and analytical reconstruction of the crisis of Brazilian trade-unionism, of the involution of left-wing movements in Brazil and of the deconstruction of labour in the preventive counter-revolution under the country’s most recent governments – all without losing sight of the possibilities and opportunities for a simultaneous process of emancipation *of* labour, *in* labour and *from* labour, and more generally of a new mode of life in Latin America, beyond its national configurations, at continental and global scales.

Antunes’s is an organic, global, timely and all-encompassing gaze on the transformations of the new morphology of labour, which helps us to understand what the working class is today, by whom it is composed and how. It is precisely a gaze capable of taking in – and bewitching – peripheries and metropolises of the world-system; ‘old’ and new technologies; manual and intellectual labour; material and immaterial; contractualised and informal; properly waged and that which is equally waged but falsely autonomous; skilled and unskilled; agricultural, industrial and service labour; the ‘uberised’ worker and the ideology of presumed ‘self-entrepreneurship’.

The Brazilian sociologist argues and demonstrates that labour has not disappeared. If – through the decentralisation of production processes, their relocation from the factory to domestic settings, the creation of ever smaller and ever more interconnected firms in their supply chains, processes of offshoring, the expansion of immaterial productive activities, technological transformations and the ‘uberisation’ of labour – the restructuring of the capitalist mode of production has entailed a rupture with the Fordist (and Taylorist) mass worker, that is, with the increase in the constant portion of the organic composition of capital, and thus a significant reduction of living labour, a marked weakening of the world of labour and of the class-that-lives-from-labour, ever more fragmented and composite, this does not mean that labour and its class have disappeared. On the contrary.

Above all, Antunes emphasises that the theses concerning the expansion of immaterial productive activities in contemporary capitalism focus on a ‘Euro-centric’ or, more precisely, a Global North prerogative and find no ontological basis if one considers the totality of global production – thus including the Global South and countries such as China, India, Mexico, South Africa and so forth, endowed with an enormous and growing labour force contingent. To understand labour in its global reach, then, it is necessary to look beyond the purely national case – almost always Western – and to recognise the formidable and objective rise in the number of wage labourers and the working class at the global scale. Even in the metropolis, the decline in the number of Fordist-Taylorist factory workers does not translate into a decline in the proletariat, which instead increases, albeit in a more complex form, changing ‘shape’ and becoming precarious. Antunes thus returns to Marx’s argument in Volume I of *Capital* with regard to the industrialisation of manufacturing and agriculture, to the real subsumption of labour under capital, in order to describe the process of subordination of services to capital and the consequent explosion of the service proletariat – a heterogeneous component of the working class which, in this form and with these modalities, certainly did not exist in earlier centuries. That is, this is a reflection which allows the theme of immaterial labour to be situated within a framework in which it *combines* with material labour, in a structured and structuring system of modes aimed at the extraction of the maximum quantity and quality of value from living labour.

Another theme traversing Antunes’s theoretical and empirical trajectory lies in his reflections on the process of value-production within the circulation process of commodities. While the basic premise of Marx’s thought remains for him undeniably fixed – that surplus value is created in production – by revisiting Volume II of *Capital* he also emphasises that capitalist production is not reducible to industrial production in the strict sense (and invites us to consider industrialised agriculture); industrial capital transcends strictly material production (and invites us to consider the transport industry and its induced branches); and production is immediately also consumption and vice versa – that is, production, distribution, circulation, exchange and consumption form part of a single *global* process. Especially in exceptional situations (for example, in the case of goods requiring particular forms of transport and/or warehousing), the circulation and warehousing of commodities produce – or rather ‘preserve’ – surplus value. The time of production, then, comprises not only production proper, but also circulation. Hence, the shorter the circulation time of the commodity – meaning the more the metamorphosis of the circulation of capital occurs under ideal conditions – the higher will be the productivity of the labour necessary for its production, the profit and the surplus value generated. It follows that the phenomenological reduction of immediate industrial activity (assuming that this occurs or has occurred at a global level) does not entail a reduction of surplus value and extraction of value from living labour, of exploitation and of the working class itself. The service proletariat, in fact, even if it does not play a primary role in the creation of surplus value through production, performs it in the creation – or ‘preservation’ – of surplus value through the reduction of commodity-circulation time.

The theme of the ‘uberisation’ of labour directly evokes the ideology of self-entrepreneurship (with its neolinguistic lexicon made up of empty and euphemistic expressions such as ‘platform economy’, ‘sharing economy’, ‘gig economy’, ‘co-working’, ‘home office’, ‘smart working’ and other apologia of ‘resilience’, which transform subordination into ‘synergy’ and the salaried worker into ‘collaborator’, ‘partner’ or ‘entrepreneur of oneself’). It is a metamorphosis, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, into which the proletariat is propelled in the 21st century: formally becoming ‘service providers’, entailing their progressive exclusion from what still survives of social-protection legislation of labour and working conditions; the intensification of work rhythms and hours; the shifting onto workers – and hence the saving for firms – of costs of provisioning and maintenance of fixed capital.

The new morphology of labour, then, is reflected in subjectivity and poses a major challenge to labouring humanity and to the class-that-lives-from-labour. For capital, in fact, as much as the exploitation of labour in itself is necessary, so too is the ideological mystification of that exploitation, the presentation of exploitation and self-exploitation in the positive

terms of self-valorisation – that is, the concealment of material conditions and their reduction to the individual responsibilities of the individual. Through the coercion to live one's material condition as one of 'autonomy', under the ideological veneer of mystification that represents it as autonomous, 'free', easily combinable and reconcilable with other productive and reproductive activities, what is realised instead is the highest level of hetero-determination and subordination of one's existence. One could, in part, challenge the Brazilian sociologist – or rather say add to what he has observed – in that false consciousness arrives where the urgency of material necessities does not, which pushes workers to accept 'uberisation' more out of necessity than from an ideological and uncritical adherence to a given mode of existence.

In the forms of exploitation of labour in the latest phase of capitalism, thus, we see reappear archaic forms of labour deployment and exploitation: the exploitation of labour in the digital era closely resembles the exploitation of labour in the 'first industrialisation', showing incontrovertibly now that capitalism, having reached this phase, can still survive only by pushing back the conditions of existence and the way of life of the working class and society. It is, upon closer inspection, a return – or better, the *creation* – of a combination of piece-work and home-based work.

In his writings, Antunes deconstructs this ideology and defines these new labour modalities as an extension and expansion of the law of value via firms (Amazon, Uber, Glovo, Deliveroo, FedEx, etc.) that, especially in the pandemic era, are acquiring incredible strength, assuming the role of the vanguard in the current phase of capitalism. A fundamental thesis of Antunes's work, then, is that the law of value, instead of waning, has intensified, broadened and deepened its validity: moving on a global scale, from industry to all activities of production and reproduction of social life, inserting itself into the interstices of the processes of production – and reproduction – clearly visible today in the so-called Industry 4.0.

The process of informalisation of labour and, more generally, precarisation, Antunes emphasises, does not constitute a specificity of our time or of the current phase of the capitalist system, but is in the nature of the very social and productive – and life – system of capitalism. He hypothesises that the present capitalist phase, in which platforms and algorithms regulate an enormous part of the labour processes, in modalities encouraged and commanded by the large global corporations, is nothing other than something increasingly closely resembling the original essence of capitalism. That is to say, it is a tendency which originates with the very creation of wage labour under the dominion of capital – and which can intensify, more or less rapidly, depending on the capacity of the working class to resist and on social conflict. Already Marx and Engels had shown how the exploitation of labour was inversely correlated to the 'relative over-population': the surplus labour force that could be employed by capital as a leverage for intensifying levels of exploitation and, consequently, for the precarisation of labour. In the current phase of the economic and social capitalist system, 'relative over-population' acquires new dimensions and configurations. The 'industrial reserve army', globally considered, as part of the class-that-lives-from-labour, thus acquires a new morphology.

Capital has exploited the pandemic and economic crisis to reorganise and expand, as well as normalise, its mechanisms of labour exploitation, starting from services labour and extending to all sectors of the economy. Once again, the burden of the crisis is transferred onto the labouring class.

Finally, another dimension explored by Antunes concerns technique, in reference to the so-called platform capitalism: a linguistic expression – also ideological – that appropriates a supposed 'neutrality of technique' according to which a capitalism in which the technical medium dominates capital would have emerged, whereas in fact it is capital *hiding behind* the technical medium, in order to attribute to extra-social reasons, embedded in the mechanisms of production and circulation of commodities, a certain relation of subordination – ever more totalising – of living labour.

With respect to this aspect, one could raise an observation regarding a process left under-explored by Antunes. The Brazilian scholar does not treat in depth the crucial theme of the impact and transformations that automation, artificial intelligence and robotics are producing and will produce for labour. If, on the one hand, such technological innovations respond to capital's need to further reduce production costs and produce more in less time, on the other hand, since this entails a progressive substitution of living labour and of human bodies put to work and to reproduce, the capitalist problem arises – where and how to continue extracting surplus value.

It should also be said that Antunes does not leave the reader in the grip of despair, pessimism and despondency but, of course, does not lose sight of the role that the class-that-lives-from-labour has in the struggle for possible social, political and economic transformation. While delineating the contours of the current capitalist phase as those of a phase in which

we are witnessing the most totalitarian possible form of capital's dominion (over labour) – or in any case the most totalitarian in the history of the capitalist system to date – Antunes does not eliminate from his analytical horizon social conflict: on the contrary, even in times when it appears to be ruled out by naïve and immediate empiricism, he highlights the irreducibly dialectical dimension of materiality. The Brazilian scholar, while warning us of the need not to underestimate the totalitarian, pervasive and destructive power of (capital's) domination, and while emphasising the fragmentation, heterogeneity, high level of ideologisation and 'false-consciousness' that characterise the working class today, points out how the progressive and objective overall deterioration of its conditions of existence and the convergence downward of the living conditions of workers of the Global North and those of the Global South may entail an objective unification of the class-that-lives-from-labour. If such unification is the result of capital's need to valorise itself, through the devalorisation of living labour, simultaneously, upon that unification one can – and must – build the ever necessary class struggle.

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