

INTRANSIGENCE

An aerial photograph of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Two soccer balls are suspended from the top of the tower. A large crowd of people is gathered at the base of the tower, and a large screen displays a soccer match. The surrounding area is filled with green trees and city buildings.

ISSUE № 5 — OCTOBER 2019

PROJECT

Intransigence is a publication aiming at the regroupment of the communist left in North America, based on shared fundamental principles and broad points of agreement. A list of these principles can be found at the end of this issue. Several groups are affiliated so far. You can find their website and e-mail contacts below, or visit our website for more information. Guidelines for submission are also included further toward the bottom of the page.

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SUBMIT

If you are interested in submitting something you've written to Intransigence, send your piece to intransigencejournal@gmail.com. Pieces of varying length will be considered, and can cover a range of theoretical, practical, historical, or journalistic topics so long as they are relevant to the publication's themes. But bear in mind this is a political medium, not an intellectual clearing-house.

INTRANSIGENCE

PUBLICATION OF INTERNATIONALIST COMMUNISTS IN NORTH AMERICA

ISSUE № 5 — October 2019

"Present-day society, which developing productive forces to a gigantic degree, while powerfully conquering ever new realms, while subjugating nature to man's domination on an unprecedented scale, begins to choke in the capitalist grip. Contradictions inherent in the very essence of capitalism, and appearing in an embryonic state at the beginning of its development, have grown, have widened their scope with every stage of capitalism; in the period of imperialism they have reached proportions that cry to heaven. Productive forces in their present volume insistently demand new production relations. The capitalist shell must inevitably burst."

Nikolai Bukharin

Imperialism and World Economy (1917)

Contents

— Editorial	3
— Left Unity	5
Laser637	
— Organizing the workplace: Part II	8
Magnus Zeller	
— Caliban and the Witch: A critical analysis	17
Translation by SC	
— Social history of the Internet: Part II	37
Humanaesfera	
— Primitive accumulation in the Amazon	45
Atticus	
— A class perspective on the 'women question'	48
Battaglia Comunista	
— In defense of decadence	56
Emanuel Santos	

EDITORIAL

OCTOBER 2019

Communists haven't always opposed the development of capitalism. During the American Civil War, communists threw their support behind capitalists. After his re-election President Lincoln received a letter of congratulations from the First International (though technically it congratulated the American people for re-electing Lincoln). This was in spite of the fact that Lincoln was obviously no communist. And the support of the Union cause by communists was not limited to words. Communists such as Joseph Weydemeyer and August Willich served as officers in the Union Army, rallying others to join the war effort.

This might all seem strange, given that communists in the present day are steadfast in their opposition to capitalism. Why would they have supported it in the past? What changed?

Our answer is that capitalism became decadent. In the 19th century, capitalism was in its ascendancy. It was a rising force taking on the old order of aristocratic rule, which was a society itself in decay. In the American South, the ruling class was not of birthright as in other parts of the world, but the laboring class of slaves were condemned to servitude with no means of escape. The destruction of this slave society liberated millions, and it paved the way for a new social order—one spreading from the North—which had advantages over the old system but was not free of drawbacks. The factory system and wage labor spread, and the opening of even larger markets fueled profits. By the end of the 19th century, the United States was a beacon of industrial capitalism and a competitor on the world stage. The Gilded Age, as it was called, saw migrations of many from the countryside, including freed slaves and their descendants, into the crowded cities. Immigrants arrived as well, seeking escape from unrest in their former countries. That unrest occurring in Europe in Asia was in part a transformation of those countries, from stagnant, largely peasant societies into quickly industrializing nations. The growing pains of capitalism were felt as more and more found themselves with nothing but their labor to sell.

The great powers of the world at the turn of the 20th century found themselves hungering for labor and resources, as no amount of growth could sate

their appetite for profit. European powers, like Britain, that already had large military occupations throughout the world, were at an advantage, while newcomers to the scene had to race to carve up the world to obtain necessary resources to their own development. Resources like copper, rubber, coal, and oil became strategically necessary to continue commodity production. The firms that were given free reign to exploit those resources were often monopolistic, and in their conquest of an even greater market share, their interests became one with the state that was reliant on them to build up arms to defend against any and all competing national interests.

With this rise of capitalism came the rise of two great classes. With the rise of the capitalist class and the proletariat came struggle. Labor fought battles in the streets to obtain concessions, but the state always came to the loyal defense of its capitalist class. In this period, the working class began to see its interests as being in total opposition to those of its masters. Mass parties formed, and some grew powerful enough to enter national politics. It was not long before politicians found themselves with great power, and the lines between their own interest and the interest of the state blurred.

In the decades following this great arc upward for capitalist development came the bloodiest period in human history. The development of capitalism was always far from harmonious, but the period prior to the First World War would come to be known in Europe as *La Belle Époque*—the “beautiful epoch”—a period where prosperity within the imperialist powers seemed to be destined to bubble at the surface indefinitely. Underneath that surface, however, prosperity was a false promise for the working class. When the façade of harmony came crashing down, that hollow promise turned into an industrially advanced, mechanized nightmare the likes of which the world had never seen. It was, of course, the working class that would be asked—or condemned—to sacrifice for the interests of nation and state. Many workers had come to identify their own interests with that of the state, but many came to understand that in the war to follow their interests were more closely aligned to their “en-

emy”, the worker in the other trench, than with the officers that barked orders at either one of them. Unfortunately, the career politicians of the working class parties were left with a dilemma—to support the cause of proletarians of all countries, and to demand an end of their bloodshed, or to subordinate the working class parties to the cause of defending the interests of the nation. For many workers of the Social Democratic parties, the swift betrayal came as a shock. Few, if any, were prepared at that moment to comprehend what this travesty would mean for their class.

Communists mark the period of the start of the First World War to the beginning of the Russian Revolution as having profound implications for the proletariat. Throughout the years of brutality, the appeal to nation grew frail, the promise of a common national interest irreconcilably broken. A brave few stood up to the nationalist appeals and rejected the positions of the Social Democratic parties pitted against one another in alliance with their local capitalists. As the war raged on and the death count entered the millions, the calls of communists grew louder. While even in the early stage desertion and resistance from workers on the battlefield was “a problem”, it became apparent that the end to the war had not in sight if the working class was willing to continue to fight it. By the end of the war, soldiers regularly refused orders. Mutinies in the Navy and strikes in the major cities cut plans for further conscription short. The eventual collapse of the military machines of Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary were brought about through organized proletarian resistance. With the collapse of the Russian Empire, and its rump bourgeois Provisional Government, came the rise of an explicitly proletarian, internationalist, and communist movement. Unlike the calls from the Social Democrats to continue bearing arms against their own class, this movement called for end to the war, and the beginning of a revolutionary civil war against the states that oppress proletarians the world over.

This decline marked the end of the overlap between the interests of communists and capitalists. In earlier times, the expansion of capitalism created the conditions necessary for socialism, specifically the global spread of large industry. But once that became a reality, there was no further use for capitalist development. And soon, the development of capitalism became not only useless, but it became self-destructive. Once that threshold was crossed, any support for capitalism only

weakened the movement for socialism.

It is part of the nature of capital that it must expand. Unfortunately, the world is not such a big place, and capital grows like a weed. And with virtually every corner of the world engaged in capitalist production, there is nowhere left to go. So, capital must extract more from places it already controls. More time from workers, more resources from the Earth, more energy from fossil fuels. More of everything than we could hope to sustain.

That is why giant sections of the Amazon are being intentionally burned to ash. It's not that capitalists don't know the consequences of environmental destruction. They know as well as we do that the world is burning and every day brings us closer to extinction, but they can't stop the expansion of capital any more than the Sorcerer's Apprentice could stop all those brooms in Fantasia.

The logic of capitalist expansion tests the limits of our environment, and the limits of working class submission. As markets have expanded to every corner of the globe, rising movements of workers both in their workplaces and against the state have become commonplace. Ongoing strikes and protests are occurring simultaneously in multiple locations throughout the world. Often these movements make ambiguous demands, but even when the state concedes the movements have yet to accept a truce. Whether the fight is in Baghdad, Paris, Hong Kong, or Quito, the various states have yet to quell building resentment.

Capitalists have to serve the interests of capital. So whatever bargains they make, whatever reforms or regulations they promise, they can't give us what we need. Appealing to them in the hope of fixing a broken world is pointless. Only the independent action of the working class can help us now.

There's a saying that what you own owns you. There's a kernel of truth in that, but it breaks down at a certain point. The working class doesn't really own anything of significant value—not enough to make workers beholden to capital. So, it would be more accurate to say of capitalists, that what they own owns the world. The only way to save the world from being burned and pillaged and broken until we can no longer live on it is to get rid of ownership altogether. And because we own nothing, and are therefore owned by nothing, the working class is the only group free to do what needs to be done.



—*The face of left unity*

LEFT UNITY

Talk to enough people who call themselves communists, and you'll hear someone suggest unity among the left. The argument typically goes that any move towards the left is helpful, and that united action by the entire left will facilitate the rise of communism. They'll say stuff like, "If we could just stop fighting with each other for a minute, and unite against capitalism, we would succeed." This argument doesn't really add up, but it's surprisingly popular.

There's always someone singing the praises of left unity. They're usually terribly confused about politics. Either that, or they just have terrible politics. And while there's nothing wrong with unity, there's quite a bit wrong with the left.

That might seem like a strange thing for a communist to say. Aren't communists part of the left?

No? Then what is the left? Specifically, what is it "the left" of?

The left

In politics, "left" originally referred to the supporters of the French Revolution in the National Assembly. They sat together on the left side of the president, while the monarchists sat on the right side. So, at that time, the left consisted of liberals and their allies in the government. They wanted to change government policy to stop unduly favoring the most wealthy and powerful members of society. In this way, it has remained much the same.

The left-right spectrum in politics still describes the same sort of policy differences. The left wants

more government intervention in the economy, aimed at making capitalism more palatable for poor and downtrodden people. This usually takes the form of various state-run social programs. Sometimes, it includes state ownership of certain industries. Other times, leftists want the government to facilitate worker ownership of businesses. In any case, the left wants the state to help the lower classes of society get a fair shake.

The right, on the other hand, wants the state to enable the ruling class to better consolidate wealth and power. This is generally done by decreasing the government's intervention in the economy. So, fewer social programs, fewer regulations on business, lower taxes, etc.

Communists don't share either set of goals. The right wants to make the state better for business. The left wants to make the state nicer to the common people. Communists want to smash the state into a million pieces. And not just one state, but all of them, to allow for the establishment of a global, stateless, classless society.

Left unity

Proponents of left unity don't always say what exactly it would consist of. Presumably, they want us all to work toward the same goal, even when we have theoretical disagreements. But this leads to the first problem: we don't have the same goal. We want to abolish capitalism. They want to make it nicer. There's no compatibility there. One goal contradicts the other. And our strategies for reaching those goals differ accordingly.

Now, at this point, someone invariably points out that there are times when our short-term goals overlap in some way. Maybe we're both supporting the same group of striking workers. Or maybe we both oppose the same imperialist war. But if that's supposed to justify unifying with the left, then what happens when our short-term goals overlap with someone on the right?

After all, conservative trade unions exist. They support striking workers in some cases. Should we unite with the right when that sort of thing happens? If not, then why unite with the left just because there's some overlap with them? There isn't anything special

about the left. If there's a fire about to engulf the room, I could "unite" with damn near anybody to douse the flames. But left unity is supposed to be based on some special affinity between communists and leftists. The trouble is, there isn't any.

So, if we aren't even trying to reach the same goal, and we aren't using the same strategies, how do we unite? Unity of action presupposes some degree of theoretical unity. Unless we can do two things that are mutually exclusive, we have to pick one goal, and a strategy that could lead us to it.

And it's not like moving state policy to the left makes it any easier to achieve communism. Leftists have proven willing and able to crush socialist revolutions, just as much as the right. One of the most striking examples of this was the suppression of the Spartacist Uprising.

In Berlin, in 1919, a government run by self-avowed democratic socialists was faced with an attempt at socialist revolution. Instead of helping it succeed, they drowned it in blood. Anyone who's serious about revolution should remember that strengthening your enemies is not a good strategy. And the left is absolutely an enemy of communism.

When someone asks for left unity, it's usually because they want you to work toward their goal, use their strategy, even though you disagree with it. They obviously don't want to work toward your goal at the expense of their own.

But that raises a pretty important question: Why would you want to do that for them? There's no good reason to subordinate your goal to their goal. Not if you actually want to achieve your goal, anyway.

Of course, if you point this out, leftists will throw a fit. They'll accuse you of "purity politics", "sectarianism", or some other bullshit term for having principles. Criticizing others for theoretical purism is a time honored tradition on the left. And while I don't approve of that tactic, I'll admit that some people get a lot of mileage out of it. It's actually a very shrewd move if your own theory is full of holes.

Communism

So, who should we be uniting with, if not the left? For the answer, it helps to look at the main distinctions between communists and leftists. We take the

position that, since capitalism became decadent, the bourgeoisie has been reactionary to its core. The working class has nothing to gain by siding with any bourgeois faction.

No politician can fix our problems. Nor can any innovative business run by some trendy CEO. Capitalist states, however far left or right, are enemies of workers.

There are people who share that position, but they aren't part of the left. Or the right, for that matter. They're working class people who never vote, if only because of an intuitive sense that whoever is elected will just end up screwing them over anyway.

Politically, they are our closest kin and our greatest hope. They are more numerous, more powerful, and more principled than leftists. And unlike leftists, we don't have to convince them that the new "progressive" flavor-of-the-week politician's hare-brained scheme won't work. They already think it's a

load of shit. And they're right.

Leftists often take positions on various issues that have some superficial similarity to ours. But we have to remember what side they're on. We have to resist the temptation to direct our energies toward winning over leftists. Our main focus should be on organizing those workers who already accept the principle that distinguishes us from the left: that the bourgeoisie, in all its forms, is an intractable opponent of workers, and should be treated as such without exception.

The ideal condition for socialist revolution is not when the left is united. It's when the left has been reduced to smoldering ruins. Unfortunately, that might take a while to happen. But in the meantime, we should at least avoid strengthening our enemies. And we should be building strength by organizing people who understand who the enemy is.

Laser637



ORGANIZING THE WORKPLACE

PART II

Introduction

Where we left off in Part 1, the organizing effort had met some success. The fight to get recognition cards culminated in reaching well over half of the bargaining unit. We were able to confront the executives with our victory at a commission meeting. Even though the effort was now “public”, it would be a tough hill to climb to get coworkers to openly express their support. Once workers in the agency began to show support, it would be up to them to keep that momentum going, and to encourage others, in particular new staff as the agency continued to hire more, while turnover risked us losing some of the more militant supporters. Now management was also publicly aware of the organizing going on under their noses. We wondered if this would mean increasing hostility and retaliation, or if it meant they would be compelled by upper management to remain “neutral”. It is, after all, technically within our legal right to file complaints against retaliation. Of course, we knew

that enforcement against these types of complaints is weak. Planning in this new phase will require reorganizing our tactics around communication and maintaining pressure on management so that they would not sense that we were losing support. While we knew that there is a delay between recognition and the bargaining process, we were not sure how long it would take. If things dragged on for too long, morale could take a hit and fear could begin to set in. Supporters may move on to other (mostly union) jobs at higher pay and with better benefits. New hires will not be aware of the struggle faced by staff with more years on the job. All of this means thinking quickly and being careful about our messaging. Having never gone through anything like this before, I could not foresee the challenges ahead. I was shaking at the front of the conference room in front of all of management. It was at this point, that although I was caught up in the anxiety of putting words to our collective bargaining power, I came to realize that my own struggle was just beginning. What I may have underestimated at the

time was just how important it would be to maintain resolve, not only against management, but against the union as well.

Most committed labor organizers will paint a rosy picture of labor unions. In the process of organizing, this is how they will convince others that the union is looking out for everyone, and this is why they as a supporter should sign a card or appear with their fist held in solidarity in the next flyer. Some more passionate organizers will know and recite the history of labor's successes throughout the 20th century. They may talk about the victories of won contracts in the face of often violent reaction by management, and in some cases reaction with the assistance of private or public police, and even the National Guard. The narrative is simple yet effective. The story goes that workers decide to form a union. The union, not as some separate entity, but as an organic emergence, appears from inside the struggle, and exists as an organization inseparable from the workers themselves. In this framework, the assertion of power is through the labor union. Want to see a difference in how things work around here? The union will make that happen! We see this attitude on the left, and in the United States, in this period of ever-decreasing union membership, there are fewer and fewer elders for us to ask, "What was it like to organize?" As bonds between past and present are broken, labor history becomes mythical, and mystified. So what is the real relationship between the labor union and the worker, or to the working class as a whole? And if you find yourself, as I have, downright compelled to fight back and to organize, what should your narrative be?

The workplace is the focal point of struggle

A common position on the communist left, which traces its tradition to the revolutionary period following the First World War, is that labor unions are managers for capital, that serve the interests of capital by redirecting struggle. In the common narrative on the left, unions have won many great victories, and in their inability to separate the working class from the legal entities known as labor unions, often the left fails to acknowledge that, if anything, the union often stood in the way of even greater demands. In one

stunning example, May 1968, the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) commanded workers to return to work at a point when a revolution appeared not only possible, but likely. The large confederation of unions, "communist" dominated as it was, supported the Grenelles Agreements, making peace with the bourgeois state once and for all. In the United States, "communist" dominated red unions were to play the role of manager for capital. In 1934, a daring wave of strikes took place, starting at the ports on the West Coast and cascading throughout major urban centers across the United States and across many industries. These strikes were not endorsed by the unions, and in fact the leadership was at loggerheads with the militants who sought to grind the economy to a halt. The union leaders were concerned with reputation and continued cooperation with industry leaders. After a confrontation between police and strikers became lethal, the workers defied their unions and declared a general strike, which came to include 150,000 workers.

Notice something about these events that goes against the narrative we often hear. I don't want to make any blanket statements suggesting that every action taken by a labor union has been against the interests of the workers they legally and ostensibly represent. I don't think that that is true. Instead, I do want to make the case that unions are a product of capitalist social relations and are inherent to capitalist social relations. Unions originated as a response to antagonism between worker and capitalist. Early unions were often illegal or were painted as illegal or revolutionary bodies. However, in time many of those same unions gained acceptance as legal assemblies. They grew, and in growing, they required their own division of labor, where someone, perhaps a long-standing member, took a full-time role as an employee for the union. Now the union could be understood as separate from the workers themselves. Although sanctioned and approved by workers in the fight to gain representation, unions grew to have an increasing number of interests of their own. Dues paid to salaried union employees must continue to flow for their union to continue its representation. Increasing membership means increasing the size and scope and resources that fall within the union. This is all well and good so long as one views the role of the union as a

collective bargaining body and nothing more. However romantic narratives of the relationship of unions to class struggle go far beyond this.

As I said earlier, organizers see the union playing a revolutionary role. Syndicalists argue the union for itself is a vehicle for revolution, and many on the left argue that the labor union will produce a “trade union consciousness” on its own without communist political education, but that the simple injection of this revolutionary consciousness is a possible way to co-opt unions for the purpose of transforming them into a revolutionary addendum to a communist party. I am making the case for neither of these positions. Instead, I understand that unions as bodies viewed separate from the rank-and-file can and do play a reactionary role in struggle. The union, like any other entity set up within the capitalist framework, has a legal obligation to settle disputes between the rank-and-file and the boss. The leadership does not want to see a confrontation. In fact, confrontations that lead to strikes can dry up the strike fund. A healthy union in this legal framework is one that has a constant supply of new members with minimal cost sunk into external organizing and is one that has a full strike fund that it never has to tap into, because both worker and employer are satisfied with their contract. For these logical reasons, unions will avoid the most difficult workers to organize and will take steps to pressure workers to accept weakened concessions from management if it means a quick resolution to conflict. If you are beginning to see the labor union not as a deep cover revolutionary body, but more like a lawyer trying to provide a swift and tidy settlement, then I am conveying my position as intended.

Labor unions have as their core interest self-perpetuation and have historically made their existence permanent in the landscape of capitalist society by making peace not only with bosses, but with bourgeois political parties. In the United States, that relationship is between the largest and most powerful unions and the Democratic Party. The Democrats have a bristling yet storied relationship with the American labor union. Democrats occasionally show up to picket lines with a megaphone, but mostly provide their critical support for the unions through their praises of the imaginary

blue-collar worker still making family-wide decisions at the kitchen table somewhere in a contested purple state. In real life, however, rank-and-file union member support for the Democratic Party has been eroding for decades. Within the *ménage-a-trois* between the rank-and-file, union leadership, and the Democratic Party politicians, it seems that there is only one participant that is still interested: The union. While workers are abandoning unions as useless for their immediate material needs, and Democrats cannot even be bothered to put on a hard hat once in a while, the union will endorse the Democratic candidate with zeal. The reason unions are the most enthusiastic institutional shill for the Democratic Party is concealed in their “pledge to serve” the interests of workers. Of course, the Democrats may endorse a pro-union policy, and the union will express support for Democratic policy positions, but the two institutions are reliant upon one another, and that reliance comes before any reform.

Many labor union activists with leftist leanings believe in gaining entry into the union in hopes to change it “from the inside”. I think there is enough of a reason to doubt that this strategy could ever work, given just how wedded to bourgeois politics the contemporary labor unions are. But we don’t need to speculate on how unions will treat entryists. The ones who tried found themselves purged. This strategy not only leads to a reaction from the union against employees that work inside the union, but it can have a chilling effect on those who are among the rank-and-file, who may now avoid intervening in struggle if it means getting targeted by their own union as a communist. The other side to this failed strategy is that, while you are never going to change the union from the inside, they may change you. People often think that this cannot happen to them, but this is one of the many ways we deceive ourselves into thinking that our actions and our hearts can co-exist in contradiction. Any time you enter an organization, you become a mouthpiece for the leadership. Even in the unlucky event that you become the leadership, you are subject to the rules of the organization, which dictate communications strategies, official positions, endorsements, funding, etc. The only way up the ladder is to abandon the class. And even with the best intentions, you will run into the reality that the union

must perpetuate itself; it must continue to provide expedient resolution to conflicts and of course the union can't run out of money.

If we understand the reactionary nature of unions, we can understand how to work closely with workers that are engaged in struggle within their workplace, without succumbing to the politics of the labor union itself. Finding yourself in this situation means striking a careful balance, and not taking a position so anti-union that you refuse to engage with unionizing or unionized workers. Yes, workers that are in a union are worth talking to about communism. Sometimes, the situation at the workplace will push people towards unionizing, in other cases workers may push for other ways to struggle against the conditions of their labor. It is important to listen and it is important to speak. We do not want to "meet them where they are at" politically, but we do want to meet them where they are at physically. The workplace is where you'll find workers, and it is where the working class will feel a sense of itself most keenly.

I thought as I continue my story about how organizing happened at my workplace, I would start off with this deeper dive into my position on labor unions, my apprehensions and the difficulty organizing as a communist that is completely aware of the reactionary unions that are reliant on the very logic of capital. I wanted to frame the narrative around this, because as I continued my work, tried not to get fired, onboarded new co-workers, and watched many comrades leave for better pastures, my current position on unions came to be. Early in the process, I was ambiguous about unions. I had heard the critique of unions as reactionary, and I understood it logically, but I had an optimism that I have a sense many others have. I think it is fair to say that many readers of this series will be skeptics of my position. They might view the union as one with the worker or might not be ready to drop the notion that institutions from within capital's juridical framework will tend toward support for capital, expressed often in the form of a conciliatory attitude toward management. The period I am discussing in this piece taught me that lesson first hand, and I hope readers can take something from my experience.

Between recognition and bargaining

Recognition felt like a victory, but that feeling was short-lived. I knew that my co-workers believed things would improve immediately as a result. I also knew that the rules changed very little after recognition, because there was still no contract in place. Management would seek to drag out the process as long as they could. At this stage, the strategy is to pressure management to get to the bargaining table as quickly as possible. The bargaining process involves voting for delegates who will act as representatives of the whole bargaining unit, while management will appoint their own delegates. Each side has a lawyer to represent them. The whole ordeal is a nightmare to be frank, but it will be the focus of part three of this series. Instead I want to focus on the missteps, miscalculations, and minor victories of the period before management finally reached a stage of acceptance that the union was there to stay.

After a few weeks, the union called meetings and encouraged attendance from anybody who could make it. The union wanted us to form two branches, one who will focus on communication and one that would be elected to sit at the bargaining table. We were warned that the process would take some time, and that we needed to stay engaged. The methods of engagement proposed by the union were activities like tabling in front of the office, handing out lanyards and fliers. They wanted us to continue to talk to people, and to ask for their support. One thing I felt at this point was a lack of enthusiasm. I thought these strategies could only serve to reinforce support for the union, and nothing else. At best, this would help people get into the habit of wearing union colors and trinkets. At worst, this can only serve to promote the idea that the union is the source of strength. It felt as if a gulf was forming between the union and the original supporters. The strategy proposed was one of escalation, in which you get people comfortable with increasing expressions of resistance by showing solidarity. The realm of escalating tactics discussed always remained symbolic, and it was almost as if there was a fear that our expectations for action were too high from the start. While the union stressed the importance of getting collective buy-in, there was always a hidden message that we don't want to cause

any real trouble.

I had other ideas in mind. After remaining “underground” attempting to get cards, I wanted to find ways to encourage ownership of our collective accomplishment. I knew of course that workers locking arms and taking a daring stand against management were going to win more concessions, but there was a lot more to it than that. I knew that there was a culture of obedience and fear of management that the workers needed to shake. I was just as afraid of management as anybody else. The mission of the agency is deeply flawed, and the execution of plans to solve homelessness is so hindered by the state finding ways to make homelessness a profitable endeavor for somebody, but there is pride in work that involves a direct service to somebody in need. Of all types of work, what outreach workers do should have some small impact in the lives of people broken down by the system. However much these brave people go through to help others, they were often subjected to being demeaned by supervisors. They are given little to no autonomy in work that often requires quick response and experience. Many of these workers experienced homelessness and know a hell of a lot more about it than some of their superiors. What I had hoped for going into this organizing effort was to connect with co-workers who need a voice, to listen and to provide support when they chose to fight back. One person alone would be fired on the spot for standing up against management in this agency. However, we had cards signed from nearly every member of outreach, and enthusiastic support along with organizers right at the center of our struggle. Organizing is not about simply winning a contract. It is about expressing power. That expression of power is a lesson in struggle that makes the power of an organized working class real. Finding the easiest possible way to quietly sign a contract with no teeth was not going to provide anybody that lesson.

My focus was on bringing groups of co-workers out of the office and somewhere to talk about what was giving them the most grief at work. I wanted to understand both where people were most at odds with their supervisors, but also how much they would gain or lose from pushing back. I knew I had less to lose than someone with a family, but I

wanted to convey that I am willing to stand up beside them and that, with every person who takes the same stand, the chances of a serious retaliation diminish. I would talk about politics, both the inner politics of the union and politics in the abstract. I wanted to understand who was receptive to radical ideas, and who wasn't. Most often, I found pushback from people with a strong loyalty to the Democratic Party. There is a certain kind of liberal both in the region and in the sector where I work that is resistant to anything so long as it challenges the supremacy of the liberal tradition, and especially any authority. Their vague support for the union was easily lost when the discussion moved toward any kind of action. These co-workers often had the belief in mind that we could reason with management so that they wouldn't retaliate. I wasn't surprised that there were people, although not many, who would do anything to “support” the cause so long as it didn't involve physically supporting the cause in any way. In many ways, their support for the union was a mirror reflection of my skepticism. I could see that the union they wanted was a strong institution lording over the workers that represented liberal values. They didn't want to have anything to do with the tradition of workers that stopped work, refused management's orders, or occupied factory floors, often without the approval of the labor union.

Despite flaky supporters, and occasional detractors that preferred to leave all decisions up to management, I found buy-in from many co-workers in the idea that we needed to act in order to get things done. I knew that there were certain topics that animated a lot of people. One example is the director, mentioned in part one, that was infamous for bringing people to tears, pitting workers against one another, who engaged in light espionage in order to undermine the organization process. This director was vulnerable, because underneath them was a mini-revolution brewing. Not only was the director hated, but a particular manager they had hired was happy to play the role of enforcer. Everyone reporting to the manager were brought to the breaking point. They needed no convincing to sign a recognition card, and now that that step was over, they were ready to act. I tried to meet with them as often as I could. We discussed the possibility of taking a collective action

against the manager and director, but it was difficult to come to a decision on how to act. The turning point arrived when management announced that there would be changes in their responsibilities. Their oblivious plan was to make these formerly contracted positions permanent, and to radically increase the number of responsibilities that fall in the job description, without any major change in compensation. People holding these titles were extremely upset. The decision to keep them as permanent, but to give them more tasks for nearly the same pay was a slap in the face. Within a very short time, we had meetings planned and the discussion to engage in a direct action against management was underway.

This was one of the most powerful moments in the whole experience, not just for me but for everyone involved. As confidence grew and plans were underway to organize a voiced response for more pay, there was also a call for the director and manager to step down. There was no alternative that would have been acceptable. They needed to go, and conditions needed to improve immediately. This wasn't going to be resolved with a contract. The initial idea was to demand her resignation or termination at an all staff meeting. However, as we began an offensive, the moment to stand against management was taken from us. It isn't clear what happened, but upper management either got wind of what we were doing or pre-empted the whole affair. After a year of tormenting staff, both the manager and director were quickly escorted out of the building one day. A member of upper management called the whole floor to a meeting and announced that the two were terminated and that we were not allowed to discuss what happened. We waited until we were somewhere safe, but we celebrated. Certainly, with victories like this, energy for more radical actions can be lost. I wanted to continue this fight because I knew a simple personnel switch was not enough to transform the toxic culture of the agency. I think everybody knew this. Moving forward, however, some of the most militant co-workers I knew were the ones that pushed for this action. The experience bonded us and made it very clear that management would only take us seriously when we showed our strength.

An additional plan was in the works to bring workers together to make immediate demands. This

plan involved use of some existing structures. The agency developed a "committee" that existed for show, but that had the potential to entirely backfire on management. There was an hour meeting once a month for each department in which staff could discuss issues around the office, and then one representative would bring the message of the meeting to the executive team on a monthly basis. Management would stress that all they really wanted to hear was if the coffee machine was broken or what theme the next potluck should be. People tended to comply with this type of content, although nobody tended to show up. Sometimes someone would use the committee to air grievances, but this was always done in a way that kept that person atomized and vulnerable. Most of the time, whatever minor issues workers would try to resolve would get ignored. Now, things were beginning to change. People had begun to feel that they could bring up real problems in the workplace, including *time-card* irregularities, pressure to "volunteer" and so on. I knew that there were serious problems with the structure of the committee that hindered its ability to protect people who voiced complaints. I also noted that the committee was a glorified suggestion box, and that there really was no implied threat of direct action behind complaints.

There was an opportunity to speak out against some of the regular abuses that took place in this agency, and to demand that a formal structure come into place that would position itself as workers representing themselves. After attending a few of these meetings, I went back to my co-workers that were most deeply involved in organizing. I proposed that we should each go to our respective department committee meeting with a course of action to bring back interest in the committees and transform them into something stronger. I suggested that we reframe the way we communicate with the executives by having our representatives make demands on behalf of the department, with vote counts to show how strong support was for these demands. In addition, I thought it would be a good idea to break barriers between departments so that there could be agency-wide votes for immediate demands. I thought that the immediate change of tone and in the types of demands being made to executive management would send a signal to them that we were serious. It would

be an autonomous project, separate from the union, that would again prove that workers have the final say if they are organized. Additionally, this committee could keep all the workers in the agency linked together so that a plan to stop work could be coordinated effectively.

When the next scheduled meeting arrived, I spent the first half of it listening. A lot of the complaints were the same as previous meetings. I had trouble containing myself and the anticipation was making my palms sweat. When things reached a nadir, and it seemed like the meeting could end early, I raised my hand and proposed the idea. I spoke for a while, and by the midpoint I had everybody's attention. People were nodding in agreement that things needed to change and that the current committee model wasn't working. Eventually, others began to chime in, bringing up specific complaints that they have voiced in the past fearing some retaliation and yet have seen no improvements. Others joined the chorus, and eventually the meeting was filled with conversations all happening simultaneously. Within minutes the concurrent conversations became an uproar. The energy in the room could hardly be contained. Then, with a sudden drop, the room fell silent. One of the executives was standing in the doorway of the meeting room. They appeared angry, and commanded us to break up the meeting immediately. They said we were interrupting an important meeting with elected officials in attendance several doors down!

Looking back, I wish I had pursued this path more aggressively after that initial meeting. Predictably, the executive team not only cancelled the next committee meeting for every department, they also sent out an email stating that the meetings will be cancelled indefinitely. In the email, they said that the meetings would no longer be necessary, now that there is a union representing us. They instead told us to go to our union with any complaints that we have, which will then assist us in resolving them through the contract. This message, that we would now rely on the union to deal with all complaints, that we will deal with disputes through the union contract, was to become their favorite way to diffuse autonomous activity of workers in the agency. Even if someone was to abide by the "open door policy" of a manager, the manager would send them away saying that they

should talk to the union if they have a problem. This worked out in favor of management in a lot of ways. People often believed that this statement was true, and that the union was the method that we would be able to see change in the office. It would keep people from seeking alternative avenues to get concessions from management. It would put pressure on the union to deliver things that it cannot do, things that only workers can make happen through direct confrontations. This message sends workers to the union with a promise that they will solve all their problems, only to let them down slowly when they realize nothing's going to change. This all produced a pessimism that was to become the greatest challenges we would need to overcome.

I attempted to build support for something that would parallel the original committee structure, but that would exist outside of work and after hours. This was a slow and difficult process, especially after the rug was pulled from beneath the last attempt. After the initial committee takeover attempt, turnover reached a peak. The agency received some new funding, and began a hiring frenzy. The plan was to double the size of the agency in around a year. First, they hired many new supervisors, and many of them were internal organizers. They found themselves in a situation where they couldn't participate in either the union or the pressure campaigns we were conducting. By the time a year had passed, many of the dedicated organizers were gone or promoted. I was one of the few remaining. Some of the staff that were now involved were long-time employees that felt compelled to participate now that the main cohort was gone. Others were staff that were hired at some point after recognition went into effect. Management would sometimes criticize us now, by suggesting we were no longer representative of the agency as a whole. Many people were onboarded into the agency without being told there was a union organizing effort in the process. This forced me and others to change gears to make sure that new staff were aware of our past efforts and our continued commitment to make improvements. Even though things were not improving all that much, new staff were often less aware of some of the long-standing problems their longer-serving co-workers dealt with. And when problems did arise, the agency always had an excuse:

we are a growing organization and we are just experiencing some growing pains. Of course, any time a firm doubles in size, it will require new supervisors and old policies that worked for a small company will need to change to make way for a more complex structure. These excuses would work for a time, but within about a month, new staff would find that they couldn't hold onto the halo of positivity that comes with a full time gig for the first time at the tail end of the recession.

My own department's structure changed. I was moved from one department to another, then the department was changed, split, dissolved, and a whole new set were created. I could hardly keep up with the name changes, and would get corrected in meetings referring to departments by the second name they went by a few months prior. My work in data was specialized as the agency grew. Instead of being a vestige hanging off of the end of a large department, we budded off into our own division, and eventually into a full department in its own right. It seemed during this period that the supervisors outnumbered staff. Probably the biggest danger to solidarity was the massive expansion of the outreach teams, which ended up becoming around half of the agency staff. This department grew so large, and shed so many of its original members, that we nearly lost our ability to connect with new staff so we could provide them with materials and a run-through. Not only did they drastically expand this department, but they also began building out co-located offices. Before then, all staff regardless of the region in the district where we worked would arrive at the same building each morning, then they would drive out to their location. After the change, workers would share office space with other government entities like libraries and city councilor's offices and would be cut off from the rest of the staff population four out of the five days of the work week. When they were at the main site, they were bogged down in meetings, and they were only there temporarily. This would mean that even just maintaining contact would prove a challenge.

The executive team planned all of this change knowing that it would weaken the workers bargaining power and leave us without the ability to organize. By moving me far away from everything, and off into a different department with only a small number co-

workers around, I was less able to interact with co-workers throughout the building, let alone across multiple locations. Meanwhile, the lawyers for the agency were dragging their feet, and managed to suspend bargaining activity for an entire year through sheer flakiness. Each time, there was a new excuse for not meeting with the union lawyer, and they knew there was little we could do. They took advantage of the rapid growth and changing faces to erode at our position of relative strength. The union held an election for the bargaining team. The bargaining team is the core group that will take time out of work to physically meet with the executive team to hash out the written contract. Each of the bargaining team members would be elected, and the plan was to nominate at least one person per department. At the beginning of the process, the number of bargaining team members proposed was modest, but by the end of the campaign to get a bargaining team together, the number of departments multiplied, and the team size grew too large. We eventually settled on five members. However, over the long and drawn out process, one of the biggest challenges of simply keeping the team alive was attrition, turnover, and promotions. By the time we were ready to nominate bargaining team members, two years had passed since the first whispers of organizing a union.

The union organizers were mostly absent for a lot of the twists and turns of the year following recognition. It wasn't clear that we would be able to get people interested in a contract negotiation, or if we would get half of the demands we were hoping for. What was clear was that there was a lot of work to be done to simply keep management from successfully suppressing the organizing effort. Even in an agency in a region of the United States where union participation is strong, and unions are regarded positively by bureaucrats and functionaries of the state, there will always be resistance. Once the union contract goes into effect the mood will change. The reason for this shift is simple. There is a loss of power held by management when a union forms. Even though the union will ultimately serve to mediate between workers and management, dampening further militancy through concessions, any loss of power comes with some mourning. In our case, there was hostility toward the organizers and subtle

attempts to counteract the effort. Any time we would push for action an email would go out instructing employees to direct any questions or concerns to the union, noting that the contract is going to be the method of resolution from now on. This was misleading for a number of reasons. Of course there were small disputes and minor grievances that could be solved through basic collective action or through “open door policy” conversations. What these emails did was suppress dissent by pushing it so far out of people’s expectations that they would not even consider something as daring as stopping work or walking out. This had the double effect of framing the conversation away from making demands and simultaneously pushing people to see the legal contract as the be-all and end-all of collective worker action.

My own politics had evolved considerably since that time, and I had begun to see things differently as a result of many of these experiences. While much of the early decisions I had made were based on self preservation, some impulse, and a genuine desire for some relief, I came to understand that the balancing act of intervening in struggles is a heavy responsibility. In hindsight, I would make different decisions earlier on to push in a more radical direction, to explicitly educate and agitate based on the position that the union and management will both act as weights

around the neck of organizers. Either through inaction, deferment to the contract, or retaliation, we find ourselves pitted in a classic antagonism between forces that want to suppress our self activity. It is not going to change with a change in leadership, and it will not change with the right formula of labor activism. These are features and not bugs within the logic of a framework of control. But this is the conversation to have with workers at the point of struggle. The point is not to run away from the possibility of connecting to workers. Communists must instead find themselves where workers are, where their coworkers are, ready to propose the impossible and to offer to demand the impossible right alongside them. Here, I am distinguishing between weaseling demands for the likely or improbable edgewise as some deceitful political bait and switch, and an honest approach laying out communist positions in their totality. If there is one thing that I have learned, it is that people prefer to get the truth and they will resent false promises and half-truths. The value of struggle is that it presents the working class with the unresolvable and the unimaginable. The value of communists intervening in struggle is to pass on knowledge to others of what pieces of the real solution to the never ending grind will look like when the chains we are all in are finally broken.

Magnus Zeller



CALIBAN AND THE WITCH: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Forward

The following is a translation of a collaborative critique of *Caliban and the Witch*, written by Yann Kindo and Christophe Darmangeat in December 2017, and published in two separate essays on their respective blogs: [La Faucille et le Labo](#), and [La Hutte des Classes](#). The first, for the most part, deals with the historical facts themselves and the method with which S. Federici deals with them (badly); the second tries to discuss the main theoretical understandings developed in the book. The foreward, by Alain Bihr, was taken from the abridged brochure, available at des éditions Smolny.

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Critical analysis of Sylvia Federici's book *Caliban and the Witch* demonstrates her lack of seriousness in dealing with an important issue: why was the last phase (from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century) of the multi-secular transition from feudalism to capitalism accompanied in Western Europe by a deterioration of the situation of women, from the top to the bottom of the social ladder? In the course of their criticism, Yann Kindo and Christophe Darmangeat mention two important elements of an answer, moreover

largely linked to each other: on the one hand, the reintroduction of Roman law during the Middle Ages, and, through it, that of the Roman conception of private property, both full (involving both the *usus*, the *fructus* and the *abusus*¹) and free (transmissible and alienable); and, on the other hand, the triumph of the nuclear family over other family structures (patriarchal family and family-stock)—both elements and conditions of the formation of capitalist relations of production—giving the woman a status of legal minor, excluding her (largely) from the transfer of property and placing it under the tutelage of husband after that of his father.

To make this degradation of women one of the main drivers of the final phase of the transformation of feudalism into capitalism is to omit such important aspects of capitalism such as: the effects of the commercial and colonial expansion of Western Europe towards the Americas, Africa and Asia on its proto-capitalist dynamics; the prodromes² of the “agricultural revolution” and those of the industrial revolution in its countryside; the process of enlarging and concentrating the markets; mercantilist policies implemented by states in almost permanent war; the transformation of an ‘order structure’ into a class structure; the first bourgeois revolutions (in the United States and England); the impact of these cultural revolutions that were the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, etc.

Alain Bihr, February 2018

History and the facts abused

Caliban and the Witch is a book published in English in 2004, before being translated into French by Editions Entremonde in 2014; its success has earned it a reissue in 2017. The author, Silvia Federici, is an American academic of Italian origin who, after part of her career in Nigeria, became Professor Emeritus of Social Science at Hofstra University in New York. She is a feminist activist, from a tradition that is generally

described as “autonomist,” “radical,” or even “materialist”.

In this book, the most famous she wrote, she develops a thesis that could be summarized as: the episode of the great witch-hunt in Europe must be understood as a moment of primitive capitalist accumulation, which corresponds to a generalized subjugation of women and which was as indispensable to the development of nascent capitalism as was, for example, the Atlantic Slave Trade.

It is with undisguised curiosity that we decided to start reading a text that deals with a subject of which we are neither specialists. We quickly went from astonishment to astonishment...

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It would obviously be inappropriate to reproach Silvia Federici for wanting to do a historian's job without having the academic training, for many excellent works have been written by people who were not specialists or even did not have any university credentials. On the other hand, whatever the actual or supposed skills of the authors, a history book must not be a storybook: the facts and ideas it contains must be presented with rigor and honesty—all the more so when, as is the case here, the author claims to question the facts on which a consensus within the field has been reached. And there's the rub.

A. Revolutionizing historiography?

One of the topics on which *Caliban* explicitly claims to propose a historiographic revolution is that of witch-hunting, a movement that touched all of Western Europe at the hinge 16th and 17th centuries.

The author's view of the (copious) historiography that precedes it cannot be distinguished either by its indulgence or its sobriety:

The fact that the victims in Europe were mainly peasants probably explains the indifference of historians to this genocide. An indifference that has come close to complicity, the erasure of the witch hunt from pages of history that helped trivialize their physical elimination at the stake. (...) The kind of

misogyny that inspired the approaches scholarship on witch hunting abound. Like Mary Daly reported it as early as 1978, most of the literature on this topic was written “from the executioner’s point of view,” discrediting the victims of the persecution, the representing as failures (women “dishonored” or frustrated in love) or even perverts taking pleasure in teasing the inquisitors males with their fantasies. (p. 252)

Just that. This view of things clearly has nothing to do with the academic works that we have been able to consult. In support of her categorical judgment on her predecessors, Federici does not mention anything of the works of specialists like the American Levack or the French Muchembled at this point in her presentation; she summons in total two authors of a History of Psychiatry to support her judgement, two authors who happen to not be historians, but psychoanalysts. However, in France, the hunt for witches was studied in 1862 by the most famous historian of that time, the rationalist Jules Michelet; his work, *La Sorcière*, still considered today as an international reference, is precisely written from the point of view of the victim, vis-à-vis whom he constantly shows a strong lyrical empathy. This does not prevent Silvia Federici from claiming that “it is only after the feminist movement that the witch hunt has come out of oblivion where it was relegated,” (p. 253), as if this subject had not occupied, besides Michelet, generations of historians. There is no reason to systematically revere the great classics, but the author adopts an attitude towards academic historians that combines a surprising ignorance with a very violent arrogance, as when she attacks by name her eminent Italian colleague Carlo Ginzburg, writing about one of his analyses (very briefly quoted) that “he thus renders the victims responsible for their disastrous fate” (p. 310). Well-known historian, founder and leader of “microhistory”, but also a left-wing activist who has used his competency on the subject of witch hunts to shed light on the logic of contemporary trials against Italian far-left activists such as Adriano Sofri, Carlo Ginzburg is, on the face of it, hardly suspect of what Federici accuses him.

The central question of the number of witch-hunt victims illustrates the flippancy with which Federici proceeds. On several occasions in the book, she reports “hundreds of thousands” of executions. However, the highest estimate from a professional historian (Anne Barstow) estimates the number of victims at 100,000, the other specialists (Hutton, Levack, Rowlands, Vissière) setting it unanimously between 40,000 and 60,000. Inflating the numbers by multiplying them by about ten is obviously necessary to build the book’s thesis: “Feminists quickly realized that hundreds of thousands of women could not have been slaughtered and subjected to the most cruel tortures without threatening the structure of power” (p. 254). Later, on the same page, Marxist historians are also accused of having refused to see the reality: ““The magnitude of the massacre should have aroused suspicion, with hundreds of thousands of women being burned, hanged and tortured in less than two centuries.”

But how to justify this freedom taken with the figures currently admitted? Note 11, page 254, the only one to approach the question, asserts that the question is “controversial”. From this controversy, the author retains only the highest estimate, that of Anne Barstow, which she immediately transforms into “several hundreds of thousands” (without any sort of ‘trial’, one could say). In doing so, however, it shows, if it is permissible to speak thus, of a certain restraint: the inflation on this question is a well-established tradition in certain branches of feminism, since in 1893, the suffragette Joslyn Gage was already advancing in her book *Woman, Church, and State* the truly delusional figure of 9 million killed.

To the question of the overall number of executions is added that of the proportion between the sexes. In order for the witch hunt to be assimilated to a war against women, the vast majority of her victims must of course have been female. Throughout his presentation, Federici assumes this hypothesis, without taking the trouble to support it otherwise than by a short development, page 282:

In the first period, men accounted for up to 40 per cent of the accused, and a smaller number continued to be judged, mainly vagrants, beggars, itinerant workers, gypsies

and lower-ranking priests. (...) But the outstanding fact is that over 80% of those tried and executed in Europe in the XVIth and XVIIth century for crimes of witchcraft were women.

What “first period” is referred to, no way to find out. Still, according to historians who have studied the question, the percentage is not quite that given by Federici: “Globally, 70 to 80 percent of those tried for witchcraft in early modern Europe and England were women.” However—and especially:

There was, however, considerable regional variation in the sex of persecuted individuals. (...) Men were in the majority in Iceland, Normandy, Estonia and Russia; men and women were prosecuted in roughly the same proportions in Finland, Burgundy and the French regions which depended on the Parliament of Paris“. (Alison Rowlands, “Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe”, in Brian P. Levack (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, 2003)

These elements, by themselves, certainly do not invalidate the thesis defended by Federici. But, at the very least, they question her: how to explain that a movement whose deep nature had supposedly been a specific persecution of women has, in certain places, attacked men as much as, if not more so? One would be justified in waiting for the author to examine the question and answer it, by highlighting the factors that could explain these local variations. Lost penalty: Federici traces its path, and failing to refute the elements that could contradict it, she chooses to ignore them (or, we will see, to disguise them).

In general, it is also striking that *Caliban*, contrary to custom, offers almost no reflection on the use of its sources. We are thus surprised by all that Federici knows (or believes she knows), especially about the popular classes of the so-called modern era (from the 16th century), for which we have very few sources. In reality, her method is to practice a “cherry-picking”³ according to the needs of her thesis, leaving, when that is not enough, to cheat a little to fill the

gaps.

Caliban certainly contains good passages, well supported by specific facts and sources. Generally, they are widely borrowed from other authors and, above all, they do not concern the heart of her thesis, as in pages 45-46, where Federici evokes in a very interesting way the peasant resistances to chores and other obligations imposed by the Lord.

Often, however, it draws definitive conclusions on certain topics without sufficient evidence. Sometimes she seems to be unaware that the absence of proof is not proof of absence, and she draws strong conclusions with a lack of sources! Thus, on page 298, she explains that with the exception of a case of fishermen from the Basque country,

despite numerous individual attempts by sons, husbands or fathers to save their loved ones from the stake, we have no narrative of male organization opposing persecution, showing that this propaganda has managed to separate women and men.

But do we have so many stories of women's organization to oppose these same persecutions? And since this does not seem to be the case, since Federici does not mention it, does that mean that women have been “separated” from women?

In the same spirit, page 152

I would add that the intensification of the persecution of 'witches' and the new disciplinary methods that the state has adopted during this period to regulate procreation and to break women's control over reproduction can also be related to this crisis. The evidence for this argument is only indirect, and it must be pointed out that other factors have strengthened the determination of the European power structure to more strictly control the reproductive function of women.

To the direct evidence that nourishes other causes than those she has chosen to favor, the author generally prefers tenuous “indirect proofs” going in her direction:

Slavery also had an impact on the wages of European workers and their legal status: we cannot talk of coincidence if only with the end of slavery did wages rise sharply in Europe and European workers obtained the right to organize. (page 185)

Pointing a correlation is not enough to show causality. For this one must still study the relationship from cause to effect. Otherwise, we could also claim that it is not a coincidence that the number of cases of autism identified has increased since the introduction of the MMR vaccine (or since we find organic products in the supermarket; this works as an example as well). Federici sometimes uses a posteriori logical reconstructions of her own making as proof. Very often, the proof that things have happened like this is that, within the book's framework, it would be logical for them to have gone that way. Expressions of the type "one guesses that..." abound thus in the work.

B. The manipulation of iconography

But the main compensating technique used by the author, which sometimes comes down to pure and simple manipulation, remains the use she makes of iconography, particularly rich.⁴ Page 35, while she intends to demonstrate the extent of the decline of the status of women in modern times, which results in a more gendered division of labor than previously, the reader is offered an image that represents women masons in the Middle Ages:

At this moment of its reading, the circumspect reader finds these "masons" of the fifteenth century still very well dressed, and is surprised that one of them even wears a headdress with a royal appearance. In the absence of further details on the provenance of the illustration (a constant throughout the book), the reader then uses the internet to find the original image:

Femmes maçons bâtissant un mur d'enceinte. France, XV^e siècle.



—Female masons building a wall. 15th century; taken from the french edition



—La Cité des Dames, 1405

It can be seen that Silvia Federici has not only carefully amputated this image of its left side, which is much less in line with her thesis, but above all she has made it say exactly the opposite of what it says. Indeed, it turns out that the illustration is taken from a book by Christine de Pizan entitled *La Cité des Dames*, published in 1405, in which the author develops the idea of a feminist utopia where women, armed with reason, can build a new more egalitarian society between the sexes. In other words, it is by no means depicting a scene found in real life: the mason is none

other than Christine de Pizan herself, striving to build her city with the help of three allegories crowned: Reason, Righteousness and Justice.⁵

In a section devoted to the obsession of male control and the new power of men over women in modern times, the proof this time is the negative figure of the woman who wears the pants in the house. Thus, p. 169, an illustration—just as little referenced as the others—shows a woman beating her husband, with the caption:

Just like the struggle to know who wears the pants, the image of the domineering woman challenged the sexual hierarchy. The blows she bore to her husband were one of the favorite targets of social literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

No one will think of challenging it a priori, but if this is an element supposed to show the major break from the attitudes that preceded it that occurred at the

time, it is embarrassing that a book like that of Robert Delort, *La vie au Moyen Age*⁶, already report the same phenomenon for a much earlier period, a period that was supposed to work differently:

It has been remarked, at least in the literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that the number of husbands reprimanded, beaten, tyrannized—and cuckolded—by their wife-ogress, strong in mouth and sole patroness at home, is far superior to that of women “corrected” by their husbands.

Later, on page 181, the growing contempt for women in the modern age is illustrated by the cover of the book *Le Parlement des Femmes*, and by a drawing of the “bridle”, an instrument of punishment which concerned in fact mostly women. The legend of the illustration does not specify however that its use, pretty much, was limited to Scotland, where it originated, and will thus make the reader believe that it was a widespread practice.

But one of the most significant—and, dare we say, unworthy—examples of *Caliban's* tendentious processes can be found on page 206, with an illustration that reproduces the cover—the public dissection of a woman's body—of the book *De Humanis Corporis Fabrica*, published in 1543 (shown below). Nowhere is it stated that the author of the book is Vesalius, nor that it is the first modern treatise on anatomy, considered a turning point in the history of medicine, attempting, for the first time, to correctly represent the human body (including the female genitals). For Federici, the scene illustrates something else: “The triumph of the male, of the ruling class, of the patriarchal order through the constitution of a new anatomical theater cannot be more complete.”

It will be understood, the essential point in her eyes is that the dissected body is that of a woman, necessarily humiliated by the operation. Now, when we go through period illustrations about public dissections, we quickly see that the great majority of them, including the famous Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp of Rembrandt, were practiced on bodies of men and not women, and the illustration chosen by Federici is rather the exception than the rule—she herself shows a picture of dissection of a clearly masculine body, on page 216.

Let us add, as regards the book of Vesalius, that for their part, the specialists seem to have some



difficulties to interpret the details of the scene and to identify the characters.⁷ But for Federici, everything is clear: “The female character in the background (perhaps a midwife or a prostitute) looks down, probably shame at the obscenity of the scene and its implicit violence.” Aligned in some way with medieval prejudices about dissections, with regards to the founding work of modern anatomy, and a new, more scientific look at the body, Federici retains—and offers his readers—only her own fantasies.

C. A thousand and one ways to deal with the facts

Only an army of specialists determined to sacrifice their time without counting could rectify all the assertions as peremptory as inaccurate that mark out *Caliban*. The lack of seriousness and the freedom taken with the facts transpire throughout its reading.

We have already been able to appreciate Silvia Federici's rather distant relationship with the figures regarding witch hunts. Here is another example: page 80, which presents the battle of Roosebeke of 1382, between a militia of the weavers of Ghent in revolt and the French army, protecting the interests of the nobles and local bourgeois. According to her, “26,000 rebels” were killed in this battle. However, this number of 26,000 actually concerns the total number of deaths in the battle, both camps combined.⁸ In the same vein, a note on page 36 states that towards the end of the Roman Empire, the baggage riots “seized Gaul”, while at their largest extension, they held only two fifths. If, contrary to the number of victims of the witch hunt, these are additional errors, unnecessary to the main thesis of the book, they are nonetheless significant of the lightness of the company.

The same goes for several false English etymologies, which have little impact on the content, but which testify to Silvia Federici's propensity to assert things she would like to be true, without taking the trouble—and the risk—to check them. If we may say: sometimes, the devil is in the details.... So, on page 305, about the English word “nightmare,” she writes “Other animals also play a role in the life of the witch as instruments of the devil: goats and mares (from which nightmare is drawn).” In fact, an etymological dictionary can easily teach us that this is a homophony

and they explicitly point out that the two have no relation, since the word “nightmare” was rather created from another “Mare”, a demonic creature of Germanic and Slavic folklore that came to haunt dreams. The poor mare is there for no reason. Similarly, page p. 311, Federici states that “The English word faggot reminds us that sometimes homosexuals were used as a small wood for the bonfires on which witches were burned.” The image is strong but does not rely on anything. Wikipedia's article on the word “Faggot” explores several possible etymologies, but the one chosen by Federici is described as an “urban legend.”⁹

If the etymology of words is thus interpreted on the spot, the same is sometimes true of the metaphors they evoke. Thus, on page 307, we learn that in witch stories, they become a toad because this animal is the “symbol of the vagina” and that it “synthesizes sexuality, bestiality, femininity and evil.” We have not found any trace of the idea that the toad was a symbol of the vagina, and it seems to the contrary that in the Middle Ages it was often considered the male of the frog. In terms of metamorphoses, tales actually report cases of witches that turn into toads, but the same metamorphosis also frequently affects the ‘charming princes’.

Sometimes, in this profusion of ideas thrown on the fly and swarming interpretations, the presentation gives the feeling of contradicting itself. For example, page 256, Silvia Federici makes a new focus:

I want to emphasize that, unlike an image propagated by the Enlightenment, the witch hunt was not the last fire of a dying feudal world. It is well known that the ‘superstitious’ Middle Ages did not persecute any witches. The very concept of witchcraft was not formulated until the end of the Middle Ages.

Yet, just a few lines later, she says that “In the seventh and eighth century, the crime of maleficium [evil spell, mischief] was introduced into the codes of law of the new Teutonic emperors.” Therefore, we do not really see the meaning of the distinction it makes between repression of black magic and repression of witchcraft. Likewise, she had previously explained that “There is

continuity between the witch hunt and the oldest persecutions of heretics who also punished specific forms of social subversion under the pretext of imposing religious orthodoxy" (p. 281). She also notes that the witch hunt first developed in areas where the persecution of Waldensian or Cathar heretics had been most intense, which is somewhat contradictory with her claims about the exceptionality of witch hunts and the break it forms compared to the Middle Ages. As she is well aware, she goes out of her way by saying that very similar things become very different in a context that has changed, which is quite convenient to interpret everything as she pleases.

The contradictions are not only about the facts, but also about the method. Thus, page 266, the reader is offered a critical remark about the absurdity of the accusations made during the witch trials: "Even today, however, some historians ask us to believe that witch-hunting made sense in the context of contemporary beliefs." Which acts as saying: when it comes to accusations of witchcraft, it is important to consider their unfounded character. But why write on page 224, about the supposed magical powers of women: "It would not lead to anything to know whether these powers were real or imagined", if it not to apply a "double standard" to beliefs, depending on the sympathy felt with those who claim them?

Finally, because of both the choice of vocabulary and the elasticity of the concepts used, the reader is confronted throughout the book with a more or less strong but fairly permanent impression of anachronism. Thus, when describing the class struggles in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Federici paints with a bazooka a "dominant class" in which bourgeois and nobles seem to have already completely merged, facing a proletariat already largely constituted 200 years before the industrial Revolution. The struggles of heretics, for their part, are identified (albeit in inverted commas but "not exaggerated") to a "first" international proletarian ". Likewise for the so-called Cabochian uprising, in Paris in 1413, described (always with quotation marks) as "workers democracy" (p. 85), or that of the Ciompi, in Florence, promoted on the following page—and this time, without quotation marks—at the rank of "dictatorship of the proletariat". As for the mentalities of the fifteenth to eighteenth century, they are described on

pages 299-300 as completely dominated by the bourgeoisie, which is not (yet) the dominant class in most of the regions concerned. The nobility also tends to disappear from the book, as if it were already an epiphenomenon in modern times.

This feeling of anachronism seems to be rooted in the very origins of the author's project, which states in the introduction that she has forged her analysis of witch hunts by observing the effects of the World Bank's policy in Nigeria when she taught there in the 1990s. When everything is so similar to everything, whatever the context and times, we get formulas like the one on page 112, about the privatization of land, presented as a world phenomenon in the context of the birth of capitalism:

The process of privatization of the most massive land took place in America where, in the middle of the seventeenth century, the Spaniards had appropriated a third of the indigenous communal lands with the system of *encomienda*. The enslavement in Africa also resulted in the loss of land, which deprived many communities of their best young people.

However, it is very strange to speak of "privatization of land" about a pure and simple conquest via plundering coupled with an intensification of the capture of African slaves that was not accompanied by any territorial conquest at that time (the Europeans most often did not capture the slaves themselves and left the dirty work to local groups they favored). The question of privatization really obsesses Silvia Federici, who proposes on page 145 this other formula, to say the least mysterious: "Even the individual relationship to God was privatized." One can certainly imagine that "an individual rapport" with God is something other than "privatize". But note that this paragraph, which explains that "everything has been privatized, even the relationship with God", is followed by another one that concerns...the development of public assistance and the state of the relationship between classes. Understand if you can.

The impression of anachronism is also fueled by an outrageous and deliberately controversial vocabulary. The same is true of the repeated and unjustified use of words such as "genocide", "holocaust", or page 194 of the term "death camps" about damage to workers' health in the workplace

conditions of South American mines. Far from helping to understand what is so designated, this abusive use of contemporary terms referring to Nazi politics blurs the stakes of the past and gives the uncomfortable impression that Auschwitz must always be summoned at all times to strike the soul, as if no horror below this level of horror, could really be seen as horrible.

In another order of ideas (but in the same spirit), we will note the gratuitous statement on page 376 according to which the slanders spilled on the “oil-bombers” during the Paris Commune of 1871 were “taken from the repertory of the witch hunt.” As is also shown by the all-round use of the idea of “enclosures” (see the second part of this text, by Christophe Darmangea). Silvia Federici seems to think that metaphor is the same thing as demonstration, and that the more the outrageous the metaphor, the stronger the demonstration.

D. “Speculative” speculation and sometimes surreal commentaries

The passages which seek to incriminate the philosophies of Hobbes and Descartes, on the one hand as reactionary enterprises, on the other hand as the intellectual base of the witch hunt, are among those where the author gives the strongest impression of torturing the facts to satisfy a pre-established agenda. Rather than seeing in the rationalist dimension of the thought of these authors a progress compared to the dominant religious conceptions at the time, Silvia Federici rather reads in their work what comes to her head. This is so with this passage, page. 221, about the design of the body as a machine:

When, for example, Hobbes declares that 'the heart is a spring [...] and the joints as many wheels', we perceive in his words a bourgeois spirit for which, not only the condition and the destination of the existence of the body are work, but there is also a need to transform all bodily dispositions into dispositions at work.

What is the relation between this very short quotation from Hobbes and what the author tells him to say?

Such extra-textual perceptions sometimes

turn squarely into a form of historical conspiracy. For example, on the next page, Silvia Federici unmasks Hobbes and Descartes and reveals that they were actually working for the state. More exactly, she “guesses” the thing:

Behind this new philosophy, we see a vast initiative of the state, by which what the philosophers called irrational was declared criminal. (...). That is why at the height of the 'Age of Reason', the age of skepticism and methodological doubt, we have a fierce attack of the body, so well supported by most of those who adhere to the new doxa.

Hence we learn that, in the case of Hobbes and Descartes—the rationalist philosophers of the modern epoch—in fact relayed in their works the pre-existing political program of a bourgeois state still in the making, but already fully conscious, where it was previously agreed that these same philosophers, in the name of rationality, were most often opposed to the powers of their time, namely, the state allied to the Church. We are dealing with fundamental revisions of historical knowledge.

Still in terms of free interpretation, lovers of Freudo-Scatology will be delighted to see that Silvia Federici is following in the footsteps of the Viennese psychoanalyst, theorizing a sort of “anal stage” of the development of bourgeois thought in the organization of work.

We can relate the great medical passion of the time, the analysis of excrement, from which we drew multiple deductions on the psychological tendencies of the individual (and vice versa), to the conception of the body as a receptacle of impurities and hidden dangers. Clearly, this obsession with human excrement reflected in part the disgust that the middle class was beginning to feel for the nonproductive aspects of the body (...). But in this obsession can also read the bourgeois need to regulate and clean the machine-body of any element that could interrupt its activity, and create “dead time in the expenditure of work.”

Clearly? Really? one could think more simply that these medical practices related to excrement have, as for bleeding, a relationship with the pre-scientific conceptions of the body which are at the time those of the theory of humours. The author practices here a sort of *mise en abyme*¹⁰, of her subject, for, like the physicians of the time of which she speaks, she also makes shit say a lot of things, according to her humour.

On page 304, we move from Freudian free interpretation to the true Lacanian interpretative delusion, the one who sees a Phallus in any vaguely oblong form:

The repulsion that non-procreative sexuality began to inspire is reflected in the myth of the old witch flying on her broom, which, just like the animals she was traveling on (goats, mares, dogs) was the projection of a penis in extension, a symbol of unbridled lust.

The most fun here is the fact that the mare is considered an extension of the penis, while it is the female horse. What would she have said if the witch had traveled on the back of a male horse, whose reproductive organ's impressive size is known!

In another vein—even another—we cannot ignore how Federici deals with the anthropophagic practices of Amerindian societies. Pretending—against all evidence, as can be seen by reading the books in question—that the first Europeans who recounted these practices used them to reject the Indians in animality, she goes on:

It should also be noted that the cannibalistic rituals discovered in America and which occupy a good place in the stories of the conquest were not very different from the medical practices then popular in Europe. In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and even the eighteenth century, drinking human blood (especially when blood was harvested after a violent death) [...] were common remedies for treating epilepsy and other diseases in many European countries.

It is true that medical practices of this kind are attested to occur in modern Europe, as evoked by the work of Richard Sugg Mummies, *Cannibals and Vampires*. But it appears that for the purposes of his demonstration, Federici considers as a detail the fact that in Europe, one only drank blood or consumed parts of the body that individuals already deceased, while in the Amazon prisoners were captured and put to death for the sole purpose of devouring them.

And since a little sketch of Monty Python is often better than long explanations, let's bring up the "Liver Donation" to illustrate the subtle difference between the two types of situations.¹¹

E. Derision and Rejection of Rationalism

Finally, let us emphasize that the lack of scientificity of the demonstration shown in *Caliban* at least has the merit of epistemological coherence, since the author states her rejection of science and its methods regularly during the book. And this is a structuring element of her vision of the world, since several times in the book she quotes and takes up the analysis of Carolyn Merchant, according to which the emergence of scientific rationalism was a factor of increasing women's oppression—and that it has been essentially that.

Let's go back to the manner in which she rebels about the cover of Vesalius' anatomy book: "The anatomical theater reveals to the public a disenchanting body, desecrated." She thus assigns Vesalius, whom she ends up quoting later in the text, a "mechanistic" vision of the body conceived as a machine. But what does she propose instead? A more fantastic and less scientific vision of the body, like page 219, where we learn that nascent anatomical science is also part of the grand conspiracy to enslave women in the service of capitalism:

To lay down the body in terms of mechanics, void of any intrinsic teleology, those 'occult virtues' attributed to it by natural magic and popular superstitions of the time, made intelligible the possibility of subordinating it to a restless work process, increasingly on

consistent and predictable patterns of behavior.

Silvia Federici devotes long explanations to explain that the attacks on witches were also a rationalistic attack against the magic vision of the world, a vision that for its part would have been more respectful of nature and the body. According to her, capitalism needed to destroy the belief in magic to impose its own vision of the world, and rationalist philosophers knowingly helped it. She quotes in support of this thesis another small passage from Hobbes, according to which people would obey better if the belief in magic was eliminated. Hobbes is indeed a philosopher of the order, panicked by the abuses of the English civil wars and whose ideas aim above all at the avoidance of chaos. However, here is restored the entire passage of *Leviathan* incriminated by Federici:

If the superstitious fear of the spirits was dismissed, and with it the divinatory practices made from dreams, the false prophecies and many other things that depend on them, by which clever and ambitious individuals deceive the little people, humans would be better off willing they are only to civil obedience.

We can see that what motivates Hobbes, just as much as the social order, is to fight against the power given by the possibility of exploiting the credulity of others. And in modern Europe, for which Federici tends to forget or minimize the weight of the Church, such an approach, that of of materialistic philosophers like Hobbes, has something subversive, as seen in *Leviathan*:

For the wandering fairies and ghosts, the opinion [that they exist], I think, was purposely taught, or not refuted, to keep the credit of the use of exorcism, signs of the cross, holy water, and other such inventions of men who deal with spirituality.

For a philosopher of the order, this is a very good attack against what is perhaps, via the abuse of credulity, the main guarantor of the established order at the time!

Certainly, the rationalist philosophers of that time were, in their philosophical as well as political ideas, far from being proletarian revolutionaries. But then, why not criticize them for the insufficiency of their rupture with the old world, their concessions to anti-rational ideas (in particular, the divine idea), in short, the inconsistency of their materialism? On the contrary, Federici chose, on the pretext of solidarity with the victims of the new order that was then set up, to take over, albeit insidiously, the worst grievances against science and reason.

Thus, to support her anti-rationalist thesis, she draws her quotations almost exclusively from the most conservative rationalist philosophers of modern Europe. We would like to know how much more representative people like Hume, Locke, Diderot, d'Alembert, Holbach or even Voltaire fit into her framework, according to which the rationalists would have been a force at the service of the established order, where magical beliefs would have been more liberating than rationalism. In any case, even Newtonian physics, reduced here to the rank of mere belief, is indirectly complicit in the witch hunt: "after Newtonian physics had spread the belief that the natural world was empty of occult powers" (p. 237). Between science and magic, comrade Federici chose her side: "Seeking to control nature, the capitalist organization of work had to counter the unpredictability inherent in the practice of magic, and prevent the establishment of privileged relationships with the natural elements," (p. 274); "The fight against magic has always accompanied the development of capitalism, until today," (p. 273). Let's concede, however, that some amazing revelations nuance this picture, even if they do not really help to enlighten the reader; We learn as follows: "Newtonian physics had to discover its gravitational attraction not to a mechanical perception, but to a magical conception of nature," (p. 372). Understand that, if you can.

The "materialism" of the feminism claimed by Federici blithely changes into its opposite: a representative argument of ecofeminism, which is politically suspicious of rationality and science, which prefers magic and superstitions. The author's obsession to see increasing social control in the slightest scientific progress is never convincing, but it turns downright ridiculous when, on page 232, it

stigmatizes even the simple vulgarization of astronomical knowledge:

The inspiring force of the need for social control is evident even in the field of astronomy. A classic example is that of Edmond Halley (the secretary of the Royal Society) who, at the time of the appearance in 1695 of the comet which was later given his name, organized clubs all over England in order to demonstrate the predictability of natural phenomena to dispel the popular belief that comets announce social disorders.

Thus, spreading astronomical knowledge in the population would be “social control”? Does Silvia Federici find it more liberating to maintain scientific knowledge among elites and to manipulate the good people into believing that this or that astronomical phenomenon would be some sign of the action of an invisible power to which they should submit?

After claiming that the most famous advocates of nascent modern science were not particularly opposed to witch hunts at the time, the conclusion towards which all these tendencies tend to turn appears on page 320, black and white: The question that remains unresolved is whether the rise of the modern scientific method can be considered as the cause of the witch hunt! And she summons again Carolyn Merchant, who explains that the ultimate origin of the witch hunt would be the mechanistic philosophy of Descartes. The argument, of a pachydermic levity, is again based on a simple chronological coincidence and on an excessive use of the metaphor as proof:

Merchant sees proof in the link between persecution of witches and development of modern science in the work of Francis Bacon, one of the reputed father of the new scientific method, showing that the concept of scientific investigation of nature was modeled on the interrogations of witches under torture, portraying nature as a woman to conquer, unmask and rape.

How to answer such nonsense?

First, one can easily recall this other sequence

of the Monty Python, which calls into question the rational method of investigation in the condemnation of a witch, a classic scene whose content is probably no further from the historical reality than is the development of Federici.¹²

One could also object that the rationalists of the time were not really in a position of strength and that their possible silence can also be explained by the desire to preserve their own lives that may have already been threatened elsewhere. Is it worth remembering that Giordano Bruno also ended his life on a bonfire in 1600, like many supposed witches?

But above all, there is a major counter-example to Silvia Federici's thesis, which she does not mention, in the person of Jean Wier (or Johann Weyer), doctor and philosopher of the sixteenth century, ancestor of psychiatry, who played a role in the fight against the witch hunt by explaining that they were not possessed by the demon but victims of hallucinations.¹³ Jean Wier wrote two books denouncing the witch hunt: *De praestigiis daemonum* in 1563 and *De Lamiis* in 1582.¹⁴ Here is what Brian P. Levack, a specialist from this period already mentioned:

His books constituted a frontal attack on the conceptions expressed in *Malleus Maleficarum*. To support his theses, Weyer used his medical knowledge by claiming, on the one hand, that the so-called maleficia of the witches could be explained by medical and natural causes, and on the other hand, that the witches' confessions relating to their diabolical activities were largely the consequence of a uterine disorder, called melancholy.¹⁵

Federici evokes Levack a few times in his book. But in light of the above, one may wonder whether she really read it, or whether she chose to simply ignore any content that did not fit her thesis, knowing that what does not fit with her thesis, very often, is simply reality.

Finally, let us note that the idea hammered by Federici, according to which the advent of modern medicine was a fight led by the triumphant patriarchy, and that the witch hunt aimed at the healers, especially the midwives, has nothing new about it. As early as 1973, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English

asserted that the goal had been to eliminate the rivals of male doctors, thereby ensuring male dominance over the medical profession. However, this idea has long been denied—according to the expert cited above, Alison Rowlands, who states:

The myths without a factual basis forged by nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, which feminists have acritically adopted to serve their own agendas. (...) Historians have refuted the idea that midwives and healers were the specific targets of an elite-orchestrated witch hunt. Midwives were sometimes prosecuted for witchcraft, but they were much more likely to participate in infanticide proceedings than to be accused of using witchcraft to kill the children they had borne.

To conclude part 1

It may happen that changes in society give new ideas to scientists, and that they are led to look differently at a reality that had already been investigated, but which is judiciously re-enlightened by these new preoccupations. This is, for example, in a way what happened in biology with the rise of social acceptance of homosexuality following the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s: as biologists became interested in the sex of the animals they saw copulating they realized that the fact there was among them “couples” of the same sex was more important than they had previously believed, for want of simply being interested in this phenomenon.

This kind of paradigm shift can happen in history, and revisionism can be fruitful.

But for this new perspective to be a step forward, and not just a fad; it must be based on solid observations and on a substantial archive; it must prove its legitimacy in order to correct, or even replace, the old one. Thus, to reassess the historical significance of the witch hunt—and, beyond that, the place assigned to women in the primitive accumulation of capital—as Silvia Federici claims to do, will take much more than pulling numbers out of a hat, indirect “proofs”, pure speculation, “forgetfulnesses” that work well for the author’s thesis, and, for good measure,

some documents diverted from their real meaning.

II. Primitive accumulation and social relations between the sexes

Federici's book raises the question of the historical and logical relationship between the deterioration of the position of women, in the world of work and in society in general, and the establishment of capitalist society. As shown in Part I, we have seen that the book brings enumerable biases, and, frankly, some outright fantasies, to bear on this question, even on the strictly factual level. But it must also be noted that the book does not present itself as a scientific discussion. At no point in the 400 pages of her book does Federici bother to address other possible theses or explanations of the data, nor to discuss their possible weaknesses and show how her point of view is more satisfactory; only her point of view is given to (or, should we say, forced upon) the reader.

Obviously, the question she raises is in itself entirely legitimate. Historians have long agreed that the period between the end of the Middle Ages and the industrial revolution in Europe is one of a global retreat, both in terms of empirical fact and in terms of legal right, of the status of women. In legal terms, this decline in France hit its nadir with Le Code Napoleon, which turned women into permanent legal minors. The movement was a long time coming: the first attacks against the rights of women—removing the right to practice certain trades—occurred as far back as the 12th century regardless of whether the witch hunt was really a way to put all the women in step (which is questionable, as we have seen), and without idealizing in the least the place of women in the Middle Ages, the fact remains that the transition from feudalism to capitalism was clearly accompanied, in Europe, by a general strengthening of male domination.

However, and leaving aside the obvious, this finding alone does not suffice to infer that women's disempowerment was a necessary condition for the accumulation of capital. Coincidences are not correlations; further, correlations aren't causalities (which in themselves can be diverse and multifaceted). Before reaching such a conclusion, one should consider the different possible relationships between the

two phenomena (primitive accumulation and the disempowerment of women) and evaluate their likelihood.

One element certainly makes it possible to exclude “a simple coincidence” from the outset: I speak of the essential role played by the promotion of Roman law, on which all historiography insists, but of which Federici, strangely enough, does not breathe a word (unless I am mistaken). The rediscovery of this law at the end of the Middle Ages corresponded to a double need: on the one hand, that experienced by the rising bourgeoisie, who found there (or found there) an instrument particularly adapted to codify the commercial property (as opposed to the feudal right, which admitted a multiplicity of rights on the same ground; on the other, that of the States in reconstruction, for which this right codified the new range of the public power. Roman Law was also the one that consecrated the legal inferiority of women, giving the (male) head of the family an exorbitant power over the rest of the family (wife, unmarried children, and, originally, slaves)—on this subject, we will be able to consult this very interesting article of Alain Bihl.¹⁶

There is indeed a causal relationship between the gestation of capitalism and the deterioration of the status of women in Europe. The whole problem lies in knowing the exact nature of this causality, which is far from being as simple as *Caliban* would have us believe since, as we have said, there is no trace of discussion of other theses in the book, it is limited to declining two fundamental arguments.

A. Natalism: Fruit of a demographic crisis?

The first, probably the most original, is that the nascent capitalism would have faced a risk of labor shortage (whether a real or fantasized risk is not clear, nor does it give any sources to establish the existence of this panic). Thus, it is at the highest social level, that of the state, that a strict pro-natalist policy was put in place in order to thwart this possible crisis. Increasingly fierce legislation thus kept women more and more in the role of reproducers, while practices that could lower the birth rate were more and more severely punished.

But if the fact (the policy of birth, the repression of contraception and abortion) is proven, it is difficult to be convinced by the causes invoked. Federici writes, for example:

The question of labor became particularly urgent in the seventeenth century, when the population in Europe continued to decline, bringing the specter of a demographic collapse similar to that which had taken place in the American colonies in the decades following the conquest. (p. 332)

However, there is no tangible evidence behind this claim. The general, if not unanimous, opinion of specialists mentions a slow population growth from the beginning of the 15th century; one searches in vain for works establishing a “decline”, of which, moreover, contemporaries should have had more or less clear awareness.

The reality of the facts thus suggests that the natalist policies pursued by the states should perhaps be attributed much less to the real problems of nascent capitalism than to the unjustified anxieties of its promoters, which is already very different. But above all, in a context of strong military rivalries, there is no need to resort to forced reasoning around the primitive accumulation to explain that the states of the modern era, amidst inter-state conflict and competition, wanted to have access to the largest population possible. This hypothesis suggests that the natalist policy corresponded to the political necessities of the moment, rather than the demands of the new economic system.

Incidentally, one can only be astonished when reading about this state-sponsored policy of births that, “From then, until today, the State has spared no effort to take back women's control over reproduction” (p. 186). We do not really know what this sentence is supposed to refer to, but there is, at the very least, an ahistorical generalization, which sweeps Malthus and the pill away from the same hand, and sounds strange at the time of legalization of the PMA. In most developed countries, women have acquired both the right to divorce and the right to contraception and abortion, without the impression that the state, as such, is fighting continue to take

them back. That there are reactionary political currents that militate in this direction, and that such currents, alas, sometimes win victories, is one thing, but to present such setbacks (or threats of setbacks) as the result of a general political will of the states is, once again, to look at the facts with singularly distorted lenses. What threatens today women's ability to fully control their bodies are the residues of religious backwardness and austerity policies in the health field, and not a supposedly eternally natalist essence of capitalism.

B. Domestic work and capital's profitability

Turning to the second argument, long since formulated by the materialist-feminist current (with which Federici is associated): by providing free domestic work, to reproduce the labor force, women would have helped to decisively raise the rate of profit:

The development of the modern family was the first long-term investment of the capitalist class in the reproduction of the labor force beyond its numerical growth. This was the result of a compromise, concluded under threat of insurrection, between the guarantee of higher wages, to maintain a 'non-working' wife, and a more intensive exploitation rate. Marx speaks of it as the transition from 'absolute surplus value' to 'relative surplus value' [...] (p. 200)

Let us pass over the inaccuracies (a "more intensive" rate, or the so-called "passage" from one form of surplus value to another) the baseless assertions (the family as "investment" made by the capitalist class, the conclusion of a "compromise" granting, under threat of insurrection, "guarantees" to male workers). From this passage there emerges an indisputable idea: all things being equal, the provision of free work (it would be more accurate to say quasi-free) by a fraction of the working class, for the production of a commodity used in production (in this case, labour-power), represents an additional gain for the capitalist class. The whole question is to know what we can conclude.

Traditionally, the materialist feminist movement saw in it the indication that the subordination of women and their relegation to the sphere of domestic work was a vital dimension for capitalism: the rate of profit could not be sustained if women's work was paid equal to that of male employees. This seemingly convincing reasoning is based on a series of slippages, or implicit assumptions, which are not obvious.

Without repeating all the arguments that one of us had already developed on this subject¹⁷, let us say that, although quasi-free domestic work has undoubtedly represented (and still represents) a boon for capitalism, nothing says that capitalism could not have adapted just as well to another configuration. Essentially, the materialist feminists say "all things being equal, if quasi-free domestic work were paid, there would be a fall in the rate of profit." But there is no reason to assume that all things would remain equal; it is quite conceivable that if domestic work, for whatever reason, had to be remunerated, then "male wages" would have been (still) lower than they were.

Let us end by noting the daring and peremptory assertion that, with regard to productivity gains, the impact of women's free labor greatly overshadowed the division of labor and the Industrial Revolution... a complete challenge to the traditional vision of economic history:

This aspect must be emphasized, given the existing tendency to attribute the progress capitalism made to the productivity of labor to the specialization of tasks. In reality, the advantages that the capitalist class derives from the differentiation between industrial and agricultural work within the industrial work itself [sic], celebrated by Adam Smith in his ode to the manufacture of pins, *are very few in comparison to those it drew from the devaluation of women's work and their social position.* (p. 243, italics ours)

Of course, one waits for the quantitative data to justify this "radical" statement in vain.

C. Women and enclosure

The idea that the trusteeship of women constituted

an important, even essential, dimension of primitive accumulation—though we think it unlikely—is not absurd a priori, and could be discussed; it would still have to be on the basis of unbiased facts and solid reasoning. Instead, these are often replaced by the other with pure rhetorical effects. We know that the emblematic act of the primitive accumulation was enclosure, the fencing off of the communal lands that ruined the small peasantry in England. According to Federici, the subordination of women must absolutely also be an enclosure. This assertion, repeated many times throughout the book, leads to a formulation such as this one about witch hunts and colonialism: “It is also an enclosure strategy that, depending on the context, could be an enclosure of the earth, the body, or social relations.” (p. 382). The reader who has not yet lost their mind will say that either the term “enclosure” is a catch-all supposed to be able to qualify just about anything, depending on the context; or that, in these different contexts (social relations, bodies, etc) it is used in its normal sense—the establishment of barriers”. But what are these enclosures that privatize and lock up women’s bodies? Even when the formulation is less foggy, the reasoning is hardly acceptable:

In this new social/sexual contract, the proletarian women replaced the lost land in the enclosures for the male workers, becoming their most basic means of reproduction and a common good that everyone could appropriate and use at will. (...) in the new organization of work, every woman (*apart from those privatized by the bourgeoisie*) became a common good, insofar as, as soon as women’s activities were defined as non-work, their work began to appear as a natural resource, available to all, as well as the air we breathe or the water we drink (p. 195-196, emphasis by the author)

The nail is pushed a few lines further:

In precapitalist Europe, the subordination of women to men was moderated by the fact that they had access to the communal, whereas in the new capitalist regime *the*

women themselves became the communal, since their work was defined as a natural resource, outside the sphere of market relations. (ibid, emphasis by the author)

In what way, in the new society, did every non-bourgeois woman become a “common” resource? Mystery! If, as Federici explains at will, women and their work have, in the course of this evolution, been more *privately* adopted by men than before (father and then husband), we should rather conclude exactly the opposite. If we understand—which is not easy—and compare the economic metaphors used in different parts of the book, then women become during the period considered very oxymoronic “enclosed communal property,” in a way. We think that this oxymoron sheds some light on the text, however obscurely, this rather crude confusion between gratuity and communality has only one explanation: the will to establish at any price a parallel between the fences of the fields and the fate of women, to address the imagination to make up for the lack of solid reasoning.

D. The idealisation of pre-capitalist societies

To return to the thesis, if there is one aspect for which we can quite reasonably establish a causal link between the rise of capitalist relations and the modifications of the “reproductive” social relations, it is the emergence of the nuclear family. For example, one could convincingly explain how the commodification of economic relations tends to dissolve the older, more extensive family forms and to foster the socio-economic unity of a couple and their children. On the other hand, it is much more difficult to situate the place and necessity of male domination in this movement, as well as that of the relegation of women to domestic tasks. We’ve already mentioned our issues with the conclusions around the impact of domestic work on the profitability of capital (in section B)). But it must also be noted that, in itself, Capital is perfectly indifferent whether this domestic work is done by women exclusively or principally, rather than by men. Free labor is free labor, regardless of the sex of the worker, and the surplus value drawn therefrom is no

more gendered than it has an odor.

From the beginning of the book, Silvia Federici tells us that “with capitalist society, sexual identity becomes the vector of specific functions” (p. 23). Yet the specialization of women in domestic work was not created *ex nihilo* by nascent capitalism; although capitalism has clearly strengthened it, it represents a legacy that seems as old as human societies themselves. Federici, however, paints an idyllic but misleading picture of the relationship between the sexes in previous societies, to better highlight the darkness of ours.

First, she idealizes the place of women in the Middle Ages:

Peasant Women were less dependent on their male companions, less differentiated from them socially and psychologically, and less dependent on the needs of men than 'free' women were later to be in capitalist society. (p. 40)

Yet, the author points out just after, the limit to the woman's dependence on her companion rested on the authority of the Lord, owner of land and people: “

It was the lord who commanded the work and social relations of women, deciding, for example, whether a widow had to remarry and who was to be her husband; in certain areas, a lord could even claim the *juice primae noctis*, the right to sleep with the wife of the serf on the wedding night.

This form of dependence and enslavement, therefore, seems *a priori* hardly more enviable than that which has succeeded it. We read the following on page 179, on the 17th century: “A new model of femininity emerged as a result of this defeat: the woman and the ideal wife, passive, obedient, economical, silent, hardworking and chaste.” Certainly. But how is it fundamentally different from the model of femininity proposed in the eleventh / thirteenth century in novels that portrayed courtly love, as described by Georges Duby in a collection with a significant title.

The man who takes a wife, regardless of his age, must behave like a senior and hold this

woman in check under his tight control. (...). The agreement begins with this postulate, obstinately proclaimed, that the woman is a weak being who must be necessarily submissive because she is naturally perverse, that she is destined to serve the man in the marriage, and that the man is in legitimate power to make use of her. (Georges Duby, « L'amour en France au XII^e siècle », *Mâle Moyen Âge*, Flammarion, 1988, p. 37)

And it is not for nothing that a specialist of the medieval history genre, although without denying the later degradation of the feminine position, can conclude his work on the subject in the following way:

In many areas, [the distinction of sex from the twelfth to the fifteenth century] results in male domination and a devaluation of the feminine. [...] In modes of representation, the feminine is on the side of the carnal and the masculine, on the spiritual. [...] The inferiority and devaluation of women lead to their exclusion from the priesthood, the university or the urban power. She is more present in hell than in paradise. [...] She receives less education, occupies little space in literature, arts and culture. On a legal level, she remains an eternal minor, dependent on men. In crimes and offenses, she is more victim than offender. [...] High gender diversity and low division of labor tasks do not prevent higher male wages, a lower proportion of women in lucrative and socially recognized jobs, and the possession of the most sophisticated tools by men. (D. Lett, *Hommes et femmes au Moyen Âge*, Armand Colin 2013, p. 211-213))

But it is also, and above all, colonized societies, such as those of pre-Columbian America, which are the subject of a retrospective fascination that is largely fantasy. It is therefore not surprising when Federici states women were “in a position of power (...) [which] is reflected in the existence of many female deities” (p. 401). If words have meaning, then they were matriarchies. Such a revelation, which contradicts all the ethnological knowledge, is not encumbered

with any reference (and for good reason), and relies only on an argument refuted long ago, for a number of societies have worshiped female divinities while remaining perfectly patriarchal.

E. Capitalism and the situation of women

A bias in one sense doubles itself as a bias in another sense: in Federici's interpretation of the facts, capitalism is unilaterally presented as a system degrading the position of women. This degradation, seen as a necessary condition of the birth of capitalism, is also supposed to mark all its later evolution, until today. But such a tale of the effects is (at best) lying by omission.

To begin with, the period Federici deals with is less about capitalism itself than about the hybrid social forms that preceded it. The sixteenth century was certainly in the process of engendering capitalism, but it was still far enough away that the bourgeoisie was forced, in the following centuries, to overthrow the political power by force in order to impose the new social structure.

Then Federici herself shows (for once with precise examples) that the process of monetarizing the economy from the 12th to the 15th century led many rural women to migrate to the cities, where they had access to a variety of different jobs. and more autonomy... which is perfectly contradictory to the general thesis of the book.

Starting in the industrial revolution, and in a more and more marked manner in the twentieth century, the capitalist system has undeniably produced an emancipatory effect on the condition of women, in a vivid way in the heart of the richest countries. We live in the first of all known human societies that has conceived of the ideal of gender equality—that is, the social undifferentiation of genders. Even if this ideal is still far from being fully realized, our societies are none the less the only ones to have, legally, brought down one by one all the barriers that legally separated women from men, particular as regards the access reserved for certain positions or jobs. The fact that the world's leading states have been promoting (at least in words) gender equality for decades is part of this movement. Moreover, this fact is also one of the

elements which make it possible to think that such a program of gender-equality hardly subverts Capital, which is served by these States with zeal.

Here again, of course, we can discuss why this evolution has occurred; in fact, one of us has already proposed a materialist explanation for it, in a book published a few years ago.¹⁸ But in the text of *Caliban*, the discussion is not even possible—if only to try to understand the reversal from the tendencies observed at the Renaissance: this major dimension of reality is simply evacuated. Under Federici's pen, capitalism becomes a system that, systematically and for congenital reasons, can only relegate women to the domestic sphere and organize their oppression.

F. The addition to historical materialism

This account cannot be completed without mentioning the few passages in which Federici explicitly intends to criticize Marx and, above all, to reconsider the place of the capitalist system in social evolution. Thus, it appears that “Marx could never have thought that capitalism opened the way to human emancipation if he had considered this story from the point of view of women.” (p. 21). By thus suggesting that, if Marx attributed to capitalism a progressive historical role, it is because it would have improved the situation of the workers, Federici shows that she did not understand one of his most elementary ideas (or that she pretends not to have understood it, but the result is the same). All Marx's reasoning, all the “scientific” character of his socialism, rested on the idea that capitalism, by developing the productive forces, set up, for the first time in human social evolution, the conditions of socialism. As we have just said, it should be added that capitalism has also laid the foundation for the disappearance of the sexual division of labor; that is, the emancipation of women.

But Federici handwaves this away. After recommending, on page 39, to avoid idealizing “the servile medieval community” as a model of collective organization of work, she does just this a little further in describing a model of “primitive communism” on the basis of which it would have been possible for humanity to economize the capitalist stage of its development—here we find the logic of the Russian

Narodniki, against whom the revolutionary workers' movement was constructed. Federici also boldly asserts that the "proletarian" struggles of the late Middle Ages might well have been victorious (p. 107)—without, however, informing the reader of the type of society that might have emerged from such hypothetical victories—and the text proposes a vision for the least original of the social evolution of the last centuries:

Capitalism was the counter-revolution which reduced to nothing the possibilities opened by the anti-feudal struggle. These possibilities, if they had become realities, would have spared us the immense destruction of human lives and the natural environment which marked the progress of capitalist relations throughout the world." (p. 36)

As for the idea, fundamental to Marx, that capitalism represented in relation to feudalism "a superior form of social life", it is "a belief (...) [which] has not yet disappeared." (p. 36). In case you have a doubt, this idea is repeated a little further:

It is not possible to equate capitalist accumulation and the liberation of workers, women or men, as many Marxists have done (...) or to understand the emergence of capitalism as a moment of historical progress. (p. 118)

What emerges from this? On the one hand, whether voluntarily or not, Federici impoverishes Marx's statement, making him say that capitalism represents an emancipation, where he defended the idea that he sets the conditions for future emancipation, which is more than a nuance. But above all by claiming, without any kind of justification, that medieval societies could have given birth directly to a socialist society and that capitalism, from this point of view, was not a step forward but a step backward, Federici throws overboard precisely the materialism she said she claims. Into the dustbin goes the close link between the forms of material production and social relations; the idea, a thousand times developed and illustrated, that capitalism—the great industry, the advance of the

techniques and the sciences, the creation of the world market, the concentration and the internationalization of the production—has for the first time in human history laid the foundation for an equal society; also in the dustbin goes the symmetrical idea that, without this development of capitalism—if society remained in the limited pre-capitalist forms of production, the rule "to each according to his needs" can only remain unfulfilled, and that:

This development of productive forces (which itself implies the actual empirical existence of men in their world-historical, instead of local, being) is an absolutely necessary practical premise because without it want is merely made general, and with destitution the struggle for necessities and all the old filthy business would necessarily be reproduced. (Marx, *The German Ideology*, p. 11)¹⁹

Only the flat statement remains, and at bottom a reactionary nothing, that capitalism brought only evils and that human societies, in a way, "was better before."

Conclusion

The last (but not the least) question about *Caliban* is why such a questionable book has received so little criticism and so much praise, even in circles that claim to be Marxist.

A first possible element of an explanation lies in the fact that academic historians consider, regrettably, that noting the many errors of a text intended for the general public and whose author is not related to their discipline is a waste of time.

But, more deeply, the answer is self-evident: *Caliban*, despite all the weaknesses of its lyrics, sings a song that pleases. To begin with, it appears as an additional avatar of innumerable stories about primitive matriarchy—the author does not hesitate to repeat Bachofen and Engels' outdated conceptions of the "historical defeat of the female sex"; but, here, the story has been modernized. This defeat is supposed to stem, just as much as the birth of social classes, from capitalism: the last lost paradise was only a few centuries ago; and clearly, in the eyes of the author, it

still exists in many parts of the Third World that resist “neoliberal globalization.” The story, like so many others before it, implicitly plays on the misleading feeling that a past in which women have held a favorable position would be a base for their future struggles.

But how, even beyond the absence of seriousness and honesty in the restitution of historical material and data, can “Marxists” subscribe, sometimes enthusiastically, to a narrative that turns its back on the most basic analyzes of historical materialism? It's sort of a sign of the times and a further proof that social relationships are stronger than words and abstract references. The idea that, in the march to a world free of exploitation, capitalism has represented a necessary stage of social evolution, is obvious to the militants who intend to rely on the collective strength of the international proletariat, this exploited class has been created by capitalism. But in a context where this proletariat has been plunged for decades into political sluggishness, many people now refuse to see it as a force and come to consider that its existence (and, more generally, that of all the material and social transformations brought by capitalism), is only an unimportant detail—even an obstacle to the path of a socialism henceforth envisaged as an idealization of ancient societies.

There is more. The belief that male domination is a vital dimension of capitalism legitimizes (or seems to legitimize) the feeling that fighting for gender equality would *ipso facto* be a fight against capital. We are living in a time when it is infinitely easier to campaign on the ground of feminism—most often, in environments that are not the most exploited—than on that of communist ideas, and among the workers’ ranks. Therefore, it is tempting to convince oneself that the feminist struggle is an acceptable substitute to the communist struggle. This is unfortunately false, and if, as is the case here, under the cover of “radicalism”, this renunciation is accompanied by a fawning look upon anti-rationalist ramblings, an idealization of pre-capitalist societies and the abandoning of the most fundamental reasoning of Marxism, the resignation takes on the appearance of debacle.

Notes

1 Usus is the right to use a thing; Fructus is the right to the fruits produced by or derived from a thing

without diminution of the thing's substance; and Abusus is the right to dispose of a thing as long as such disposal is not infringing upon health, safety and welfare (<https://libguides.law.lsu.edu/c.php?g=664726>)

2 an early symptom indicating the onset of a disease or illness.

3 In science, “cherry-picking” is a fraudulent technique that consists, among a host of results, to retain only those who are in the direction of the original thesis deliberately ignoring the contrary results

4 The editor's work, which does not help understanding, can be deplored. For example, in the second edition, page 89, we can find an illustration with a legend about the damage of the Black Death of 1348 in Europe, when in fact it is the depiction of a brothel in the fifteenth century, a error that does not appear to be in the original edition. In the first edition, however, the same legend is found under two different illustrations, page 79 and page 95.

5 <http://expositions.bnf.fr/.../extra/antho/moyenage/3.htm>

6 Robert DELORT, *La vie au Moyen Age*, Seuil, 1982, p.103

7 https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_humani_corporis_fabrica

8 https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bataille_de_Roosebeke#cite_note-3

9 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faggot_\(slang\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faggot_(slang))

10 mise en abyme is, in art theory, a formal technique of placing a copy of an image within itself, often in a way that suggests an infinitely recurring sequence.

11 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgCgViLnvR0>

12 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PK8yQ-zpn_k

13 <http://psychiatrie.histoire.free.fr/pers/bio/wier.htm>

14 https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Wier#Le_De_praestigiis_daemonum

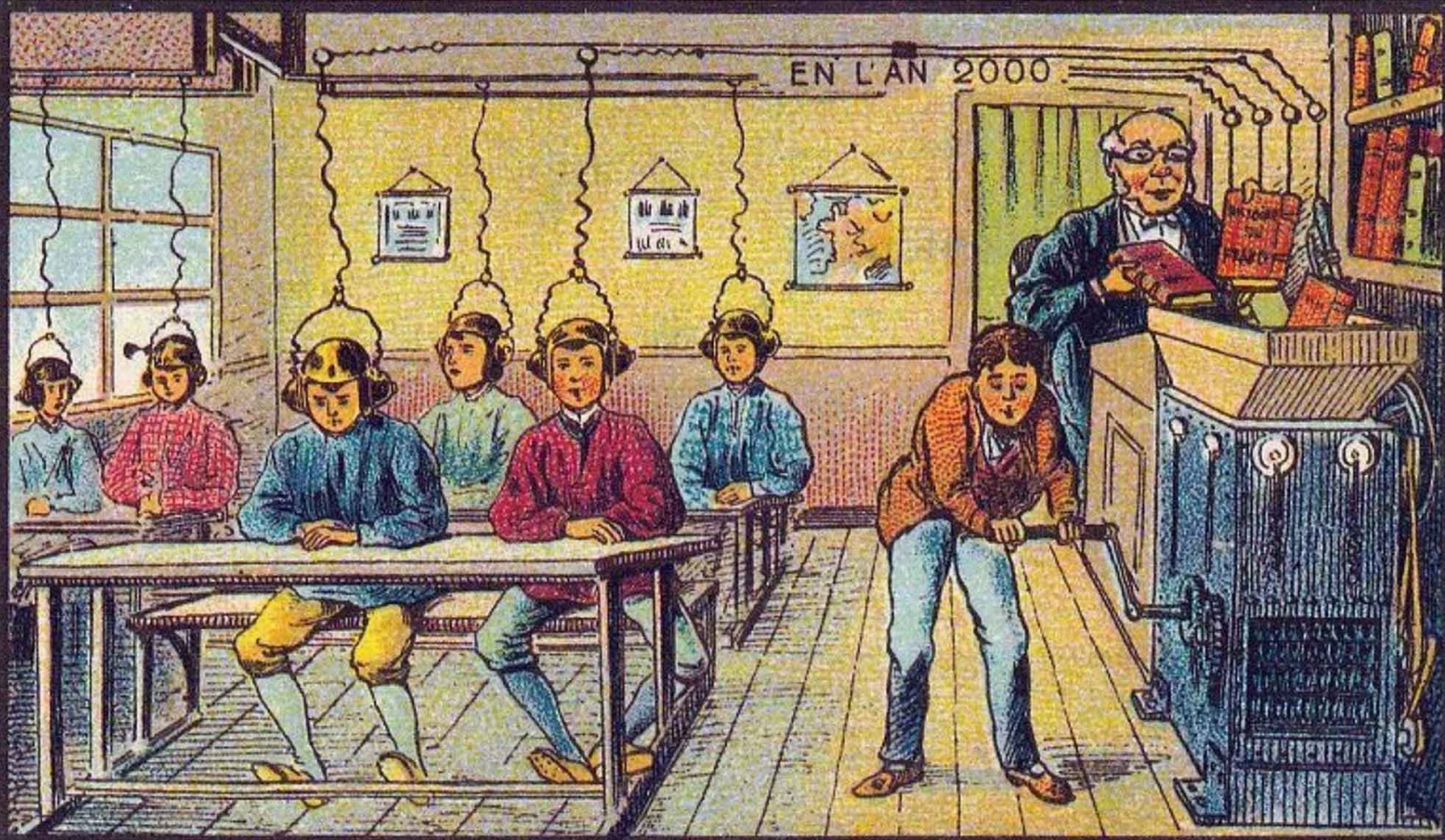
15 Brian P. Levack, *La grande chasse aux sorcières en Europe au début des Temps Modernes*, Champ Vallon, 1991, p. 72

16 <http://www.revue-interrogations.org/La-reinvention-du-droit-romain-au>

17 <https://cdarmangeat.blogspot.fr/2014/01/capitalisme-et-patriarcat-quelques.html>

18 <https://www.hobo-diffusion.com/catalogue/1175/le-communisme-primitif-n-est-plus-ce-qu-il-etait>

19 https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_The_German_Ideology.pdf



A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE INTERNET

Part II

6. Subsumption of the gears that make up the mind: Memory, thought, volition, appetite

Not only are the social relations of each person's knowledge, abilities, and affections with others being increasingly subsumed to capital, but the relationship of each person to the ideas and capacities within themselves are being subsumed. By externalizing knowledge, faculties, and feelings in social networks, the data become, in a short time, uninteresting, obsolete and disposable. There is no time or space for deep development of any ideas, knowledge, or capacity for oneself, because there is no longer time or space in which they can be expressed to be enjoyed and confirmed (or not) as an objective, social human power.

Socrates criticized writing because it externalizes human memory into objects, which would make people unable to remember, becoming increasingly forgetful and less and less autonomous over time.

Perhaps he was exaggerating, but it is an accurate description of what we are seeing today: memory is increasingly outsourced and abandoned, to be appropriated by companies, which makes it scarce, opaque, and difficult to access in the original form in which it was outsourced, so that it becomes a commodity when it is processed, "chewed" by algorithms, manipulated, and formatted to create dependence on enterprises. It is the *modus operandi* diametrically opposed to that of the previous free internet community, whose wealth came from increasing the autonomy and abilities of those who participated in it, and who became more powerful with each story and memory shared.

This algorithmic operationalization—of the mind for private property can be seen in current man-machine interfaces. They become increasingly bestializing, devoid of all the wide configuration and modification possibilities they once had (even the simplest software of the 1990s looked like complex spacecraft panels). The current interfaces (from

operating systems, applications, programs, to machines and even entire industries) are usually just big colorful kindergarten-style buttons with all possibility locked, inaccessible, or hidden.

Companies now sell a supposed maximum facilitation that saves the maximum amount of time (which is "money," the abstract time of capital), and this is made possible by algorithms that invisibly monitor the life of each person and their actions, and analyze their bio-socio-psychometric profile to present to them, at the human-machine interface, the free-choice objects they supposedly already want to choose.¹¹ As we saw earlier in chapter 4, this "facilitation" was only possible due to the flood of artificially injected noise on the Internet. And so, applications like torrent, where movies, programs, and music were downloaded for free have been emptied. Private properties specialized in streaming whose algorithms "facilitate all" (as long as you pay), such as Netflix and Spotify, took their place overwhelmingly.

7. Laborization of existence

This human-machine interface provides the capitalist class with near-absolute power over human existence. With the popularization of smartphones, miniaturized computers connected to the internet, with telephone and various sensors (cameras, camcorders, microphones, geolocation, accelerometers, gyroscopes, proximity, magnetometers, lux meter, thermometers, etc.) that are ubiquitous and made compulsory for those who do not want to be excluded from social contact, each person is monitored in virtually every aspect of their lives 24 hours a day by private property algorithms.

The data collected by companies allows them to implement, through the same smartphones, a subsumption of society to capital that covers the smallest details of daily life. The distinction between work and consumption disappears more and more, with everything becoming in one way or another some form of labor, a "value addition". Even unconsciously, by the development and application of gamification techniques, that is, designing the conditions of any and all activities to make it look like a game, Pavlovianly manipulating the user to perform unpaid tasks under the command of the owner of

these conditions, the capitalist class.

With a millenarianist and utopian ideology, companies of the "collaborative economy" like Uber promise a Midas touch that transforms objects of consumption as well as the body and mind of proletarians into capital (homes, cars, tools, furniture, appliances, toys, etc., which are only costs, are now consumed, that is, wear out every day with every use). They proclaim the transubstantiation of proletarians, finally made free from wage labor and owners of their own time, into capitalists.¹²

In fact, with all this post-industrial futurist rhetoric, capital merely resurrected, with high technology, the most archaic form of subsumption of labor to industrial capital: the "putting-out system", including even the gloomy-figure of the "middleman". The difference is that now, through its "frictionless" algorithms that analyze and compare the performance of everyone with each and each with everyone, to the extent that it involves the entire planet, the owner class impose on the proletarians a continually optimized global competition for offering the maximum amount and intensity of work in exchange for the minimum wage. The only thing that separates this maximum from being absolute is the time of feeding and sleep (although often interrupted by bosses, thanks to smartphones). Eating and sleeping are still inescapable needs of proletarians around the world. They are the last frontier of exploitation, unacceptable, intolerable, inconceivable for—the system of private property.¹³

In addition, the production, transportation and distribution of all goods became inseparable from the internet. In supply chains, the increase or decrease in demand for goods commands directly (with algorithms instead of humans), through the transmission of information through the internet, the automatic activation of the various phases of production, assembly, stock and flow (maritime, road, rail, air) of goods throughout the world. Often the transmitted signals directly drive the machines, robots, conveyor belts, container handling to and from ships, and the hiring and mobilization of workers scattered and fragmented all over the planet, all of which are connected by these logistic chains, private property of mighty and invisible "middlemen".¹⁴

Proletarians around the world have never

been so close, but they are increasingly placed in a situation where they do not directly see that they are working for capital, for bosses, for the owner class. Everything makes them seem to work immediately for themselves and against the other competing proletarians (the renaissance of provincialism, racism, xenophobia, nationalism, left and right identitarianism, separatism, militarism, fascism, etc., which for many is an unfathomable mystery is nothing more than a banal expression of the extreme intensity of competition for survival among workers,—competition for the "merit" of exclusive submission to "their" owning classes). They think they are only making money in return for satisfying the automatic demands of the world market that are signaled in the man-machine interfaces that surround them.^{15 16}

8. Transfusion of destructive forces into the pores of the physical world. The Inlaying of private property in the "nature of things": The supreme utopia of capital (fortunately still unrealizable).

The domination of capital, first and foremost, is the artificial inlaying of scarcity into the objective nature. It is nature transformed by the alienated labor of human beings into a power separate from them, private property. The population becomes deprived of its material conditions of existence, and consequently—everyone, democratically, is forced to buy, and for this, forced to sell commodities voluntarily, if one wants to survive.

In pre-capitalist societies, in servitude and in slavery, domination was personal, directly from men over other men, the personal will of some is imposed directly on others, denying it. In contrast, the most basic aspect of capitalist society is that it transforms the domination and exploitation of man by man into something that is voluntary, a manifestation of one's free will. This is because it occurs in an objective coercive condition—deprivation of property—which imposes objectively—that is, in a "neutral" ("democratic," "impersonal," "reasonable," "fair," "natural") way—the need to compete for submission to private property, to the capitalist class, in order to receive a wage and survive.

Since each proletarian, because he is deprived of the means of production, has nothing to sell, he, if he wants to survive (socially and physically), has only the option of voluntarily selling himself, his vital capacities, in the labor market, to the owners of the means of production (the capitalist class). He has free will, as he "may" choose to starve or become a beggar rather than sell himself. Purchased by the capitalists, this commodity is consumed: the proletarian is placed to work and transform nature increasing the objective force that confronts him as a hostile power, private property. The more he works, the more deprived of property he becomes, the more powerful private property becomes, and the more it transfers human capabilities to it (fixed capital: machinery, automation; knowledge, and know-how made intellectual private property, etc.), actively creating what makes him increasingly disposable, deprived of property, proletarian.

In short, in capitalist society, domination presents itself as an imperative of objective reality, a "force of nature" ("second nature") that was created by human labor. Scarcity—deprivation of property, private property—reproduces itself as an independent power that commands all beings (human and nonhuman), including the person of the capitalist (and also the states) who, if they fail in the competition for accumulating capital, go bankrupt, and are automatically replaced by more "efficient" ones (that is why we use the word "capital", for in fact it commands the society of the commodity according to an autonomous, automatic, but opaque logic, while capitalists are only agents, personifications of the power of capital, obliged to apply the dictates of its accumulation over human beings under penalty of falling into the hell of becoming proletarians).

But to this day capitalist society has been impossible without a central power, which, with police and prisons, enforces respect for private property by violence, centrally validates the equivalence of means of exchange and payment (money, credit), protects and guarantees the contracts between proprietors, and represses the struggle of proletarians against the deprivation of their living conditions (a struggle which, by definition, disrespects the private property of these conditions). Thus capitalist society has a very concentrated and visible Achilles heel, which, if attacked,

instantly disarms all the gears of the private property system. Of course, the existence of this vulnerable point, the State, causes great concern to the owner class.

To this day, the only way for the owner class to justify and legitimize the state—which is simply a territorial enterprise, which, like all capital, is a dictatorship for the imposition of wage labor, subject to the same imperatives of capital accumulation like any other enterprise—was to present it in the imagination as neutral, above classes and capital. That is, "Rule of Law", representation of subjects (the citizen) whose "autonomy" coincides with their voluntary subjection to it, and in which the citizen elects his own boss (who competes to be freely chosen at the polls), representation of the "general will of the people". In other words: democratic ideology (or "socialist" ideology, as in countries with nationalized capital such as the USSR and Cuba).

However, this purely imaginary legitimation is never fully convincing, and many capitalists prefer to preach that the state is totally separate and alien to private property, whereas in reality, as we have seen, it has always been in fact the supreme and indispensable institution that guarantees its existence. It is simply impossible for private property to exist without police, courts, armed forces and prisons. Until today.

Blockchain technology (the so-called smart contract) is now heavily financed with the explicit goal of making private property something that no longer depends on absolutely any "central power", becoming embedded in the automatic and decentralized behavior of things, and therefore in human relations mediated by these things.

Its purpose is to make each thing spontaneously verify, homologate, and validate the presupposed condition of deprivation of property. This means to instantly authenticate the artificial scarcity of everything by the quantitative equivalence imposed by private property: the homologation of limitation of use by payment, limitation of copy by copy licenses, authentication of the command by the execution of the work, instant enforcement of respect for patents and intellectual property in all things, and even laws in cases in which it applies, etc.

With this, each object will tend to cease to be a "product"—which is bought at once, and whose use,

after being bought, is independent of the company and the market—to become a "service"—in which a subscription or a license is paid continuously for its use, like a rent. This makes its short-term use seemingly much cheaper and more accessible to proletarians, but will mean that the owner class will have the power to impose directly on any and every use the dictate of continuous scarcity, "monetizing" even the most ordinary gestures (especially with the popularization of wearable technology, e.g. smart clothes, augmented reality, transhuman prostheses, biomedical sensors, etc.), such as dressing, walking, going to the bathroom, operating the toilet, yawning, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, even peristalsis, blood circulation, brain synapses. Every gesture, and even the functioning of the human organism, will incarnate the coercion to labor. It will be necessary, even more so than today, to work desperately to get money to pay for simply existing.

It is a scenario where the "internet of things" will automatically take on the role of police-penal wedge that separates needs from capacities, imposing the submission to private property of the means of life and of production in absolutely all aspects of human existence.

The utopia of private property, as we have seen, has always been to convert the totality of circumstances in which human beings exist in 'natural', 'objective', 'automatic' and 'voluntary' imperatives of submission to the dictates of capital accumulation, into the maximum amount of work. The difference this time is that with these two technologies, blockchain and internet of things, policing will be automatic. It will be in the "nature of things". The prison could be the sofa in your house or the "smart home" itself, which suddenly locks up the "human capital"; or it may be all things (every "service" in the smart home and smart city) that suddenly stop working, isolating one from the society that only exists connected to them. And the "crime" judgment, a decentralized algorithm that returns to the "criminal"—who does not even need to be informed that he has been charged, tried and convicted (as is already the case today—with the "bans" in social networks and "collaborative economy" companies)—the automatic execution of the penalty. "De jure" and "de facto" become indistinguishable. The ideology of the "rule of law" becomes totally

unnecessary to legitimize the police-penal-wedge, which becomes the "neutral" objectivity of the conditions where each atomized individual is "voluntarily forced" to "choose freely".¹⁷

Fortunately, all this is still just the dream of capital. And there is no doubt that the slightest attempt to implement it in a society, which is a blind mechanism whose behavior the capitalists and their technocrats are inherently the least able to understand (for their praxis—and therefore their thought—is totally clouded by commodity fetishism), will certainly lead to uncontrollable effects that threaten to disrupt and undermine the overall functioning of capital itself. (For example, look at what happened recently with the little experience of the cryptocurrency Bitcoin—from which the very idea of blockchain originated—which was created on the basis of the unshakable fetishist faith in the invisible hand acting through auto-moving technology, dead labor).

It is much more likely that, in the end, blockchain technology will be used primarily by states to keep their records instantly up-to-date and to make surveillance, judgment, punishment, and policing schemes automatically unified and immediate to the utmost. Or else, what in fact makes no difference, by enterprises that in the division of labor will play the unifying role ("interoperability") necessary for the continuity of capitalist society (which, without it, collapses torn by competition, the war of all against all that moves it), charging a bill for access to the blockchain that is its private property (e.g. blockchain implementations such as Ethereum). It is a private property that will be the indispensable unifying infrastructure for all transactions and things produced in capitalist society. In practice, this bill will be the same as a taxation, just as these enterprises will be the same as a state.—The latter will only cease to adorn itself with the democratic ideological façade ("republic", "constitutional monarchy", "socialism") to become directly an absolutist corporate monarchy (in fact, as it always was, in one way or another: dictatorship of capital).

As for artificial intelligence and the illusions about it, unemployment and universal basic income, we will not speak here, because we have already addressed it [previously](#).

9. Conclusion: Forget hope.

As we saw earlier, the self-constitution of the proletariat as an autonomous class against capital—the class struggle—can never take place on an empty or funereal background that would be confronted by the free will of the hopeful exploited, who would break the isolation through a community of suffering, pain, and guilt.

In concrete reality, it is exactly the opposite: human capacities and needs—the productive forces—are both ends in themselves and the means of the struggle of the proletariat against capital depend on the rupture of isolation and atomization, the fraternization, their irruption as a world-historical class, as well as their victory or defeat. As long as the other is found in practice as a cause of incapacity, denial of desires and necessities, impediment to survival in the competition of all against all for submission to the private property of the means of life, there is no possibility of breaking atomization and isolation. And attempts to break it by "willpower," "correct ideas," or activism only reproduce the same circumstance, at the most creating an even more unbearable moralistic competition, introducing at an even more extreme level in human subjectivity the "doing for the sake of doing", "production for the sake of production", i.e., the real subsumption to capital.

To freedom, which consists in the practical affirmation of the productive forces of the human species, capital opposes the fictitious freedom of free will or free choice. This imaginary freedom is the way in which it submits and adapts human subjectivity to the separation of capacities from needs, which are—violently separated by the deprivation of their means (private property). This pseudo-freedom serves to turn them against themselves, converting them from productive forces into destructive forces, accumulation of dead labor, active servants of the imperative to choose among the innumerable options of submission and exploitation that capital presents in order to reproduce itself indefinitely.

Human faculties and needs are created, produced, and developed in the material conditions of existence that they are transforming, that is, in praxis. In this, they produce themselves, bringing out in this transformation untold faculties, potentialities, desires

and needs, the discovery of unimaginable and impossible potentials under the previous conditions. There is no free choice. Choosing, by definition, is to pick out from among the things already known, already existing – the components of the status quo itself. In genuine freedom, on the contrary, nothing is chosen, nothing possible is selected, but rather, by transforming the conditions in their totality, what was always seen as rigorously impossible emerges.

This implies that it makes no sense to try to make communist theory to compete with others to be chosen by the exploited, popularized, "go viral". This is because, as we have seen, it is not from the free choice of the proletarians that arises and develops their struggle, their freedom, their autonomy, but rather from the materialistic increase of their capacities to act (to affirm their desires in practice, to satisfy their needs, etc. associating as class without borders against the dictatorship of capital), which are indistinguishable from the increase of their capacity to think autonomously. It is only as an expression of this that communist theory may be appropriate on its own terms, rather than being reduced to one more advertisement in the society of the spectacle. In other words, it is from communist praxis that the need arises to appropriate the present and past theories that have dealt precisely with this praxis. At the same time, theories are criticized, ridding them of the mistaken aspects of the past, to develop the theory of their concrete praxis, the knowledge of what is objectively necessary to do to destroy capitalist society and clear the way for the process of irruption.

This also implies that in the long periods of practical incapacity like the present (profound defeat of the proletariat), the tiny minority that (thanks to existential accidents) takes part of communism develops theories whose only importance is to compose a radical analysis of capitalist society, the mutations of domination and exploitation, and especially of the situation of human needs and faculties. It is these latter that sooner or later burst forth as wild productive forces, since capital is bound to periodically invoke them to expand the material conditions of the intensification of accumulation, inadvertently unlocking these forces. But as every transformation of the conditions of existence creates the irruption of the impossible, of the unexpected and unpredictable, capital

is forced to strive violently to domesticate these forces, to make them turn against themselves, otherwise they threaten to overflow it, abolish it, defeat it.

From the analysis of the contradictions and potentialities that unfold in capitalist society, the theory updates the communist program, which is nothing more than an outline of synthesis (always incomplete as long as capital and the state are not abolished) of the practical necessities objectively indispensable to overcoming class society today (all strictly impossible, as we saw earlier).

For example, in the face of the fact that strikes, protests, and occupations have become domesticated and channeled by the various factions of the ruling class competing to direct wage labor, capital and the state (from the left and right bureaucrats to the countless legal and illegal factions of national and international capital, including industrial, financial, and commercial capitalists), it is today an illusion to suppose that these tactics press for gradual capitalist reforms in favor of the workers (i.e., toward a "welfare state"). Against this illusion, the communists (or at least us) stand affirming the objective necessity to overcome these old tactics, substituting the strike with the tactic of free production that immediately abolishes the enterprise and employment by rapidly diffusing exponentially throughout the world, uncontainably. This rapidity in exponential diffusion is necessary to abolish the division of labor—i.e., the conditions of existence of the commodity, the state and capital—before capital gets the time to study and implement the reaction, and before the stocks run out, forcing us to trade—buy/sell—for products man-ufactured in the other part of the world from which we are still deprived (this would compel us to compete with it so that the products are traded advantageously, reproducing necessarily the exploitation and the class society). It is a question of suppressing the private property of universally interconnected conditions of existence (world supply chains, the means of production and distribution) with the aim of abolishing any system of rewards and punishments, liberating the productive forces as expressions of human desires, needs and capacities, as ends in themselves—the world human community.

humanaesfera, July 2018

Notes

11 Interesting article on this: Style Is an Algorithm
<https://www.racked.com/2018/4/17/17219166/fashion-style-algorithm-amazon-echo-look>

12 On this, *Dossiê: Luta nos aplicativos (Passapalavra)*
<http://passapalavra.info/2016/11/110470>. Also, Adam Greenfield's book *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life*, it sheds light on the implications for everyday life of a range of technologies, such as smartphone, internet of things, augmented reality, digital fabrication, cryptocurrency, blockchain, automation, machine learning and artificial intelligence.

13 To understand how all these "novelties" only reiterate and intensify tendencies of capitalist society that have appeared since the defeat of the proletarian struggles of 1968 and the world crisis of profitability that lasts from the years 1970 until today, see this text of 1988, which remains incredibly current: *The Luster of Capital*, by Alliez and Michel Feher.

On sleep, see Jonathan Crary's book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*.

14 See *Logistics and the factory without walls*, by Brian Ashton. <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/logistics-and-factory-without-walls>

15 This submission to the owner class which has the appearance of making workers small capitalists, entrepreneurs, human capital, petty-bourgeois, also leads to an illusory struggle on the part of the workers, a kind of Proudhonism. This illusion presupposes that, in order for their interests to be achieved, it is necessary to put an end to the monopolies of big corporations and to establish a society of small producers (self-management) that, with application softwares, exchange commodities "fairly" with each other, establishing the "fair value" which remunerates each one. However, this is illusory because the exchange of commodities is a social relation that, regardless of the will and good intentions, implies competition (for "customers" buy their goods instead of others, competition for buy cheap and sell expensive, etc.). By definition, competition is always competition for monopoly, for mutually exclusive ownership: private property. Competition and monopoly are mere adjectives of private property, which presuppose deprivation of property, i.e. proletarianization, and hence wage labor,

accumulation of capital, capitalist class, state ... As for "value", it is also a social relation that is independent of the will or good intentions: value is the command that a private property, through competition, obtains over the labor of others, by making the buyers have to work to the maximum to buy from it (i.e., to its commodity becomes equivalent to the maximum abstract labor of society in exchange for the minimum labor in it), and to impose that the workers—agree to work at their maximum—in exchange for the minimum to try to win the competition. Thus, this illusion must always be openly opposed in the struggles of the workers.

16 In the book *Platform Capitalism* (by Nick Srnicek) this new configuration of capitalist society is called "platform capitalism." According to him, platforms are characterized by the extraction of data from society as raw material to profit. It classifies five different types of platform:

"[...] the important element is that the capitalist class owns the platform, not necessarily that it produces a physical product. The first type is that of advertising platforms (e.g. Google, Facebook), which extract information on users, undertake a labour of analysis, and then use the products of that process to sell ad space. The second type is that of cloud platforms (e.g. AWS, Salesforce), which own the hardware and software of digital-dependent businesses and are renting them out as needed. The third type is that of industrial platforms (e.g. GE, Siemens), which build the hardware and software necessary to transform traditional manufacturing into internet-connected processes that lower the costs of production and transform goods into services. The fourth type is that of product platforms (e.g. Rolls Royce, Spotify), which generate revenue by using other platforms to transform a traditional good into a service and by collecting rent or subscription fees on them. Finally, the fifth type is that of lean platforms (e.g. Uber, Airbnb), which attempt to reduce their ownership of assets to a minimum and to profit by reducing costs as much as possible. These analytical divisions can, and often do, run together within any one firm. Amazon, for example, is often seen as an e-commerce company, yet it rapidly broadened out into a logistics company. Today it is spreading into the on-demand

market with a Home Services program in partnership with TaskRabbit, while the infamous Mechanical Turk (AMT) was in many ways a pioneer for the gig economy and, perhaps most importantly, is developing Amazon Web Services as a cloud-based service. Amazon therefore spans nearly all of the above categories.”

17 Felix Guattari, Eric Alliez and Maurizio Lazzarato use the concepts of social subjection—and machinic enslavement to describe this modification of domination. According to this hypothesis, the trend in recent decades is that capitalist society ceases to legitimize itself by an affirmation of the freedom of the subject that voluntarily crosses several compartments of capitalist society to subject himself—to them (social

subjection). This freedom for subjectivity to cross compartments (such as working time and rest time, imprisonment and freedom, school and time outside of school) culminated in autonomy as a voluntary citizen subjection to the rule of law, and hence the legitimacy of capitalist society through democratic rights and freedoms, the welfare state, and so on, considered as free and external to the machinic domination of capital. After the 1980s, capitalist society tend to transmute itself overthrowing all of these compartments in which the subjectivity that went through them was presented as free from domination, to present itself immediately as machinic enslavement, which is exactly what we described in this chapter on the supreme utopia of capital.

PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION IN THE AMAZON

“

[...] the fraudulent alienation of the state domains, the theft of the common lands, the usurpation of feudal and clan property and its transformation into modern private property under circumstances of ruthless terrorism: all these things were just so many idyllic methods of primitive accumulation. They conquered the field for capitalist agriculture, incorporated the soil into capital, and created for the urban industries the necessary supplies of free and rightless proletarians.

—Karl Marx, Capital Volume I, Chapter 27

Last week marked a further grim development in capital's onslaught against indigenous peoples of the Amazon, as illegal gold-mining operations murdered the chief of the Waiapi tribe and invaded its territory in the north-eastern Amapá province of Brazil.¹ This

kind of bloody expropriation, often aided by military-grade weapons, has found a significant expansion under new Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, whose campaign promises to eliminate “every centimeter of indigenous land” have been a great boon to the many timber mafias and mineral-extraction enterprises that infest the Amazon on all sides today.

Bolsonaro's acutely explicit racism towards Amazonian tribes and his equally explicit promises to auction off every ounce of Brazilian rainforest are certainly a significant deviation from the previous rhetoric of Brazilian heads of states, and for this reason the bourgeois press have sought extensively to exceptionalize his presidency. This is an insidious erasure of the fact that similar state support for mining and logging on indigenous land have been a mainstay of Brazilian democracy for years, not just under the right-wing presidency of Bolsonaro's



predecessor Michel Temer², but also under the leftist administration of Workers' Party politician Dilma Rousseff. Throughout her presidency, Rousseff publicly paid lip service to indigenous and environmental concerns, while privately making concession after concession to Brazil's powerful agribusiness lobby.³ A comparable situation can be found in Venezuela today; President Nicolas Maduro claims to champion indigenous Venezuelan rights, but in the past year alone his military forces have been responsible for the murder of numerous Pemón activist protesting displacement by illegal gold-mining operations.⁴ Likewise, leftist Bolivian President Evo Morales—himself a indigenous Bolivian—has in the past few years revoked a slew of legal protections for native tribes to enable construction projects in the Bolivian Amazon.⁵ To understand why leftist regimes in Latin America on the one hand claim to champion the interests of indigenous peoples while on the other enable and even actively participate in ruthless violence against them, it is important to first understand the class character of this brutal expropriation.

In certain ways, the barbaric plunder of the Amazon is fundamentally anachronistic. Since the start of World War I, communists have recognized that capitalism has entered into its “decadent” phase, marked, amongst other things, by the solidification of capitalism as a world system. (See, e.g., ⁶ or ⁷). The old pre-capitalist modes of production have largely disappeared, swept away on a global scale by brutal colonial policies, and the world market permeates nearly every corner of the earth. Hence the character of imperialist policy has changed; it has moved from being solely the domination of pre-capitalist nations by industrially developed ones, to militarist competition and domination between industrially developed nations.

The Amazon today is by far the largest exception to this state of affairs. Sectors of the rainforest remain that are completely untouched by industrial development, and their “uncontacted tribes” represent the world's only real remaining outposts of genuinely pre-capitalist society.⁸ This, coupled with an unrivaled abundance of natural resources—rubber, oil, iron ore, gold, timber, cocoa, and wide range of minerals—makes the Amazon fertile ground for imperialist primitive

accumulation: the process by which pre-capitalist economies are subsumed into the world market.

Historically, imperialism arose as a means for capitalist nations to combat crises—particularly crises of overproduction. Capitalist economies exported excess capital to economically backwards regions, serving the three-pronged purpose of dumping their unsellable surpluses, building infrastructure (rail lines, roads, factories, and refineries) by which to strip valuable untapped natural resources, and creating a new source of dirt-cheap proletarian labor from the local population. What we are witnessing in the Amazon today is a textbook example of this. Since the 1960s, tens of thousands of miles of roads and highways have been built in the Amazon by its surrounding nations.⁹ This has enabled the epidemic of logging and mining operations in the region, to the extent that 95% of all deforestation has occurred within fifty kilometers of these projects.¹⁰ In turn, this deforestation has required the bloody expropriation of indigenous lands, causing the mass displacement and proletarianization of native peoples—thousands of indigenous refugees have been forced into cheap labor either within the forest¹¹, or in nearby urban centers.¹² All in all, we are faced with a clear example of imperialist primitive accumulation.

It is therefore not a coincidence that the recent Brazilian state support for nominally “illegal” development projects in the Amazon were first initiated in late 2012 and 2013—the start date of a Brazilian economic slump that persists to this day.¹³ The situation is similar in Venezuela; despite its “socialist” pretensions, the Bolivarian petrostate remains thoroughly capitalist, and like all other capitalist nations is subject to the whims and contradictions of the world market. Thus, when the international oil market began to collapse in 2013, the Venezuelan economy fell with it, leading to the well-reported crisis we see today. This is the context for Maduro's sudden willingness to enable expropriation of Venezuela's indigenous lands; it's a desperate attempt at mitigating the country's crisis, with horrific consequences for regional native peoples.

It is also for these reasons that blood-and-soil calls for

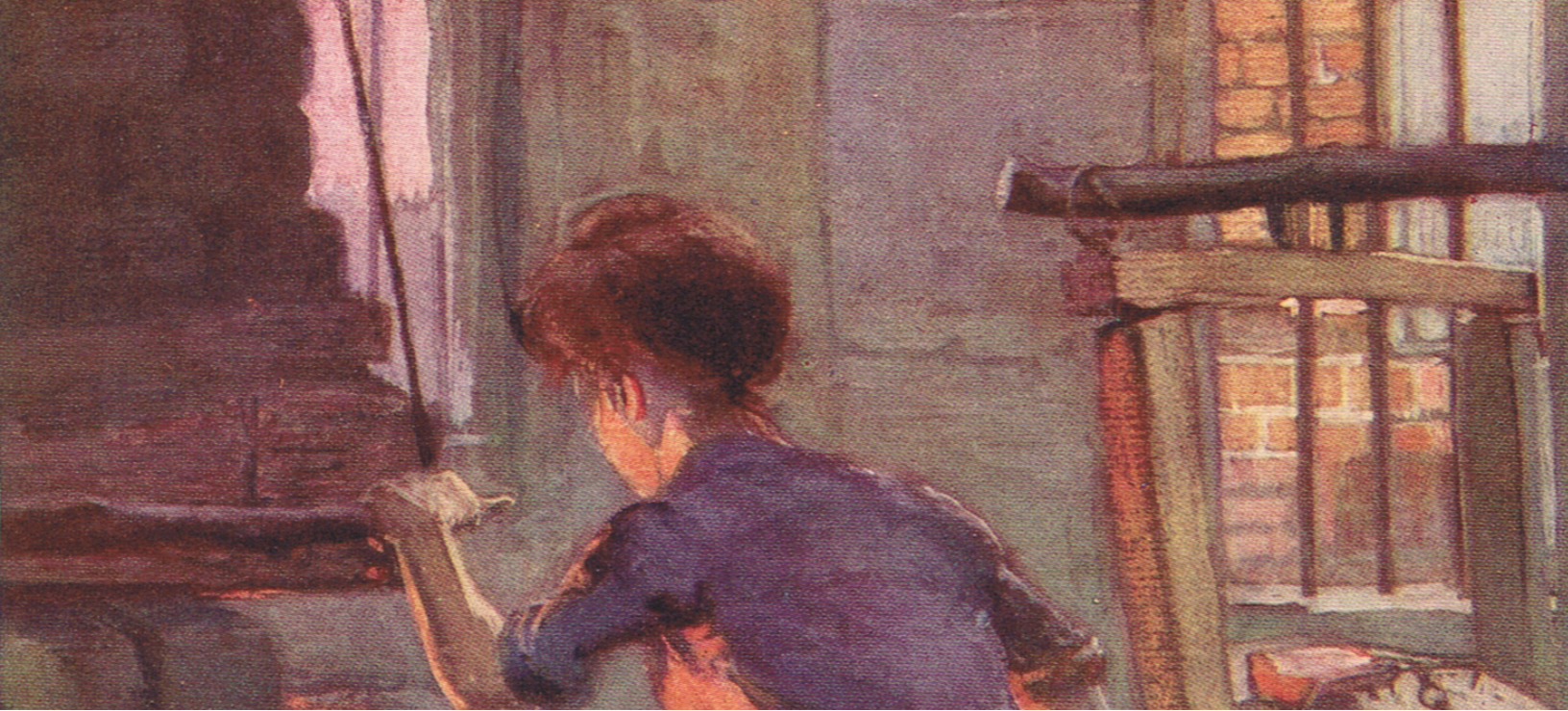
indigenous sovereignty—popular on the left—are a utopian vision under capitalism. As we have argued, brutal imperialist policies—from endless war to vicious expropriation and primitive accumulation—are an inevitable consequence of capitalism’s crises, and the situation in the Amazon is no different. Regional policies of preservation of indigenous land—long fought for by on-the-ground activists in Brazil, Venezuela, and Bolivia—were abandoned on a dime as soon as it became necessary for the bourgeoisie, as no elected politician or legal regulation can hope to overcome capitalism’s contradictions and the corresponding demands of bourgeois rule. National self-determination as a slogan—which attempts to combat imperialism without combatting capitalism and would seek to liberate the Amazon’s native peoples by merely by demarcating land on ethnic grounds—is therefore a futile errand, and offers no solution to capital’s vicious onslaught. The only way out lies in the solidarity of the entire international proletariat, united with indigenous workers in a revolutionary struggle against capitalism.

Indeed, the ongoing atrocities against the native peoples of the Amazon are bound to only worsen as the global capitalist crisis deepens. The equally horrifying dimension to these imperialist ventures is their potential for catastrophic ecological consequences; the Amazon—which ranges over 2 million square miles—is by far the world’s largest rainforest, and thus plays a pivotal role in regulating the planet’s weather systems and carbon dioxide levels. Deforestation by logging and mining operations is hence responsible for a tangle of dire consequences, ranging from its own hefty carbon emissions to large-scale freak weather, droughts, and famines.¹⁴ The magnitude of these effects cannot be underestimated, and in conjunction with similar international developments poses a serious existential threat to the human race. Between this and the mass displacement and oppression of native tribes, in the Amazon, as everywhere, the choice remains socialism or barbarism.

Atticus, 4 August 2019

Notes

- 1 <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/we-are-great-danger-amazon-indigenous-waiapi-chief-killed-illegal-n1035806>
- 2 <https://nativenewsonline.net/currents/michel-temer-incites-violence-indigenous-peoples-brazil/>
- 3 <https://amazonwatch.org/news/2013/0808-indigenous-rights-under-assault-in-brazil>
- 4 http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article47621&fbclid=IwAR1SdfjxUn7PBbU9KhjgZv4QoXj5bTvqVRDraD98_pdCVifgp8zd7tzcZTs
- 5 <https://www.worldcrunch.com/world-affairs/three-highways-in-the-amazon-and-dilemmas-of-deforestation>
- 6 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1917/imperial/>
- 7 <https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2005-06-01/refining-the-concept-of-decadence>
- 8 <https://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/uncontacted-brazil>
- 9 <https://www.livescience.com/40914-amazon-road-building.html>
- 10 <https://globalforestatlas.yale.edu/amazon/land-use/roads-amazon-basin>
- 11 <https://books.google.com/books?id=pXZgDgAAQBAJ&pg=PA123&lpg=PA123#v=onepage&q&f=false>
- 12 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/venezuelan-refugee-crisis-view-brazil>
- 13 <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-48386415>
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A CLASS PERSPECTIVE ON THE 'WOMEN QUESTION'

1. The general terms of the 'women question'

The issues facing women have made an urgent political reappearance in recent years, ranging from the horrific numbers of women killed by their partners to the scourge of wage differences and harassment at work. Clear evidence has emerged that gender equality—so often trumpeted by various politicians as the objective of public political intervention in "democratic" countries under conditions of advanced capitalism—is a mirage whose achievement remains a hundred years away (according to studies looking at the current rate of the equality gap between men and women worldwide).¹

Since the dominant ideology of every historical age is that of the ruling class, these studies—which testify to the impact of gender inequality—do not in any way differentiate between the situation facing women who belong to the ruling class from working class women and those who live in conditions similar to the proletariat. It is these women who have a very close association with poverty, so much so that the term feminisation of poverty was coined by the social sciences in order to describe the phenomenon by which most of the planet's poor are women.

This situation marks the massive difference

that separates the exploited women of the lower classes (proletarians) from the women of the bourgeoisie who, for example, can afford to pass on domestic drudgery to third parties, and pay for it with portions of surplus value extracted from the working class, appropriated through the exercise of a bourgeois occupation or simply by virtue of their belonging to a bourgeois family in the first place.

The democratic spokespeople of the ruling class and the radical (or not so radical) feminists fail to consider the irrationality which is inherent in the reality of women's subordinate economic position in the advanced capitalist societies (even where the State establishes formal equality of women before the law) and they complain of the loss in economic terms that the limited participation of women in the life of the nation represents. What they forget is that capitalism is an anarchic mode of production in which an economic activity that meets the real needs of society is impossible: capitalism is based on production directed exclusively at the realisation of the exchange value of the commodity and the surplus value contained in it, in short: profit. In a society of this type, any public planning run by the bourgeoisie, which tries to integrate women in the same way as men, in order to promote the good of that society, is a fantasy that can only arise in the mind of a social democrat and/or

a feminist. In fact, feminists are often inclined to formulate programmes whose actual implementation would primarily require the overturning of capitalist society. Regardless of this fact they continue to believe their programmes are possible in current society. Hypotheses of this type can be considered only if they don't take into account the enormous advantage that the bourgeoisie, including its female component, draw from the subordinate status of working class women regarding the only thing that really interests the bourgeoisie itself: maximum profit and capital accumulation. Many democrats admit that society, taken as a whole, is damaged by the exclusion and subordination of women throughout its various branches. However they're silent on the fact that this is a society divided into social classes with antagonistic interests. To affirm that current society sees its potential GDP diminishing due to the 'female question' only amounts to saying that unemployment and the under-utilisation of industrial plants depress growth, but all these cases are phenomena determined by the *modus operandi* of capitalism and are accentuated by the unfolding of its insoluble crisis.

2. Proletarian women

Capitalism has historically uprooted working class women from the narrow base of feudal-era family economic units (let alone other earlier class formations) and thrown them into the jaws of the labour market. The sale of female labour in exchange for a wage has also taken place in ways that are particularly advantageous to capitalism, in conditions that have allowed the bosses to take advantage of a female labour force, especially regarding married women, who have often formed an industrial reserve army, (i.e. a low-cost workforce to be used with maximum flexibility).

This has been possible because of the position traditionally held by women in the family, which has led to them being placed second with respect to the spouse or male partner on the labour market. This has allowed bosses to pay women workers a wage less than the real value of their labour power. In the aftermath of the industrial revolution women were employed *en masse* in industries, together with children, which contributed to lowering the overall

price of the workforce. This created a situation so dire from a social and health point of view that the bourgeoisie, driven by workers' struggles, was forced to run for cover and regulate the exploitation of female and child labour to ensure the existence of successive generations of proletarians.

What's more, the free domestic work performed by women in the family, whilst not producing value, nevertheless suits capitalism because it frees the rest of the family from this burden, and reduces the cost of a man's wages if the expense of paying for permanent hired help were to be considered necessary to reproduce his own labour power. The disadvantage that the female proletariat derives from its function in the family is proved, among other things, by studies that report that homosexual and bisexual men are on average paid less than their heterosexual class brothers, while this relationship is reversed in the comparison between heterosexual women and lesbian women living in a couple relationship², because of the different family arrangement in the first case and the lower probability of having children in the second. It must be said that these data are at least partly clouded by the inclusion of self-employed women and worker/managers as well as the failure to include gay women who are unemployed.³ However the data background does not change: if you are married and you have children you will probably be paid less for the same job. In periods following the industrial revolution, and especially in the last 60 years, the mass participation of women in the labour market has also been conditioned by this economic context. For married women especially, they've had limited inclusion in phases of general expansion and relatively high wages⁴, but their numbers have soared in phases like the one we have been experiencing since the early 1970s, where the rate of profit is lower and a single wage is no longer sufficient to support the family. Naturally we're not advocating the reactionary idea of invoking a return of women to the hearth and home; here we're simply pointing out that the facts show that capitalism has certainly not viewed the mass entry of the female labour force into the labour market for its emancipation but rather, as always, for the maximisation of profit. Indeed, like the immigrant labour force, the female labour force, as is, is less well

paid, and is used by the employers to reduce the cost of labour as a whole.

Free housework carried out within the family, discrimination in the workplace, sexual harassment, gender-based violence, cuts in social services for children, for the disabled, and for women in difficulty: this is the reality which women workers and women on the margins must confront every day; not to mention the violence, including practices that violate a woman's physical and mental integrity, and the open discrimination that women experience in so-called developing countries. However, the conditions to which the female proletariat is subjected in the advanced capitalist countries illustrate in a striking way the structural aspect of this question, where women's emancipation is not attainable within the framework of rights recognised by the bourgeois state in its democratic form.

3. Harassment and commodification of bodies

As highlighted even by the media, one in three women between the ages of 16 and 70 have reported that they have been a victim of some form of physical or sexual violence—from the most common "simple" harassment to the most brutal sexual abuse. The scandal of "harassment and sexual abuse in the entertainment world", to which the media (desirous of salacious content) has dedicated ample space, has revealed, as if we didn't already know, the ubiquity of this phenomenon in bourgeois circles, as well as the hypocrisy of those who try to clean up their image by paying out cash in the context of a typical public relations operation, so common to the beautiful bourgeois world. In certain so-called left-wing circles—openly on the side of the ruling class—violence and gender harassment pass through a pathological macho reflex of some male proletarians, who feel threatened by the loss of their domestic supremacy and by the "ascent" of their partners, and the loss of their functions as head of the family ... These "leftists", are silent on the conditions of social degradation in which these tragedies are often carried out.

In fact, despite the partial integration of the female proletariat into the labour market and the changes in sexual customs and family law in the

capitalist metropolises, sexist prejudices are still widespread among men of all social classes—and even among women—and the desire for control over women's choices, emotional or otherwise, often leads to the mentality that women are a mere object of property, a commodity object used for advertising purposes or even by some men for use for the personal satisfaction of their own libido. However, this situation is not at all the result of an innate social sickness or cultural degeneration, but the natural consequence of the social inferiority to which capitalism forces women, and in particular women from the working class and related social groups. This subordination is aggravated on a supra-structural level—but in this case the effects on the structure and on the degree of exploitation of the female proletariat cannot be ignored—by the use and propagation in the media of what are, very often, degrading images of the female figure, which strengthen such pre-existing secular mentalities, and exploit them without the least "social" scruple. This is done at the expense of chatter about so-called responsible capitalism. If the logic of profit requires the commodification of the female body in order to occupy a market share or place an advertisement, why give it up? It is merely a fact, and this applies to any company, obeying the laws of capital valorisation.

The proliferation of capitalistically unproductive expenses in terms of the production of surplus value (like advertising or the distribution of multimedia contents) is typical of capitalism in its imperialist phase, and it causes a plague which is already endemic, proving that capitalism and the division of society into classes are the real crux of the problem. Of course, to cover some sectors of the market, the media also presents issues with feminist participation, which, however, does not have a great effect on the improvement of the real conditions of existence of the female proletariat and related social groups, as well as being of very dubious efficacy for the ambitions of bourgeois women, many of whom also remained trapped in the same squalid mechanisms we mentioned above in order to be able to "make a career" (just look at the recent scandals in Hollywood). However, even the commentators on "the Hollywood thing", could not help but notice how this environment—the product of a reaction to white-

wash the scandal—was deeply sexist and not only in media representations. The same dynamic is shown in the fact that the most desirable roles are mostly assigned to young, beautiful actresses. Moreover, in a world based on the exploitation and oppression of wage labour, it is not surprising that forms of dominion inherited from previous modes of production are incorporated into the bourgeois world, and due to the subordinate position occupied by females in the family, working class women are penalised in the labour market for their reproductive and care functions, compared to their class brothers. The superstructural consequence of the substantial inequality between men and women is found in all classes, (with of course a woman's body being more commodified than a male one)—but these consequences are pushed further in literally capitalist terms, through the market of in vitro fertilisation and uteri for rent—and depicted as a tool of pleasure or an object whose main quality is beauty. This can be seen in all media, the creators of a fertile ground for sexism and it is functional for capitalism, where proletarian women often find themselves in a reserve of underpaid labour power, often forced into involuntary part-time roles. The media, unsurprisingly, haven't said much on the violence and harassment faced by women workers who, at the mercy and blackmail of the boss, cannot raise their voices if they care about maintaining their wage slavery. The innumerable sexist humiliations which working class women face in the workplace, (similar to those suffered by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois women, though they have the means to defend themselves by resorting to bourgeois justice), include—but aren't limited to—outright dismissals, sexual harassment, and demands for sexual favours in return for career advancement.

4. An emergency issue to be resolved with repression

Almost every day we are bombarded with news of gender violence and femicide, but the only solutions put in place (and often without even too much conviction) by the bourgeoisie in every country are a tightening of prison sentences to be imposed on those who commit such crimes, leaving out any form of support for the victims, which is deemed too

expensive in a phase of dismantling the "welfare", which has fallen victim to capitalist austerity. And given the current state of bourgeois law and the belief of individual responsibility, there is little scope to treat the offender as anything other than a deviant, holding out little hope of rehabilitation. Finally, it should be noted that often the cases given centre stage in the news, especially in the case of murders, are exploited in a racist and patriotic way (e.g. if they see a migrant as responsible). Faced with such a depressing picture, it is not surprising that a substantial number of women have joined movements to raise demands and combat gender-based violence and rampant sexism.

5. Welfare cuts and economic spending

The management of state finances is in perfect harmony with the class nature of the bourgeois state. While the state is carrying out a scorched earth policy around anti-violence centres and other associations that assist abused women (places that can't even get the few funds allocated in the budget by the local authorities and the central state⁵), it is instead increasing the budgetary funds directed to its imperialist military enterprises and to internal repression. The various reforms on work, pensions and schools, together with interventions in favour of the restructuring of the industrial sectors in crisis and the rescue of the banking system, should have made it clear a long time ago to any supposed revolutionaries that the spaces for mediation within bourgeois institutions are now close to zero and that reformism has run out of time. The issue of gender-based violence, as noted by the associations themselves, is certainly not a governmental priority.⁶ Governments may, though, have an interest in safeguarding the family as a social shock absorber in the face of a feared re-emergence of the class struggle, not to mention the advantages for capitalism to be able to count on a constantly underpaid workforce, (like women), whose low wages are closely linked to their family role.

6. Different points of view on the issue of women

Democratic feminism⁷, in its various forms, has, in critical moments, always chosen to take sides with the

ruling class, despite mouthing emancipatory ideals. Working class women, on the other hand, have been able to carve out a decisive role in the class struggle whenever the proletariat has attempted revolutionary action. This is proof of the undeniable contrast between the social nature of feminism and the proletarian class struggle. The cases are innumerable: from the Commune of Paris to the Russian Revolutions of February and October 1917 to cite just the best-known cases. In all these cases it was proletarian women, together with those of related social sectors and those deserters originating from the ruling class, who participated in the class movement as conscious members of the dominated class, politicising the objective social antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and challenging the domination that the bourgeoisie imposes on the rest of society to organise it in accordance with its class interests. In particular, the female proletariat played a decisive role at the dawn of the February Revolution (which began on March 8th), fraternising with the soldiers of the Tsarist armed forces and protesting against food shortages and the war which caused them.⁸

These results were achieved by the female proletariat fighting alongside their class brothers and certainly not isolating themselves, or making their own particularistic claims that clashed with the general class movement. During the imperialist massacres of the First and Second World Wars, however, feminists, as mentioned above, actively collaborated with their respective bourgeoisie in exchange for promises that committed governments to eliminate some of the legal and political discrimination that relegated women to the status of second-class citizens. It is precisely on this point that the distance between the battles of democratic feminism and that of the revolutionary proletariat is measured: feminism both in its institutional and in the radical-reformist guise, after having obtained equality before the law in the countries of the capitalist metropolis, is now fighting so that, thanks to changes implemented in the law by the State, the social barriers that prevent each woman from advancing according to the bourgeois canons of career advancement and of receiving a "just salary" are eliminated. The proletariat, instead, has as its historical objective the emancipation of humanity from

exploitation through the abolition of wage labour and the socialisation of the means of production, an indispensable premise for the elimination of all forms of oppression and gender discrimination as well as national and ethnic discrimination.

Moreover, it is clear that the ideal of the career woman desired by institutional feminism precludes the most basic class solidarity on the terrain of demands, sacrificing it on the altar of professional success, and leads, as in those cases held up as a model by the feminist movement, to the rise to prominent roles in bourgeois society, which equate in all respects to the social climbers in question in the rest of the bourgeois class. Naturally we will hear objections raised by some feminists who adhere to intersectional feminism⁹ who instead claim to have recognised the issue of class struggle and social stratifications within the female gender and socially discriminated sexual and gender orientations. These are some of the fringes of the feminist movement that we call radical reformists. This feminism is radical-reformist because it inherits from traditional feminism a purely individualistic conception of social relations and its claims, (like those of institutional feminism), come down, at the end of the day, to requests for intervention aimed at the capitalist state, to be carried out within its framework and compatible with it.

For radical-reformist feminism, the class domination that falls on the proletariat and characterises it as an oppressed class turns into an oppression that affects the individual woman in her double identity as a woman and proletarian or in a discordant identity for men, at least for the ideological presuppositions of feminism, of man and proletarian. If class domination is reduced to a question of devaluation of the person in their individuality, then the passage from the enunciation of anti-capitalist slogans to the acceptance of the rules of the game of the system—which is inherent in founding a pressure group for the progress of a category from the legal point of view—is very short. There is good reason why the law, an instrument of the ruling class to perpetuate its domination, has, at its core, the isolated individual, who has to be recognised as an equal of other individuals. Feminism inspired by the theory of intersectionality, therefore, finds in bourgeois democracy fertile soil in which to anchor itself, despite

its radical slogans.

7. Women in the class struggle and in the revolution

Radical-reformist feminism admits, unlike mainstream feminism, the use of class means of pressure such as the strike, but its conceptions of the class struggle do not go beyond the level of the class “in itself”. In its attempt to repaint itself red, it has often flirted with rank and file unionism and exalted the isolated disputes animated by the trade-union radical-reformism as the non plus ultra of the class struggle. Although rank and file unionism is not as directly compromised with the ruling class as the traditional unions, it is still based on bargaining between capital and labour and therefore must legitimise itself before the employer in order to continue as a permanent organisation that co-manages and contracts the price of selling labour power. Due to the inherent limitations of trade unionism, which push the various grassroots unions to imprison demand struggles in rigid sectional barriers, radical-reformist feminism’s recognition of the struggle for demands, dominated by the grassroots unions, does not give it Marxist credentials or as one might expect, even simple membership of the proletarian camp. Just as radical-reformist feminism suffers from the original vice of being born as an inter-class movement, base syndicalism is limited by its nature as a permanent organisation for the contracted sale of the labour force, which prolongs its existence beyond the exhaustion of a demand or a series of disputes, excluding the development of struggles to the political level. The alliance or solidarity between the two movements, whose political conceptions do not go beyond the horizon of reformism, cannot therefore solve their respective problems: contrary to what happens in mathematics, two negatives do not make a positive.

For our part, we have always maintained that the best way for the proletariat to defend itself during demand struggles is by self-organisation outside, and if necessary against, the unions. The proletariat itself has demonstrated the validity of these forms of conducting struggle by putting up a more radical fight whenever it has been able to set up strike and self-

organisation committees independent of the unions. In the areas of personal services, where the female proletariat is more represented than the male, self-organisation and forming connections with users of services are inescapable factors to avoid being crucified by the smear campaigns conducted by the bourgeois media. This is easier said than done, given the inconvenience that users experience in the event of unrest, but it is still an indispensable and certainly possible step in the light of the difficulties that the end users of proletarian and petty bourgeois extraction are themselves experiencing with progressive cuts in welfare. Solidarising with fragments of politicised or politicising users would ruin the plan of blaming and isolating strikers that the bourgeois media stage in these situations. But all this would still not be enough. The fight for demands and the political struggle are qualitatively, and not quantitatively, different precisely because the fight for demands remains tied to contingent circumstances and to the need to resist employers’ attacks against proletarian living conditions and / or to mitigate the rate of exploitation. The organ through which the proletariat exercises its political power during and after the revolution is the soviet, or council, sharing with the strike committees only the democracy and revocability of the positions that distinguish both forms. For the economic demand to go further and become a political struggle, the intervention of the party as a vanguard rooted in the class and able to support the spontaneous action of the class is fundamental, with its heritage of lessons learned from past episodes of the class struggle and warning the class of the strategies implemented by the ruling class to preserve its privileges. A striking example of the vital importance of the party is the experience of the German revolution of 1918-19: because of the absence of a strong party built in time, the ruling class managed to get the Soviet congress to vote or advise the transfer of powers to the constituent assembly! The German example shows how the birth of the soviets is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to pose the problem of political power and challenge the bourgeoisie on its own ground. In the event that the soviets are politically dominated by left bourgeois parties that link the interests of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, convincing them of the peaceful and parliamentary

way to socialism, perhaps through an impossible—unless the councils are emptied and reduced to mere trade-union organisations—coexistence between soviets and parliament.¹⁰

8. The communist alternative

Despite the seriousness of the crisis and of the imperialist winds of war which are now becoming more and more insistent, a proletarian reaction that is equal to the enormous crisis of capitalism and the incessant attacks of the bourgeoisie remains absent. The female proletariat must escape the trap of feminism and fight alongside their class brothers in defence of their living conditions, beyond particularism, adhering with the rest of the proletariat to the communist revolutionary programme, to that of the class party located on the political level as the alternative to this system. Unless this happens, there cannot be a truly egalitarian society, where the exploitation of wage labour, wars and gender oppression, together with other forms of oppression imposed on social classes by the bourgeoisie in its strategy of divide and rule, become only a distant memory to study in the history books. Let us make it clear: the communism we invoke is communism in the Marxist sense of a real movement that abolishes the existing state of affairs, and has nothing in common with the mystification erected by the USSR following the Stalinist counter-revolution and the countries of Eastern Europe, as well as all the other so-called real socialisms - including the Chinese and Cuban cases—which pass off state capitalism as socialism.

Communism as a social system presupposes the abolition of the law of value. By abolishing the law of value and transforming indirectly social and alienated labour inherent in capitalism into work that is directly social and responsive to human needs, the very basis of the organisation of domestic service will be transformed and the care and upbringing of children will be socialised. This of course doesn't mean separating them from parents and loved ones; rather it means educating them in places integrated into the social fabric, giving them an education adequate to meet all their social and individual needs for their growth and development. In this way, women will finally be emancipated from the oppression of private

domestic service. In today's capitalist society, the domestic work of the working woman as part of the family is atomised and disregarded as part of her social role in the private organisation of the family. Despite the enormous services rendered to capitalist society in the contribution to the reproduction of the labour force and to the education of new generations of proletarians, domestic work appears, in fact, unproductive of value and moreover not waged and not even susceptible to appropriation by capital to the extent that it is carried out in the family. The new organisation of the family and of the education of the new generations will be taken over by society, without having to come up against limits of compatibility with the capitalist system that have revealed time and again, with the incessant cuts in welfare, the absolute falsity of a social "democratisation" within capitalism.

The Russian Revolution itself, although it could not bypass the capitalist social horizon in an isolated and capitalistically backward country, had foreshadowed the future resolution of the gender issue by experimenting with collectivisation and free supply of domestic services, introducing, as its first interventions and often for the first time in the world: equal pay, kindergartens and free health care, the right to abortion and divorce. Minimal interventions, if you like, but ones that capitalism itself cannot manage to guarantee. The Russian Revolution, before its degeneration, tried to break the capitalist organisation of the family in a society that still remained capitalist. There, the instrument of bourgeois domination and exploitation, the state, was broken, thus opening the only possible way for an effective emancipation of women, and the liberation of humanity from wage labour and capital, through the conquest by part of the proletariat and related classes of the means of production and distribution. In short, we cannot talk about proletarian and communist revolution if it does not express both the emancipation of the proletariat from class exploitation, and, on the same basis, the emancipation of women from gender oppression.

We are convinced that every other political proposal for the emancipation of women, proposals which may seem realistic because of their compatibility with the system are, in reality, utopian and bankrupt.

**The Internationalists of Battaglia
Comunista
Affiliate in Italy of the Internationalist
Communist Tendency
Thursday, March 7, 2019**

Notes

1 Studies reported by the BBC in: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-41844875>

2 <https://qz.com/881303/eight-million-americans-are-affected-by-a-pay-gap-that-no-one-talks-about/>

3 https://d.repubblica.it/attualita/2016/04/06/news/donne_omosessuali_coming_out_retribuzione_lavoro-3040027/

4 <https://ourworldindata.org/female-labor-supply>

5 <http://www.lanotiziagiornale.it/quanta-ipocrisia-sulle-donne-finti-centri-antiviolenza-e-trasparenza-zero-il-piano-va-troppo-piano/>

6 <https://www.fanpage.it/centri-antiviolenza-donne-senza-fondi-situazione-disastrosa-servizi-tagliati-e-operatrici-sottopagate/>

7 We will give a more detailed and contextualised critical analysis of the main radical-feminist approaches and their fundamental political limits in future works already in the pipeline.

8 For more on this see <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2017-03-07/celebrating-international-women%E2%80%99s-day-100-years-on>

9 The theory of intersectionality is a popular theory among the academics of American universities and embraced by the most radical feminists, inclined to adopt the language of class that is apparently attentive to the class struggle. As a theory it fits perfectly with the identity politics that have been so successful among the reformist and radical-reformist left of the Western world as it postulates the coexistence and intersection of different forms of oppression related to the identity of the oppressed person: the emphasis is on the subjective identity of the oppressed person and their vulnerabilities, often identified according to the criteria of the social sciences taught in the universities, without any formal reference to Marxism. The central element of oppression for us, on the contrary, is capitalism and, in opposition to it, the revolutionary potential of the proletariat as a social class. For intersectional feminism what they call patriarchy (social discrimination against women of all social classes) and capitalism are two interdependent variables and the former is not a dependent variable of the latter and of the other societies divided into classes.

10 For more on the German Revolution see <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2018-11-09/a-hundred-years-on-lessons-of-the-german-revolution>



IN DEFENSE OF DECADENCE

“

The ripest maturity, the highest stage, that anything can attain is the one at which its fall begins.

—Hegel, “The Science of Logic”¹

The concept of decadence remains a source of controversy for Marxists. Those who reject it oftentimes do so because they have come to associate that idea with a position of resigned fatalism positing the automatic collapse of capitalism as a consequence of the mechanical operation of abstract “laws of history,” without any need whatsoever for conscious human intervention. Ironically, this interpretation is shared both by deniers of decadence and the economistic tendencies within Marxism. For that reason, it becomes necessary to clarify our position from the outset that the mortal crisis of capitalism will

not result from any breakdown tendency inherent in the system but will instead depend entirely upon the degree of class consciousness and independent self-organization achieved by the working class. In other words, the concept of decadence is not a pretext for us to turn humankind into a marionette of the capitalist economy. It is rather a tool—an analytic construct—that allows us to better understand the historical evolution and progressively-strained operation of a given mode of production.

Numerous theories have attempted to explain the phenomenon of decadence, far too many to do each of them justice in this short text. So, we shall have to be somewhat restrained in our exposition. For our purposes, however, they can all be collapsed into one of two categories: historical-philosophical and economic-technical explanations.

From a historical-philosophical standpoint, a

social order outlives its purpose—i.e., it becomes decadent—from the moment that it brings into existence the material preconditions for its own transcendence. From this perspective, every social order that exists or has existed to date carries within itself the possibility of its own undoing in the antagonistic struggle between social classes for control over society's productive forces.

The "proof" of capitalism's decadence is therefore given by the working class as well as its antagonist: the capitalist class. The working class gave its definitive proof when—in 1917—it called forth an international revolutionary movement to abolish capitalism. The historical mission of capitalism was to spread its relations of production to every distant corner of the world and develop humanity's productive forces sufficiently to establish a global communist society. The most important of these productive forces—the working class—has repeatedly shown its communist potential by rebelling against the rule of capital. The capitalist class, for its part, gave proof of the decadence of its society over the last century by plunging humankind in two bloody world wars and since then a slew of smaller armed conflicts, whose human costs are calculated in the hundreds of millions—sacrificial lambs on the altar of capitalist profit. To top it all off, capitalism has produced thermonuclear and biochemical weapons capable of exterminating the entire species in mere minutes and continues to inflict irreversible damage on the biosphere.² These are all the hallmarks of a society that is long past its proverbial "sell-by" date.

The economic-technical explanation for the decadence of capitalism follows from the theory of crisis based on the falling rate of profit articulated by Marx in the third volume of *Capital*. The tendency of the rate of profit to fall derives logically from the application of the labor theory of value (henceforth, LTV) that Marx inherited from classical political economy to the process of capital accumulation. According to the LTV, the exchange-value of a commodity can be linearly determined from the amount of time required, on average, for its production. From the LTV, we get Marx's formula of capital reproduction: $c + v + s$, where c represents constant capital, or means of production; v represents variable capital, or living labor-power; and s represents

surplus-value, or the value generated by workers in excess of their own wages over the course of the working day.³ In more traditional economics parlance, constant capital would refer to fixed assets, variable capital refers to wages, and surplus-value refers to value added. From Marx's formula of capital reproduction, we derive the following formulae:

The rate of exploitation (henceforth, ROE);

$$\frac{s}{v} \text{ OR } \frac{\text{value added}}{\text{wages}}$$

The rate of profit (henceforth, ROP);

$$\frac{s}{c+v} \text{ OR } \frac{\text{value added}}{\text{fixed assets} + \text{wages}}$$

And the organic composition of capital (henceforth, OCC).

$$\frac{c}{v} \text{ OR } \frac{\text{fixed assets}}{\text{wages}}$$

Social needs are satisfied indirectly under capitalism. The goal of production is to make profits for the owners of capital. The laws of competition compel capitalists to increase the scale of their operations in order to keep apace with their rivals on the market. The incessant growth of the means of production (i.e., the physical capital stock) for its own sake, to which we shall refer from here on as 'capital accumulation', causes the OCC to rise by increasing the proportion of constant to variable capital.⁴ The inevitable outcome of this process is that a shrinking number of workers must generate enough surplus-value to maintain and expand an ever-larger mass of capital.⁵

Capital accumulation benefits capitalists in the short term. A rise in the OCC yields higher labor-productivity, which allows for the same quantity of goods to be produced within a shorter length of time. This translates into lower costs of production per unit, because it means that a somewhat bigger investment will be spread over a much-increased output. The difference between average social production costs and the new, lowered costs owing to the higher OCC returns to the capitalist entrepreneur as additional surplus-value. These changes in the ratio of capital

investments, or value composition of capital, are automatically reflected in a higher ROE and ROP.⁶

But since every business follows similar imperatives, and therefore behaves according to the same logic, this means that, given enough time, the higher OCC will be adopted as a standard within that industry. This creates a problem for capitalists, because, in keeping with the LTV, the increase in labor-productivity that accompanies a rising OCC necessarily reduces the exchange-value of the commodities produced and thus the amount of surplus-value available for capital accumulation. A contradiction thereby arises between the growing mass of capital, whose expansion requirements become increasingly burdensome to profit-making, and the shrinking mass of surplus-value that would serve to finance its expansion.⁷ This contradiction—inherent in capitalist production—manifests itself via the tendency for the rate of profit to fall. We demonstrate this mathematically as follows:

Let the exchange-value of a whole mass of commodities be equal to 192.

Let the c and v invested in its production both be 64, so that the OCC is:

$$\frac{64_c}{64_v} \text{ or } 100\%$$

The exchange-value of those commodities would break down as follows:

$$64_c + 64_v + 64_s = 192$$

The ROE would be:

$$\frac{64_s}{64_v} \text{ or } 100\%$$

And the ROP would be:

$$\frac{64_s}{64_c + 64_v} \text{ or } \frac{64_s}{128_{c+v}} \text{ or } 50\%$$

Let the scale of production and the total output both expand two-fold. Assuming the constant capital grows at twice the rate as the variable capital, that would make the new OCC:

$$\frac{2 \cdot 64_c}{1.5 \cdot 64_v} \text{ or } \frac{128_c}{96_v} \text{ or } 133.33\%$$

In that case, the exchange-value of those commodities would break down as follows:

$$384 = 128_c + 96_v + 160_s$$

Or, for half of the output:

$$192 = 64_c + 48_v + 80_s$$

That would make the ROE:

$$\frac{80_s}{48_v} \text{ or } 166\%$$

And the ROP:

$$\frac{80_s}{64_c + 48_v} \text{ or } 71.42\%$$

Now, if the same output can be produced in two-thirds the amount of time as before, then it follows, per the LTV, that its value will also diminish by one third once the higher OCC becomes standard within that industry, which would make the value of those commodities come to 144.⁸

Under those circumstances, the breakdown of the exchange-value of those commodities would be:

$$64_c + 48_v + 32_s = 144$$

The ROE under the new generalized OCC would be:

$$\frac{32_s}{48_v} \text{ or } 66.66\%$$

And the ROP would be:

$$\frac{32_s}{64_c + 48_v} \text{ or } \frac{32_s}{112_{c+v}} \text{ or } 28.57\%$$

As the example above shows, even under normal conditions of capital accumulation, the rate of profit must fall. In the short term, the declining profit rate may be partially compensated by the growth, in absolute terms, of the total mass of profits and the rising rate of exploitation, as we have just seen.⁹ Invariably, however, a point will be reached at which

the maximum amount of surplus-value that could be extracted from a diminished working class will prove insufficient to expand the capital which has already been accumulated and production will need to be scaled back accordingly. Thus, “[t]he true barrier to capitalist production”, turns out to be, “capital itself”.¹⁰

There are, however, countertendencies to the falling rate of profit which may dampen its effects, or even defer them temporarily, although they are unable to nullify them in the long run.¹¹ The first of these, the rise in the rate of exploitation, we have already mentioned, but it is worth expanding upon it a bit more. Capitalists have essentially two strategies at their disposal to raise the rate of exploitation: increasing the productivity of labor and pushing wages below their value, as determined by the reproduction costs of the workforce.¹² A great deal of time has been devoted in this piece to discussing the first of these, because it is so crucial to the capital accumulation process, but the second is no less important. Indeed, it would be impossible for us to make any sense of austerity measures and similar policy changes put into place by capitalist governments the whole world over without first situating them in the historical context of capitalism’s impaired ability to generate profit. Austerity measures can contribute to raising the rate of exploitation by slashing public-sector expenditures and obligations, more specifically social supports that disproportionately benefit the working class, and which are largely financed out the profits generated by the private sector of the economy. Austerity is essentially decadent capitalism’s attempt to make the working class pay for the crisis of overaccumulation by redistributing surplus-value upwards.

The third countertendency to the falling rate of profit is the cheapening of the elements of constant capital relative to the total mass of profits. The OCC is a superb measure of this because it is at once a technical composition of capital (i.e., a ratio of machines to workers) and a value composition of capital (i.e., a ratio of capital investments), so it is extremely sensitive to such changes. If the value of the constant capital declines, then the OCC will reflect this. Instead, what we see upon examination of the empirical data is a gradual rise in the OCC over time, with some devaluation after major crises, and, of

course, massive de-capitalization in the 1980s due to offshoring. How do we explain this pattern? Both the ROP and OCC undergo cycles of growth and contraction, even if they trend in a specific direction in the long run, but those cycles differ greatly in length and are out of lockstep with one another (see Table 1). This is not really an inconvenient finding for us, as it conforms perfectly to Marx’s theory. Recall that in the short term, a rising OCC need not decrease the ROP at all. In fact, the ROP can even increase, provided the ROE grows quickly enough. It is only in the long run that a rising OCC causes the ROP to fall.

Table 1. Mean number of years between troughs, peaks, and from trough to peak for the years 1960-2017.

<i>Time Series</i>	<i>Trough to Trough</i>	<i>Peak to Peak</i>	<i>Trough to Peak</i>
Organic Composition of Capital	9.20	12.25	6.11
Rate of Profit	6.86	6.71	3.4

The fourth countertendency to the falling rate of profit is relative overpopulation and the growth of the industrial reserve army. The term ‘industrial reserve army’ has traditionally been used to refer to that subset of the working class which experiences unemployment on a semi-permanent basis or is otherwise subject to de facto exclusion from the workforce, as has been the case for members of racial/ethnic minorities in the United States and other countries. Yet, it may be worth updating this definition somewhat in light of the proliferation of precarious work arrangements and the relocation of industries employing large numbers of workers in the developed world to low-wage—typically underdeveloped—countries. The official unemployment rates made available by government fact-finding agencies capture only a part of the full picture. A more accurate estimate of the unemployment rate would include those whose attachment to the labor market may be described as marginal at best, as well as the many others who have been cut back to part-time for economic reasons. Data incorporating these populations are scarce, only going as far back as the mid-1990s, so we are naturally limited in the conclusions that we can draw. The basic logic, however, is that if the ROP falls, then the capitalist class as a whole will not be able to employ the same number of workers as before, so naturally

unemployment would go up. Likewise, a rising OCC is associated with a gradual displacement of the workforce and a growing industrial reserve army due to the increasing capital-intensiveness of production. Competition for employment increases as well, causing wages to fall. However, any rise in profitability resulting from this is quickly offset by the creation of less well-paid positions in the logistical and service industries to transport and sell off the expanded output generated by the private sector of the economy. Instead of mass unemployment and angry mobs of destitute people roaming the streets, with all of the political consequences that this would likely have, we get an expansion of the tertiary—i.e., service—sector of the economy relative to industries such as manufacturing that produce material goods.

The fifth countertendency to the falling rate of profit is the rise of foreign trade as a proportion of national income. Foreign trade helps compensate for the declining profit rate by providing capitalists with cheap inputs of raw materials and labor-power otherwise unavailable in their home countries. By reducing capitalists' production costs, foreign trade increases the proportion of the commodities' exchange-value that consists of surplus-value. Moreover, by reducing the value of the constant capital in relation to its variable component, foreign trade curbs the growth of the OCC, forestalling the fall in the ROP. It might be helpful to illustrate this using an example:

Let the exchange-value of a whole mass of commodities be equal to 192.

Let the **c** and **v** invested in its production both be 64, so that the OCC is:

$$\frac{64_c}{64_v} \text{ or } 100\%$$

The exchange-value of those commodities would break down as follows:

$$64_c + 64_v + 64_s = 192$$

The ROE would be:

$$\frac{64_s}{64_v} \text{ or } 100\%$$

And the ROP would be:

$$\frac{64_s}{64_c + 64_v} \text{ or } \frac{64_s}{128_{c+v}} \text{ or } 50\%$$

Let the value of the **c** and **v** invested in production fall by a quarter, so that the exchange-value of those commodities breaks down as follows:

$$48_c + 48_v + 96_s = 192$$

In that case, the OCC would still be:

$$\frac{48_c}{48_v} \text{ or } 100\%$$

But the ROE would be:

$$\frac{96_s}{48_v} \text{ or } 200\%$$

And the ROP would be:

$$\frac{96_s}{48_c + 48_v} \text{ or } \frac{96_s}{96_{c+v}} \text{ or } 100\%$$

Besides this, foreign trade supplies capitalists with new export markets unto which they can dump all of their excess output (i.e., whatever domestic markets are unable to absorb). Its positive effect on the ROP is, however, limited to the short term, tapering off over time. The higher demand for labor-power that results from exporting production to low-wage regions increases workers' bargaining power relative to employers, which causes wages to rise. So, the class struggle is what accounts for the global rise in living standards in the past few decades (paltry as it has been by comparison to the developed world), much of which has been limited to two countries: China and India. Simply put, there is no mechanism inherent to capitalism that would automatically raise living standards for working people. The labor costs that workers can impose on their employers depend entirely on their ability to organize in order to press demands collectively and what the latter can actually concede, since naturally wages cannot exceed profits. In any case, rising wages for workers in the developing world present a problem for capitalism as a whole because it removes one possible solution to the falling ROP off the table, so to speak.

The sixth and final countertendency to the declining profit rate is the growth of financial (or interest-bearing) capital relative to the total output of the capitalist economy. Financial capital has always played a role complementary to capitalist production by shortening the turnover time of capital—i.e., the duration of time between production of goods and the realization of surplus-value.¹³ By extending to businesses a line of credit, financial capital enables them to continue paying employees and buy the raw materials necessary to keep up production while their goods are in circulation; in exchange, of course, for a percentage of the profits thereby generated. Financial capital consists, then, of a claim on future income, regardless of whether that income takes the form of rent, profit, or wages.¹⁴ Now, these claims may be held individually by a bank, credit union, or other lending institution, or they may be bundled up with other such claims and resold to investors as speculative assets. The creation and buying up/selling of debt are at the heart of the national and global financial system. However, financial capital becomes all-important for the maintenance of capitalist profits in capitalism's decadent phase. As profitable investment opportunities in the productive sphere become scarce, for the reasons that we have discussed, money-capital is increasingly diverted towards speculation in the financial sector of the economy.

Multivariate regression provides us with a means by which to empirically test Marx's theory of crisis based on the falling rate of profit. Regression analysis measures the change in the outcome variable for every unit-increase in the predictor variable(s).¹⁵ If Marx's theory is true, then we would expect there to be a negative relationship between the ROP and OCC—i.e., a rise in the OCC is associated with a decline in the ROP and vice-versa. In other words, we are testing a null hypothesis (H_0) of no or positive association between the ROP and OCC against an alternative hypothesis (H_1) of negative association between the ROP and OCC. We perform two types of regression analysis to test this relationship, using proxy variables for the countertendencies to the falling ROP.¹⁶ The bivariate model tests the association between the ROP and OCC alone, while the full model controls for the effect of countertendencies.

The results of the analyses in Tables 2 and 3 confirm our alternative hypothesis.¹⁷

Table 2. Predictors of rate of profit changes for the US private sector for the years 1960-2017.

<i>Predictors</i>	<i>Bivariate Model</i>	<i>Full Model</i>
Organic Composition of Capital	-0.0354**	-0.0114***
Rate of Exploitation		0.2333***
Average Household Debt		0.0457
Rate of Accumulation		0.0009
Unemployment Rate		0.0272
Foreign Trade to GDP		-0.0219
Financial Assets to GDP		0.0026
Government Spending to GDP		-0.0244
Prob > Chi ²	0.0065	0.0000
Number of Observations	56	53

ARIMA (0,2,0) regression coefficients shown. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$. More stars indicate greater statistical significance.

The results of ARIMA regression in Table 2 can be interpreted as follows: for the bivariate model, a single unit-increase (percentage) in the OCC is associated with 0.0195 of a percent reduction, on average, in the ROP; for the full model, a single unit-increase in the OCC is associated with a 0.0108 of a percent reduction, on average, in the ROP, holding countertendencies constant.¹⁸ The robust regression results in Table 3 (next page) can be interpreted thusly: for the bivariate model, the relationship between ROP and OCC appears statistically non-significant, but since the ROP is positively correlated with itself in the previous year, it is likely that the effect of the OCC on the ROP is being subsumed into the autocorrelation; for the full model, a single unit-increase in the OCC is associated with a 0.0146 of a percent reduction, on average, in the ROP, holding constant the effect of counter-tendencies.¹⁹

(Continued)

Table 3. Predictors of rate of profit changes for the US private sector for the years 1960-2017.

Predictors	Bivariate Model	Full Model
Rate of Profit (t-1)	0.8476***	.0387*
Organic Composition of Capital	-0.0036	-.0146***
Rate of Exploitation		0.2330***
Average Household Debt		0.0136
Rate of Accumulation		0.0042
Unemployment Rate		0.027
Foreign Trade to GDP		-.0628***
Financial Assets to GDP		-0.0027
Government Spending to GDP		-0.0017
Prob > F	0.0015	0.0000
Number of Observations	58	54

Robust regression coefficients shown. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$. More stars indicate greater statistical significance.

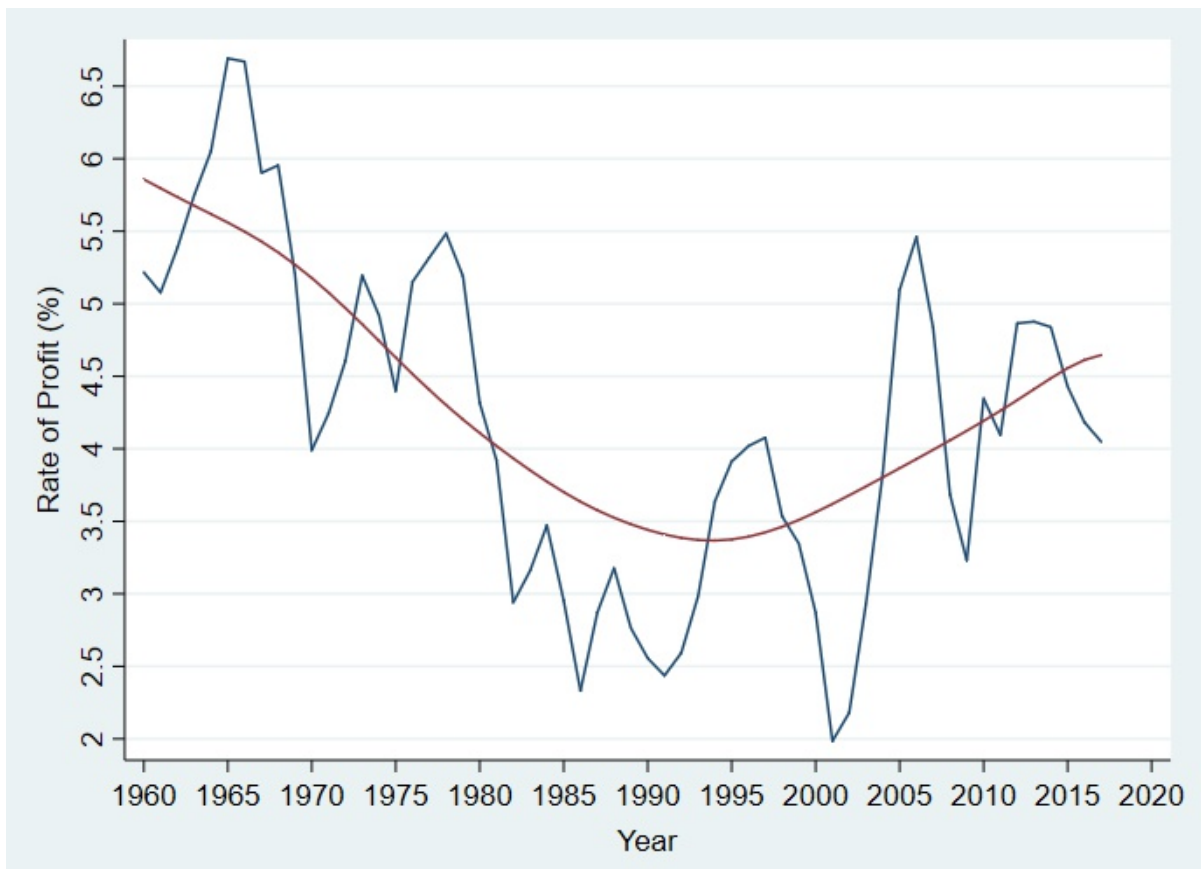
The phenomena that we call crises are nothing more than periodic disruptions in the process of capital accumulation due to the absolute overaccumulation of capital.²⁰ Of course, every new crisis differs from the previous one. They each have their geneses in a combination of factors, which, because they are not entirely knowable, also make it impossible to predict them ahead of time. What each crisis has in common,

though, is that its origin can be traced back unfailingly to the internal dysfunctionality of capitalistically organized production.²¹

The decline in the rate of profit is a fairly well-documented phenomenon, although economists outside of the Marxist tradition have always been perplexed by it, attributing its persistence to forces supposedly “outside” of capitalism, such as government regulation, wars, famines, and environmental disasters. This should not surprise us in the slightest, since they generally dismiss the LTV and all the theoretical conclusions drawn from it as an atavism of classical political economy. Nevertheless, the empirical data are unmistakably clear: the rate of profit has fallen. It is not a linear tendency – there are peaks and troughs – but the long-term trend indicates a decline.²²

Even though the falling rate of profit is accepted by economists and ideologues of all stripes as an incontestable fact, its root cause remains the object of much debate. Here, too, the empirical data lend support to the Marxist thesis, which posits that crises stem from the irreconcilable contradiction between the inflated mass of capital and the surplus-

Figure 1. US Private-Sector Rate of Profit with Lowess trendline for the years 1960-2017.



value available for accumulation. Figure 2 below illustrates that the decline in the rate of profit for the period of 1960-2017 is (roughly) inversely proportional to the rise in the organic composition of capital.

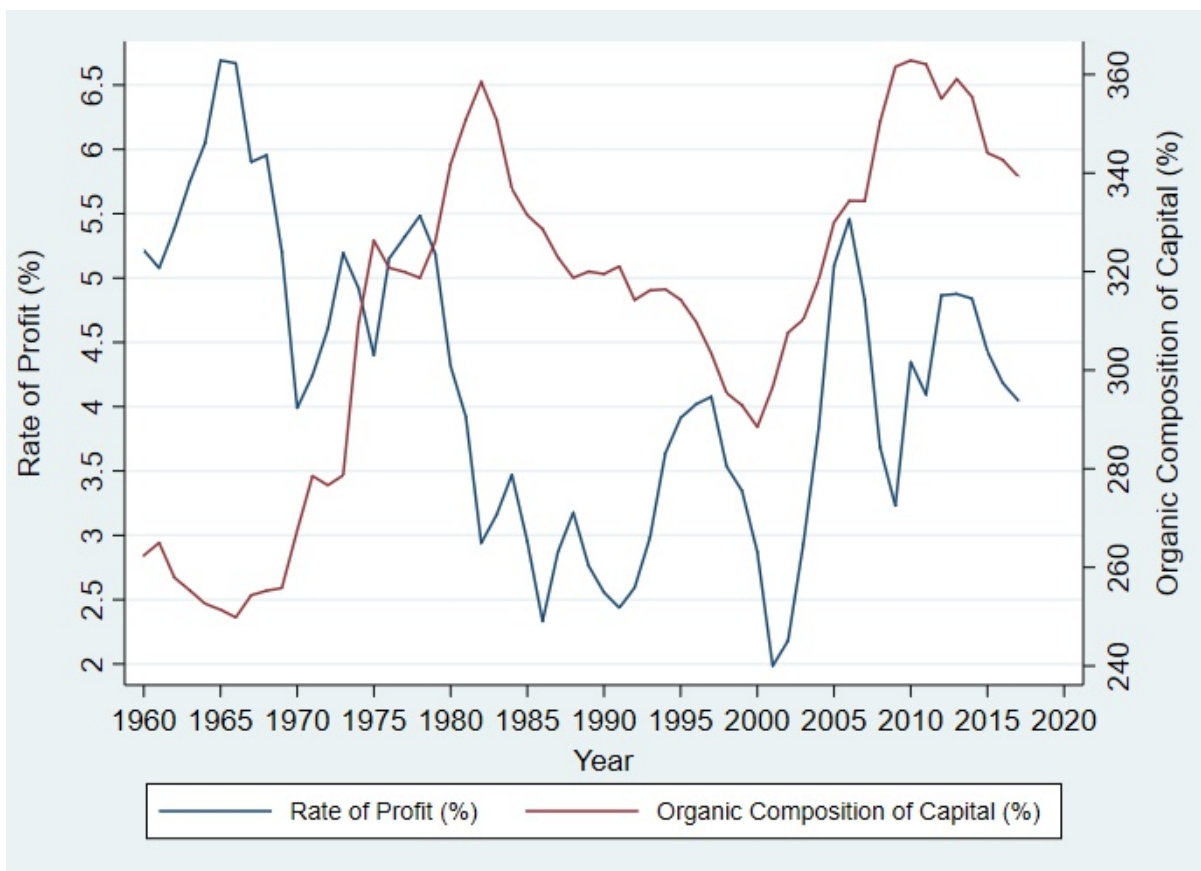
This observation is entirely consistent with the explanation for crises we outlined earlier. To reiterate, at a certain point in the capital accumulation process, the mass of capital grows too large in relation to the available surplus-value. Its expansion requirements become insurmountable as a consequence, and a crisis ensues. The crisis mechanism restores profitability to production by forcing capitalists to liquidate—i.e., sell off—their unused capital and get rid of excess workers, which has the net effect of reducing both capital investment and labor costs in the short term. This raises the rate of profit to a level acceptable for capital accumulation to begin once more.

Because, however, the accumulated capital is larger than it was previously, the amount of profits that will have to be generated to expand it are also greater each time that the cycle restarts. Eventually, the mass of capital will grow large enough that crises on their own no longer restore profitability, or the length of time for which they would have to drag on

becomes unacceptable to those in power. This prompts the State to intervene in the economy on behalf of capitalists, although not necessarily on their terms. One of the chief means by which governments typically do so is through “pump-priming”, which involves injecting money into the economy to stimulate growth.²³ For that reason, the role of the State in the economic sphere has expanded significantly in the second half of the twentieth century, coinciding with the decline in the ROP, as can be seen from Figure 3 (next page).

Indeed, total government spending as a percentage of GDP has averaged 31% in the US since the end of the Second World War, meaning that the State effectively controls a third of the economy. Even though the US government does not dictate output quotas to private capitalists, it is nevertheless engaged in a form of quasi-planning through the subsidization of production by deficit financing.²⁴ Yet, the periodic collapse of the capitalist economy cannot be prevented through state-facilitated accumulation alone; at best, it can be deferred. For the government has, properly speaking, no money of its own. The money that it spends is obtained by taxing the profits

Figure 2. US Rate of Profit by the Organic Composition of Capital for the years 1960-2017.



extorted from the working class by private capitalists or is otherwise borrowed against future tax revenues. Even in the latter case, that money has to be paid back with interest, which further depresses the rate of profit.²⁵ But the State cannot borrow money to prop up an ailing economy forever. The gravy train will eventually arrive at its final stop. In that case, there will only be one solution for the capitalist system as a whole: the destruction of capital values on a scale possible only through imperialist war. By destroying a portion of the accumulated capital, its expansion requirements can be lowered sufficiently for production to resume. This would be functionally the same as reverting to an earlier stage of capital accumulation.²⁶ It should go without saying that states do not go to war with one another with the aim of reducing their own industry to rubble. Instead, they do so for typical capitalist reasons: gaining access to new markets and inputs. Regardless of the actual motive, wars make possible a new round of accumulation by lowering the expansion requirements of the accumulated capital.²⁷

This means that all subsequent accumulation under decadent capitalism is fated to end in imperialist

barbarism—i.e., in war. By imperialism, we are not referring to an aggressive foreign policy that states can adopt or abandon at will; nor do we mean the predation by powerful states upon weaker ones. Imperialism is rather a new stage in the global operation of the capitalist mode of production. It is the stage reached by capitalism when the OCC is so high in the industrialized countries that the only way to ameliorate the decline in the ROP is to seek out new sources of raw materials and labor-power in the underdeveloped world.²⁸ In other words, imperialism is the militaristic expression of the economic competition among various capitals. What underlies imperialism, then, is a conflict among capitalists to capture for themselves a larger share of the global pool of surplus-value generated by the world working class. Military spending appears unproductive from capitalists' vantage point—a deduction from the total profit. This is far from the case, however. For although military spending and the wars that it makes possible are funded by private-sector profits, the returns it yields for the capitalist economy are considerable.

As before, we use multiple regression analysis to see whether this explanation holds up empirically.

Figure 3. US Government Spending as % of GDP by the Rate of Profit for the years 1960-2017.

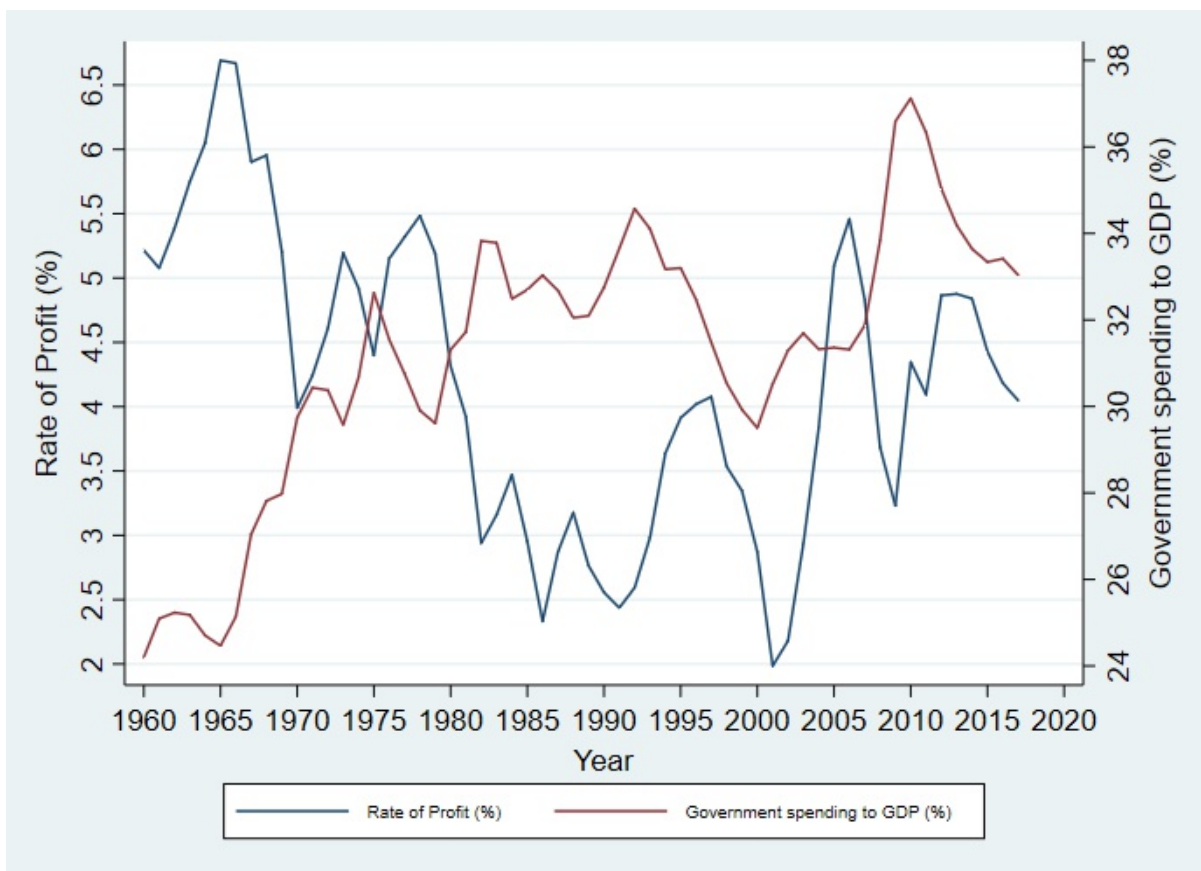
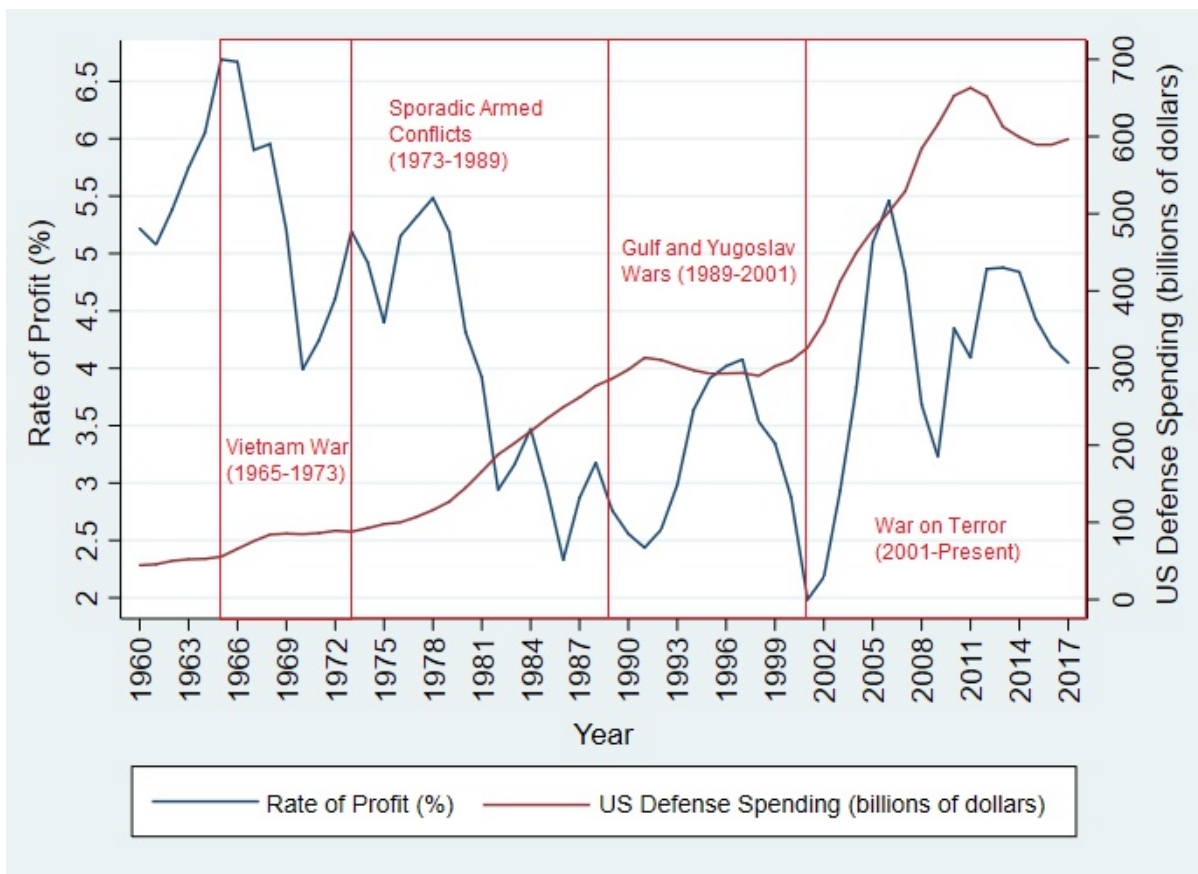


Figure 4. US Defense Spending by the Rate of Profit for the years 1960-2017.



Here, we test a null hypothesis (H_0) of no or negative association between US defense spending and the OCC against an alternative hypothesis (H_1) of positive association between US defense spending and the OCC, including as controls the ROP, ROE, foreign trade as a percentage of GDP and financial assets as a percentage of GDP.

Table 4. Predictors in changes to US Defense Spending for the years 1960-2017.

Predictors	Bivariate Model	Full Model
US Defense Spending (t-1)	0.9911***	0.9047***
Organic Composition of Capital	0.1435*	1.4351***
Rate of Profit		90.6755***
Rate of Exploitation		-22.1303***
Foreign Trade to GDP		4.5005*
Financial Assets to GDP		0.4724**
Prob > F	0.0000	0.0000
Number of Observations	57	54

Robust regression coefficients shown. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$. More stars indicate greater statistical significance.

The results of robust regression in Table 4 seem to

confirm our alternative hypothesis. They can be interpreted as follows: for the bivariate model, a single unit-increase (percentage) in the OCC is associated with a 140 million dollar increase, on average, in US defense spending; for the full model, a single unit-increase in the OCC is associated with a 1.435 billion dollar increase, on average, in US defense spending, all else being the same. In the same model, it can also be seen that for every unit-increase (percentage) in the ROP there is a corresponding increase of 90 billion dollars, on average, in US defense spending, net of all the other variables included in the model. This is consistent with our earlier claim that imperialism—measured using US defense spending as a proxy variable—helps maintain the profitability of the private sector.²⁹ Further, the positive association between US defense spending and the ratio of foreign trade and financial assets to GDP supports our argument that imperialism is vital in securing access to foreign export markets and new spheres for financial investment.

It is thus that we should understand all conflicts between different factions of the capitalist class, including so-called movements for national liberation. These had an historically progressive

character earlier in capitalism's history because they helped consolidate capitalism as an economic system by clearing out the remains of past modes of production, in the process creating a world working class in whose interests it would be to abolish class society. With the onset of capitalist decadence, this function of independence movements has been completely superseded. In the age of imperialist decay, independence movements are no longer progressive but have become incorporated into the struggle for profits between competing factions of capital.³⁰ Therefore, the working class no longer has anything to gain from supporting them. In the last century, communists gave support to independence movements following the rationale that they would weaken the hold of imperialism in the colonies and prepare workers for the contestation of political power, but this has never once happened. Instead, these movements merely shifted the center of gravity within a region from one imperialist power to another competing power.

In summation, the accumulation of capital, once progressive, has completely outlived its historic purpose. Instead of laying the groundwork for a global human community without states, exploitation, or wars, it can only undo the acquired social development by dragging humankind towards disaster in the form of war, economic collapse, and ecological catastrophe. More than a hundred years ago, Rosa Luxemburg wrote that humanity was being presented with a stark choice between socialism and barbarism.³¹ Two decades into the twenty-first century, we are long past the point where barbarism—i.e., the collapse of mass civilization—is our worst-case scenario. Instead, the realistic choice before us today is between communism and extinction. The survival of our species is too important to leave in the hands of the social parasites who command our lives and labor. No progressive faction of capital can exist today because the capitalist class as a whole is materially invested in the preservation of a social order that is no longer capable of contributing to the wellbeing of humanity. Consequently, any strategy that calls on us to make a common front with our enemy, even if temporarily, cannot fail to have disastrous consequences. We must look, instead, to the working class as the engine of social transformation. Though it will surely strike some

people as doctrinaire, only the working class, a class whose self-emancipation simultaneously does away with all other oppressions, has an immediate interest in abolishing capitalism and founding a new social order (communism) in its place.³² Its arrival on the stage of history as a conscious political force is necessary—today more than ever—to move beyond the impasse of capitalist decadence and avoid an apocalyptic future.

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Notes

- 1 George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 539.
- 2 Grandizo Munis, "Impossibility of Capitalist Development," published in *Alarma* issue nos. 23-24, organ of F.O.R (Fomento Obrero Revolucionario/Workers' Revolutionary Ferment). First translated into English and re-published in the inaugural issue of *Intransigence*.
- 3 Karl Marx, *Capital vol. 1* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 320.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 739.
- 5 Paul Mattick, *Economic Crisis and Crisis Theory* (London: Merlin Press, 1981), 53-54.
- 6 Marx, *op. cit.*, 432-435.
- 7 Karl Marx, *Capital vol. 3* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 317-319.
- 8 It is impossible to say with absolute certainty how much productivity will increase simply by adding more machines to production—i.e., by increasing investment in **c** relative to **v**. The OCC varies significantly among firms; it also develops unevenly across industries, even within the same country. I have imputed productivity growth from the percentage increase to the OCC. I justify this on the basis that all of these differences should disappear in the aggregate when analyzing the US, or even world, economy as a single capital.
- 9 Paul Mattick, *Marx and Keynes: The Limits of the Mixed Economy* (Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1969), 63-65.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 358.
- 11 Marx, *op. cit.*, 339-348.
- 12 Karl Marx, *Capital vol. 1* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 645.

13 Karl Marx, *Capital vol. 2* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 233.

14 Karl Marx, *Capital vol. 3* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 471.

15 Regression models are essentially a-theoretical, insofar as they do not posit a specific relation among variables. They make certain assumptions about the shape of the distribution, the distribution of the errors (residuals), the consistency of central tendencies such as the mean across time, the instance-independence of observations, etc. Real-life distributions violate these assumptions a majority of the time. However, there are regression models which are robust against violations of these assumptions. Moreover, it is possible to 'fit' a model in such a way that the true nature of the association among the predictor and outcome variable(s) can be determined.

16 ARIMA (autoregressive integrated moving-average)

regression is a statistical model used in analyzing and forecasting time-series data. An ARIMA models consists of three components, or parameters: an autoregressive component specifying that the outcome variable is a linear function of its current and past value(s); an integrated component that subtracts, or differences, an observation's current value from its past value(s) to make the data stationary – i.e., the mean and variance are consistent across time – and remove trends; and, finally, a moving-average component specifying that the outcome variable is a linear function of its current and past error(s). Thus, ARIMA models are typically denoted as ARIMA (p, d, q), where p is the number of lagged observations, or lag order; d is the differencing order, or times that observations are differenced; and q is the size of the moving-average window, or moving-average order.

Figure A. Correlation and Partial Autocorrelation plots for the Rate of Profit with first-order differencing.

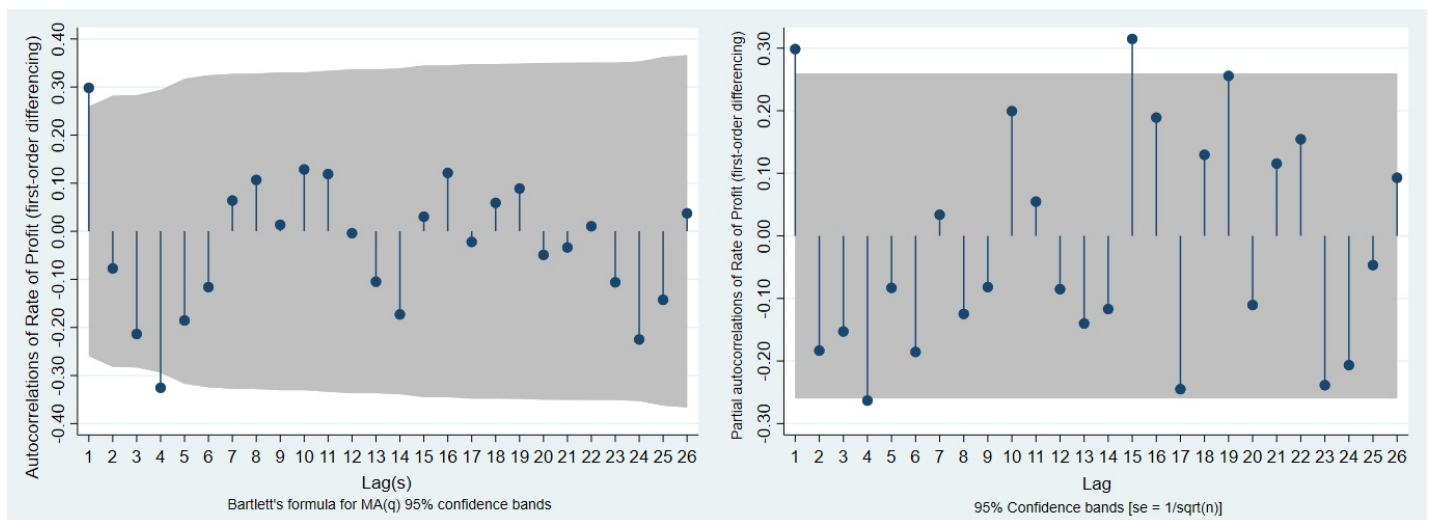
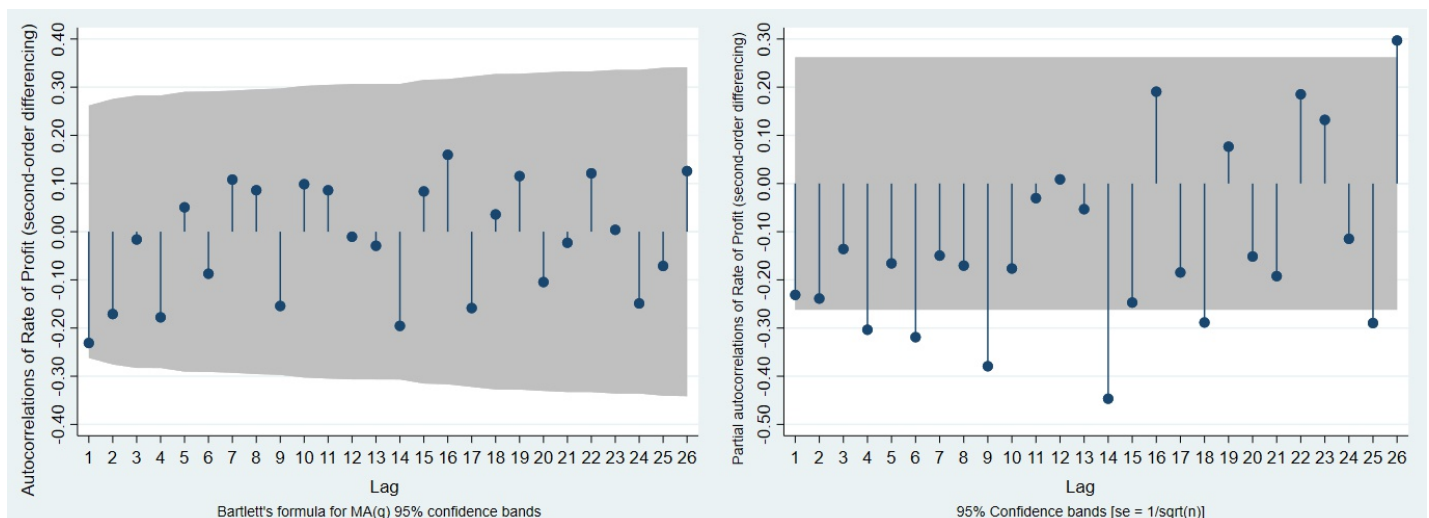


Figure B. Correlation and Partial Autocorrelation plots for the Rate of Profit with second-order differencing.



The (non-)stationarity of a time series can be determined via the Dickey-Fuller Test (DFT). The DFT tests a null hypothesis (H_0) that the outcome variable contains a unit-root, in which case it is not generated by a stationary process, against an alternative hypothesis (H_1) that the process generating the data is stationary. Results of the DFT indicate first- and second-order differencing to be plausible.

Table A. Dickey-Fuller Test results: US Rate of Profit for the years 1960-2017.

Order of Differencing	t-statistic	Number of Observations	p-value
0	-1.93	57	0.3179
1	-5.401	56	0.0000***
2	-9.251	55	0.0000***

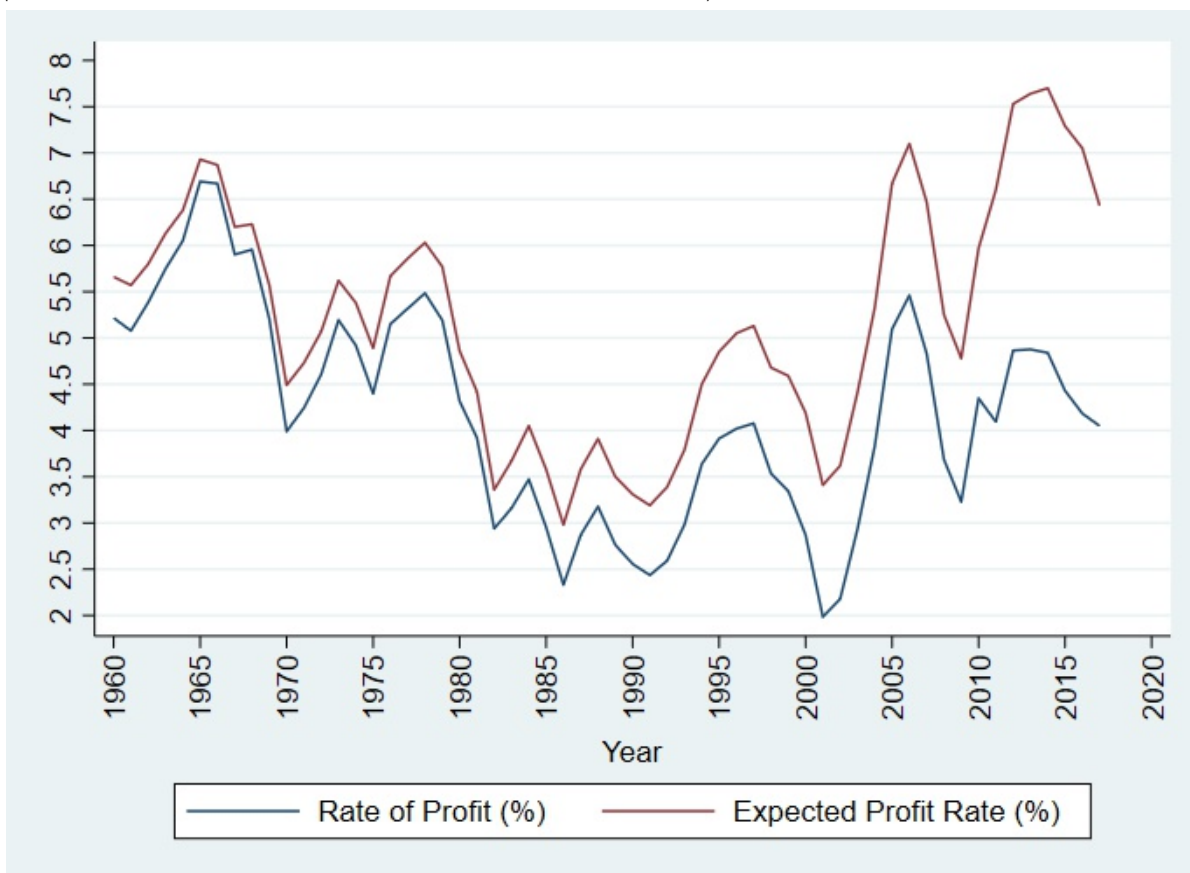
* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$. More stars indicate greater statistical significance.

The lag order (p) and size of the moving-average window (q) can be determined through the

autocorrelation and partial auto-correlation functions (ACF and PACF, respectively), as per the [Box-Jenkins method](#). The ACF provides the correlation between an observation and its past value(s), while the PACF provides the correlation between an observation and past value(s), excluding all values in between the two. AC and PAC plots measure the statistical significance of autocorrelations and partial autocorrelations. Lagged correlations outside of the 95% confidence band are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ threshold—i.e., there is a 5% likelihood of obtaining that result if the null hypothesis (H_0) were true. A statistically significant autocorrelation or partial autocorrelation at n lag indicates that n be considered for the lag and moving-average order(s). For reference, see the summary of goodness of fit statistics for different plausible models on Table B. We show AC and PAC plots for the rate of profit with first- and second- order differencing below (Figs. A & B).

As an additional test of the robustness of my model, I have produced a forecast of the ROP for the time-period under examination (1960-2017) using the coefficients from the ARIMA (0,2,0) model in my article and the mean ROP for that same time-period

Figure C. Expected and Actual Rates of Profit for the US Private Sector for the years 1960-2017.



as the intercept, or constant. My model, like all others, is far from perfect; it slightly overshoots the ROP, especially in the later years. However, it is generally successful at replicating the data points. I include a graph of the expected and actual profit rates for the years 1960-2017 below.

The prediction equation for regression model above, which I used to forecast profit rates for the years 1960-2017 is as follows:

$$ROP_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 OCC_t + \beta_2 ROE_t + \beta_3 AHD_t + \beta_4 ROA_t + \beta_5 UNMR_t + \beta_6 FT2GDP_t + \beta_7 FA2GDP_t + \beta_8 GS2GDP_t + [(ROP_t - ROP_{t-1}) - (ROP_{t-1} - ROP_{t-2})] + \varepsilon_t$$

The current year's profit rate— ROP_t —is the outcome. Beta naught (β_0) is the intercept: the value of ROP_t when all other variables are set to zero. As before, OCC_t and ROE_t are the organic composition of capital and rate of exploitation in a given year. AHD_t is average household debt, which proxies for the total wage packet paid out to the working class. ROA_t is the rate of accumulation, computed by dividing gross fixed capital formation by net fixed assets and measures the value of constant capital. $UNMR_t$ is the official unemployment rate, which is proxying for the industrial reserve army. $FT2GDP_t$ is foreign trade as a percentage of GDP, which is measuring the dependence of profits on foreign markets. $FA2GDP_t$ is the ratio of financial assets to GDP, which measures the financialization of the economy. $GS2GDP_t$ is government spending as a percentage of GDP, which attempts to get at the size and role of the State in the economy. The formula $(ROP_t - ROP_{t-1}) - (ROP_{t-1} - ROP_{t-2})$ stands for second-order differencing (i.e., the change in the changes). Finally, ε_t is the residual – or error – term for the current year; it ideally captures all the 'white noise' in the time series.

17 The results with which we are concerned with here are the statistical significance of our regression coefficients, as determined by the p-values of said results. P-values tell us the likelihood that a result would be obtained if the null hypothesis (H_0) were true.

18 Although the ACF and PACF both seemed to indicate the data-generating process is ARIMA (4,2,0), it is generally considered best-practice to try out other

plausible models in order to avoid errors resulting from misspecification. The Akaike and Bayesian information criteria (AIC and BIC respectively) are post-estimation analyses used to determine the best-fitting among several possible models. In this case, the 'best-fitting' model is the one that best explains our data while minimizing model complexity. In other words, overparametrization—i.e., overfitting—is penalized and parsimony is rewarded. As such, a smaller AIC and BIC implies a better-fitting model. The results of postestimation analyses in Table B seem to suggest that ARIMA (0,2,0) is the best-fitting model for my data.

Table B. Goodness of Fit Statistics for ARIMA models.

Model	Log Likelihood	AIC	BIC	Regression Coefficient
ARIMA (0,2,0)	69.89411	-119.7882	-100.0853	-0.0114***
ARIMA (4,2,0)	78.1835	-128.3670	-100.7829	-0.0099***
ARIMA (3,1,0)	86.4176	-146.8352	-120.9785	-0.0108***
ARIMA (2,1,0)	86.3414	-148.6828	-124.8150	-0.0108***
ARIMA (1,1,0)	85.7214	-149.4429	-127.5640	-0.0108***
ARIMA (0,1,0)	85.5114	-151.0227	-131.1329	-0.0108***
ARIMA (1,1,1)	88.8346	-153.6692	-129.8013	-0.0114***

ARIMA regression coefficients shown. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$. More stars indicate greater statistical significance.

19 Since I only had data on the US and the rate of profit is susceptible to external 'shocks', I used robust regression, an offshoot of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression which downweights the influence of outliers, to hedge against extreme observations.

20 *Ibid.*, 359-360.

21 Michael Roberts, *The Long Depression* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 26.

22 All the data were obtained from the [Federal Reserve Economic Data](#) (FRED). I computed the rate of profit by dividing [non-financial corporate profits](#) by [net fixed assets](#) plus [employee compensation](#). The organic composition of capital was computed by dividing net fixed assets by employee compensation. The rate of exploitation was obtained by dividing non-financial corporate profits by employee compensation. The rate of accumulation was obtained by dividing [gross fixed capital formation](#) by net fixed assets. Finally, I calculated average household debt by dividing [household consumer debt](#) by the [total households](#) in the US. I use average household debt in my analysis as a proxy measure for workers' wages and social

supports, which are complementary to the wage packet. My reasoning for doing so is that if wages fall below the amount needed for workers to afford the basic necessities of life, as determined by their social and cultural context, then that shortfall will have to be made up by a rise in household consumer debt. The dataset that I used to make all of my charts and tables and run my analyses for can be downloaded freely [here](#). I labor on the assumption that prices closely follow—if not directly mirror—the value of inputs. I argue that this assumption is justified when working from data on the level of a whole country, particularly a country that is as centrally-positioned within the world economy as is the US, because while there are differences across firms and industries, these tend to break down in the aggregate and prices should theoretically approximate exchange-values.

23 Mattick, *op. cit.*, 136-137.

24 Mainstream—i.e., bourgeois—economists will retort that the ratio of total government spending to GDP does not actually mean that the US government controls such a percentage of the economy, since most of the money generated via taxation is spent on goods produced in the private sector. Of course, this is an elision of the main argument being made here, which is that, under the conditions of capitalist decadence, governments increasingly see themselves obligated to assume the basic functions associated with private capitalists. In specific, they use taxation as a means to redistribute profits and steer production and capital investments towards certain sectors.

25 Paul Mattick, *Economic Crisis and Crisis Theory* (London: Merlin Press, 1981), 117-118.

26 Henryk Grossman, *The Law of Accumulation and the Breakdown of the Capitalist System* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), 156-157.

27 Internationalist Communist Tendency (ICT), “[The Economic Role of War in Capitalism’s Decadent Phase](#),” published in *Revolutionary Perspectives* issue no. 37.

28 Internationalist Communist Tendency (ICT), “[The Fall in the Average Rate of Profit - the Crisis and its Consequences](#),” published in *Revolutionary Perspectives* issue no. 52.

29 Strictly speaking, it is not possible to infer a causal relationship between US defense spending and the rate of profit from the regression on Table 4.

Nevertheless, I ran a separate model which confirmed my earlier claims about imperialism. In the interest of simplicity, I have opted not to include a table of these results in the main text, but I do so here for our more quantitatively-inclined readers to peruse.

Table C. Predictors of rate of profit changes for the US private sector for the years 1960-2017.

Predictors	Bivariate Model	Full Model
Rate of Profit (t-1)	0.8775***	0.0209
US Defense Spending	-0.0001	0.0008**
Organic Composition of Capital		-0.01338***
Rate of Exploitation		0.2374***
Rate of Accumulation		0.0007
Foreign Trade to GDP		-0.0418***
Financial Assets to GDP		-0.0032***
Government Spending to GDP		-0.0103
Prob > F	0.0000	0.0000
Number of Observations	57	54

Robust regression coefficients shown. * p < 0.05. ** p < 0.01.

*** p < 0.001. More stars indicate greater statistical significance.

The results of robust regression on Table C can be summarized thusly: for the bivariate model, the relationship between the rate of profit and US defense spending appears non-significant, but since the rate of profit is positively correlated with itself in the previous year, it is likely the effect of US defense spending on the rate of profit is being subsumed into the autocorrelation; for the full model, every billion dollar increase in US defense spending causes the rate of profit to rise by 0.0008 of a percent, on average, all else being the same.

30 International Communist Tendency (ICT), “[The National Question Today and the Poisonous Legacy of the Counter-revolution](#),” published in *Revolutionary Perspectives* issue no. 55.

31 Rosa Luxemburg, “The Junius Pamphlet”, in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, eds. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 321.

32 Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 141.

BASIC POSITIONS OF INTERNATIONALIST COMMUNISTS IN NORTH AMERICA

1

We denounce capitalism, whatever its apparent form of government, as a social system based on the exploitation of man by man.

2

We denounce the so-called “socialist” countries as brutal exploitative regimes to be overthrown by the working class.

3

We support communism as the only means capable of saving humanity from its extinction under capitalist barbarism.

4

We reject all interclassist struggles and ideologies as alien to the proletariat and contrary to its interests as the universal class.

5

We encourage self-organized struggle for workers’ immediate interests and for revolution, beyond any legal or economic framework that might fetter their activity—including the union form and its bureaucracy, opposed to the rank and file themselves.

6

We affirm, in this moment, the total decadence of the capitalist system—its inability to contribute further towards social development—and the immediate need for a communist revolution on a global scale.

7

We advocate the establishment of a revolutionary party to function as the nerve center of the class.



"Present-day society, which developing productive forces to a gigantic degree, while powerfully conquering ever new realms, while subjugating nature to man's domination on an unprecedented scale, begins to choke in the capitalist grip. Contradictions inherent in the very essence of capitalism, and appearing in an embryonic state at the beginning of its development, have grown, have widened their scope with every stage of capitalism; in the period of imperialism they have reached proportions that cry to heaven. Productive forces in their present volume insistently demand new production relations. The capitalist shell must inevitably burst."

Nikolai Bukharin

Imperialism and World Economy (1917)