

The peculiarity of the peculiar commodity:
A brief history of the concept of “labour power”



March 2014



This article was published in the issues 39-40 of the magazine *Antifa: War Against Fear* by the collective Antifa Scripta. It is part of the column "Studies in the Blue&Black", which is a column concerning the history of Greek fascism. Its name is derived from an ironic word play with the colors of the Greek flag. The Greek flag is colored white and blue. The authors of the column want to shed light to the dark sides of Greek fascism and imperialist state policy, hence the black replaces the white.

Translation: M.

The contents can be used freely for the purposes of class struggle. In any case, the ethics of social movements call for the reference of the original source.

The peculiarity of the peculiar commodity: A brief history of the concept of «labour power»

We understand that many might find all that follows to be somewhat... irrelevant to the usual endeavours of the column "Studies in the Blue&Black". From our perspective though, it is not that irrelevant. The first thing we understood while preparing to deal with the famine that happened during the (German) occupation¹ was that all the existing narratives regarding this historical episode had one common characteristic: they all assume that the famine of the occupation was a unique event, which took place only in Greece and only because of «the Germans». We want to negate this assumed uniqueness and show that on the one hand, famines are ordinary episodes in the history of capitalism, on the other, as processes they are not exceptions but parts of the ordinary functioning of capitalism. We discussed a lot around the subject of «famine, capitalism and fascism» and we managed to approach the subject through the concept of labour power. More accurately, in the history of the concept of «labour power» - because as we shall see, «labour power» is not a one-sided or unchangeable concept and its history can teach us a lot about the history of capitalism and its enemies. Indeed, just prior to abandoning hope we will end up learning some things about the history of famines.

I. Marx becomes confused

Marx published the first volume of his book in 1867.² The first chapter of his book was titled «Commodities» and the first paragraph of the book was:

The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an "immense collection of commodities"; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity.³

Some things have already been clarified. For example the fact that the subject of the book is wealth, its production and distribution under the type of social organization which is called capitalism. Furthermore, the fact that commodities are of concern (and the «investigation» begins here) because they are the form in which wealth is presented under capitalist conditions. Finally though, and this is of great importance, it might be the case that what «presents itself» is a vast parade of commodities, but this is not the essence of things; the experience and the reality of the capitalist system deviate.

The world of Marx's book is a world of commodities and the relations that exist amongst them. The foundational position of the book is that these relations between objects are in reality relations between

¹ The historical episode known as "the occupation" refers to the German occupation of Greece during the Second World War. It lasted from April 1941 and it ended in October 1944, except for some parts of Greece that were "freed" in May and June of 1945.

² The Greek word for "Capital" happens to be the same as "chapter". To avoid confusion we will be referring to *Capital* as Marx's book.

³ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Penguin, 1990, pg. 125.

people and social classes. Bosses and workers become integrated in social relationships between each other and it is these relations which present themselves as relations between commodities. This is a real miracle, a miracle with a religious significance attached to it. And if this miracle can become reality, it is through the specific organization of our societies. The task Marx takes on is that of locating the relations between people, concealed as relations between objects. It is not observed often, but this model has very important outcomes. The most important one is that the world of Marx's book, if we take his initial realizations literally, did not include any notion beyond that of commodities and their exchange value.

Of course Marx was a very careful man. He understood very well that the world he was describing was the world of capital, that it was the viewpoint of capital he was analyzing, its "ethics" and conduct he was describing. He also understood that in reality the world of capital is not the world of people and that a great tension exists between the two. On the one hand we have people, beings with feelings, with the ability to know, to deny and to be disaffected. On the other hand we have capital, a type of organization of social relations, which is equivalent to a general abstraction from reality. Capital disregards people, their passions and their opinions, it disregards life and death, it does not recognize anything beyond exchange value, or in other words the «average socially necessary labour-time» that is spent for the production of commodities.

Marx was a careful man; whenever this tension rose to the point of influencing his analysis he would become even more careful. And when this tension reached the point of confusing his words entirely, he became more careful than a cat. It is logical that the controversial point appeared not very far into the analysis of his book. Of course the world of Marx's book was a world of commodities, but it is a fact that commodities are produced somehow and most importantly by someone. And those who produced commodities in the time of Marx, those that produce commodities today, are not an abstract aggregation of labour-time, but people with flesh and bones, beings that existed outside the world of capital and until page 270 existed outside the world of Marx's book.

But eventually page 270 came along and Marx had to talk about a very important issue, specifically about how the living worker happens to become involved with exchange values and generally with the world of the abstract and the dead in the interior of the process of production. He probably grinded his teeth, wrote the title «The Sale and Purchase of Labour-power» and began to write, adopting from the analysis of others, that had walked the earth before him, a new important concept; that of labour power. The definition went like this:

We mean by labour-power, or labour-capacity, the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind.

The careful Marx jumped on every chance he got to separate the concept of labour power from that of labour. Labour was the specific physical process, during which the human worker utilizes their body and their natural resources to produce useful things. *Labour power* on the other hand, the capacity for labour, was... what else? A commodity, one of the entities that constitute the world of Marx's book, the world of capital and at the same time, what is sold by the worker and bought by the capitalist. To make this separation more

understandable Marx introduced the metaphor of digestion and the capacity for digestion. Obviously the two are different, he said, because as we know digestion needs something more than a strong stomach. By reproaching a metaphor from the basic biological functions, he showed us his understanding of the difficult facets of the issues he is contemplating and their source - the complex relation between capital and the world of the living.

Anyhow, since labour power was a commodity, the determination of its value was simple:

This peculiar commodity, labour-power, must now be examined more closely. Like all other commodities it has a value. How is that value determined?

The value of labour-power is determined, as in the case of every other commodity, by the labour-time necessary for the production, and consequently also the reproduction, of this specific article. In so far as it has value, it represents no more than a definite quantity of the average social labour objectified in it. Labour-power exists only as a capacity of the living individual. Its production consequently presupposes his existence. Given the existence of the individual, the production of labour-power consists in his reproduction of himself or his maintenance. For his maintenance he requires a certain quantity of the means of subsistence. Therefore the labour-time necessary for the production of labour-power is the same as that necessary for the production of those means of subsistence; in other words, the value of labour-power is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of its owner.

Marx ended up dealing with the subject of labour power and value by putting forward an equation through which the daily value of labour power was determined:

$(365A + 52B + 4C + \dots)/365$, where A was the bread we buy every day, B were the candles we buy every week, C were the shoes we buy every 3 months (or whatever....) and so on and so on. Equations and their results are so nice and tidy... Wait a moment though! Let us take another look at the commodity «labour power» and what Marx tells us about this commodity: The worker sells it, the capitalist buys it, its value is calculated in the same way capital calculates the values of commodities... Why then should it be «peculiar»? In the ten pages of «The Sale and Purchase of Labour-power », Marx highlighted two facets of the peculiarity of the peculiar commodity. The highlighting of the first facet is direct and explicit: This commodity is «peculiar» because it is the only commodity that can create new exchange value from thin air; it is the source of the «wealth» we find at the beginning of his book. But Marx also highlights a second facet of the peculiarity of the «peculiar» commodity. This time his approach is indirect and implicit. It can be found in the way he concludes the topic of labour power:

*Let us therefore, in company with the owner of money and the owner of labour-power, leave this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone, and follow them into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice ' No admittance except on business'.
(...)*

[Here]... a certain change takes place, or so it appears, in the physiognomy of our dramatis personae. He who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power

follows as his worker. The one smirks self importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but - a tanning.

Here we find a second peculiarity of labour power; this one is implicit - it is not named, but it is there. The labourer, the owner of labour power, is a living being, a being with a conscience of what has happened. Labour power might be a commodity, but its bearers are not commodities. They think, they have feelings, they have opinions. And if the expression of their (living) face gives us an idea of their condition, what they are *really thinking about* is by definition unsolvable, equally for the scientist Marx who is observing the scene and for the full of certainty capitalist who «minds his own business». «[A] certain change takes place». Because *what is really happening is known only by the worker.*

So, on the one hand we have labour power as it is perceived by capital. On the other hand we have labour power as something intertwined with its living bearer. A subjective side of labour power emerges; with it emerges the capacity for undermining, for refusing and ultimately denying the conversion of labour power into labour. Capacities that occur from the fact that this commodity is summoned from the world of the living to the world of capital, without having witnessed its own death, in the same way mythical heroes used to descend to Hades, while still alive.

The tension that occurs here is a tension between the viewpoint of capital on the one hand and the real world on the other.

The capital relation sees commodities, values that are calculated in correlation to labour-time. This viewpoint can be described scientifically and this is what the scientist Marx does with his theory of value. The real world on the other hand, is a world of tension and denial, of contradictory interests and authority. It is a world of class struggle that cannot be described scientifically, only historically. The whole of Marx's book is governed by this tension. This happens because it is not a tension that occurs due to some type of theoretical error, but from the nature of the capitalist system of social organization. In the approximately 1000 pages of his book, the attentive Marx returned to the subject multiple times, without mentioning it. Possibly because he rarely felt absolutely satisfied with the outcome of his endeavours.

2. Marx fights to get over his confusion

The chapter «The Sale and Purchase... » is not the only point in Marx's book where the concept of «labour power» is put under the spotlight. We will present one of many examples, because we believe that it will help us understand the problems Marx faced and their political significance. The point we are interested in is located in the chapter «Machinery and Large Scale Industry». There Marx discusses the introduction of machines in the productive process. Initially things seem to be going well; the concepts that have been advanced in the previous chapters (value, surplus value, labour power, constant and variable capital, concrete and abstract labour) are recruited and work together in the most scientific manner. It is proven that the introduction of machines, precisely because machines are «constant capital», leads with mathematical certainty to the recruitment of women and children in production, to the extension of the working day and

the intensification of labour. As the pages move along though, we reach the section «The Struggle Between Worker and Machine». And there we find the following excerpt:

The division of labour develops this labour-power in a one-sided way, by reducing it to the highly particularized skill of handling a special tool. When it becomes the job of the machine to handle this tool, the use-value of the worker's labour-power vanishes, and with it its exchange-value. The worker becomes unsaleable, like paper money thrown out of currency by legal enactment.

World history offers no spectacle more frightful than the gradual extinction of the English hand-loom weavers; this tragedy dragged on for decades, finally coming to an end in 1838. Many of the weavers died of starvation, many vegetated with their families for a long period on 2½ d. a day. In India, on the other hand, the English cotton machinery produced an acute effect. The Governor General reported as follows in 1834-5 : "The misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton-weavers are bleaching the plains of India." ⁴

In the chapter «The buying and selling... » the value of labour power was bread, candles, shoes and so on and so on. There, the attentive Marx recognized on the one hand that « *In contrast, therefore, with the case of other commodities, the determination of the value of labour-power contains a historical and moral element*», he continued though by saying that «*(...) in a given country at a given period, the average amount of the means of subsistence necessary for the worker is a known datum*».⁵ Here on the other hand, we find ourselves approximately 300 pages later; and suddenly we discover that the exchange value of labour power cannot by any means be taken for granted, because «with the use-value, the exchange-value too, of the workman's labour-power vanishes». This double disappearance can happen from one moment to another with the introduction of a new machine-technology. All this is stated when a few pages back, «labour power» and its «value», not only were absolute - albeit largely - determined, but were dancing in harmony with the other marxist terms in order to prove that machines «*extend the working day*» and to reach the other «*scientific conclusions*» of the first sections of « Machinery and Large Scale Industry».

If this relativization of the value of labour power is startling in itself, the examples used are even more eye opening in regard to the types of problems Marx had to face. Marx mentions two cases of mass famine of the 19th century (there are many more). These events, might be relatively unknown in our day, in Marx's time though, they were well known and startling. Furthermore they were events that very few expected would cease to occur. It was obvious that the victims of famine were workers and that famine was an outcome of the changes in the productive process, they evolved around the process of labour and its transitions. Marx was a careful man with the ambition of describing «scientifically» the nature of the capital relation and the capitalist world, therefore making it impossible to ignore such phenomena.

As it is logically expected, Marx attempts to explain famines with the tools he had laid out in the previous 500 pages of his book. But here the ground is slippery. Here workers are left to die of hunger, the thirst of capital for the exploitation of living labour seems to dry out, life and death become interchangeable situations.

⁴ Same as before, pg. 557-558

⁵ Same as before, pg. 275

Human bones are bleaching the plains of India and the English weavers die by the tens of thousands in plain sight, they die over decades in the heart of the most advanced capitalism of the planet. And Marx admits in two short paragraphs that finally this «peculiar commodity» is even more peculiar than he had initially assumed. It was so peculiar it could even change value, it could exist in one instance and vanish in the next, connect the world of the living with the world of the dead, look at life and death at the same time just like Janus, separate the one from the other and then merge them again, as if by a whim.

But all this is closer to poetry than it is to marxist science. In the best case scenario it is history; the real history of capitalist societies from their first appearance until today. In our opinion, the whole of Marx's book is governed by this tension between the «science» he was trying to develop on the one hand and the real history of capitalist societies on the other. Marx's «science» was an ensemble of tools destined for use in «normal circumstances». The history of capitalist societies on the other hand, was a perpetual transition between extraordinary circumstances. Marx the scientist deployed new concepts, or adopted old ones and put them into use to discover the «laws of capitalist society». Marx the historian knew the history of capitalism as well as a person of his time could know history, concurrently, perhaps by intuition, perhaps consciously, he acknowledged that it is impossible to describe history as the outcome of the functioning of «scientific laws», he acknowledged the tension between the world his theories depicted and the real history of the world.

The result of all this is that Marx the scientist and Marx the historian alternate from chapter to chapter and sometimes from page to page of his book, from the scientific discourse of exchange value in the first chapter, to the historical discourse of the birth of capitalism in the final one. Within these alternations, the concept of labour power holds one of the leading roles. Because on the one hand it is a commodity (considered to be a valuable tool of marxist science), on the other though, it is a concept of the ontology of capital, a way by which the capital relation views the worlds of the living. If we accept that «labour power» exists, this means we also accept that there is a specific type of perception that when viewing humans understands *exclusively and only* the «capacity for labour». And because humans - or to state it better: workers - are much more than the «capacity for labour», the concept of «labour power» is a concept which accepts from the beginning that the viewing of capital strays far away from reality. And at the same time: the capital relation attempts to impose the concept of «labour power» with which and through which it can impose itself on reality. The variations of the concept of labour power, in Marx's book, as well as in the writings of all those who followed or differentiated his theories, are rooted in the exact fact that the viewing of capital can be wrong, not in one, but in a thousand ways and regardless of all this, it seeks to impose itself in another thousand ways.

In any case: Marx's book is the result of the tension between Marx the scientist and Marx the historian. This is where its richness stems from, this is also where its meaning for the revolutionary movements that followed was rooted. The most indicative moment of this tension is the concept of «labour power» and its thousand faces. It is not peculiar then that the way in which this tension is expressed and its political significance influenced the thought of revolutionary movements for over one and a half centuries.

3. The concept of «labour power» evolves

Marx wrote his book in a historical period where the capital relation was completing its domination over living labour. The ideas and methods of labour as a natural process, the participation of body and mind in the process of labour were obtaining their distinct capitalist form. Concurrently the working class began to exist as such; the struggle against the extension of the working day had begun to set limits to the accumulation of capital, the sporadic attempts to storm heaven had highlighted the issue of power. The bosses had already set in motion their grand venture of introducing science in capitalist production. Both these events had influenced Marx's book, which can therefore be understood as a historical product.⁶

If it is the case -which it is- that ideas are creatures of their time, marxist intellectuals of the beginning of the 20th century were facing a very difficult task. On the one hand the domination of capital over living labour had developed to the point of taylorist production methods. On the other hand, capitalist development had extended to the point of acquiring the totality of inhabited land of this earth. Imperialism and fascism developed from the 1900 onward like the two sides of the same coin. The space for available expansion had finished and nation states were beginning to collide amongst each other; fascism was the final political articulation of this collision and its basic prerequisite, the defeat of the organized working class.

To put it in other words, a brave new world was approaching at the gates. The marxist intellectuals (who in those old times were not only intellectuals) adapted to the new needs and circumstances in the way that the idiosyncrasies of their times allowed them to. Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci, who are the ones which concern us here, before ending their days violently in the hands of fascism, managed to develop new ideas regarding the concept of «labour power», congruent with their times.

Before she defended the values of proletarian internationalism to the end by being murdered by the Freikorps, Rosa Luxemburg had managed to write many books and articles, which in their majority dealt with the crucial issue of imperialism and the forthcoming (First World) war. Her book *The Accumulation of Capital*, had the subtitle *A Contribution to an Economic Explanation of Imperialism*. There we find, amongst other things, the following passage:

Each new colonial expansion is accompanied, as a matter of course, by a relentless battle of capital against the social and economic ties of the natives, who are also forcibly robbed of their means of production and labour power. (...) Accumulation (of capital) with its spasmodic expansion, can no more wait for, and be content with, a natural internal disintegration of non-capitalist formations and their transition to commodity economy, than it can wait for, and be content with, the natural increase of the working population. Force is the only solution open to capital; the accumulation of capital, seen as an historical process, employs force as a permanent weapon,(...)⁷

⁶ Such an approach to Marx's book can be found in George Caffentzis, «Why Machines Cannot Create Value: Marx's Theory of Machines», in George Caffentzis, *In Letters of Blood and Fire*, Autonomedia, 2013.

⁷ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, Routledge, 2003, 1st ed., 1913.

We are not sure if it is obvious at first glance but here the issues that confused Marx when he was dealing with the famine of the Indian weavers are placed in the centre of attention. Luxemburg points out that we must not look just at the famine - a specific historical episode - but at the general form of colonialism and the violence that invariably accompanies it. Of course this is not about some type of «irrational» violence. Violence is necessary for capitalism in order to destroy the old social relations and replace them with the new relations of «commodity economy». This is how violence, one way or another, not only isn't a deviation from the normal functioning of the capitalist modes of organising social relations, but it is an irreplaceable part of their normal functioning. This means that violence is the way, the only way to produce labour power, the way to *impose* this special viewing of the world, in parts of the social sphere where it does not exist. The last sentence of the text has its special meaning: If «the accumulation of capital», i.e. the title of Luxemburg's book and concurrently the process that Marx attempted to deal with in his book, is understood «as a historical process »... *if we therefore do what Marx hesitated to do, we will discover violence as a permanent component of the process of the creation of labour power.*⁸

Antonio Gramsci was also murdered by fascists, but his death was much slower than Luxemburg's. More specifically, Gramsci, the general secretary of the Italian Communist Party, found himself in jail in 1926. Leading up to this, the Italian labour movement had faced military defeat and the rise of fascism to power in the beginning of the '20s. Gramsci stayed in jail for ten years and died in a hospital in 1937 at the age of 46. During the years of his incarceration, Gramsci wrote a lot about various subjects. His writings were salvaged and published with the general title *Prison Notebooks*. *Notebook 22* was titled *Americanism and Fordism* and inside it Gramsci tried, amongst other things, to explain the doubling of the daily wage in Ford's automobile industry. That doubling of the daily wage (from 2,5 to 5 dollars) had become known to the entire world; understandably, on the one hand it had provided tons of arguments for those that supported the claim that capitalism is the way forward for the progress of humanity and on the other hand it had created serious problems for marxists. Because if the value of labour power, as Marx had said, is stable and does not rely on anything but the «value of the means of reproduction», how can it double in a single moment, just because Ford decided so? Gramsci provided the following solution for this problem:

*(...) Ford's industry requires a discrimination, a qualification, in its workers, which other industries do not yet call for, a new type of qualification, a form of consumption of labour power and a quantity of power consumed in average hours which are the same numerically but which are more wearying and exhausting than elsewhere and which, in the given conditions of society as it is, the wages are not sufficient to recompense and make up for.*⁹ (8)

⁸ Speaking some years later, from a very different side of the planet and from a very different position, another marxist made sure that Rosas words were confirmed, not theoretically, but in practice: «At first sight it would seem that there is plenty of it (labour power). But how are to get at it? How are we to apply it? How are we to productively organize it? (...) The only way to attract the labour-power necessary for our economic problems is to introduce compulsory labour service (...)» Those were the exhortations of Trotsky regarding the restructuring of production in the Soviet Union after the socialist revolution. Violence remained the necessary component of the creation of labour power, regardless of underlying ideologies. [Trotsky's' proposal towards 3rd Panrussian Conference of the Unions can be found in Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 1920]

⁹ This excerpt is from Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, International Publishers, 1971. pages 311-312

Gramsci, having to face the fascists of his country and their attempts to control the entirety of social life through state violence, had discovered something new about labour power and its exchange value. More specifically the fact that what is labour power -and what is not- depends on general social conditions and not only on the conditions of production. «*Life in industry demands a general apprenticeship, a process of psycho-physical adaptation to specific conditions of work, nutrition, housing, customs, etc. This is not something “natural” or innate, but has to be acquired (...)*», he wrote. And concomitantly he recognised that the creation of labour power is a process that is extended outside the field of production, in the location of the reproduction of the worker. He also recognised that "the capacity for labour" was much more than simply the knowledge on «how machines and factories function». According to Gramsci, the existence of the «capacity for labour» is based on the premise of the existence of a specific culture, morality and worldview. And here, in the production of the desirable culture, is where the state can get involved:

In America rationalisation of work and prohibition are undoubtedly connected. The enquiries conducted by the industrialists into the workers' private lives and the inspection services created by some firms to control the “morality” of their workers are necessities of the new methods of work.(...) [the American phenomenon] is also the biggest collective effort to date to create, with unprecedented speed, and with a consciousness of purpose unmatched in history, a new type of worker and of man.¹⁰

Gramsci continued by highlighting that the «new type of worker and man», i.e. the new type of labour power that the American government and industry were attempting to create, had to be temperate and measured, from their culinary to their sexual habits. The puritan ethic, the stable household and monogamy were important features of labour power, even as much as knowledge regarding the working of machinery. The attempt of government and industry to create these, brought the imperatives of the capitalist system of social organization to places about which the viewing of capital should not usually have any interest in: the kitchen, the pubs, the bedroom. The doorplate stating «*No admittance except on business*» had ceased to be the limit between the world of capital and the world of humans.

To sum up, Gramsci and Luxemburg, obviously drawing their ideas from the historical experience of their time, from the fordist system (for Gramsci), from colonialism (for Luxemburg), offered two important innovations regarding the concept of labour power. The first innovation was the idea that the production of labour power was not only the shoes and bread of Marx, but a general process of production outside of capitalist production. The world of commodities became connected to the world outside it through the specific nature of the commodity «*labour power*». The second innovation was that the process of production of labour power was firmly intertwined with violence. These two ideas remained underutilised for a long time, they were briefly lost in the midst of the cataclysmic events of the first half of the 20th century, crushed under the domination of stalinism within the labour movement. But they did not die along with those who thought them. They would become the object of elaboration and practical application some decades later, beginning from the 60's.

¹⁰ Idem, page 302

4. Workerists and autonomous feminists of the 60's

i. Workerists and the denial of labour

The Italian workerists and autonomous intellectuals never became as well known as Gramsci and Luxemburg did. Maybe because their life did not end as dramatically - these intellectuals never died in the hands of the enemy; they just lost and in their majority returned quietly to the places of class compromise from where they had begun; the political party and the university. In the meantime though, they had managed to make some extremely important contributions to marxist theory and to modify once again the concept of labour power in a groundbreaking way.

The oldest one of the lot was Mario Tronti. Tronti left (or more accurately «distanced himself») from the Italian communist party in the beginning of the 1960's criticizing its institutional role. The historical circumstance was once again very important. The Italian factories were boiling slowly sending the first signals of the battles of the mass worker that destined to rock Italian society at the end of the 60's and in the beginning of the 70's. Tronti and with him many other intellectuals of Italian leftist parties, were finding out that their parties were entirely incompatible to the requirements of their time and concurrently discovering that their problems had their roots in theory - i.e. the interpretation of Marx's writings. During the 60's, many of them deserted the Italian leftist parties and created groups and organizations that aimed to re-read and apply marxist theory in a way that would fit to the level of class struggle of their time. The Italian workerists were therefore created with their gaze directed towards worker struggles of their time and place, in an important sense they were created by the working class.

The book *Operai e Capitale* [Workers and Capital] was published in 1972 and consists of essays by Tronti which were initially written for workerist magazine publications of the 60's. There we find excerpts like the following:

The labour theory of value means *labour-power first, then capital*; it means capital conditioned by labour-power, set in motion by labour-power ... *Labour is the measure of value because the working class is the condition of capital.*¹¹

What is obvious here is the anxiety to give the initiative of action to the working class. This anxiety reached off lengths. «Labour as abstract labour and therefore labour power - this can be already found in Hegel. Labour power - and not just labour - as commodity, already exists in Ricardo. The commodity of labour power as working class: this is Marx's invention», we read elsewhere.¹² As we have already seen of course, it is probably difficult to locate such attempts in the actual works of Marx. It is not Marx talking here, but Tronti and those surrounding him, trying to discover the subjectivity of the working class, its hostility for the world of capital, the capacity to destroy this world. And the time and history of the workers movement

¹¹ The excerpt by Tronti from *Operai e Capitale* can be found in Steve Wright, *Storming Haven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, Pluto Press, 2002.

¹² Mario Tronti, «Introduction to Marx, Labour power, Working Class», in Mario Tronti, *Operai e Capitale*, Einaudi, 1966.

were such that they had to discover what they were looking for in the writings of Marx. Of course this was not entirely impossible. As we saw, Marx balanced his scientific and historian selves with exquisite phrasing and masterful transitions from theory to history and sometimes from history to prose. Therefore the workerist venture could happen by taking from Marx what they liked and forgetting what they did not like. The worker of Marx, who has sold his labour power and passes with his boss the doorplate stating «*No admittance except on business*», may manage to remain incomprehensible, but he is alone, he is not a class. It does not matter, say the workerists; let's keep the incomprehensible and let's add the class, besides class exists now that we speak, exists in plain sight and it is rocking Italian industry.

There is also something less obvious to note regarding the excerpt by Tronti regarding the labour theory of value. Quite so, here we can locate the general method the workerists chose to bring forward their venture. «The labour theory of value *means* that first comes labour power and then comes capital». Marx told us that value is the only thing capital understands. He also told us that this value is the average socially necessary labour-time. He told us that average socially necessary labour-time is consumption-time of abstract human labour. Tronti informs us that this law is not a scientific law; it has a deeper but obvious political meaning, specifically it *means* the supremacy of labour power in the battle between workers and capital. The «scientific laws» of Marx are not scientific laws - they are political forces and their motivating power is class struggle.

And this is how the concept of labour power changed yet again. Until the workerists came along, «labour power» was the specific viewing of capital regarding the world, little connection did it have to that world. With the workerists we learn that the capital relation is *obliged* to adopt the concept of labour power and because of this need it has already enfranchised its political supremacy to the working class. From there on, the working class "only has to look at itself in order to understand capital. It only has to fight itself in order to destroy capital. It has to realize itself as a political force and deny itself as a productive force".

To deny itself as a productive force. Here we can distinguish the last shift in the concept of «labour power» appearing with the most condensed definition possible: labour power is the capacity to labour, that is what bosses buy, what workers sell. At the same time and in fact, obligatorily, what they sell and buy is the capacity for the denial of labour. The denial of labour is a capacity which is interwoven with the concept of labour power. Therefore the foundational viewing of capital regarding what is human includes the possibility of its (own) destruction. Capital is living through a real drama.

ii. Autonomous feminists and the hidden reproductive labour.

The foundational lack of a definition for the value of labour power by Marx is obvious. As we have seen, for Marx the value of labour power was clothes, bread, and so on, needed for every day of the year. Of course we all know that if at night you put clothes, raw food, a bed and a worker in a room, what comes out the next day is certainly not a worker who is ready to work. The clothes need washing, the food needs cooking, the bed needs making and the worker needs a haircut. In other words the production of a worker who is ready for work does not happen by just using commodities - it needs more labour. Indeed, this labour is not little nor is it negligible socially. This is the labour that has historically been assigned to women.

Undoubtedly Marx was mostly preoccupied with human labour and its exploitation. «The immense accumulation of commodities» we find at the beginning of his book is proven to be nothing but a product of human labour and indeed it is because of this fact that it presents itself as «wealth». However, in the case of the production of labour power, Marx chose to ignore the obvious presence of labour. The reasons for this negligence are still ambiguous: the feminists of the 70's attributed this to the fact that he was a man, in fact quite comfortably settled in the world of men. Others said that he was afraid of the theoretical complications that would occur in his scientific model due to the existence of a type of labour which is not conducted under capitalist conditions but is of essential importance for capitalism. Finally some highlighted the fact that the working class of Marx's times could not afford to do much reproductive labour - it just existed, with a life expectancy of 20 years, living and dying with bread and water, day by day.

Regardless of what the reasons were, the fact remains: Marx neglected entirely the labour that is consumed for the reproduction of labour power. And this negligence had found a way of remaining unnoticed for generation upon generation of marxists with the exception of Antonio Gramsci. As we saw earlier, Gramsci had located the connections between reproduction and household, even between reproduction and sexuality. But Gramsci did not live in an age that provided much fertile ground for his ideas to spread, develop and find political application. Jail was not the best of places for new ideas to become viral and the stalinism of the interwar period was certainly not a good environment for theoretical innovations.

The decade of the 70's on the other hand was an entirely different story. At that time, for reasons that are beyond the scope of this essay, women revolted en masse against the male world. As we saw earlier, especially in Italy, this uprising had at its disposal specific theoretical tools that were not available in other parts of the globe. The Italian feminist movement had in its arsenal the tradition of Gramsci's innovations regarding the concept of labour power; these innovations were accompanied by those of the workerists of the previous decade. The environment of the mass feminist movement, the Italian ideas of new marxism and the prior tradition merged together in an exceptionally fruitful manner. The result of that exceptional conjuncture were the ideas of the Italian autonomous feminists. As we read in the introduction of the most famous relevant book,

This (Labour power) is a strange commodity for it is not a thing. The ability to labour resides only in a human being, whose life is consumed in the process of producing. First it must be nine months in the womb, must be fed, clothed and trained;

(...)The community therefore is not an area of freedom and leisure auxiliary to the factory(...) The community is the other half of capitalist organization the other area of hidden capitalist exploitation, the other, hidden, source of surplus labour. It becomes increasingly regimented like a factory, what Mariarosa calls the social factory (...).¹³

By this point ideas that existed in an embryonic form in the prison notebooks of Gramsci evolve and become the guide for a mass movement that was unprecedented in human history - the women's movement. Capital is forced to see people as labour power. But people come from a world much different than the world

¹³ Selma James & Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Libcom, 2005.

of commodities. Capital attempts to impose its viewing, therefore it is forced to turn its gaze to that world, to humans and human communities, to oversee and to attempt to determine the production outside of production. The «social factory» that is formed in this manner, this locus of capitalist production outside of capitalist production, is a new field, unknown to capital. Capital is forced to attempt to permeate into this field; and there it discovers the kitchen, the bedroom, the classroom. Concurrently, and not without horror, it discovers new denials (that are deployed) against it, new faces that are added to the thousands of faces of the working class. Housewives, school kids, students; parts of the working class that labour in the social factory. This is where they express their denials, this is how they become another addition to the enemies of capital that seek its destruction.

5. The lost link: violence

And just like that, the movements of the decade of the 60's gave birth to new ideas regarding the concept of labour power. The old definition of Marx (labour power as a capacity to labour and actual source of capitalist wealth) was joined by labour power as the capacity for the denial of labour and labour power as a connection between the places of production and the places outside of production (the social factory).

In the meantime though, as we understand from what preludes, there was one old innovation which did not find a continuation in the decade of the 70's, or at least it did not find a continuation that we know about and is worth mentioning. The old innovation of Roza Luxemburg, the interwoven relation between labour power and capitalist violence remained unnoticed and dead. In our opinion this was an omission of equal magnitude with the omission of women's (reproductive) labour by Marx. Let alone the fact that contrary to women's reproductive labour, the relation between violence, capitalism and death did not pass at all unnoticed by Marx himself. It is not only the passage regarding famine that we already mentioned. The final chapter of Marx's book, titled «Primitive Accumulation» is a history of the birth of the capitalist system. There Marx the historian prevails. There we do not encounter «owners of capital» and «owners of labour power». On the one hand the government's murderers disguised as judges and executioners hurtle themselves on farmers that have been exiled from their land. On the other hand «thieves», «beggars» and «vagabonds» reach the end of their lives in jail, in the galley and under the noose; such were the names that were given to the working class at the age of its «primitive denial», when it was still denying to become a working class. «(...) [C]apital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt» is Marx's final conclusion.

The intellectuals of the movements of the 60's and 70's had in their disposal many more historical examples of capitalist violence than Marx or even Luxemburg did. From the innovation of Luxemburg until their age two world wars had intervened, fascism, concentration camps for Jews, the bloody freeing of capitalist colonies, as well as a multiplicity of famines, even more devastating than the famines that had troubled Marx, just to mention the most obvious examples. Despite all this, the movements of the 60's and 70's, regardless of how productive they proved to be in other areas, proved equally unproductive in the area of theories regarding imperialism, war, death and state violence.¹⁴ As Wright informs us, «the experiences of

¹⁴ There are of course some post-war sparse «heretic» marxist opinions regarding the relation between capitalism, government and violence, for example in the writings of Amandeo Bordiga [e.g. «Auschwitz, or the Great Alibi», *Programme Communiste*, no. 11, 1960.

either fascism or stalinism» did not attract much of the attention of the Italian workerists and autonomists; and generally, «the problem of decomposition, of the destruction of the class as political subject» was not at the top of their priorities.¹⁵

We can make some assumptions for this extremely obvious paucity. More specifically, from all the countries that were affected by the movements of the 60's and 70's, Italy proved to be the most theoretically rich. But the Italian state of the 60's and 70's participated in the geopolitical rivalries as a member of NATO, its ambitions had frozen within the general freezing of the cold-war balance. The state which did not see its geopolitical ambitions freeze on the other hand, that is the U.S. state, procured despite its will an enormous and powerful anti-war movement. Although this movement contributed greatly to the defeat of the USA in Vietnam, it lacked the theoretical tradition of the Italians. And therefore the Italian movement had the theoretical vigor but in its short existence did not have a direct experience of imperialism,¹⁶ while for the American movement the case was exactly the opposite.

An additional factor which should not be overlooked is the power of ideology. Italian intellectuals, as well as their counterparts in the USA, were children of the respective national communist parties. These parties had participated in the Second World War on the side of the Soviet Union and had ended the war with tremendous "historic compromises". The history of fascism generally and national fascisms specifically had been written by the historians of those parties. And in every special case it had ended in subversions of the same scale and similar goals with those that we discover characterizing the Greek case.¹⁷ The new marxist theorists - both in America and in Europe - had inherited this weighty tradition and the cold war gave them a scarcity of direct political reasons for undertaking the difficult task that was required in order to contest it.

Of course, every rule has its exceptions. It is a fact that some of the last remaining theorists of the movements of the 60's and 70's managed to say some very interesting things regarding the relation between violence, imperialism and capitalism. One of them was George Caffentzis. Caffentzis participated in the American anti-war movement in the 70's and wrote in the 80's and 90's. The subject of war has concerned him multiple times and in his writings we find spectacular ideas just like this one:

Just as capitalist production only incidentally (though necessarily) creates use-values in order to produce value, so also in capitalist reproduction labour power is the object while the human animals that embody it are only created by the way.

(Thanks to Nikos for sharing this article with us)]. It is a fact though that political views like those expressed by Bordiga remained sterile and without much political weight. G. Caffentzis, who at some point attempts to narrate a story of marxist theories regarding imperialism from Marx until the 80's, does not find any worthy heirs of Luxemburg... other than the state-funded American social-democrats Baran and Sweezy. The words of the above two are the best proof of the poverty of marxist theories regarding state violence.¹⁵ Wright, Idem.

¹⁶ For example, the protagonist of the book «La Banda Bellini» is a member of antifascist groups, participates in demonstrations and confronts violently cops and fascists, but when the time comes, he serves the Italian army without even thinking that he has to justify his choice to the rest of the movement. See Marco Philopat, La Banda Belini, Shake Edizioni, 2002.

¹⁷ Regarding the Greek case one can read the introduction of the book Σπουδές στο Γαλανόμαυρο, Α: Ο Ελληνικός φασισμός στον Μεσοπόλεμο (Studies in the Blue & Black, Vol.I: Greek Fascism in the Interwar Period), Antifascista, 2013. Regarding the international post-war campaign for subverting the events of the 1940 - 1950 period, one can read Hagen Fleischer, Οι Πόλεμοι της Μνήμης, Νεφέλη, 2008 (The Wars of Memory, Nefeli, 2008). This must be read while keeping in mind that Fleischer is one of the leading figures of the Greek version of the subversion.

From capital's viewpoint these animals only are human if they embody labour powers (...) The birth of an animal is by no means the birth of labour power and the death of an animal is by no means the death of labour power: the class struggle is not a struggle over birth and death, but more fundamentally a struggle over what is being born or being killed.¹⁸

Labour power is capital's worldview. The world of the living is nothing but a disinterested and often unfortunate escort. The thirst of capital for labour power is not always translated to a love for the world of the living. Indeed, sometimes it means the exact opposite; as Sylvia Federici informs us, there are historical periods where «The body had to die so that labour-power could live».¹⁹ Therefore the production of labour power can obtain a reversed facet, a facet of calculated death, one of orchestrated destruction. Capitalist history is full of such moments.

There is a moment in every major change in capitalist development that can be described as the eternal return of primitive accumulation. The older ways must be destroyed, the proletariat must be "freed" from its past and the only way for this to occur is through the fire and blood of war and its violence. The Napoleonic wars that lead to the creation of European factory proletariat and the First and Second World Wars that led to the formation of the post-1945 "boom" are clear examples of the "echo" of original accumulation.²⁰

In the years that followed 1980 and the world-wide defeat of class movements, Caffentzis, and especially Federici, revisited in many ways the final chapter of Marx's book where «primitive accumulation » and the birth of capitalism were explained. There they discovered that Gramsci was right, namely that the concept of «labour power» does actually encapsulate much more than the «know-how of work» and that the creation of «labour power» entails the creation of «a new type of man». The transition is always huge and it involves a series of changes from understandings about the body and existence to everyday conduct, «how one laughed, walked, sneezed, how one should behave at the table, and to what extent one could sing, joke, play».²¹ But they discovered something beyond what Gramsci had said; that the creation of this «new man», viewed as a historical process (as Luxemburg would say) is strictly interwoven with violence, from the small scale of the medieval village that trials and kills its witch, to the average scale of the state criminal law and penal system with the tens of thousands of incarcerated and dead, to the large scale of the transnational war with millions of deaths. «Labour power» is not something that is alive – it is the view of capital regarding what has to live and what doesn't; it is born and imposed with the production of those that need to live and with the violent death of those that do not need to.

Therefore, if we want to sum up the history of the concept of «labour power» we would say that in the one and a half century that followed the publication of Marx's book the concept was enriched by the discovery of three hidden aspects. The first aspect was labour power as the capacity for denial of labour as it

¹⁸ This can be found in «Freezing the Movement: Posthumous Notes on Nuclear War». Included in Caffentzis, Idem.

¹⁹ Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Autonomedia 2004.

²⁰ Caffentzis, «Freezing the Movement...», Idem

²¹ Federici, *Caliban...*, .

was highlighted by the Italian workerists. The second aspect was the production outside of production that was highlighted by Gramsci and the hidden living labour of reproduction that was highlighted by the autonomous feminists. The third aspect was the hidden destructive labour of reproduction: the state, its violence and its participation in the production of labour power as it was highlighted initially by Luxemburg and later on by Caffentzis and Federici.

6. Labour power and violence today

As one can tell, the creation of the first southern Balkans Antifa groups in 2004 had a both sad and comic side attached to it. On the one hand the people that were setting up the groups were sourcing many of their theoretical references from the movements of the 60's and 70's. On the other hand, as we have seen above, these movements had neglected to talk about fascism, the decomposition of the working class and capitalist violence. Caffentzis and Federici were able to help, but they were but drops in the ocean. It is true, and we saw this above, that they had utilised some of the ideas of the autonomous movements of the 70's to talk about the relations between capitalism, violence and death. It is also true though, that their ideas differed in important ways from the ideas of the movements of the decade of the 70's. The most important of these differences was exactly the absence of a movement. The ideas of the workerists and the autonomous feminists were being trialed and were evolving in practice for years, they had become the common ground of massive movements, they determined their everyday politics. The ideas of Caffentzis and Federici did not have the same luck. The time in which they wrote was a time where the movement had been completely defeated and the tone was dictated by the unopposed onslaught of the ideas of neoliberalism. And this environment of general defeat may have provided the motive for research around the subject of violence and capitalism, on the other hand though, these ideas were unavoidably articulated in the extremely narrow space between academia and the remnants of a political movement that existed as a refuge for the defeated autonomous intellectuals of the 80's and 90's. As far as we know the ideas of Caffentzis and Federici regarding the state, violence and labour power did not become the topic of discussion for anybody else, they were never altered and they were never enriched. They remained scattered, intriguing paragraphs without any political application.

Let us return though to those men and women that set up the first southern Balkans Antifa groups and their both funny and sad side. Our theoretical references talked about the working class and its supremacy in the war with the bosses. They were convincing references and they had already helped us talk about important episodes of the history of the 20th century without resorting to the bullshit we were accustomed to hearing from the left and its companions.²²

But our experience differed greatly from the situation that was described by our theoretical references. Nowhere in our immediate experience did we see «the working class as it is, proud and menacing» in the way that Tronti described it. What we saw was a mass of immigrant workers being torn apart under the weight of their artificial illegality. What we saw was local workers surrendering themselves happily to the pleasures of

²² One can find some of these ventures with their pros and cons, in the volumes with the propositions of assemblies called Metropolitan Councils and Federation from 2001 until 2005. [Metropolitan Councils and Federation can be considered to be the political predecessors of the current network of autonomous groups in Greece].

commodity consumption, ready to utilize racism in order to remain first-class workers. What we saw, finally, was the Greek state and its participation in transnational competitions in the Balkans and the eastern part of the Mediterranean throughout the decade of the 90's. The southern Balkans Antifa groups were not created to celebrate yet another attack of the working class against the world of the bosses; they were created after a nation-wide pogrom against Albanian immigrant workers.²³ The Antifa groups did not see the future as being lit by the proletarian revolution; they saw, we saw, the pogrom of 2004 and the Greek imperialist adventures of the 90's as a forerunner of much worse developments to come.

We did not know it then, but our times were times of the sort which did not concern the workerists and the autonomists of the 60's, times of decomposition and defeat of the working class. What we needed was a new aspect for the concept of «labour power», we needed it as desperately as the workerists needed denial and the autonomous feminists needed reproductive labour. But we were not intellectuals that had left the KKE (Communist Party of Greece) in disagreement – on the one hand the KKE never had intellectuals, on the other we never had anything to do with that specific type of person. Nor were we part of a lively mass class movement. Remnants of the post-civil-war compromise, blind copying of the international wisdom regarding «the anti-globalisation movements», «the greek people» that are not racist, the working class which is an «outdated term», «the nation states that are disintegrating», «information that produces value» and leftist humanitarianism; such were the goodies included in the packet of the theory of the movements of the twenty first century.

In the years that followed we tried to make our needs into abilities; we tried to cover our theoretical poverty in anyway and as much as we could. The word «fascism» proved to be a good guide. When we chose it as the name of our antifa groups we had in mind neonazis and also a very roughly empiricist picture of the permeating Greek racism. Our starting points seemed weak, but they were as rich as their time and age allowed them to be. Without being able to comprehend it fully, our empiricist ascertainment of a «permeating greek racism» led us into dealing with the attempts at organising this racism by the greek state, from there to the military management of the immigrant workers and finally to the transformation of the greek state into a mafia-state. Meanwhile, the same word, «fascism», was leading us toward the points of the history of the twentieth century that had stayed out of the innovations and interests of the movements of the 60's and 70's. Before we knew it we were led to the history of the interwar period and the decade of the 40's. And there we started to discover events and connections which did not exist in any history that has been written until our day. To make a long story short, from 2006 on, we applied ourselves month by month in order to patch-up our theoretical holes which finally, apart from the rest of its products, around 2010 led to a small publication titled «Fascism Without a Swastika».

We chose the title «Fascism without a Swastika» and we meant two things. *Firstly that we have to become acquainted with the fascism of the 40's without the swastika*: no crazy nazis and racial theories, but the organization of labour, statistics, demography, medicine. Capitalism, as a system of organization of social relations and its technologies, up to the material manifestations of this system, had to be discovered in the decade of the 40's, and to be put at the centre of a new historical narrative, so that knowledge that is useful

²³ The authors are referring to nationwide attacks by Greeks (supported by the police) on Albanian immigrants and immigrant centres after many Albanians hit the streets in celebration after the Albanian national football team defeated the Greek national equivalent in the preliminary round of the International football cup.

for our class today could be produced. To understand that similar processes are underway as we speak, to distinguish, explain and fight them. The *second* thing we meant with the title of that publication was that *in order to talk about today's fascism we need to stop looking for swastikas*. And to start looking for processes that have similarities with those that we find developing in the decade of the 40's, if of course we are careful and patient enough to subtract the swastika from there as well.

Finally we had found in our own way a new meaning for the concept of «labour power», that seemed to be suitable for the times we live in. We utilized the ideas of George Caffentzis, Sylvia Federici and Sergio Bologna²⁴ in order to support the claim that the production of labour power has always attained a reversed side, a hidden hand armed with a whip, facing towards the working class. We supported that the history of fascism of the 30's and 40's was in fact the history of the methods of action of this whip and that the whole process can be described as the devaluation of labour power until it reaches the point of mass extinction of workers. It is our opinion that this was the essence of fascism in the decade of the 40's if we subtract the swastika. This is also the essence of fascism today. It is with this concept in mind that in both cases it is fascism we are dealing with.

The series of articles that is being published in this magazine with the title «Studies in the Blue&Black » can be described in many ways. One can say that it is a history of Greek fascism. It also conducts a frontal attack to the leftist narrative regarding Greek history, the uncovering of its political goals and the planning of the goals of a history of the Greek state that is created to serve the purposes of autonomous class antifascism. To sum up, one can say that «Studies in the Blue&Black » is an attempt to subtract the swastika from the history of greek fascism.

In all that follows we will talk about the famine during the (German) occupation. In our opinion this is the biggest moment of Greek fascism in the way that we choose to define it. Of course our opinion is certainly not the norm.

When it comes to Greek historiography, the famine of the (German) occupation was a unique episode (because it concerned Greece and the Greeks), an episode that is obviously unrepeatable (because since then progress from good to better has been a one-way road). Finally, the famine during the German occupation was an episode strictly interwoven with the fact of the occupation – everybody agrees it was the Germans' fault; in any case foreigners are to blame.

The famine that we are about to describe is different. It will be a process of mass extinction, poised against the working class, without swastikas and other ideological accessories. It will be the outcome of the capitalist organization of Greek society and it will be conducted according to the rules that are set by this organization. What we will be describing is the devaluation of labour power in its ultimate moment, the moment where it becomes death, a choice between those who shall live and those who shall die. In the meantime we will try to connect this famine with all the other famines that mark the history of capitalism and to confirm the opinion articulated by Caffentzis, that the Second World War was nothing but the most extreme moment of the «demographic politics» of capitalism. And that its innovatory elements are only linked to the objects of this politics (the Europeans) and the historical moment of its application (the twentieth century).

²⁴ The articles of Caffentzis and Federici that we used have already been referenced (there is, of course, much more). The book of Bologna is Sergio Bologna, *Nazism and the Working Class*, Libcom.

We find all this extremely relevant to our own historical period. By the end of our venture we hope that the analogies will have been made clear.