

Introduction

For decades now, some critical thinkers have been arguing that the proletariat no longer holds the historical place it occupied during the long cycle of the workers' movement, from the mid-19th century to the crisis within Fordist capitalism in the 1970s. The de-industrialization of western economies, the fragmentation of labour, the expansion of the service sector, the tenuousness of employment, the individualization of work relations and the increasing absorption of social life into the logic of consumerism have triggered a questioning of the viability of class politics as a strategic avenue to emancipation.

The debate has been especially intense in libertarian circles. Authors such as Tomás Ibáñez and Miquel Amorós contend that the thoroughgoing changes in capitalism have eroded the historical circumstances that made the classical workers' movement possible. The evaporation of worker culture, the integration of trade union organizations into the establishment, the break-up of the old working communities and barrio communities and the increasing commercialization of life had supposedly robbed the proletariat of the political centrality it enjoyed for upwards of a century. The issue now was allegedly not just the defeat of certain organizations, but also the exhaustion of an historical cycle in which the working class had been able to set itself up as a revolutionary actor.

Elements of this diagnosis are hard to dispute. It is plain that contemporary capitalism had wrought profound changes in the conditions of production, the make-up of waged labour and the working class's traditional modes of organization. It also seems indisputable that the workers' movement's historical experiences – whether social democrats, communists, councilists, revolutionary syndicalists and anarchists – pertain to an historical context that cannot be mechanically replicated. Anybody out to resurrect the 20th century organizational formats whilst turning a blind eye to the shifts in global capitalism will inevitably lapse into anachronism.

However, registration of these considerations does not necessarily point to a conclusion that the proletariat has ceased to be a potential driver of revolutionary change. Between acknowledgment of an historical defeat and the assertion of an historical impossibility there is a crucial distinction. That the political forms by means of which the proletariat acted over a given period have faced a crisis does not imply that the social relations that rendered their emergence possible have evaporated. Let alone can one conclude that the contradiction between capital and labour has lost its formative character in the context of contemporary capitalism.

The hypothesis informing this article is the precise opposite. The worldwide reorganization of capital that started in the 1970s has not done away with the material underpinning of the proletariat, but it has kneaded it and boosted it on a hitherto unprecedented scale. The relative de-industrialization of Europe and North America has coincided with an extraordinary expansion of waged labour in Asia, Latin America, Africa and Eastern Europe; the fragmentation of productive processes has been accompanied by an ever more intense integration into the global market; and the diversification of forms of employment has done nothing to lessen dependency on wages, but has, instead, extended it to brand-new sectors of the population.

It is vital that we distinguish between two levels: on the one hand, a crisis in class consciousness, workers' organizations and the historical forms of proletarian politics, and, on the other, the persistence of objective conditions that make feasible the existence of a class that is defined by its need to sell its labour power just to survive.

So, it is not the intention of this article to query the profundity of the defeat suffered by the workers' movement over recent decades, nor to idealize organizational formats that are self-evidently in crisis. Nor is it out to champion some essentialist notion of the proletariat as a predestined subject of history. Its aim is narrower, but also more precise: to investigate whether the changes undergone by capital do actually justify the conclusion that the working class has once and for all lost all its revolutionary potential or whether, instead, the crisis mainly affects the historical forms into which it has been organized, rather than the structural position it continues to occupy within the relations of production.

Providing an answer to this issue requires that we shift our analysis away from the narrow context of western societies and look at worldwide capitalism as it actually exists. Only such an approach makes for a possibility of assessing the extent to which the planet-wide expansion in waged labour, brand-new international migrations, reorganization of the global chains of production and the emergence of brand-new forms of exploitation amend – or confirm – the classical contention according to which the contradiction between capital and labour remains a fundamental axis of capitalist societies.

Late capitalism, obsolete in terms of its promise of a general well-being, clings to life through a shift in the direction of a war economy. When civilian production's profit margins peter out, military budgets are reactivated, priority being given to the security and ongoing exceptionalism that keep society in order and reconfigure public priorities. This arrangement – criminal in its effects – makes a show of costs – be they environmental, human and democratic – whilst turning fear and conflict into new opportunities for accumulation. Against this backdrop, the tenuousness of labour and the erosion of the proletariat's vocation as a political subject are not flaws in the system, but prospects of feasibility for a model that needs a population that is available, dis-organized and monitored, to serve a mechanism that generates value by means of destruction.

The proletariat as a social relationship rather than as an actor in history

The debate surrounding the viability of the proletariat usually starts from the changes in contemporary capitalism, and then proceeds to draw sociological conclusions. But first, we would do well to stipulate this notion: that the proletariat is not a particular historical actor – the Fordist manufacturing worker – but a position within the social relations of production.

From that point of view, it seems telling that a goodly part of the theses regarding the crisis in the proletariat take as their reference point a very specific historical figure: the industrial worker, brought together into large manufacturing firms, organized along trade union lines, mingling in relatively homogeneous working class barrios and a carrier for a collective culture built up over more than a century of social struggles. That figure really existed and played a crucial role in the history of the European workers' movement. But identifying it with the proletariat per se means turning a specific historical experience into a universally applicable definition.

That was never Marx's approach. Throughout *Das Kapital*, the designation 'proletarian' is not identified with any particular trade, branch of industry or specific form of labour organization. What defines the proletarian is where he sits in the scheme of the social relations of production. The worker is proletarian because he lacks his own means of production and of reproducing his existence and therefore finds himself obliged to sell his labour power to the owner of capital. That definition is sufficiently abstract to encompass an extraordinary range of different forms of work and, for that very reason, accounts for capitalism's enormous capacity for adapting to shifting historical circumstances.

This distinction is more than mere word games. All subsequent interpretation hinges upon it. If the proletariat is identified with the huge industrial working class that emerged under Fordist capitalism, it is a pretty simple conclusion that we are today watching its demise. If, by contrast, the proletariat is to be understood as a social relationship determined by a dependency upon wages and expropriation of the means of production, then the undergoes a complete change of nature. No longer is it a matter of asking whether the figure of the industrial worker is still in the majority, but of checking whether capitalism's growth has whittled down or boosted the numbers whose lives are dependent upon their selling their labour power.

The answer to that seems pretty plain. Over the past five decades, capitalism has experienced an extraordinary expansion of wage relations. Not because of any improvement to the living conditions of those who work, but because it has drawn into commercial production entire regions of the planet that had hitherto partly been untouched by it. The process of accelerated urbanization that has gone along with economic globalization represents, in all likelihood, the greatest shift into proletarianization that history has ever known.

It is worth dwelling on this point for a moment, because it is usually overshadowed by an outlook that is unduly centred upon the European experience. Since the late 1960s, hundreds of millions of peasants have turned their backs on rural economics in order to engage with capitalist production. The Chinese experience represents the best-known example of this, but not the only one. Similar, albeit less intense, processes can be seen in Vietnam, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mexico or Ethiopia. In every one of these instances, we see the formation of enormous concentrations of wage labourers whose place in society aligns perfectly with the classic definition of the proletariat.

Thus, what is petering out is not the proletariat, but a specific industrial geography. From Europe, the process of de-localization of production is usually construed as a phenomenon of de-industrialization, when in actual fact, it represents an international re-distribution of production. The factories shutting down in the North reappeared, in many cases on a much larger scale, in the Pearl River delta, in China's special economic zones, in the industrial strips in Southeast Asia or in the maquiladoras of Central America. Capital pulled out of some areas only to set up shop elsewhere, but it remains dependent upon waged labour as the sine qua non of its valorisation.

This geographical relocation has an important bearing on social theory. If the analysis is confined to the borders of Europe, an impression that the proletariat is evaporating is understandable. The old working class districts are disappearing, the huge plants are cutting back on staff, the unions are losing membership and industrial jobs are giving way to tertiary activity. However, that picture changes radically when the focus looks beyond the national or the continental and becomes global. What then emerges is not a reduction in working class numbers, but instead an extraordinary

inflation of those numbers, alongside a thoroughgoing re-organization of the international division of labour.

At which point we need to introduce a significant nuance. Acknowledgment that the proletariat has grown in terms of numbers does not amount to a denial that the conditions under which it can set itself up as a political subject have altered. It would be a nonsense to turn a blind eye to the fact that fragmented production, precarious employment, the individualization of work relations or geographical dispersion are huge hindrances to the construction of stable organizations and collective identities comparable to the ones that were features of the classical workers' movement. But, for that very reason, we need to distinguish carefully between a class's objective existence and the historical forms assumed by its political organization.

The muddle between the two has often been an accompaniment to debate over recent decades. Where the older workers' organizations are dying out, the tendency is to conclude that the class that made them possible has also gone away. However, the connection can be made in precisely the opposite terms. Maybe what is facing a crisis is not the proletariat but the forms of organization inherited from a given stage in capitalist growth. If this hypothesis is correct, the political issue would no longer be finding some new revolutionary subject, but would instead be understanding how a class might reorganize itself that is still existing, but under profoundly altered conditions.

Which issue brings us directly to the crux of the debate. Because in actual fact, the debate does not revolve solely around the sociology of contemporary work. What is at stake is the very interpretation of the historic defeat inflicted upon the workers' movement over recent decades. And it is precisely there that the theses of Ibáñez and Amorós – in my estimation – mainly fall down.

Defeat of the workers' movement and the mirage of its disappearance

The matter takes on a different dimension when the focus ceases to be just the evolution of waged labour and looks instead to the historical trajectory of the workers' movement. In all likelihood, therein lies the root of the pessimistic diagnosis that pervades much of contemporary critical thinking. Because it is hard to deny that the organizations that for more than a century articulated the political experience of the working class are going through a far-reaching crisis.

The big unions have been institutionalized, the workers' parties long ago jettisoned any ambition of changing society and the proletarian culture typifying large industrial areas have all but disappeared and the defeat after defeat suffered since the end of the 1960s have undermined the confidence in social conflict's ability to alter the course of capitalism.

All of this adds up to an historical fact which no serious interpretation can ignore. However, acknowledging that defeat does not necessarily require that we embrace the conclusions that frequently drawn from it. Between the registration of a political defeat and the assertion that the proletariat no longer occupies a central position within capitalism, there is an argumentative leap that is rarely adequately explained.

Maybe we ought to bear one basic factor in mind. Social classes do not disappear just because they have been defeated. If that were the case, one would have to conclude that the bourgeois ceased existing every time it lost political power in the context of some revolutionary process or that the aristocracy disappeared in the immediate wake of the liberal revolutions. Classes are not defined in terms of the success or failure of their organizations, but rather, due to the position they occupy

within the social relations of production. Defeats tinker with the correlation of forces, demolish institutions, interrupt political traditions and even profoundly alter the collective consciousness, but, on their own they do not overhaul the structural underpinnings of social relationships.

This observation proves particularly pertinent when it comes to analysis of capitalism's evolution since the 1970s. The neo-liberal onslaught did not consist solely of a series of economic reforms. It was, above all, a mammoth political operation designed to smash the power that the workers' movement had built up during the years following the Second World War. The defeats of the British miners, the readjustment of industry across much of Europe, the flexibilization of the labour market, the de-localization of production or the growing submissiveness of economics to the financial sector were not unconnected processes. They formed part of a strategy to reorganize capitalism and its purpose was actually to undermine the negotiating and resistance capabilities of the working class.

Paradoxically, the success of that onslaught has wound up being construed, occasionally, as proof that the proletariat no longer exists or has, allegedly, lost all historical relevance. In actual fact, the very opposite case can be put. If capital invested so much effort into transforming the organization of work, shifting production to other areas of the planet, breaking up staff and rendering employment precarious, it was precisely because it takes the abiding view that worker concentration constitutes one of the main hindrances to its processes of accumulation. The reorganization of capitalism is not evidence of the banishment of conflict between capital and labour: it constitutes a response to that conflict.

Here we need to dwell momentarily on the implications of the very notion of capitalist reorganization. Capitalism has not been continually tinkering with its forms of production merely out of some sort of taste for technological innovation. Every significant alteration has, in part at least, been dictated by the need to overcome obstacles that cropped up during the preceding phase of accumulation. Mechanization was a response to the need to boost productivity; Fordism allowed the organization of mass production; de-localization facilitated reduction of labour costs; global logistics made feasible the coordination of geographically scattered productive processes. None of these changes eliminated waged labour. All sought to reorganize it along lines more favourable to the capital accumulation.

Perhaps, in the light of this, we might do better to talk about a crisis of the historical forms of the workers' movement than of any crisis in the proletariat per se. The organizations that grew up around Fordist big industry were a response to very specific conditions: relatively stable employment, the marshalling of thousands of workers in the same productive location, a continuity of labour relations and the presence of relatively cohesive worker communities. When those conditions vanish or undergo profound alterations, the organizational forms bequeathed stop working with the same efficacy. But there is no reason to deduce from that that the class whose existence gave rise to such organizations is on the way out.

History has lots of examples to show of this difference. Early 20th century revolutionary syndicalism was not identical with English Chartism, any more than the latter was with the artisanal forms of organization prior to the Industrial Revolution. Each change in capitalism produced new forms of conflict and called for brand-new organizational responses. Nobody would have concluded from that that the working class was petering out every time that one of those historical forms entered into crisis. It is odd that these days such a conclusion should be swallowed so easily.

All of which requires us to revisit our initial query. Maybe the crunch issue is not whether the proletariat remains the same as the one that spearheaded the big labour disputes in the 20th century. It self-evidently is not. Nor can contemporary capitalism be identified with the capitalism analysed by Marx in Victorian England. The real issue is determining whether the changes enacted over recent decades have altered the fundamental relationship between capital and labour, or have instead merely tinkered with the forms under which that relationship carry on reproducing.

An answer to this question requires that we dump the Eurocentric outlook and examine the development of capitalism as a global system. Only thus can we gauge the extent to which the apparent disappearance of the proletariat constitutes a real fact, or is instead an optical illusion derived from examining only one aspect of the process. **The class is not dying: capital is reshaping it.**

Now, acknowledging how deep this transformation goes does not force us to conclude that the sheer possibility of a class politics has evaporated. Instead, it means that the conditions whereby such a politics is going to have to be rebuilt are radically different from those that obtained during much of the 20th century. The difference is an important one, because it relocates the nub of the issue. No longer is it a matter of deciding whether or not the proletariat exists or does not exist, but of understanding why an objectively more numerous class runs into so many difficulties in appreciating its existence as a class and in equipping itself with stable forms of organization.

In actual fact, this question should not come as a surprise. To a large extent, capitalism's history can be read as a history of efforts on the part of capital to prevent the association imposed upon the production process from turning into political collaboration against capital per se. Every significant gain by the workers' movement has been followed by attempts to so reorganize production as to hinder new forms of solidarity. The introduction of machinery, the scientific division of labour, decentralized production, automation, out-sourcing or the economics of platforms are not just answers to technical demands. They also amount to ways of organizing labour in such a way as to modify workers' ability to act on a collective basis.

From that vantage point, the current fragmentation of work assumes a quite different meaning. Where some analyses regard the fragmentation of work as the proletariat's death certificate, it could, alternatively, be construed as capitalism's historical response to the persistence of class conflict. In the first instance, the conclusion is, inevitably, pessimistic: with the subject out of the way, all that remains is scattered resistance and partial struggles. In the second instance, the problem is of a very different sort. The issue ceases to be the non-existence of the class and instead becomes the quest for fresh forms of organization capable of responding to the conditions created by capitalist restructuring. And the difference is not merely theoretical. It has a direct impact on political practice. How reality is construed also dictates the opportunities that are deemed open. If we start from the premise that the proletariat has been consigned to the past once and for all, it is reasonable to turn our attention to different social actors and discard the prospect of a class politics. If, on the other hand, the reckoning is that the working class is still the material foundation of contemporary capitalism, even though it may have undergone profound alterations, then the strategic question is completely different. The challenge is no longer the replacement of the proletariat by brand-new historical actors, but of reaching an understanding of how a collective consciousness can be reassembled wherever capital has done everything possible to thwart that.

This observation allows us, finally, to hark back to where this article started from. The crucial issue is not denial of the profound changes undergone by capitalism since the 1970s. Those changes are real and they have radically amended the social landscape in which the classical workers' movement operated. Discussion should centre on turning such changes into evidence that the relationships underpinning capitalism no longer obtain. Because, at the very time when waged labour has achieved an unprecedented global scale, pronouncing the category 'proletariat' extinct looks less like a description of capitalism's objective reality than the historical experience of a political defeat, the importance of which no one ought to under-estimate, but the explanation of which cannot be sought in the supposed disappearance of the defeated class.

This is no merely abstract hypothesis. The experiences of workers' autonomy in Italy in the late 1960s and 1970s – experiences ranging from the "hot summer" to widespread self-organizing in the factories and territorially – and the assembly-ist and anarcho-syndicalist experiments during the Transition in Spain showed that the association imposed over production can be turned into political partnership without any intervening party, through bottom-up organization in workshop, barrio and logistical connections.

The political consequences of a diagnosis

The contention so far has been that the changes undergone by capitalism since the 1970s do not warrant talk of the death of the proletariat as a social class. The worldwide expansion in waged labour, the geographical reorganization of production and the lingering capital-labour relationship seem to point in the opposite direction indeed. However, the importance of this discussion does not lie exclusively in an issue of conceptual precision. What really count are the political consequences that flow from this or that diagnosis.

Theoretical categories are never neutral. There is more to them than mere descriptive tools; they are ways of ordering historical experience and thus of setting the boundaries for the politically feasible. When how a social reality is understood is altered, so too what are deemed the reasonable strategies for impacting upon it. In which regard the debate on the proletariat spills over entirely from the terrain of sociology and stands four-square on the terrain of political theory.

If we accept that the proletariat has stopped playing a structural role in contemporary capitalism, the logical consequence of that is the jettisoning of any strategy based on class organization. Whereupon emancipation is no longer thought of as the outcome of a conflict arising out of the relations of production per se and comes to hinge upon a spectrum of resistances, the articulation of which always has all the appearances of an open problem. Revolutionary politics then loses the leverage that, historically, always guided the workers' movement and tends to shift in the direction of a multiplicity of partial struggles which are no doubt worthy enough in themselves, but the convergence of which can no longer look to an obvious material foundation.

Querying the legitimacy or importance of those struggles does not enter into it. Feminism, ecology, anti-racist campaigning, housing disputes or the defence of public services mirror actual contradictions within contemporary capitalism and have notably enriched the purview of social criticism. The problem crops up when those struggles are thought of as substitutes for the capital versus labour conflict rather than as specific aspects of a society whose structure continues to be organized around the process of capital accumulation.

Actually, capitalism is not merely the sum of free-standing dominances. The exploitation of labour is still the mechanism whereby the overall system reproduces itself. Which is not to say that all forms of oppression can be mechanically whittled down to economic exploitation, but there is an implicit acknowledgment that capital accumulation still orchestrates the space within which these assume their concrete historical forms. Dispensing with this relationship implies the risk of analysing the sundry manifestations of domination as if they existed outside of the orbit of the mode of production that orchestrates them.

This may well be one of the chief differences between a critique of capitalism and a critique of certain of capitalism's consequences. The first represents an attempt to understand the logic behind social relations generally; the second risks restricting itself to combatting some of its most visible effects without broaching the principle that gives rise to them all. So the issues lies, not in broadening the field for emancipation struggles, but in ensuring that such broadening does not finish up breaking down the analysis of class relations into a multiplicity of conflicts with no connections between them.

From that point of view, the theoretical shift discernible in some libertarian thinking over recent decades become particularly meaningful. The crisis of the traditional workers' movement has encouraged an understandable distrust of the organizational formats bequeathed by the 20th century. Such distrust has spurred the search for fresh subjects, new practices and new modalities of political intervention. However, on occasion that search seems to have gone hand in hand with a progressive distancing from analysis of the relations of production. The critique of work has finished up replacing the critique of capital and thinking about capitalism's cultural changes has usurped the place once occupied by scrutiny of its economic structures.

There is the lingering paradox whereby this shift has come about at the very point at which capital has arrived at an hitherto unknown degree of concentration and centralization. The big corporations had never amassed so much economic power, the production chains never been on such a global scale and dependency on wages never affected such a broad swathe of the world's population. Given these factors, turning away from class analysis somehow equates to accepting the finality of one of neo-liberalism's main ideological victories: **the notion that capitalism had given up on orchestrating society around the conflict between those owning the means of production and those with nothing but their labour to offer.**

It seems no accident that this view has spread precisely following the historic defeat suffered by the workers' movement in the West. Every significant defeat inevitably brings forth a crisis in the terms in which the vanquished had thought about the world. The history of revolutionary thought offers lots of examples of that phenomenon. In the wake of every big failure there is a temptation to chalk defeat up, not to the historical correlation of forces, but to the shortcomings of the actual subject that was the protagonist of that defeat. Yet that sort of explanation turns an historic event into an alleged structural necessity and turns a contingent defeat into an enduring theoretical conclusion.

This may well be the point at which to introduce one final consideration. No social class has any pre-guaranteed historical mission. The proletariat's existence is not of itself any guarantee of revolution, any more than the bourgeoisie's existence automatically guaranteed the success of the liberal revolutions. History has no knowledge of providential subjects. But acknowledgment of that fact does not require us to deny that certain classes occupy structural positions from where they may call

the established order into question. The capacity for revolution does not grow out of some metaphysical quality ascribed to the proletariat, but out of the objective contradiction that pits capital against those who produce society's wealth and, yet, are held at some remove from the means that make it possible.

So the core issue of our time does not consist of finding some subject to replace the proletariat but of grasping the concrete forms in which the 21st century proletariat can reconstruct its capacity for collective action. The question of strategy has not changed, despite occasional claims that it has. What have changed are the historical conditions in which that strategy is going to have to operate.

International migration and the production of a brand-new global proletariat

There is one phenomenon which, by itself, is enough to raise questions regarding the thesis about the supposed disappearance of the proletariat; the enormous international migrations of workers that is a feature of contemporary capitalism. If the proletariat had stopped being a foundation of the economic system, it would be hard to account for why hundreds of millions of people quit their homelands in order to enter the labour markets of the more developed economies or the new hubs of accumulation and do so almost always in the most precarious conditions.

The current migrations are not a marginal phenomenon nor are they the straightforward human fall-out from wars or natural disasters. They are part and parcel of the *modus operandi* of global capitalism. The free circulation of goods, capital and investments are accompanied by tight controls on the movements of the labour force. And this is no coincidental contradiction. Capital needs workers to be mobile, but not so workers with rights. The existence of a huge mass of migrants prey to ongoing legal insecurity adds up to one of the fundamental mechanisms whereby wages are kept low and the negotiating ability of the working class as a whole is undermined. Since the end of the 20th century, Western Europe, the United States and Canada have taken in wave after wave of migrants from Latin America, the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, the Near East and Asia. These workers, for the most part, are concentrated in those sectors featuring intensely highly exacting work, low pay rates and minimal labour protection – intensive farming, construction, the hotel sector, cleaning and care and home deliveries, logistics, domestic service or certain branches of the food and manufacturing industries.

The choice of these sectors has nothing to do with cultural preferences nor any supposed lack of qualifications. It has to do with the structural position that capitalism has allotted to a labour force, the legal vulnerability of which paves the way for forms of exploitation a lot more intense than those borne by the rest of the workforce. Administrative irregularity, reliance upon residence permits for work contracts, the constant fear of expulsion or the ever-present threat of unemployment all make the migrant worker a particularly disciplined labour force.

In this respect, the figure of the “undocumented” workers encapsulates one of the most complete embodiments of the contemporary proletariat. In many instances, not only does he have no ownership over the means of production but the same is true of even the most basic civil rights that enable him to negotiate the sale of his labour power on a minimally equal footing. His situation is particularly revealing of the essential asymmetry of wage relations under capitalism.

The United States provides an especially telling example here. Millions of workers drawn from Mexico, Central America and other Latin American countries are mainstays of entire segments of

farming, construction, catering or the meat industry. However, those very workers live under the permanent threat of deportation. Periodical campaigns targeting irregular immigration, the militarizing of the border with Mexico, police round-ups or the tightening of the laws on migrants do not eradicate this labour force. Instead, they help keep it in a position of vulnerability that is of direct benefit to lots of entrepreneurial sectors. Criminalization of the immigrant thus serves an economic purpose as well as a political one: producing workers that are easily exploited due to their ongoing fear of losing the very right to stay in the country.

A similar rationale can be seen at work in much of Europe. The external borders of the European Union have become the scenes of escalating militarization whilst lots of economic sectors are structurally dependent upon migrant labour. Intensive farming in southern Spain and Italy, greenhouse farming, fruit-picking, construction work, domestic service or caring for dependents would have a hard time surviving without a labour force drawn in from Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe or Asia.

The contradiction is starkly obvious. The very same states that are erecting walls, making a great show of controlling their borders and pursuing policies persecuting irregular immigration also need to bring in hundreds of thousands of workers in order to sustain whole swathes of their economies. Immigration is officially portrayed as a security issue, whereas in actual fact it operates as a vital component of the labour market.

The position in the Persian Gulf countries is even worse., Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait or Bahrain have built a very important part of their economic expansion thanks to the labours of millions of migrants drawn in from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, the Philippines or Sri Lanka. Over decades, the sponsorship arrangement known as *kafala* has made the worker beholden to his employer, to the extent of his being prevented from freely changing his job or leaving the country without permission. Although some states have in recent years introduced some partial reforms, lots of international organizations and trade unions continue to document exhausting working hours, unpaid wages, confiscation of passports, unfit accommodation and serious restricted rights that leave many workers in circumstances bordering upon debt slavery or contemporary forms of slave labour.

Qatar's preparations for the World Cup placed these facts under an international spotlight. Thousands of migrant workers were involved in stadium building, road-building, constructing metro lines and huge infrastructural projects in extremely tough conditions. The pertinence of this as far as the argument developed here is concerned is not just that such abuses are serious, but that they are revealing when it comes to the operations of global capitalism: the great 21st century projects still rely upon huge numbers of workers denied any effective chance of negotiating the conditions of sale of their labour.

Asian migrations provide a further example of the same dynamic at work. Millions of workers leave rural areas of China every year, bound for the industrial areas along the coast; from Indonesia, the Philippines or Vietnam, they make for the more developed economies in East Asia; or from Bangladesh and Nepal, they head for the oil monarchies in the Gulf. In every instance, the mobility of the labour force is a core factor in contemporary capital accumulation.

Nor should we overlook the situation of the Palestinians. Occupation, territorial fragmentation and the systematic destruction of much of the Palestinian economy have, over decades, produced a mass

of workers profoundly dependent upon the Israeli labour market or precarious employment in the occupied territories. The denial of national rights is wedded here to intense economic exploitation, showing one again how political domination and labour exploitation can bolster each other.

All in all, such processes afford us an understanding that contemporary capitalism is continually reproducing new forms of proletariat, but that it is internationalizing them. The massive mobility of workers amounts to a structural condition of the process of capital accumulation. Wherever capital needs to cut labour costs, it finds the migrant population a particularly vulnerable labour force whose dubious legal status is a boon to intensified forms of exploitation.

So international migration does nothing to give the lie to the theory of the splitting of society into antagonistic classes; it offers particularly emphatic proof of it instead. Capitalism is not replacing waged labour with some other form of social organization. It is broadening the worldwide labour market, continually drawing in fresh contingents of workers and deliberately contriving situations of legal inequality that enable it to step up its exploitation rates.

The figure of the undocumented migrant, or the seasonal farm labourer, of the foreign-born domestic servant, of the digital platform staffer, of the Asian construction worker or the Palestinian worker subjected to the occupation offer perhaps the best possible depiction of the circumstances of the 21st century proletariat. They do not constitute an exception to the normal operation of capitalism: they stand as one of its most typical manifestations. For that very reason, their mere existence is one of the soundest empirical rebuttals of the contention that argues that the proletariat is no more. If anything this shows that global capitalism is precisely the opposite: it has never before needed to mobilize, displace and exploit such huge numbers of waged workers on a planetary scale.

A program of action: twelve guidelines for resurrecting the proletariat

If the proletariat has not 'gone away', but has been scattered, reduced to precariousness and internationalized, the strategic question consists of rebuilding its capacity for autonomous organization. That requires that we abandon both any nostalgia for past forms as well as any defeatist resignation that pronounces any sort of class politics an impossibility. There is no single model, but we can point to a few basic guidelines.

1. Rebuilding proletarian sociability

The number one task consists of recapturing meeting-places, debates and solidarity in the barrios, workplaces, study centres and territories. In the absence of ongoing social relations there is no collective consciousness and, without that, no organization can stand against capital.

2. Organizing wherever the majority works these days

The new workers' movement is going to have to embed itself as a matter of priority in logistics, transport, digital services, healthcare, the hotel trade, business, the care sector, intensive farming, industrial sub-contracting and the major distribution hubs. Organization must shadow the actual displacement of capital.

3. Overcoming fragmented working

The division into established and temporary staff, natives and migrants, wage earners and sham self-employed, public and private employees, amounts to one of the main instruments of

employer domination. The class organization has to be rebuilt upon the shared material reality rather than upon the administrative categories imposed by the market or the State.

4. Bringing the migrant proletariat fully on board

Equality in terms of labour, social, trade union and political rights between native and migrant workers represents a crucial condition if capital is to be prevented from utilizing legal inequality as a standing resource for reducing pay and imposing collective discipline.

5. Resurrecting direct action trade unionism

Trade unionism must once more become a tool in day to day conflicts rather than a mechanism for operating the institutions. The assembly, revocable delegates, federalism, autonomy vis a vis the State and direct action remain wholly viable principles.

6. Building our own mutual aid institutions

Strike funds, consumer cooperatives, labour consultancies, Ateneos, social libraries, care networks, cultural centres, people's schools and community spaces represent the material infrastructure that is vital for the sustenance of prolonged disputes and strengthening class autonomy.

7. Coordinating Struggles on an International Scale

In the face of a capitalism that is organized internationally, merely national responses prove inadequate. Cooperation between workers from the same logistical or production network, international campaigning and effective solidarity should become consistent practices.

8. Connecting social struggles without diluting the class issue

Campaigns for housing, public health, education, feminism, social ecology, anti-racism or opposition to militarism all form part of the same historic conflict when prosecuted by means of a critique of capitalism rather than as demands isolated from one another.

9. Recovering political grounding and historical memory

Memory loss represents one of neo-liberalism's main successes. It is crucial that a critical culture be rebuilt through ongoing training, study of the workers' and libertarian movement's historical record and the inter-generational transmission of organizational expertise.

10. Combatting the war economy and authoritarianism

The growth of militarization, boosted defence spending, the spread of surveillance equipment and the normalization of emergency powers are all designed to discipline work. Opposing militarism and the war economy are integral parts of the fight against capital. The only counter to capital's wars is the class war.

11. Democratizing production and social reproduction

The libertarian approach cannot confine itself to improving the conditions of the sale of labour power. It should aim at direct control of production being vested in the hands of those that do the work, with collective management of shared assets, socialization of care and exploration of cooperative and federal approaches to economic organization.

12. Building people power from the bottom up

The strategic goal is not to capture the State in order to run capitalism under fresh management, but to roll out an expanding network of autonomous organizations capable of challenging capital over its economic, social, cultural and political functions. Self-organization, cooperativism, federalism, direct democracy and mutual support are more than mere ethical principles; they also stand for the material pre-conditions for a revolutionary transformation of society.

These 12 guidelines do not add up to a signed and sealed program, nor are they an exhaustive catalogue of demands. They do aim to suggest a strategic direction. 21st century capitalism has wrought deep-seated changes in how the proletariat is made up, but it has not done away with the **basic contradiction between those who own the means of production and those who have nothing but their labour power**. If society continues to be shaped by this contradiction, the libertarian movement's task does not add up to casting around for some other subject, but rather making a contribution to a conscious, autonomous, federal and internationalist re-assembly of the working class. So less of the obituaries and on with the organizing.

Conclusions: the defeat of the workers' movement and the limits of defeatism

From the review paraded across these pages we can come to the conclusion that, albeit simplistic in its framing, it carries significant theoretical and political implications. The profound changes undergone by capitalism since the 1970s do not, on their own, warrant the conclusion that the proletariat no longer amounts to the potential driver of some revolutionary transformation. What these transformations make plain is, primarily, the crisis that has befallen the historical formats by means of which the working class successfully organized itself during the workers' movement's long phase.

This is a distinction that needs to be carefully preserved. The defeat of Europe's workers' movement, the de-composition of traditional labour culture, the absorption into the establishment of much of trade unionism, the fragmentation of production processes or the growing individualization of social relations add up to fully documented historical facts. Denying them would be tantamount to turning a blind eye to half a century in the evolution of capitalism. However, it does not necessarily follow from that that the social relations that made possible the emergence of the proletariat as a class have disappeared, let alone that any chance of a politics rooted in the capital-labour conflict has evaporated.

And here indeed we have the issue that this article takes with some contemporary libertarian thinking. Writers like Tomás Ibáñez and Miquel Amorós have offered remarkably clear-sighted descriptions of the depth of the defeat suffered by the workers' movement and capitalism's ability to dismantle the forms of sociability that fed class consciousness. Their analyses incorporate highly valuable insights into the commodification of day to day living, the crisis within traditional organizations, the disappearance of the old working-class barrios or the absorption of social conflict into the machinery for managing the system. All of which represents a crucial contribution to an understanding of the present.

The discrepancy pops up when that diagnosis of history turns into a strategic conclusion. Because the argument that, to date, the proletariat has lost the political centrality it came to wield during a given

phase in capitalism's development, is one thing and insisting that that loss amounts to an irreversible change or that capitalism no longer produces the material circumstances upon which a class politics might be re-launched is quite another. In between the two contentions there is a theoretical leap that the facts, as examined in this article, do not appear to justify.

The worldwide reorganization of capitalism points instead to a more complex reality. Never before was the proletariat so numerous, so internationalized and so integrated into a single global market. The spread of industrial production in Asia, the upsurge in global logistics, the proletarianization of much of the service sector, the spread of precarious employment and digital platforms, as well as the major labour migrations criss-crossing the planet, indicate that capitalism is still replicating proletarian status on a massive scale. What has changed is not the existence of that proletarian class, but its make-up, where it is concentrated, its shared experiences and the conditions in which a collective consciousness can grow.

International migration amounts to one of the plainest expressions of this process. Millions of workers cross borders every year to enter labour markets where they take up the most precarious and worst paid jobs. From the farm labourers in southern Europe to the Latin America workers harried and criminalized in the United States, from the migrant domestic servants to the Asian workers subject for years to the sponsorship arrangements of the Gulf monarchies; from Palestinian workers under the occupation, to those who man the big global logistical and distribution chains, contemporary capitalism continues to generate fresh batches of proletarians, the legal vulnerability of which actually becomes an additional level of exploitation. **Far from heralding the end of the status of proletarian, these facts demonstrate that that status is being broadened and diversified planet-wide.**

Precarious legal standing, a statist tool in keeping labour in line, confirms that the class struggle cannot be dis severed from the fight against borders, institutional racism and labour policy.

So the core issue is no longer determining whether the proletariat exists. That is largely a matter for empirical evidence to explore. The real question is a different one: how come a class that is, objectively speaking, more commonplace than ever seems to be fragmented politically and what historical circumstances might facilitate a brand-new re-assembly of its capacity for collective action?

Answering that question requires that we dump two contrasting simplifications. The first consists of imagining that reconstructing the classical workers' movement's organizational formats would do the job. History does not turn back and 21st century capitalism is not replicating the social conditions amid which the revolutionary organizations of the past grew. The second simplification consists of the conclusion that, since all of those historic formats have been defeated, so too the door has been closed once and for all to the prospect of a proletarian politics. This latter simplification **turns an historic defeat into a structural impossibility** and makes an historical law of what has been, no matter how deep it may go, a circumstance.

However, capitalism's history teaches the precise opposite. The working class's organizational forms have never been immutable. Demand-driven trade unionism, workers' councils, revolutionary collectives, affinity groups, anarcho-syndicalist organizations, workers' commission subject to recall, workers' *Ateneos*, cooperatives, revolutionary, defence or supplies committees, rationalist schools, mutual aid societies and workers' umbrella groups always popped up as specific responses to specific historical circumstances. None of them was a deduction from a pre-existing theory, nor a response to

a universal model. They all grew out of the encounter between an objectively exploitative structure and the ability of the workers themselves to devise institutions suited to their times.

There are no grounds for thinking that this historic process is dead and gone. What the workers' movement's defeat forces us to acknowledge is not the clash between capital and labour being now spent, but that there is a need to rethink formats by means of which that clash can once again be translated into organizing, solidarity and a scheme for emancipation. Capitalism has made profound alterations to work: it would be strange if the forms of resistance did not also have to undergo transformation.

In this regard, philosophical defeatism amounts to an understandable temptation, but one that is politically sterile. Every big defeat prompts the thought that the enemy has once and for all resolved the contradictions that had fed the previous challenge mounted against him. However, capitalism remains as dependent today as it was yesterday upon organizing production on the basis of wage relations; it persists in concentrating wealth in one location and economic dependency in another; it still displaces millions of workers to wheresoever accumulation requires them to be and it persists in resorting to precariousness, fragmentation and legal inequality as ways of disciplining the work force. None of these trends even hints at the elimination of the social question. Instead, they suggest that it is assuming fresh, more complex and more international formats than any experienced by the classical workers' movement.

In libertarian terms, such dispersion calls for flexible forms of organizing: barrio-workshop mutual aid networks, trade union branches free of bureaucracy, worker autonomy groups that do not substitute themselves for the class, and federal coordination between logistical hubs, deliverers, sub-contractors and carers. It is not, then, the task of a critical theory to sign the death certificate of the proletariat as an actor in history, but rather to understand the metamorphosis that capitalism itself thrusts upon the make-up of the working class and its organizational potential. The crucial issue is not whether the 21st century proletariat resembles the one from a hundred years ago. Plainly it does not. The issue is finding out which forms of consciousness, solidarity and organizing can arise out of the specific conditions created by global capitalism.

Far from shutting down the prospects of a class politics, contemporary capitalism is requiring that it be rebuilt on fresh foundations. The workers' movement's defeat belongs to history. The contradiction between capital and labour is still extant. Getting the two mixed up means turning an historical experience, no matter how dramatic, into a theoretical finding unwarranted by the data. And it may well be that muddle that is one of the main hindrances to thinking about the chances of liberation in our times.

Recent historical examples endorse this approach. The drive for worker autonomy in Italy (1969-1977) and the assembly-ist and anarcho-syndicalist experiences in Transition Spain showed that the class can come together free of the tutelage of parties and States; through self-organization wherever production and reproduction are taking place, through federal territorial coordination and the politicization of workers, with no need for any vanguards.

The task is not replacing the proletariat with some new, heaven-sent subject, nor subordinating it to parties or States, but reassembling its autonomous, horizontal and federal potential so that it can overwhelm capitalism in every facet of life. If capital is global and all-encompassing, then our organization should be likewise.

None of the foregoing ascribes any guaranteed “historical mission” to the proletariat. That a class exists is not guarantee of its victory; it merely indicates the field on which the struggle can be fought out. The alternative to defeatism is not some promise of insurrection, but a rebuilding of the components of possibility: sociability, conflicting infra-structures, revocable coordinating panels, effective internationalism, communities in struggle. That is what supporting a libertarian class outlook amounts to today: not the heralding of it but laying the groundwork for it. And lo and behold groups such as Liza, Embat, Batzac and so many others are arguing for a higher profile for the proletariat and fewer defeatist obituaries.[1]

“Revolution or barbarism” is no longer a catchphrase: it is a genuine alternative, mid-way between two competing futures.

Agustín Guillamón

Barcelona, July 2026 <https://serhistorico.net/2026/07/13/mas-proletariado-y-menos-obituarios/>

KSL Note,

1, Liza is a Madrid-based libertarian socialist platform. Embat is the Libertarian Organization of Catalonia, active since 2014. Both appear to be platformist of the especifist variety exemplified by the Uruguayan FAU. Batzac is the name of a hard core punk band in Catalonia and also of a Libertarian Youth group there.

Translated by Paul Sharkey for the Kate Sharpley Library <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/>