

On the Lumpen-Precariat-To-Come

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Abstract: As a prolegomena to writing a critique of contemporary capitalism which takes into account its semiotic, affective dimensions and which emphasises the notion of hyper-capitalism with Asian characteristics, and in considering the nature of the floating, heterogeneous population of the lumpenproletariat in the Asia-Pacific region in the 21st century, the authors believe they remain faithful to Marx and the 11th thesis on Feuerbach. Bringing a unique perspective to the debate and raising pressing issues regarding the exploitation of the lumpenproletariat, we are not content to merely revisit the concept of the lumpenproletariat in Marx's writings such as *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) but to apply this concept to the contemporary conditions of capitalism and especially to the loci of the precariat in Asia. Our goal is to begin to account for the changing demographic of labour flows, the precarity of life, the modern day slavery which takes place in our time. In examining the passage from the lumpenproletariat, hitherto defined as “non-class” or “people without a definite trace”, to lumpen-precariat, defined as people not seen in Asian economies (refugees, the illegally employed, illegal migrants, nationless foreign labour, the withdrawn clan, sex industry workers, night workers; those behind walls, gated communities, and other entrance-exit barriers), this paper discloses not only the subsistence of those in the non-places of the world – in the technocratic-commercial archipelago of urban technopoles – but also and, arguably more importantly, on the Outside, namely the rest of the planet, the other six-sevenths of humanity. This paper looks for “a” missing people, “a” singular, people yet to come, those exiled, excluded and unseen – sited on the edges of respectable society.

Keywords: lumpenproletariat, Japan, Korea, Marx, Deleuze, Guattari

1. Introduction

Certain déclassé, degraded or degenerated elements of the proletariat are named by Marx as the *lumpenproletariat* (Draper 1972; Thoburn 2014). In *On the International Workingmen's Association and Karl Marx*, Bakunin (1971, 294) describes this concept as “the ‘riffraff’, that ‘rabble’ almost unpolluted by bourgeois civilization”. The lumpenproletariat signifies the destitute, the lowest of the low, the underclass, the social scum. Put in contemporary parlance, this element is without work, education or vocational training. It is the proletariat of the proletariat. The lumpenproletariat constitutes the heterogeneous, waste, unproductive expenditure. As such it is unassimilable. It is the modern day NEET, the coinage of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the *freeta* in Japan (the portmanteau of the English word freelance and the German word *Arbeiter* or labourer). It is the precariat. This abject element works in the labour force – often informally, sometimes illegally and casually, forming a disposable class whose work is manifestly precarious and so their existence too as they are essentially *without place*. Their space is outside or on the margins of the law. They are the spectres of the spectacle of hyper-consumption. Put another way, the lumpenproletariat *en mass* does not constitute work as their *œuvre* is excluded from the world of work and reason (Lingis 2017).

For Mikhail Bakunin, the lumpenproletariat carries “in its heart, in its aspirations, in all necessities and the miseries of its collective position, all the germs of the socialism of the future” (Bakunin 2004, 48). Why? Because the lumpenproletariat is a revolutionary class untarnished by power relations, unpolluted by “bourgeois civilization”, there is no surplus-value to sell. As a reserve army of labour it is radical as it is rootless. The lumpenproletariat is composed of untouchables, prostitutes, rioters, revolutionaries, even poets and artists – the good, the bad and the ugly. In other language, this heterogeneous mass is comprised of those schizos, hysterics, paranoiacs as invoked in Deleuze and Guattari’s work (1983). The lumpenproletariat is the Ur-proletariat; it is present in all societies in the metakosmia or *intermundia* of the world, subsisting there in the middle of things with the possibility to act, to act as a catalyst, to seek out the limits of capitalism.

Marx discusses the concept of the lumpenproletariat in various places. First used in *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels 1845/46), it then appears at length in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Marx 1852), or also in *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 1848). In volume one of *Capital* (Marx 1867), in Chapter 25.4, entitled “Different Forms of Existence of the Relative Surplus Population. The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation”, Marx (1867, 797) describes the actual lumpenproletariat as “vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes”. In 1848, in Chapter One of *The Communist Manifesto*, the lumpenproletariat is named the “dangerous class”, the social scum, “that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society” (Marx and Engels 1848, 494). While it has no revolutionary self-consciousness in itself, it nevertheless, for Marx, is tied to the question of the proletarian revolution. Outside society, in the intermundia, between worlds, it carries the transcendental potential to transform the inner workings. Yet, Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* believes it is nigh possible for this “dangerous class” to be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution. He writes:

[That] passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue (Marx and Engels 1848, 494).

Marx describes this composition in depth in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in which he speaks of the lumpenproletariat as “the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither” (Marx 1852, 149). It is composed widely of outlaws, vagabonds, discharged soldiers and ex-cons, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, pimps, brothel keepers, porters, tinkers and beggars. While this remains worthy of scholarly exegesis, we must constantly update this list. In the 21st century, the lumpenproletariat or exploited multitude is without tribe, clan, without employment: a living dead or permanent underclass. The question asked by Marx remains profound: How to transform the waste product of society, the disposable, surplus, the nonassimilable and nongovernable into a mass capable of ushering in a new epoch? (Stallybrass 1990). This is taken up by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. He grants the lumpenproletariat a role in the envisioned African revolution. Fanon writes: “So the pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed, and the petty criminals throw themselves into the struggle like stout working men [...] The prostitutes too, and the maids who are paid two pounds a month, all who turn in circles between suicide and madness, will recover their balance, once more go forward, and march proudly in the great procession of the awakened nation” (Fanon 1963, 130).

Félix Guattari picks up on Marx's focus on the role of desire, the production of subjectivity and its importance as a tool of revolutionary momentum and imagination in the first half of the 18th century. While Marx's understanding of the social subject is deemed distinct from Guattari's own sense, which is to say a focus on fantasy, social creativity or "transversality", Guattari says: "I am glad to find in Marx – and no longer the 'young Marx' – this re-emergence of subjectivity". He writes: "[N]owadays the margins (the emarginati), the new forms of subjectivity, can also affirm themselves in their vocation to manage society, to invent a new social order, without thereby having to take their directions from [...] phallogocratic, competitive, brutal values. They can express themselves through their becomings of desire" (Guattari and Rolnik 2008, 416). In the wake of the student uprisings in 1968, Guattari – deliriously – in "Students, the Mad, and 'Delinquents'" a paper delivered at the Third International Congress of Psychodrama, Sociodrama, and Institutional Therapy, held in Baden, September, 1968, designated revolutionary militant escapees, "the Katangais" or thugs - as those who in fleeing control could be conceived as prototypes of the "new man" of the future socialist society.

2. Japan

It is clear that 200 years after the birth of Marx, the composition of the lumpenproletariat has changed from "vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes", pariahs and untouchables, to precarious workers, a working poor, to contract staff, day staff, zero hour contract staff, and more desperately to the underclass or permanent underclass. Marx's distinction between the revolutionary labouring poor and the reactionary lumpenproletariat no longer holds under the global conditions of contemporary exploitation.

I ask my Japanese students about the term. They stumble for the smartphones for the answer. I tell them that *ルンペン* (lumpen), a Japanese word, is from German. The word is tied to *浮浪者* (furousha) which formally means vagrancy. It is a verb too: to wander, or to bum about. Synonymous nouns include a vagrant, a street urchin, a waif, a tramp, or hobo. It is also synonymous with a jobless or unemployed person. A hobo's life is translated as *ルンペン生活* (lumpen seikatsu). I tell them that in Samuel Johnson's 1755 Dictionary, the lumpenproletariat is designated "wretched, vile, or vulgar" – a sub-human class. They form the lowest level of the proletariat, unskilled workers, the precariat, the unemployed or underemployed, the working poor, alienated from the society they serve. No one knows of its existence and meaning. No student I have come across knows of its existence and meaning. More than this, few want to know of its existence and meaning, save compromising their blissful, convenient everydayness.

The question "how can Marx's theory of the lumpenproletariat help us to understand capitalism today?" in hyper-authoritarian Asian economies found in Korea, Japan, Singapore, and the Philippines is a timely one as it considers the various modes of composition of the lumpenproletariat in metropolises like Seoul, Tokyo, Singapore, or Manila. The neologism *lumpenprecariat* is used here to distinguish it from the historical sense of lumpenproletariat in Marx and the modern sense of precariat in Japan, as discussed by Franco Berardi (2009), Anne Allison (2013), and others. We are looking to assess the formation of the precariat of the precariat, the lumpen of the precariat, the waste and wasted of all levels of the socius.

In Japan, the heterogeneous formation of the lumpenproletariat has been designated the "*working poor*". Loulia Mermigka (2010, 138) designates the lumpenproletariat as those without fixed political allegiance. It is a heterogeneous collectivity of "high school and university students, unnameable proletarians [...] refugees, immigrants and civilians". Such a group may Mermigka explains, "choose to participate in

the violent expression against the police, against chain stores as symbols of the society of the spectacle, against the banks as symbols of financial capital, and against public buildings as symbols of the state” (Ibid.). Mermigka argues it is timely to analyse and search for “the anarchist subjectifications” and new revolutionary connections with the lumpenproletariat and with minorities (Ibid., 140). Following Deleuze and Guattari, Mermigka argues that it is from within “the unnameable proletariat, the unemployed and the minorities” (Ibid.) that new lines of flight will be drawn and “vital connections made against the automation of the capitalist axiomatic and its bureaucratic programming” (Ibid.). Out of this world of bums, outcasts and multitude in the Asian region, we must forecast the possibility of another world and people.

In Japan, the composition of the lumpenproletariat may have shifted somewhat. The multitude work but do so precariously (Berardi 2009; Allison 2013). They remain a non-class, a “people without a definite trade, *gens sans feu et sans aveu* [men without hearth or home]” as Marx (1850, 62) says in Part I of *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850* and they vanish as soon as they are spotted (see König and Kremers 2008). This form of subaltern, identity is without home, without employment, without a state. It is a precipitate on the meniscus of the socius.

There are tens of thousands of young people who work the night shift in Tokyo to make rice balls and sandwiches for the convenience stores. Many of these young people I suspect are without official paperwork. They lead a precarious existence outside the normal way of the world. Japan cannot survive without them. They are not seen. And intentionally so. If they were seen the whole system would collapse. This is the other side of the middle class dream, the lumpenproletariat who work in the shadows, in the dark, working the night shift away from respectable Japanese society. Their existence is not seen.

In the early 1980s I began reading Marx when dogmatic ideas and mantras about the revolution to come were very much out of vogue. And after 1989, little was left but to indulge in the spectre of Marx. Yet I continue to read him now even though talk is less about species-being (*Gattungswesen*) and the return of man to man and more about the object and non-human relations. Furthermore, the trauma of the Anthropocene has rightly redirected questions back to the needs of humanity. Yet, it is Marx’s work which redirects my attention so as to think about the precarious lives of vast swathes of humanity. This is less a desire to interpret the world renew and more a desperate need to transform material reality to help those born into this world. Yet, gone are the days when “we” could take inspiration from Marx’s (1843, 187) claim in the *Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law* that “[b]y proclaiming the *dissolution of the hitherto existing world order* the proletariat merely states the *secret of its own existence*, for it is *in fact* the dissolution of that world order.”

As both perpetrators and victims of Integrated World Capitalism (Guattari and Negri 1990), we, without the democratic right to vote, who must move around the globe to work, we, the lumpenproletariat, dare not organize and contest the way of things – lest we are sent back home. We have a membership to the most docile generation that has ever existed, according to Agamben.

Our revolutionary energy is spent elsewhere – on computer games, porn, gambling, endless forms of intoxication to escape the reality of the working day. Moreover, it is not so much that the “people are missing” as Deleuze and Guattari insist but that they are invisible. We do not see them. And “we” do, but do not wish to. These are the people who work in the factories and farms on shadowy apprentice schemes which escape Japan’s strict immigration laws. Those who start work late and finish only in the early morning. We see groups of them at the train stations getting on buses in the

evening; young, precarious, downcast and illegal. They are the people which polite society does not wish to see but hypocritically demands. Who or what is this lumpenproletariat, this “industrial reserve army”? Its composition are the Filipino women who service the sex industry, who are sometimes forced into prostitution or, if not, who come freely to work for several months to save money for those back home. Žižek talks about this reality too, those from Bangladesh who work in the Middle East on the construction sites, whose passports are taken away; as private citizens they are not allowed to visit the malls and supermarkets they have built as workers. He writes in *Living at the end of Times* (Žižek 2010, x):

[N]owhere are the new forms of apartheid more palpable than in the wealthy Middle Eastern oil states – Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Dubai. Hidden on the outskirts of the cities, often literally behind walls, are tens of thousands of “invisible” immigrant workers doing all the dirty work, from servicing to construction, separated from their families and refused all privileges.

Žižek asks the right questions, “what do you want, what kind of society do you want?” Yet, for those on the outskirts of society, there is no reply, other than a long, brooding silence. There is no rejection of the life of the city, there is no desire for withdrawal, no purist commitment to authenticity; those destitute populations in the outer zone of the “archipelago of urban technopoles” (Lingis, quoted in Sheppard, Sparks and Thomas 2005, 192) only want to belong to the inner circles of the city – who want to exploit others, who want to enjoy their will to revenge. In *The First Person Singular*, Lingis (2007, 85) puts the universal brotherhood of man in question:

The lumpenproletariat, the inner-city poor, the slum dwellers do not form a homogeneous class, but instead milieus, clans, marginals, packs, and gangs linked by attractions and repulsions, sympathies and antipathies, alliances, and penetrations where individuals are coupled on to a few implements and a few luxury objects and to other individuals. Cues, watchwords, passwords order these couplings. They are discontinuous utterances. They are not derived from a coherent ideology.

Marx’s views are not altogether prejudicial. He writes of the honest and “working” lumpenproletariat (Marx 1857/58, 271): “From whore to pope, there is a mass of such rabble. But the honest and ‘working’ lumpenproletariat belongs here as well; e.g. the great mob of porters etc. who render service in seaport cities etc.” This springs to mind Lingis’s comments in *Dangerous Emotions* in his chapter entitled “Joy in Dying” in which he speaks of the role of the hero:

Heroes do not merely occupy their minds with the oppression and misery of a whole people and derive out of this pity for others, felt as a personal affliction, the forces with which to anticipate a future and construct a strategy of liberation. They are those who understand not only the suffering of the downtrodden, but also their bravery [...] Their cause is not to enlist the whole people in the service of an idea that sacrifices the present to the future, only to extend the world of work and reason to the marginalized, to those languishing in shantytowns and adrift in the filthy nights of cities. Their cause and their struggle is to think and work for a world where the laughter of those on doorsteps, in dingy bars, on the docks, and in the fields will be heard over the guffaws of the rich and powerful (Lingis 2000, 169-170).

From the above it can be seen that it is timely to write a social critique of the masses of people, the slum dwellers and marginals, living in “hopeless economic conditions and cultural collapse of the outer zone” (Lingis, quoted in Sheppard, Sparks and Thomas 2005, 205). Lingis (2000, 156) continues:

The sacred is not only what sovereignly places itself outside the world of work in sumptuous splendor; it is also what the world of work and reason relentlessly drives out, torments, and crushes. The delinquent, the derelict, the senile, the lumpenproletariat – this living human waste, more difficult to dispose of than the industrial waste of high-tech America – excites the most vehement repugnances.

3. Korea: Bitcoin and the Lumpenproletariat

The lumpenproletariat, christened by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, is the by-product of capitalism. Its members are working class, but do not recognise themselves as such, that is, they are a working class without class consciousness. When Marx and Engels coined the term to criticise the “underclass” they regarded the lumpenproletariat as those who are not able to think about the revolutionary movement of the proletariat. For Marx and Engels, the lumpenproletariat is the “dangerous class” who are ready to collaborate with reactionary forces at any moment. However, this presupposition should be revised once observing the existence of the lumpenproletariat. They still seem to be the dangerous underclass, but not in the Marx and Engels’ sense. In a different way, they emerge as the incarnation of desiring machines. Picking up a case in South Korea, the so-called Bitcoin Syndrome reveals how the dangerous elements of the lumpenproletariat come to exist.

Capitalism operates as the mechanism of self-cancellation. It does not produce its buriers but destroyers. The more productive, the more useless. Exchange-values come to replace the essence of use-values. The point Marx tries to make through his critique of capitalism is that exchange-values disguise themselves for use-values. In this way, the lumpenproletariat could be misrecognised as workers. However, they are not. The Bitcoin Syndrome in South Korea apparently exposes the truth of the lumpenproletariat, the “scum of the earth” as Hannah Arendt (1979, 267) named refugees. As non-workers, they are not useful; in other words, they have no human capital. They cannot make a profit by selling their labour power. Bitcoin Syndrome brings into focus the relation between economy and state. Students and young people do not want to work in the old ways but to get rich quick through cryptocurrency trading, a desire the government cannot control and regulate. In South Korea, young people are fascinated by the idea of investing in Bitcoin. They insist that Bitcoin is the only hope for their future, in the sense that it would allow them to rise up the social ladder. According to *The New York Times* on 3 December 2017, “nowhere has the public frenzy been more feverish than in South Korea.” One young man on a TV programme dealing with the issue of the Bitcoin craze argues that “you are always already underclass, even though you have 5000 dollars”. This sentiment is shared by many Korean young people and can be attributed to the neo-liberal cynical credo that “there is no alternative”. Korean young people have suffered from unemployment and economic austerity very long time. In my view, this cynicism is reproduced and enhanced by neo-liberal bio-politics, which reduces humans conceptually to the notion of the “population”. Only statistic data represents them, though not in a round figure, but a flat fragment. The useless scum exists as indicators of consumption, in graphs of desire, but they nonetheless

are not so much passive as aggressive. Their cynicism expresses criticism of capitalism, even though no method is offered to exit the way things are.

What the Bitcoin Syndrome proves is that the lumpenproletariat would demolish the capitalist system if there is a chance of escape from it. The members of the lumpenproletariat are out of order, working as anarchic energy against the state, a flowing and floating population hidden behind the sum of data. They will cancel the capitalist axiomatics by exhibiting their uselessness as labour power, resisting the use of them in the capitalist mode of production. As Marx and Engels say, they are not a revolutionary class, but if there is no longer any revolution breaking through capitalism, how should they find any possible exit from this hellish reality? They do not intend to revolt against the system, but they do have the intention to stay in their uselessness, resisting the way in which capitalism commodifies their labour power. In sum, they do not want to be workers, but capitalists. This is the way of life of being the underclass. It seems that they are definitely complicit in reproducing the given system, but not in the usual way, perhaps in the dangerous conjunctures of desires.

4. Conclusion

In the technocratic-commercial archipelago of urban technopoles, we continue to work because not only are millions of people suffering in loneliness and isolation, living precarious lives, their subjectivity ripped away from them, engineered by others, but because we are them too, teaching, writing and living, without the rule of law and the right to vote. We are those who travel thousands of miles to find work, who live in spaces invisible to mainstream society, disenfranchised, and at the mercy of the abuse of power. Incapable of dreaming alternatives to the status quo: this is the modern day lumpenproletariat. We are them and we too must imagine a different tomorrow. We share the decision to embrace a world in which the lumpen and the philosopher will equally belong to groups-in-fusion focused on the transformation of the world.

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