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Savage Inequalities: Capitalist Crisis and Surplus Humanity

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ABSTRACT

The escalation of worldwide inequalities reflects a crisis of global capitalism that is as much structural, one of over-accumulation, as it is political, one of hegemony. This article explores the current restructuring of global capitalism and global labor. Capitalist globalization has undermined earlier redistributive arrangements at the level of the nation-state, unleashing unprecedented global social polarization and also aggravating over-accumulation pressures. The transnational capitalist class has turned to several mechanisms to sustain accumulation in the face of stagnation: financial speculation, the pillaging of public finance, and militarized accumulation. Digitalization is driving new world capitalist restructuring that is resulting in increased precariatization and the expansion of surplus labor or surplus humanity. This precariatization includes cognitive workers who are atomized and isolated as the labor process has become individualized, which poses new challenges for working-class consciousness and solidarity among multilayered members of the global working class. The crisis poses a danger of twenty-first century fascism and a global police state but also new possibilities for emancipatory projects. An emancipatory project must bring together surplus humanity and its struggles in the margins and at points of social reproduction with workers inserted into the circuits of global capital under precarious work arrangements.

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One thing I've been hearing from a lot of very wealthy people these days, since the [US] election [in 2016 of Donald Trump], is that they all have escape plans. . . . rich people are buying up ranches in New Zealand and creating bunkers in the Bahamas, or wherever they're going, thinking that they're somehow going to be able to avoid the apocalypse when it comes. There's actually a business that operates in New York. It's a boat that will come, you can apparently pre-buy [tickets], . . . if there's some political crisis or some danger moment, and they'll come and pick you up and whisk you up the Hudson. (Ferozhar 2018)

Society and governments need to be amenable to disproportionately allow/encourage the few to retain that fatter profit share. The Managerial Aristocracy, like in the Gilded Age, the Roaring Twenties, and the thriving nineties, needs to commandeer a vast chunk of that rising profit share, either through capital income, or simply paying itself a lot. (Citigroup 2005, 10)

Speaking at a "Business of Luxury Summit" in Monaco in 2015, the billionaire owner of the luxury jewelry company Cartier, Johann Rupert, told the audience that the prospect of

robots replacing workers and the poor rising up “keeps me awake at night.” Equally as frightening, he went on to say, is that in the face of imminent social upheaval the middle classes would no longer want to buy luxury goods for fear of exposing their wealth (see Withnall 2015). The transnational capitalist class (TCC) to which Rupert belongs has good reason to be frightened. The data on global inequality has by now been widely disseminated. Capitalist globalization has resulted in unprecedented social polarization worldwide. In 2015, just 1% of humanity owned over half of the world’s wealth and the top 20% own 94.5 of that wealth, while the remaining 80% had to make do with just 4.5% (Hardoon 2015). What is more, this polarization continues to intensify. The British House of Commons released a report in 2018 which warned that the richest 1% of humanity are on course to control as much as two-thirds of the world’s wealth by 2030 (Savage 2018).

If such savage inequalities keep the TCC up at night, they impose untold hardships on billions of people who face daily struggles for survival and uncertain futures. Yet they also reflect a crisis of global capitalism that is as much political as it is structural. Capitalist globalization has undermined redistributive policies that came into being following the Great Depression of the 1930s, themselves the result of widespread social and class struggles from below that forced such redistribution on capitalist states. Now digitalization is driving a new round of worldwide restructuring that promises to expand the ranks of surplus labor and extend the “precariatization” of work. The more global inequalities expand, the more constricted is the world market and the more the system faces a structural crisis of over-accumulation.

But escalating inequalities and the inability of global capitalism to assure the survival of billions of people throw states into crises of legitimacy and push the system towards more openly repressive means of social control and domination that exacerbate political and social conflict. The system is approaching an organic crisis; a general crisis of capitalist rule. We have entered a fluid period of great uncertainty that opens up the dangers of neo-fascism and war but also new possibilities for emancipatory projects. Part of the struggle for a counter-hegemony from below involves understanding the nature of the new global capitalism; how it has reshaped global class relations, the terrain of class and social struggles, forms of consciousness and prospects for transnational class solidarities. In what follows, we summarize the crisis of global capitalism and the new wave of restructuring now underway as the backdrop to an exploratory discussion on the expansion of surplus labor worldwide. We revisit the concept of the lumpenproletariat and the generalization of precarious forms of employment in light of this expansion. We conclude with some brief comments on the challenges that global class restructuring and the threat of neo-fascism present for counterhegemonic and emancipatory projects.

The Crisis of Global Capitalism

What accounts for escalating worldwide inequalities that have so alarmed the likes of Johann Rupert? As Marx (1972; 1978) analyzed in *Capital*, polarization is inherent to the capitalist system since capitalists own the means of producing wealth and therefore appropriate as profits as much wealth as possible that society collectively produces. But such inequalities end up undermining the stability of the system since the mass of working people cannot purchase the wealth that pours out of the capitalist economy to the extent

that capitalists and the well-off retain more and more of total income relative to that which goes to labor. If capitalists cannot actually sell (or “unload”) the products of their plantations, factories, and offices then they cannot make (“realize”) profit. This is what in critical political economy constitutes the underlying internal contradiction of capitalism or the over-accumulation problem. Capitalists accumulate huge amounts of surplus but do not find outlets to continue to profitably invest that surplus. Hence, if left unchecked, the expanding social polarization that is endemic to capitalism results in crisis—in stagnation, recessions, depressions, social upheavals and war.

The Fordist-Keynesian social order that took shape in the decades following the 1930s Great Depression involved high growth rates, a rise in living standards for substantial sectors of the working class, and a decrease in inequalities in the developed core of world capitalism. Why “Fordist-Keynesian”? It was Henry Ford who first recognized that the new system of mass, standardized production (“Fordism”) could not be sustained without introducing mass, standardized consumption. This meant establishing a stable employment arrangement—or capital–labor relation—for a significant portion of the working classes and wages high enough for the working class to actually consume the goods and services that their labor produced—in exchange for workers’ obedience to capital. In turn, John Keynes analyzed that the Great Depression owed to insufficient demand as a result of the concentration of wealth. The state needed in Keynes’s view to intervene in the economy in order to regulate the market (especially financial markets) and to boost demand through state spending on public projects such as infrastructure and social services as well as through the establishment of minimum wages, unemployment insurance, pensions, and so forth (Amin 1994; Cox 1987; Harvey 1990; Robinson 2014).

These Fordist-Keynesian arrangements came about because of the mass struggles of working and popular classes from the late 1800s into the 1930s, including worker, populist and socialist movements, the Bolshevik revolution and the anti-colonial and national liberation struggles in the Third World. The period of post-World War II prosperity in the core countries owed a great deal to this combination of Fordist production and regulated capital–labor relations and Keynesian monetary, budgetary and regulatory policies. State intervention in the capitalist market and a component of redistribution came to define economic policy in the mid-twentieth century in the then First World, as well as in the then Third World in the wake of decolonization. Redistributive nation-state capitalism evolved, therefore, from capital’s accommodation to mass upheavals from below in the wake of the crisis of the two world wars and the Great Depression.

In the wake of the next great crisis, that of the 1970s, emergent transnational capital went global as a strategy of an emergent TCC to reconstitute its social power by breaking free of nation-state constraints to accumulation, to do away with the Fordist-Keynesian arrangement, and to beat back the tide of revolution in the Third World. The post-World War II “class compromise” had served capital well for several decades. Corporate profits rose sharply from 1945 to 1968 and then declined until the early 1980s, when it again rose very rapidly, this time as a result of globalization (Piketty 2014, 227). The corporate class and its agents identified the mass struggles and demands of popular and working classes and state regulation as fetters to its freedom to make profits and accumulate wealth as the rate of profit declined in the 1970s. As the TCC congealed, it forged what became known as the “Washington Consensus,” or the agreement around sweeping worldwide economic restructuring through neo-liberalism to put in place a new

transnational corporate order and go on the offensive in its class warfare against working and popular classes.

Globalization enhanced the structural power of transnational capital over states and popular classes worldwide. Popular and working classes have been less effective in defending wages in the face of capital's newfound global mobility. And states have seen the erosion of their ability to capture and redistribute surpluses given the privatization of public assets, ever more regressive tax systems and prospects for corporate tax evasion, mounting debt to transnational finance capital, inter-state competition to attract transnational capital, and the ability of the TCC to transfer money instantaneously around the world through new digital financial circuits. Behind this alleged "loss of state sovereignty," capitalist globalization changed the correlation of class forces worldwide in favor of the TCC. Transnational capital has been able to exercise a newfound structural power over states and territorially bound working classes, which has undermined the ability of states to capture and redistribute surpluses.

However, by escalating global social polarization and inequality, globalization fueled the chronic problem of over-accumulation. By the late 1990s stagnation once again set in and the system faced a renewed crisis as privatizations dried up, the conquered and reconquered regions were brought into the system, global markets became saturated, and new technologies reached the limits of fixed capital expansion. Given the extreme polarization of wealth and income, the global market cannot absorb the output of the global economy. The Great Recession of 2008 marked the onset of a new structural crisis of over-accumulation. Transnational corporations have been awash in cash. Corporations have recorded record profits yet do not find opportunities to profitably reinvest these profits (Robinson 2018c).

The TCC turned to several mechanisms to sustain accumulation in the face of stagnation. One is militarized accumulation, as the TCC acquired a vested interest in war, conflict, and repression as a means of accumulation. A second is the sacking and pillaging of public finances and cycles of public debt, reflecting a more general transformation of capitalist state finance. Predatory transnational finance capital extracts ever-greater amounts of surplus value from labor via public finances recycled as bailouts, subsidies and the issuance of bonds. Capitalist state finance has been reconfigured to reduce or even eliminate the state's role in social reproduction and to expand its role in facilitating transnational capital accumulation. A third and close mechanism is frenetic financial speculation in the global financial casino. The TCC has turned to investing in financial instruments over new production circuits. Financializing that dates back to the late twentieth century has led to one bubble after another. Fictitious capital now so exceeds the real output of goods and services that a new collapse of devastating proportions would appear all but assured. Although they helped keep the global economy sputtering forward, all three of these mechanisms have further aggravated inequalities, over-accumulation, and political conflict as the social fabric collapses around the world. But now it appears that the TCC has placed its bets on a new round of worldwide economic restructuring and profit-making through digitalization. What effect will digitalization have on inequality and over-accumulation?

Digitalization, the Global Precariat, and Surplus Humanity

Proletarianization worldwide has accelerated through new waves of primitive accumulation as billions of people have been dispossessed and thrown into the global labor market. The global wage labor force doubled from some 1.5 billion in 1980 to some 3 billion in 2006, as workers from China, India and the former Soviet bloc entered the global labor pool (Freeman 2010). These workers have entered the wage labor force at a time when labor markets have been deregulated. Spatial reorganization has helped transnational capital to break the territorial-bound power of organized labor and impose new capital–labor relations based on fragmentation, flexibilization, and the cheapening of labor. As workers become “flexible” they joined the ranks of a new global “precariat” of proletarians who labor under part-time, temporary, informalized, non-unionized, contract, and other forms of precarious work. While the concept of a precariat has been popularized by Standing’s 2011 study, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*,¹ the precariat should be seen not as a class but as a condition—precariousness—imposed on increasing numbers of the global working class in the face of capitalist globalization and the transition underway for several decades now from Fordist to flexible accumulation. While precariousness has been the condition of most people brought into the capitalist economy over the centuries, precariatization now appears to be conjoined with expanding proletarianization and institutionalized in the capital–labor relation worldwide, and includes white- and blue-collar work, service work, and professional and managerial work.

The fragmentation of labor markets has been made possible, in part, by digitalization, which has facilitated spatial decentralization, reorganization of the labor process, and new forms of value extraction. The tech sector is now at the cutting edge of capitalist globalization, driving the digitalization of the entire global economy on the basis of a more advanced computer and information technology (CIT), the collection, processing, and analysis of data (“big data”), and the application of digitalization to every aspect of the global economy, including to production, services, and finance, as well as to systems of warfare, social control, and repression. This rise of the digital economy responds in important part to earlier cycles of capitalist development and crisis, especially the downturn of the 1970s, then the boom of the 1990s followed by the dot-com bust and global recession in 2000–2001, and then the global financial collapse of 2008 and its aftermath. The technology sector has become a major new outlet for uninvested capital in the face of stagnation and over-accumulation. Investment in the IT (information technology) sector jumped from \$17 billion in 1970s to \$175 billion in 1990, then to \$496 billion in 2000. It then dipped following the turn-of-century dot-com bust, only to climb up to new heights after 2008, surpassing \$700 billion as 2017 drew to a close (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis 2017).

The first generation of capitalist globalization from the 1980s on involved the creation of a globally integrated production and financial system, whereas more recently digitalization and the rise of “platforms” have facilitated a very rapid transnationalization of services. Platforms refer to digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact. As the dependence of economic activity on platforms spreads the tech sector becomes ever more strategic to global capitalism. Trade in CIT goods in 2015 exceeded \$2 trillion, according to United Nations data, while CIT services exports rose by 40% between 2010 and 2015. In that year, the production of CIT goods and services represented

6.5% of global GDP and 100 million people were employed in the CIT service sector. Moreover, global e-commerce sales reached \$25 trillion as 380 million people made purchases on overseas websites (UNCTAD 2017). By 2017 services accounted for some 70% of the total gross world product (Marois 2017) and included communications, informatics, digital and platform technology, e-commerce, financial services, professional and technical work, and a host of other non-tangible products such as film and music.

We are set for the digital decimation of major sectors of the global economy. Anything can be digitalized, and this is increasingly almost everything. Automation is now spreading from industry and finance to all branches of services, even to fast food and agriculture. Neo-liberal economists and policymakers claim that the digital economy will bring high-skilled and high-paid jobs. Yet evidence suggests that digitalization will accelerate the trend towards mass and underemployment as near laborless production expands throughout the economy alongside increased precarious and casualized forms of employment for those that continue to work, as members of the TCC seek to lower wages, to eliminate workers, and to out-compete one another. In the short term, digitalization may expand opportunities for accumulation and allow for a new round of fixed capital expansion. But ultimately, digitalization to the extent that it replaces labor with technology pushes costs down toward zero. All of the contradictions of capitalism become intensified. The rate of profit decreases. The realization problem is aggravated. Hence the emerging digital economy cannot resolve the problem of over-accumulation.

In the United States, for instance, the net increase in jobs since 2005 has been almost exclusively in unstable and usually low paid work arrangements. Precarious labor is predicated on so-called “flexitime,” which as Starzmann (2018) notes, often means nothing other than a non-stop work schedule. On-call temp workers are rapidly replacing regular staff in retail, delivery, restaurant and hospitality work in the United States (Bhattarai 2018, A10). Amazon, with a workforce of 230,000 and tens of thousands of seasonal workers, is notorious for brutal sweatshop-like labor conditions in its warehouses and logistical networks, described as “the future of low-wage work”; meanwhile, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos became the richest man in the world in 2017, with a net worth of over \$100 billion, while thousands of Amazon employees require food stamps to make ends meet (Edwards 2013; Jamieson 2015). Indeed, digital-driven production seeks to lower wage, capital, and overhead costs—ultimately to achieve what the Nike Corporation refers to as “engineering the labor out of the product” (Ford 2015, 12). Revealingly, the US labor market added 9.1 million jobs between 2005 and 2015, including 9.4 million precarious jobs, so that the net increase in jobs since 2005 has been solely in these unstable work arrangements (Srnicsek 2017, 79). A billion dollar data center built in 2011 by Apple in North Carolina created a mere 50 full-time positions (Ford 2015, 107). In the Philippines, 100,000 outsourced workers earn a few hundred dollars a month searching through the content on social media such as Google and Facebook and in cloud storage to remove offensive images (Chen 2014). Yet they too stand to be replaced by digital technology, as do millions of call center, data entry and software workers around the world, along with their counterparts in manufacturing and in other service sector jobs (UNCTAD 2017).²

It had already become evident in the late-twentieth century that the restructuring of world capitalism associated with globalization and CIT has involved a polarization of the working class between those whose work has been deskilled and routinized and

those who moved into the ranks of so-called knowledge workers engaged in high-skilled (and allegedly high-paid) labor. These workers are what Robert Reich called “symbolic analysts” and others have referred to as those performing immaterial labor (Aronowitz 2003; Hardt and Negri 2001; Reich 1992). However, digitalization brings about the expanded commodification of cognitive labor and the proletarianization and precariatization of those who perform such labor. This process involves the real subsumption of cognitive labor. Formal subsumption refers to the process by which people are separated from their means of survival or production, such as land or small businesses, so that they are forced to work for capital, whereas real subsumption refers to the subordination of workers into the capitalist production process as it is directly controlled by capital in the factory, the plantation, service sector, or in this case, through control over immaterial labor through the internet. Real subsumption involves the total corporeal discipline, oppression, and domination of labor, so that one loses whatever is left of individual power and autonomy, incorporated, in Marx’s words as a “living appendage” into the production process.

There is an important generational dimension to these new capital–labor relations insofar as the “millennial generation” is the first to be born into a digital world in which precarious work is becoming the norm and which could become normalized in the absence of a class-conscious movement against precariatization. The twentieth-century social contract that regulated work is a thing of the past for many, perhaps most of the millennial generation born between 1980 and the turn of century, and even more so the next generation that some have referred to as “Generation Y” (Koukoulas 2016). This was precisely at a time when the global working class increasingly resembles a global army of youth. “While countries across Europe and East Asia are grappling with declining birthrates and aging populations, societies across the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia are experiencing youth booms of staggering proportions,” noted one 2016 report (Lord 2016).

More than half of Egypt’s labor force is younger than age 30. Half of Nigeria’s population of 167 million is between the ages of 15 and 34. In Afghanistan, Chad, East Timor, Niger, Somalia, and Uganda, more than two-thirds of the population is under the age of 25. (Lord 2016)

And 300 million Indians were under the age of 15 (Lord 2016). The global youth face a wave of labor-replacing technology and the real prospects of laborless production. At the same time, global marketing tantalizes youth with an endless stream of products and services. How will the youth of today respond politically to the contradiction of being swept up in this ubiquitous “culture-ideology of consumerism” and the reality of unemployment and poverty?³

Young knowledge workers in particular are set to swell the ranks of the increasingly impoverished and alienated digital proletariat. A growing portion of this proletariat labors by supplying “on-demand” digital services online, what is sometimes dubbed the “human cloud.” While neo-liberal economists and policymakers refer to them as “self-employed entrepreneurs,” they are in effect outsourced contract workers laboring in the absence of any job stability or income security, entirely at the whim of those who contract them. The notion of a “sharing economy” gives the sense of control and autonomy even as the work involved becomes even more precarious and disciplined. Firms such as Freelancer.com and UpWork contracted more than five million people to work remotely online in 2017. Such “micro-work” sites as Mechanical Turk, a service operated by

Amazon, contracts some 500,000 “Turkers” who earn a few cents for each task performed (*The Economist* 2017, 55). “All across the world,” notes Starzmann (2018), “uncountable solitary figures have committed themselves to lives in front of screens, fingers moving across keyboards ceaselessly—thinking, typing, producing.” And Bradley and Lee (2018, 642) warn that the “revolutionary energy [of this young digital proletariat] is spent elsewhere—on computer games, porn, gambling, endless forms of intoxication to escape the reality of the working day.”

Here we need to explore the implications of such a shift for subject formation, for consciousness and for what Pierre Bourdieu has termed *habitus*, as “an acquired system of generative schemes” adjusted to a given set of social conditions (Bourdieu 1977, 95).⁴ The development of inter-subjectivities and class consciousness are impeded by the individuated and isolated nature of much cognitive labor. What type of a worldview may come out of this work absent some political mobilization outside of the work process? Cognitive workers may be more inclined to identify with middle and professional strata rather than with the global working class to which most belong. Fragmentation of the labor process and of work into scattered and irregular moments of labor power throws up new challenges to the organization of the working class and to the development of working-class consciousness. Certainly, any emancipatory project in order for it to succeed would have to bring together surplus humanity and their struggles in the margins and at points of social reproduction with those formally inserted into the circuits of global capital under precarious work arrangements.

From Lumpenproletariat to Lumpenprecarariat

In the broader picture, the global working class brings together those exploited more intensively through precarious and casualized employment with those excluded. Digitalization, in addition to generating precarious forms of employment, is expected to exponentially increase the surplus labor population. The “end of work,” the “jobless future” and the “rise of robots” that replace human workers is a commonplace topic among academics, journalists, and politicians.⁵ Millions of people expelled from formal employment have managed to scratch out a living through Uber and other “platform companies” as informal and “self-employed” workers. But in 2016 Uber announced that it would replace one million drivers with autonomously driven vehicles (Mitchell and Lien 2016, A1). Foxconn, the Taiwanese-based conglomerate that assembles iPads and other electronic devices, announced in 2012 following a wave of strikes by its workers in China that it would replace one million workers with robots. As productivity increases the system sheds more and more workers. In 1990 the top three carmakers in Detroit had a market capitalization of \$36 billion and 1.2 million employees. In 2014 the top three firms in Silicon Valley, with a market capitalization of over \$1 trillion had only 137,000 employees (*The Economist* 2016, 9).

As digitalization concentrates capital and heightens polarization and inequality the process expands the ranks of surplus labor. Surplus humanity toils in all sorts of survival strategies in the informal world of a “planet of slums.”⁶ The informal sector has always been functionally linked to the formal sector in a myriad of ways, including as a bastion of social reproduction and for the provision of services to the formal sector.⁷ Yet under globalization the lines between formality and informality become ever more blurred. Surplus

humanity is of no *direct* use to transnational capital. However, in the larger picture, surplus labor is crucial to global capitalism insofar as it places downward pressure on wages everywhere and allows transnational capital to impose heightened discipline over those who remain active in the labor market. Moreover, as Swidler (2018) notes, capital is increasingly reliant on methods of extracting surplus labor other than the wage relation, among them, social reproduction in the family and the community, piece work, unpaid labor such as internships and prison labor, predatory finance, and shadow work. “The overwork of the employed part of the working-class swells the ranks of the reserve,” notes Marx (1972, 425), “whilst conversely the greater pressure that the latter by its competition exerts on the former, forces these to submit to over-work and to subjugation under the dictates of capital.” However, the restructuring of world capitalism through globalization has given rise to a new global army of superfluous labor that goes well beyond the traditional reserve army of labor that Marx discussed. The processes by which surplus labor is generated have accelerated under globalization.

Crises provide capital with the opportunity to restructure and to accelerate the process of forcing greater productivity out of fewer workers—a process that may increase exponentially through digitalization. At the same time, there has been a massive new round of primitive accumulation and displacement of hundreds of millions, perhaps billions, around the world. The TCC undertook hyper-accumulation in recent decades by applying new CIT technologies to organize a globally integrated production and financial system, and through neo-liberal policies, and new modalities of mobilizing and exploiting a global labor force. The TCC conquered new markets in hothouse fashion in the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the Third World. Several hundred million new middle-class consumers in China, India and elsewhere in the so-called “emerging countries” provided new global market segments that fueled growth. But at the same time hundreds of millions, perhaps billions of people, were displaced from the Third World countryside through new rounds of primitive accumulation brought about by neo-liberal policies as well as social cleansing, and organized violence such the “war on drugs” and the “war on terror,” both of which have served as instruments of primitive accumulation and for the violent restructuring and integration of countries and regions into the new global economy (for example, Paley 2014). Banks and institutional investors began vast new land grabs around the world in the second decade of the twenty-first century in what amounts to a new round of global enclosures.

All this has generated a vast army of internal and transnational migrants who have swelled the ranks of the unemployed and the structurally marginalized. In 2015 there were 232 million international migrants and 740 million internal migrants, according to the International Organization on Migration (Çağlar 2015, 2). Some of the uprooted millions are super-exploited through incorporation into the global factories, farms, and offices as precarious labor, while others are marginalized and converted into surplus humanity, relegated to a planet of slums. The International Labor Organization (ILO) reported that 1.53 billion workers around the world were in such “vulnerable” employment arrangements in 2009, representing more than 50% of the global workforce. The ILO also reported that in the late-twentieth century some one-third of the global labor forces had been made superfluous and locked out of the global economy.⁸

Let us revisit accumulation crisis and link it to this expansion of surplus labor worldwide. Capitalist competition and class struggle push capital to reduce costs and/or increase

productivity by increasing the organic composition of capital, which leads to the tendency for the rate of profit to fall (Marx 1978). This tendency, the “most fundamental law” of political economy, is expressed as over-accumulation crisis. It is worth quoting Marx at length with regard to how capitalist production of necessity, constantly reproduces an “industrial reserve army” or “surplus population” because the creation and expansion of this surplus population is the central background factor to understanding unprecedented inequality worldwide, the expansion of surplus humanity through a new round of global capitalist restructuring based on digitalization, and looming global crisis:

It is capitalistic accumulation itself that constantly produces, and produces in direct ratio of its own energy and extent, a relatively redundant population of laborers, i.e. a population of greater extent than suffices for the average needs of the self-expansion of capital, and therefore a surplus population. The laboring population therefore produces, along with the accumulation of capital produced by it, the means by which itself is made relatively superfluous, is turned into a relative surplus population; and it does this to an always increasing extent. . . . This increase is effected by the simple process that constantly “sets free” a part of the laborers; by methods which lessen the number of laborers employed in proportion to the increased production. The whole form of the movement of modern industry depends, therefore, upon the constant transformation of a part of the laboring population into unemployed or half-employed hands. . . . But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labor-army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus-population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to its torment of labor. The more extensive, finally, the Lazarus-layers of the working-class, and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.* (Marx 1972, 422, 424, 429–430; emphasis in the original)

The constantly replenished reserve army of labor to the pulse of capital accumulation is for Marx “the general law of capitalist accumulation.” Marx goes on to identify three forms of surplus labor: floating, latent, and stagnant. The first two were seen as those who weave in and out of the production process in accordance with the cycles of capital accumulation and changes in the division of labor. The third, however, is a group that has been pushed structurally outside of the production process, that is, which is of no *direct* use to capital over entire historical epochs. Marx tended to denigrate those in this latter category as lumpenproletariat. But given that digitalization, to the extent that it replaces labor with technology, has the potential to drastically reduce the need for labor (“variable capital” in Marx’s lexicon) and to push costs towards zero, it may be that the expansion of the ranks of surplus humanity worldwide is a permanent structural phenomenon of global capitalism rather than a transitory dislocation pending absorption into new circuits of accumulation.

The concept of the lumpenproletariat has an important etiology in the history of capitalism. Marx first discussed the lumpenproletariat in derogatory terms as a *déclassé* and degenerated element among the proletariat—prostitutes, vagabonds, petty criminals—an underclass without a class consciousness and prone to serving as “a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.” He describes the lumpenproletariat as “vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, pimps, brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars—in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither” by capitalism (Marx 1952, 38). However, some of the negative connotations of the lumpenproletariat fell away in the mid-twentieth century as it became clear

that racism, colonialism, and imperialism thrust hundreds of millions of their victims into the ranks of the displaced, the unemployed and the excluded. Lumpenproletariat now appeared as a structural (and sometimes legal) location of marginality and informality in the world capitalist system with a contingent political agency. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1963) referred to the lumpenproletariat as displaced peasants who constituted a potentially revolutionary force against the colonial system, although he warned that it is unpredictable and could as well turn into hired soldiers of the colonialists. 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)

In the United States, the Black Panthers sought to organize the black lumpenproletariat as a mass social base, although this strategy was not without its limitations and its critics (Booker 2005, 337–362).

But now in this age of capitalist globalization, surplus humanity may be an analytically as well as politically superior concept to make sense of that mass of humanity thrown into the margins of the system. While there is certainly a delinquent element among the mass of humanity that has been “thrown hither and tither” by the destabilization of global capital, surplus humanity appears to be a structural category thrown up by an accelerated restructuring and a more advanced stage of global capital accumulation. Surplus humanity includes those who suffer from long-term structural un- and under-employment, the mass of people who eke out a living (or do not even manage to do so) in the informal economy of the slums of the world’s megacities, as well as international refugees, those internally displaced by wars, repression and natural disasters, migrant workers who may be forced underground and unable to enter the formal labor market, among others who exist in what Bradley and Lee (2018) call the “non-places of the world.” In this regard, surplus humanity exists in conjunction with the precariat and may weave in and out of more formal yet precarious employment. Bradley and Lee observe

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. (Bradley and Lee 2018)

We concur with their political assessment: “Marx’s distinction between the revolutionary laboring poor and the reactionary lumpenproletariat no longer holds under the global conditions of contemporary exploitation” (Bradley and Lee 2018, 641). *Lumpenprecariat* captures the idea of a global working class that brings the precariat together with surplus humanity.

Concluding Comments: Out of the Grey Zone

It is this lumpenprecariat that so terrifies the likes of Johann Rupert and the TCC and that gives impetus to a global police state to contain the real and potential rebellion of the lumpenprecariat. Savage global inequalities are politically explosive and to the extent that the

system is simply unable to incorporate surplus humanity it turns to ever more violent forms of containment, captured in the concept of global police state (Robinson 2018a, 2018c). Global police state refers to three interrelated developments. First is the ever more omnipresent systems of mass social control, repression and warfare promoted by the ruling groups to contain the real and the potential rebellion of the global working class and surplus humanity. In this regard, global police state is centrally aimed at *coercive exclusion* of surplus humanity. Second is how the global economy is itself based more and more on the development and deployment of these systems of warfare, social control, and repression simply as a means of making profit and continuing to accumulate capital in the face of stagnation—what Robinson has termed *militarized accumulation*, or *accumulation by repression*—and that now goes well beyond military Keynesianism. And third is the increasing move towards political systems that can be characterized as twenty-first century fascism, or even in a broader sense, as totalitarian.⁹

There is a dangerous spiral here in the contradiction between a digitalization that throws ever more workers into the ranks of surplus humanity and the need for the system to unload ever-greater amounts of accumulated surplus. Once masses of people are no longer needed on a long term and even permanent basis there arises the political problem of how to control this expanded mass of surplus humanity. Greater discipline is required, both for those who manage to secure work under new regimes of precarious employment and super-exploitation and for those expelled and made surplus. The global order as a unity becomes increasingly repressive and authoritarian. Projects of twenty-first century fascism gains traction as mechanisms of cultural hegemony that involve the manipulation of anxieties and desires, and of structural (economic) control such as debt, combine with heightened coercive control.¹⁰

We have focused here on the problem of surplus humanity and the precariat and do not claim clarity on the solution. We have sought to interrogate the current wave of capitalist restructuring that is reshaping class relations and consciousness. Yet we cannot be Ludites. The problem is not technology but capital. The expansion of surplus humanity and precariousness is not a result of digitalization as much as an expression of the problem of capitalism. If capital has no use for labor it will be ghettoized in the so-called *grey zone* and subject to the new systems of social control and repression in a global police state. The grey zone refers to spaces in between those of the well off and those of outright warfare, where policing and other forms of containment become normalized against the lumpen-precariat subject to repressive discipline. Here is where we find the prison-industrial complexes, immigration and refugee control systems, mass surveillance, ubiquitous, often paramilitarized policing, alongside a mobilization of state ideological apparatuses that portray the outcast as dangerous, deprived, and undeserving and that inculcate petty consumerism and flight into fantasy.

Ruling groups have turned to containment of surplus humanity through criminalization, as is the case with the bogus wars on drugs and terror. In many cases, criminalization makes surplus humanity *both* a structural and a legal location, as in the legal criminalization of immigrant workers in the United States. In Denmark, the government announced in 2018 plans to legalize discrimination against poor and immigrant communities through a bill that would set apart as “ghettos” communities where more than 50% of residents are non-Western immigrants, where unemployment is above 40%, and where the average income is less than 55% of the average for the region (BBC News 2018). In “the United

Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights,” Philip Alston, warned in a 2017 report on poverty and inequality in the United States:

In many cities, homeless persons are effectively criminalized for the situation in which they find themselves. Sleeping rough, sitting in public spaces, panhandling, public urination and a myriad of other offenses have been devised to attach the “blight” of homelessness. Even more demanding and intrusive regulations lead to infraction notices, which rapidly turn into misdemeanors, leading to the issuance of warrants, incarceration, the incurring of unpayable fines, and the stigma of a criminal conviction that in turn virtually prevents subsequent employment and access to most housing. (Alston 2017)

There is both a danger and a silver lining to the restructuring of the global working class and the devastation wrought on it by capitalist globalization. Those sectors that saw rising standards of living in the post-World War II period are now experiencing under capitalist globalization downward mobility, heightened insecurity and precariatization that threaten to undo the hegemonic blocs forged in the twentieth century in the rich countries through the incorporation of these sectors. When reform-oriented transnational elites bemoan the “loss of the middle class,” they are referring to the destabilization of these formerly privileged sectors among the working and popular classes and to the erosion of the earlier hegemonic blocs around the world. The erosion of such hegemonic blocs creates fertile ground for counter-hegemonic struggles but it also creates ground for the recruitment of such destabilized sectors into right-wing populist and neo-fascist projects that often involve racist and xenophobic mobilizations. The threat of neo-fascism poses the need for broad class alliances, or united front politics. Historically such fronts have subordinated the left to the reform-oriented and “democratic” bourgeoisie. This time around, in our view, any strategy of broad anti-fascist alliances must foreground a clear and sharp analysis of global capitalism and its crisis and strive for popular and working-class forces to exercise their hegemony over such alliances.

Splits and infighting within the ruling groups are escalating as hegemonic blocs unravel. Reformists among the transnational elite, concerned over the fragility of the global economy, have called for mildly redistributive measures and introduction of transnational regulation of the global financial system.¹¹ They have also expressed concern over the prospects of twenty-first century fascism and alarm that extreme levels of inequality will undermine the prospects for growth and profit-making and fuel popular revolt. “Doing nothing, in the current model around capitalism, will destroy capitalism,” warned in 2017 Mark Bertolini, the CEO of Aetna, a \$250 billion healthcare company (Leaf 2017). “When 65% of people under the age of 35 believe that socialism is a better model, we have a problem. So unless we change it, it will change—and maybe not in a good way” (Leaf 2017). These concerns may become more widespread as the systems spirals into deeper crisis. “A crisis exists, sometimes lasting for decades,” observed Gramsci. “This means that incurable contradictions have come to light within the structure and that the political force positively working to preserve the structure itself are nevertheless striving to heal these contradictions, within certain limits” (Fonseca 2016, 23–24).

Alliances with reformers among the transnational elite may be important, but so too is pushing beyond the reformist approach to global inequality. This approach is entirely inadequate because it bypasses the questions of *power* and of corporate control over the planet’s productive resources that are at the very heart of global capitalism and its crisis.

Any resolution to this crisis requires a radical redistribution of wealth and power downward to the poor majority of humanity. Social justice requires a measure of transnational social governance over the global production and financial system as a necessary first step in this radical redistribution, which in turn must be linked to the transformation of class and property relations and a struggle for what ultimately must be an eco-socialism. While we cannot take up here these larger matters, part of counter-hegemonic struggle is the interrogation of how forms of class and social consciousness have been shaped by exclusion, precariatization, and the individuated nature of work and life under digital capitalism, as well as the challenges to emancipatory struggles posed by these capital–labor relations.

The rise of the precariat and surplus humanity points to an expansion of the global working class that opens up a world of possibilities with regard to common interests and experiences even if organizing this class, or its self-organization, is made problematic by its atomization and individualized consciousness. And we should be mindful that there is still a “traditional” industrial working class that has stepped up its struggles in recent years (see, *inter alia*, Ness 2015). Yet the lumpenprecariat condition changes the terms of its struggles and the challenges of regenerating working class consciousness and a collective action capacity. As Aronowitz reminds us, following Marx, “the central criterion for class formation is the capacity of a social formation or a constellation of them for self-organization and self-representation” (Aronowitz 2003, 58), that is, to forge some sense of a shared identity and a community.

The key challenge of reconstructing emancipatory projects under the new conditions of global capitalism is to build solidarity among workers who experience such individuated isolation along with those who are not in a position to withdraw their labor and those who face extreme vulnerability in precarious employment. The conditions that the lumpenprecariat face, combined with the isolation and individuated nature of cognitive workers, suggest that the axis of class consciousness and collective agency surely must involve a shift from isolated points of production to everyday life, communities and the political system. How do we link a politics of everyday life to projects of collective emancipation beyond the local, keeping in mind the fragmentation of struggles, whether at the local or world level, that are always specific and conducted in particular places and subject-matters, such as ecology, women’s rights, social services, and community demands? Any fight back will have to challenge exclusion and struggle against precarious work arrangements alongside the more traditional struggles of those that may be formally employed. The repertoire of global working-class struggles must involve strategies, in addition to strike activity, for the widespread disruption of the system, insofar as those excluded cannot fight by withdrawing their labor.

Notes

1. Guy Standing (2011) popularized but did not coin this term. Standing’s social democratic conception is seriously flawed. He suggests that the precariat is “a new class” rather than part of the working class experiencing a condition faced by expanding sectors of the working class. He does not conceive of this condition as an instance of the capital–labor relation. He takes a First World/Eurocentric view of the global precariat—what we could call “methodological Westernism”—and appears unable to combine class with racial, ethnic, and cultural analysis. His liberal orientation does not critique capital as a relation causal to the rise of the

precariat as much as the state as an inadequate regulator of the market and its social consequences. For discussion, see inter alia, “Roundtable on the Precariat” (see, <https://www.greattransition.org/publication/debating-the-precariat-a-roundtable?highlight=WyJ3aWxsaWFtliwid2lsbGlhbXMiLCJpIiwiaSdtIiwiaSdkiIiwiaSd2ZSIsImknbGwiLCInaSIsInJvYmluc29uIiwicm9iaW5zb24ncyIsIndpbGxpYW0gaSIsIndpbGxpYW0gaSByb2JpbnNvbiIsImkgcm9iaW5zb24iXQ==>).

2. UNCTAD (2017, 62), estimated that more than 85% of all retails and service workers in Indonesia and the Philippines were at risk of losing their jobs to digital automation.
3. In the United States and perhaps elsewhere, higher education is becoming a strategy for deferring unemployment. There has been an unprecedented increase in university enrollment of over five million since 2001 and enrollment numbers are expected to climb another 15% by 2015, while the price for tuition and fees has jumped 157% in private institutions and 237% in public schools (Starzmann 2018). Student debt approached \$1.5 trillion in 2018, over twice the total US credit card debt (see *Student Loan Hero* 2018). See Soederberg’s (2014, 79–132) brilliant analysis in Chapter Five, “Debtfarism and the Student Loan Industry.” This debt is a claim on the future wages of these students, and in at least 20 states debtors can be denied drivers licenses and professional licenses if they do not maintain debt payments. Their precarious situation creates the conditions for lives as precarious workers in the future, while training becomes more and more disconnected from income.
4. There is a burgeoning literature on work, social organization, culture, and consciousness in the digital era that we cannot discuss here. But see, inter alia, Betancourt (2016), and Stiegler (2017).
5. See, inter alia, Aronowitz and DiFazio (2010), Ford (2015), Srnicek (2016), and Rivkin (1995).
6. The phrase is from Davis (2006).
7. See, inter alia, discussion in Portes, Castells, and Benton (1989).
8. For the figure on those in vulnerable employment, see ILO (2011). For the figure on the unemployed, see ILO (1997).
9. On twenty-first century fascism, see Robinson (2019).
10. See Robinson (2019) and Robinson’s (2014, 158–213) Chapter Five, “Policing Global Capitalism.”
11. For detailed discussion, see Robinson (2018b).

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