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“We are a service class”

A workers’ inquiry into the class composition of service commodity production during the unreal interregnum

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the University of West London for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

It is half a century since the British workers' movement went into decline. This downwards trajectory was not reversed by the financial crisis of 2008 – in fact, if anything, it was accelerated by it. Levels of working class self-organisation and collective action in the sphere of production remain at historic lows. This lack of activity has left us trapped in a long decade of crisis, subject to a deeply unequal balance of class forces. This thesis makes two contributions to understanding how this impasse might come to an end by focusing on the class composition of one fraction of the contemporary British working class: young, low-paid, service workers who are disconnected from the institutions of the workers' movement. First, it develops an original theoretical framework for the analysis of class composition on the basis of a 3-part model (technical, social, and political). This framework uses original readings of Marx, the socialist feminist tradition, and Lenin in order to analyse working class organisation in the sphere of production through a consistent system of categories founded in the materialist analysis of social relations. Second, it presents the results of a workers' inquiry made up of three case studies into three separate workplaces in Brighton. This study found a class fraction which is subject to intense systems of managerial control – but which also has the capacity to throw those systems into disarray. Below the surface of the service sector, many of the conditions necessary for a rapid shift in the balance of class forces are present. What's missing is a subjective spark – a spark which could be provided by the significant minority of workers who are sympathetic with political militancy, and whose agitation might prove capable of starting a process of associational amplification through which the fraction first struggles for their immediate economic interests, and then leaps into the fight for

their more fundamental political ones. Such a leap, if merged with the concerted efforts of socialists to create mechanisms for the expression of this antagonism at the political level, might offer some hope, as the long post-crisis decade comes to an end with an unparalleled global interruption of capital valorisation as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic.

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Avanti popolo, alla riscossa!

[Forward people, to the rescue!]

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Introduction: “All that exists deserves to perish”

During the long, post-crisis decade that stretched from 2008 to 2020, British society was defined by the accelerating contradiction between outbursts of an intense collective desire for the complete destruction of the present state of things, and the irrational continuity of everyday life. Such a clash is by no means a novel phenomenon. Engels, reflecting on the revolutionary implication of Hegel’s argument in his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* that “what is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational” (Hegel 2011, 20), underlined that such contradictions are integral to historical development:

> … reality is, however, in no way an attribute predictable of any given state of affairs, social or political, in all circumstances and at all times. On the contrary. The Roman Republic was real, but so was the Roman Empire, which superseded it. In 1789, the French monarchy had become so unreal, that is to say, so robbed of all necessity, so irrational, that it had to be destroyed by the Great Revolution, of which Hegel always speaks with the greatest enthusiasm. In this case, therefore, the monarchy was the unreal and the revolution the real. And so, in the course of development, all that was previously real becomes unreal, loses its necessity, its right of existence, its rationality. And in the place of moribund reality comes a new, viable reality — peacefully if the old has enough intelligence to go to its death without a struggle; forcibly if it resists this necessity. Thus the Hegelian proposition turns into its opposite through Hegelian dialectics itself: All that is real in the sphere of human history, becomes irrational in the process of time, is therefore irrational by its very destination, is tainted beforehand with irrationality, and everything which is rational in the minds of men is destined to become real, however much it may contradict existing apparent reality. In accordance with all the rules of the Hegelian method of thought, the proposition of the rationality of everything which is real resolves itself into the other proposition: All that exists deserves to perish. (Friedrick Engels 1994, pt. 1)

The emergent expressions of this Hegelian proposition, of this desire to abolish a social reality which felt beyond its time, were not unidirectional at the time of Engel’s commentary and are not unidirectional today. Attempts to break the systematic continuity of post-crisis Britain began from many different points and headed in many

different directions: some towards reaction, some towards revolution, some towards irrelevance. And yet, fundamentally, that overstaying continuity was not broken by any of them. History left us hanging in the much-quoted Gramscian interregnum, meditating on our morbid symptoms.

This thesis is an examination of the balance of forces at the end of our liminal decade from the perspective of one of its key subjects: the working class. But I do not take this perspective with any illusions. Whilst maintaining that the working class is the class to whom the future belongs, the class that must emancipate itself through its own action, and the class whose slogan is rightfully "*I am nothing but I must be everything"*, it is impossible not to recognise that this unreal decade has seen a continuation of a half-century of profound defeat for the British working class. Instead, I take this perspective in order to try and understand how the long-suppressed insurgent potential of that class might find expression, as we teeter on the edge of a new historical period.

The long depression

Lenin, whose theoretical work was almost entirely dedicated to the question of how to intervene in such transitional moments, offered the following discussion of what constituted a revolutionary situation in *The Collapse of the Second International,* written a year after the outbreak of the First World War in 1915:

> What, generally speaking, are the symptoms of a revolutionary situation? We shall certainly not be mistaken if we indicate the following three major symptoms: (1) when it is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule without any change; when there is a crisis, in one form or another, among the "upper classes", a crisis in the policy of the ruling class, leading to a fissure through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes burst forth. For a revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for "the lower classes not to want" to live in the old way; it is also necessary that "the upper classes should be unable" to live in the old way; (2) when the suffering and want of the oppressed classes have grown

> more acute than usual; (3) when, as a consequence of the above causes, there is a considerable increase in the activity of the masses, who uncomplainingly allow themselves to be robbed in "peace time", but, in turbulent times, are drawn both by all the circumstances of the crisis *and by the "upper classes" themselves* into independent historical action. (Lenin 2003, pt. 2)

The first and second of these conditions were manifestly evident in the last decade. The financial crash led to a global recession followed by a "long depression" (M. Roberts 2016) in which capital valorisation has been anaemic at best. In historical context, the post-crisis decade has seen remarkably sluggish growth in all key indicators:

Table 1. Average Annual Rates of Growth (%, 2016 prices) (Mohun 2019)

	Social Democracy		Neoliberalism and Globalisation		
	Golden age	Transition	Tory years	Labour years	Crisis and austerity
	1948-73	1973-79	1979-97	1997-2007	2007-17
GDP per head	2.9	1.51	2.11	2.38	0.34
Consumption per head	2.34	1.46	2.7	2.94	0.21
Total Investment	7.46	0.62	1.59	3.27	0.77
Output per hour	3.62	1.68	2.29	2.02	0.33
Average weekly wages	2.48	2.33	2.47	2.21	-0.09

The British economy's post-crisis period has been defined by the remarkable ability of capital to cut wages during a period of very limited recovery (see Table 1). This singular fact encapsulates how employers have been on the offensive throughout

the long decade. This offensive has not just resulted in household disposable incomes falling, particularly outside of London (Mohun 2019), but also in the reorganisation of much of the productive sphere. The British workforce has expanded, and the new employment which has followed the crisis has been predominantly based on non-standard and self-employed forms of work, and so has been combined with a deterioration in conditions of employment and wages (OECD 2017; ILO 2019). Many of these newly-incorporated non-standard workers have been migrants and people forced into the workforce by aggressive welfare and pension reform - the sick and the elderly (ILO 2019). Less than a quarter of British workers have employment contracts lasting 25 months or longer (ILO 2019). Trade union density amongst permanent employees was 24% in 2018, whereas amongst temporary staff it is just 14.8% (ONS 2019d). Given the expansion of non-standard employment and self-employment, this means that rates of unionisation are lowest in precisely those layers of the labour market which have expanded post-crisis. The new norm of non-standard work is also a new norm of non-union work.

This expanded workforce has predominantly been employed in low-productivity service work, with deindustrialisation continuing to shift the sectoral balance of British capital, as will be discussed further below. As a result of the nature of service commodity production, gains in labour productivity have been low, and what growth there has been has relied on an expansion in absolute surplus value production through increases in the raw number of hours worked in the productive sector as a whole (which rose 15% from 910 million hours in June-August 2009 to 1,055 in August-October 2019), and the intensity of those hours, rather than relative surplus value production through technological development (ONS 2020b). But despite this short-term trend, which runs counter to the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (Marx 1981,

3:317–38), profitability is still only just returning to the historic norm (Mohun 2019). This expansion in employment has, however, meant that unemployment rates remain low. Rather than the crisis generating huge surplus populations who experience immiseration through exclusion from the wage relation, it has instead generated an expansion of in-work poverty (SMC 2019). The British working class has (to varying degrees) been *immiserated within the wage relation*.

So, the pre-crisis norm has been replaced by widespread precarious employment in low-wage, low-productivity jobs. But this ruling class offensive in the workplace has been just one aspect of a generalised process through which the ruling class as a whole responded to the fact that it was no longer possible to maintain their rule without changing anything. One of the central planks of this process was austerity. The supposed logic of the coalition government's austerity policy was to reduce the national debt as a percentage of GDP, but in fact it achieved the exact opposite: in 2010, it stood at 71.7%, in 2017, 86.1% (Mohun 2019). Instead, what austerity really achieved was a dramatic cut in the social wage, the privatisation of previously public social functions, the sell-off of public assets at below market prices, and the forcing of an ever greater section of the population into poverty.

In 2014-15, 30% of British households had incomes below the minimum level needed to afford a basic basket of goods and services (Padley, Hirsch, and Valadez 2017). In 2019, 14.3 million people were in poverty in the UK (SMC 2019). This immiseration has been deadly. Health and social care cuts alone have been linked to 120,000 excess deaths since 2010 (Watkins et al. 2017), with other analysis suggesting that slowed progress in disease prevention is linked to a further 130,000 deaths (Hochlaf, Quilter-Pinner, and Kibasi 2019) and that austerity has contributed to the stalling of UK life expectancy (Hiam et al. 2018). Such quantitative estimates are

partial, mostly focusing on austerity in the specific domain of health policy, and therefore likely reveal only a fraction of the overall mortality burden linked to austerity. As that noted radical, the UN special rapporteur for extreme poverty, put it:

> Although the United Kingdom is the world's fifth largest economy, one fifth of its population (14 million people) live in poverty, and 1.5 million of them experienced destitution in 2017. Policies of austerity introduced in 2010 continue largely unabated, despite the tragic social consequences. Close to 40 per cent of children are predicted to be living in poverty by 2021. Food banks have proliferated; homelessness and rough sleeping have increased greatly; tens of thousands of poor families must live in accommodation far from their schools, jobs and community networks; life expectancy is falling for certain groups; and the legal aid system has been decimated. (Alston 2019, 1)

Whilst this degree of working class immiseration might have allowed capital to escape a perpetual recession, that is not to say the British economy is in rude health as the long post-crisis decade comes to a close. Such a "recovery" amounts to a partly-successful programme of class war from above, which has retrenched power and value in the hands of the bourgeoise at the expense of working class immiseration.

But if systemic crisis and immiseration were the defining features of the last decade, the third symptom Lenin mentions, the independent historical action of the popular classes, was less evident. Lenin's category of independent historical action is somewhat vague for our purposes, so in this thesis I will focus on what I consider to be two specific subsets of this wider bracket: the self-organisation and collective action of the working class in the workplace. Self-organisation is not a phenomenon which is prone to easy measurement (as will be discussed in part two), but collective action is much more measurable. So, what big picture evidence is there of trends in workplace collective action in Britain in the post-crisis decade?

Despite tight labour markets and falling wages, both of which would conventionally be assumed to contribute to rising levels of industrial militancy (see, for

instance, Shorey 1977), levels of strike action have remained at historic lows. This decline is perhaps best demonstrated by looking at the trend in the number of stoppages ongoing in any given month over the last fifty years. The record low of just six stoppages in progress in one month in the UK has been hit four times: December 2007, December 2008, April 2009 and April 2010. The near-record low of seven stoppages in progress in a month has been recorded eight times, all of them since 2005 and six times within the decade in question: January 2009, February 2009, August 2010, April 2018, December 2018 and January 2020 (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of Stoppages in Progress (monthly) in the UK, January 1970 to January 2020 (ONS 2020a)

This decline is part of a long trend, the full analysis of which stretches far beyond the limits of this thesis. However, the basics of this decline are quite simple. Thatcherism decimated the collective agency of the British working class, by undertaking what Richard Hyman called a programme of “coercive pacification” (Hyman 1994, 199). Unemployment doubled, a quarter of manufacturing jobs were

destroyed, public sector employment was curbed, repressive anti-union and anti-strike legislations were introduced, the major unions were attacked in set piece battles which placed the full repressive power of the state on the side of capital. This was nothing less than a premeditated offensive, based around the 1977 “Ridley plan”, which aimed to escape the crises of the 1970s by bludgeoning the working class into submission – and it succeeded (Joyce 2015; Gallas 2016). Thatcherism directly intervened into the workplace in order to improve the capacity of British industrial capital to extract surplus value through the production process. By 1992 the initial offensive had proven wildly successful: levels of strike activity had collapsed to unprecedented lows, where they have stayed ever since (Lyddon 2015), and trade union density had fallen by a quarter from 57.4% to 32.4% (Brown, Deakin, and Ryan 1997, 75). Post-Thatcher Conservative governments continued to systematically undermine the basis for working class collective action until they finally lost the 1997 general election, only to be replaced by a New Labour government which proved to be only slightly less opposed to working class power at the point of production (Coulter 2014).[1]

However, the story is not as simple as a quantitative reduction in collective action and the intensity of class struggle. There last fifty years have also seen substantial qualitative transformations in the form of class conflict in Britain. One major vector of these transformation was the shift in the centre of gravity in the class struggle outside the workplace, particularly post-crisis. Bailey’s work on social movements over the period 1985-2020 has shown an upwards trend in mobilisation since 2010 (Bailey 2014; 2015; 2020). In a national economy, like the UK, characterised by low levels of coordination, these movements often adopt an approach characterised by Shibata and

[1] On a theoretical level, see, for instance, major New Labour theorist Giddens and his complete failure to indicate any significant role for working class organisations in shaping in the functioning of Third Way social democracy (Giddens 1999).

Bailey as “excluded contestation” (Bailey and Shibata 2017; Shibata and Bailey 2018) which is defined by apparently spontaneous outbursts of innovative and militant protest. The anti-austerity and student movements that emerged post-crisis both seem to fit this model (Bailey 2014; Myers 2017). Rioting, whilst not as readily recognised as a political phenomenon by many actors in the public sphere, was also a key modality, with 2011 seeing large scale outbreaks across England which were at least partly caused by the impact of austerity on working class communities (Lewis et al. 2011; Tyler 2013; Endnotes 2013a). That workplace struggle which did take place was also marked by the crisis context. As Gallas has identified, whilst the numbers of strikes might have remained very low in the post-crisis period there was a qualitative shift in the dynamics of politicisation that applied to collective action. Many of these strikes, such as the large coordinated anti-austerity public sector strikes over pensions in 2011-12 and pay in 2014, were “internally politicised”. That is to say, the workers involved merged economic and political demands through their own action, in response to the crisis conjuncture (Gallas 2018, 249). Developments have also taken place in the relation between these movements and parliamentary politics, with the Labour party moving sharply to the left under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership from 2015-2020 (Seymour 2016; Nunns 2016). In the place of the trade unionism of the 1970s, a new working class repertoire of contention emerged, founded on an increased extra-workplace social movement component and a partly-novel relationship of mediation with the Labour party.

However, it seems generally apparent that despite the emergence of increased levels of social movement mobilisation and the politicisation of collective action in the workplace, the latest round of the long ruling class offensive has been successful. In the most brute economic terms, we only need look at the downwards trend in average

wages discussed above. A working class which cannot even defend its immediate interests in the face of a general wage cut is a very weak working class indeed. In electoral terms, the Conservatives have gone from being the largest party in a coalition government in 2010, to a majority in 2015, and then to an overwhelming majority in 2019. Amidst all the multifaceted crises of the long depression – from environmental to economic, social and constitutional – the British ruling class appears to have stabilised the unstable. The post-crisis working class repertoire of contention has failed to fundamentally alter the balance of forces between classes and as a result the working class has been trampled underfoot by capital and its pet Etonians.

The multitude of factors contributing to this failure extend beyond the scope of this thesis, but one point seems clear: the low ebb of struggle within the sphere of production has left the working class without significant experience of wielding power over capital via interrupting the process of surplus value production. If our interregnum is to be ended in the years to come, it will be through precisely the kind of “independent action of the popular classes” which is, at present, in short supply. As such, understanding the apparent inertia of the working class within the workplace is key to understanding the potential ways in which the multitude of crisis points which make up this conjecture might be resolved.

In this thesis, I will contribute to the wider project of answering this question by analysing the situation and experience of one fraction of the British working class using specific methodological and theoretical tools: workers’ inquiry and class composition, respectively. These will both be introduced in due course. First, however, I will introduce the class fraction which is the subject of the empirical component of this thesis.

The growth of a service class

Beverly Silver's global study of patterns of working class mobilisation in *Forces of Labour* led her to argue that: "we need to look to the sites of significant new job growth as the critical areas for emergent working-class formation and protest" (Silver 2003, 108). Given the interest of this thesis in emergent forms of working class self-organisation and collective action, I will apply Silver's approach to identify the contemporary frontiers of capitalist development in our social formation.[2] Once these frontiers have been identified, I will then narrow my focus to the specific class fraction which is being recomposed at these points of development, and which will be the focus of the inquiry that makes up part three of this thesis.

[2] This analysis will focus on industrial capital in the UK – that is to say, on capital invested in the domestic production of commodities (either for domestic sale of export) as opposed to financial capital, which is largely invested in overseas assets. Whilst industrial capital has played a secondary role to financial capital in the UK since the neoliberal turn in terms of profits (Mohun 2019), studying the working class employed by British financial capital would both be the study of a radically different objective phenomena and require radically different methods from those employed in this thesis.

Figure 2. Employment change by sector, UK, Jan 2007 to Dec 2019 (ONS 2020a)

Since 2007, employment in the manufacturing and construction sectors has contracted, whilst absolute employment growth has been focused in service-based sectors (See figure 2). The largest growth was seen in health and social care, followed by: professional, scientific and technical activities; education; information and communication; accommodation and food services; and other services. However, these figures fail to reflect the expansion of self-employment, and in particular self-employment on platforms. A report by the University of Hertfordshire estimates that, as of 2019, 9.6% of the UK's adult population (4.7 million workers) work for platforms in some capacity - more than double the percentage measured with the same methodology three years before in 2016 (SSCU and HBS 2019), a growth that dwarfs that of conventional employment in the sectors measured above. In short, more workers than ever before are employed in the production of services. Many will be employed in the production of service commodities for profit in the private sector. Overall, therefore, service commodity production has become an increasingly core part of the activity of British social capital.

My inquiry focuses on exactly this expanding frontier. The three case studies in this inquiry are drawn from across a range of service commodity production contexts: at FinServ, where call centre workers cooperate to produce and realise financial service commodities; at Deliveroo, where platform workers carry out commodified food delivery; and at J D Wetherspoon, where workers produce food commodities, serve drink commodities and maintain a commodified environment. In the course of my inquiry I found that the workers in these workplaces could best be understood as part of a collective class fraction – as Tom, a FinServ call centre worker said: "we are a service class". By researching the composition of this fraction across a number of different workplace contexts within one city (Brighton, on the south coast of England)

this study to develops an understanding of how the workers on the front line of capitalist development are self-organising and taking collective action, and how they might contribute to the re-emergence of working class power at the point of production.

The major defining feature of this class fraction is their employment (or self-employment) in service commodity production. This is not, however, the only common characteristic that marks them out. In this inquiry I identify three more. First, they are generally low-paid, by which I mean paid at a pre-bonus hourly rate (or average piece rate in the case of Deliveroo) that is approximately +/- 20% from the real living wage (£7.50 in 2017/18 rising to £8.21 in 2019/20). Second, they are mostly young. As Yates has argued, "young workers are now better conceptualised as providing an almost permanent supply of low-waged labour to sectors of the economy which are growing largely because of these sectors being dominated by accumulation strategies which depend on an abundant supply of cheap labour" (Yates 2017, 13). The truth of this analysis is reflected in the results of my sampling approach. Whilst I interviewed workers across the three case studies without initially considering age, the interviewees in this inquiry ended up ranging from their late teens to their early thirties. Third, this class fraction begins from a point of disconnection with the trade union movement. The three case studies above all concern workplaces without either pre-existing trade union structures or formal collective bargaining between workers and management. In the language of industrial relations, all three workplaces were "greenfield".

So, the fraction that is the subject of this inquiry is made up of young, low-paid, disconnected service workers. My decision to analyse a specific part of the class should not be confused with a claim that this fraction of the working class is a new subjectivity of exceptional significance. Such comparative analysis of the relative

importance of the various fractions that make up the British working class is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I have narrowed down the subject of my empirical analysis to the class composition of this fraction on the frontier of capitalist development in order to understand how it might contribute to a more general working class counterattack on the terrain of capitalist production – a counterattack which might disrupt ongoing processes of immiseration and begin to threaten the bourgeois stabilisation of our unreal conjecture.

Contribution

In this thesis, I make two primary contributions. First, I develop an expanded theoretical framework for the Marxist analysis of class composition. The goal of this framework is to enable Marxists interested in the study of work to approach the question of how capitalist social relations in production are expressed in historically-specific forms, and how those changes in these forms are both caused by and causative of alterations in the balance of class forces within a society. Then, I use this framework to analyse the results of a workers' inquiry into the class composition of young, low-paid, disconnected service workers in the latter part of the long post-crisis, pre-pandemic decade, capturing the lay of the land just as it was coming to a close. Through this empirical analysis, I identify the key trends in the technical, social and political composition of this class fraction.

In order to make these contributions, the thesis is organised as follows: in part one I discuss the Marxist study of work, and the relationship of this thesis both to the literature and methods associated with it; in part two I develop my theoretical approach to class composition; and in part three I present the results of my workers' inquiry into the composition of service workers.

Chapter-by-chapter, this is broken down as follows. Chapter one is a literature review that locates this research relative to the main currents in the field, before chapter two elaborates on questions of method by discussing the genealogy of workers' inquiry and the approach of this thesis. Chapter three uses a close reading of Marx to elaborate on technical class composition. Chapter four discusses the concept of social class composition via historical feminist debates. Chapter five turns to political composition, in particular the relationship between economics and politics through a reading of Lenin: first with a rigorously contextual lens, then with an aggressively expansionist and adaptive one.

Chapter six focuses on a FinServ call centre and discusses how self-organisation can be successfully prevented from emerging through the implementation of an effective system of control. Chapter seven moves onto food delivery platform Deliveroo and discusses the self-organisation of platform workers, with a particular interest in the interaction between trade unionism and networked collective action and the dynamics of migration. Chapter eight discusses pub chain J D Wetherspoon, and how workers there demonstrated that hospitality workers can use deep organising strategies to build workplace power. In chapter nine, I discuss the inquiry as a whole, and draw out my key conclusions on the class composition of this class fraction. Chapter ten concludes the thesis with a summary of the contribution of this thesis to the field and a discussion of potential further avenues for research.

Gigi Roggero summed up the fundamental sentiment which guides workers' inquiry as follows: "the militant is always looking for something that they don't yet understand, a possible force to make the contradictions explode, something that already exists but that they can't yet see" (Roggero 2020). This thesis is written in that explosive spirit. After all, as Engels said, all that exists deserves to perish.

Part One: The Marxist study of work

In his 1873 afterword to the second German edition of *Capital* Volume 1, Marx argued that "in so far as such a critique [of political economy] represents a class, it can only represent the class whose historical task is the overthrow of the capitalist mode of production and the final abolition of all classes – the proletariat" (Marx 1967, 1:25–26). This argument was further developed by later theorists working in Marx's tradition. Italian philosopher Lucio Colletti argued that Marx's methodology entails conceiving of theories as material "social institutions" (Colletti 1969, 10). When Marx read Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, he was "not only studying the bourgeois theory of the state, but the bourgeois *state* itself" (1969, 11). Hegel's work was a part of the material expression of the bourgeois state in its social context – in so far as it represented a class, it represented the bourgeoise. The conclusion of this argument is that theory is materially inextricable from the practice of society, and in a class society, that means that theory is always *class* theory.[3] Furthermore, since it is always produced in a determinate context, that theory is always situated in a conjecture. The task of reading such theories is therefore one of multiple interpretation: we must attempt to read (class) theory with a view to how it related to its own historical context, but then also read it with a view to how it relates to the contemporary context in which we read it. The encounter between the reader and any theory of society is always switching between these two hermeneutic modes, the retrospective and the prospective.

[3] Colletti's argument, whilst unique in its particular form, arrives at similar conclusions to Althusser in his reading of *Capital*: "'thought' is a peculiar real system, established on and articulated to the real world of a given historical society which maintained determinate relations with nature, a *specific* system, defined by the conditions of its existence and practice, i.e. by a *peculiar structure*" (Althusser and Balibar 2009, 45).

The dominant approaches to the analysis of work are those that represent the ruling, owning, and managing class. The goal of the first part of this thesis is to review those currents of research that express a different class interest and which retain a fidelity to Marx's critique, and to read them both in relation to the conjectures in which they were written and in which we read them.

Ch.1 Literature Review: Between Industrial Relations and Labour Process Theory

Marxist discussions of work have tended to bifurcate towards two poles, depending on the level of abstraction on which they work. The first of these is industrial relations. Industrial relations has analysed work in order understand the epiphenomena of the workers' movement and the trade unions. It takes the processes of class formation and struggle in the sphere of production in order to understand the material basis for the emergence of collective working class organisations, rather than as an end in itself. The bread and butter of this approach is an analysis of trade unions, the patterns and dynamics of collective action, the relationship of the state to the system of regulations in the workplace and so on. The second of these poles is labour process theory. Labour process theory has paid much closer attention to the specific forms of capitalist production, innovations in the labour process, and the smaller details of class struggle within the tight confines of the "hidden abode" of production (Marx 1967, 1:172). Rather than studying the workplace in order to abstract from it, the tendency amongst the weaker parts of the field is to view the analysis of the workplace as an end in itself. This chapter will review those two poles and locate the approach of class composition theory relative to them, before turning to a discussion of the specific sub-literatures relevant to the inquiry that makes up the empirical component of this thesis.

Industrial relations

The emergence of a specifically Marxist approach to Industrial Relations as an academic discipline began in the second half of the 20th century. In order to understand

Marxist industrial relations, however, one has to begin the discussion earlier, with the emergence of the discipline on an entirely different class basis.

The development of industrial relations was led by the fraction of the capitalist class who dealt with conflict on the shop-floor more than any other: industrialists. John D. Rockefeller Jr. founded an industrial relations department within the Rockefeller Trust in 1914.Trust In 1922, Rockefeller Jr. established the first university-based industrial relations program by donating the funds to found a department at Princeton and (Kaufman 2007). In the UK, Montague Burton took the lead. He had been, from 1921-25, the owner of the largest clothing factory in the world, employing 10,000 people in Leeds (Honeyman 2000). In 1931 he decided to fund the first academic positions in industrial relations at the universities of Cambridge, Cardiff, and Leeds (Ackers and Wilkinson 2005).

The industrial relations field that emerged out of a period of “disciplinary formation” a few decades later (Ackers and Wilkinson 2005) took as its major priority the integration of the working class within capitalist development. There were two possible theories of integration within the field: unitarism and pluralism. Unitarism proposed that all classes within capitalist society have fundamentally the same interests, and that class struggle only emerges when this familial unity was subverted. Pluralism, on the other hand, proposed that all classes within capitalist society have different but potentially harmonious interests which could be negotiated through effective mediation. Class struggle could be turned into industrial peace through institutional cooperation and a social settlement with multi-party legitimacy. Both approaches agreed on the necessity of the continuation of the capitalist mode of production. The real distinction was to be found on the question of how and by what managerial means that continuation could be guaranteed. Industrial relations would

be dominated by this second, compromising school during its “classical” period. Heery argues that:

> Classic IR pluralism quintessentially was an intellectual response to the rise of the industrial working class and was concerned with the development of institutions that could integrate workers into stable, developed societies (Kaufman, 2004). In the political sphere, these institutions comprised liberal democracy, the welfare state, and social democratic political parties, while in the industrial sphere they consisted of trade unions and systems of collective bargaining. The central pre-occupation was the problem of order, of finding means to integrate workers into functioning capitalist economies on the basis of a societal exchange in which workers received improved conditions, and a degree of industrial citizenship in return for acceptance of the prevailing social order. (Heery 2016, 4)

Beginning in 1954, the “Oxford School” at Nuffield College led the development of an increasingly dominant and coherent pluralist model of industrial relations. The development of pluralism corresponded closely with a period of corporatist development and convergence between the state and capital in the UK. The growth of tripartite institutions - such as those later developed under the 1964-1970 Labour governments with the aim of securing trade union compliance with a national incomes policy and regulating the employment relationship (Panitch 1976) – was fertile ground for a discipline which Clegg later defined as “the study of the rules governing employment, together with the ways in which the rules are made and changed, interpreted and administered. Put more briefly, it is the study of job regulation” (Clegg 1979, 1).

However, classical pluralist industrial relations faced a series of problems as a discipline. An influential review by ex-Oxford school pluralists Bain and Clegg (G. S. Bain and Clegg 1974), who led the recently formed Industrial Relations Research Unit at Warwick, identified five key issues within industrial relations research. First, it was largely descriptive rather than analytic. Second, it focused primarily on the institutions

of collective bargaining and trade unions rather than the social relations that provided the material basis for those institutions. Third, it was largely under-theorised, leading to the disorganised use of data. Fourth, key concepts such as collective interests and power were not sufficiently understood. Fifth, the research agenda was driven by policy-makers not researchers, meaning that industrial relations was oriented to ends it did not control. These weaknesses were to increasingly combine with an intense wave of transnational workplace conflict (Crouch and Pizzorno 1978b; 1978a; Lyddon 2015) to render pluralist industrial relations open to challenge.

This challenge first came from the left. As the post-war settlement began to look increasingly unsteady, Marxists began to become more prominent in the British field, with Richard Hyman acting as a particular figurehead. In contrast to Clegg's definition of industrial relations as a study of regulation, he provided a Marxist definition of the field that focused on questions of control: "the study of the *process of control over work relations*; and among these processes, those involving collective worker organisation and action are of particular concern"(Hyman 1975, 12). Rather than beginning from the assumption that class interests could be successfully mediated, Marxist industrial relations began from the assumption that opposed classes were inevitably in conflict.

Hyman's critique of pluralism on its own terms focused on its reliance on certain unspoken "pragmatic" assumptions and its lack of a theoretical basis (Hyman 1978). This failure meant that pluralism was unable to deal with changing circumstances, and ultimately unviable as an intellectual project. This Marxist challenge was another development in a wider process of "paradigm breakdown", that began with the Donovan Report into industrial relations in 1965, as the old pluralist organisation of labour-capital relations was slowly liquidated (Ackers and Wilkinson 2005). Post-war pluralism had lost its grip.

However, just as the Marxist current that superseded it was starting to flourish, the objective situation changed again. A period of heightened confrontation between classes on the terrain of production ended in a decisive defeat for the organised working class. A shift in political momentum had become a point of widespread left discussion as early as 1978-9 (Hobsbawm 1981; Hall 1990; Hyman 1979). The Thatcherite offensive that followed turned the militancy of the 1970s into the retreat of the 1980s.

This shift was expressed at the level of theory in the development of Human Resource Management (HRM), a new bourgeois unitary theory of industrial relations. The explicit approach of HRM was to study labour/capital dynamics from the perspective of managers themselves in order to pursue the central objective advanced by those managers: the maximum valorisation of capital (Boxall, Purcell, and Wright 2007). Elements of HRM had been latent within a more general unitarism since the advent of scientific management (Kaufman 2007), but its specific origin as a body of theory can be traced to the Harvard Business School and the publication of *Managing Human Assets* in 1984 (Beer et al. 1984). In this field the worker is properly considered only as a unit of variable capital. The new field was met with critical analyses (Legge 1989) but succeeded in expanding to take over pluralist industrial relations' classical terrain with a totalising managerial perspective (Kaufman 2010).[4]

[4] Pluralism was premised on class compromise, and in the face of an all-out offensive from above its logic had failed decisively. In order to maintain a perspective which viewed productive cooperation between classes as the objective of industrial relations it was forced to reform itself from dealing with disorderly workers to dealing with disorderly markets (Heery 2016). To the anger of some more classical pluralists, this trend (perhaps best exemplified by Blyton and Turnbull 2004) became increasingly polarised towards Marxist assumptions as a form of "radical pluralism". As the disciplinary middle ground became untenable, the traditional field of industrial relations split between a dominant unitarism in the form of HRM and a subaltern Marxism, with an associated radical pluralism (Ackers 2002).

It was in this polarised disciplinary environment that Marxist industrial relations underwent a new development, in the form of mobilisation theory. Kelly's *Rethinking Industrial Relations* (Kelly 1998) went beyond the Marxist approaches of the 1970s by presenting a fully articulated theoretical framework, building on Tilly (C. Tilly 1978) and others, through which to understand the "microdynamics of workplace conflict" (Atzeni 2010, 16). The ideas presented within it were first developed as a series of lectures delivered at the LSE in the early 1990s in an attempt to address "address the increasingly pressing intellectual and political issues of how workers become collective actors in the first place and how they acquire the capacity to confront employers and the state" (Kelly 2018, 702). The current state of the discipline cannot be understood without a detailed discussion of mobilisation theory, which is to date one of the most developed approaches to working class self-organisation in the sphere of production.

Tilly's earlier work on social movements provides Kelly with his general framework for mobilisation. This involves five key categories: interests, mobilisation, organisation, opportunity, and the forms of collective action (Tilly 1978). *Interests* are the things gained and lost through a group's interaction with other groups – groups have an interest in what is at stake in a given group-to=group interaction (for example, a contested resource).*Organisation* is a group's structure, and particularly those aspects of the structure that impact its capacity to act in pursuit of its interests. It is not just a static property, but also open to activity: groups can become more organised or disorganised over time. *Mobilisation* is the extent of the resources that the group controls which are required for collective action, and also the process by which the group gets access to more resources or gets them under closer control. *Opportunity* is the relationship between the group and externalities (the world/other groups) and the leverage or options that gives the group. It has three further sub-components:

power, which is the capacity for a group to force its preferred outcomes (and therefore its interests) ahead of other groups' preferred outcomes; repression/facilitation, which is the cost/benefit imposed on the group as a result of the action taken by other groups; and opportunity/threat, which is the extent to which other groups are vulnerable to the action of the group or threatening to take action against the group. Finally, *collective action* is the way in which a group acts in pursuit of common interests on the basis of the above (Tilly 1978, 10–11, 34–37).

Figure 3. Tilly's Simple Collective Action Model (1978)

Kelly articulates these concepts with specific reference to the workplace. He defines interests in the workplace through reference to another mobilisation theorist, McAdam. This development of Tilly introduces the concept of "injustice" into his framework. In this model, when a subaltern group asserts their rights, and then perceives these rights to be infringed upon illegitimately by a ruling group, a "personal efficacy" (or a sense of agency) arises – but only on the condition that the subaltern group perceive their potential collective action as having a chance of succeeding.

Kelly's examples here are almost exclusively of workers *reacting* to the agency of management (Kelly 1998, 28–29). Kelly then further discusses the role of attribution, social identity and leadership in shaping injustice and collective interest in a way which leads to collective action. Whatever injustice is perceived by the subaltern group has to be attributed to the ruling group if collective action is to result. With regard to social identity, Kelly draws on the literature to argue that individualism and collectivism are "situationally specific responses to social cues": the identity of a person can be either collective or individual depending on the environment in which that identity is being expressed (Kelly 1998, 31).

Leadership is vital in making sure groups express their collective identity when confronted by injustices. Kelly draws on studies of shop steward organisation to argue that leaders within subaltern groups erode the legitimacy of ruling groups, attribute injustice to ruling groups, and act to shape a common group interest that can be pursued through collective action against ruling groups (Batstone, Boraston, and Frenkel 1977; 1978). When the actual process of mobilisation prior to collective action begins, leaders are again required to promote group cohesion and identity, persuade workers to take collective action, and defend collective action against counter-mobilising arguments and actions. These vital processes take place in the micro-mobilisation context: within the structure of small informal work groups. His discussion of opportunity and the forms of collective action is much briefer.

We can sum up Kelly's vision of mobilisation in the workplace context as follows: collective action is the result of a mobilisation process. This process is made up of a series of subsequent stages: interests are latent within the workforce; these interests are identified by shop-floor leaders, who then articulate them as collective injustices against the workforce perpetrated by the employer; then, given the right

organisational structure and strategic opportunity, collective action results. Kelly's approach is a thorough one, but as I will argue below, there are key flaws in it which force us to go further to and develop beyond mobilisation theory if we want to accurately understand working class self-organisation in production.

The next development in Marxist industrial relations with significance for this thesis came via Beverly Silver's *Forces of Labour* (Silver 2003). Silver is notable for applying "world-systems" Marxism to the specific problems of the discipline. One of the major theorists of this approach, Giovanni Arrighi, once articulated the scale of his approach relative to that of Marx in *Capital*. He argued that if the first volume of *Capital* went underground, into the basement containing the hidden abode of production, world-systems theory operated at the top of the skyscraper (Arrighi 2010, 25). The application of this skyscraper perspective to industrial relations was led by the research of the World Labour Group and the unique dataset they collected which allowed for the analysis of longue-durée trends in global labour unrest.[5] Silver's discussion of the spread of militancy amongst car manufacturing workers globally added empirical weight to her theoretical developments. Silver argued that capitalism is always navigating between the Scylla of a legitimacy crisis and the Charybdis of a profitability crisis, and that the ruling class employ spatial, technological and product fixes in an attempt to avoid falling into one or the other.

The leading critique of mobilisation theory, and final development in industrial relations to be examined here, has been made by Atzeni (Atzeni 2010). His critique of mobilisation theory focuses on the concept of injustice itself. As argued above, Kelly modifies Tilly through the introduction of injustice as an important category in his

[5] For other uses of this dataset, see (Arrighi 1995; Beittel 1995; Casparis and Arrighi 1995; Dangler 1995; Dubofsky 1995; Quataert 1995; Selden 1995).

framework. For Atzeni, this introduction leads to mobilisation theory resting on a relative concept – injustice – that can only be understood in relation to the hegemonic ideology of the ruling group. For him, this contradicts a structural account of workplace antagonism, which begins from the objective material contradictions within the social relations of the capitalist mode of production. This critique is an acute one, and points to serious flaws within Kelly's model (which mostly emerge via his adaptations and extensions of Tilly).

In order to overcome this limitation, Atzeni proposed a return to the labour process: "the site where both the opposition of labour to capital and yet, its dependence on it are constantly reproduced and solidarity linkages are established" (Atzeni 2010, 20). His analysis of the labour process intends to understand the objective and material conditions from which collective action arises with much greater detail, focusing on the development of embryonic solidarities through inter-worker cooperation in particular. He views this solidarity as the precondition of all organisation, which can become activated and turned into active solidarity when the right mobilising conditions emerge. To articulate Atzeni through the language of Tilly, this theoretical turn is an attempt to get away from Kelly's primary focus on interests, in favour of a greater focus on mobilisation, organisation and opportunity (considered within the specific context of the labour process). In part two I will follow in Atzeni's path to develop beyond Kelly through a return to the objective processes and relations in which the working class are enmeshed – although, unlike him, I will do so with reference to the theoretical resources associated with class composition.

Having reviewed the development of the industrial relations field, it is now important to return to its relationship as a whole to the thesis. How far is this thesis a study of industrial relations? To answer this question, it is worth returning to Hyman's

definition: “the study of the *process of control over work relations*; and among these processes, those involving collective worker organisation and action are of particular concern” (Hyman 1975, 12). Clearly, questions of the process of control over work relations are significant in any study of worker self-organisation. In the sense of Goodrich’s seminal early study of workers’ control, workers’ self-organisation frequently originates in the collective practices used by workers to get an upper hand in the inter-class battle over the “frontier of control” conducted on the shop-floor (Goodrich 1975). Furthermore, this thesis does not focus on individualised forms of organisational misbehaviour and resistance (Ackroyd 2012; van den Broek and Dundon 2012), it is specifically interested in the development from those forms towards what Hyman identifies as the particular concern of industrial relations, “collective worker organisation and action”. However, there are also significant discontinuities. This thesis draws heavily upon methodological and theoretical resources (workers’ inquiry and class composition, to be discussed below) with no history of deployment within the discipline. It also refuses to adopt the institution-centric approach of much Marxist industrial relations, which treats worker-self organisation as secondary to its institutional expression, and class struggle over the relations of production as secondary to bargaining over wages and conditions. So, if this thesis is not a straightforward study of industrial relations, to what other fields might it be related? There is one clear answer: labour process theory.

Labour process theory

The emergence of anglophone labour process theory can be traced to Harry Braverman’s 1974 *Labour and Monopoly Capital*.[6] Braverman, a metal worker and

[6] As Thompson recognises, the most influential work being done on the changing nature of work and class prior to Braverman was in French and Italian (P. Thompson 1983, viii). This work will be discussed later in relation to workers’ inquiry and class composition.

Marxist, claimed that his work was a direct continuation of Marx's project, without any mediating steps. He was alone in returning to Marx and discovering the need for an analysis of the "concrete and historically-specific analysis of technology and machinery on the one side and social relations on the other" (Braverman 1975, 17) from the working class point of view. Braverman had a catalysing effect on the Marxist analysis of the labour process. He laid out a substantial analysis of Taylorism and scientific management as the "explicit verbalisation of the capitalist mode of production" (Braverman 1975, 86), of the ongoing deskilling of work, of the political role of technology in the reorganisation of the labour process, and of the ongoing proletarianization of clerical office workers. *Labour and Monopoly Capital* was understood by contemporaries as breaking down the different silos of the study of work and initiating a new, wider field (Littler and Salaman 1982, 25–26).

However, Braverman's project was left unfinished. He specifically limited his analysis in *Labour and Monopoly Capital* to the objective development of trends within the mode of production, leaving out working class resistance and subjectivity entirely (Braverman 1975, 27) despite the obvious contextual connections. Following his early death in 1976, he would never get the chance to go beyond this self-imposed limitation. It was a book that announced the start of a new direction in Marxist research, but that direction was not entirely defined by its author. As a result, it kicked off a process of intensive research that sought to further that direction and respond to the conditions of post-war capitalism.

This generative openness was developed through work like Friedman's *Industry and Labour* (Friedman 1978). On the surface, this was a simple empirical study of the automotive industry in Coventry. In reality, however, Friedman went substantially beyond that limited goal. Whereas Braverman did not focus on worker

resistance, Friedman made resistance the core of his theoretical contribution. Going beyond Marx, he attempted to develop a framework through which the concessions made by management in the face of resistance can be understood and incorporated into a discussion of the changing concrete forms of the labour process. He disagreed with Braverman on the role of deskilling: rather than an innate tendency of capitalism, he saw it as a specific managerial strategy applied in the face of resistance. He also viewed Taylorism specifically as one possible managerial strategy, not the only strategy compatible with capitalism (Friedman 1978, 80). Alongside direct-control based management, Friedman posited the existence of “responsible autonomy” based management and laid out an empirical analysis of how class struggle historically determined the wages paid for labour-power.

Edwards’ *Contested Terrain* (Edwards 1979) further developed the discussion of the evolution of forms of capitalist managerial control. He analysed the interlinked development of control strategies and worker resistance on the contested terrain of the workplace through a long historical evolution from simple control to structural control and then finally bureaucratic control. He did not posit these three forms as entirely subsequent —at any one time these three forms continue to coexist within different sectors and locations – but he did identify a clear trend from pure coercion to consent.

The discussion of control had another prominent dimension in the work of Burawoy, based on participant observation in a machine shop paid by piece wages. He extensively discussed the mechanisms that produced working class consent on the shop-floor (Burawoy 1979). For Burawoy, it is important to understand that the relations of exploitation are concealed from the worker in the labour process. This concealment is not unilaterally imposed upon the worker – the worker also creates the

conditions for consent through their own adaptations. These adaptations primarily take the form of rule-setting and game-playing (or “making out”). When workers are making their own adaptations to the labour process, they are not contesting the overall organisation of production. The complex processes of making out lead to workers sometimes ending up spontaneously cooperating with management, and conflicting with other workers, leading to an overall dispersion of conflict from inter-class to intra-class (Burawoy 1979, 65–71).

Burawoy’s most important contribution, however, was made in *The Politics of Production* (Burawoy 1985). The book defends and develops a version of Marxism which sees the productive sphere as decisively shaping the development of class struggle (Burawoy 1985, 7). Its central contention is that the type of “production regime” (a combination of the labour process and the political and ideological apparatuses of production) that is dominant in any particular period and location determines what forms of struggle emerge. Alongside this argument, Burawoy also presents an extensive critique of Braverman’s understanding of the labour process and advances his own, based on the division between social relations in production and social relations of exploitation (as opposed to Braverman’s mental/manual conception/execution distinction). As a result of this shift, Burawoy’s analysis is less orientated towards class domination in the workplace, and more towards the way in which the working class is integrated into the reproduction of capitalist social relations. In line with his earlier work, he argues that, as a result of Braverman’s focus on the objective expressions he misses the subjective political and ideological apparatus which goes alongside coercive control to produce working class consent. For Burawoy, Taylorism only had a limited capacity to increase coercive control over the

relations of production and its real success was on the ideological level, rather than the practical.

Littler's review of labour process theory debates in the UK between 1974-88 identified three key points of contention: deskilling, internal labour markets, and managerial strategies/control (Littler 1990). Altogether, however, the discussion of mechanisms of control and the relationship between consent and coercion was the heart of the emergent field. The most comprehensive overall review of the early development of the field was Thompson's *The Nature of Work* (1983). This review ended on a fundamentally positive note – despite the reality of coercive pacification in the workplace, Thompson was hopeful that the field could continue to develop useful insights.

In the decade between 1983 and 1995, however, Thompson formulated a new and more pessimistic outlook. Alongside Ackroyd, he argued that the field had begun to deprioritize worker resistance, and instead increasingly focus on managers as the active agent within the workplace. These omniscient managers and their techniques of control were now at the fore of analysis, relegating workers to a status of quiet obedience (Thompson and Ackroyd 1995). Rather than debating the forms of managerial control within the workplace, labour process theory had begun to accord management total, irresistible control through practically perfect mechanisms of discipline. Mumby et al. have argued that this trend was reversed in the decade after 1995, and that in a variety of fields related to the study of organisations there is an ongoing explosion of resistance analyses (Mumby et al. 2017). This might be correct – but it seems to me that the theoretical basis of the field has been largely static since the developments of the period 1974-1983. Worker self-organisation and collective action in the workplace continues to be the focus of less research than is merited by

its structural importance, and what research there is often fails to use its empirical findings to reflect on and contribute to theoretical developments.

This thesis is not a study of the labour process *per se*. Its primary interest is in the processes of worker self-organisation and collective action that take place in response to and on the basis of labour processes, rather than in those processes themselves. As such it lies on the edge of the field. However, labour process theory offers a remarkably rich vein of thought and research to which this thesis can relate in the study of the workplace. It is characterised, as a field, by a high degree of attention to the concrete reality of work under capitalism and a well-developed comprehension of how class relations are manifested in the workplace. However, recent labour process theory tends to fail to abstract from the instances of collective resistance discovered in individual case studies in order to ground a theory of class struggle at a higher level in the material detail of the labour process. This failure means that when it comes to discussing how and why self-organisation and collective action might remerge, labour process theory represents both a resource to draw on and a limitation to exceed.

Understanding decline

Given the decline of the workers' movement in the UK and transnationally (Kelly and Hamann 2010; Vandaele 2011; Kelly 2012; Gall 2013), it is hardly surprising that this thesis is not alone in taking as its focus a question of how and why the trend might be reversed. However, as argued above, the majority of these analyses have emerged via an institutionalist lens and without paying sufficient attention to the changing content of the social relations of production, circulation, and distribution. In the section that follows, I will discuss exactly how this thesis situates itself relative to these two errors.

A decade after the peak of British trade union membership in 1979, and four years after the profound defeat of the miners, Kelly and Heery conducted a study of trade union recruitment (Kelly and Heery 1989). They intended to analyse how, during a period of general retreat for the labour movement, recruiting activities were being conducted, with a particular focus on the activity of full time officials (FTOs). In the process, they developed a fourfold typology, which could be used to distinguish between different kinds of recruitment: close consolidation, distant consolidation, close expansion, and distant expansion. Here we have the perfect example of the institutionalist focus of industrial relations (which Kelly claimed to oppose) at work: the decline in the workers' movement is registered through the recruitment practices of trade unions, which is itself investigated through interviews with paid employees of those unions.

Table 2. A Typology of Recruitment (Kelly and Heery 1989)

Coverage by recognition agreements	*Proximity of target job territories*	
	Close	*Distant*
Yes, consolidation	Non-members in organised establishments covered by recognition agreements e.g. civil service	Non-members covered by company/national recognition agreements but in weakly/non-organised establishments e.g. retail distribution
No, expansion	Non-members in organised establishments not covered by recognition agreements e.g. white collar staff in manufacturing	Non-members in unorganised establishment without recognition agreements e.g. insurance, hotels

However, despite this difference of emphasis, their classification of recruitment is useful. They identified that distant expansion, in particular, was likely to face significant obstacles in the form of employer opposition and high levels of labour

turnover. However, Kelly and Heery failed to identify at this stage the singular importance of one of their categories: distant expansion. Repeated quantitative studies have empirically shown that the definitive factor in the decline of British trade unions (as measured by membership) after 1979 is the failure to organise greenfield, disorganised workplaces – particularly newly established workplaces in the private service sector (Disney, Gosling, and MacHin 1995; Machin 2000). I earlier argued that one of the defining features of the class fraction that is the subject of my inquiry is that they are disconnected from the institutions of the workers' movement. As a result, all processes of union recruitment within the workplaces studied below would be classified as distant expansion by Kelly and Heery, and take place in precisely these post-1979 workplaces in the private sector which Disney Gosling and Machin identified as the graveyards of the workers' movement.

The work of Bronfenbrenner and Juravich did much to establish which union strategies and tactics prove most effective when unions are campaigning to win recognition during both close and distant expansion. In a series of empirical studies of collective bargaining elections in the U.S. – covering the public sector in 1991-92 (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1995), the private sector in 1986-87 (Bronfenbrenner 1997), and the private sector in 1994 (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998) – they repeatedly established that a "grassroots intensive strategy, building a union and acting like a union from the very beginning of the campaign are critical components of organising success" (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1995). This rank and file strategy is made up of six key components: first, person-to-person contact to identify and develop organic leaders on the shop-floor; second, rank and file responsibility for and participation in the campaign; third, a long-term strategy that builds towards the exertion of leverage through collective action from day one; fourth, inside and outside

tactics that draw on extra-workplace coalitions and solidarities; fifth, an emphasis on demands and desires like “justice”, with a wider scope than just pay and conditions; sixth, a union culture of organising. Prefiguring Simm’s later discussion of organising outcomes (Simms 2015), they also recognised that this rank and file strategy succeeded not only in winning formal recognition of the trade union by the employer, but also in building long term shop-floor power that was viable independent of the central union (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1995). This work established that there is a necessary connection between distant expansion and worker self-organisation: one cannot happen without the other.

The intertwining of these questions of self-organisation and union renewal means that there are different understanding of causation at play in the wider field. In the relation between self-organisation and union renewal, which is the cart, and which is the horse? It is the perspective of this thesis that working class self-organisation precedes and is the ultimate condition of trade union renewal. When self-organisation takes place, this will doubtless have positive impacts upon that process of renewal, but it is conceptually important to highlight that the ultimate object of interest in this study is the phenomenon of self-organisation itself, not its mediated institutional form.

Despite the initial work to set up the question of renewal through greenfield organising, relatively few industrial relations studies have focused on the question of distant expansion specifically. Gall was one of the first to respond to the research agenda implied by the prior literature (Gall 2005a). He examined the question of distant expansion in eight “new economy” greenfield sites via a research methodology based on a series of union FTO interviews spread over a number of years. Whilst he accepts the limitation of the FTO perspective, he justified the methodological decision through the desire to achieve a large *n*. Although mentioning in passing the role of

workplace micro-factors in his eight case studies, Gall paid little or no attention to the labour processes of the “new economy” which he sought to analyse. His conclusions were that trade unions were not succeeding in reversing their problem with distant expansion, with workers in six out of the eight workplaces in his study failing to agree recognition agreements between union and employer. His further research also indicated that there was a significant problem of FTO substitutionism, as union officials made up for deficient shop-floor organisation in greenfield sites by doing from outside the kind of organising tasks that should have been achieved by the workers themselves (Gall 2005b).

Instead, the majority of the literature on expansion – the process of trade unions organising sites without collective bargaining agreements —developed in connection to what was called the “organising model”. The first discussions of this model in the UK focused on the ideas behind the approach and the prospects for its application in the specific national context (Heery et al. 2000). Further debates, which are not directly relevant to this thesis, have been extensive (see, for an introduction, Gall 2009; Heery 2015).

Recent research distinguishes between “rank and file member activism” and “rank and file tactics” (Hickey, Kuruvilla, and Lakhani 2010) in order to further a critique of that research which sees rank and file regeneration as essential for union revitalisation (Gall and Fiorito 2007). On the basis of this distinction, Hickey et al. go on to claim both that “rank and file member activism” is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for successful organising campaigns, *and* a fidelity to the research of Brofenbrenner and Juravich. In their study, Hickey et al. define activism as union members displaying greater responsibility for and initiative in an organising campaign. On closer examination, the distinction between this “activism” and the kind of rank and

file strategy advocated by Brofenbrenner seems untenable. As established above, Brofenbrenner views rank and file responsibility for and participation in an organising campaign as a central feature of a rank and file strategy, which is empirically linked to organising success. To argue that she is correct to do so whilst also arguing that member activism is not necessary for organising success is a manifest contradiction. Despite this contradiction, the conclusion of Hickey et al. (that not all union renewal is strongly linked to member activism) has been accepted by the initial targets of their critique (Gall and Fiorito 2012).

A recent review by Ibsen and Tapia shows three trends across the literature on union revitalisation: first, the organising approach has now become a very widespread model, even in previously “institutionally secure” labour markets; second, that the strategies associated with organising are not guaranteed to succeed if implemented in isolation; and third, that unions are building coalitions on local and transnational scales with social movements and other actors to overcome changes in the role of the state (Ibsen and Tapia 2017). They identify that the literature is still strongly polarised between the neopluralist approach, which argues for partnership, and the radical approach, which argues for mobilisation. Ibsen and Tapia’s overall assessment of the possibility of trade union revitalisation is bleak: “counter-mobilisation against market enhancement will not be sufficient for a renaissance without an institutionalised role for organised labour in employment relations” (Ibsen and Tapia 2017, 15). In other words, unless the state comes to the rescue, trade union decline will not reverse. Their predictions for the future of the field include an increased study of campaigning methods, and an increased utilisation of digital research methodologies. The questions of distant expansion and worker self-organisation do not figure in their discussion.

This thesis begins from the position that whilst the debates and research reviewed above provide a substantial basis on which to build, the industrial relations literature is not sufficient to answer a number of questions about distant expansion and worker self-organisation. First, despite the reliance on case study approaches, the literature displays insufficient attention to the material specifics of the labour processes and workplaces in which organising and renewal has to take place. The distinctions between specific workplaces – between a private sector call centre and a local government department, for instance – are flattened out. Instead, the two are seen as homogenous *tabulae rasae* for the application of toolboxes of techniques and strategies (Simms and Holgate 2010), rather than already-complex battlefields between capital and labour (Juravich and Bronfenbrenner 2005).

Second, the literature remains fundamentally institutionalist. That is to say, it has both a methodological and theoretical preference towards seeing all the processes of organisation and renewal from the perspective of FTOs and the central trade union organisation. This critique is one of the five Bain and Clegg raised decades ago, but it remains a serious problem for industrial relations (Bain and Clegg 1974). One of the primary results of this institutionalist focus can be found in the discussion of organising outcomes, which are evaluated primarily by recognition agreements and membership density. Both of these measures of outcome are prone to producing significant distortions (Sullivan 2010; Simms 2015). The institutionalist focus also means that the politics of organising are generally overlooked (Simms and Holgate 2010), and so the failure of trade unions to articulate their role in a wider class politics, as agents beyond labour market regulators, is reproduced by the people who study them. Finally, the institutionalist approach means that the agency of workers to self-organise is disregarded. In this sub-field, a case study is usually judged worthy of

attention when a trade union is involved – the phenomenon of working class self-organisation in itself is not a viable object of study before this institutional legitimation takes place. Mobilisation theory's foundational text recognised the necessity of moving "away from bargaining structures and institutions and towards the social processes of industrial relations" (Kelly 1998, 38), and indeed some of the Marxist literature has succeeded in doing so, but the literature as a whole remains hooked on institutional analysis. It seems to me that the way out of this impasse is through a more "actor-centred" approach, in which the analytical focus is on the actions of workers themselves (Alberti and Però 2018). In adopting such an approach, class composition theory overcomes the institutionalist stasis of the industrial relations literature – and therefore can shed more light on the potential for the emergence of working class self-organisation and collective action in the workplace.

The analytical tools and method of labour process theory have rarely been comprehensively applied to the question of the renewal of working class self-organisation. What case studies in this tradition do exist (for instance Alberti 2014) have not been abstracted from in meta-studies in order to try and create a more generalised analysis. As will be expanded upon below, a class composition analysis has the potential to avoid the pitfalls of the existing industrial relations and labour process theory literatures and develop a new approach to the question of movement renewal in previously disorganised sectors which begins from actually-existing working class self-organisation, understood in the context of a specific workplace, and prioritises the development of a political analysis.

Ch.2 Methodology: workers' inquiry

This empirical component of this thesis is based on a workers' inquiry. This chapter develops an account of the method of workers' inquiry by beginning at the beginning: with Marx's first use of it in the late 19th century. From there on, the chapter briefly traces the genealogy of workers' inquiry via two key developmental moments: the Johnson-Forrest tendency and *Socialism ou Barbarie*. Then, arriving for the first time at Italian *operaismo* [workerism], the chapter introduces the tendency and the way in which it developed materialist research into class composition through the method of workers' inquiry. The chapter will then go on set out in a novel direction by going outside what is classically recognized as the workers' inquiry tradition and systematically comparing the methodology of British workplace sociologists in the 1970s and 80s to workers' inquiry. This comparison allows both for a reconceptualization of the history of the method, as well as a significant widening of anglophone influences on the methodology. Finally, the chapter discusses the specific form of workers' inquiry used to gather data on this thesis' three case studies.

Marx's inquiry

In 1880 Marx published a questionnaire in *La Revue Socialiste* titled "A Worker's Inquiry". This questionnaire marked the emergence of something new within Marx's methodology for the study of the capitalist mode of production. His topics of interest included: the size and composition of the workforce; the division of labour and use of machinery in the workplace; health and safety; workplace lighting; accidents; breaks during the working day; night shifts; employment contracts; wages; piece rates; the cost of rent, food, clothing and taxes; the cost of commodities produced in the workplace; any "resistance associations" or friendly societies amongst workers;

strikes; employers' associations; the use of the armed forces by the state to break strikes; the existence of profit-sharing schemes, and so on. The questionnaire generally works by clustering questions on topics together and slowly progressing in an increasingly agitational direction. Questions 75-80, for instance, ask questions to which Marx had already developed his own theoretical answers in parts 3-7 of *Capital* Volume 1:

> Compare the price of the commodities you manufacture or the services you render with the price of your labour.
>
> Quote any cases known to you of workers being driven out as a result of introduction of machinery or other improvements.
>
> In connection with the development of machinery and the growth of the productiveness of labour, has its intensity and duration increased or decreased?
>
> Do you know of any cases of increases in wages as a result of improvements in production?
>
> Have you ever known any rank and file workers who could retire from employment at the age of 50 and live on the money earned by them as wage workers?
>
> How many years can a worker of average health be employed in your trade? (Marx 1880)

Questions like this seem to be at least partly designed to lead workers' answering the questionnaire towards a premeditated end goal. But there are other questions which seem to be more genuinely directed at collecting data on the condition and composition of the French working class. Particularly when Marx asks about strikes and resistance associations, he requests substantial detail. He asks for respondents to include their name and address with their answers, perhaps in the hope of establishing a correspondence towards a political end. There are contrasting accounts of how many questionnaire replies were sent to *La Revue Socialiste* and how many made their way to Marx, with suggestions ranging from zero to one hundred

– but regardless, the data collected was not sufficient to encourage Marx to conduct any further work on the project (Hoffman 2019, 35).

The articulated logic for this incomplete inquiry was the relative lack of available information on conditions facing the French working class as opposed to the English working class. Whereas Marx could refer to the reports of factory inspectors when writing *Capital* (Marx 1967, vol. 1, chap. 10), no comparable source existed to understand the situation in France. His solution to this void was to float the idea of a process of data collection premised on the working class's knowledge of their own "misfortunes":

> We hope to meet in this work with the support of all workers in town and country who understand that they alone can describe with full knowledge the misfortunes from which they suffer and that only they, and not saviours sent by providence, can energetically apply the healing remedies for the social ills to which they are prey. We also rely upon socialists of all schools who, being wishful for social reform, must wish for an exact and positive knowledge of the conditions in which the working class — the class to whom the future belongs — works and moves. (Marx 1880)

With this insight that workers are best placed both to understand and transform the mode of production which relies upon their exploitation, Marx began to articulate a methodology which would come to bear the name of this first attempt: workers' inquiry. The strongest analysis of this questionnaire comes from Haider and Mohandesi, who argue that Marx's preface to the inquiry "basically amounted to a single principle: *learning from the working class itself*" (Haider and Mohandesi 2013). If this was the first epistemological principle of the method, then the first political principle was that "Socialists would begin by learning from the working class about its own material conditions. Only then would they be able to articulate strategies, compose theories, and draft programs. Inquiry would therefore be the necessary first step in articulating a historically appropriate socialist project" (Haider and Mohandesi

2013). A genealogy starting with this questionnaire and these two principles stretches from Marx to the present (Haider and Mohandesi 2013; Woodcock 2014). This genealogy will be the primary focus of this discussion.[7]

The Johnson-Forrest tendency

The initiation of the modern period of the workers' inquiry can be dated with some precision, to the 1947 publication of *The American Worker*, written by Phil Singer (under the pseudonym Paul Romano) and Grace Lee Boggs (under the pseudonym Ria Stone). *The American Worker* presented an account of work in a car factory in the post-war period and a theoretical analysis in a two-part structure. The inclusion of a workers' own account of the factory floor ahead of the theoretical reflection of an intellectual was an innovative inversion which reflected the first epistemological principle of inquiry (Pizzolato 2011) but simultaneously introduced a significant formal development: the use of ethnographic narrative.

Marx's inquiry elicited the experiences of workers in the form of the questionnaire. Its goal was not to gather the story of one particular worker, but rather to capture a wider set of data that could be used to reflect more generally on the situation of the working class. Marx's form might provoke reflection on the part of the worker who filled it in, but it was not primarily designed for its consciousness-raising qualities. On the other hand, Singer used the narrative form to attempt to have a subjective impact upon the reader in that was not possible for Marx, given his use of the questionnaire. This formal distinction might be why, as Haider and Mohandesi

[7] This genealogy is not uncontested. Hoffman (Hoffman 2019) has identified also generated a different history of the "militant investigation" which looks extensively at the experience of Lenin conducting interviews with factory workers in 1890s Petrograd and Mao's inquiry on the role of peasants in the revolutionary movement (Mao 1927) and his subsequent development of a theory of inquiry (Mao 1930), both experiences which are not discussed in depth by Haider and Mohandesi or Woodcock.

note, the text is not explicitly referred to as a workers' inquiry, despite Boggs referencing Marx's survey (2013).

The two key arguments of Singer's ethnographic narrative were that there existed "a latent and spontaneous workers' resistance to the regimented life of the factory, irrespective of any actual union organization" and that "workers [have an] instinctive ability to organize their work in a more humane, but equally effective way". That is to say, there was an organic process of class struggle going on even before it was formally channelled into representation, and this organic process aimed towards a different set of social relations under which work would be controlled by workers not bosses. The narrative overflows with factory floor details. A reader learns about the way machine oil stained workers' clothes, the informal timing of collective smoke breaks (10am first smoke, 2pm second smoke), and the behaviour of the rank and file at union meetings. Singer was both forensic in his attention to detail and encompassing in his analysis, centring the experiences of black and women workers throughout his discussion (Romano and Stone 1947).

Boggs begins by arguing that Singer's essay is "a social document describing in essence the real existence of the hundreds of millions who constitute the basis of our society" and that "only by understanding the actual conditions of life and the actual strivings of an actual working class at a certain stage of its development, can the problems of humanity as a whole be understood" (Romano and Stone 1947). Boggs goes on to propose an intensely humanist variation of Marxism focused on the process of production as the site of potential emancipation, building on the evidence provided in Singer's analysis (Romano and Stone 1947). Boggs' analysis treats Singer's narrative as simultaneously both a subjective representation of the underlying kernel of working class experience *and* an objective scientific basis from which to approach

the “actual conditions” of the working class. Such an approach means that ethnographic narrative is taken to have the same empirical veracity as something like a questionnaire, and a greater potential to stimulate class consciousness in the reader. The gap between these two objectives (data collection and emotive storytelling) is the seed of a contradiction which developed throughout the application of this form of inquiry in an unstably combined narrative-scientific form.

These two writers were part of the Johnson-Forrest Tendency (JFT), so called after the pseudonyms of two of its key founding members: C. L. R. James (pseudonym: J. R. Johnson) and Raya Dunayevskaya (pseudonym: Freddie Forrest). The JFT was an independent Marxist organisation which left the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (U.S.) in 1951, moved its centre of activities from New York to Detroit in the process (Boggs and Ward 2011), and used this relocation to undertake a process of political development. The JFT was characterised by its connection to this reinvention of inquiry. Martin Glaberman, another member of the JFT who published his own inquiry, *Punching Out,* in 1952 (Glaberman 2002), reflected that:

> This [the format of *The American Worker* as an inquiry] was not done to provide justification for a party line or illustrations of the ideas of intellectuals. It was done because "That is what Marx conceived as socialism -- the actual appropriation by the workers in the productive material life, of their human capacities." (Page 65.) Neither essay stands alone. Neither is cause, neither is effect. They depend on each other. A theoretical framework to free the worker to express his deepest needs. The experience of workers to provide the basis for the continuing expansion and development of theory, that is, of the continuing analysis of capitalist society and the socialist revolution being created within it. (Glaberman 2008)

If the first epistemological principle of inquiry is that workers’ have a specific insight into the nature of capitalist social relations, the second epistemological principle established here is that this insight alone is not enough – it has to be combined with a wider theoretical-political framework and further developed. The

critique of capitalism embodies the perspective of the working class, but it is not entirely derived from the immediate insights of that class in any simple way. However, alongside this principle, Glaberman also presents one of the characteristic positions of the JFT in arguing that Bogg's theoretical framework enables Singer's experience to be understood as both an empirical basis for theoretical analysis and an accurate expression of the subjective "deepest needs" of the entire class.

The JFT also conducted some experiments with in-person inquiry, such as the "third layer school", established in New York in the early 1950s – at which intellectuals were the pupils, and workers were the teachers (Frazier 2011). The name "the third layer school" referred to James' reading of Lenin's argument after the Bolshevik revolution that the rising tide of state capitalism could only be opposed by workers and peasants who were autonomous of both the first layer (the Bolsheviks) and the second layer (the trade unions) (James 2013). In specific reference to the U.S. context, James felt that the failure of the U.S. Trotskyist movement was a result of its inability to be open to the voices and perspectives of rank and file workers, who were overruled by the first and second layers of intellectuals and cadre (James 1947). Overcoming this bureaucratic tendency, and opening up politics to the influence of this third layer was a constant priority for the JFT in their use of inquiry (Glaberman 1971). Their political principle that politics has to be subject to the autonomous influence of the working class was applied in practice through the process of inquiry. Again, the fusion of the two epistemological principles of workers' inquiry is evident: workers were understood as having unique insights into capitalist social relations, hence why they taught in the third layer school – but there was no suggestion of abolishing the role of the intellectual altogether.

The JFT were keen to apply their method of inquiry in multiple different contexts. Alongside *Punching Out*, the early 1950s saw the publication of Matthew Ward's *Indignant Heart* (pseudonym: Si Owens) on the experience of a black worker moving from the agricultural south to the industrial north, Arthur Bauman'sBauman's *Artie Cuts Out* (published anonymously) about the experience of going to high school in New York, and Selma James (pseudonym: Marie Brant) and Filomena D'Addario's (pseudonym: Ellen Santori) *A Woman's Place* on the experience of housework, reproductive labour, and women's self-organisation (Haider and Mohandesi 2013). Here, at the origin of the modern workers' inquiry tradition, we can already see the potential of the inquiry model in providing a basis for the class analysis of life beyond the sphere of production.

Further evidence of this diversity can be found in the JFT's newspaper, *Correspondence*, which began publication in October 1953. The JFT imagined that this would be a workers' paper of a new kind - defined by its openness to the voices of rank and file workers, women, young people, and African Americans (Boggs and Ward 2011). The masthead of early copies of the newspaper declared that it was: "A Paper That Is Written/Edited/Circulated by Its Readers" (qtd. in Boggs and Ward 2011, 37). Despite McCarthyite repression, the paper was published for eleven years, over which time it went through repeated transformations and factional disputes that saw it move from a rank and file workers' paper to a theoretical journal and then back to a black movement paper - in which role it catalogued the radical fringe of the civil rights movement and prepared the ground for the development of a Black Power current.

The defining stylistic feature of the JFT's use of inquiry was the tension between collecting accurate data and telling a good story. Haider and Mohandesi present a well-grounded critique of the potentially over-generalising nature of the narrative form,

and how that generalisation could undermine inquiry as a method of data collection. For instance, Glaberman argues in *Punching Out* that “the working class today recognizes the labour bureaucracy as an enemy, as an administrator of capital” (Glaberman 2002, 28). But if this was really the shared perspective of every section of the American working class in 1952, we might reasonably expect this recognition to have led to a working class insurrection on the factory floor. It goes without saying that no such insurrection emerged. It seems that some sections of the working class (if not most) still felt that both their bosses and their unions retained some degree of legitimacy. Such generalising claims displayed the tension between the two parts of the JFT’s method of inquiry: bringing the experience of the third layer to bear upon the development of politics in a scientific manner, and the expression of universal experiences in a way which raised the general level of class-consciousness. As Haider and Mohandesi argue: “with these narratives, the tension in Marx’s workers’ inquiry – between a research tool on the one hand, and a form of agitation on the other – is largely resolved by subordinating the former to the latter, transforming inquiry into a means to the end of consciousness-building” (2013). The scientific intention of Marx’s method was lost in the JFT’s application – even if there were interesting developments in application. In the light of this experience, my application of inquiry in this thesis sets out to prioritise, in ever instance, the use of inquiry as a research tool. To find the resources to support this prioritisation, however, it’s necessary to look to later periods of the method’s development.

Socialisme Ou Barbarie

Grace Lee Boggs, a central member of the JFT and co-author of *The American Worker*, spent six months in Paris in 1948 (Pizzolato 2011). During her time there, acting as a representative of the JFT at the second world congress of the Trotskyist

4th International, she met Cornelius Castoriadis (Dosse 2014, 111) - a Greek migrant and increasingly dissident Trotskyist. Alongside Claude Lefort, he was in the process of breaking away from the 4th International to form *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (*SoB*) – a group very much like the JFT (van der Linden 1997). The first issue of the group's eponymous journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, published 1949, contained a French translation of *The American Worker* (Pizzolato 2011). The translator applauded the text because it expressed a "universal" kernel of working class experience through a "proletarian optic" that shattered "the barefaced propaganda of Hollywood". It was interpreted to be, in short, the advent of a new genre: proletarian documentary literature (see Hastings-King 2014), which captured the fundamental experience of the class through the life of one factory worker (Guillaume 2013).[8]

In issue 11 of the review, published in 1952, the lead article was Claude Lefort's "Proletarian Experience" (Lefort 2018). Here, Lefort laid out one of the understandings of inquiry that proliferated within *SoB*. It began with the argument that Marx was consistently interested in the form of working class subjectivity that pertained at a specific point in the historical development of the mode of production – but also that this interest has not been followed up by post-Marx Marxism. To combat this, Lefort proposed a mode of inquiry which was heavily influenced by the JFT approach:

> This class can be known only through itself and only on the condition that whoever inquires about it acknowledges the value of proletarian experience, is rooted in its situation, and makes his own this class's social and historical horizons. …This concrete approach, which we deem instigated by the very nature of the proletariat, implies that we might be able to gather and interpret testimonies from workers. By *testimonies* we especially mean narratives recounting life, or, better, individual experience

[8] Notably, *SoB* borrowed very heavily from the *JFT* in their analysis of the workplace but gave no such priority to inquiry into the experience of members of the working class outside the non-male, non-factory. Whereas *Correspondence* set aside specific space on its pages for the discussion of how specific parts of the class had specific experiences of capitalist social relations, *SoB* tended to treat the factory worker as a undifferentiated subject.

> that are done by the interested parties and that are capable of providing insights into their social lives. (Lefort 2018, 116)

These testimonies/narratives would ideally describe “the workers’ relationship to [their] work”, “relations with other workers and people from other social strata”, “life outside the factory and knowledge about what arises in the wider social world”, and “links to properly proletarian history and traditions” (Lefort 2018, 116–18). Lefort’s subjectivist version of inquiry was, in short, a reaffirmation of the approach taken by the JFT with an added emphasis on the universal working class experience contained in testimonies of work and the proletarian documentary literature genre. As such, it continued to manifest the contradiction between narrative and scientific analysis.

Also in 1952, Daniel Mothé (real name Jacques Gautrat), a politically-experienced worker at the Renault Billancourt plant situated on an island in the Seine to the west of Paris, joined *SoB*. He had been heavily influenced by the JFT (van der Linden 1997). Mothé would go on to play a crucial role in the factory work of *SoB*. In April 1954, seven months after the JFT began publishing *Correspondence*, *SoB*-sympathetic workers in a Renault workshop distributed a leaflet on wages. The positive reception of this leaflet led to the creation of a factory newspaper, *Tribune Ouvrière* [The Workers’ Tribune], in May 1954. As a near-exact copy of *Correspondence*, it would take the form of an independent organ of the rank and file. Writing a year after the paper’s first publication, Mothé reflected on his experience with a workers’ paper. He distinguished it from both the bourgeois paper and the ideologically “revolutionary” paper by its lack of a distinct apparatus and proximity to its own readership:

> This workers’ paper will be a paper that will not have a separate apparatus; in other words, its editors, its distributors, its readers will be a reasonably large ensemble of workers. Not only will the paper’s apparatus not be separated from its readers, but its content, too, will be determined

> by this collective of working-class editors, distributors, and readers. The paper will not have as its objective the diffusion of an established political conception to the working class, but will share the concrete experiences of individual workers and groups of workers, in order to respond to the problems that concern them. (Mothé 2013)

Mothé envisioned the paper operating as a "transmission belt" (Haider and Mohandesi 2013) between the working class and the revolutionary organisation (*SoB*). It would not just bring the ideology of the organisation to the workers, but also bring the reality of working class life to the organisation: "If the working class needs the revolutionary organization to theorize its experience, the organization needs the working class in order to draw on this experience" (Mothé 2013). The JFT principle of the "third layer" continued here, albeit in a different formulation. Explicitly, the workers' paper would not be "documentary literature" comprised of worker-narratives. As Mothé pointed out – the workers already know what is going on in the factory, anecdotal accounts of everyday life were of no interest to them. Instead, it would distinguish itself by presenting a political line and arguing for it in practical terms, rather than in abstractions. Mothé's version of inquiry was significantly more objectivist than Lefort's, and became associated with the faction within *SoB* that was grouped around Castoriadis. It is this development of an objectivist turn within *SoB* that is particularly important for the method of this thesis, because it began to challenge the implicit homogenisation of narrative storytelling and data collection which began with the *JFT*.

SoB's aspirations for *Tribune Ouvrière* were not fully realised, as Mothé recognised, but it played a valuable role in the growth of the organisation and the development of struggle nonetheless. As Stephen Hastings-King argues "it was the focus of an experience of militant activity, a way to create contacts amongst workers across shops and to transmit information about conflicts and problems" (Hastings-King 2014, 18). As a result of its role as a circulator of struggle, the paper became

increasingly networked with a wider range of workforces over time. This development also stimulated or coincided with the development of similar publications in other cities and firms around Paris (van der Linden 1997).

SoB split in 1958, when the conflict between a Lefort-led faction and a Castoriadis-led faction finally became untenable. The practical issue which forced the split was the question of forming a vanguard party organisation out of *SoB*. Lefort was strongly against the idea, and Castoriadis strongly for. The Lefort-faction were in the minority, and so left to form a new organisation, *Informations et Liaisons Ouvrières* (van der Linden 1997). Following this, the newly-vanguardist *SoB* coordinated the multiple worker newspapers that emerged from beyond Renault and beyond Paris in the form of a new newspaper *Pouvoir Ouvrier* [Workers' Power]. This vanguardist faction had its own distinct understanding of the role of inquiry in socialist strategy. Castoriadis went further than Mothé in his vision of the paper as a component of a *scientific* workers' inquiry methodology: for him, the paper operated as a way of submitting theory produced by the revolutionary organisation to the working class for verification or modification in relation to the actual experience of the class it claimed to represent (Haider and Mohandesi 2013). The factional split mapped the contradiction within the inquiry form between narrative and science. So, as Haider and Mohandesi summarise it, there were two visions of the role of inquiry within *SoB*, which ultimately related to two divergent political projects: "For Lefort, the object of inquiry was universal proletarian attitudes; for Castoriadis, it was the rudimentary content of the socialist program" (ibid.). The unique contribution of this period of development to my thesis is that through this split it allowed for the initial theorisation of inquiry as a scientific tool for the creation of theory which corresponds to the current balance of

forces at a specific point of capitalist development. In the Italian context, this scientific approach would find its greatest opportunity to flourish.

Operaismo and *l'inchiesta operaia*

"FIAT has branded me" – that is the title of a short interview with an ex-FIAT worker and shop steward conducted a few days after he was fired for his political activity in 1979 (Pansa 2007). In the interview, the anonymous worker explains how the working conditions in the paint shop of the Mirafiori factory led to him losing eight teeth: "I was paying for my job at FIAT with my skin," he says (2007, 25). But FIAT did not just leave a mark on its workers. It also branded *operaismo*, a current of Italian Marxism which is highly significant for the approach of this thesis.

The origin of the Italian use of workers' inquiry can again be located in relation to *The American Worker*. Based in Turin, Danilo Montaldi was an ex-*Partito Comunista Italiano* (*PCI*) member, who had left the organisation to curate a current to its left. This current was in direct contact with both the *JFT* and *SoB*, and in 1954 Montaldi translated *The American Worker* (Pizzolato 2011). The introduction to that translation emphasised in particular the important step taken by the inquiry:

> *The American Worker*, as much as the newspaper *Correspondence*, expresses with great force and profundity this idea, practically forgotten by the Marxist movement after the publication of the first volume of *Capital*, that the worker is first of all someone who lives at the point of production of the capitalist factory before being the member of a party, a revolutionary militant, or the subject of coming socialist power; and that it is the productive process that shapes his rejection of exploitation and his capacity to build a superior type of society, his class solidarity with other workers, and his hatred for exploitation and the exploiters, the traditional bosses of yesterday and the impersonal bureaucrats of today and tomorrow. (Montaldi 2013)

This emphasis on the experience and composition of workers at the point of production was about to become unavoidable in the context of the Italian workers' movement.

In 1955, the *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (CGIL) union was badly defeated at FIAT. In the years after, a palpable detachment between workers and unions emerged - within FIAT specifically, but also across the entire country. When the movement next went on the offensive and a wave of rank and file militancy spread through the textile and metal working industries in 1959-60, it was clear something had changed. This was the first indication of the depth of the disconnection between the politics of parties and conditions of struggle in the sphere of production. The cycle reached its political apotheosis with the revolt of the "striped T shirts" [*magliette a righe*] in the summer of 1960 in Genoa. Attacks by young workers wearing cheap striped T shirts on the neo-fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano* party congress involved violent clashes with the police which left more than twelve workers dead and led to the resignation of the Prime Minister, Tambroni. This struggle, which was simultaneously working class and political, launched a process of rapid circulation of struggle in the factories (Wright 2017, 31). Working through the newly founded journal *Quaderni Rossi* [Red Notebooks] which would publish its first issue in 1961, a collection of Marxists in the vague tradition of Montaldi (but split across parties and political tendencies, from the *PCI* to the *Partito Socialista Italiano* and further afield) began to use sociological methodology to examine this cycle of struggle and its apparent detachment from existing forms. They wanted to understand the categories of Marxist analysis as they were actually historically determined in their contemporary context. It was not enough, for them, to talk idly about the proletarians – they wanted to understand who and what this class was, in what seemed like a moment of rapid

transformation. In order to do so, these collaborators would use workers' inquiry. This process of research was to be the birth of *operaismo*.

Retrospectively, the editors of workerist-influenced journal *Primo Maggio* [First of May] would define workers' inquiry in the Italian tradition as a scientific instrument rather than a narrative form:

> [An] instrument to break down the wall of apparent working class 'inertia', to read the signs of unfolding processes, and above all to reopen the communication channels between those sectors of the working class left actively investigating a qualitatively new capacity of initiative, and the majoritarian and 'silent' component of the class. (qtd. in S. Wright forthcoming) [9]

Half a decade after the defeat of the CGIL, the workerists of *Quaderni Rossi* decided they would undertake an inquiry into the situation at FIAT. Steve Wright has undertaken specific archival work on the history of this milestone inquiry, which would go on to have significant ramifications for the methods and politics of workerism more generally (Wright forthcoming). Wright identifies the inquiry as having three main elements: first, a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with FIAT workers and recorded either by notetaking or transcription; second, observation notes and descriptions of the labour process in certain workshops within the plant; and third, reflective notes from seminars held with the research group and wider layers of intellectuals. The idea of actually beginning with the working class, of sending the researchers into the factories and workers' districts to use sociological methods for Marxist ends, was a fundamental innovation in the Italian context.

Alongside this, there were also instances where specific additional methods were used by researchers involved in the inquiry. The young "anarcho-sociologist"

[9] I am indebted to Steve Wright for letting me read a substantial portion of his long-awaited *The Weight of the Printed Word: Text, Context and Militancy in Operaismo* ahead of its publication. His intellectual generosity made much of this chapter possible.

Romano Alquati (who had his first political education under Montaldi in the *Gruppo d'Unita Proletaria*) took part in the FIAT inquiry and identified a few additional channels for data collection in his write-up of his research for the first edition of *Quaderni Rossi*. These were: conversations with socialists and communists involved in the internal trade union commission at the plant; discussions with young workers and office staff who were outside the communist and socialist parties but who possessed a level of political and class consciousness; and random conversations with workers from the plant (Wright forthcoming). The first of these, discussion with trade union militants, was his dominant method of data collection. Alquati placed a lot of significance on identifying specific samples in terms of their relation to the formal political institutions of the trade unions and leftist parties.

The results of the inquiry were not straightforward. As it turned out, investigating the historically-determinate form of Marx's abstract categories was not a simple process. As Wright has identified, only three efforts were made to communicate the results of the inquiry, and two of these were made by the young Alquati. In particular, Alquati identified, for the first time, the anti-institutional layer of young workers in the factory, whose resistance to trade unionism but embrace of class struggle would later come to characterise much of the activity of the "mass worker" figure developed in later workerist research. In 1960, Alquati predicted the eventual re-emergence of class struggle at FIAT at some point in the near future. The invisible organisation of workers in the plant, he felt, was nearing boiling point (Alquati 2018). At the time, the workers' movement at FIAT was heavily repressed. This conclusion seemed, to outside observers, quite outlandish (S. Wright forthcoming).

But in 1962 the struggle at FIAT finally broke into the open. During a round of pay bargaining, the first big strikes for years were called. Alquati's conclusions were

proven to be at least partially sound. However, just as the strikes were gaining momentum the conservative trade union confederation *Unione Italiana del Lavoro* (*UIL*) sabotaged the other two, larger trade union confederations at FIAT by signing a separate agreement with management. The workers' response was explosive. In July the Piazza Statuto riot in Turin saw hundreds of workers, many of them *UIL* members, besiege the union's offices. The official labour movement generally condemned these workers' actions. But within *Quaderni Rossi*, there was a growing split. A political divide, which had been latent as early as the first days of the FIAT inquiry, between the "sociologists" and the "interventionists" came to a head (Wright 2017, 53–55).

Primarily, the division between these two groups resulted from contrasting ideas about the utilisation of workers' inquiry: was it intended to develop information for the use by working class "institutions" to reconnect the trade union confederations to their members, or to promote working class autonomy from those institutions? As was the case with *SoB*, the factional and political divide was mapped onto questions of methodology. As well as disagreeing about the positive or negative nature of the explosion at the Piazza Statuto, the two sides also disagreed about the purpose of all the work they had done over the last three years.

Raniero Panzeri, who had been a fundamental influence behind the foundation of *Quaderni Rossi*, intended to rejuvenate the Italian labour movement.[10] He was through-and-through part of the sociologist faction. For him, the Piazza Statuto riot expressed just one example of the more general crisis which would result from the

[10] He summarized the goals of his practice of inquiry as follows: "The aims of inquiry can be schematically summarised thus: we have important instrumental goals driven by the character of inquiry as a correct, efficient and politically fertile method to establish contacts with singular and grouped workers. This is a crucial objective: not only is there no discrepancy, gap or contradiction between inquiry and the labour of building political relations; inquiry is also fundamental to such process. Moreover, the work needed for inquiry, the labour of theoretical discussion with comrades and workers, is one of serious political training, and inquiry is a great tool for this" (Panzieri 1965).

disconnection of the working class from its unions and parties. The “biological hatred” (qtd. in Wright 2007, 61) of the unions and political institutions evident in these young workers and their interventionist supporters was evidence that the crisis of disconnection between the politics of parties and conditions of struggle had become a complete disaster.

Conversely, Romano Alquati sided with the interventionists. *Potere Operaio* [*Workers’ Power*], a workerist-inspired group in what could broadly be considered the interventionist lineage, would later claim that “Piazza Statuto was our founding congress” (qtd. in Wright 2007, 58). These interventionist researchers saw inquiry as developing the means through which to foster a new autonomous workers’ movement. Rather than closing the gap between the politics of parties and the conditions of struggle, these interventionists wanted to push it wide open. They would base themselves not within the labour movement more generally, but within the most advanced points of the conditions of struggle in the factories. Their new mass newspaper, titled *Classe Operaia* [Working Class] would replace *Quaderni Rossi* as their platform of choice from 1963 onwards, as the old journal split into two factions just two years after its first issue.

Agitation would be their goal, and it would be pursued through an adapted form of workers’ inquiry known as “coresearch” [*conricherca*]. Roggero’s retrospective presentation of coresearch articulates it as a practice which breaks down the distinction between researcher and research subject to simultaneously produce subjectivity and autonomy as well as knowledge (Roggero 2014).[11] In a simplified form, the interventionists’ insistence on coresearch meant pursuing immediate

[11] For more on the concept, see Alquati’s *Per Fare Conricherca* (Alquati 1993).

organisation against capital, rather than a mediated process of institutional integration. It was in essence a more aggressive development of workers' inquiry. Mario Tronti and the Roman workerists, who left *Quaderni Rossi* for *Classe Operaia* alongside Alquati, were less involved with actual inquiry and instead focused on questions of theory. They understood this process of organisation as the transition from the spontaneous "refusal of work" that emerged out of the working class experience in production to the consciously-organised "strategy of refusal" that sought to overturn the relations that structure production by blocking the development of capital in the sphere of production and thereby sparking off a wider crisis. This pushing of an alternative methodology began to exacerbate the question of political distinctions between the interventionists and the sociologists.

Vittorio Reiser, who was part of the sociologist faction, articulated the division between the two factions of proto-workerists through a distinction between inquiry "from above" and "from below". This pair of terms was used to describe the relationship of the researcher to the subject of research. The workers' inquiry "from above" utilised traditional sociological methods in order to study workers, the inquiry "from below" used political methods to study work collectively and alongside workers. The first "from above" approach was classical workers' inquiry, the second "from below" approach was coresearch. The sociologists were identified with the method "from above", and the interventionists with the method "from below". But, as Reiser noted in retrospect, this methodological debate seemed to hinge more on questions of access than desirability:

> [Coresearch] is a fundamental method, but it requires being in a condition where you are pursuing enquiry with workers that you are organizing or workers that are already organized and therefore in either case strictly related to political work. … If the conditions are there, this [coresearch] is clearly the best method. If instead you are external to the real situation,

> then traditional means are the first you pursue to acquire knowledge of the situation … (Reiser 2006)

The primary requirement of beginning an inquiry with coresearch is a pre-existing relationship with the workforce. If this is possible, Reiser argues, it should be pursued. If it is not, then workers' inquiry via "traditional means" is the only option. However, there is also a third option: an inquiry which begins using orthodox sociological methods can make the transition to coresearch. This is possible when the relationship between researcher and subject becomes increasingly horizontal, and the distinctions between the two which may have been present at the start of the inquiry are gradually undermined. A survey might lead into an interview, which might lead into a political discussion, which might lead to cowriting political material and then into a collective meeting and so on. The increasing strength of relationship between worker and researcher can, over time, develop the methodology which it is possible to use. In practice, most workers' inquiries both historically and contemporaneously have relied upon a combination of elements "from above" and "from below", and this third option has often been the result. The reality of Alquati's coresearch methodology during the FIAT inquiry was hardly iconoclastic or unorthodox, despite his radical claims: his main data collection consisted of interviews with a network of *CGIL* militants, and only partially relied on him establishing contact with a layer of non-political workers. Therefore, the methodological point of distinction seems to have primarily been developed by different factions of proto-workerists in order to draw lines between their different camps on the question of methodology, rather than to further the application of workerist methods of research *per se.* As Mario Tronti has reflected: "there was less disagreement [between the interventionists and the sociologists] than we thought at the time" (Tronti 2019, 332–33)

Another element of the methodological dispute between the two factions emerged over the question of how an inquiry should be timed. For Panzieri, inquiries should be conducted at moments when everyday resistance was being transformed into a collective struggle in order to understand the process of mobilisation more clearly:

> Our insistence on the importance of inquiry on the spot (hot inquiry) is grounded on a basic assumption: an antagonistic society can never reduce one of its basic constituent elements - the working class - to homogeneity. Therefore it is necessary to study the extent to which it is possible to concretely grasp the dynamics behind the working class tendency to move from conflict to antagonism and to make the dichotomy typical of capitalist society unstable. (Panzieri 1965)

This “hot” inquiry was contrasted with the interventionist preference for beginning inquiries “cold”: when there was no overt evidence of working class self-organisation, in order to be able to gain clearer access to the hidden substratum of activity out of which struggle could emerge. However, assuming that inquiry is a process conducted over the course of months, it is quite possible for a hot inquiry to go cold or a cold inquiry to run hot. Again, the strict differentiation of the two seems to be factional rather than practical. There is merit both in studying workplaces in states of quiescence and states of conflict, and during the two varieties of transition (mobilisation and demobilisation) that link the two.

As a result of the distinctions within the workerist model of workers’ inquiry, it is impossible to identify one paradigmatic example of the Italian period of development. Over time, the movement which had once given workers’ inquiry such a prominent place in its arsenal gradually drifted away from applying it (Wright 2007; 2018). Workers’ inquiry came out of the period as a method which had been used in new contexts and been forced forwards in new ways, but not one which had been adopted as an ongoing priority over the course of decades. The theoretical developments made

by the workerists through the application of this methodology are manifold, and the application of inquiry as scientific method during this period is the inspiration for the approach of this thesis.

The reemergent workerist-inspired current that has blossomed after 2012 has frequently referenced the “inquiry trilogy” discussed above to account for its own historical roots (Woodcock 2014; Haider and Mohandesi 2013). However, it is important that this trilogy is not understood as three distinct instances. Pizzolato’s study of the interrelation between Marxists involved in workers’ inquiry in Turin and Detroit makes clear that: “many of their ideas, practices, and tactics were hatched in the transnational arena” (Pizzolato 2011, 20). Instances of exchange between the tendencies discussed above are too numerous and expansive to catalogue. For instance, militants involved in the Revolutionary Union Movement in Detroit had extensive exchanges with workerist-inspired Italian militants throughout the late sixties and early seventies, to the point that “events in the Michigan plants were probably followed more avidly in Turin and the other Italian industrial centres than anywhere in the United States” (Georgakas and Surkin 2012, 51). Furthermore, as is argued below, the trilogy account of the transnational co-development of workers’ inquiry is not a complete and final one. There remain important examples of the method beyond that trilogy which applications of workers’ inquiry can learn much from. This thesis will propose one such example: British workplace sociology.

British workplace sociology: inquiry by another name?

The inheritance of British workplace sociology in the development of contemporary workplace analyses via Labour Process Theory has already been discussed above. These sociological studies, however, also offer a methodological example of note. Between approximately 1971 and 1985, a current of Marxist and

radical sociology emerged in Britain which was particularly focused on close, empirical studies of workplaces.[12] These studies were often conducted with similar methodological toolboxes: non-participant observation, extensive interviews with shop stewards, and ethnography were all popular. These data were then presented through direct quotation, with the best instances of the form allowing for the voices of workers and writers to be given equal weight and presented with few notable stylistic distinctions.[13] Long-term embeddedness within a workplace allowed for impressive levels of access and the ability to accurately understand highly-complex phenomena. Overall, mobilisation theorist John Kelly's claim that to this current marked the "intellectual high-water mark of a brief period of fertile and highly insightful accounts of social processes at the workplace" (Kelly 1998, 7) seems accurate. However, these accounts were rarely explicitly theorised in the workers' inquiry tradition.

On the other hand, an explicitly workerist-influenced current was emerging in Britain which very much saw itself in that tradition. Clustered around the publisher Red

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[12] The key contributions to this current include: Tony Lane and Kenneth Roberts' *Strike at Pilkingtons* (Lane and Roberts 1971); Huw Beynon's *Working for Ford* (Beynon 1973); Theo Nichols and Peter Armstrong's *The Workers Divided* (Nichols and Armstrong 1976); Stephen Hill's *The Dockers* (Hill 1976); Huw Beynon and Theo Nichols' *Living with Capitalism* (Nichols and Beynon 1977); Huw Beynon and Hilary Wainwright's *The Workers Report on Vickers* (Beynon and Wainwright 1979); Coventry, Liverpool, Newcastle and North Tyneside Trades Councils' *State Intervention in Industry: A Workers Inquiry* (Coventry, Liverpool, Newcastle and North Tyneside Trades Councils 1980); Anna Pollert's *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* (Pollert 1981); Ruth Cavendish's *Women on the Line* (Cavendish 1982); Nick Hedges and Huw Beynon's *Born to Work* (Hedges and Beynon 1982); Sallie Westwood's *All Day Every Day* (Westwood 1984); and Paul Thompson and Eddie Bannon's *Working the System* (P. Thompson and Bannon 1985). John Kelly, in his listing of the key studies in the lineage includes some accounts which give more time and space to managers than the rest of the tradition (Batstone, Boraston, and Frenkel 1977; 1978; Armstrong, Goodman, and Hyman 1981; P. K. Edwards 1982) and similarly excludes some of the examples listed (Kelly 1998, 7).

[13] Theo Nichols and Huw Beynon expressed this stylistic aspiration best: "In attempting to document the waste involved in capitalist society we have also sought to offer some explanation of why it occurs – to point to the mechanics of capitalist production. We have not found this an easy task because so much of what passes for "theory" (even Marxist theory) fails to connect with the lives that people lead, whereas most descriptive social surveys too often fail to grasp the structure of social relations and the sense which people make of them. *It is almost as if another way of writing has to be developed; something which tells it like it is even though in any simple sense this is not possible; something which is theoretically informed yet free from theoretical pretentiousness, and which destroys the gap between the abstract and the concrete concrete*" (emphasis mine, Nichols and Beynon 1977, vii–viii). Unfortunately, the academic form of the PhD largely prevents me from following in this lineage.

Notes and the political organisation Big Flame(Wheeler 2015), these Anglo-workerists took part in interviews and cowriting with Ford workers and action groups in a manner parallel to their comrades at FIAT, producing pamphlets which parodied Ford's blue book of industrial relations in the process (Red Notes 1978). Thompson (co-author of *Working the System,* see footnote 12 above) took part in a process of political exchange between Big Flame in Liverpool and the workerist-inspired Lotta Continua in 1971 that involved leafleting FIAT plants in Turin (P. Thompson 2018). Beyond Big Flame, Montaldi established contact with the British Solidarity group (Pizzolato 2011) and *SoB* were at one point connected to Tony Cliff and the International Socialists (van der Linden 1997). When, in 1983, Thompson wrote about the "Italian labour process theorists", he was in fact writing about the workerists. Panzieri, Bologna and Tronti were the first workerists to be translated into English in 1976 (Conference of Socialist Economists 1976), and a steady stream of translations from the Italian movement which covered both workerism and its indirect inheritor *autonomia* continued from then onwards via Red Notes, thanks to the efforts of Ed Emery. These translations came too late to influence the first round of labour process debates in the UK, but they were understood by Thompson as forming an important part of the later debates on the emergence of a new class composition, and referenced the ideas they contained on the mass worker and the social factory (Thompson 1983). The development of an anglophone workerism and the incorporation of workerist arguments into the discussions over labour process theory occurred at the same time as the high-point of workplace sociology case studies was being reached. This coincidence, however, did not lead to the development of a full-blown Anglo-workerist takeover of the domain of industrial sociology, and so the developments of British workplace sociology have not been included in the genealogy referred to above. This

leads to an obvious question: could parts of the British workplace sociology tradition be retrospectively considered as developing methodological tools and approaches that we could deploy as part of a contemporary workers' inquiry?

The compatibility of much of British workplace sociology with workers' inquiry can be established by referring to the three core principles of the methodology established above: first, that one can gain unique insights into the nature of capitalist socialist relations by learning from the working class; second, that these insights from the perspective of the working class must then be reintegrated into a wider Marxist analysis of the totality; and third, that only through this double-movement of inquiry and integration can socialists develop a political project that responds to contemporary conditions. The task of exhaustively proving this with in-depth readings of that whole tradition is beyond the scope of this thesis, but a number of examples can be given:

> At best they [academic sociologists] have produced sociology for sociologists: an absurdity which cuts the writer off from the subjects of his writing. In writing *Working for Ford* I have tried to overcome this contrived isolation. I have never worked for Ford. I have told the story of other people's experiences, some of which I shared, as an outsider. An outsider who was accepted inside. These pages are the product of that hesitant mutuality. They are made up of the activity and conversation of men and women in the pub, the factory, on the picket-line or in their homes, combined in an attempt to describe the lives that people lead when they work on the shop-floor of a large car factory; to outline the crises they encounter and the way in which they try and make sense of them and the world they live in. The names are their names and the book is written for them in the hope that they, and others like them, will be able to identify parts of themselves in the story and perhaps, thereby, see more clearly the way they are going. (Beynon 1973, 9)
>
> At ICI and Lucas, in the machine tool industry and the motor industry, amongst others, workers and shop stewards have shown a similar interest in 'research' and in developing their own counter strategies.
>
> … This report is therefore just one example of a more general activity, and we very much hope it will help strengthen the development of research which bases itself upon the expressed needs and interests of the people who work on the shop-floors of offices and factories and experience the consequences of decisions taken by 'experts' and accountants in head

offices. (Beynon and Wainwright 1979, 7)

In addition, Nichols and Armstrong make their position clear with their excited affirmation of the new working class militancy of the early 1970s which developed tactics like flying pickets, used an unofficial mass strike to free five shop stewards from prison, and won set-piece battles like Saltley Gate (where miners successfully picketed a vital coke plant during a national strike). They castigate Marxists who write off quiescent sectors and workplace studies as unimportant and argue for close-up inquiries into these workplaces in order to understand what was going on below the surface and contribute to the development of new militancy in these contexts (Nichols and Armstrong 1976, 13–15). Cavendish argues that the interrelationship between different segments of the working class and its overall composition is a key strategic issue for socialists, and that the best way to answer it is by fostering an active and continuous relationship between intellectuals and workers (Cavendish 1982, 4–8). Thompson and Bannon prioritise a focus on worker resistance and disavow objectivity entirely (Thompson and Bannon 1985, 4–5).

In particular, *State Intervention in Industry: A Workers' Inquiry* demonstrates the vitality of this period. The inquiry sought to understand how and why the 1974-79 Labour government failed workers (specifically through the damp squib of the National Enterprise Board) and develop strategies to make sure that it would not happen again in the future.[14] In order to develop this understanding, the four trades councils involved in producing the report all carried out local processes of inquiry involving questionnaires and discussions with at least twenty five different shop stewards committees over the course of six months. These local investigations were followed

[14] As the authors put it: "the one conclusion which comes most clearly from the inquiry is that *never again can we leave politics to the politicians*. Socialist politicians do not have the power to carry through socialist policies by parliament alone" (1980, 6).

up with a tribunal at the House of Commons in which members of the trades councils interrogated the Labour ex-ministers who had failed to implement the promised programme of nationalisations and industrial democratisation. The strategic conclusions drawn on the basis of their research included a recognition of the necessity of: first, aggressively democratising the Labour party so that its structures could be influenced from the shop-floor; and second, building rank and file multi-union combine committees as organs of class power. The remarkable scope and thoroughness of this inquiry marks it out as a serious milestone in the inquiry tradition.

However, this general inclination of workplace sociology towards inquiry-compatible approaches is not absolute. Counter-examples can be found. Consider, for example, Lane and Robert's claim that "our aim is simply to describe and to analyse"– however unconvincing that apparent neutrality is in the context of the study as a whole (Lane and Roberts 1971, 21). Many researchers also failed to build the kind of long term organisational and political links to the workforces they studied which would be considered typical in the best examples of inquiry. But despite these counter-examples, the overall direction of travel seems clear: these studies were understood as a cohesive current by those writing them, and one of the defining elements of that current was an attempt to use sociological research methods as a way to both understand the workplace from below and to assist in working class self-organisation. Whilst not every single listed above is an inquiry in the fullest sense of the term, the current shares enough with the other periods of development discussed before to suggest that a new moment be added to the genealogy of inquiry. This period has its own distinctive contributions to that history that would bear further research – varying from the strong focus on female workers' experience in the factory, to the stylistic aspiration to universal comprehension. This addition is also significant in that it

expands the number of examples of workers' inquiry to which contemporary anglophone applications of the method can refer. These often combine a variety of forms of inquiry, from ethnography to questionnaires and interviews, and do so in novel ways. Lane and Roberts (1971), for example, conduct what we might call a "retrospective inquiry" into a strike, by following up their observation of the latter half of an eight week dispute with a large survey and extensive interviews – an approach that has no obvious precursor in the rest of the workers' inquiry tradition, and will be drawn on in my own inquiry below. The expansion of the tradition of workers' inquiry to include British workplace sociology opens up substantial avenues for further research and reflection.

After this high water mark of workplace studies came an extended decline. I have already discussed Thompson and Ackroyd critique of the "virtual removal of labour as an active agency of resistance" in industrial sociology (1995, 615) in which they argued that the historic gains made through a focus on the workplace "from below" were being eroded by a focus on research which made management the sole agent determining the conditions within the workplace. This critique was only framed in passing as a methodological one,[15] but Thompson and Ackroyd's insight that workers were being discounted as agents could be attributed as much to the decline in the use of methodology "from below" as it could to their preferred explanation, the advance of Foucauldian conceptual frameworks. Without a strong commitment to shop-floor detail, the empirical data which proved the existence of workers as an agent within the workplace was lacking. Research which does not utilise a methodology that

[15] "Rather, as industrial sociologists we have to put labour back in, by doing theory and research in such a way that it is possible to "see" resistance and misbehaviour, and recognising that innovatory employee practices and informal organisation will continue to subvert managerial regimes" (Thompson and Ackroyd 1995, 629).

specifically aims to understand a workplace from below is inevitably stripped of the ability to understand the depth of social processes of self-organisation and resistance in that workplace. Given the invisible and covert nature of both embryonic solidarity and resistance tactics employed by workers, any reliance on the evidence presented on the surface of a workplace is highly flawed. It is precisely this capacity to view the workplace from below that British workplace sociology shares with many other workers' inquiry traditions.

The method of this thesis

Workers' inquiry acts as an overall methodological framework, rather than specifying any one set of data collection techniques. Inquiries can use a variety of different channels – from Marx's questionnaire to the JFT's ethnographic narrative and workerism's interviews. This section will discuss the specific method used in this thesis, not only in light of the workers' inquiry but also in relation to the mainstream of social science. As a result, it will articulate the Marxist current discussed above through the occasionally alien language of scholarly research – but it will do so without losing sight of the fact that it is the iconoclastic nature of workers' inquiry that gives it its value.

The empirical work in this thesis consists of three case studies. A case study is defined as "an instance of a class of events" (George and Bennett 2005, 17). In this instance, the class of event in question is a process of working class self-organisation by a specific class fraction in a previously non-unionised workplace. George and Bennett identify four key benefits to case studies: they have the potential to develop a high degree of conceptual validity; they are strong at developing new hypotheses; they allow for the close analysis of causal mechanisms; and they have the capacity to address causal complexity. Another benefit, which is important for this thesis, is that

case studies situate phenomena within their real-world contexts (Yin 2009). Regardless of the specific understandings of the case study, the overwhelming focus of this methodology is always on deep understanding (Mabry 2008). Overall the case study approach prioritises the situated study of complex phenomena and makes possible significant theoretical developments. As a result, the case study approach has proved popular in the union revitalisation literature at large (Ibsen and Tapia 2017) and also in some of the specific studies that have inspired elements of this thesis (Darlington 1994; McAlevey 2016). But, as with all methodological choices, these advantages come at a price. The pro-case study literature recognises the major deficiencies of the method as a lack of theoretical parsimony and the impossibility of achieving representative results in the mould of positive science (George and Bennett 2005).

When reviewing the literature which criticised the validity of case studies investigated through semi-structured interviews, Diefenbach found 16 main varieties of critique spanning research design, data collection, data analysis, and the potential for generalisation (Diefenbach 2009). At their most aggressive, these critiques attempt to relegate case studies based on qualitative data collection from valid research to the purely anecdotal. So, this methodology – whilst it is common – still has to be presented with that debate in mind. In this discussion of my method, I will argue that workers' inquiry is a subjective, interventionist, and process-focused methodology that generalises from the concrete processes of production to the abstract mode of production and aspires to undermine the hierarchy between researcher and research subject. It is defined by its relation to a political force, the working class, and as such is always a method which finds its ultimate realisation beyond the written communication of data, in the real movement to abolish the present state of things.

In order to clarify my application of inquiry, I will first discuss the selection of cases in this thesis and my mode of generalisation from those cases towards the level of the social totality. Then I will discuss the specific modes of data collection to be used in these case studies, and how taking a process-focused approach allows me to develop an adaptive methodology which could aspire towards coresearch whilst retaining more of the features of a conventional research strategy. Finally, I will discuss and justify the interventionist approach and subjectivity that is constitutive of workers' inquiry.

It is widely understood that case studies are not "representative", in the mould of positive science. In other words, they cannot be abstracted from through statistical process in order to make claims about an entire population (George and Bennett 2005; Mabry 2008; Yin 2009). Three case studies of working class self-organisation cannot, in these terms, be extrapolated from in order to make conclusions about the general state of working class self-organisation – instead, the insight of case studies comes from their in-depth discussion of complex phenomena and the development of theories, through which researchers can then reflect back on the general question of the independent action of the popular classes. On this basis, case study methodology is often discussed in relation to a phenomenon called "selection bias". Selection bias is understood as occurring when the range of data collected is skewed by either the design of the study or the reality of the phenomena being studied, resulting in systematic error. Its primary application is in statistics, but it has also been utilised as a critique of case study approaches which select the most extreme rather than the most representative examples of a phenomenon (Collier and Mahoney 1996; George and Bennett 2005; Yin 2009).

However, there are also dissenting approaches to how cases can be used. Burawoy's methodological justification for his case selection in the *Politics of Production* is worth quoting at length in this regard:

> The cases were chosen not for statistical representative-ness but for theoretical relevance. … the very idea of a typical factory is a sociological fiction. It is an artificial construction of those who see only one mode of generalisation – the extrapolation from sample to population. There is, however, a second mode of generalisation, which seeks to illuminate the forces at work in a society as a totality rather than to reflect simply on the constancy and variation of the isolated factory regimes within a society. This second mode, pursued here, is the extension from the micro context to the totality which shapes it. According to this view every particularity contains a generality; each particular factory regime is the product of general forces operating at a societal or global level.[16] (Burawoy 1985, 17–18)

Burawoy's model, here, is one of generalisation between concrete and abstract using the social relations that bind the two. This approach, which argues that "every particularity contains a generality", derives directly from what Marx describes as his method of political economy in the *Grundrisse* (1993) and which reached its apotheosis in *Capital* (Lebowitz 2003, 52–63). The case studies selected for this thesis – a food platform, a call centre and a high street pub chain – are understood as being particularly theoretically relevant to the study of working class self-organisation because the analysis of the social relations within them opens a path towards the concrete totality. To Diefenbach's charge that the selection of the unit of investigation for case studies is not "objective" (2009, 891), a Marxist answers: yes, precisely.

In a similar manner to Darlington's study of shop steward organisation in Merseyside manufacturing plants (Darlington 1994), all of the case studies of this thesis are from one specific urban environment: the city of Brighton. Brighton is a city with large personal and producer service sectors, both of which were identified as

[16] For an earlier version of this same sentiment, see (Burawoy 1979, xiv–xv).

potential sites of working class recomposition as early as the 2000s (Silver 2003). Brighton offers us an opportunity to study young, low-paid, disconnected service workers, and to see this recomposition from their point of view.

Brighton is also a city I lived in and organised in between 2015 and 2020. This embeddedness allowed for high levels of access, in line with the findings of Sixsmith et al. that access to communities can be best achieved through researchers "being there" (Sixsmith, Boneham, and Goldring 2003). In this case, my situatedness within the broader workers' movement in Brighton was fundamental to my ability to gain access to participants in all three case studies. I began from a position of "insider-outsider" (Carey, McKechnie, and McKenzie 2001): even though I did not work alongside the participants, I was part of a workers' movement which they recognised themselves as affiliated to. This process of access was emergent and ongoing, as access always is (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

The data collection methods used within these case studies share considerable common ground with one, with some minor alterations based on the degree of previous knowledge I had ahead of the research period, and the level of access I was able to achieve.[17] In contrast to the approach of some industrial relations scholars (for example, Kelly and Heery 1989; Gall 2005a) I have specifically not prioritised interviewing trade union employees as part of these case studies. Instead, I adopted sampling priorities similar to those of workerists like Alquati (Wright forthcoming) by

[17] I worked at Deliveroo part time for eight-months before beginning this thesis, meaning that I have a degree of pre-existing knowledge about the workplace and the dynamics therein. I was also a participant in the processes of worker self-organisation and resistance which provide the background to this case study. However, rather than using a specifically ethnographic method in this thesis, I will instead reference the details of my experience via other published material. This will allow me to approach the case study premised less on my experience of the process and more on the collective experience of other workers. This is not the case for the Wetherspoon and call centre case studies, where I had no relevant previous knowledge.

beginning my data collection via semi-structured interviews with a layer of workers with some form of existing connection to the workers' movement. In all three cases, they were either already union members or workers who aspired to organise a union branch. When possible, I then moved on to semi-structured interviews with a broader scope of workers, subsequently contacted via snowball sampling (for details, see Appendix 1). I sampled only workers who were participants in the processes of self-organisation and collective action in their workplace for two reasons. First, because the tight interlinkage between research and intervention in the inquiry method limits the capacity to sample and connect with workers who are apathetic or actively antagonistic to those interventions. Given my methodological approach, I was rarely if ever perceived as non-partisan. Second, because the goal of this thesis is to understand those processes of self-organisation and collective action from the inside, meaning that this sampling approach reflected the wider goals of the project. This means, however, that the attitudes and motivations discussed in this inquiry are those of participants in self-organisation. They may not be shared amongst the variably sized portion of the workforce who remained outside these processes.

My recruitment strategy for this study could therefore be summarised as follows: I used my insider-outsider status and embeddedness within the Brighton context to make initial contact with workers in my case study workplaces who already had some degree of existing connection to the wider movement. After initial semi-structured interviews, I then pursued a snowball approach where possible, going on to interview other workers who became involved in the process of self-organisation until I felt I had started to approach saturation. However, as Thomas et al. have argued (2007), the concrete interactive practices that made up my recruitment strategy underwent the unavoidable modification and adaptation that the practice of research

demands. In line with McCormack et al. (2013) I viewed the minor specific modifications that occurred in each case study as positive methodological innovation rather than unpardonable deviation from my research design. I have provided further details of these specific variations in the case studies below.

I combined these interviews with elements of participant observation at demonstrations and picket lines, the systematic observation of elements of the labour processes (where access was possible), and a secondary documentary analysis of relevant "proletarian documentary literature" (Hastings-King 2014), produced by workers during the period of the inquiry – almost all of which was digital (Carmichael 2008). This combination of methods is almost the same as that employed by Gent in his inquiry into the distribution sector (Gent 2019). The only addition is the element of participant observation, which itself is the result of some of the case studies in question becoming "hot" inquiries during the research period.

Given the primacy of interviews in my method, it's important to understand how I approached them. Oakley's work on feminist approaches to the semi-structured interview are of particular relevance to my applied method. She noted that her actual interviewing practice deviated from the textbook norm in several key ways: her interviews were two-way information exchanges, in which she treated her interviewees as agents rather than data-containers, and as a result they became social interactions that produced more than just a transcript (Oakley 1981). Oakley's non-hierarchical and involved interviewing style, rather than the hierarchy and supposed objectivity of the classic semi-structured methodology, was the inspiration for my interview technique.[18] The flexibility allowed by this kind of interview allowed workers to determine what they

[18] For a contemporary version of this orthodox methodology these classical methodologies, see (Hopf 2010).

themes or ideas they felt were most significant and draw out their own immanent analyses through our conversations.

This flexibility had great benefits in terms of allowing me to understand the point of view of the workers I was interviewing, but also presented some challenges. In early interviews, I discovered that interviewees were often very keen to provide exceptional details and stories about their workplaces. However, they saw their everyday practices as largely unimportant and unworthy of comment, and so often skipped over them. It was the details of these practices which contained rich data on their role in the labour process, their informal work groups, their informal resistance practices, their everyday relationship with management, and so on. The study of work generally and class composition specifically often requires the elucidation of routine details that make up the everyday practices of those involved (Nicolini 2009a). So, at the start of my research process, I was faced with a problem: how could I get into this detail of everyday practice without applying a highly structured and hierarchical interview practice?

I found my answer in the "Interview to the Double" (ITTD).[19] The ITTD is an interview technique which begins with a simple premise being presented to the interviewee: imagine that there is an exact impersonator of you, who wants to go to your workplace tomorrow and successfully pretend to be you for a full day. What instructions would you need to give them in order for them to successfully complete their task? The ITTD was initially developed by Italian Marxist industrial psychologists in the 1970s in order to provoke interviews that validated and engaged with the knowledge embedded in workers' everyday practices and develop towards a wider

[19] I owe Patrick Carmichael significant thanks for pointing me in the direction of this methodological approach in a discussion at the *Historical Materialism London* in 2018.

discussion about workers' agency and class consciousness (Oddone, Re, and Briante 1977; Nicolini 2009b). I used it in a similar way, with the intention of gathering initial data on the routine of work and setting a baseline from which further discussion could develop.

Throughout these various interviews, I collected data by recording audio and making handwritten notes of my immediate reflections on the conversation. Later, after transcription, I used these notes as a guide for rereading the transcript and highlighting/annotating material I found insightful or significant, as well as identifying questions I wanted to pursue further in future interviews. I then used these annotated transcripts as constant reference points as I wrote up the case studies, attempting to use verbatim quotes where possible in my presentation of the data. Unless otherwise stated, all the detail of the labour process elaborated in the case studies is based on interview data. In workplaces where the semi-public nature of the space made observation of the labour process possible without negotiating access with management, my data collection process was simple note taking. When undertaking participant observation of picket lines and strikes, I similarly made brief handwritten notes throughout.

The application of workers' inquiry in this thesis is conducted in light of the development of "social composition" (Notes From Below 2018), which will be addressed further below. This development aims to overcome the short-sightedness of some class composition theory, which can tend towards being so grounded in the details of the sphere of production that it misses the ways in which the relations experienced by the working class can be determined beyond the workplace. I will deal more with the theoretical implications of this rebalancing in chapter four below. However, there are also purely methodological concerns raised by the development

of a class composition lens which pays attention to consumption and reproduction as well as production. As this is one of the first workers' inquiry projects to utilise this specific concept in concrete analysis, I have had to design my inquiry without many examples to fall back on. In the end I decided on making one small modification: widening the scope of interviews to include discussions of issues of social composition in the style in which Marx included questions on the processes of consumption and reproduction beyond the workplace in his paradigmatic workers' inquiry (see, for instance, his questions on rent and food prices). Along the same lines, I also made sure to press for relevant details when conducting an ITTD. For example, I made sure not just to ask workers to provide instructions from the moment they entered the workplace, but also to ask them whether they ate before a shift, what their journey to work was like, and how they recovered afterwards.

Alongside the introduction of the ITTD, I also introduced group interviews on the suggestion of one my interviewees. The horizontal nature of this interviewing process was advanced by workers beginning to question each other during these group interviews, and a much broader collective process of idea formation and experience gathering was made possible as a result. Bohnsack, in his discussion of the group interview, makes extensive reference to the untranslated work of Frankfurt School sociologist Werner Mangold. He identified how, in the post-war West German context, Marxist sociologists developed the group interview in an attempt to get a better understanding of collective idea formation. Mangold in particular developed the concept of *gruppenmeinung* [group opinion]. He believed this collective opinion constituted more than just the sum of the participants' individual opinions and was instead a qualitatively different collective social phenomenon (formed largely before the actual instance of group discussion even begins). Only through group discussion

could data be collected which detailed the prevailing group opinion (Bohnsack 2010). When I used group interviews, gaining access to a form of this group opinion of the workforce (or a particular collective within it) was a substantial methodological benefit.

Finally, the most ambitious of these developments in interview technique was a small reading group, initiated by workplace leaders at a J D Wetherspoon pub. We discussed two of Marx's texts written for trade unionists (*Wage Labour and Capital* and *Value Price and Profit*) and Paul Romano's first section of *The American Worker* over the course of a few weeks, with the intention of advancing our analysis of the workplace and the process of self-organisation collectively. In the case of both group interviews and reading groups, my data collection method remained the same.

As a result of developments like this, I spent very significant amounts of time with some workers – in some cases, this amounted to upwards of fifty hours of interviews, meetings, reading groups and general chat. This depth of sampling is one of the core strengths of inquiry as a methodology. In general, then, rather than applying a singular method to each case, I was willing to explore and adapt my approach as opportunities to expand and develop the inquiry became available.

This process-based approach was also reflected in my data-processing strategy. Rather than collecting my data in one go and then coding and processing it all at the end of a period of empirical work and before analysis, I was instead transcribing and reflecting on interviews as I went (as discussed above). This allowed me to develop hypotheses throughout the case study process and identify areas where my raw data collection was lacking, and then bring those insights and questions back to workers for discussion. This simultaneous process of data collection and processing draws heavily on the methodological tradition of "grounded theory" (Strauss and

Corbin 1994; Charmaz 1995; 2006; Charmaz and Belgrave 2015). Although this study remains distinct from grounded theory in a number of respects (most notably the use of Marxist theoretical tools which were developed outside the context of the case studies) the reciprocity of theoretical development and data collection was a strength of this approach, allowing me to actively construct data collection practices that reflected my ongoing analytical developments.

By the time of my second or third interview with a worker our relationship had usually developed, through our interviews as social interactions (Oakley 1981), to the point that our discussions flowed much more freely. At times I would ask for clarity on specific questions and raise points for discussion, or else we might just chat about the current processes of organisation going on in the workplace and any changes since we last spoke. The more semi-structured nature of my early interviews gave way to something closer to unstructured conversation. This relaxed interviewing technique was full of exchanges of ideas. Sometimes workers would ask me for advice on how I might approach an organising problem, or what I thought about a political issue. I never held back from offering a full and honest response, building on Burawoy's insight that: "intervention is not only an unavoidable part of social research but a virtue to be exploited" (Burawoy 1989, 14).[20] Rather than advocating that the researcher seeks to erase themselves from the process of data collection, Burawoy stresses that the inevitable intersubjectivity of researcher and research subject in social contexts can be made into an advantage. Braverman has additionally argued that "active and interested parties, whose interpretations are enriched by their efforts at practice, convey a solidity, a depth and subtlety of observation, an anticipation of changing

[20] Burawoy is by no means unique in making this point. For instance, Law also argues for the inevitability of the researcher changing the world through their observation of it, and responds to this messy situated-ness by advocating an embrace of partiality (Law 2004).

moods, and an ability to disentangle the durable from the ephemeral that's entirely absent from the tabulations of [conventional] sociology" (1975, 30). Intervention is, in his model, a key part of gaining the capacity to interpret the "options, feeling, sentiments and changing moods of the working class" (ibid.) because through intervention the researcher develops the kind of relationship which allows for a fuller collection, interpretation and analysis of data. If a method proscribes intervention on the part of the researcher, it proscribes the full development of that researcher's relation to their subject. This position is the basis upon which I based my desire to move these processes of workers' inquiry towards coresearch (Roggero 2014) where possible. That is to say, wherever the hierarchy between worker and researcher was breaking down, I welcomed its disintegration. Whilst I never achieved coresearch in the fullest sense of the term (because the demands of academic study require that the final processes of data analysis and writing up be walled-off from the workers who are the subject of that analysis), I did end up pursuing a process of data collection within the inquiry which was radically more open to worker intervention than classical methods would have allowed.

The question of intervention leads towards the related issue of partiality. If intersubjective interventions aspiring to coresearch are to be made, they will inevitably be made in the favour of one party or the other. This poses no obstruction to Burawoy, however, who views partiality as a positive asset for social research. When reflecting on the broader challenge of generating a public sociology, he says that "if our predecessors set out to change the world, we have too often ended up conserving it" (Burawoy 2005, 5). For him, this willingness to take a side is part of what defines his discipline, and so: "in times of market tyranny and state despotism, sociology—and in particular its public face—defends the interests of humanity" (Burawoy 2005, 24).

Whilst would be inaccurate to describe myself as a sociologist (I remain, for better or worse, some kind of social theorist) this aspiration reflects something fundamental about the orientation of the Marxist study of work which is shared by this thesis. Also relevant to the discussions of partiality is Breman's writing on his research in the strongly class-divided rural areas of Gujarat, in which he highlights both the specific challenges of research conducted "from below" and the unequal nature of discussions of objectivity. A sociologist who claims that performance management in a workplace is an essential part of the labour process is objective, but a sociologist who claims that performance management is one part of a wider strategy of class domination is partial. Both are making ideological claims about the nature of work, but the criticism of partiality is directed at those researchers who contest the views "that flourish amongst those that rule the roost" (Breman 1985, 29).[21]

This thesis, however, can draw on more than the abstract arguments made by Burawoy, Braverman, and Breman about sociological method. Three prominent points of comparison for this thesis, each of which uses one or more case studies, can also be seen to employ partisan approaches (Darlington 1994; McAlevey 2016; Woodcock 2017). This body of research is absolutely partial: partial in favour of car factory shop stewards, call centre workers, teachers and nurses – in the same way that workers' inquiry has always been. As discussed above, this critique attempts to embody, insofar as is possible, a class: the working class.

Workers' inquiry is a method that aims to build an empirically-grounded picture of the class composition of the contemporary form of capitalism during periods of

[21] Whilst the caste system is a specific form of class relation with significant distinctions from the "classical" bourgeoise/proletariat class structure of the UK, I interpret the analysis of power relations in Breman's research as being analogous enough for the cross-applicability of conclusions to be maintained.

transition. In doing so, it is a mechanism to apply the influence of working class struggles upon the abstractions of socialist politics in order to form a strategy and a programme that can be applied practically on the material terrain of struggle. In this thesis, the method will be used, referring back to *Primo Maggio*, to break down the walls of working class inertia. Processes of self-organisation in previously disorganised workplaces will be the focus of my case study approach. The goal is to begin to develop the empirically-grounded analysis required for a new relation between the politics of parties and the conditions of struggle through a politico-strategic analysis of the independent action of the working class.

Part two: Class composition

In his seminal *Workers and Capital*, Mario Tronti argues that it is necessary to read Marx “not in his time, but in our own. *Capital* should be judged on the basis of *the capitalism of today*” (Tronti 2019, 3). Theoretical work, in this model, cannot be separated from the perspective and struggles of the working class, and therefore has to be located within a specific determinate context and read, as argued above, both retrospectively and prospectively. The following chapter will articulate the framework of interlinked concepts that I will use in our determinate context today to both describe and analyse my case studies, and by doing so attempt to read workerism in our own time.

In order to do so, I will propose significant modifications to a workerist approach; ranging from the synthetic addition of new conceptual material to the redrawing of schemas and the wholesale addition of new elements. This modification brings with it a set of challenges: the theorists referenced hereafter belong to different sub-traditions, and have taken different positions on different debates, leading to an increased potential for internal contradiction within the framework. However, I consider this risk to be a small downside when compared to the benefits of broadening the theoretical vocabulary of class composition analysis through substantive engagement with other Marxist approaches.

As part of this process of development, however, I will circumnavigate the confused field of “post-*operaismo*” entirely. This theoretical approach, as Gigi Roggero has identified, was produced by the collision between operaismo and the Anglophone academy in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Roggero 2020). During this period, the innovations of the current were largely understood via the later work of prominent ex-

workerists. The problem was that much of this later work, such as Hardt and Negri's best-selling *Empire*, diverged profoundly from what might be characterised as the mainstream of workerism in its original iteration. As a result, the diverse and contradictory contributions of decades of theory (of variable usefulness and accuracy) were flattened under an "autonomist" canon of novel concepts: post-Fordism, the multitude, the cognitariat, the precariat, horizontal and informal modes of resistance, the undesirability of political mediation and so on. The result has been a retreat from theory grounded in the experience and composition of the working class into the abstract play of idealistic schemas (for further discussion, see Broder 2020). It is such ungrounded theoretical free play which I aim to avoid here, hence my insistence on developing a theory of class composition at the same time as undertaking an inquiry.[22] Instead, the chapters that follow might be best understood as a study and development of what Anstasi and Mandarini call the "other operaismo" (2020).

This development takes place in a gap. Marx's six-book plan for *Capital*, laid out in the 1859 Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* indicated that he would "examine the system of bourgeois economy in the following order: capital, landed property, wage-labour; the state, foreign trade, world market" (Marx 1859). However, these six volumes never appeared, and *Capital* was slowly transformed through relentless work into the three volume text we know today.[23] On

[22] To refer to Tronti's argument on the relationship between empirical work and theory: "one absolutely cannot accept that there exists a researcher who offers material to the theorist, and then there is a theorist who re-elaborates it and produces theory. There cannot be a Seppilli who makes the social inquiries and then carries them to Colletti, and a Colletti who organizes them into a general theory, in the same way as there cannot be the purely theoretical type of intellectual who only has the task of offering materials to the politician, who then applies them concretely. Rather there is a continuous unity precisely in so far as this unity is realized already within Marxism, and therefore it already lives precisely in the person of the Marxist" (Tronti 2016). That said, as with many of Tronti's declarations on the proper approach to research, the extent to which he himself overcame this dualism is very much open to question.

[23] See (Musto 2018) for the exhaustive details.

questions of class composition, Marxism has developed substantially beyond Marx and *Capital*, into the gap left by “the missing book on wage labour” (Lebowitz 2003:27). In this developing space, as the editors of *Viewpoint* put it: “many of the best political ideas emerge when different currents find themselves forced to speak to each other” (Viewpoint, n.d.). The goal of this chapter’s expansion-through-encounter is to develop a form of what Tronti called the “neo-synthetic conceptual apparatus of the working class point of view” (2019, 278) that makes the most of these crossings of currents and rises to the challenge of theorising the balance of forces we face today. In the words of Alberto Battaggia, writing in 1981: “the best way to defend workerism today is to supersede it” (Battaggia 2018).

The 3-part model

My starting point for this chapter is the theoretical position produced by a group of workerist-inspired researchers collected around the British journal *Notes from Below* (of which I am a part). Our articulation of a class composition framework is distinguished by its introduction of the concept of social composition alongside the classical ideas of technical and political composition, and defines its components as follows:

> Class composition is a material relation with three parts: the first is the organisation of labour-power into a working class (technical composition); the second is the organisation of the working class into a class society (social composition); the third is the self-organisation of the working class into a force for class struggle (political composition).
>
> In all three parts, class composition is both product and producer of struggle over the social relations of the capitalist mode of production. The transition between technical/social and political composition occurs as a leap that defines the working class political viewpoint. (Notes From Below 2018)

The structure of the chapter will progress through the three static categories outlined above: technical composition, social composition, and political composition.

In each discussion a series of concepts will be developed and discussed to add granular detail to the wider category, leading to a progressive development of the model over the course of the chapter. The end goal is to move from this sketched outline to a detailed map.

Each section will be structured around the discussion of a key node: first, Marx's account of the labour process and the development of the factory system in Volume 1 of *Capital*; second, the domestic labour debate; third, Lenin's conception of the relationship between economics and politics. But first, this chapter opens with a discussion of class structure in contemporary capitalism and defines exactly what we mean when we talk about the proletariat.

The class structure of the capitalist mode of production

There is one abiding question created by the absence of the book on wage labour from the finished parts of Capital: what exactly would Marx's fully elaborated theory of class have looked like? Volume 3 famously tails off just pages into chapter 52, titled "Classes", just after Marx introduces wage-labourers, capitalists and landowners as the three classes into which bourgeois society tends to divide and argues that: "this class articulation does not emerge in pure form", with the boundaries between these positions often being part-concealed (Marx 1981, 3:1025–26). However, despite this lack of clarity on the exact inheritance of Marx, the unified starting point of the discussions of class that follow in his footsteps is a refusal to treat classes as empty sociological containers defined by relative income levels, occupational roles, or cultural signifiers. Instead, we understand classes as real social forces that, through their collective behaviour and struggle, determine the shape of the social formation they are situated within. But beyond that, there are a great diversity of Marxist approaches to the question of what classes are, and how they operate.

The conceptualisation of class used in this thesis will develop on the basis of one specific debate between Poulantzas' 1974 *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* and Erick Olin Wright's 1978 *Class, Crisis and the State.* At stake is the question of what the proletariat is and how it is defined. In particular, my answer to these questions will draw on Olin Wright's prioritisation of economic relations in the determination of class boundaries, allowance for the existence of contradictory class locations, and account of the specific structural and organisational capacities of different classes. However, it will also retain Poulantzas' theoretical approach to the role of class struggle in class formation and his distinction between the structural determination of class by the mode of production and the conjectural modification of classes in specific social formations.

Poulantzas' argument in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* begins from the definition of classes as groupings of social agents in conflict with other classes – that is to say, other groupings of social agents. This does not mean that classes only exist when they are conscious of and organised to pursue their own interests. Instead, Poulantzas defines class struggle as a constant reality of the social relations of a capitalist mode of production, rather than a specific and conscious form of concrete activity that only exists during periods of mobilisation.[24] They do not exist as a thing, a sociological object, and *then* enter into struggle, but exist only in class struggle (Poulantzas 1978, 14).

[24] "Class struggle, in Poulantzas' analysis, does not refer to the conscious self-organisation of a class as a social force, but rather to the antagonistic, contradictory quality of the social relations which comprise the social division of Labour. Class struggle exists even when classes are disorganised." (Olin Wright 1993, 32) Or as Marx and Engels put it in the Holy Family: "It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment *regards* as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is visibly and irrevocably foreshadowed in its own life situation as well as in the whole organization of bourgeois society today" (Marx and Engels 1956, chap. 4).

The nature of a class is defined *primarily* by its position in the relations of production but also by its political and ideological relations to other classes, which are conceived of as objective and concrete in the same manner as economic relations.[25] These relations combine with the larger systemic dynamics and imperatives of the mode of production to produce an objective position in the social division of labour which a class is structurally determined to occupy. But whilst classes are structurally determined by the mode of production, class positions also vary in each specific conjuncture according to the "always unique historical individuality of a social formation, in other words, the concrete situation of the class struggle" (1978, 14). Internally, also, classes can be divided into different fractions and strata along the lines of minor variations in economic, ideological and political relations.[26]

Poulantzas then uses these theoretical premises to develop a theory of the proletariat. In particular, he seeks to draw a line between the proletariat and what he calls "the new petit bourgeoise". This division was of contemporary political significance because Poulantzas wanted to contest the *Parti Communiste Français*'s (*PCF*) strategy regarding the "intermediate wage-earning strata" and what he saw as the unprincipled slide into a social democratic strategy of forming a popular alliance of wage-earners against monopoly capital, which obscured real contradictions amongst "the people" (1978, 197-204). However, despite the valid impulse to oppose the

[25] Prezeworski argues that this should be seen as a continuation of a Gramscian mode of class analysis (1977, 368).

[26] "The Marxist theory of social classes further distinguishes *fractions* and *strata* of a class, according to the various classes, on the basis of differentiations in the economic sphere, and of the role, a quite particular one in these cases, of political and ideological relations … These differentiations, for which reference to political and ideological relations is always indispensableindefensible, are of great importance; these fractions, strategies and categories may often, in suitable concrete conjunctures, assume the rule of relatively autonomous social forces." (Poulantzas 1974, 23).

watering-down of the proletarian political viewpoint, the theory of the proletariat at which he arrives contains fundamental inaccuracies.

Poulantzas divides the proletariat from the new petit bourgeoise along three lines: economic, political and ideological. First, economically, he argues that the proletariat is directly involved in producing surplus value through productive labour, whilst the new petit bourgeoise is only secondarily involved in the production of surplus value, and carries out unproductive labour. Second, politically, he argues that the proletariat occupy non-supervisory positions within the labour process, whereas the new petit bourgeoise are invested with the task of supervision by the bourgeoise. Third, ideologically, he argues that the proletariat are engaged in manual labour, whilst the new petit bourgeoise are involved in mental labour.

So, in summary, he argues that the proletariat is comprised only of manual, non-supervisory workers who produce surplus value. Most other categories of worker were not part of the proletariat, but instead the new petit bourgeoise. Olin Wright takes issue with this theory on a point by point basis. First, on the division between productive and unproductive work, he demonstrates the incoherence of Poulantzas' conception of value production. Poulantzas argues that "labour producing surplus-value is broadly equivalent to the process of material production in its capitalist form" (1978, 221) – that is to say, that productive labour is broadly equivalent to the capitalist manufacture of physical commodities. This is a fundamental confusion of the Marxist analysis of value production, because it uses a concrete process (the manufacture of physical commodities) as an index of a social relation (surplus-value production). This is explicitly opposed to Marx's argument in *Capital*:

> If we may take an example from outside the sphere of production of material objects, a schoolmaster is a productive labourer when, in addition

> to belabouring the heads of his scholars, he works like a horse to enrich the school proprietor. *That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of in a sausage factory, does not alter the relation.* Hence the notion of a productive labourer implies not merely a relation between work and useful effect, between labourer and product of labour, but also a specific, social relation of production, a relation that has sprung up historically and stamps the labourer as the direct means of creating surplus-value. To be a productive labourer is, therefore, not a piece of luck, but a misfortune. [Emphasis mine] (Marx 1967, 1:477)

Should Poulantzas' definition be accepted, any worker involved in the production of service commodities (like the schoolmaster) rather than material commodities would be excluded from the proletariat. In later discussions, Poulantzas tried to walk back from this mistake, but did so without making adequate revisions to his overall argument to account for the resulting inaccuracies (Poulantzas 2008, 329–30). Further to problems of defining productive labour, Olin Wright also identifies two further points of critique: that the division between productive/unproductive labour does not map onto specific positions in the muddled reality of real world labour process, and that there is no division in class interest between productive and unproductive workers (E. O. Wright 1993, 46–50).

However, Olin Wright fails to recognise that Poulantzas makes two points in the elaboration of his (ultimately flawed) argument which are vital for the accurate conception of classes more widely. The first is that *classes exist only as constituted in struggle*, and that this struggle is a constant reality of the relations of production rather than a specific form of collective mobilisation. The second is that classes are shaped on two levels: first at the level of the mode of production by a process of "structural determination", and second at the level of the social formation by a process of "conjectural modification". The proletariat, as it exists under the capitalist mode of production, is structurally determined to occupy a certain objective class position whereby its labour is commodified, it is divorced from ownership of the means of

production, and so on. But it can also be conjecturally modified by those same relations in less fundamental, more contextual ways.[27] Classes take on specific positions and forms in specific historical moments – and this is, in fact, exactly the kind of insight that class composition seeks to further. All forms of class composition analysis focus on what, following Poulanzas, we can think of as the conjectural modification of classes in the social formation. It is this capacity to see classes as, at the same time, part of a consistent system *and* always in the processes of being remade – at once in world-historical opposition and in flux – that forms the basis of the analysis to follow.

So if the proletariat is not to be defined as manual, non-supervisory workers who produce surplus value, how should we understand it? Olin Wright proposes two major steps, the first of which is scrapping the mental/manual and productive/unproductive distinctions used by Poulantzas. The second is theorising that there exists a series of contradictory class locations around the proletariat which, rather than being reassigned to the petit bourgeoise, should be thought of as being of conflicted status between the two (1993, 61-87). His resulting definition is:

> The working class can be understood as those positions which: (A) occupy the working class position within the social relations of production, i.e., wage labour which is excluded from control over money capital, physical capital and labour power; or, (B) are linked directly to the working class through immediate family or class trajectories; or, (C) occupy working class positions within political and ideological apparatuses i.e. positions which are excluded either from the creation or execution of state policy and ideology.[1] (1993, 98-9)

[27] The nature of the state apparatus, in this context, is to "maintain the unity of the social formation by concentrating and sanctioning class domination, and in this way reproducing social relations i.e. class relations." (1978, 25). As such, we might think of the state as a regulator the limits within which class composition is permitted to develop autonomously.

Once this class has been defined with regards to the other classes of capitalist society, the question of internal structure comes to the fore. If the proletariat exists as a coherent class, how does it exist? What is the substance of its internal relations? This is where Olin Wright's concept of class capacities, understood as "the social relations within a class which to a greater or lesser extent unite the agents of that class into a class formation" (1993, 98), comes into play. Class capacities provide the mechanism through which a class in formation participates in struggle and thereby constitutes itself as a class. Wright divides these capacities into two: those produced by the wider mode of production which he calls structural capacities, and those consciously produced by the members of that class which he calls organisational capacities: "the structural capacities of classes can be thought of as structuring the possibilities for the self-organisation of classes. The organisational capacity of classes, on the other hand, constitute the actual linkages among members of a class created by and through consciously directed class organisations" (1993, 101). These internal relations will be of great significance for our wider theory of class composition.

So, what is the class structure of the capitalist mode of production? Capitalist society remains fundamentally dominated by a ruling bourgeoise who are opposed by an insurgent proletariat. These two are, by definition, always locked in class struggle, regardless of what conscious ideas are held by the members of either class. In between them lies a variety of groups with contradictory class locations who can be drawn into various forms of alliance with the two dominant classes depending on historical circumstance. These classes have unique internal structural and organisational capacities which shape the ways in which they are able to act to pursue their interests in that constant struggle. The challenge facing a theory of class composition is to create a systematic way of understanding the balance of forces

between these classes in a specific social formation and articulate how processes of conjectural modification act to alter the scope for successful proletarian offensives. It is to this challenge that we will now turn.

Ch.3 Technical composition

In the discussion above it became clear how the social relations of production both structurally determine and conjecturally modify the shape of the proletariat in any social formation. The concept of “technical composition” allows us to better analyse how the organisation of commodified labour-power into a working class both shapes and is shaped by class struggle. Beyond analysis, an understanding of technical composition can also become part of the theoretical basis for forms of collective action that aim to overturn the system of exploitation and domination that is the capitalist mode of production. In order to develop an understanding of technical composition, this section will take the form of a close reading of Marx’s analysis of the labour process and its transformation over time. By progressing step-by-step through *Capital*, we can turn the structure of Marx’s argument into the foundation for a Marxism of composition – once which has seen many more cycles of recomposition and more development than he could have imagined, but which retains a fidelity to that original articulation. Through this reading, we can develop the answers to a series of key questions: how do we define technical composition? What are the boundaries of the concept? What are the key elements of the concept? The view of technical composition we will end with is both an ongoing process – the totality of the pre-political forms of organisation and counter-organisation through which the balance of forces in the workplace is contested – and the result of that process, in the form of a terrain of struggle that is the sphere of production in a determinate social formation.

Human labour

In *Capital*, Marx begins his discussion of the labour process “independently of the particular form it assumes under given social conditions” (Marx 1967, 1:173).

Before he discusses labour processes under capitalism, he discusses labour processes in general. The universal definition of labour he arrives at is as follows: “a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, heads and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature’s productions in a form adapted to his own wants” (1967,1:173). The labour process is therefore the specific set of actions that allow the appropriation of nature for human ends. Human labour processes are distinct from the activity of spiders weaving webs or bees constructing hives because they follow a purpose that has been consciously pre-formulated in the mind of the worker.[28]

Under all social conditions, this process of conscious appropriation can be further analysed by looking at the three “elementary factors” that make up any labour process: “1, the personal activity of the man, i.e. the work itself, 2, the subject of that work, and 3, its instruments” (1967,1:174). The subject and instruments of labour (factors two and three) constitute the means of production. The goal of this simple labour-process is the production of use-values. It is the relations within a labour process which define whether an object is part of the means of production or a product of that production: a hammer is both the product of the hammer-making process, and the means of the house-building process. Any attempts to define objects as means of production or products of production by making reference to the intrinsic nature of the concrete object will fail, because these properties can only be understood as social relations. Labour processes cannot be studied in isolation: if you want to analyse one

[28] As Braverman argues, this line of argument has as its precursor the Aristotelean concept of “intelligent action” (Braverman 1975, 43).

instance of production, you have to also understand the social relations surrounding that instance, up to and including the scale of the entire mode of production which predominates in the historical form of society where that instance takes place.

The labour process under the capitalist mode of production

From this analysis of the universal form of human labour, Marx moves on to discuss the specifically capitalist labour process. At this stage he only identifies two fundamental characteristics: “First, the labourer works under the control of the capitalist to whom his labour belongs”, and second “the product is the property of the capitalist and not that of the labourer” (1967,1:180). This capitalist-dominated process also differs from the transhistorical labour process in terms of its products. Instead of producing use-values to adapt nature to human needs, the capitalist labour process produces use-values in so far as they act as the “material substratum” for exchange-values (1967,1:181). The relation of production to human need is only incidental. Because the end goal of production has changed under capitalism, so too does the process of production: “just as commodities are at the same time use-values and values, so the process of producing them must be a labour process and at the same time a process of producing value” (1967,1:181). The exchange-value produced through a capitalist labour process contains a “surplus-value” as a result of the exploitation of labour-power. So, the capitalist process of commodity production is “the unity of the labour process and the process of creating surplus-value” (1967,1:191).

By this point in *Capital*, Marx has already extensively discussed the capitalist form of value and the significance of valorisation, but to recap in brief: the capital relation cannot survive without constant expansion. It is in this context that he reveals how production and valorisation are now inextricably linked, with the production of commodities coming to act as the *sole source of new surplus value inputs* into the

system. The mode of production has a bottleneck built into it. The capital relation, which is at base a relation of bourgeois class domination, can *only* be reproduced through valorisation, which can *only* take place through the exploitation of labour-power in the process of production.

Marx, in his earlier discussion of the different forms of value embodied within the commodity, has already identified that there are two forms of labour that produce commodities: concrete labour (which produces use-value) and abstract labour (which produces exchange-value). This point of distinction, which he calls “the pivot on which a clear comprehension of political economy turns” (1967,1:49), is key for an accurate, non-substantialist account of Marx’s value theory (see Heinrich 2012). The salient point for a discussion of technical composition, however, is to identify that both these forms of labour are subject to indeterminacy.[29] Between the moment of purchase and the moment of realisation lie two processes which the capitalist must successfully negotiate in order for valorisation to result.

For abstract labour, this indeterminacy is located at the point of entry into circulation. The abstract component of expended labour-power is only retroactively validated when the commodities produced enter into circulation and are evaluated by the market as part of the total social division of labour (Heinrich 2012). But the circulation-based indeterminacy of abstract labour is preceded by production-based indeterminacy of concrete labour (Braverman 1975, 57). As Edwards puts it, “the capacity to do work [labour-power] is useful only to the capitalist if the work actually gets done [concrete labour]” (Edwards 1979, 12). But unlike potatoes or computers,

[29] The dual indeterminacies of abstract labour in exchange and concrete labour in production are always deeply interrelated in a much wider sense than discussed here (See Atzeni 2010, 21–22). In fact, as Lebowitz notes, the attempt to solve a crisis of one of these forms of indeterminacy can often lead to a crisis of the other: “what capitalism does in the sphere of production comes back to haunt it in the sphere of circulation” (Lebowitz 2003, 12).

labour-power is controlled by a subjective force outside of the control of the capitalist. Potatoes cannot refuse to be peeled, but a worker can refuse to work, presenting the capitalist with a “natural obstacle to free consumption” (Atzeni 2010, 20). This threat relies on the external subjective control of the gap between the potential application of labour-power and the realised application of concrete labour-power. The bottleneck of production concentrates those unruly possessors of labour-power, the indeterminate proletarians, at exactly the point at which they can create a systemic crisis and prevent the reproduction of the capital relation.

In an effort to bridge the gap between the potential application of labour-power and the realised application of concrete labour-power and ward off any crisis in the reproduction of their capital, the capitalist must develop a “system of control”, through which the capitalist can direct work tasks, evaluate work task performance and outcomes, and discipline workers (Edwards 1979, 18). The theoretical implications of these systems of control will be discussed later in relation to cooperation – for now it suffices to note that they exist as a result of this gap. These systems are intended to provide a final closure to the question of indeterminacy: to strip labour-power of its external subjective control, and turn it, at last, into a sack of potatoes. But control is not that simple. The contradiction between the legal right of ownership over labour-power as the private property of the capitalist and the innate subjective control of labour power by the proletarian is not soluble within the capitalist mode of production. This indeterminacy is one of the structurally-determined points of distinction between the two classes.

As such, systems of control can only aspire, at best, to a temporary suppression of the problem of indeterminacy. When, after the development of a system of control, the contradiction re-emerges, it will do so at a higher point of development and in a

more profound form. Systems of control are, in fact, just the *primary form of capitalist agency* in the dialectical process of class struggle over the indeterminacy contradiction. These systems are opposed, on the proletarian side, by the capacity for refusal, through which the worker prevents their *reductio ad potato*.

Marx's first mention of class struggle in *Capital* comes after a discussion of the indeterminate quality of labour-power and the necessary conflict of interest between worker and capitalist over the duration and extent of its usage. Given that "Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more the more it sucks", then "if the labourer consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist" (1967,1:224). The struggle over the extent of the working day is the site of this struggle over life, between not just individual capitalists and individual workers but two opposed classes. Between these two, force decides the outcome: "Hence is it that in the history of capitalist production, the determination of what is a working-day presents itself as the result of a struggle, a struggle between collective capital, *i.e.*, the class of capitalists, and collective labour, *i.e.*, the working class" (1967,1:225). So, the indeterminacy contradiction that is embedded within labour-power is the most fundamental site of class struggle within the sphere of production.[30] Technical composition, therefore, takes this contradiction as its defining moment.

Tronti articulates the implications of this indeterminacy as the potential for workers to refuse work. He sees this refusal as a particularly potent tactic in the wider class struggle because during the labour process the value that capitalists want to see valorised has been put at stake to purchase commodities that have to undergo an

[30] Marx makes a similar argument, although with more stress on wages, in *Value, Price and Profit*: "The fixation of its actual degree is only settled by the continuous struggle between capital and labour, the capitalist constantly tending to reduce wages to their physical minimum, and to extend the working day to its physical maximum, while the working man constantly presses in the opposite direction. The matter resolves itself into a question of the respective powers of the combatants" (Marx 1865).

indeterminate process, the results of which are ultimately not within their control. Commodity production is always a gamble:

> In the factory, in production, when the workers serve the capitalist as machines do capital, but moreover have the possibility of choosing not to serve him, and when labour is within capital and at the same time against it, then the collective boss is enormously weak, for he has left – for a moment – the arms which he was fighting, the productive forces of labour socialised and objectified in the working class, in the hands of his enemies. (Tronti 2019, 220)

The indeterminacy of labour-power, and the potential for refusal that it creates, is the starting point for a systematic analysis of the contradictions within the capitalist labour process that lead to the permanent volatility of the technical composition of the working class. If the system of control is the primary form of capitalist agency with regards to the dialectical development of the indeterminacy contradiction, then its counterpart on the side of the working class is the refusal of work.

Relative surplus value

This struggle between worker and boss determines the amount of work that can be done with a specific sum of labour-power. As such, this struggle sets an absolute limit to the amount of surplus value that can be produced per worker. The response of the capitalist is to increase the productivity of labour-power, thereby reducing the proportion of the working day the worker spends producing the value that they will be paid in a wage and extending the proportion of the working day during which they produce surplus value for the capitalist. Under such conditions, “it is no longer the labourer that employs the means of production, but the means of production which employs the labourer” (1967,1:293-4). That is to say, the technical composition of the working class is the organisation of living labour around the demands of dead labour (capital) and its relentless drive to accumulation.

This organisation, however, is not a stable historical form. The capitalist does not conduct a cycle of development to reorganise the means of production and the labour process, produce more relative surplus value, and then kick back and relax. Instead, each individual capitalist has to respond both to renewed forms of the refusal of work, and to the conditions in the sphere of production as a whole in order to maintain constant accumulation. If one individual sum of capital fails to do so, it will fail to valorise itself and be redistributed or fall into disuse. As a result: “the technical and social conditions of the process, and consequently the very mode of production must be revolutionised” (1967,1:298-9). Technical compositions are never fixed in stone, and so “the concept of the working class is not fixed in any single definitive form without development or history” (Tronti 2019, 135). This process of technological development will be analysed further below, but for the moment the vital point to make clear is that the structurally determined indeterminacy contradiction takes on different forms over time as the relation between classes in the social formation becomes conjecturally modified. The analysis of technical composition moves alongside this process of recomposition, in order to capture in each new instance the specific advantages and disadvantages offered to each class.

Cooperation as “philosophical centre”

It is with his discussion of cooperation that Marx provides us with the capacity to understand how the indeterminacy contradiction becomes amplified into class struggle proper. Chapter 13 of *Capital* is so instrumental that Fredric Jameson claims that it is the “philosophical centre” of the text (Jameson 2014, 53). It is significant that he finds it here, amidst Marx’s discussion of collective actors and historical conditions, rather than in the intricate dialectical ascent from the commodity form that makes up the (rightfully) well-studied first chapters. Jameson does so because it is in the

discussion of cooperation that the balance of forces between classes reveals itself as the defining and determining relation to which all others refer. When the indeterminacy contradiction meets cooperation, the result is the broad conception of conflict between newly-formed classes that provides the engine to historical development under this mode of production.

Marx's argument begins by clarifying that capitalist production proper takes place when workers are concentrated in one place to take part in a labour process that produces surplus-value on a mass scale. This quantitative expansion leads to development through comparison of an average labour-power, rather than individual labour-powers. Even before the labour process is reorganised from its pre-capitalist form, the quantitative increase in labourers leads to a transformation in the material conditions of that process: the means of production are increasingly consumed in common by this collection of average labour-powers. This reduces the costs of production and leads to the "instruments of labour [acquiring] a social character" (1967,1:308). This first step in the process of cooperation and class formation is quickly superseded, as it generates the conditions required for the "creation of a new power, namely, the collective power of masses" (1967,1:309). This power arises out of the micro sociological cooperative interactions of one worker with another, as the "animal spirits" of the "social animal" strip off the fetters of individuality and develop the capacities of the species. Here, for the first time, we see the proletariat – as opposed to the proletarian – starting to fully emerge in the sphere of production.

But it is necessary to clarify exactly why Marx calls this power "new". We have to understand what is specific about cooperation under capitalism if the concept of technical composition is to maintain its integrity as referring *historically* to capitalist socialist relations. Because, after all, did the construction of the pyramids not also rely

on the collective power of the masses? Certainly, it relied on a form of cooperation enforced by a ruling class. However, the power of cooperation proper only emerges when it transcends isolated instances of production and becomes the generalised basis of the social division of labour. This predominance of cooperation as a productive force across the productive sphere marks the moment at which the formation of the working class as a political subject opposed to the dominant class becomes *possible* – hence the emergence of a new power. However, proletarian class formation requires two processes to take place across two spheres: circulation and production. The first of these processes is the creation of the worker/owner class relation, and the second is the creation of the capital relation itself.

First, in circulation, a dispossessed group of agents with no means of accessing the means of subsistence beyond the sale of their labour power comes face to face with another group of agents who need to purchase labour power in order to produce value: “the capital relation arises only in the production process because it exists implicitly in the act of circulation, in the basically different economic conditions in which buyer and seller confront one another” (Marx 1978, 2:115). In this sense, Tronti is correct to identify that the *class relation* precedes the *capital relation* – and indeed is a precondition for the conversion of money into capital (Tronti 2019, 135). The working class is formed in circulation, as a class with nothing to sell but its ability to work: “the sale of labour power thus offers the first, elementary stage of composition of wage-labourers into a class; a social mass obliged to sell labour-power is also the general form of the working class” (Tronti 2019, 135). The initial class relation has thus been established when the sale of labour-power occurs on a mass scale – but class formation is not yet fully achieved.

Then, in production, that class of dispossessed agents is deployed as part of a commodity-producing labour process in order to produce a surplus value which can valorise the initial sum of value put forward by the capitalist employer. Here, therefore, the capital relation emerges. Now, with both the class and capital relation in place, the proletariat emerges as a composed subject. Their cooperation as a productive force does not only produce commodities, but also reflexively produces the co-operators as a class. Their employers also undergo a change. The socialisation of cooperative labour-power as the basis of the social division of labour and the associated ascendency of the capital relation as the dominant relation of production transforms them from a kaleidoscope of individual capitalists into a capitalist class proper through their own process of class formation. This capitalist class formation relies on the existence of the proletariat as the variable part of capital, and therefore can only ever be secondary. Once the working class is formed and integrated into the capital relation, the capitalist class emerges as a structure erected on top of these slippery foundations (Tronti 2019, 137). Only on the other side of the capitalist labour process do we see the proletariat as a class which sells its labour-power *and* as a cooperative power facing off against a capitalist class. This confrontation marks the point at which the working class enters into a collective relationship of class struggle proper. Cooperation thus technically composes the working class as a political subject facing off against the capitalist class and wielding the contradiction of indeterminacy as its weapon.

Cooperation and organic structures

Having reached this abstract conclusion, it is necessary to descend to the concrete level of production again to understand what the formation of the proletariat as a technically composed subject means in practice. The new power of the working

class has two sides to it. It is a productive force that allows for the development of the capitalist mode of production. But it is also a subject whose control over labour-power threatens the foundations of that same mode of production. Cooperation multiplies both the potential use of labour-power to produce value, but also the potential resistance of labour-power against this use. As labour process theorist Maurizio Atzeni puts it: “if on the one hand this cooperation becomes functional to capital’s valorisation, on the other it represents a first associational moment among the collective of workers, upon which solidarity links may be created” (Atzeni 2010, 26). The development of a technically composed working class escalates both its productive and disruptive potential.

For Atzeni, there is a distinction to be drawn between cooperation as the material precondition of the capitalist labour process and solidarity as the social relation between workers generated by this material precondition. When workers cooperate, they create relations of solidarity which are not primarily of use to their employers. In fact, these relations, and the way they structure the workforce, are a direct threat to the interests of the capitalist because they create the conditions for the refusal of work.

Stan Weir, a militant worker from the U.S. with experience as a merchant sailor, docker, trucker and autoworker during and after WW2, gave us a means of understanding this general relation of solidarity in a more granular way. He identified how his various experiences of work cooperation led to the formation of “informal work groups” (Weir 2004). These groups were identified in the managerial literature already, but Weir turned the concept on its head and made it a cornerstone of his analysis of refusal. Despite the clear utility of this concept, Weir never successfully elaborates on

it in the abstract. Such an approach is only offered by Alice and Staughton Lynd, in an introduction to one of Weir's essays on the topic, where they define such groups as:

> … that team which works together daily in face-to-face communication with one another, placed by technology and pushed into socialization by the needs of production. It is literally a family at work torn by hate and love, conflict and common interest. It disciplines its members most commonly by social isolation and ridicule, it has a naturally selected leadership, makes decisions in the immediate work area, and can affect the flow of production. (A. Lynd and Lynd 2014, 177)

For Weir, these groups were the monomer of the working class in production: "a workplace isn't a collection of individuals so much as a collection of informal groups" (2004, 250). Informal work groups have their form determined by the material condition of cooperation and the organisation of the labour process. From this material basis, embryonic solidarity develops. Unlike Atzeni, Weir identified a step-by-step development in this solidarity. Over time informal group members progressively self-organise: from working together, to forming social bonds, looking out for each other, analysing their situation, finding common ground, evaluating courses of action, and making agreement on action. As they do so, these groups develop and identify leaders through processes of peer selection (2004, 28). Despite this distinction between their perspectives, however, Atzeni and Weir share the conclusion that informal work groups take the social relation of solidarity (created as a result of the material precondition of cooperation) and use it as the objective basis for mobilisation into collective action. This discussion of cooperation allows us to reach a theoretical definition of self-organisation. It is not a "spontaneous" creation. Instead, *self-organisation is the process of collective structure-building undertaken (in both conscious and unconscious, direct and indirect ways) by a workforce in order to pursue their own interests.*

It is worth elaborating on the concept of “interests”, here, in order to get a more accurate understanding of the goals to which self-organisation can be directed. Eric Olin Wright defines interests as the “potential objectives” which class actors pursue if they understand the social relations in which they are enmeshed. In other words: “they are hypotheses about the objectives of struggles which would occur if the actors in the struggle had a scientifically correct understanding of their situations” (1978, 89). In this sense, when Olin Wright defines a class position as within the working class, he argues that if those who occupied this position were engaged in a struggle which they fully understood then they would be pursuing working class interests. Certain objective interests are materially linked to certain objective class positions (acting, as Marx puts it, as character masks into which real people are interpolated) – but that does not mean that they are the straightforward subjective goal of every actual occupant of that class position. A process of interest identification must occur before those class interests are turned into the actual goals of struggle. Olin Wright furthers this definition by making the distinction between immediate and fundamental class interests: immediate interests are those which can be pursued to improve the position of an actor within their existing social relations (for example, higher wages) whilst fundamental interests are those which challenge those social relations themselves (for example, the abolition of wage labour). I will discuss the movement between these two sub-categories further in chapter five below.

To return to self-organisation, Mike Davis’ essay “Old Gods, New Enigmas” provides a historical overview of the classical proletariat which allows us to put these theoretical observations in a more concrete context. Davis claimed that “the factory system organises the workforce as interdependent collectives that, through struggle and conscious organisation, can become communities of solidarity” (Davis 2018, 46).

This process of synthesis, through which partial group immediate interests are formed into common class fundamental interests, takes place through self-organisation, which may take trade union or non-trade union forms. Despite the fact that trade unions became the dominant unit of analysis for Marxists engaged in the workers' movement, collective action revealed that the "deep structure of the workers' movement" (Davis 2018, 65) was based on informal work groups and their systems of organic leadership. Such a deep structure is the scaffold, the "invisible organisation" (Alquati 2013; see also Calder Williams 2013; Roggero 2020), on which all more overt forms of collective class action rely. The substratum of micro sociological relations in the hidden abode is fundamentally the level on which the proletariat is technically composed – and furthermore, the level on which the potential for the emergence of collective action in pursuit of class struggle is determined.

However, all informal work groups exist in specific social formations and specific technical compositions. Depending on the shape and conditions of the labour process they are engaged in, informal work groups have access to different opportunity structures. Here we can see in concrete terms what Olin Wright's "structural capacities" mean in practice. If all the members of one group take lunch break in a work canteen at the same time, then the discussions had in that canteen become key determinants of the course of the local class struggle – but if all the members of the group are released at different times to go and buy a meal deal at one of a range of nearby supermarkets, then the opportunities available for self-organisation and the tactics which can successfully achieve it change completely. In a review of the sociological literature of the 1970s, Stephen Hill clarified discussions of informal work groups by identifying four key variables which determine their form: structural conditions, the extent of group consciousness, the nature of group

consciousness, and power position. This framework functions as an initial map of what structural features of the technical composition impact upon the form of informal work groups and modify the expression of embryonic solidarity, and so lays out the field of variables which will form the substance of this thesis' inquiry into technical composition.

Table 3. Hill's summary of factors effecting informal work groups (Hill 1974)

Variable	**Range**	**Factors relevant**
Structural conditions	Impending-via /facilitating-encouraging	Production system Payment system
Extent of group consciousness	Individualism/complete group consciousness	Orientations to work Meaning of occupational membership Management policy
Nature of group consciousness	Accept normative system regarding relationships with management and other groups/reject normative system	Definitions of group solidarity Ideology and imagery Nature of plant prestige hierarchy Experience of work
Power position	No power over job regulation or for fractional bargaining/ complete power	Production system Product and labour markets Management structure and policy

But work groups are not only defined by the structural capacities available to them and the objective features of the technical composition in which they emerge. Hill's framework provides an excellent way into questions of informal work group composition but neglects to emphasise the key role of peer-selected leaders in shaping informal work groups and their collective action. The processes and structures of leadership in informal work groups have been the subject of significant attention from those interested in the molecular processes of working class organisation, but there is a latent ambiguity within this discussion which needs to be clarified.

The Militant Minority

Labour organiser and theorist Jane McAlevey identifies that the historical U.S. Confederation of Industrial Organisations (CIO) organising repertoire contained a set of tactics explicitly targeted at identifying, recruiting and developing these “organic leaders” in order to gain the strongest possible connection to the social structures of the rank and file for minimal resource investment (McAlevey 2016, 34). McAlevey defines organic leaders as “key influencers of the constituency”(2016, 12t), “the person on the shop-floor who has followers” (2016, 47), and quotes a union organiser who defines them as precisely *not* activist workers who are likely to have strong political commitments and seek out opportunities for self-organisation, but rather as cautious observers who need to be identified and recruited. Underlying this definition is an analytical distinction McAlevey seeks to make between mobilising and organising as categorically distinct modes of action. Mobilising, is, for McAlevey, based on self-selecting groups engaging in campaigns whilst supported by extensive professional staffing structures, whereas organising is based on similarly professional union organisers going into bounded structures that already exist within the social formation and creating majorities for action amongst “ordinary” people within. “Grassroots activists” and “organic leaders” are correspondingly dichotomised as the leading non-professional agents on each side of the mobilising/organising distinction (2016, 12t). Whilst this argument may have proven to be a useful bending of the stick in the context of the U.S. movement, it has the potential to introduce significant theoretical inaccuracies at an abstract level. Primary amongst these inaccuracies is the

obfuscation of the vital role of what the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) first called the militant minority (Dubofsky 1987, 61).[31]

The militant minority is generally taken to be that part of the workforce who recognise the necessity of mobilisation and action using class struggle methods. This layer is often heavily comprised of those with a strong ideological commitment to emancipatory politics, and who see working class self-organisation as a vital mechanism through which they can pursue their aims. To early American Communist Party theorists this minority was: “the thinking and acting part of the working class, the very soul of Labor. It works out the lighting programs and takes the lead in putting them into execution. It is the source of all real progress, intellectual, spiritual, and organizational, in the workers’ ranks” (Foster 1922). As Uetricht and Eidlin identify in a more contemporary context, this layer have often played a pivotal role in supporting upsurges in the U.S. workers’ movement (Uetricht and Eidlin 2019, 37). In other words, they a subjective agent that has historically laid the groundwork for union revitalisations on a mass scale. And yet this minority is likely to be made up of precisely those activist workers which McAlevey discounts as potential workplace leaders.

The contradiction between the concept of the militant minority and the mobilising/organising distinction has often remained latent. This is particularly true in the U.S. context, where the two are frequently used alongside one another in the same analyses.[32] But this tension needs to be developed and articulated if a framework

[31] There are, is an interesting parallel history of the course, many examples of its previous usage - usually this concept as a term of abuse by the representatives of various industries. Take, for example, the U.S. car industry representative figure who opined, during WW2, that, “the manpower problem exists principally because the desire of a majority of workers to do more work and get this war over with is being thwarted by an unrestrained militant minority group of workers, stewards and union representatives” (qtd. in Glaberman 1980, 37).

[32] See, for instance, the slightly confused lengths to which Sam Gindin goes to in order to square the circle of McAlevey’s disavowal of ideologically motivated workers as leaders and the historic role of the militant minority (Gindin 2016).

which contains both these elements is not to be internally contradictory. The evidence for the existence of such a minority does not only come from the history of the American labour movement. In the British context, these structures of informal work group leadership have historically been solidified into shop steward systems. As Hill argues, these processes are not direct, as the constituency which elects a shop steward is usually more diverse than a single work group (Hill 1974). However, shop steward systems operate as semi-formalised organic leadership structures, which operate as a scaled-up and aggregated form of peer selection. This change of scale is not so great as to make the analogy worthless, and so we can apply research on the role of shop stewards to the question of organic leadership in order to clarify what precisely the role of militant informal leaders is – and therefore clarify exactly how they operate to modify and utilise the technical composition of the working class.

Batstone et al.'s seminal study of shop steward behaviour identified two predominant varieties of shop steward: populists and leaders (Batstone, Boraston, and Frenkel 1977). Populists were defined by their commitment to immediate material improvements for the members they represented, with 75% saying their reason for being in a trade union was to pursue improvements in wages and conditions, and a delegate-style form of representation. On the other hand, leaders were defined by their commitment to wider political goals, with 83% saying their reason for being in a trade union was to pursue socialism, and a representative-style form of representation. Populists made up 45% of shop-floor stewards, and leaders 38% (1977, 32-38).[33] This work provides concrete evidence of the historical existence of a very substantial layer of workers who were both semi-formalised organic leaders and also members of the

[33] The remaining shop stewards were part of two smaller categories, "cowboys" and "nascent leaders" with less clear ideological alignments.

militant minority. Armstrong et al.'s study, *Ideology and Shop-floor Industrial Relations* identified how British workers in medium-sized manufacturing in the late 1970s only manage to express a "fragmentary counter-ideology" to the dominant managerial ideology and associated prerogative (Armstrong, Goodman, and Hyman 1981, 43).[34] Where this counter-ideology was expressed, however, it operated as a "legitimising resource" for opposition to managerial control and allowed for workers to use their power to pursue newly-legitimated collective goals. This analysis of the shop-floor struggle over legitimacy has an abiding value in demonstrating how unmediated class interests are not spontaneously pursued by all actors in capitalist production but have to be articulated and legitimated through the use of ideological resources (1981, 87). One of the central functions of the militant minority is that they provide precisely these ideological resources. Their contestation of dominant workplace ideology is a vital step in allowing for the use of solidarity for the ends of collective action. To refer to Hill's variables, they play a vital role in shaping the nature and extent of group consciousness – but, in contrast to his objectivist model, they do so through *subjective* agency.

Hinton reinforced this point in his historical study of the shop stewards movement in the British engineering industry between 1910 and 1921 (Hinton 1973). He identified how shop stewards, in opposition to both the state and trade union

[34] Their argument that: "not only is management ideology the characteristic world view of managers themselves; it is also, since mangers and their employers area dominant group in society, a key component of the "dominant ideology" itself" (Armstrong, Goodman, and Hyman 1981, 41) is not at all incompatible with a more orthodox Marxist argument, baring as it does a striking resemblance to Marx and Engels' argument in *The German Ideology: "*The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance" (Marx and Engels 1845).

leadership, articulated a critique of the “servile state” and the drive towards industrial compulsion expressed in legislation such as the 1916 Munitions Act; defended the right to strike through manifold instances of illegal action; and developed a unique “sovietist” ideology that bridged the gap between syndicalism and communism and laid the foundations for the creation of the British Communist Party in 1920-21. In this example, key sections of the organic leadership of the engineering workforce acted as a militant minority which actively created a counter-ideology that legitimated collective action in the face of huge opposition. Their “activist” ideological resources proved a crucial component of a successful response to state repression.

So, the roles of the militant minority and organic leaders are not mutually distinct. Against the suggestion of McAlevey, this thesis will argue that whilst the peer-selected leaders of informal work groups are always organic leaders, that does not mean they cannot also be self-selecting members of the militant minority – and that there is significant potential for overlap between the two. [35] Additionally, I argue that such activist militants are not at all ill-suited to playing leadership roles in structure-based organising, as it is precisely their ideological leadership function, which has been strongly demonstrated by repeated empirical work, that makes them effective in promoting collective action. The analysis of informal work groups has to hinge, in part, not just on the structural capacities offered by the objective organisation of the technical composition – but also on the subjective analysis informal structures of peer-selected leadership.

[35] Indeed, this is the position that Blanc and Ueitrecht have previously adopted, even if they do so whilst shying away from making the obviously-resulting critique of McAlevey (Uetricht and Blanc 2019).

However, organic leaders are not always won over to the cause of worker self-organisation. Capital often attempts to exert control over the workforce through the recruitment of organic leaders into supervisory positions. In this way, the separation of workers across a complicated job structure that diffuses managerial authority can manipulate the social relations of cooperation to reinforce that authority.[36] This is a point well made by the *Angry Workers of the World* collective, writing about their own experiences gender dynamics in the workplace:

> The main problem with unions is not that they don't listen to women's voices per se – after all, the union movement is awash with women from different backgrounds, much more so in my experience than left groups and feminist organisations. Rather they don't listen or encourage grassroots workers' voices or self-organisation at all. They focus more on recruitment to the extent that 'organising' and 'recruitment' are used interchangeably. This gives rise to an over dependence on certain reps, male or female, to be the 'organic leaders' that drive membership and become the spokespeople for everyone. This is problematic because in my workplace, the reps who are elected, male and female, in a supposedly 'democratic' process, are all of a higher caste, and hold supervisory positions. There is a massive conflict of interest in the fact that they are the ones who are put into the bullying positions (making people work faster, saying no to holiday requests, messing up people's pay) at the same time as 'defending workers' rights.' … This is why the 'organic leader' strategy is so dubious… Obviously there are some people who have a bigger voice in a workplace and can convince people to do things. But in my factory, those people are all supervisors and/or union reps. McAlevey makes a distinction between the supposed leaders and the real, organic leaders, but in my experience, it is not possible to distinguish between them. The workers who are 'respected' are respected because they are close to management and have extra privileges. In a contradictory way, they are listened to, but people also have little faith or trust in them. The sad thing is that this is still more faith and trust than they have in themselves. As organisers, do we really want to reproduce the leadership model, when it will do little to tackle the profound lack of trust people have in themselves and other working class people?(Angry Workers of the World 2020b)

[36] A wider theoretical background for the bourgeois incorporation of organic leaders can be found in the Italian Fascist sociologist Villfredo Pareto and his idea of the "circulation of elites". Pareto was highly influential upon the founding theorist of Human Resources, Elton Mayo, and the wider Harvard Business School (Pareto 1973; Heyl 1968; Hanlon 2016).

Whilst I disagree that it's necessary to discard the idea of the organic leader because preceding theorisations have failed to account for the ways in which organic leaders can be utilised by capital, it is important to recognise that in many workplaces where self-organisation is weak there may in fact be no organic leaders who have not been won over, to a greater or lesser degree, to acting as functionaries of capital. In addition, the theory of the organic leader should not be understood as an abdication of belief in the capacity of workers who have not been selected as leaders by their peers. Here is where the idea of the militant minority comes to the fore – it is, if anything, a voluntarist declaration of faith in the ability of all workers to contribute to processes of class struggle.

Cooperation creates a workforce which is crisscrossed by a deep structure of embryonic solidarity, informal work groups and peer-selected leaderships. All three of these factors can contribute to the development of uniquely working class forms of political organisation and struggle. The technical composition of the class refers primarily to the way in which workers are organised as a productive force through cooperation – but also to the fact that this organisation does not lead to a one-sided increase in productive potential. Instead, the new force upon which the capitalist mode of production relies is a force which is *both entirely internal to and entirely opposed to* the capital relation. The workforce as composed by capital is always on the verge of becoming a workforce composed against capital.

Control

As we have seen, the development of the power of cooperation in the labour-process leads to an increasing potential for the indeterminacy of labour-power to manifest itself in a collective form, and for the contradictions of the capitalist labour process to split wide open. So, with increasing cooperation comes an increasing need

for the capitalist to bring that cooperation under control and direct it. As Marx argues, “that a capitalist should command on the field of production, is now as indispensable as that a general should command on the field of battle” (1967,1:313). First and foremost, for the capitalist, this authority is directed towards the goal of maximising the exploitation of labour-power and the subsequent production of surplus-value. There are two interlinked managerial imperatives at work here: the first is to make production as efficient as possible in terms of the means of production, the second is to make production as intense as possible in terms of productive labour. The managerial drive to intensification, in particular, is amplified by the power of cooperation contained within production. Since cooperation is also a source of resistance to the domination of capital, the greater the productive force of cooperation used in the labour process the greater the need for managerial counter-pressure. The dialectical development of the indeterminacy contradiction keeps on rearticulating this question at a higher and higher level of complexity.

Management, therefore, becomes a function of capital, and a function that “is consequently rooted in the unavoidable antagonism between the exploiter and the living and labouring raw material he exploits” (Marx: 313). The location of this antagonism was theorised by Carter Goodrich in his classic 1920 study of the movement for workers’ control. In it, he coined the term the “frontier of control” – that is to say, the point at which workers and capital present contrasting claims to control of the labour process. This point “is more a matter of accepted custom than precisely stated principle” (Goodrich 1975, 56), which is to say its location varies based on: the negotiated agreements governing employment in a workplace; the history of conflict over questions of control in a workplace; and the informal practices that make up the everyday operation of a workplace. In practice, systems of control are not applied as

designed or negotiated in the boardroom. He notes that the actual frontier "must be looked for as a shifting line in a great mass of regulations" (1975, 62) – some of which will never have been consciously contested. But such a frontier does definitely exist: there are issues of control on which neither side willingly concedes. The frontier of control denotes the contested border between managerial (and therefore capitalist) authority and working class refusal.

Processes of recomposition initiated by capitalists can operate defensively behind the frontier of control, or aggressively beyond that frontier – and take the form of an attempt to recapture control of a greater portion of the labour process.[37] As Mike Davis identifies, struggles over this frontier have been a longstanding trigger for wider class movements: "resistance to workplace despotism … has always been the pilot light of the modern class struggle" (2018, 52). Because management is a function of capital, contesting the frontier of control and defending against an aggressive recomposition can lead to the escalation of struggles from the level of concrete questions of process to the level of abstract issues of the class structure of the mode of production. Struggles over immediate interests can rapidly escalate into struggles over fundamental interests.

Technical composition is not just the study of the literally technical organisation of the labour process and the cooperation that emerges from it, but also the study of the management strategies utilised in the construction of systems of control. The alien imposition of a form of organisation onto cooperative labour-power by capital is the substance of this side of technical composition:

[37] Aggressive attempts at removing control often overlap with a phenomenon discussed under the heading of "deskilling", which forms a major part of the wider Marxist discussions of control from the 1960s onwards (See Braverman 1975; R. Edwards 1979; A. L. Friedman 1978; Burawoy 1979; and commentary by P. Thompson 1983).

> Their [workers'] union into one single productive body and the establishment of a connection between their individual functions, are matters foreign and external to them, are not their own act, but the act of the capital that brings and keeps them together. Hence the connection existing between their various labours appears to them, ideally, in the shape of a preconceived plan of the capitalist, and practically in the shape of the authority of the same capitalist, in the shape of the powerful will of another, who subjects their activity to his aims. If, then, the control of the capitalist is in substance two-fold by reason of the two-fold nature of the process of production itself, which, on the one hand, is a social process for producing use-values, on the other, a process for creating surplus-value in form, that control is despotic. (Marx 1967, 1:314)

The plan of capital establishes an externally-determined objective organisation of production that attempts to bend indeterminate labour-power to its despotic intent. However, as Tronti identified "every further link between the various parts of capital is a further channel of communication between the diverse constituent parts of the working class" (2019, xxxi). That is to say, the objective organisation of the relations of production structures not only the process of value production, but also the process of proletarian insubordination. The division of labour by capital creates a working class in a particular form, in a particular technical composition, which can (and will) turn on the alien force that divided it.

In closing our consideration of Marx's chapter on cooperation, then, we can see the basis for the definition of technical composition used in this thesis. Technical class composition concerns both the organisation of labour-power into a working class through cooperation, with all the potential for class struggle self-organisation which that entails, and the ways in which capitalists hedge against any such class struggle taking place.

Manufacture, modern Industry and the factory system

Marx then moves onto articulate a genealogy of the development of capitalist production from manufacture in the mid-16th century to the factory system. This

genealogy offers us a first model of how to analyse the technical recomposition of the working class under the capitalist mode of production, and as such deserves close attention.

For Marx, manufacture emerges from two sources: the cooperation of multiple workers skilled in *different* trades under the control of one capitalist, and the cooperation of multiple workers skilled in *the same* trade under the control of one capitalist. Regardless of which of these predominates in the individual instance of manufacture under consideration, however, they are all fundamentally “a productive mechanism whose parts are human beings” (1967, 1:320). The workers involved in this mechanism are skilled “detail labourers” who occupy different niches in the division of labour and use specialised implements of labour to carry out their work. The combination of the newly-concentrated means of production with all of their specialised varieties of labour, either in sequence or parallel, is the precondition of commodity manufacture.

As multiple instances of manufacture develop, they increasingly develop forms of interconnection. As this development continues, the individual detail labourer is no longer the predominant working class subject and is progressively replaced by the collective labourer united by common cooperation in a single division of labour. This collective labourer, despite being a single subject, is internally stratified by a wage structure. As part of this formation of a collective labourer, a new tier of worker is required, who was previously excluded from handicraft production: the so-called unskilled labourer. This worker is deprived of skills, and the absence of all development in labour-power is turned into a speciality. These developments lead to a fall in the overall value of labour-power, and the apprenticeship of the detail labourer is undermined by the hierarchy of the collective labourer. These manufactures

combine in a social division of labour which is not planned or organised on a central basis. Instead, exchange relations structure the organisation of production (which is always determined in the final instance by the drive towards valorisation).

Once manufacture has been established on the basis of the division of labour and the labour process, the valorisation of capital inevitably leads to an increase in the minimum amount of capital each capitalist must possess in order to be viable: “the transformation into capital of the social means of production and subsistence must keep expanding” (1967,1:340). Capital increasingly subsumes more and more of the social relations which make up the totality of society. Gradually, the individual labourer loses the capacity to work independently and is forced into employment – where they are also forced to accept the control of the boss. They become a “crippled monstrosity”, working only for the benefit of an abstract social relation that they have no stake in and are “branded the property of capital” (1967,1:340-1).[38]

As this concentration of production under the control of the capitalist occurs, so does a concentration in knowledge about the production process in the hands of the capitalist. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx’s notebooks made in the preparation of *Capital*, he elaborates on how the development of fixed capital is only possible as a result of the use of general social knowledge as a direct force of production. The shared human pursuit of knowledge becomes subsumed and redirected towards the interests of the capitalist class, as the shared “general intellect” becomes itself dominated by the pursuit of increased forces of production (Marx 1993, 706).

[38] This occurs at the same time as the processes of primitive accumulation of land and colonial expansion of markets elsewhere, which likewise reduce the capacity for any form of social reproduction external to the social relations of capital (see Marx 1967,1: Pt. 8).

Manufacture's transformation of labour and knowledge away from handicraft production through the introduction of new instruments of labour and a new technical composition, however, does not resolve the indeterminacy contradiction. This new organisation of the social division of labour relies on groups of connected detail labourers, and therefore "manufacture was unable, either to seize upon the production of society to its full extent, or to revolutionise that production to its very core"(1967,1:347) because of the refusal of detail labourers, which led to constant "complaint of want of discipline amongst the workmen" (1967,1:347). This blockage can only be resolved by a recomposition through the development of machines, which can abolish the detail labourer as a subject capable of refusal.

Modern industry thereby emerges from manufacture with the development of machinery that operates to "cheapen commodities, and, by shortening that portion of the working-day, in which the labourer works for himself, to lengthen the other portion that he gives, without an equivalent, to the capitalist" (1967,1:351). Whereas: "in, manufacture, the revolution in the mode of production begins with the labour-power, in modern industry it begins with the instruments of labour"(1967,1:351). Rather than the quantitative increase in the number of workers employed, it is the qualitative alteration in the labour process that begins this recomposition of capital. Marx's analysis of machinery includes an extensive and (literally) technical analysis of the development from the single machine to the factory system and its role in a capitalist class offensive.

In the factory system he sees "an organised system of machines, to which motion is communicated by the transmitting mechanism from a central automaton, is the most developed form of production by machinery. Here we have, in the place of the isolated machine, a mechanical monster whose body fills whole factories, and

whose demon power, at first veiled under the slow and measured motions of his giant limbs, at length breaks out into the fast and furious whirl of his countless working organs" (1967,1:360). In this factory system, the worker has to operate according to the objective dictates of the productive apparatus. The disciplinary problem faced by collective detail labourers is dealt with by the development of a technical system of control. But, as argued earlier, the process of development does not resolve the indeterminacy contradiction but rather rearticulates it again at a higher level. Within the factory system, cooperative power is a fundamental necessity, built into the organisation of constant capital itself. The disruptive potential of the hierarchy of detail labourers is replaced by an expanded working class (now involving increasing numbers of women and children) which has lost its skill to the factory system, and which is now massified as "minders of machines" (1967,1:396). The factory worker emerges as a product of a specific technical composition as part of a "radical change on the composition of the collective labourer" (1967,1:434).

In this analysis Marx presents a threefold recomposition of the working class; from detail labourer, to collective labourer, to factory worker. Marx's class analysis does not end with the identification of the division between proletarians and capitalists, but instead continues in the form of a detailed analysis of how each class has been composed and recomposed throughout the process of capitalist development. Class composition theory embraces and extends this project beyond the vantage point of the 19th century, and seeks to understand how the proletarian lineage has developed from the factory worker onwards. By working in the vein of this analysis of recomposition, we can see how the back and forth scrap over the indeterminacy contradiction gives rise to technical recompositions, and how the conjectural modification of the social formation gives rise to different kinds of proletarian subject

(from the detail labourer to the factory worker) who has access to different structural capacities for struggle and is organised into different kinds of embryonic deep structures.

Technology

During this threefold study of recomposition, Marx lays the basis for a clearer analysis for the role of technology in the capitalist mode of production. This basis emerges from the imperative towards valorisation that defines the capital relation. When new technology is first introduced by a capitalist it converts:

> The labour employed by the owner of that machinery, into labour of a higher degree and greater efficacy, by raising the social value of the article produced above its individual value, and thus enabling the capitalist to replace the value of a day's labour-power by a smaller portion of the value of a day's product. During this transition period, when the use of machinery is a sort of monopoly, the profits are therefore exceptional. (1967,1:383)

That is to say, new technology increases the productivity of the labour process, and (as discussed above) increases relative surplus value production. However, over time the relative competitive advantage conferred by the adoption of a new technical composition fades as the average labour expended per commodity falls due to the wider adoption of that technology, leading to an equalisation of surplus value production across a branch of industry – before another advance in labour productivity forces another recomposition. This relentless push to develop new and more productive technology in order to gain a relative surplus value advantage and exceptional profits is one of the drivers of technical recomposition that constantly incentivises individual capitals to overcome the barriers to their development. There is, however, a second driver of technological development which Marx identifies:

> But machinery not only acts as a competitor who gets the better of the workman, and is constantly on the point of making him superfluous. It is

> also a power inimical to him, and as such capital proclaims it from the roof tops and as such makes use of it. It is the most powerful weapon for repressing strikes, those periodical revolts of the working-class against the autocracy of capital. According to Gaskell, the steam-engine was from the very first an antagonist of human power, an antagonist that enabled the capitalist to tread under foot the growing claims of the workmen, who threatened the newly born factory system with a crisis. It would be possible to write quite a history of the inventions, made since 1830, for the sole purpose of supplying capital with weapons against the revolts of the working-class. (1967,1:410-11)

Marx goes on to quote Andrew Ure's more aggressive arguments about using technology to smash working class resistance as the "perfect [expression of] the spirit of the factory" (1967,1:411).[39] Capitalists do not only pursue valorisation through development by expanding relative surplus value production, but also by attempting to improve the systems of control which implement class domination and reduce the regularity of incidences of counter-valorising indeterminacy. The factory worker was a recomposed working class subject, deprived of the structural capacities available to the collective labourer. But as even a cursory knowledge of the history of the workers' movement indicates, such recomposed subjects find weapons of their own in their new environments.

Marxists after Marx have frequently elaborated on this point. The Italian workerists identified the "technological path to repression" as a means of "breaking whatever political unification the working class has achieved during a given cycle of struggles, by means of a technological revolution in class composition" (Baldi 1972).

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[39] Ure says of a machine used in calico printing: "At length capitalists sought deliverance from this intolerable bondage" [namely the, in their eyes, burdensome terms of their contracts with the workmen] "in the resources of science, and were speedily re-instated in their legitimate rule, that of the head over the inferior members." Speaking of an invention for dressing warps, he says:

> "Then the combined malcontents, who fancied themselves impregnably entrenched behind the old lines of division of labour, found their flanks turned and their defences rendered useless by the new mechanical tactics, and were obliged to surrender at discretion." With regard to the invention of the self-acting mule, he says: "A creation destined to restore order among the industrious classes. . . This invention confirms the great doctrine already propounded, that when capital enlists science into her service, the refractory hand of labour will always be taught docility" (1967,1:411).

Panzieri, in his critique of objectivist readings of Marx's theory of technology, also reaffirmed that productive forces developed and implemented through capitalist social relations were inimical to the working class (Panzieri 1980). In particular, he stressed how the development of constant capital acts directly upon the balance of power between classes – but rather than eliminating the potential for resistance, the intensification implied by this development of constant capital leads to an increasing explosive potential: "the subversive strength of the working class, its revolutionary capacity, appears (potentially) strongest precisely at capitalism's "development points", where the crushing preponderance of constant capital over living labour, together with the rationality embodied in the former, immediately faces the working class with the question of its political enslavement" (1980). The increasing intensification of cooperation and fixed capital in certain branches of industry creates new potentials for refusal. Technical recomposition might be used to break working class self-organisation, but it can never preclude it re-emerging in the future – no matter how total the control a recomposition generates might appear in the short term.[40] The forms of self-organisation generated at these intensified development points can prove politically crucial in contesting the tendencies of capitalist development and further processes of recomposition on a wider scale.

This process of technological repression was understood on the micro level by Stan Weir in his discussion of informal work groups. When the organisation of the collective power of workers through cooperation is changed by managerial diktat, the structures around which these groups construct themselves are blown apart. As a

[40] When Fordism was first being developed in the early 20th century, American trade unionists made precisely this mistake by assuming that the introduction of the assembly line and associated mass production technologies on a large scale would prevent workers unionising. It was only in retrospect, after the militancy of the 1920s and 30s that they realised how wrong they were (Silver 203, 6).

result, “the greatest enemies the groups have are unemployment or any change in technology that destroys the group’s life continuity, internal relationships, and group culture” (2004, 249).[41] As the form of cooperation is transformed, so too is the technical composition of the working class.

Marx, however, barely considers the implications of his argument about the existence of a second driver before moving rapidly on to questions of technological unemployment. The relationship between the first and second driver of technical recomposition is never clarified, leading to an uneasy sense of co-determination. We are left with the conclusion that technology is introduced into the labour process by capitalists to increase surplus value production either by increasing the production of relative surplus value through increases in the productivity of labour-power, or by clamping down on proletarian refusal. But there is no elaborated theory in Marx of how these two avenues to surplus value relate or when and under what conditions one predominates over the other.

This gap in Marx’s theory of technology poses a significant challenge to any theory of technical composition. Given the centrality of technological developments in the conjectural modification of class composition, we need a clear understanding of the relation between development to increase the productivity of labour-power and development to break the capacity for refusal. I will argue that we can best understand the relationship between these two drivers of technological recomposition through a theory of inter-class contradictions and intra-class tensions.

[41] Weir saw this process perhaps most concretely in the spread of containerisation in docks, and his writing on the subject offers a close account of recomposition that deserves more scholarly attention than it has so far received (2004)..

Technological development that aims to increase the productivity of labour-power results from intra-class tensions: from the constant competitive relation between different capitals within the capitalist class. Development that aims to break the capacity for refusal, on the other hand, results from inter-class contradictions: from the potential indeterminacy of labour, and the inevitably antagonistic relationship between working class and capitalist class. My argument is that, assuming a stable equalisation of intra-class tensions across the productive sphere, *inter-class contradictions ultimately determine the development of the productive forces.* This is because the indeterminacy of labour-power means that workers as a class have the capacity to prevent any capital gaining a competitive advantage *regardless of the efficiency of the labour process employed by that capital*, because workers have the power to prevent surplus value extraction occurring in the first instance by refusing to work or by forcing wages so high that competition becomes impossible for that capital. The indeterminacy of concrete labour can act in the sphere of production, before commodities ever make it into circulation and before the indeterminacy of abstract labour ever comes to bear. The productivity of an individual capital's labour process is rendered irrelevant if that labour process is not taking place or has been rendered unprofitable. First and foremost, capital must act to ensure that production can continue, then it must act to make sure its production is competitive in comparison with other capitals.

To ground this argument directly in Marx, we can refer to Volume 3 and his argument there that competition "can only even out the inequalities in the rate of profit within a branch of industry" (Marx 1981, 3:1004). Competition on price does not create or determine the level of prices; this is what Marx calls the illusion created by competition. Instead, inter-class tensions in the form of competition operate to stabilise

the value of commodities and the rate of profit at any given composition of capital. Fundamentally, these factors are determined by the division of the value of commodities into three components: the value of constant capital, the value of variable capital, and surplus value. Once stabilisation of price has been achieved by competition across a branch of industry, the fundamentals of valorisation are determined within the production process.

These arguments bring to mind one of the most influential reinterpretations of this relation between relative surplus value production and the technological path to repression: the audacious "Copernican inversion" which characterised Mario Tronti's particular brand of workerism. This inversion can be summarised as follows: "at the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development is subordinate to working class struggles" (2019, 65). Rather than understanding the development of the mode of production as being determined by capitalists making rational decisions in board rooms, he argued, it is more accurate to say that development is determined by strikes, demonstrations, sabotage and struggle.

First and foremost, to understand this inversion we have to recognise that Tronti is making a historically-specific claim. The inversion of the relation of labour to capital only occurs "at the level of socially-developed capital", that is to say, at the point at which he argues that the social relations of the factory expand to become the social relations of society.[42] In his contemporary context, as Italy was going through a period of sustained and rapid economic growth, working class demands for a larger share of income (mediated by the trade unions and social democratic social policy) functioned to boost aggregate demand for manufactured goods and secure legitimacy for a rapid

[42] This is the other of Tronti's most famous arguments, a specific periodisation of post-war capitalism as the "social factory", to which I will return later in the chapter on social composition.

process of recomposition in Italian industry. This was not a uniquely Italian phenomenon, as across the advanced capitalist world the political and economic power of organised labour was internalised to drive systematic development (Streeck 2016, 21). This internalisation was partly expressed through the formal wage demands of trade unions, but also began to spread beyond that – into the self-organised demands of wildcat strikers. Their insurgent refusal broke them out of their role as the internal, variable part of capital, and began to generate the class as an autonomous externality: “living labour’s refusal of activity is the recovery of its autonomy, which is to say, precisely the autonomy that the production process has to break” (2019, 221). Such autonomy, in a society so dominated by the factory relationship that there is barely anything outside of it, demands that either capital reintegrate the working class into the mechanisms of development through the incorporation of trade union demands, which come to reflect directly capital’s own needs (2019,259) – or leads to a revolutionary blockage in the mechanism of development, and the immediate commencement of a period of revolutionary crisis. Hence Tronti’s idea of a “strategy of refusal” through which the working class would initiate this crisis by collectively refusing to present demands to capital, and by refusing to be mediated as a productive force. Here we have a solid historical example that demonstrates that in a period where intra-class tensions are stabilised by competition operating to equalise conditions across a branch of industry in a context of (on average) successful capital valorisation, inter-class contradictions win out.

But the assumption of constant economic growth and successful capital valorisation is by no means guaranteed. Capitalism is, after all, a system prone to extreme periodic crisis. In such periods of capitalist crisis, the Copernican inversion can lose its contextual purchase as intra-class tensions between owners of the means

of production accelerate, leading to a conflict which can *invert the inversion*. Temporarily, tensions overdetermine contradictions, as the workers' movement is put to flight amidst redundancies and capital is restructured. In this context, the primacy of concrete labour's indeterminacy is not structurally eliminated, but the actual application of this indeterminacy is limited by the way in which the social formation is deformed by periods of crisis. Equalisation takes on such a temporarily dramatic form as to overdetermine the capacity of the working class to set the pace in the production process. Tronti admits as much in his postscript to the second edition of *Workers and Capital*, in which he identifies the New Deal as a "revolution-of-capital" (2019, 303) in which the capitalist class drove forwards a process of development in order to escape from a crisis situation. So, the Copernican inversion is a highly persuasive articulation of the relationship between drivers of development within the Marxist framework in periods of significant economic growth and working class militancy, and at a certain level of capitalist development. However, in different contexts, where different circumstances prevail, it should not be applied as if it were a universal law. This position is in line with Tronti's own retrospective autocritique, made in 1972, in which he argued that "we must think of capitalist society as something in which there are a number of engines running at the same time" (Tronti 2020).

Given an equalisation of intra-class tensions through the regulating mechanism of competition, inter-class contradictions win out and technological development is ultimately determined by the struggle of the working class within the production process – meaning that development is primarily driven by the capitalist attempt to prevent refusal. However, in circumstances where intra-class tensions are sharpened, such as periods of low growth, recession and crisis, the inversion can become inverted, as the struggle to outcompete individual capitals comes to predominate and

the refusal of work is temporarily suppressed. This has significant implications for the study of technical composition in our context today, where the post-crisis “long depression” (M. Roberts 2016) needs to be thought of as a prolonged inversion of the inversion.

These two drivers of change combine with the constant overriding systemic demand to maximise the valorisation of capital to produce a sphere of production that is constantly revolutionising itself: “Modern industry never looks upon and treats the existing form of a process as final. The technical basis of that industry is therefore revolutionary, while all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative. By means of machinery, chemical processes and other methods, it is continually causing changes not only in the technical basis of production, but also in the functions of the labourer, and in the social combinations of the labour-process.” (1967,1:457). However, despite this discussion of objective factors which determine the relationship between the two drivers of development, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the subjective factor is ultimately primary – the decision of workers to refuse work, to utilise the indeterminacy of their labour power to defeat their class enemy, remains the ultimate regulating factor of development insofar as it allows it to continue at all. The working class makes history, but not in conditions of its own choosing.

From labour-power to working class

Marx uses the term “technical composition” in his own discussion of the composition of capital. For him, the technical composition of capital describes the relationship between fixed and variable capital within the labour process (1967, 574). Theorizing the technical composition of the working class is a way into this same relation but seen from the other side. Rather than describing the relationship between two forms of capital, it describes the organisation of labour-power into a working class.

This process of organisation is not a one-off process of class formation, but instead the structural determination of classes is followed up by a constant cycle in which different agents conduct conjectural modification of the social formation as part of a wider struggle over the indeterminacy of labour-power. The sphere of production, which by the law of private property should be the exclusive dominion of the capitalist, is in fact a contested terrain. The living part of capital, its variable and value-producing component, always retains a capacity for refusal – the form of which is largely determined by deep micro-sociological structure. Instances of refusal emerge on the basis the structural capacities that are afforded by a particular organisation of production and out of the embryonic solidarity of cooperation. Exactly the power which capital seeks to harness by generating a technical composition of the class also always threatens to undermine the capital relation through open revolt.

Capitalism is a mode of production defined by the emergence of the collective, cooperative power of the working class as the basis for the social division of labour. But this power, which forms the variable component of capital and its essential beating heart, does not take on one stable form. Instead, it is a dynamic power, at once both internal to and antagonistic to the system which rests upon it. Through the analysis of technical composition, we can grasp the mechanisms through which this power is created, harnessed, exerted, and controlled – but also, vitally, come to understand the balance of forces within the sphere of production, and thereby gauge the potential for the world to be turned upside down. The inquiry which makes up part three below will study exactly how this dynamic power is composed in our context today.

Ch.4 Social composition

Whilst, as a class, proletarians might be defined by the need to sell their labour-power, workers live varied lives far beyond the boundaries of the workplace. It is to these lives, and the relations which constitute them, that this chapter now turns. In doing so, it follows a lineage of socialist feminism which has long sought to develop the tools required to understand working class reproduction. Specifically, this chapter uses the early social reproduction tradition of the Second and Third Internationals to dispute some of the arguments that characterise workerist feminism and find a new path between a class composition analysis and a feminist analysis of social reproduction via the concept of social composition.

In the previous chapter on technical composition, I used Olin Wright's concept of structural capacity to describe the way in which the technical composition of the working class creates a scaffold on which self-organisation can be built. But Olin Wright does not limit his concept purely to the sphere of production and goes on to argue that: "the structural capacity of the working class is not determined only within the production process. One can also talk about the structural capacity (and incapacity) of the working class which is rooted in community i.e., the social relations amongst workers outside production" (E. O. Wright 1993, 100). This chapter follows this line of thought to think about how extra-productive relations influence the balance of power within production, and as a result, how an analysis of social composition can further our inquiry into the experience of young, low-paid, disconnected service workers. In other words, my interest here is in developing the capacity of class composition theory to accurately analyse extra-productive relations in order to apply

the insights of this analysis to a productive context, although this application does not exhaust the uses of social composition as a concept.

It begins by discussing workerist feminism and its historical answers to the problem of workerism's production-centric conception of class composition. However, rather than endorsing this historical answer from within the workerist tradition, I will then turn to earlier sources and examine how they might offer us a more acute basis on which to try and reformulate a theoretical account of class composition beyond production. By using the insights of this earlier tradition, we can reformulate the classical workerist analysis of the social factory and move on to begin to formulate a new concept of "social composition". This new development steps into the extra-production gap in analyses of class composition and provides a new framework for analysis.

The Piazza Ferretto

On the Italian mainland, about six kilometres outside Venice, there is an industrial port called Porto Marghera. From 1952 onwards, it was home to one of the major bases of the chemical industry in Italy, with large plants producing chlorinated soda, tetrachloroethylene, trichloroethylene and vinyl chloride (Wildcat 2010). These chemical plants were the site of a series of formative conflicts for the Venetian *operaista*. Their first experience of what they called "guerrilla warfare in the factory" (quoted in Wright, 114) was a dispute in 1967 that saw a dozen stoppages at the chemical plants and large worker demonstrations which ended in the town of Mestre. Those demonstrations converged in the central square, the Piazza Ferretto, and it was here that a generation of communist militants learnt the arts of the mass strike and the street fight. And it was also here, in 1974, that Mariarosa Dalla Costa made the following speech:

> In the factories of Porto Marghera there have been many strikes, many struggles. We well remember the marches of male workers who started in Porto Marghera, crossed the Mestre Bridge and arrived here in this square.
>
> But let's make this clear. No strike has ever been a general strike. When half the working population is at home in the kitchens, while the others are on strike, it's not a general strike.
>
> We've never seen a general strike. We've only seen men, generally men from the big factories, come out on the streets, while their wives, daughters, sisters, mothers, went on cooking in the kitchens. (Dalla Costa 2010)

Dalla Costa, alongside others like Selma James, Silvia Federici and Leopoldina Fortunati, was part of a current of thinkers who argued that workerism had developed as a result of its obsessive focus on the class composition of automotive, technical and chemical manufacturing – but this focus had led to the development of a lopsided perspective, with little to no capacity to articulate a critique of, or build power in, the capitalist social relations that lay beyond this kind of work. As a result, this current was associated with *Lotta Feminista*, an organisation which aimed to take "the workerist experience to the feminist movement" (Fortunati 2013).

An analysis of the most advanced points of capitalist development, according to the workerists' theoretical approach, was meant to enable an analytical abstraction towards the totality of capitalist social relations. But somewhere between the concrete level of work on the factory floor and the abstract level of the historically-existing mode of production, the workerists had got lost. As a result, feminist critics could rightly characterise the insights of workerism as an abstract analysis of a partiality (the sphere of production), rather than the intended totality (the entire social formation). Rather than ending up with a theory of class composition at a general level, the workerists had developed a concentrated (and, perhaps, isolated) understanding of class composition in some major factories with advanced and militant workforces.

Dalla Costa's symbolic challenge to workerist partiality in the Piazza Ferretto came two years after the publication of one of the strongest articulations of this perspective: Dalla Costa and Selma James' *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (1972). In it, Dalla Costa and James argued that the identity of the housewife was a universal female identity. Working class housewives were specifically the determining social element within this wider universal identity, thereby meaning that there existed an indivisible link between class and gender. The housewife was the product of an offensive by capitalist society against all forms of the reproduction of labour-power outside the nuclear family, in the same way that the worker was the product of the offensive of primitive accumulation. The tendency of capitalist society was not to preserve external pre-capitalist social relations outside of production, but instead to actively reorganize the reproductive sphere for its benefit.

The post-war period had seen working class housewives gradually develop a struggle against the reorganization of reproductive labour.[43] Here, they employed a category first developed by Mario Tronti, the "social factory". Tronti argued that the subsumption of life under capitalist social relations meant that all forms of social life were coming to represent the factory. Dalla Costa and James transformed this concept, however, by using it to suggest that all social relations had increasingly become productive of value for capital – and therefore that housework was now productive work, because it reproduced labour-power for capital, albeit in the privatised and unwaged sphere of the home. It followed that just as work provoked revolt and refusal in the sphere of production, so too should work in the home. The revolt of women against the factory-organisation of the reproduction of labour-power was, for Dalla Costa and James: "one of the decisive forms of the crisis in the systems

[43] For more on this form of struggle, see Federici (2012).

of the factory and the social factory" because of its structural centrality to the reproduction of labour-power. Housewives were not only productive workers, they had huge leverage by virtue of their control of the one commodity capital could not do without.

However, they argued, struggle of women within the home was limited by the lack of a wage, which meant a lack of a direct power relation with the capitalist class. Instead of paying for the productive labour of the housewife in the creation of labour-power in the home directly, capitalists utilised the family as a structure for redistribution by paying the male worker a wage which was intended to compensate for the labour of both partners. This use of the family as a strategic instrument aimed to perpetuate the subordination and exploitation of the female non-waged socially reproductive labourer, whilst simultaneously naturalising their role in reproduction (thereby obscuring its productive nature) and cutting the costs of labour-power. The workers' movement had never got to grips with this strategic use of the family before, leading to the failure to recognise the struggle of women as a class struggle running parallel to the struggle of the worker in the factory. Following on from this, Dalla Costa and James progressively moved towards the conclusion that struggle in the domestic sphere had to be integrated within the class struggle – and that this integration was possible because women's work in the home is already a central park of the social division of labour. They argued that if there was in fact no structural distinction between the production of commodities in the sphere of production and the reproduction of commodity labour-power in the sphere of reproduction, then the isolation of social reproduction from surplus value production was a result of capitalist strategy rather than an objective barrier – and could be overcome by a mass working class struggle to socialise the struggle of the housewife.

Workerism gave absolute analytical primacy to the struggle between classes in production. Workerist feminists believed the struggle of women beyond the factory was also an integral part of the general class struggle. So, when they attempted to reconcile these two frames, they redefined social relations in the home and community as a form of capitalist work.[44] This redefinition allowed them to apply all the tools of workerism to a field of social relations it had previously ignored. However, as will be argued below, this redefinition was a critical error. It failed to account for the specificity of social reproduction. Rather than going beyond the partiality of workerism to relate it to the totality more comprehensively, the workerist feminists overcame the partiality of workerism by homogenising the totality of social relations into the framework of that partiality. The result was a theoretical compression of all the social phenomena of class society into a theoretical framework which was optimised for the specific analysis of the sphere of production.

Workerist feminists launched a practical struggle to overcome the isolation of the housewife through the demand of "wages for housework" in 1974. Despite their initial opposition to the demand, expressed in the first edition of *The Power of Women* on the basis that it would offer the state an easy avenue for the recuperation of the movement, James and Dalla Costa came round to supporting this development. In the wages for housework milieu, theorists like Federici and Fortunati began extending this rearticulation of the women's struggle in new directions (Federici, 2012; Fortunati, 2013, 1995). This development was, at its base, one which was premised on a serious criticism of Marx, which accused him of being: "hampered by his inability to conceive

[44] This was not the first time such an analytical step had been made. Inman made a similar argument in her debate with the Communist Party U.S.A. in 1940: "And all the wives of all the Firestone workers, by the necessary social labor they perform in the home, have a part in the production of Firestone Tires, and their labor is as inseparably knit into those tires as is the labor of their husbands." (Inman 2015). Did this argument extend to claims about social reproduction as surplus value generating? The quote doesn't necessarily make this clear.

of value-producing work other than in the form of commodity production and [consequently blind to] the significance of women's unpaid reproductive work in the process of capitalist accumulation" (Federici 2012, 92).

But many feminists were unsupportive to this new theoretical turn and *Lotta Feminista* remained a minority tendency within the Italian feminist movement. In particular, these critics took issue with the argument that the reproduction of labour-power in a non-workplace context was as productive of surplus value as the production of commodities in a workplace. In doing so, they were adopting a position first established by a Marxist tradition that long pre-existed the political experiences of the Piazza Ferretto.

The early social reproduction tradition

Ankica Čakardić has identified an "early social reproduction tradition" within the left of the Second and Third Internationals (Čakardić 2019). These early theorists were unusual in that they did not neglect questions of domestic labour, but instead attempted a materialist analysis of the gendered division of labour.

One of the canonical texts of this tradition was Engels' study of early human history: *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1972). This text, which Vogel interprets as a veiled critical response to Bebel's highly-popular *Woman in the Past, Present and Future* (Vogel 2013), attempts to put Marxist interpretations of the gendered division of labour on a solid theoretical footing through a materialist discussion of human social development. Engels theorised that under primitive communist social relations, the socially necessary use value production which makes up domestic labour had been the common activity of women in the public sphere. Only with the emergence of the patriarchal family did a private domestic sphere proper

emerge in which domestic labour could be isolated and made into a “private service” (Frederick Engels 1972, 137). This isolation was further reinforced by the development of the single atomized, conjugal family. In fact, for Engels, it is only with the emergence of modern large-scale industry that women once again had a chance to participate in production outside the home: this participation did not imply the end of domestic labour, but rather its redefinition as a secondary form of labour.[45]

However, as other early social reproduction theorists identified, this “secondary” form of labour was precisely *not* identical to the primary form of labour in commodity production. Rosa Luxemburg, who only wrote sparingly on the issue of women’s oppression, was categorical on this front:

> This kind of work [domestic labour] is not productive in the sense of the present capitalist economy no matter how enormous an achievement the sacrifices and energy spent, the thousand little efforts add up to. This is but the private affair of the worker, his happiness and blessing, and for this reason non-existent for our present society. As long as capitalism and the wage system rule, only that kind of work is considered productive which produces surplus value, which creates capitalist profit. From this point of view, the music-hall dancer whose legs sweep profit into her employer’s pocket is a productive worker, whereas all the toil of the proletarian women and mothers in the four walls of their homes is considered unproductive. This sounds brutal and insane, but corresponds exactly to the brutality and insanity of our present capitalist economy. And seeing this brutal reality clearly and sharply is the proletarian woman’s first task. (Luxemburg 2003)

Here we can see that, amongst early social reproduction theorists, the fact that domestic labour is not attributed value by the social relations of capitalism is not

[45] As Kollanti later analysed, domestic labour became a second shift in addition to paid labour: “She has to work the same hours as her husband in some factory, printing- house or commercial establishment and then on top of that she has to find the time to attend to her household and look after her children. Capitalism has placed a crushing burden on woman’s shoulders: it has made her a wage-worker without having reduced her cares as housekeeper or mother.” (Kollontai 1977, 252). As Tilly and Scott argue, it is impossible to understand these two forms of labour as completely distinct, and Engels narrative is in many ways oversimplified. Looking at the examples of England and France from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, they demonstrated that the engagement of women in productive labour did not proceed along a simple upwards gradient, but instead was at a high level in pre-industrial household economies, fell with industrialisation, and then increased again with the advancing capitalist subsumption of socially reproductive labour through service commodity production (1987).

uncritically endorsed but nonetheless recognised as an objective fact. Already, in 1912, Luxemburg reinforced the distinction between labour in the sphere of production and labour in the sphere of consumption with regard to the production of the capitalist form of value.

Kollontai, writing whilst the Bolsheviks were busy implementing "western feminism's maximum plan" (Eley 2002, 188), similarly argued that under capitalist social relations domestic labour produced no commodities and therefore was not productive of the capitalist form of value:

> The housewife may spend all day, from morning to evening, cleaning her home, she may wash and iron the linen daily, make every effort to keep her clothing in good order and prepare whatever dishes she pleases and her modest resources allow, and she will still end the day without having created any values. Despite her industry she would not have made anything that could be considered a commodity. (Kollontai 1977, 255)

This is not to say that she argued that domestic labour did not need to be reorganised under communism: her vision was one of de-commodified public restaurants and communised social reproduction that liberated women from the burden of domestic labour. However, domestic production of use values was understood as a specific phenomenon, distinct from the sphere of production more generally. This is a distinction between productive and unproductive labour which comes directly from Marx. The point that Luxemburg makes with reference to the music-hall dancer is the same one he made with reference to schoolteachers, hotel workers, and clowns.[46] As discussed above, productivity is categorically not defined

[46] I quoted Marx's schoolmaster example below at the start of part three. The other two examples are as follows: "The determinate material form of the labour, and therefore of its product, in itself has nothing to do with this distinction between productive and unproductive labour. For example, the cooks and waiters in a public hotel are productive labourers, in so far as their labour is transformed into capital for the proprietor of the hotel. These same persons are unproductive labourers as menial servants, inasmuch as I do not make capital out of their services, but spend revenue on them" (Marx 1863); "These definitions are therefore not derived from the material characteristics of labour (neither

by the concrete nature of labour, but is instead an expression of a specific social relation of production as seen from the stand point of the capitalist. The labour which produces reproductive services *which are sold as commodities* is therefore productive. The obverse is also true: that labour that produces reproductive services *which are not exchanged as commodities* is not productive. Vogel argues that these initial theorisations of precisely how to account for the complex category of reproductive labour within the Second and Third Internationals did not establish a stable basis for the discussion of gender within Marxism (Vogel 2013, 133). However, they did lay the ground for the emergence of social reproduction theory at a later date.

This re-emergence of a feminist tradition which built on this early analysis was marked by work such as Margret Benston's seminal 1969 essay "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation", in which she argued that women have a specific relationship to the means of production as "that group of people who are responsible for the production of simple use-values in those activities associated with the home and family". In a line of thought which directly contradicts Dalla Costa and James, Benston argued that unproductive domestic labour therefore was not best understood by defining it as if it were identical to commodity-producing labour. Instead, by focusing on the specifics of this labour, the nature of women's oppression could be clarified.[47] In line with Kollontai, Benston argued that only the industrialisation of housework under socialist relations of production could fully overcome the gendered division of labour which reproduced women as a materially-constituted subordinate group within the

from the nature of its product nor from the particular character of the labour as concrete labour), but from the definite social form, the social relations of production, within which the labour is realised. An actor, for example, or even a clown, according to this definition, is a productive labourer if he works in the service of a capitalist (an entrepreneur) to whom he returns more labour than he receives from him in the form of wages; while a jobbing tailor who comes to the capitalist's house and patches his trousers for him, producing a mere use-value for him, is an unproductive labourer" (Marx 1863).

[47] For more on this line of thought, see (Himmelweit and Mohun 1977)

working class (Benston 2019). Going further down this route, contemporary contributions to social reproduction theory have increasingly "[recast] the labour theory of value from the point of view of wage labour (as opposed to from the side of capital)" (Bhattacharya 2017, 14). One of these influential recastings has been the Endnotes collective's essay "The Logic of Gender", which argues that the prevailing distinction between "domestic labour" and "work" on the basis of concrete forms of activity should be overturned, in favour of a less mystifying distinction between Directly Market Mediated (DMM) and Indirectly Market Mediated (IMM) activities (Endnotes 2013b). This approach makes the distinction in the social relations which mediate different forms of concrete activity central to the process of analysing those activities, and therefore enables a substantial increase in analytical accuracy. DMM labour is productive, whereas IMM labour is not – even if the concrete activities involved (cooking, cleaning, caring for the elderly) are identical.

By combining the early social reproduction tradition with the developments of contemporary social reproduction theory, we can inherit a basis for an analysis of the class composition of social relations beyond the workplace which does not mistake unproductive IMM labour for productive DMM labour. This approach takes forward the desire of workerist feminists to overcome the isolation of social reproduction from the class struggle, whilst refusing to argue for a structural homology between the value-producing expenditure of labour-power and use-value producing expenditure of human activity. In line with other recent readings of this debate, my desire is to retain the political impetus for a Marxist analysis of unwaged reproductive labour, without accepting the foundational inaccuracies associated with the WFH current (Gotby 2019, 37). In order to further begin to seriously develop the concept of social composition, this chapter will now turn to two interlinked tasks: the first is a

reinterpretation of the classical workerist “social factory” thesis, and the second is a systematic location of the concept relative to Marx’s general formula of capital and his argument over the historical determination of the means of subsistence.

The social factory

In order to begin to move towards a concept of social composition we have to first identify the relationship between production, as the determining sphere of any social formation, and the other spheres which also make up the totality of a social formation. Marx articulates his understanding of the relation between production and the other spheres of bourgeois society in the *Grundrisse*, where he argues that production determines more or less directly the form of every social relation that makes up a social formation, but it does not reduce the other spheres to identity with itself. Instead, it determines them whilst maintaining their non-identity. All elements of the whole exist as part of an interdependent, simultaneous totality – and one internal element determines the form of the whole:

> The conclusion we reach is not that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity. Production predominates not only over itself, in the antithetical definition of production, but over the other moments as well. … A definite production thus determines a definite consumption, distribution and exchange as well as definite relations between these different moments. (Marx 1993, 99)

This determination is not static. It develops and expands as the development of a mode of production advances. Tronti’s argument regarding the “social factory” is that as capitalism develops, the relationship of determination between production and consumption, distribution, and exchange becomes more and more profound. The intensification of the determining capacity of valorisation increases as part of the process of capitalist development. This is not to say, in agreement with Dalla Costa

and James, that all social relations become forms of productive labour. In fact, the argument should be understood as completely distinct: *all social relations – including those of distribution, exchange and consumption – increasingly become subsumed under the capital relation as it is determined in production.* [48]

> The more that capitalist development advances, which is to say, the greater the penetration and extension of the production of relative surplus value, the more necessarily production-distribution-exchange-consumption form a complete circuit – that is, the relation between capitalist production and society, between factory and society, between society and state, becomes increasingly organic. At the highest level of capitalist development, this social relation becomes a *moment* of the relation of production, the whole of society becomes an *articulation* of production, the whole society lives in function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domain over the whole society. (Tronti 2019, 26)

In order to accelerate relative surplus value production, capitalist development reorganises all relations across the social formation to generate productive advantage. This recomposition is not limited to the social relations of production but extends across the totality and occurs as part of the general process of capitalist development. As the class composition in the sphere of production changes, so additional changes result in the composition of other fields through this chain of determination. In addition, however, the social relations of distribution, exchange and consumption are liable to being recomposed by capital (often acting via the state) without immediately identifiable precursors in production: despite the chain of determination between production and the other parts of the whole, agents retain the capacity to act on the social formation in an semi-autonomous manner.[49] Production does not determine the

[48] My use of the concept of subsumption here leans on Marx's usage of the term in his drafts of *Capital*, specifically "The Results of the Direct Production Process" (Marx 1994).

[49] The complex question of what range of conscious action is afforded to agents by the chains of determination that are generated by the social formation they exist in exceeds this thesis. However, it is important to note that Tronti's later theorisations of the "autonomy of the political" are a far cry from vulgar base-superstructure determinism. In discussions that often include extensive auto-critique, Tronti became open to the idea that capitalism is a mode of production "in which there are a number of engines [of development] running at the same time" (Tronti 2020) and that the political field of

totality in such a rigid way as to make every change in social composition subsequent to a change in technical composition.

Seen as a whole, the process of development occurs so that, on a systemic level and in the short-term, capital can reproduce itself *by maintaining its variable part*. The proletariat has to be socially composed as a consistent part of a class society, not just worked to the bone within the sphere of production. Hence, as Marx argues, the introduction of the limitation on the working day saves the proletariat from being totally destroyed by the demands of capital (Marx 1967, 1:285). The extra-productive relations entered into by the proletariat have to be on average viable if the whole mode of production is to continue.

That is not to say that this viability is guaranteed. As influential ecological Marxist James O'Connor identified, the capitalist mode of production often relies on consuming and degrading conditions of production (from the existence of labour-[power to the free gifts of nature) which are not reproduced in the productive sphere (J. O'Connor 1988). As Andreas Malm argues, this failure to reproduce the conditions of production might be reaching apocalyptic proportions in the currently accelerating process of climate collapse (Malm 2020, 111). It does not contradict this recognition, however, to recognise that there exists a counter tendency to such degradation of the conditions of labour in the form of action taken by parts of all of the capitalist class to

action was more insulated from economic determination than vulgar readings of the Copernican inversion thesis would allow, meaning that occasionally forms of political action could emerge which reversed the chain of determination between the two: from superstructure to base. At points, this acute analysis allowed him to see the potential for a political turn towards something like neoliberalism as early as 1972 (Anastasi and Mandarini 2020). The implications of this analysis include a significant demand to introduce theories and analyses of political mediation to the more strictly workerist canon of techniques – a demand which I am keenly interested in pursuing, but which falls outside the bounds of this thesis.

guarantee a social composition which maintains some key elements such as the reproducibility of sufficient labour-power.

So far, most of our discussion of capital has focused on individual capitals. But as well as talking about capital on an individual scale, Marx also discusses social capital. We see this particularly in Volume 2: “each individual capital forms only a fraction of the total social capital, a fraction that has acquired independence and been endowed with individual life … The movement of the social capital is made up of the totality of movements of these autonomous fractions, the turnovers of the individual agents” (Marx 1978, 2:427). Only at the scale of social capital does the circuit of capital always contain all of: the sale of labour power, the immediate production process, and the consumption of commodities. Whereas, Marx explains, in Volume 1 he assumed that the capitalist finds the material means of production that are required to continue the process of production, this is not always the case. Individual capitals are not guaranteed endless reproduction, and different fractions have to balance their production and consumption if they want to achieve maximum valorisation. Rather than just the unified monolith of “capital” encountered in Volume 1, we are here dealing with the question of the complex relations that internally structure the capitalist class. So, in Volume 2 Marx goes on to discuss the equalisation of value transfer between two departments of the economy: the first that produces the means of production, and the second that produces consumer goods. However, there is an alternative line of thought that can be developed on this basis. If we leave Marx behind in his discussion of intra-class relationships, and return to the questions of inter-class relationships, we can ask if the failure of a fraction of capital to access the material means of production can be imposed from the outside. In other words, what if there is not always a proletariat which can (or will) sell its labour to social capital? Marx’s thinking on this

problem is expressed most fully in his discussion of primitive accumulation and the origin of the capitalist system:

> But this transformation [of money and commodities into capital] can take place only under certain circumstances that centre in this, viz., that two very different kinds of commodity-possessors must come face to face and into contact; on the one hand, the owners of money, means of production, means of subsistence, who are eager to increase the sum of values they possess by buying other people's labour-power; on the other hand, free labourers, the sellers of their own labour-power, and therefore the sellers of labour. … *The capitalist system presupposes the complete separation of the labourers from all property in the means by which they can realize their labour. As soon as capitalist production is once on its own legs, it not only maintains this separation, but reproduces it on a continually extending scale.* The process, therefore, that clears the way for the capitalist system, can be none other than the process which takes away from the labourer the possession of his means of production; a process that transforms, on the one hand, the social means of subsistence and of production into capital, on the other, the immediate producers into wage labourers. The so-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. (Emphasis mine, Marx 1967, 1:668)

The expropriation of producers from the land through the violence of enclosure is precisely the original sin of social recomposition on which the capitalist mode of production relied for its initial development. Proletarians did not end up in their doubly-free position (free to sell their labour, free of the capacity to survive if they do not sell their labour) through an accidental process of historical development – they were violently forced off the commons and into the sweatshops of the industrial revolution. This initial recomposition, however, was not a one-off event.

In the final chapter of *Capital* Volume 1, Marx discusses how the capitalist mode of production in newly-colonised territories like the U.S. suffered from the insufficient expropriation of the mass of the new colonial population from the land. This population could gain access to the means of subsistence via means apart from the commodification of their labour: there was always the option to flee westwards. This availability of an escape route, which allowed for workers to survive without selling

their labour-power to capital, meant that no stable class of proletarians formed. Instead, he paints a picture of a flock of migrant workers fleeing across the continent and away from bosses, capital, and the discipline of the workplace. These migrants de-proletarianized themselves as soon as they could, leaving the capitalists of the east coast unable to find anyone desperate enough to hire themselves out indefinitely: "the wage worker of today is tomorrow an independent peasant, or artisan, working for himself. He vanishes from the labour-market, but not into the workhouse" (Marx 1967, 1:720). Instead, workers vanished towards the west coast – often acting as pioneering colonisers of the very system from which they were trying to escape and depriving the indigenous population of their access to the means of subsistence as they did so.[50] But for capital this was a crisis, first and foremost, of social composition. The escape route of unenclosed land created an externally-enforced shortage of variable capital on the whole American capitalist class. This example demonstrates to us that the creation of doubly-free proletarians is an ongoing task, and that the potential of failure on this terrain always hangs over the heads of capital.[51] Primitive accumulation does not end, once and for all, the challenge of socially composing a class that sells its

[50] What kind of power were these "multitudinous" anti-proletarians (Virno, 2004, p. 45) using to escape from the clutches of American capital? It was the power that results from the capacity to reproduce oneself autonomously from the dominant mode of production. Primarily, the history of this form of power in the 20th century has been the history of internal autonomy, which is not situated in an exogenous "west" but inside the society of capital itself (Cuninghame 2015; McBride, Stirling, and Winter 2013; Mohandesi and Teitelman 2017). Further discussions of this form of power might also critically investigate the discussion of self-valorisation which emerged from Toni Negri's work in the late 1970s. Negri proposes two measures to track the expansion of the proletarian form of value: the refusal of work, and the multiplication in the amount of socially useful labour devoted to the free reproduction of a proletarian society. This autonomy, for Negri, emerges internally in the same way that "if the labourer consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist" (Marx, 1967, p. 224). The two subjects of the capitalist mode of production, workers and bosses, occupy the entire social terrain – and any expansion or contraction on either side leads to struggle. "Every time I break capital's margins of valorisation, I appropriate yet another space for workers' valorisation. For the proletariat there are no vacuums. Every space left empty by the enemy is filled, occupied, appropriated, attacked by an expansive force that has no limits. The relation with capital has no points of homology: capital is defeated in order to replace it." (Negri 2005, 260)

[51] See also Harvey's heavily Luxemburg-influenced argument on 'accumulation by dispossession' (D. Harvey 2005; 2006b).

labour to capital in return for access to the means of subsistence. As quoted above, the social composition of the proletariat is not only maintained but reproduced on a *"continually expanding scale".*

This expanding scale is precisely what Tronti picks up on when he argues that "the mere survival of labour-power as such is no longer sufficient: what is needed is a process through which labour-power is accumulated *for* social capital" (Tronti 2019, 54). The working class must be continually *socially recomposed as a purchasable commodity for capital*, despite the tendency of technical composition to undermine the basis for this reproduction. As Marx argued in his analysis of capital's pitiless expansion of the working day, the tendencies of intensification in the labour process lead to an "expansion of the labourer's time of production during a given period by shortening his actual lifetime" (Marx 1967, 1:253). The technical composition of the proletariat into a cooperative power engaged in the immediate process of production is contradictory, in that the intensity of exploitation to which capital aspires leads to the destruction of the social conditions that enable it. As Tronti put it: "all of the processes of the rational decomposition of concrete labour tended to destroy the abstract possibility of its own social organisation" (Tronti 2019, 54). In order to prevent this, as Marx identified with reference to the working day, workers' historically organised against the expanding demands of capital to defend their access to the means of subsistence and conditions that allowed for that reproduction (Marx 1967, 1:285).

But Tronti's argument goes further, to make the point that "the more capital succeeds in organising itself," that is to say, the greater the subsumption of the social formation under the capital relation, "the more it is forced to organise the working class for its own ends – to the point that the working class no longer has to become the *mirror* of social contradictions: it can directly reflect itself as a social contradiction"

(Tronti 2019, 57). From the moment that the capital relation becomes hegemonic within the social formation the proletariat must be socially composed as a viable, reproducible class not only by the antagonistic action of the proletariat against capital – but also by the positive action of social capital, so that it can preserve its variable part and guarantee at least one of the factors that make up its conditions of existence. Hence, the antagonistic struggle over the working day is brought inside capital itself as a struggle over the conditions of proletarian reproduction – and in this struggle, the combination of workers for their own defence and the informal action of families to secure their own reproduction becomes an internal force which fights *within* capital in order to create a form of social reproduction which is viable f*or* capital. It is in this sense that all of society comes to reflect the relations of the factory.

To return to Poulantzas, the nature of the state apparatus, in this context, is to "maintain the unity of the social formation by concentrating and sanctioning class domination, and in this way reproducing social relations i.e. class relations" (Poulantzas 1978, 25). The sphere of production is not hermetically sealed from the rest of society and cannot self-reproduce. Whilst the relations of production delimit what the state can do and how its power is constituted, it also has an semi-autonomous and positive role in reproducing the social formation and maintaining those same relations. Often this positive role is most evident in the way that the state operates as the mechanism through which concessions are granted to subordinate classes. In the history of the 20th century, many of these concessions consisted of the construction of limited welfarist protections for the subordinate classes, and that produced a social composition which acted as the material substratum for an attempt to foster mass consensus (Poulantzas 2014, 25–31). The creation of total reliance upon capital for access to the means of subsistence via primitive accumulation, and

the creation of welfarist policies which attempt to craft a consensus through social recomposition – both are strategies which make the proletariat into a resource for social capital, and both are mediated by the state (understood as the "apparatuses of hegemony" (2014, 36) rather than just the public kernel). As such, we should think of state institutions as acting to guarantee the social composition of the proletariat and actively make possible the integrated reproduction of a subsumed working class and provide for the continued supply of labour-power via both coercive and consensual strategies.[52]

But the other driver of development, which was earlier discussed with regard to technological change, applies here too. Technical and social recompositions through processes of development are not just pursued with the intention of accelerating relative surplus value production: just as capital invents machines for the purposes of strike breaking, so it destroys communities which obstruct its valorisation. In parallels to our discussion of technical composition, capital also acts to break up social compositions which give rise to structural capacities for the proletariat. This drive to destroy proletarian structural capacities through social recomposition can perhaps be easiest understood via a discussion of social composition in an embodied context: first, in the urban geography of the post-war United States.

The social path to repression

Just as Baldi identified the "technological path to repression", so we can also identify a social path to repression.[53] In order to do so, I'll engage with three short examples from Washington DC (Ward 2019), Chicago (Hirsch 1998) and Detroit

[52] For an excellent discussion of this role of the state through a Poulantzian les with particular reference to the British experience of Thatcherism, see (Gallas 2016).
[53] My initial articulation of this idea followed a discussion of similar themes with Ben Beach (see Beach 2020 for his discussion).

(Sugrue 2014) to illustrate the determination of social composition in one specific historical context – the United States in the 20th century - along lines of industrial/urban development, and race, understood as a modality through which class is lived.[54]

Yulanda Ward's analysis of "spatial deconcentration" in Washington DC demonstrates that social recomposition is used as a repressive tool by capital and the state in just the same way as technical recomposition. Ward shows how after serious riots in the late 60s, 50,000 predominantly black proletarian city residents a year were being intentionally relocated by the city government's Department of Housing and Urban Development:

> Simply put, you disperse the concentrations of Black and poor people in DC where they could erupt into a dangerous force to challenge the ruling class of the city and form a political base to threaten indifferent and sold-out officials. The program creates small pockets of poor people, isolated in the suburbs, available to work when the economy needs them, but separated and alienated, like the South African Blacks who are forced to live in Bantustans that surround rich white settler cities.(Ward 2019)

This argument demonstrates that social compositions are complexes of social relations, influenced by the balance of forces and the dominant class in just the same way as the capitalist designs the labour process. The distinction between the organisation of social and technical composition is one of the degree of immediacy (the capitalist tends to have more control over the organisation of the workplace than the organisation of a neighbourhood, in the short term at least) rather than one of kind. However such recompositions are not definitive resolutions to the antagonistic class structure of capitalist society. As Hirsch has shown, capital-driven cycles of urban

[54] "But race performs a double function. It is also the principle modality in which the black members of that class "live", experience, make sense of and thus come to a consciousness of their structured subordination. It is through the modality of race that blacks comprehend, handle and then begin to resist the exploitation which is an objective feature of their class situation. Race is therefore not only ab element of the "structures"; it is a key element in the class struggle - and thus in the *cultures* - of black labour" (Hall et al. 2013, 347).

redevelopment in Chicago transformed the urban environment and by doing so transformed the actions of the people who live in that environment – but did not succeed in preventing the potential for collective action. What he terms the first ghetto, generated through the process of postbellum migration to the north of the United States by black workers, was broken down in the post-war period – but far from this leading to desegregation, Hirsch argued, it actually generated a reinforced, second ghetto. This time, however, the ghetto was characterised by high-rise public housing projects rather than slums. Hirsh also argued that the forms of rioting which emerged from these two ghettos, these two compositions, were different: whereas riots emerging from the first ghetto produced inter-communal violence between black and white Chicagoans, the second ghetto produced riots which, like those which broke out after the assassination of Martin Luther King, were characterised by black proletarians targeting private property within ghettoised areas. The link between the form of structural capacity and the resultant form of collective action, whilst not completely determinate, still holds in social composition.

So, I argue that social composition can be recomposed in order to undermine proletarian structural capacities, but that this recomposition does not preclude the re-emergence of a new form of class struggle which arises from the fundamental relations that structure the mode of production. But it is not the case that social and technical recompositions can be neatly separated. Sugrue's study of post-war Detroit identifies the close intertwining of technical and social compositions, and how the alteration of one impacts upon the other (although not in these terms). The exclusion of black men from the higher tiers of the industrial labour market in Detroit in the post-war period created a large black male surplus population, members of which were forced to try and make a subsistence income by finding informal work from multiple sources. In

order to find this work, these men congregated in an informal outdoor labour market near highly-segregated black neighbourhoods on the periphery of the city (which came to be known as the "slave market" by local whites) where they waited in the hope of being offered subcontracted construction work. Conditions like these became symptomatic of the creation of a precarious underclass, whose "street corner society" was perceived as a gang threat by the repressive apparatuses of the state. This was one of a matrix of factors that led to the explosion of riots in the city in 1967, in a borderline insurrection that would retrospectively be known as "the general strike of '67" by the revolutionaries at the *Inner City Voice* (Georgakas and Surkin 2012). There is no firewall between social and technical compositions.[55]

In all these cases, social class composition determines and is in turn determined by the forms of class struggle that arise from the working class' structural and organisational capacities located in the sphere of circulation (in the form of the riot). But alongside this capacity to act, social composition also codetermined the way that the class was technically composed (as in the "slave market" of Detroit) and was vulnerable to ruling class offensives in the form of social decomposition (as in spatial

[55] The examples above could easily have been drawn from the history of the European workers' movement where central role of social composition is evident in the most cursory survey. Temma Kaplan's discussion of the mass strikes of Barcelona in 1913 demonstrates quite clearly how working class women in the newly-absorbed industrial suburbs found opportunities in their social composition to spread workplace action. Daily discussions in the suburban bread markets and central old city general markets served to mobilize the fraction of the working class involved in the textile industry. Rather than just limiting their strike action to the workplace, women also used demonstrations and square occupations to link together their social and economic struggles – so that neither the workplace nor the neighbourhood were understood in isolation. As Kaplan identifies, this kind of mass strike action threw the questions of social reproduction wide open (Kaplan 1982). In this context, we can then make sense of Geoff Eley's general argument on the rise of the European workers' movement: "if the workplace was one frontier of resistance, where collective agency could be imagined, the family—or more properly, the neighbourhood solidarities working-class women fashioned for its survival—was the other" (Eley 2002, 58).The working class was composed as a subject within the production of surplus value, but also as a class fighting for access to the means of subsistence in the urban environment: "once urbanization passed a certain threshold, the city's everyday life— notably in transport and rented housing—became a practical infrastructure binding working people together" (2002, 59). As a result, "the challenge for the Left was to organize on both fronts of social dispossession" (2002, 58).

deconcentration). As Duda has identified, the post-war period in the U.S. is one particularly profound example of how urban planning acted as a form of military logic which was oriented internally. Social composition is, in this respect, just another terrain in the class war (Duda 2008).

We earlier discussed how “systems of control” are developed by capital to make futile attempts to resolve the indeterminacy contradiction in the labour process. An analogous process occurs beyond the sphere of production: in every capitalist social formation, the hegemonic apparatus must develop a system of control on the terrain of the social which prevents attacks on the class structure arising from non-productive relations. These systems of control on the terrain of the social can also be deployed in concert with the systems of control in the sphere of production to undermine the structural capacity of the proletariat in any specific social formation.

Structural capacities in social composition can feed into struggle in production, and form its foundation – but they can also be expressed autonomously, particularly by parts of the proletariat with little or no long-term place within production. These forms of struggle deserve attention in the spirit of E.P. Thompson, who argued that “the food riot in eighteenth-century England was a highly-complex form of direct popular action, disciplined and with clear objectives” (E. P. Thompson 1971, 78). He argues that in this specific social formation the marketplace was socially composed as “the point at which working people most often felt their exposure to exploitation, [and] it was also the point – especially in rural or dispersed manufacturing districts – at which they could most easily become organised” (E. P. Thompson 1971, 134). As a result, such a point of structural capacity was “as much the arena of class war as the factory and the mine became in the industrial revolution” (E. P. Thompson 1971, 120). Joshua Clover argues that just as the strike characterises the apex form of class struggle in

the sphere of production, so the riot is the apex form of struggle within the sphere of circulation:

> Strike and riot are practical struggles over reproduction within production and circulation respectively. Their strengths are equally their weaknesses. They make structured and improvisational uses of the given terrain [in my terms, of the structural capacities offered by that composition], but it is a terrain they have neither made nor chosen. The riot is a circulation struggle because both capital the dispossessed have been driven to seek reproduction there. (Clover 2016, 46)

Such theorisations can help us begin to think through the forms of struggle which emerge beyond the workplace but which can nonetheless be analysed through the frame of class composition.[56]

So, it is now clear that within the social factory argument itself we can find significant resources that allow us to avoid a productionist fallacy. Tronti's intent on this point is very clear: "placing the accent on one part means recognising and insisting on the essential character of this part relative to the others – even more so when this particular element, by its very nature, generalises itself. The scientific unilateralism of the working class point of view is not to be confused with a mystical *reduction ad unum*. Rather, the important thing is to look at distribution, exchange and consumption from the point of view of production" (Tronti 2019, 29). Whilst *Workers and Capital* might not live up to this aspiration, there are directions of travel within workerism which lead us clearly towards the concept of social composition. The challenge, then, is to

[56] Whilst I disagree with Clover on two of his main theses (that the strike is a form of struggle in long term decline due to changes in the balance of capital investment in the social formation, and that the emergence of massive surplus populations in advanced capitalist economies is already, and will continue to be, the defining feature of our contemporary class composition) his discussion of riots is highly useful if we want to understand outbreaks of collective action beyond production not just as random emotional outbursts, but as material phenomena deserving of serious and sustained theoretical attention.

articulate further the points made above with specific reference to the social relations of the capitalist mode of production.

The concept of social composition

To begin this movement from embodied contexts to an abstract conceptualisation, I'll begin by returning to Volume 1 of *Capital*. Specifically, a passage where Marx contrasts two forms of the circulation of commodities:

> … the simplest form of the circulation of commodities is C-M-C, the transformation of commodities into money, and the change of the money back again into commodities; or selling in order to buy. But alongside this form we find another specifically different form: M-C-M, the transformation of money into commodities, and the change of commodities back again into money: or buying in order to sell. Money that circulates in the latter manner is thereby transformed into, becomes capital, and is already potentially capital. (Marx 1967, 1:146)

By contrasting these two circuits, Marx illustrates the difference between "the circulation of money as capital, and its circulation as mere money" (1967, 147). Whereas C-M-C ends with the consumption of commodities as use-values, M-C-M does not end at all, it just expands through the addition of surplus value and begins again at greater magnitude: "the circulation of capital has therefore no limits"(1967, 149). Marx's analysis finally arrives at a general formula of capital as it appears in the sphere of circulation: M-C-M[1].

Rather than continue to discuss the circuit C-M-C in the abstract, Marx goes on to give both a historical and conceptual account of how workers, within the capitalist mode of production, are compelled to sell their labour-power as a commodity in order to gain access to the means of subsistence as a result of their separation from the means of production. So, in Volume 1, the abstract consideration of the circuit C-M-C only operates to clarify its antithesis, capital.

In Volume 2 Marx's argument with reference to working class consumption advances further. Marx begins the volume by discussing metamorphoses of capital between its monetary, productive, and commodity forms. During this discussion, he argues that "the capital relation arises only in the production process because it exists implicitly in the act of circulation, in the basically different economic conditions in which buyer and seller confront one another, in their class relation" (1978, 115). Clearly, therefore, classes within capitalist society arise from the unity of production, consumption and reproduction rather than just production alone. This argument on the specific emergence of class relations fits with Marx's earlier position in the *Grundrisse* that "production is also immediately consumption" and "consumption is also immediately production" (Marx 1993, 90). Under the capitalist mode of production, production consumes labour-power, which then needs to be produced again through the consumption of the means of subsistence. It is fundamentally not possible to understand the fullness of the capital relation within only one of these interlinked spheres.

So, understanding the category of social composition has to begin with understanding the circuit C-M-C as the inverse circuit of capital valorisation. An analysis of the social relations involved in this "selling in order to buy" allows us an accurate way into the social relations that make up the working class experience of the capitalist mode of production. However, Marx's discussion of this circuit in Volume 2 is limited:

> The wage-labourer lives only from the sale of his labour-power. Its maintenance – his own maintenance – requires daily consumption. His payment must therefore be constantly repeated at short intervals, to enable him to repeat the purchases – the act L[labour-power]-M-C or C-M-C – that are needed for this self-maintenance. Hence the capitalist must constantly confront him as money capitalist … in order that the mass of direct producers, the wage-labourers, may perform the act L-M-C, they

> must constantly encounter the means of subsistence in purchasable form i.e. In the form of commodities. Thus this situation in itself demands a high degree of the circulation of commodities. (1978, 119)

Hence C-M-C is, as has been argued elsewhere, “the general formula of working class reproduction” (Notes from Below, 2018). However, Marx’s only conclusion on the basis of this formula is that: “as soon as production by way of wage-labour becomes general, commodity production must be the general form of production” and that, in turn, “the existence of a class of wage labourers in turn encourages the transition of all commodity production to capitalist commodity production” (1978, 119). So, he understands the role of the general formula of working class reproduction as a catalyst for the development of the capitalist form of commodity production and circulation – but not beyond that. What happens if we try to follow this formula further?

The working class has nothing to sell but its own commodified capacity to work, labour-power. So, the formula has to begin with that: commodity (labour-power) or C(LP). The sale of labour-power to the employer is made in exchange for a sum of value, expressed in the form of money. On average, the amount paid to the worker for their labour-power covers the cost of reproducing labour power (as socio-historically determined). So, the formula continues with money, or M. This sum of money is exchanged for the commodities that make up the means of subsistence required to reproduce labour-power. So, the formula continues with commodity (means of subsistence), or C(MS). These means of subsistence are then transformed through the processes of social reproduction into commodity (labour-power), and the cycle begins again. So, the fully expanded formula runs Commodity (Labour-power)-Money(Wage)-Commodity(Means of Subsistence)-Commodity(Labour-Power). In shortened form:

C(LP)-M(W)-C(MS)-C(LP)

Now, it is possible to identify three specific processes within this expanded formula. C(LP)-M(W) is production seen from the workers' point of view – that is to say, it is the expenditure of labour-power in commodity-producing work in return for a wage. M(W)-C(MS) is consumption, whereby a worker purchases commodities with their wages. C(MS)-C(LP) is the social reproduction of labour-power, whereby those commodities are turned into use values which, when consumed, reproduce the commodity labour-power. However, as was argued above, these three processes are not homologous. Following Endnotes, we can divide them into two types: directly market mediated (DMM) and indirectly market mediated (IMM). If we take the symbol ">" to represent a DMM process and "/" to represent an IMM process we can clarify the formula as follows:

C(LP)>M(W)>C(MS)/C(LP)

Some specific concrete processes can fall into different places within this formula depending on the social relations surrounding that process. So, for example, a worker could buy unprepared food from a supermarket and prepare it (so transforming it into a use value) in their home, in which case the preparation of food would be contained within the C(MS)/C(LP) IMM social reproduction process.[57] However, workers can also purchase a commodified form of that use value in the form of pre-prepared food. In this circumstance, the preparation of food would be contained within the M>C(MS) DMM consumption process. The consequent C(MS)/C(LP) IMM process might then concretely only consist of biological digestion and doing the

[57] Here it is important to note that the purchase of commodities is not a purely DMM process in its entirety – the planning and organization of consumption was historically tasked to housewives operating as managers of household consumption. The distinction between DMM and IMM social processes is rarely black and white.

washing up. Workers can, assuming their wages are sufficient, consume commodities to reduce the amount of IMM social reproduction they have to do in order to be ready for work the next day. Similarly, other reproductive services like healthcare, education and transport can either be provided in a DMM or IMM fashion depending on the composition of the social formation in which they take place.

Technical composition allows us to understand any DMM process from the perspective of the worker involved in producing the commodity sold in that process. However, it is blind to social relations in the rest of the worker's life. Their patterns of consumption and reproduction remain structurally beyond this narrow class composition theory. Therefore the role of social composition is to specifically expand, account for, and analyse working class consumption in DMM processes, and working class reproduction in IMM processes beyond the commodity form. As such, it provides a helpful analytical lens through which to comprehend the processes of working class life under the capitalist mode of production.

Application in this thesis

The conceptual framework laid out above contains many potential directions of travel for theoretical and practical development. One of the most interesting existing crossovers between the study of class composition and social reproduction comes from Mohandesi and Teitelman, who, in their study of reproduction in the history of the American working class, argue that:

> … social reproduction was not just a terrain of struggle; it rapidly emerged as a site of class recomposition. Through struggles over social reproduction – over food, housing, and relief – different sectors of the American working class began to articulate themselves into a broader class unity. … Although the process was uneven and fraught with contradictions, social reproduction nevertheless became a primary site of class formation during one of the most militant moments in American history. It was in neighbourhoods, apartment buildings, parks, schools and

> streets that the working class made itself into a political subject. (Mohandesi and Teitelman 2017, 52)

We can extend these historical arguments to claim that, on a more abstract level, the structural capacities provided by a specific social composition part-determine the range of forms of class power and collective action that are possible within that social formation. The organisational capacities that arise out of the forms of self-organisation built on the basis of the structures of social composition have, in line with this argument, a potential to build association alliances across different fractions of the proletariat through which the class can articulate the working class political viewpoint and struggle for its fundamental interests. As such, struggle which emerges from social composition is not just an externality to account for in our analyses of technical composition, but a vital subject of inquiry itself.

In this thesis, however, I will not be able to pursue this direction of development. Instead, I will discuss migration (chapter seven) and education (chapter eight) as prominent features in the social composition of young, low paid, disconnected service workers. So, the role of social composition in this thesis is to further an inquiry which has its centre of gravity in the sphere of production. This is not out of step with contemporary social reproduction theory, which Bhattacharya characterises as “an approach that is not content to accept what seems like a visible, finished entity – in this case, our worker at the gates of her workplace – but interrogates the complex networks of social processes and human relations that produce the conditions of existence for that entity” (Bhattacharya 2017, 2). Similarly, Čakardić argues that: “the goal of SRT [social reproduction theory] is to grasp also what is not “visible” in the process of production – it asks what kind of processes enable a worker to show up at her workplace and examines the conditions of her existence and the social processes related to those conditions” (Čakardić 2018). This is precisely also the approach of a

class composition analysis utilising the concept of social composition. Whilst the process of production remains definitive for an analysis of the capitalist mode of production, a deeper analysis of the factors beyond the immediate production process only adds to the capacity to understand that process of definition by understanding class formation in the unity of production, consumption, exchange and reproduction. The analysis of class relations cannot confine itself to one sphere of the mode of production but has instead to deal with the totality of social relations as such. This is the role of social composition as an analytical category.

Ch.5 Political composition

In the previous two chapters we have this thesis has laid out a theoretical basis for understanding how the technical and social composition of the working class within a particular social formation create an objective basis for the emergence of self-organisation and collective action towards fundamental ends. Now, this chapter turns to the question of how that emergence takes place through the leap into political composition. In answering this question, I will move from the discussion of structural class capacities and the scaffolding for working class self-organisation that emerges out of the technical and social organisation of the social formation into a discussion of the organisational capacities which emerge after the leap into politics has been made. This is the moment in the thesis where the discussion of theory moves on from the objective microstructure of class composition to the question of how this objective basis ties into the analysis of a fundamental confrontation between the working class and the mode of production.

As mentioned earlier, in chapter ten of *Capital* Volume 1, Marx describes how the British working class pursued collective action to limit the working day: “For ‘protection’ against ‘the serpent of their agonies,’ the labourers must put their heads together, and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all-powerful social barrier that shall prevent the very workers from selling. By voluntary contract with capital, themselves and their families into slavery and death” (Marx 1967, 1:285). However, as the chapters roll on and Marx discusses the course of the industrial revolution, this collective class action is shown not to have resulted in the revolutionary overcoming of the mode of production, but instead to have hastened a process of technical recomposition to pursue relative surplus value, which in turn advances the process of

capitalist development. From this vantage point, having seen the outcome of working class political action and its reincorporation, Marx later returns to describe some of the outcomes of the Factory Act:

> Though the Factory Act, that first and meagre concession wrung from capital, is limited to combining elementary education with work in the factory, there can be no doubt that when the working-class comes into power, as inevitably it must, technical instruction, both theoretical and practical, will take its proper place in the working-class schools. There is also no doubt that such revolutionary ferments, the final result of which is the abolition of the old division of labour, are diametrically opposed to the capitalistic form of production, and to the economic status of the labourer corresponding to that form. But the historical development of the antagonisms, immanent in a given form of production, is the only way in which that form of production can be dissolved and a new form established.(Marx 1967, 1:458)

For Marx, the Factory Act, despite being only a meagre concession from capital, is evidence that the proletariat is an agent which aims at the dissolution of the mode of production. When the class combines to face the immediate antagonisms latent within any capitalist social formation and pursue its collective interests, the result is a revolutionary process of development, through which the class at first transforms and then destroys the system which rests on its exploitation. The transformation of the conditions of everyday life and destruction of capitalism at the level of a political totality are dialectically interlinked moments in the struggle. As Jameson puts it: “the two strategies are not, and yet they also are, the same” (Jameson 2014, 51). Any form of organisation and action which pursues the immediate interests of workers against their bosses has the potential to escalate into a more fundamental confrontation, in which what is at stake is the very mode of production itself. This dialectical relationship between the economic and the political is at the root of the concept of political composition.

For any Marxist writing after the experiment of 1917, the discussion of this relationship occurs in the shadow of Lenin. Tronti was no exception. His *Workers and Capital* is as much an attempt to grapple with the legacy of Bolshevism in a profoundly different social formation as it is an extension of Marx. In his return to Lenin, and specifically the relationship in his thought between economics and politics, Tronti first articulated the perspective of *operaismo* on the classical questions of Leninism. In his first hypothesis he made an analogy between the situation of the workerists in Italy and the period that Lenin spent in London in 1902 following the publication of *What Is To Be Done?* In both cases, he argued, the gap between the party and the class necessitated the creation of a new, compositionally-adequate form of organisation. It was the creation of such a form, in the shape of the Bolshevik party, that had "brought Marx to St Petersburg" – with revolutionary consequences. Lenin, in this reading, was fundamentally a figure who represented the adaptation of a Marxist strategy to a specific context – and therefore, should himself be adapted.

Negri went on to extend this reading of Lenin by referencing back to Lukács' argument, made in 1914, that Lenin's unique contribution to Marxism lay in his capacity to centre his thought on the "actuality of the revolution". Lukács claimed that it was Lenin's relationship to the material reality of a revolution led by the working class that allowed his full articulation of historical materialism not just as a theory of capital, but as a theory of the destruction of bourgeois society (Lukács 2009). For Negri, this argument leads to the conclusion that: "Lenin interprets, within the determinate situation, within the determinate class relationship between a historical subject (the Russian proletariat) and the overall capitalistic power structure confronting it, the whole set of questions that the worldwide proletariat faced in that historical moment" (Negri 2014, 5). To do so, Lenin – through a unity of theory and praxis – translated the

existing class composition of the Russian working class into a political form, a political composition, which was capable of breaking with the determinate social formation from which it emerged. Much in the way that Lukács famously defined Orthodox Marxism not as a set of conclusions but as a consistent methodology (Lukács 1971), so Negri argues that Leninism is a fundamentally revisable doctrine which adopts a consistent methodology in the face of new class compositions.

In the section that follows, therefore, I will discuss Lenin's conception of the relationship between economics and politics as a methodological issue, in order to elaborate a theoretical account of political composition. This discussion will begin by highlighting the failure of much contemporary scholarship on this issue via a reading of *What is To Be Done?* (*WITBD*) in the context of Russian Social Democracy in order to nail down exactly what Lenin meant and the context in which he meant it, before moving onto a discussion of Tronti and Negri's articulation of Leninism as a body of thought in their conjectures. The theory of political composition that results from these combined retrospective and prospective discussions will attempt to understand Leninism as a set of historical arguments *and* as an abstractable method that can be applied to both critique the dominant "power resources approach" within Marxist-influenced studies of labour relations, and clarify the basis on which I discuss organisational capacities, power, and struggle in the rest of the thesis.

What is to be Done, the Erfurt programme and the merger formula

The definition of political composition quoted at the beginning of part two was: "the self-organisation of the working class into a force for class struggle". To begin to understand this, it is important to begin with an apparently Leninist objection to the

very substance of this definition. This objection comes from one of the most popular interpretations of Lenin's *WITBD* and goes as follows: the working class cannot self-organise into a force for class struggle directed towards socialism, because without outside intervention the class remains purely economic in its interests. As Lenin supposedly argues, a party of professional revolutionaries drawn from sympathetic stratum of the bourgeois intelligentsia must intervene to lead the workers beyond trade union consciousness towards socialist consciousness. In this context, it makes no sense to talk of a Leninist theory of working class self-organisation, because the class is incapable of creating a political force that can pursue an ultimate resolution to the class struggle. By definition, socialist consciousness cannot arise out of working class self-consciousness because it is an external conclusion that can only be arrived at by a cadre of professional revolutionaries from a different class stratum. It is this external vanguard who must organise the workers into the correct formation, provide them political leadership, and direct them against their bosses. In making this argument, Lenin is meant to have fundamentally revised many of the previous assumptions of the Russian movement and developed his own unique theory of the role of the party as the vanguard of the revolutionary struggle.

However, this is an inaccurate reading of Lenin's conception of the relationship between economics and politics. As Neil Harding has argued, "the argument of the book [*WITBD*] is obscured rather than clarified by virtually all the commentators because they are either unaware of, or dismiss as unimportant, the context in which it was written" (Harding 1975, 451). So, in this section, I will examine precisely that often overlooked context via two key issues: the strategic transition amongst Russian social democrats from *kruzhovshchina* [the period of propaganda] to the period of agitation, and the debate over a document known as *The Credo*.

Kruzhovshchina derives from the Russian word for study circles, *kruzhki.* These circles were, before the mid-1890s, the main vehicle for social democratic propagandising in Russia. They were made up of a mix of intellectuals and workers, working together to cover questions ranging from Darwinian evolution to Marx's *Capital,* with the idea being that these circles would both bring the social democrats into contact with more and more workers and serve to convince these workers of the necessity of a revolution. But despite this educational activity, the social democrats still found themselves isolated from the class struggle going on at the coalface of Russian capitalism. Two socialists from the city of Vilna – who had been having real success organising amongst Jewish workers there – thought they understood the problem. Arkadii Kramer and Julius Martov wrote a pamphlet, published in 1896, titled "On Agitation". In it, they shared their critiques of the period of workers' circles, the *kruzhovshchina*, and proposed a new strategy of agitation. They argued that the workers' circles created a self-selecting layer of worker-intellectuals who often knew more about the class struggle in Western Europe than in their own workplace, leaving them alienated from their fellow workers and reproducing all of the problems and contradictions which had faced isolated revolutionary intellectuals in the first place. As a result, these worker-intellectuals became incapable of acting as agitators and became isolated participants in an educational sect (Martov and Kremer 1983, 201–3). Instead of continuing with this approach, Kramer and Martov proposed a wholesale change: from education by the book, to education by the struggle.

They observed that the contradictions found in the workplace constantly generated and regenerated the basis for a struggle between proletarians and capitalists. The process of development, rather than abolishing these contradictions, just intensified them. Spontaneous conflict over petty grievances was the inevitable

result. But these small fights could quickly escalate, as confrontation with one boss led to a confrontation with the state and then the entire ruling class. But this was not a guaranteed development. England, they argued, was a case in point – it had a very developed workers' movement but a weak social democratic movement. So, the social democrats should not just assume that the spontaneous direction of the economic struggle was towards a political struggle for goals like freedom of assembly. Instead, social democratic agitation was needed: "we should drive to develop *political self-consciousness* amongst the workers" (Emphasis mine, Martov and Kremer 1983, 197). Such agitation would aim to bring out the revolutionary content of the struggle and to move the workers' movement onto the terrain of politics. Conflict plus agitation could result in a widening class struggle and an educative process that generated political self-consciousness amongst the workers. They finished by laying out an expansive vision of the role of the agitator: "to immerse himself [sic] constantly in the mass, to listen, to pick on the appropriate point, to take the pulse of the crowd – this is what the agitator must strive for" (1983, 200).[58]

This new "Vilna programme" of agitation echoed developments that were already underway in St Petersburg. There, Lenin had been the author of the first agitational leaflet distributed by his own *kruzhki* in 1895 to the workers of the Semyannikov factory (Lenin 1983d). In it he made the crucial argument that "the capacity for struggle may only be evoked by struggle" (Lenin 1983d, 142) – which is to say, only through the process of taking on their boss in the workplace could workers develop the organisation and consciousness to take on their bosses as a class. No

[58] Of interest to us, also, is the epistemological relationship between struggle and theory they lay out. Kramer and Martov argue that agitators should verify their theories through practical experience, and undertake expansive processes of what we might well call workers' inquiry in order to understand exactly how they could choose the right movement and use the right method: "Information of this kind requires constant contacts with the mass of workers on the part of the agitator, requires that he constantly interest himself in a particular branch of industry and follow its progress" (1983, 200).

amount of book reading or guidance by intellectuals could replace the transformative impact of mass strikes, and the social democratic agitator would be by the workers' side throughout the struggle, aiming to promote the development of self-consciousness whenever possible.[59] Shortly after that leaflet was handed out, Lenin was arrested and imprisoned alongside the other founders of the Petersburg Union of Struggle for the crime of "Social Democratic propaganda amongst the workers" (Lih 2011, 61). Aged 25, Lenin used his time in prison to write, in invisible ink, a draft programme and explanation for a Russian social democratic party which did not yet exist.[60] Alongside the economic analysis of *The Development of Capitalism* in Russia (published 1899) it is my view that this is his most significant early political text. In it, he argues that the formation of the proletariat as a cooperative workforce in a factory system creates a tendency for conflict between workers and bosses over workplace issues to escalate into a class struggle over the relations of productions themselves. During this struggle, the goal of political organisation comes to the fore as workers begin to recognise the necessity of depriving their opponents of control of the state. The role of the party in this context is to link itself to the "popular movement that is the product of the living conditions created by the large-scale factories and plants" (Lenin 1983b, 161) in order to promote the workers' class struggle. This promotion primarily involves catalysing the development of class consciousness, defined as the "workers' realisation that the only way of improving their position and achieving their own emancipation is to wage a struggle against the capitalist and factory-owning class that

[59] Throughout this period, Lenin was one of the only writers in social democratic circles to write agitational materials like popular articles and leaflets for factory workers - the old exiled men of Russian Marxism, Plekhanov and Akselrod, studiously refused to write such material (Harding 2009, 118) whilst Lenin professed that he "wanted nothing so much, dreamed of nothing so much, as the possibility of writing for the workers" (Qtd. in Lih 2011, 55).

[60] This was at the request of some younger social democrats, and despite completing the programme it was not published until the 1920s. However, despite not being published at the time, we can see in the programme in the developments of Lenin's ideas during this period (Lih 2008, 122–23).

has been created by the large factories and plants" (1983b, 161). Self-consciousness, in this model, is achieved through struggle. In his model of party activity, the social democrats assist in the struggle by: first, "promoting the development of workers' class self-consciousness by helping them struggle for their most essential needs"; second, "promoting the organisation of the workers' so that they can survive police repression"; and third, "indicating the real aims of the struggle" through a discussion of how the mode of production operates and orienting the struggle towards the overthrow of the whole thing (1983b, 168).[61] By fighting their boss over immediate interests, workers realise the necessity of fighting against the boss class for general interests. We can see the cogs in motion in Lenin's head as he writes here, absorbing and reinterpreting the arguments of Martov and Kramer within his framework (Harding 2009, 115). The age of *kruzhovshchina* was over – the future of Russian social democracy lay in agitation.

As Lenin entered this new period, he was situated within the mainstream of the European movement. Lars T. Lih has argued that Lenin's position in these years, when understood in context, is "Erfurtian". That is to say, it broadly affirms the principles of the German Social Democratic Party's position as expressed in the Erfurt Program of 1891 and codified by Karl Kautsky in his 1892 summary, *The Class Struggle.* This document was the semi-official exposition of scientific socialist doctrine of the largest social democratic party in the world. Kautsky himself was probably the most influential

[61] As Lih argues, we can read steps one and three as two different ways towards the merger of socialism and the workers' movement, from two different sides: "The task of the Social Democrats is therefore to speed up this development of class self-awareness by participating in the workers' own defence of their essential needs. … In this way, the Russian Social Democrats work for the great merger from the side of the worker movement. The Social Democrats also work for the merger from the other side, from the side of "socialism", when they explain the "real" goals of the struggle. In order to carry out their mission, the workers have to understand why the interests of the capitalists and the workers are antagonistic and will continue to be antagonistic until private property is abolished" (2008, 127).

Marxist in the generation after Marx himself, and editor of the SPD's theoretical journal. His articulation of the program was highly significant, both for Lenin himself, who translated it in the summer of 1894 just as he was writing his first political texts for mass circulation (Lih 2011, 43), and on the wider Russian context, with eight separate Russian editions being in circulation by 1914 (Przeworski 1977, 344). So, when the factional clash that was to result in *WITBD* began, it should be understood first and foremost as a dispute between those who wanted to stick to the Erfurt Programme, and those who wanted to abandon it. It is important, therefore, to clarify the relationship between economics and politics as articulated by Kautsky in *The Class Struggle*:

> Thus there has gradually formed from skilled and unskilled workers a body of proletarians who are in the movement of labor, or the labor movement. It is the part of the proletariat which is fighting for the interests of the whole class, its church militant, as it were. … It is precisely this militant proletariat which is the most fruitful recruiting ground for socialism. The socialist movement is nothing more than the part of this militant proletariat which has become conscious of its goal. In fact, these two, socialism and the militant proletariat tend constantly to become identical. (Kautsky 1971, 183)

This merger of the workers' movement and socialist politics is a development process generated not by the agency of an external group of professional revolutionaries, but the nature of class struggle itself. As Kautsky identifies, "every class struggle is a political struggle" and "even the bare requirements of the industrial struggle force workers to make political demands" (Kautsky 1971, 184). That is to say, the process of self-organisation leads to a struggle that forces the militant proletariat to constitute themselves not just as an economic force but a political one too. Therefore, any attempt to propose that economic and political struggles exist in distinction from one another is entirely inaccurate (1971, 185). Kautsky argues that we should not view political struggle as potentially separate from economic struggle but as arising from it. There is no potential for the politics of a social formation to diverge

from the class basis on which it develops, rather "the political struggle is merely a particular form of the economic struggle, in fact its most inclusive and vital form" (1971, 186). In line with Marx, Kautsky sees political and economic struggles as dialectically linked – and the process of struggle produces an increasing unity between the moments and processes of the two. This is precisely the line of argument which Lenin pursues in 1899/1900, and the line of argument which critically shapes the concept of political composition used in this thesis.

With Lenin finally sentenced for his propagandising and on his way to Siberia (along with an also-exiled Martov), a new tendency started to emerge in St Petersburg. Following police repression, the social democratic leadership in the city had been decimated, and into this vacuum rushed the "economists". Of great retrospective importance for the economists was the internal discussion document known as *The Credo*, in which Yekaterina Kuskova argued for a Bernstein-influenced turn in the approach of Russian Social Democracy. The document was primarily characterised by a significant de-emphasis on the political element of the class struggle.[62]

> This change will be not only in the direction of a more energetic prosecution of the economic struggle, a consolidation of the economic organisations, but also, and this is the most essential thing, in the direction of a change in the party's attitude towards the other opposition parties. Intolerant Marxism, negative Marxism, primitive Marxism (which holds too schematic a concept of the class division of society) will give way to democratic Marxism, and the social position of the party in the midst of contemporary society will have to change drastically. The party *will recognise* society: its narrow corporative and, in the majority of cases, sectarian tasks will broaden into social tasks and its striving to seize power

[62] In *Evolutionary Socialism*, first published in German in 1899, Bernstein argued that: "Like production itself, the conditions of existence for the producers press towards the socialisation and the co-operative organisation of production and exchange. As soon as this development is sufficiently advanced the realisation of socialism becomes an imperative necessity for the further development of the community. To carry it out is the task of the proletariat organised as a class party which for this purpose must take possession of the political government" (Bernstein 1899). In his version of revisionist Marxism, the process of capitalist development would automatically tend towards the creation of socialism – the only role for the party was to unify the votes of the workers and assume control of society when conditions were ripe.

> will be transformed into a desire for change, for the reform of contemporary society along democratic lines that are adapted to the present state of affairs, with the object of protecting, in the most complete and effective way, (all) the rights of the labouring classes. The concept of 'politics' will be expanded, acquiring a truly social meaning, and the practical demands of the moment will acquire greater weight and will be able to count on receiving greater attention than has hitherto been the case. (Kuskova 1983, 251)

Lenin responded by writing a protest against *The Credo* from exile. His central claim was that it abandoned the merger formula, that is to say the "conviction that the united class struggle of the proletariat must join together the political and economic struggle", a formula so deeply written into Marxism that it has "passed into the flesh and blood of international social democracy" (Lenin 1983a, 255). For Lenin, to suggest abandoning this approach to focus only on the immediate grievances of the workers in the economic sphere and the general interest of an ill-defined universal subject on the terrain of politics was to abandon social democracy all together.

The challenge was to avoid, on the one hand, the over-emphasis on political demands advanced in the absence of a connection to the workers' movement, and on the other, the over-emphasis of economic demands in the absence of a connection to a social democratic organisation set on revolution. Lenin's insistence on this merger occurred during a period when he feared for the state of the Russian movement. The economists were stressing the necessity of fighting over wages and conditions and leaving the formation of a Russian social democratic party and the fight against autocracy for later. This was leading to a significant deterioration, as Lenin noted in another polemic against *The Credo*:

> On the one hand the workers' movement is losing touch with socialism: the workers are given assistance to carry on the economic struggle but nothing, or next to nothing, is done to explain to them socialist aims and the political tasks of the movement as a whole. On the other hand, socialism is losing touch with the workers' movement: Russian Socialists are again beginning to say with increasing frequency that the intelligentsia

> will have to carry on the struggle against the government entirely from its own resources, because the workers are confining themselves to the economic struggle. (Lenin 1983c, 259)

The Credo was only ever intended as an internal document for discussion amongst St Petersburg's social democratic circles, but it seems that the exiled Lenin realised that it amounted to an excellent punching bag. Through his angry attacks on it, he could articulate his favorite themes to a social democratic audience. It isn't surprising, therefore, that this polemic contains an extended section in which Lenin harps on his guiding political idea. That is to say, that the Russian proletariat was ready to emancipate itself through combined political-economic struggle:

> Social democracy is the fusion of the workers' movement with socialism. Its task is not to serve the workers' movement passively at each of its separate stages but to represent the interests of the movement as a whole, to direct this movement towards its ultimate goal, its political tasks, and to safeguard its political and ideological independence. Divorced from social democracy, the workers' movement degenerates and inevitably becomes bourgeois: in carrying on the purely economic struggle, the working class loses its political independence, becomes an appendage of the other parties and betrays the great principle that 'the emancipation of the workers should be a matter for the workers themselves'. (Lenin 1983c, 260)

So, finally, after understanding Lenin's complete insistence on: first, the potential for the emergence of self-consciousness through struggle and agitation; and second, the necessary merger of the workers' movement and socialism in a combined economic-political struggle (as in the Erfurt Programme), we can understand *WITBD* in context. The ideas Lenin presented in 1902 represented a fundamental continuity with the wider current of Orthodox Marxism and Lenin's own ideas, as they were expressed in the years beforehand (Harding 1975). Rather than a fundamental text that argues for a new theory of organisation, *WITBD* is just one of many texts written by Lenin once he had left Siberia and began working on the *Iskra* [Spark] newspaper which argued for the continued relevance of Orthodox approaches.

The contrary view of *WITBD* often focuses on a passage from Kautsky's commentary on the 1901 programme of the Austrian social democratic party, which Lenin quotes extensively and approvingly in *WITBD* to reinforce his own position:

> In this context socialist awareness is presented as the necessary immediate result of the proletarian class struggle. But this is completely untrue. Naturally, socialism as a doctrine is as deeply rooted in modern economic relations as is the class struggle of the proletariat, just as both of them flow from the struggle against the poverty and desperation of the masses generated by capitalism. Nevertheless, socialism and the class struggle emerge side by side and not one from the other – they arise with different preconditions. Modern socialist awareness can emerge only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge. In fact, modern economic science is as much a condition of socialist production as modern, say, technology. The proletariat, even if it wanted to, cannot create either one or the other: both emerge from the modern social process. The carrier of science is not the proletariat, but the bourgeois intelligentsia: modern socialism emerges in the heads of individual members of that stratum and then is communicated by them to proletarians who stand our due to their mental development, who in turn bring it into the class struggle of the proletariat where conditions allow. In this way, socialist awareness is something brought in to the class struggle of the proletariat from without (*von aussen Hineingetrangenes*) and not something that emerges from the class struggle in *stikhiinyi* fashion (*urwiichsig*) (quoted in Lenin 2008, 709–10)

This quotation from Kautsky would seem to unequivocally reinforce the orthodox reading of *WITBD*. However, as emphasised above, the quotation of chunks of highly specific political commentary out of context does little for theoretical accuracy. There are two interlinked questions at stake in this quotation: first, will a new ideology arise spontaneously from the class struggle which replaces "scientific socialism" as the ideology of the proletariat? To put it in terms I used earlier, is there a potential originality in the sphere of politics which can advance new ideas and paradigms in the absence of a new material basis of different classes and economic relations? And second, do capitalist social relations automatically produce a proletariat which is unified and conscious – and therefore does capitalist development automatically and

mechanically lead to revolution without the need for *specifically political* class organisation and action? On both fronts, as we would expect, Kautsky answers no.

The fundamental issue at stake is whether social democrats should oppose what the German SDP called *Nur-Gewerkschaftleri*, which translates to something like "trade-union-only-ism" (Lih 2008, 87). This was understood as a fundamentally bourgeois ideology (parallel to what Lenin reluctantly calls "economism") which advocated for the separation of the economic and the political, in which the goals of the trade unions could be detached from and pursued separately from the goals of the social democrats. Lenin is using this quotation to emphasise that economism/ *Nur-Gewerkschaftleri* cannot displace the necessity of merging the workers' movement and socialist politics, of merging the economic and political class struggle.[63]

To read *WITBD*, as so many do, as "[marking] a stage in the political history of our times" and the "condensation of Lenin's ideas on organisation" (Liebman 1985, 29) is a grievous mistake. If one seriously wants to propose that in 1902 Lenin made a fundamental revision of the wider European social democratic tradition to which he had aligned himself for his whole political life to that point, then significantly more evidence is required than a factionalising pamphlet. Lenin's own failure to ever reference *WITBD* after 1907 might indicate better how we should treat it: that is to say, as a specific pamphlet engaging in specific debates (Lih 2008, 15).

[63] Regarding the class basis of ideology, Lenin distances himself somewhat from Kautsky's veneration of the bourgeois intelligentsia by emphasising that: "This does not mean, of course, that the workers have no part in creating such an ideology. They take part, however, not as workers, but as socialist theoreticians, as Proudhons and Weitlings" (Lenin 2008, 710f). Kautsky's epistemological separation of the working class from an accurate theoretical understanding of the totality is, no doubt, one of the major flaws of the Erfurtian position - but it is not an integral one. It is relatively simple to junk this assumption, as Lenin begins to do here, and maintain other components of the argument. Indeed - the "third layer school" approach utilised by the JFT, which took its inspiration from Lenin's later writings and the agitational principle that the process of class struggle tests and verifies theory, is entirely consistent with the merger formula: by exerting the influence of the proletariat on the party and the intellectuals, a greater degree of integration can be achieved.

So, the orthodox reading of *WITBD* should generally be disregarded in favour of what might be called, following Lih, an Erfurtian one. This Erfurtian position is neither an “economist” refusal of political struggles, demands and methods, nor its opposite, a “politicist” refusal of economic struggles, demands and methods. Instead, the red thread of Lenin’s thought is the merger formula, through which the distinction between economic and political struggle is progressively undermined by the advancement of a working class perspective on bourgeois society, catalysed by the agitating activity of a revolutionary party. Fundamentally, despite the misinterpretations of *WITBD* which prevail amongst many readers, the theory of political composition developed in this thesis is emphatically compatible with Lenin’s conception of the relationship between economics and politics. In fact, more than just being compatible with this conception, the analysis of political composition must be built on the basis of a reading of Lenin, in much the same way that the analysis of technical composition must be built on a reading of Marx.

This is not to say that everything we can take from Lenin in order to construct a theory of political composition can be found in discussions of the development of Russian Marxism over the seven years between 1895 and 1902. There is a necessary, if messy, task of working out a form of Leninism beyond Lenin. Far from attempting a historically-sensitive interpretation of Lenin, this is exactly what the workerists intended to do in order to redevelop and rearticulate Leninism in a new context. Just as Tronti argued that “we must judge *Capital* on the capitalism of today”, so he argued that “the development of Leninism is the immediate programme of working class science” (2019, 267).[64] So, we move now from contextual readings to aggressive

[64] Similarly, Negri argued retrospectively that his approach in *The Factory of Strategy* was to configure Leninism: as “as a new “political form” able to make itself adequate to different realities both

developments in order to find an abstract method which can form the basis of our theory of political composition.

The Lenin of *Operaismo*

Workerism was, of course, a heterogeneous current. Theorists like Tronti and Negri were heavily influenced by Lenin in a way that other participants, like Alquati, were not. However, in Tronti's *Workers and Capital* and Negri's *Factory of Strategy*, two compatible interpretations emerge, in which we find the outline of a specific Lenin: the Lenin of *operaismo*.[65]

The central principles of this theoretical figure can be articulated in three strategic positions: first, the division between economic and political struggle has to be eliminated (in our terms, the merger formula has to be achieved); second, that the form of the resulting merged struggle, including the form of the leading instrument of this struggle, the proletarian party, must be defined by the class composition already existing in the social formation; third, that the transition from a technically composed to a politically composed working class is best understood as a leap.

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extensively [in different national contexts] and intensively (singularly adapting itself and putting itself at the service of different working-class compositions and proletariats …" (Negri 2014, xiii).

[65] This particular reading of Leninism might be seen as one of the major points of unity between what Roggero has called the "accelerationist" and "katechontic" (after the force in Pauline theology which holds back evil) schools of workerism He associates Negri with the accelerationist, and Tronti with the katechontic. These schools are characterised by their approach to capitalist development, and their respective belief that revolutionary struggle should either accelerate ahead of it to find new technical compositions or actively block it to force a crisis. Roggero identifies his approach as a kind of mediation between the two: "in the first paradigm we simply need to accelerate the development of the new technical composition to transform it into a political composition, in the second we need to retain the force of the old political composition to fight the technical composition. … But the method of the tendency that interests us is not about identifying an "objective" development, but about posing the problem of interruption and deviation, that is of the accumulation of force to construct recompositional processes. This force is accumulated as much in acceleration as in holding back, and its strength in one or the other depends on the period and above all on the struggles that determine resistance and that propel us forward" (Roggero 2020).

We can begin to understand this theoretical figure and its relevance for our theory of pollical composition through reference back to one of the central pillars of this thesis: *Workers and Capital*. For Tronti the distinction between the economic and political forms of struggle had to be demolished: “the effort on the working class side must be to continually try to smash open this economic form of the antagonism; it must have as its day-to-day objective the restoration of the political content to each elementary moment of confrontation; it must thus make the capitalist relation work subjectively within the class relation, conceiving capital as a production relation always and only as a moment of the working class’ struggle” (Tronti 2019, 221). As with the strategy of agitation proposed by Martov and Kramer, this demolition is primarily achieved through the subjective action of the militant. However, Tronti also introduced a conjectural argument about the gradual objective destruction of the basis for the distinction by the increasing dominance of the factory-society nexus: “The old distinction between the economic struggle and the political struggle must be exploded; this will blow up one of the cardinal points of reformism … This should not be a difficult task. If we look at advanced capitalism this distinction has already disappeared” (Tronti 2019, 90). Here Tronti seems to have imagined that the merger formula was an almost automatic achievement in a social formation where the relations of production increasingly subsumed the total relations of society. Whilst the experience of the last fifty years does not allow me to follow his optimism, we can articulate a modified form of this argument: in a society characterised by the dominance of the relations of production over everything, there are very few relations in which the assertion of working class interests through collective action could not lead to an escalating struggle over the balance of power within the social formation.

After the abolition of this distinction has been achieved politically, the question then becomes what form this combined struggle should take – and, perhaps more importantly, how it should be organised. Tronti's argument on this front diverges profoundly from the caricature of *WITBD* discussed above. He claimed that "the working class spontaneously possess [sic] the strategy of its own movements and its development", and that the role of the party is: "to identify it, express it and organise it"(2019, 93). This means that the party is not conceived of as a minoritarian organisation outside the working class but rather as the majoritarian tactical instrument of the whole compact mass of the working class which should amplify the strategy developed by the most advanced parts of it (2019, 86). As Bifo Beradi, an Italian Marxist who was part of the workerist current, argues:

> This is the original brand of Leninism that Tronti proposes: the party is not the leading subject in the revolutionary process: it is rather the tactical instrument, a tool in the hands of the organised workers. The meaning of the word "organisation" is reviewed in this fresh conceptual prospect: organisation is no more the enlightened minority of leaders, but the self-organisation of people who meet every day in the same factory and who share the same interests, the same sentiment, the same culture. The task of the revolutionary professionals is to find the weak point in the capitalist machine, and to focus on the possibility of breaking this point, so as to open the door to the expression of the strategical workers' autonomy. (Berardi 2019)

As Bifo identifies, Tronti takes on the post-Gramscian view of the party, so dominant in the Italian workers' movement, as "the wax holding together the historic bloc" (2019, 96) and instead sees it as a tool of the class struggle in the factory-society. In contrast to the long-surviving *PCI*, he theorises that such a party can only exist in the moment of a revolutionary crisis itself. A proletarian party that expresses nothing less than a total demand for power cannot coexist with a capitalist social formation without stopping that formation from reproducing itself (2019, 243). Tronti's party is therefore best thought of as an articulating moment, a revolutionary instrument of the

class which emerges out of the complex interactions between working class self-organisation and the institutions which mediate that self-organisation, rather than a durable mediating institution itself.[66]

In his analysis of the forcible limitation of the working day through working class political action, Marx identified the dialectical relation between political and economic struggle. Tronti analyses the same material:

> These workers have the historic merit of having shown for the first time, in practice – that is, in struggle – that 'the worker comes out of the production process different from how he went in'. This difference is a true and proper political leap forward. It is the leap that the passage via production provokes, in what we can call the composition of the working class or composition of the class of workers. (2019, 202)

When workers are technically composed as a cooperative workforce in the sphere of production, they begin to turn structural capacities into organisational capacities in order to pursue a struggle for their own immediate interests – and then, potentially, a struggle against their own exploitation. The moment of transition between the two is the leap into politics, the moment of real mobilisation. This leap manifests itself as a combined subjective-objective transformation in both the development of self-consciousness and the capacity for action amongst the newly politically-composed cooperative unit of workers in struggle. We can identify this point most accurately through reference to the two forms of class interests, immediate and fundamental, which were discussed above. The leap takes place in the moment when

[66] Nonetheless, Tronti remained a member of the *PCI* through the workerist period and beyond – thereby indicating that he did not view this kind of Leninist party as emerging *ex nihilo* but instead being formed out of the pre-existing structures and struggles of existing working class institutions.. He viewed the primary strategic goal within the *PCI* as will be discussed in being the prevention of that party's "social democratisation", through which he feared the part could become part of capital's motor of development. As Broder puts it, "this line of argument brought Tronti to the conclusion that the political terrain of class struggle lay in working- class pressure to turn the PCI into a battering ram against capital" (Broder 2020, 14).

self-organisation transitions from struggling for immediate class interests to fundamental class interests. This moment defines the proletarian political viewpoint because it is the point at which struggle becomes waged not for the immediate benefit of those workers involved in it, but for the benefit of the class as a whole. The contrast Marx draws between the conservative motto: “A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!” and the revolutionary watchword “Abolition of the wages system!" in *Value, Price and Profit* functions to demonstrate just this transition: when workers self-organise for the former, they fight for their particular interests in their particular location, when they self-organise for the latter, the implications are universal.

For Tronti, when the party emerges it acts as an instrument to accelerate this leap and the concomitant politicisation of economic struggle by finding a form of that corresponds to the technical (and I would add, social) composition of the class within a specific social formation. It uses this form to tactically interact with the existing self-organization of the class in order to dominate the central strategic node of capitalist society: the sphere of production. It escalates the already existing political tendencies of the class through the organised application of class power to the vital points of capital: “working class power is a potential power over production – that is, over a particular aspect of society. Capitalist power is a real dominion over society in general. But such is the nature of capital that it requires a *society centred on production*. Production, a particular aspect of society, thus becomes the aim of the society in general. Whoever controls and dominates it controls and dominates everything” (2019, 241). This is not to reduce Leninism to *trade-union-only-ism*, in which the party only uses whatever political line has been developed in the process of the economic struggle and restricts itself from the application of socialist ideology. Instead, “the party must impose on the class what the class itself is” (2019, 264) through the process of

politicisation within the sphere of production itself. As part of the subjective elimination of the distinction between the economic and political struggle, the Leninist party achieves the merger formula in practice by going through the leap alongside the most advanced parts of the self-organised class.

This merger does not turn into a revolutionary process when some mystical level of elevated class consciousness has been achieved. Instead, the process of organising the already-existing refusal of work creates the potential for a moment of rupture; a moment of political crisis initiated not by the innate tendencies of capital, but by the activity of the party-as-class. Again, without reducing itself to a vehicle for the spontaneous expression of class, the party retains its capacity for tactics. Tronti argues that the Bolshevik revolution was an example of how the party can take responsibility for seizing the tactical moment on behalf of the class – "for this reason, the class won" (2019, 261). Rather than the endless combination of self-organisation leading to a crescendo, a rupture has to be created through the tactical orchestration of confrontations by the party, acting as instrument of the class.

The factory of strategy

Negri's interpretation of Lenin explicitly follows in the footsteps of Tronti. In his preface to the second edition, Negri situates the text as arising as part of the "wholly revisionist" approach to Lenin within the workerist current. The discussions from which *Factory of Strategy* emerged took Tronti as their starting point and agreed that "Lenin lives on and confronts a new class reality" (Negri 2014, XIX). Despite political divergences between the two theorists – particularly on the question of the relation to the *PCI* – and despite the text being published after the high period of workerism was over, Negri's study presents something like the most developed form of the Lenin of *operaismo*.

Negri begins, as noted earlier in the chapter, by identifying the way in which Lenin translates class composition into organisation. That is to say, he argues that Lenin is primarily concerned with the leap through which the working class becomes politically-composed and finding the compositionally-adequate communist strategy which can facilitate and extend that leap. In order to make that transition, Negri argues that the larger pattern of Lenin's thought goes as follows: he develops a theory of capital, he then builds on this theory of capital to form a theory of organisation, and then builds on that theory of organisation to form a theory of revolution (2014, 15). Negri's shorthand version of this pattern in terms of the most-widely read of Lenin's works goes something like: *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, then *WITBD,* and finally *The State and Revolution.* Negri's first five lessons analyse this first transition, from a theory of capital to a theory of organisation, and it is here that we find his clearest discussion of the roots of a theory of political composition in Lenin.

In his discussion of *Capital* Lenin lays out what he understands to be one of the major contributions of Marxist analysis:

> …the analysis of material social relations at once made it possible to observe recurrence and regularity and to generalise the systems of the various countries in the single fundamental concept: *social formation*. It was this generalisation alone that made it possible to proceed from the description of social phenomena (and their evaluation from the standpoint of an ideal) to their strictly scientific analysis, which isolates, let us say by way of example, that which distinguishes one capitalist country from another and investigates that which is common to all of them … another reason why this hypothesis for the first time made a scientific sociology possible was that *only the reduction of social relations to production relations and of the latter to the level of the productive forces,* provided a firm basis for the conception that the development of formations of society is a process of natural history. (Lenin 2001)

Negri quotes this argument as justification of his identification of a concept within Lenin that is perhaps easiest understood as expressing the nature of the concrete universal totality after the relations of determination have done their

determining: the “determinate social formation” (2014, 16). This formation produces and is itself transformed by the determining relations of capitalist society, and these determining relations are, fundamentally, those of the class struggle: “all social relations must be referred to the struggle and the conflict of the productive forces [above all else, the working class constituted as a cooperative mass labour-power] in the relations of social production” (2014, 17).

As well as identifying a central concept within Lenin, Negri also argues that there exists a central methodological instrument: “determinate abstraction”.[67] This instrument works by identifying the most advanced moment in a determining process and abstracting from it in order to identify a more general tendency that will arise subsequently as a result of further determination. The primary determining process under capitalist social relations, in Negri’s reading, is the struggle of proletariat and bourgeoise, and therefore the analysis of class struggle is a theoretically primary task because it enables the identification of further developmental tendencies.

Negri also articulates the necessary unity of the economic and the political struggles of the working class on a deeper level than Tronti. In his reading of Lenin, Negri suggests that Lenin breaks with the Erfurtian consensus of the Second International by arguing that: “even at the spontaneous level and in economic struggle, the working class fights directly against the overall power structure that confronts it, and the insurgence is absolutely fundamental to the genesis, and thus the organisational development, of social democracy” (2014, 23). Whilst this might be an inaccurate reading of Lenin in context, it does counterintuitively arrive at the correct position on the merger formula. When Negri is trying to fight against what appears to

[67] For more on this concept in Italian post-war Marxism, see (Colletti 1969).

him to be the consensus of the Second International, he is, in fact, fighting against orthodox readings of *WITBD*. Nonetheless, this misdirected argument ends up proposing a vitalistic form of the merger formula.

Negri is clear, however, that this merger is not a merger of two equals. The political struggle is not solely comprised of the economic struggle – there is a distinction to be made between the merger of economic and political struggle and the reduction of one to the other. Political composition has to raise itself to a level above that of the workplace and direct itself towards the determinate social formation itself – the merger is achieved through the articulation of a technically (and again, socially) composed working class beyond itself: "only by descending deeply down to these levels of the masses, economism and spontaneism, could social democracy acquire the ability to leap and assume leadership" (2014, 25). That is to say, that only by discovering what form the struggle takes at the level of everyday life, by locating sources of structural capacity in the composition of the class, can a Leninist approach then discover what forms of organisational capacity could be developed to merge economic and political struggles, provoke the leap and articulate the whole process as a fundamental challenge to the entire mode of production.[68] Negri articulates this method in terms of his philosophical language of Leninism: "the concept of determinate social formation, insofar as it results from the principles of determinate abstraction and

[68] This analysis can be further supported with reference to Lenin's argument in *The Urgent Tasks of Our Movement* that: "… the task that Russian social democracy is called upon to fulfil is to instil socialist ideas and political self-consciousness into the mass of the proletariat and to organise a revolutionary party that is inseparably linked to the spontaneous workers' movement. … social democracy does not tie its hands, it does not restrict its activity to any one preconceived plan or concept of political struggle: it recognises all methods of struggle as long as they correspond to the forces at the party's disposal and facilitate the attainment of the best possible results in the particular circumstances" (Lenin 1983c, 261–62).

tendency, dialectically turns into a concept of organisation, mediating the specificity of the power relations it conceals whilst subverting and destroying them"(2014, 26).

When self-organised struggles emerge, they have already inbuilt within them a certain form of organisation structure as a result of the technical and social class composition that structures the terrain of production. This proto-political composition, however, is not guaranteed to emerge in every struggle. The merger only occurs when the party descends into and discovers the reality of the social formation at the level of technical and social composition in order to then enable a qualitative leap into political composition. This leap breaks the continuity of spontaneous struggle and converts it into an organisational form. Spontaneous self-organisation which remains as spontaneous self-organisation will fail – the transition has to be made into longer-lasting structures of class organisation. When the leap takes place, a political class composition emerges and can be studied in an advanced state of development: "the political composition of the proletariat is understood as the determination of the needs, comportments [forms of self-organisation] and degrees of political consciousness manifested in the working class as a subject at a given historical juncture" (2014, 34). The party is taken to mean a form of organisation (more permanently constituted than in Tronti's vision) that corresponds to the objective technical composition of the working class and the pre-existing forms of self-organisation but also transcends and centralises those forms – creating a political equivalent of the collective power of the masses central to the development of the factory in *Capital* (2014, 36-7).[69]

[69] We can find historical precedent for this more abstract argument in the arguments of the Clyde shop stewards in the early 20th century. Their slogan was "the ferment creates its own organisation" (quoted in Goodrich 1975, 50), and it rose to prominence as part of a wider movement which emphasised working class unity and organisation on an industrial scale. This shop stewards' movement overruled existing trade union divisions along craft lines to achieve "an amalgamation from below" and by doing so, "[attempted] to fit the structure of the labour movement to the structure of the

As a result, Negri's argument allows us to arrive at a clearer understanding of the role of collective action within the wider category of political composition. As argued above, the leap is the moment takes place in the moment that working class self-organisation transitions from pursuing immediate interests to fundamental ones. The primary analytical object within the concept of political composition is, therefore, this fundamental self-organisation. Collective action is only ever the mobilised evidence of that deeper structure. As such, the study of collective action can be a way into understanding the political composition of the working class, but the aim of class composition analysis is to go from this surface phenomena to the primary analytical object, that is to say, self-organisation in pursuit of fundamental interests. This distinction is a very important one, because failures to identify the primary object can end up putting the cart before the horse and leading to substantial theoretical confusion.[70]

So, the political composition of the class concerns the organisational capacities possessed by the proletariat at any one point in time (and these may be best analysed through the instances of their expression in collective action). These capacities are important not only in terms of their impact upon the balance of forces, but also in their

industrial unit" (Goodrich 1975, 9). The leap emerged from spontaneous struggle when the tendencies present in self-organised collective action were accelerated by the shop stewards' movement into a struggle over fundamental class interests.

[70] This was the mistake during the discussion amongst parts of the European left in the period after 2015 of the idea of the "social strike": we, myself included, tried to locate the leap into struggle over the mode of production itself at the tactical level of collective action rather than the strategic level of self-organisation (see Milburn 2015; Transnational Social Strike Platform 2017). In order, we though, to escalate struggles over immediate interests (or "socialise", in the jargon of the discussion) their tactical form had to be modified: so, strikes should be tactically connected to other struggles, particularly across the boundaries of production/circulation/reproduction. Whilst such associational co-development of struggles is an essential tactic when deployed correctly, it is not a fundamental strategic principle. Why did we make this mistake? I think because of the reticence amongst the milieu to pursue a serious line of thought about the role of the party-as-instrument, which would have given us an idea of how to intervene in struggles in such a way as to support the tendencies towards a leap already latent within them that avoided an obsession with the tactical. This confusion of self-organisation and collective action is, in retrospect, a common point of divergence between a more orthodox Marxist workerism and a much more malleable "autonomism".

qualitative dimensions: in the ways in which they alter the tactics used by the class to collectively act upon that balance of forces. But specifically, it addresses these from the point of view of the leap, of the merger. That is to say, it look at the roots of these organisational capacities in technical and social composition and their mobilisation to increase bargaining power for trade unionist ends, but then looks further forwards, towards the question of how they can be merged into a struggle against the continued existence of the mode of production on a political level.

The power resources approach: a Leninist critique

Having spent much of this chapter thinking about class struggle at the level of the entire social formation, I will now turn back to the workplace in order to demonstrate how and why this conception of political composition should be central to the study of the balance of class forces in production.

Significant theorisations of class power as a sociological phenomenon are, surprisingly enough, few and far between in contemporary Marxism. Olin Wright's essay "Working-class power, capitalist-class interests, and class compromise" (E. O. Wright 2000) is often referenced as a significant theorisation of the different potential forms of class power in and of itself (See, for instance, Silver 2003; Olney 2018), but in fact the discussion there is highly limited and peripheral to the overall goal of the essay – which is a discussion of the potential for positive class compromise. The quotation below is more or less the full extent of the theoretical discussion of power in the essay:

> In this article, our concern is mainly with what I will term working-class "associational" power – the various forms of power that result from the formation of collective organizations of workers. This includes such things as unions and parties but may also include a variety of other forms, such as works councils or forms of institutional representation of workers on boards of directors in schemes of worker codetermination, or even, in

> certain circumstances, community organizations. Associational power is to be contrasted with what can be termed "structural power"- power that results simply from the location of workers within the economic system. The power of workers as individuals that results directly from tight labor markets or from the strategic location of a particular group of workers within a key industrial sector would constitute instances of structural power. (E. O. Wright 2000, 962)

To find the roots of this brief passage, we have to go back to Luca Perrone's work in the 1980s. Perrone, whose career was cut short by his early death, developed the concept of positional power when he discovered that in most studies of strikes, power was not measured independently from strike behaviour.[71] In order to actually measure positional power, Perrone used Leontief input-output matrices to map how many inputs and outputs particular sectors of the economy had relative to the rest of the economy, with workers within those highly connected sectors being understood to have higher positional power (Perrone 1983; 1984). After Perrone's death, Olin Wright engaged with and extended this concept – in particular, by theorising how positional power interacts with factors such as the degree of working class organisation, the politicisation of strikes and the role of the state (E. O. Wright 1984). Olin Wright used the term "organisational power" to refer to the way in which positional power had to be combined with power that resulted from the conscious and subjective organisation of a workforce in order to actually result in collective action. Positional power and organisational power became, over time, the concepts of structural power and associational power which Olin Wright laid out in the essay above.

These two concepts of power were developed by subsequent contributions in what Schmaltz, Ludwig and Webster describe as the "power resources approach"

[71] "To empirically investigate the determinants of strike behaviour, it is essential to develop a concept of structural or positional power of workers that is analytically independent of its effects. For postindustrial societies, the disruptive potential of workers serviced from their position within the system of economic interdependencies is like to be a particularly important aspect of such structural power" (Perrone 1983, 238).

(Schmalz, Ludwig, and Webster 2018). For instance, Silver derived two subdivisions from her reading of Olin Wright's concept of structural power – workplace bargaining power and marketplace bargaining power (Silver 2003, 13–16). Other theorists have added logistical, institutional and symbolic power to structural and associational power in their own frameworks (Schmalz, Ludwig, and Webster 2018). The result is a diverse and unwieldly Marxist-influenced literature on class power which is, in part at least, devoid of any connection to a Marxist politics. This is because these approaches to power have nearly always had as their theoretical end point an increase in working class bargaining power, that is to say the capacity to pursue their immediate interests against the interests of capital – but whilst remaining within an overall framework of exploitation, where the bargain being struck is fundamentally over what degree of exploitation will be accepted. This trade unionist conception of class power runs contrary to the entire orientation of class composition theory.

So, if we cannot accept the reduction of class power to bargaining power, how can we understand power within the conceptual framework of class composition? It is important to note that the power resources approach is not inaccurate at a sociological level. It makes sense to continue to identify broad domains of power, and some of the literature contains materials that any Marxist theorisation can make use of. In the analysis of political composition that follows, I will use a simplified and revised framework which takes the contributions of Olin Wright, Perrone and Silver and places them within political composition, which then acts as a reorientating frame.

All potential forms of power arise from structural capacities within the technical and social composition of the working class in a specific social formation, but in order for them to actually be converted into realised power those structural capacities have to be turned into organisational capacities. Once these organisational capacities have

been generated, they may or may not be employed in forms of collective action. When this collective action takes on the form of a merged economic and political struggle the leap into political composition occurs. The proletarian viewpoint on society is only realised in its full form through this leap into struggle.

Structural power is best thought of as the power resulting from a workforce's place within the wider social division of labour. The specifically workplace form of this structural power is the capacity to bring production to a halt both within and beyond the boundaries of the specific workplace in question.[72] To extend the argument of Silver, I propose that we also think of the workplace form of structural power as having two dimensions, internal and external. Internal workplace power is the capacity to halt the production process within the boundaries of the workplace. External workplace power is the capacity to halt the production process beyond the boundaries of the workplace where the action takes place. These two forms of workplace power do not necessarily always go together. For instance, food delivery platform workers have very significant internal workplace power: if they refuse to make deliveries, the entire production process stops immediately, and commodities begin to become unrealisable. However, beyond the local restaurant sector, such a stoppage has very little external workplace power. On the other hand, port workers have very significant internal and external workplace power, as a work stoppage at a key logistical node can knock out entire supply chains. As Perrone indicated, we can perhaps find the best measure of external workplace power by accounting for commodity inputs and outputs from a specific workplace and considering connections to other industrial sectors, whereas internal workplace power needs to be accounted for on a much more

[72]. Of particular interest is in the discussion of workplace form of structural power is Silver's reference to Tronti as a key thinker on workplace bargaining power (2003, 13f), which is not significantly followed up - but indicates that the direction of travel of this thesis was potentially prefigured.

fine-grained scale with reference to the specific labour process of the relevant workplace.

The marketplace form of structural power is more straightforward; Silver's threefold discussion of the abundance or scarcity of certain skills in the labour market, the generally high or low level of unemployment (i.e. the size of the reserve army of labour), and the capacity of workers to reproduce themselves through autonomous, non-wage sources of subsistence coverings most potential avenues of elaboration.

Associational power is a much more diverse field. The potential forms of this power include every single example of organisation in the history of the workers' movement – which renders the process of summarizing somewhat problematic. A huge diversity of both organisational capacities and forms of action exist within this complex field of power, meaning that it can be difficult to discuss the detail of such power beyond platitudes about trade unions, social movements and political parties. Despite the diversity of the power resources literature, this complexity means that associational power remains undertheorised. In the course of my inquiry in part three of this thesis, I will attempt to overcome this problem through situated discussions of associational power and its role in my three cases, closing with a proposal for a new concept of associational amplification in an effort to understand the specific movement-based dynamic of associational power development.

Finally, it is important to stress again that these forms of power are not automatically translated into any kind of behaviour. As Perrone argues, class power is not reliably measurable through the proxy of collective action (Perrone 1984). Many sections of the proletariat with significant power do not take collective action that exercises that power. The existence of power does not lead irreversibly to the leap,

and therefore the study of class power is not necessarily the study of political composition. The study of power crosses all fields of composition and undergirds the transitions and de/recompositions that constitute the processes of struggle and development.

Understanding the leap

The concept of political composition addresses the process through which the working class self-organises into a force for class struggle. This process is not a linear and predictable one, but instead one which begins with a leap. The end point of this process is not just the defence of the immediate interests of one group of workers in one workplace, but rather a general, class struggle against the fundamental exploitation embedded in the mode of production.

The study of political composition is not something which can be completed or finalised whilst the capitalist mode of production is dominant in the social formation in question. The study of the leap from social and technical composition into political composition has to be a recursive one, with the impacts of development reintegrated to the analysis over time as the social formation changes and recompositions occur. Vitally, *the study of political class composition is not the study of trade unionism*. Instead, it is the study of working class self-organisation and, to return to Marx, of the "historical development of the antagonisms, immanent in a given form of production, [which] is the only way in which that form of production can be dissolved and a new form established" (1967,1: 458).

It is important to clarify how this concept of political composition forces us to think big. Class composition theory, unless it is to reproduce an artificial distinction between economics and politics, cannot just restrain itself to the sociological study of

the workplace: instead, it has to take as its subject the composition of the working class in a much wider sense. Just as Marxism is not a limited theory addressed to the hidden abode alone, but instead a theoretical approach to the totality, so too must the analysis of class composition orientate itself to this scale. Likewise, workers' inquiry cannot just be a narrow analysis of selected workplaces, in isolation from the division of labour and cooperative productive power of the class on a wider level. The conclusions of investigation into this concept are not limited to the details of the organisational capacities and forms of power generated by any one group of workers, but instead spread to more fundamental issues. Both the theory of composition and the method of inquiry must operate at the scale of a generalised analysis of the balance of class forces within society and the prominent actors that centralise and direct those forces. By reading the Lenin of *operaismo*, we can discover a concept of political class composition which reflects back onto class composition as a whole and forces it forwards and outwards. It is this Leninist conception of class composition, at the scale of the totality, which is the most developed object of workers' inquiry.

This discussion is best closed out by quoting devoted *PCI* cadre Lucio Magri. In 1963, Magri wrote an essay, titled *Problems of the Marxist Theory of the Revolutionary Party*, which articulated an aggressive but ultimately orthodox view of what the role of the new Gramscian mass party should be. However, it is not this orthodox perspective which I want to quote. Instead, I want to look at his 1970 postscript to the article, in which he – with admirable clarity and honesty – sums up what he got wrong:

> The mass movements of recent years have… demonstrated that it is possible and necessary to look to the future: to the new contradictions determined within the working class and the forces of production in general, by the development of capitalism itself. Capitalism continuously produces and reproduces its own grave-diggers — social forces and

> needs on which the revolutionary alternative to it can be built. This does not mean any rehabilitation of spontaneism: for the system powerfully conditions all new developments of the forces of production and renders them constantly ambiguous. But at the same time, through these developments, the masses and their material struggles become the real basis for the socialist revolution. To underestimate this dialectic, as I did in my essay, has a fatal consequence: the counterposition of a mass incurably bemused by trade-unionism or anarchism to a vanguard illuminated by the light of theory. In other words, an idealist conception of the revolution and a mystical conception of the party. The problem in advanced capitalist countries today is, on the contrary, an analysis of the real dialectic of material forces on which a revolutionary alternative can be built. (Magri 1970, 127)

Perhaps this freedom of reflection derived from Magri's recent expulsion from the *PCI*, alongside his other comrades who together were involved in publishing the paper *Il Manifesto*. Nonetheless, the historical experience expressed in this passage leaves us with a clear comprehension of the task class composition theory attempts to address. It is to "an analysis of the real dialectic of material forces on which a revolutionary alternative can be built", that this thesis now turns.

Part Three: the inquiry

In this part I will present the investigation of class composition in our social formation that makes up the empirical heart of the thesis. The objective of this section is to use three workplace inquiries into the private service sector in an English city (Brighton) to generate answers to the following two research questions: first, what are the key features of the social and technical composition of this fraction of the proletariat: young, low-paid, disconnected service workers? And second, when this class fraction self-organises and takes collective action, how does it do so, and what potential is there within that action for a generalised leap into a new political composition?

Ch.6 FinServ

At any hour of the day or night, the FinServ call centre is working.[73] In a glass and steel office block, row after row of young, low-paid agency workers sit answering the phone. When they get a second spare, they scroll through their feeds or, if they are one of the many students in the job, read textbooks – trying to cram in some study time between calls. When the automated call distribution system connects them with a customer, they have to be ready to think on their feet, because they have only a limited series of conversation prompts to follow and the problems they have to deal with are not always routine. Display screens overhead display the key daily statistics: the numbers on which their teams succeed or fail, and their meagre performance bonuses are calculated. When they finally get to the end of their individual shift, they take off their headsets and head straight home to recover. Quitting is rarely far from the back of an agency worker's mind. If you make it six months, you've outlasted the majority of your intake. One or two workers in every team are directly-employed by FinServ with a significantly more advantageous results-based bonus package and better benefits. They tend to be older and chattier, with an ability to deal with the ups and downs of the daily labour process with a hard-won efficiency and confidence. They do not have much in common with the rotating cast of twenty-somethings that make up the rest of the calling teams. The workforce is not unionised, and as far as anyone knows, it never has been.[74]

[73] In this case study, I have used a pseudonym for the company involved to avoid identifying the workplace in question, and thereby to further protect the identity of the participant in my research.
[74] However, I have found significant reference to earlier attempts to organise call centre workers in Brighton by a group associated with the Kolinko collective (introduced below). In 2005 they described the city as having call centres "on literally every corner", and the pursuit of struggle by workers at British Telecomms centres in the city using methods such a one day strikes and sabotage (Undercurrents 2005).

The first workplace studied in this inquiry is a financial services call centre. It is also the point in this inquiry where we encounter self-organisation at its lowest ebb. The chapter that follows primarily serves to demonstrate the existence of parts of the service sector where the experience of exploitation is profound, but even the mildest forms of self-organisation can barely gain a foothold. The class composition of the workplace successfully insures against the emergence of self-organisation through the effective deployment of management strategies that tread the line between the well-studied despotism of the call centre and the more flexible coercion of the white collar office. These methods, combined with a divided job structure and a constant emphasis on a shared company-wide set of socially liberal values, successfully displace the class antagonism onto the antagonism between workers and customers. Despite the job being difficult, stressful and low-paid, FinServ manages to manufacture a degree of consent and resignation from the workforce. This is the brightly lit, air-conditioned nadir – the kind of workplace where the idea of the workers' movement seems like a strange artefact from the very distant past.

The data presented here are the result of an extended inquiry with one FinServ worker, Tom, over the course of one year from late 2018 to late 2019 (see Appendix 1). Tom is by any definition a member of the militant minority: an autodidact whose understanding of specific sub-fields of political history borders on the encyclopaedic, with significant political experience beyond the workplace. At the time of the inquiry, he had been working at FinServ for a number of years. The inquiry started with me interviewing him just prior to him beginning an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to organise with his co-workers. Following this, we conducted an extensive "Interview to the Double" to collect data on the labour process at the call centre, before further interviews followed up on specific elements of his experience. In line with the method

of workers' inquiry above, this approach was characterised by an extensive exchange of ideas that partly-undermined the hierarchy of researcher/research subject. Call centres are, as Woodcock has argued, very difficult workplaces for researchers to access (Woodcock 2017) – therefore the depth of my relationship with the research subject and the quantity of detailed information gathered in the course of my research is a significant strength of the case study.

The call centre in context

To understand this specific call centre, it is important to first understand the state of research into call centres more generally. Their emergence as a new kind of workplace in the financial sector around the mid-1990s was rapidly followed by a current of research that sought to understand them from a sociological perspective. Marshall and Richardson were some of the first to articulate the role of call centres in simultaneously reorganising the spatial division of labour in the finance sector and the ongoing proletarianization of white collar work (Marshall and Richardson 1996). This was followed by an influential Fernie and Metcalf study which argued that levels of managerial control within the call centre approached total panoptic dominance. Their argument was that the call centre did indeed, as the advocates of telemediation technology claimed, provide "total control made easy" (Fernie and Metcalf 1998). Knights and McCabe's labour process study highlighted the possibility of limited individual worker resistance, but similarly downplayed the possibility of significant collective action by workers (Knights and McCabe 1998).

It was at this point that the first work on call centres using the combined theoretical-methodological approach of class composition and workers' inquiry began to be produced. Kolinko, a collective based in Germany, issued an internationally distributed appeal for collaborators to take part in a project of workers' inquiry into call

centres – which they understood as significant because of their rapid growth and potential function as a point of working class re-concentration in a new class composition (Kolinko 1999). This was the start of a research process from below which would only later bear fruit.

Back within the bounds of academia, Taylor and Bain were the first to provide a comprehensive definition of a call centre as “a dedicated operation in which computer-utilising employees receive inbound – or make outbound – telephone calls, with those calls processed and controlled either by an Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) or predictive dialling system” (Taylor and Bain 1999, 102). They launched their analysis of the newly-defined phenomenon through a critique of the total control thesis of Fernie and Metcalf, and also provided a detailed account of generic call centre labour processes and management practices. They were also the first to provide substantial evidence of collective worker resistance in a call centre environment and the quality/quantity contradiction (more worse calls or fewer better calls) that structured call centre management. Later, they would double down on their critique of Fernie and Metcalf and the total control perspective (P. Bain and Taylor 2000).

November 1999 saw the first strike action in the sector at British Telecom call centres across the UK. This sudden emergence of externally-visible collective action within call centres bolstered the credibility of the emerging current of research which saw these workplaces as fundamentally still structured by the antagonisms of the capitalist mode of production and vulnerable to the re-emergence of class struggle. Taylor and Bain argued, in the wake of the strike, that the battle over the conditions and organisation of production would come to the fore over the coming period (Taylor and Bain 2001). They followed this up with a study of trade union density in finance sector call centres which revealed that, in 2000, 54% workers were covered by

collective bargaining agreements. They also identified some specific sites where trade union density was as high as 75% (P. Bain and Taylor 2002).

Outside the universities, other forms of research were also reaching fruition. Kolinko's report of their three-year long workers' inquiry in call centres, *Hotlines*, was published in 2002. It drew on an expansive dataset collected from ten call centres in Germany alongside communication with workers internationally in the UK, Italy, the U.S., France and Australia. Following extensive discussion of the call centre model and the specifics of the labour process, they concluded that: "so far the workers in call centres have not found "their" form of struggle, one that uses the possibilities that arise from the fact that call centres are centres of communication. Other workers – for example in car factories – needed a generation to learn to use the assembly line for the coordination of strikes and sabotage" (Kolinko 2002).

Having established a significant body of research over the preceding years, researchers now turned to the detailed study of the labour process and worker resistance. Taylor et al. identified the diversity of workflows within call centres but also an ongoing trend towards target-based management (Taylor et al. 2002), Bain et al. identified the spread to Taylorist management practices via quantitative targets (P. Bain et al. 2002), Taylor and Bain identified the role of humour in workplace counterculture formation (Taylor and Bain 2003), and Taylor et al. identified how call centres inevitably produced occupational health problems for workers (Taylor et al. 2003). Lewig and Dollard identified "emotional dissonance" – that is to say, the degree to which emotional labour constituted a non-genuine performance – as a key factor accounting for exhaustion and job dissatisfaction in South African call centre workers (Lewig and Dollard 2003). Van den Broek showed how normative control was enforced on workers by management within call centres using a variety of strategies:

recruitment practices, work organisation, social events and bargaining. She also showed how this high level of coercion inevitably led to worker resistance (van den Broek 2004). Glucksman broke new ground by analysing the various ways in which call centres fitted into wider divisions of labour within corporate structures, and stressed the importance of contextual understandings of specific call centre workplaces (Glucksmann 2004). Mulholland published the results of her research in Irish call centres, showing how workers use collective informal practices such as cheating target-based management, avoiding work, and leaving the job *en masse* to manifest their opposition to call centre management (Mulholland 2004). Taylor and Bain turned to the question of offshoring, and showed that it was not as frictionless a process as management advocates implied (Taylor and Bain 2005). Ellis and Taylor provided an account of the historical development of the call centre, which put a now decade-old body of research on the topic into a clearer historical lineage regarding the intensification of white collar work (Ellis and Taylor 2006).

It was at this advanced stage that Brophy began to reconnect two hitherto disconnected streams of research on the call centre. He argued for the relevance of theoretical frameworks derived from Italian workerism to call centre research and, in the process, was the first to cite the exhaustive work of Kolinko in the academic literature, almost a decade after it was first published (Brophy 2011). This correctly-identified avenue for workerist call centre research was further pursued, leading to the publication in 2017 of two significant book-length studies of call centres: *Language Put to Work* (Brophy 2017) and *Working the Phones* (Woodcock 2017). Brophy catalogued an expansive scope of resistance techniques, identifying the conflict between communication for profit and communication amongst people as taking many different forms in many different contexts. Additionally, he used global case studies to look

explicitly at the macro-patterns of collective organisation in the sector. Through this scale of analysis, he perceived a generic scenario, whereby a process of workers self-organisation organisation leads to short-term concessions by capital followed by labour market exit in search of a more compliant workforce (Brophy 2017). In a complementary manner, *Working the Phones* developed the workerist analysis of call centres at a micro scale. It provided the most detailed single account of a workplace available in the call centre literature, allowing for a workerist analysis of four key issues: the labour process, managerial strategies, worker resistance, and the possibility of collective worker organisation. There has so far been limited academic research following up on these two crucial interventions. Lloyd has shown how managerial methods which aim to intensify the domination of managers over workers in order to increase work intensity also produce inefficiency (Lloyd 2018). In what might be considered a full circle return to the early debates surrounding call centre labour, however, he also proposes that “capitalist realism” (M. Fisher 2009), has successfully prohibited widespread worker resistance in call centres. The echoes of the early “total control” debate are hard to miss – although the decline in collective action in call centre contexts makes the pessimistic case more convincing this time round. Beyond academia, however, research using the method of workers’ inquiry to investigate class composition in call centres has continued (Brophy and Woodcock 2019): new workers’ inquiries have been produced which address the relation between platform capitalism and call centres in the deindustrialised north of England (Elliot 2019); new translations have shed light on processes of inquiry in non-anglophone contexts (Pezzulli 2019); and new interviews have reflected on the experience of the Kolinko collective in light of subsequent developments (Kolinko and Woodcock 2019).

Overall, however, despite the depth of understanding of call centres, limited work has been undertaken on the specific process of workers in a call centre attempting to turn their structural capacities into organisation capacities by generating self-organised structures. The transition from individual informal resistance practices to collective informal and formal resistance practices falls into the valley between the fine-grained analysis of the labour process and the meta-analysis of sectoral trends, and so has not been the subject of significant research. Whilst many of the major studies mentioned above do take steps in this direction (Kolinko 2002; Bain and Taylor 2002; Brophy 2017; Woodcock 2017), additional work is needed to clarify the transition process. By following in the methodological and theoretical lineage of Kolinko, Brophy and Woodcock, this inquiry begins to rectify this gap in the literature by studying the failure of exactly this process.

“You are part of the thing being sold”

Unlike many call centres, which are operated as functionally separate facilities by external outsourcing companies, the call centre that is the subject of this inquiry is incorporated into the FinServ HQ. This is due, in large part, to the complexity of the labour process, and the necessity of it being embedded very tightly within the larger financial service commodity production process. Tom estimated that roughly 500 people work on the phones, with about 20-25% directly employed by FinServ. The other 75-80% are employed by local employment agency WorkForce. On other floors of the building, approximately two thousand FinServ workers go about different labour processes: product design, sales, marketing, IT, cleaning, maintenance, administration and so on. FinServ is a global company based in the U.S. and with significant back office facilities elsewhere. As such, this call centre is just one of many operated by the firm.

In June 2018 the Office for National Statistics estimated that there were 113,000 workers employed in “call and contact centres” nationally (ONS 2018b). As demonstrated in the section above, the technical composition of the call centres in which this segment of the working class are employed has been the subject of much research since the 1990s, and the call centre discussed here shares an unmistakable similarity with the workplaces which were the subject of those first studies. Those 113,000 workers will likely all experience a technical composition in which call distribution is managed by an automated system which records conversations and data from each individual workers’ labour process. This surveillance process is integral to the operation of the system of control in call centres generally.

However, call centres are not one single kind of workplace. The specific requirements of the production process at each call centre determine its specific technical composition, and this variation alters the ways in which workers cooperate and resist. The call centre under discussion here is primarily an inbound customer service centre providing a “premium” customer service product. The labour process in this workplace can be usefully contrasted to outbound high-volume, high-pressure sales call centres (Woodcock 2017) and high-volume inbound call centres (Elliot 2019). Indeed, Tom understood this difference and made the comparison himself during the course of the inquiry, particularly after he read Woodcock’s *Working the Phones,* following my mentioning the book in an earlier interview*:*

> He was calling people out the blue trying to sell them stuff. That’s a very different relationship to labour than it is working at a customer service one. At a customer service one, sure, you are trying to sell them some stuff, but really *you are part of the thing being sold. Your job is the commodity itself. You have already been bought.* That means there’s a very different pressure on people. Targets are orientated differently. There’s a way of looking at call centres as a whole like they’re a factory, but there’s a really big division in labour and a division in the way they’re organised. [my emphasis]

Kolinko, in their discussion of workers' inquiry, argued that a vital role of inquiry is locating workplaces within the larger social division of labour in order to understand the social relations within the workplace through reference to the totality.[75] The expenditure of labour-power in the call centre in question was engaged in different social relations dependent on department. For instance, in all of the customer service departments, as Tom identified, workers were reacting to incoming calls with skilled problem-solving in order to support the ongoing exchange of a service commodity. However, in other smaller departments, like compliance, they were engaged in unproductive labour which facilitated and organised the production process and maintained compliance with state-mandated regulation.

For the productive segment of the workforce, the labour process is defined by the following characteristics; it is *responsive*, with the labour process being initiated by a customer demand for service rather than a managerial command to produce or create demand for sales; it is *skilful*, with the labour process being defined by solving both routine and non-routine problems (often in multiple languages), with these solutions often requiring cooperation with other team members or departments; and it is *individualised*, with the system of statistical monitoring and performance management being evaluated on an individual rather than team basis (despite the cooperation involved.). It is also marked by a division within the workforce: between a periphery of high-turnover, low-paid agency staff and a core of longer-term directly-employed workers.

As a whole, the experience of the labour process is defined by a specific kind of stress based around problem-solving, rather than achieving a standardised goal

[75] Similarly, as discussed above Glucksman (2004) identifies that the differing role of a call centre in an organisation can completely transform the internal organisation of the workplace.

(like sales, for instance) through a conversation. If an outbound pressure sales call centre is a game of Whack-a-mole, where the worker must continually reproduce the same selling behaviour with minor adaptations to different customer cues, then a premium inbound financial service call centre is more like a game of Tetris, where the worker must work quickly to solve a constant flow of potential crises. The result of this distinction is that all workers, whether agency or directly employed, develop significant problem-solving skills specific to the FinServ environment through their experience of the labour process. This skill then allows for a faster replication of the same work tasks in the future. Over time, workers can develop a toolbox of skills that allow them to answer a high proportion of queries at an accelerated rate. This development of creative skill leads to a contradiction for FinServ management: the best way to achieve high-quality customer service would be to retain an entirely directly-employed workforce of skilled and experienced call centre staff, but the costs associated with such a technical composition would be significantly higher than using agency staff due to the necessity of using a wage premium to retain staff and prevent the notoriously high rates of employee turnover associated with call centres. As well as having to manage the longstanding quality/quantity contradiction in call centre labour processes (P. Bain et al. 2002), FinServ was caught in a quality/cost contradiction. This was solved by creating a core of approximately 20-25% directly employed staff (described by Tom as an “internally-integrated aristocracy of labour”) with a periphery of 75-80% agency staff – a balance which attempted to maximise skill development and reduce the costs associated with turnover, but without massively increasing labour costs.

Entering the workplace

To understand the technical composition of the workplace more clearly, it is worth understanding the on-boarding process from the perspective of an agency

worker, as Tom was when he was first hired. After signing up with the agency and being offered the job, agency workers undergo a three-day induction process, focusing on “FinServ Values” and the labour process. On the first day, after signing a load of forms, the intake of ten to fifteen new agency workers are sat in front of a screen. This is the first time they have been together as a group. A video plays on the screen in which the FinServ CEO introduces the company. Tom remembered this video as an attempt to inspire his intake. As part of trying to generate this inspiration, the induction video uses stories of the (apparently) socially-beneficial nature of call centre work, like customers using the call centre to book flights away from disaster zones in the wake of a tsunami. It also emphasises the idea that FinServ is a community of interest in the mould of a family, with no internal class contradictions. Despite this inspirational intention, Tom felt very bored. This video is then followed by two days of team building activities, in which the agency intake build cooperative connections with one another and FinServ managers, and are introduced to the labour process.

Once the three-day induction is completed, the new agency intake begins a three-month programme of on-the-job training. At this point, partial performance management targets kick in, with things like attendance timings being measured. The best possible attendance score is only achieved if workers arrive at their shift fifteen minutes early (fifteen minutes for which they are not paid). During the training programme, the intake work as a team. At first, they sit in a cluster on the call centre floor with one member of training staff. They are set on low-priority, so primarily take overspill calls from other, already-trained teams. During these calls, the member of training staff assigned to them will periodically “plug in” and monitor the call in order to provide training feedback. However, this assistance is not as all-encompassing as might be expected: “you don’t know what you’re doing all the time, and they don’t

provide too much support." Workers are expected to use their individual initiative to solve problems and navigate challenges. A key part of on-the-job training is the development of a personalised set of habitual responses. Whilst everyone begins with the same suggested responses to certain common scenarios and are presented with the same prompts on their screens during calls, new staff are encouraged to adapt their specific phrasing to "fit" and to use this phrasing over and over again. Over the first month, the new intake learns what they have to include, and what content can be modified, so that by the end of that period they have started to develop idiosyncratic introductions and responses which are supposed to reflect their own subjectivity, and they replace the generic suggested responses with their own. This process was understood by Tom as a contradictory one – on the one hand "they hammer in a bunch of stuff to you", and on the other individual adaptation is heavily encouraged and "you're not meant to be saying [scripted responses] by rote." The goal of this aspect of the training seems to be to develop a routinised and predictable communicative individualism which gives workers "ownership in the call".[76]

Once training is over and full performance management begins, most of the key feedback data collected from customers refer specifically to the individual performance of the call centre worker rather than the collective performance of the company or the team. The personalisation of the script is a key factor in developing a supposed individual responsibility for the customer service provided. The wider company distances itself from having any control over how calls go – workers are forced into individual responsibility. If a worker has a particularly bad call as a result of

[76] This practice is very similar to other service-based managerial strategies, in which the goal is for workers to provide a standardised service in an idiosyncratic manner (see Kearsey 2020). This contradiction is often a stressful one for workers, as it requires that they create an effective illusion of individuality over and over again. In line with Lewig and Dollard, it seems likely that the psychosocial demands of such a false presentation are significant contributors to job dissatisfaction and emotional exhaustion within and beyond call centres (Lewig and Dollard 2003).

failures made by FinServ in other departments, that fact is not incorporated into their performance management. So, despite the use of team-building activities to build communication and mutual commitment amongst the intake, the necessarily cooperative nature of the problem-solving process, and the emphasis on “FinServ Values” and the family-like collective interest in the company’s performance, the responsibility for the labour process is ultimately individualised. Despite the fact that the successful resolution of a complex problem will often involve extended chains of cooperative behaviour between workers in different departments over the course of hours, the individual point of contact for the customer is always evaluated as if responsibility for the outcome rests on them alone.

The call centre floor

As soon as on the job training ends, the “trial by fire” begins. The intake of agency staff, who have previously only worked together, are split up. The normal working environment of the call centre is made up of teams of ten staff (usually a mix of agency and directly employed) supervised by one team leader. Teams are divided into functionally-specific departments. However, these teams do not always sit together on the call centre floor, and their degree of cooperation can vary significantly: “usually you would be [sat together] but the teams only have a number of set desks, [and] they always have more people than they have set desks.” Tom thought it was generally better to sit with your team, or failing that, a team from the same department, for both social and work-related reasons, but that was not always possible. Some workers on the call centre floor are not call centre staff at all, but back office teams made up of a mix of direct employees and contractors working on entirely separate labour processes who have ended up sitting in the call centre due to a lack of workspace elsewhere and the office-wide “hotdesking” system. On the other side of

the floor sits the “program office”. This is a specialised team whose only job is to supervise call centre workers and manage the indeterminacy of labour-power. They have large visual displays which show every worker logged in the call centre, and they monitor their status constantly. They are paid more than call centre staff, but a large proportion of their wage depends on the performance metrics of the teams on the call centre floor. They are part of a separate management structure from the team leaders, and act much more as omniscient disciplinarians. Rather than cultivating personalised relationships with call centre workers like the team leaders do, they are intentionally separated from the workforce. They do not hotdesk, they do not join in the team building exercises, and call centre staff are not meant to interact with them. As Tom put it, “they are like the police officer in the corner.”

A typical shift will begin in the franchise coffee shop in the office reception. Workers often stop there on the way up to the call centre in the mandated fifteen minutes gap between arriving at work and their shifts starting. The coffee shop is shared by everyone from Vice Presidents to office workers and call centre staff and is one of the only chances for communication amongst different layers of the workforce outside of structured meetings. Importantly for call centre staff, it sells caffeine (in the form of coffee, energy drinks and tablets) and painkillers, so they can get through shifts when they are hungover, ill, or exhausted.

After grabbing a coffee, workers head upstairs to find a desk space they can use for the course of their shift and sign into the two systems: the phone and the computer. Call centre staff use two screens, one which displays information from the automated call distribution system on the customer, and another which allows them to search FinServ databases and so on. Before plugging in their headset, they check around to see if their team manager is and say hello. However, contact with their

manager is not actually strictly necessary, as logging into the computer also clocks you in and begins the labour process independently of them. Depending on if workers know the people they are sitting with they might say hello to them also. Often some social bonds have been formed via inter-department team building activities organised by the company. However, hotdesking means that workers are usually sitting with new people around them every shift, which restricts the development of strong informal work groups. As the clock ticks down, and the shift gets closer to starting, Tom always checks out the overhead screens to see where the stats are at:

> It [the screen] rotates between offers, recent events, and sometimes praising specific individuals who got good surveys, and sometimes photos of people who won contests, but the main thing it is meant to do is show you what calls are waiting - how many calls are coming in, how many calls got dropped, what's the rate of calls being dropped, and stuff. And these are the stats that your team leader cares about because they're the stats that your team leader gets paid on. And so what I'll be doing first is, I'll be checking to see: is there a wait time? Because it will tell you how long the wait time is or how many calls are waiting, how many people are on the line, how many people are getting dropped. It could be telling me: is it busy, do I have to be ready to drop into a call with someone as soon as I sign on? If there's a call waiting, I will know. And if I can see it's been waiting for 5 minutes, I will know I'm going to drop into a call with someone who's really angry. … You prepare yourself in that way. … I can see if there were rushes earlier on [in the day], so if I could see there was a 16% call drop rate, that would mean the early part of the shift was really tough. Those people [customers who dropped off] might call back later on, I know this could be a really busy day.

Then, calls start coming in. After answering, the ACD screen provides customer service prompts like asking the customer for details or informing them about another product. Sometimes, when prompted to give customers bad news, workers ignore these automated prompts – given that they are evaluated on customer satisfaction, being the bearer of bad news is to be avoided at all costs, even if that means not passing on information that they are meant to. This is always a gamble, as the recording of every call means that their omission could be noticed in a performance

review, so workers have to weigh up the relevant factors. In this regard, the constant individualisation of performance management can lead to sub-optimal behaviour from the perspective of capital. As the conversation continues, workers employ their personalised habitual responses and deal with whatever problems come up. Each department tends to have a few generic types of call – for instance, the fraud department primarily deal with calls about blocked payments. However, they often end up facing problems which they have never dealt with before which require cooperation if they are to be solved:

> You have to have quite a lot of expertise that you might not have initially. So, at the start you're going to be on hold quite a lot and going and asking more experienced people. That's the main reason you want to sit with your team. Because if there are problems, and you don't know what they are, and with [department name] that's every fucking day, there's going to be completely new problems you've never seen before, you've got to go and talk to someone who knows what they're doing. And if you're not sitting with your team it's gonna take you longer to get help. That means you're going to have to put someone on hold for longer, that means your customer service score is going to be worse. Plus, the lower your call times, the more things you get paid for. You don't want to put anyone on hold because it undermines your bonuses.

If a problem is particularly difficult and the caller might be on hold for more than five minutes, call centre workers usually respond by scheduling a call back later in the day. This gives them time to solve the problem off the phone, often by consulting other back office departments, and then provide a solution in the call back. Once a problem has been solved and the call ended, or when the caller has been transferred to another department, the ACD system places workers into a state known as "aftercall." This is when they have the opportunity to interact with the customer account to leave notes. However, aftercall is also an opportunity to spend a minute or two staring into space, so: "if you're in aftercall for more than 2 or 3 minutes, you'll get a message saying 'why are you still on aftercall?' That's a human message, from the program office on the

other side of the floor." As the shift progresses, everyone working on the phones tends to be seeing roughly the same pattern of peaks and troughs in activity. As a result:

> If you're sitting with your team, there's a lot of solidarity. Especially the people who came into training with you from the same [agency] intake. And you can be off the call, during a lull, complaining about the fucking people, complaining about your fucking shift pattern, complaining about a really fucking shitty call with a really shitty person: 'oh what an asshole, yeah I spoke to him before,' and stuff like that.

Once a month every call centre worker has to have a half hour meeting with their team leader. At the start of their time on the phones, they might listen back to recordings of calls taken at random in order to evaluate their performance together. These sessions also serve to demonstrate to the worker that they are always under surveillance when they're on the phone. Team leaders are paid a significant amount of their wages on the basis of team member performance, meaning that "they have a very big incentive to make sure that you're performing well" and act as quality controllers on a micro level. Workers are also paid according to a performance bonus structure, although the variations in wages are somewhat confusing and the overall structure of payments is not necessarily well understood. As well as these one-on-one interactions with team leaders, call centre workers have a weekly team meeting and occasional split-level meetings where they get to meet senior members of staff and offer very limited, meek feedback on how the job is going. They are always asked to provide suggestions for change, but the unspoken agreement is that these opportunities should never actually be used to discuss wages or conditions. Apart from this worker-facing management role, team leaders often spend their time conferring with the program office about the performance of their staff and talking to VPs about the wider considerations of the labour process. As such, they perform two functions, first to do the "soft" performance and quality management of call centre workers, but

also to act as the interface between call centre workers and everyone else in the company.

During a trough in calls, workers with call backs scheduled will put themselves (with the permission of their team leader) into a status called “office working” and focus on solving whatever problems are left over from earlier calls. They are then unable to be assigned new calls. If they have no call backs to make, then these trough periods can actually just be taken as a rest: “it’s people calling us, not cold calling. So that means there’s more downtime because of the way the work is organised. We’re not constantly ringing the next number in a list with no time off.” During this downtime, team leaders and the program office allow workers to read, stream TV, go on their phones and generally relax. Here, the varying work intensity acts as a pressure valve – rather than working at a capital-dictated speed, the intensity of the labour process is dictated by customer demand.

However, this variability in work intensity is only possible during periods of low customer demand. When the number of calls goes up, so does the pace of work, which is entirely determined by the combined ACD/work terminal system. This system puts workers into calls, provides them with the information required to solve problems, and records details of their solutions (alongside the audio of the call itself). As such, this automated system is responsible for the bulk of the coordination and supervision of the labour process, with the two human components of the management system (the team leader and the program office) acting more as appendages to the ACD than anything else. The team leader is the “softer” face of the ACD and acts as a communication channel with the wider organisation of work, whilst the program office supervise the operation of the ACD and can add additional disciplining elements. Although the ACD system contains some very old components that have been in place

since the 1990s, it is also a constantly developing item of fixed capital. Despite FinServ's efforts to emphasise teamwork and relationships, the bulk of the management of call centre workers is undertaken by an automated system that pushes them through a highly-stressful experience of work through hard compulsion.

During busy periods customers could be unpleasant and the labour process itself highly demanding: "you're always really tense. Because there's so much tension … that you haven't been able to express. I actually found that I was grinding my teeth." Teams that deal with disputed payments, in particular, have a hard time of it. Tom said that it was not unusual to see workers leave their shifts in tears. Being on the receiving end of abuse was common – particularly for workers with strong regional accents. Tom reported being regularly abused for being perceived as foreign, with some callers assuming he was Nigerian. When customers were difficult, there was one tolerated and widely-shared way of venting feelings of frustration:

> You press the mute button, and swear them out: "fuck you, you fucking twat". You're allowed to do that as long as you're on mute and you're not doing it too loudly. It's like a pressure valve. A lot of people do it. You'd be in the middle of a conversation, mute [the call], call them a prick, then start the call again.

This necessity to vent highlights the potential for worker-customer antagonism present throughout all call centre work in the form of unmuted customer-to-worker abuse and the (muted) reverse. The managerial tolerance of the symptoms of this antagonism indicates a certain recognition of the difficulty of the labour process – but also, potentially, an indulgence of anti-consumer abuse as a safe way of expressing the anger generated by the job without leading to confrontations between workers and bosses. As Burawoy identified, workers often adapt to labour processes through game-playing in a way which reproduces managerial consent by making the labour process more bearable (1979). Swearing down the line could be seen as an example

of this kind of consent-reproducing creative adaptation. However, this adaptation was not sufficient to prevent the build-up of teeth-grinding stress that led to workers like Tom using their break times to escape the call centre floor by heading to parks or other quiet places in an effort to mentally recover from the labour process:

> I think you need to get out [of the building when you're on your break], especially if you've had big calls, because you put the phone down and your brain is just throbbing. Because you have so many issues that you need to solve. The problem-solving is mentally difficult. … When I've had a bad day, I felt like fuck it, I need to get as far away from my desk as possible.

This impulse, whilst entirely understandable, deprived workers' of chances to form stronger informal work groups through collective recreation outside the call centre floor, away from the supervision of team leaders and the program office. In addition, workers within one team are often on two or three different shift patterns in order to guarantee the extended hours of call centre operation, meaning that there is no synchronicity in the timing of their fifteen-minute short breaks, hour-long meal breaks, or the end of their working day. Some customer service teams actually operate 24/7, meaning that the call centre never sleeps. Combined with the spatial disintegration of teams caused by hot desking, this limited the potential for significant informal group formation occurring outside of management-mediated team building activities or heavily-supervised environments.

Management also spend significant resources supporting workplace schemes suggested by people in the office. For instance, an environmental network – made up of volunteers from both the full range of back office departments and call centre staff – works to identify opportunities for reductions in plastic use in the workplace; an LGBT network provides (mediated) social opportunities and mentoring for LGBT members of staff and represents FinServ at Brighton Pride (the city's biggest annual event), and

so on. Paulo Virno's tenth thesis on Post-Fordism is that it embodies "the communism of capital" – that is to say, that it manifests the drives of the defeated revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 70s in a capitalist form (Virno 2004). The role of the environmental network in FinServ is a particularly acute example of such a reincorporation of defeated drives. In this phenomenon, the struggle against climate collapse has been turned into a company-funded greenwashing effort focused on single use plastics rather than the fundamental incompatibility of a system based on compound growth with the extrinsic limits of the planet (Hickel and Kallis 2019). This network exemplifies the fact that many forms of potentially oppositional subjectivity were jumped on and turned into company-led initiatives. This incessant internalisation of all the drives and subjective variances of labour-power, as if they were organically part of the firm, did not prevent the maintenance of the inviolable core interest of capital: valorisation.

This generic labour process has one key variation worth noting. A few departments within the call centre have contact with one specific kind of customer and experience a very specific kind of antagonism: high-value customers (HVC). HVCs are customers who own specific cards, which are only accessible to those who spend over a quarter of a million dollars a year and pay a significant annual fee. Tom called them, justifiably, "the global mega rich." All HVCs get access to FinServ's concierge team, who operate as paid assistants who "just organise shit for them." Each concierge worker is specifically detailed to provide services for four high-value customers at a time. Most of the time, their contact with call centre workers is limited to talking to their respective concierge. However, workers on the fraud team are some of the few non-specialist workers who interact with HVCs. They do so most often in the case of unusual spend patterns. For fraud workers, this experience can be jarring. Tom gave

the example of calling a customer to check on a £30,000 transaction: “it is a bit fucked up, because you can see the average spend a year. You can see the average income per year, you can see where their assets are coming from … you’re consciously ringing multi-millionaires.” In calls like this, Tom reported coming to a realisation about the stratospheric differences between his life and the life of the person on the other end of the phone: “this guy spent more than I’ve ever earned in my life on a boat.” Unsurprisingly, this realisation can promote deep dissatisfaction – but it also becomes normalised over time: “in general, the longer you work there the more you turn the blind eye to it.” Class distinctions are simultaneously highlighted and made to seem intractable by these limited forms of interaction. Ultimately, this contact with the haute bourgeoise made Tom feel powerless: “the [HVCs] have so much money they do not fucking care. We are a service class, we do what we’re told. You know nothing bad can ever happen to them.”

If agency workers stick around for long enough, they can move into the direct employment of FinServ. From then onwards, however, further progression up the job ladder is unusual. Amongst the core workforce, horizontal movement between teams (in the general direction of less specialist to more specialist) is more common than promotion, because many workers want to actively avoid promotion to team leader. This desire has two sources: first, team leaders experience significantly more stress as they act as the connection point between the team and the wider managerial structure and are subject to contradictory demands and evaluated on the performance of tasks outside of their immediate control; and second, they are often paid less: “if you’re really good on the phones the bonuses more than make up the difference. Some people in consumer are earning £45,000 to £50,000 a year.” But the movement towards more specialist departments is not a universal one. Some

direct employees who really buy into the company ideology elect to stay in customer service because they find the work satisfying: “no one does customer service out of choice apart from the fucking psychopaths who really believe in FinServ values and all that. It is really, really hard.” The top performers in multiple teams all fitted a similar profile: they had worked on the phones for up to 15 years and earned relatively high wages as a result of their phone performance. One top performer was, rumour had it, actually a landlord who owned a block of flats and didn’t need the money from the job at all but was instead one of those “fucking psychopaths” who felt committed to FinServ values. This level of ideological commitment from a subset of central workers to FinServ as a supposed “community of interest” is a profound example of the capacity of capital to maintain consent through effective management.

The above labour process was not set in stone, but instead subject to constant reorganisation as part of continuous improvement, *kaizen*-style.[77] This process of improvement had two avenues: first, call centre worker feedback via split level meetings, and second, the program office. The majority of alterations came from this second avenue. Tom understood these alterations as having three purposes: first, to counteract individual resistance tactics like “hacking” the aftercall system, and as a result to increase the intensity of the labour process; second, to increase the efficiency of the labour process through adaptations that speeded up call handling and problem solving; and third, to justify the existence of project workers to management. Project workers are outside consultants who work with the program office to optimise the labour process. They are specialists in labour process redesign, and therefore have a vested interest in making sure that there are always ongoing technical recompositions

[77] Defined by Brunet and New as: “pervasive and continual activities, outside the contributor’s [worker’s] explicit contractual roles, to identify and achieve outcomes he [sic.] believes contribute to the organisational goals” (Brunet and New 2003, 1429).

in the call centre. So, taken together, the labour process was always under intense and resource-intensive attention, and the technical composition of call centre work rarely felt stable.

In line with Van den Broek's study of Australian call centres (van den Broek 2004), we can identify a number of HRM-inspired managerial strategies which were implemented at FinServ with great success. In particular, the regular use of team-building activities formed pseudo-informal work groups in such a way that they included representatives of management and did not manifest themselves autonomously from the system of control. As a result, these groups were not the scaffold of worker self-organisation but instead became part of the integrated structural support for the system of control. The dominant ideas within these groups were largely dictated by management (although no doubt some groups made modifications in emphasis and specifics) and aligned with "FinServ values". The firm was then reflected back to the workforce as the community of interest created by the sum of these groups. The resulting picture of FinServ was a profoundly unitarian vision, in which the idea of workers having any separate material interest or agency from the firm was precluded. Management intervened directly into the processes of socialisation which emerged from the technical composition in order to compromise any structural route for the collectivisation of refusal. With hotdesking meaning that you never quite knew everyone around you, irregular shift and break times that meant you usually ate meals and went home alone, and team-building and interest group activities always being led by management, micro-sociological interactions on the call centre floor were successfully defanged.

As a result, rather than self-organisation emerging to contest the frontier of control or push back against class domination, workers mostly got their heads down

and got by. Amongst many, the feeling was that the worst antagonism they felt was with customers rather than with managers or the company. The balance of frustration was tipped heavily towards the people on the end of the phone, not in-office managers, who – if not seen as on the same side – were certainly closer to the same side. After all, they tolerated muting, they were part of their work groups – they were in the family.

Responsible autonomy and direct control

Andrew Freidman, in his study of class struggle and management in monopoly capitalism, argues for a model of control premised on two different broad types of managerial strategy:

> The Responsible Autonomy type of strategy attempts to harness the adaptability of labour power by giving workers leeway and encouraging them to adapt to changing situations in a manner beneficial to the firm. … The Direct Control type of strategy tries to limit the scope for labour power to vary by coercive threats, close supervision and minimising individual worker responsibility. (A. L. Friedman 1978, 78)

Freidman theorises that these two strategies have existed, in balance, throughout the existence of capitalist production – although they cannot be switched between at the will of capital without significant reorganisation and associated disruption (1978, 106). He argues that responsible autonomy is only ever implemented as a result of “extreme pressure” from workers, through both formal and informal means (1978, 107), and if this does not exist then the tendency of management is to revert to direct control. He argues that internally, within a firm, workforces are usually variously stratified by management between central and peripheral fractions. Like all other elements of technical composition, the precise shape of this fragmented structure is determined by the balance of forces within a workplace rather than being derived directly from factors like skill level, gender, race and so on – although those factors all play a role in shaping that balance of forces. Central workers also tend to

be managed by responsible autonomy and enjoy greater pay and security, whereas peripheral workers tend to be managed by responsible autonomy and experience the opposite (1978, 117). The variations in management strategy applied to these fractions allows for the firm to retain some flexibility in the management of indeterminacy and hinder workers in forming a united front against capital by instituting various distinctions between them in the job structure of a firm (see Stone 1974). In the context of FinServ, the division between central and peripheral fractions of the workforce was clear. Directly-employed call centre staff were maintained as central workers, with performance related pay reaching as high as £50,000 per annum and permanent contracts. Agency workers, on the other hand, usually earned less than half that rate for much the same job and had no such security. This distinction of immediate interests was a significant fracture in the workforce, as Friedman identifies theoretically. However, *contra* Friedman, the two were managed by a similar system of control – a system which can best be characterised as combining the two (notionally mutually exclusive) managerial logics of direct control and responsible autonomy.

This composition is premised on a system of control characterised by a combination of hard and soft management structures, embodied in the two figures of the ominous program office and the friendly team leader. The program office uses hard compulsive means to make workers comply with FinServ instructions – such as screen monitoring and sending workers messages when they spend too long on aftercall. The team leader, on the other hand, maintains the conditions for a motivated and cooperative team through developing personal relationships with workers and leading the team-building activities. By doing so, the team leader softly pushes for commitment to FinServ values, generates the idea of the company as a community of interests, undermines autonomous forms of self-organisation and systematically

obscures the lines of class distinction within the workplace. This is not an entirely new innovation: manufacturing firms in the UK have combined responsible autonomy strategies like small team working with significant elements of more classically Taylorist-style direct control for at least three decades (Delbridge and Turnbull 1992) and such a fusion is part of what is distinctive about “Toyotist” management (Cusumano 1985). However, this combination is not commonly identified in call centre research.

It seems that this composition prevailed in FinServ because of three factors. First, the skill requirement involved in the problem-solving labour process leads to significant turnover-related costs due to the relatively extensive induction processes required to get agency workers up to speed. Workers do not actually reach peak efficiency in the labour process until they have worked at FinServ for a period of months and both gained experience with generic problems and discovered the best processes to use to solve novel ones. Whilst a certain level of turnover of peripheral workers was accepted in order to lower costs, these two factors have to be balanced. Second, the pace of work cannot be forced beyond an exogenous limit, because the level of inbound calls is externally determined by the customer base rather than internally determined by capital. In workplaces where these two factors are not present, such as the one in which Woodcock conducted his inquiry (2017), fewer features of responsible autonomy were evident, and no core of full time staff was retained at higher wages and with greater security. Third, when workers switched into “office working” mode in order to solve complex or unusual problems their labour process needed to become autonomous from the tight direct control of management because of the complexity and variable chains of cooperation involved in reaching solutions. Such an unpredictable process would be impossible to manage directly.

Again, *contra* Friedman, rather than elements of responsible autonomy being present because of the strength of workers' demands and resistance to direct control, they have emerged in this context because of the depth of workers' defeat. By which I mean, the existence of a partly-peripheral workforce and the use of responsible autonomy to manage them is actually evidence of a decomposition in the conditions of labour. What would, historically, have been a decent office job, protected from the worst excesses of exploitation and the labour market (Ellis and Taylor 2006), has been opened up to all the features of low-paid service work, hence responsible autonomy has begun to be combined with direct control. This workplace provides us with a view of the general downwards trajectory along which much white collar office work is travelling.

The primary contribution of this inquiry is to make clear that this downwards trajectory does not necessarily produce collective resistance. Rather than the introduction of direct control and degraded labour conditions provoking a long-term tendency towards collective action, capital has managed to implement the recomposition with only short-lived collective resistance followed by a rapid decline into individualised and informal forms of refusal (Mulholland 2004; Woodcock 2017; Brophy 2017). In part, this is because, for new peripheral workers inserted into an already-decomposed situation, individual resistance via turnover is an option in an economy where casual and low-paid work is easy to come by due to a tight labour market. Agency workers might not be able to leave FinServ and find a secure, high-paying role, but they can usually find work that is equally bad. This is perhaps the initial evidence for a wider conclusion about our class composition in Britain today – worsening conditions in white collar workforces have no inevitable link to collective worker resistance. Things can, in fact, just get worse. Again, we return to the problem

of the crisis in Lenin: conditions deteriorate, on a general level capital remains in crisis, and yet combative self-organisation does not develop.

As discussed in the introduction to this part, Poulantzas argued that this white collar section of the workforce constituted an office-bound “new petit bourgeoise” which tended to identify as professional and separated from the proletariat through the ideological distinction between mental and manual labour (Poulantzas 1978). However, he also argued that securing the allegiance of this non-proletarian layer and the fostering of its organisation as part of a subaltern alliance of “the people” was strategically crucial if the working class was to resist the onslaught of the 1970s. In retrospect, we can see that this issue was conclusively decided in capital’s favour. Whilst Olin Wright’s argument (discussed above) that white collar workers are a fraction of the proletariat rather than a new class outside of it is materially correct, Poulantzas’ identification of the ideological function of the distinction between mental and manual labour still retains a useful analytical core. The division between mental and manual labour might not be a differentiating point in class structure, but it is still significant because it acts as a barrier to self-organisation amongst workers who consider themselves as autonomous from the working class. Whilst white collar office workers do experience the same social relations as the proletarians of earlier social formations, there has been a forcible break in the traditions of self-organisation which registers primarily not on the objective level of material relations but on the subjective level of ideological relations. The most persuasive part of Poulantzas’ response to critics of his NPB thesis was consistently a political one, in which he identified how salaried non-productive workers were politically broken away from the working class in the course of struggles such as those that took place in Chile in 1973 (Poulantzas

2008, 326). The capacity for this fraction to be broken away from the rest of the class well lie in this ideological fracture, which leads workers to disidentify with their class.

This is precisely what Fisher's concept of capitalist realism identified – the way in which the subjective-ideological dimensions of the long ruling class offensive delimit the field of possible futures and of possible modes of action orientated towards those futures. In this sense, Lloyd (2019) is right to identify capitalist realism as temporarily victorious in many call centres. Self-organisation in contexts like FinServ today must occur beyond a caesura, one which leaves these workers without tangible subjective resources to legitimate self-organisation and collective action. As ever, class is a subjective category with an objective basis – it cannot be expressed politically in the absence of antagonistic subjectivity. This thorny, difficult-to-pin-down question of subjectivity and consciousness must remain uppermost in this discussion of FinServ. But the victory of capitalist realism is never a final one.

There is no better proof of this than in the informal practices of FinServ workers, who despite not collectivising their resistance did much to manifest their refusal. Sick days, leaving the job, time-wasting – Tom told me how each one could be employed as a weapon on the call centre floor. At times, these informal tactics were deployed in pointed ways. When a workers' individualised customer service stats fell below a certain level they were entered into a 3-month long "Relationship Care Academy" which consisted of a period of training every week and served as a disciplinary threat. Rather than sitting through hours of mind-numbing training, many of Tom's fellow agency workers just quit. When angry workers decided not to use the tactic of turnover, their refusal primarily took the form of the refusal to commit – the refusal to be invested in FinServ as a community of interest, and the refusal to believe the hype. This self-exclusion often manifested itself through small-scale work avoidance and a non-

committal attitude to team-building, which could lead to isolation from workers, which in turn made the successful collectivisation very difficult. Almost every form of workplace sociality seemed dominated by FinServ, so the easiest choice was to withdraw from workplace sociality altogether. The result was that workers like Tom ended up locked in quiet dissatisfaction and bitterness, rather than taking part in a confrontation.

It seems reasonable to assume that it is out of the awareness of the potential potency of such refusal, should it become collectivised, that FinServ management put so much effort into the creation of a series of pressure valves for workers which attempted to direct antagonism (to an externally undetectable degree) across the dividing line of the external customer/company distinction, rather than the internal worker/boss. The allowance of a widespread practice of muting calls to abuse customers can be seen in this light. In addition, allowing workers to relax during troughs in call volumes and providing notional opportunities for “input” during split level meetings can both be seen as managerial tactics which aimed to diffuse internal antagonism and create the impression of the firm as a community of interest. Taken together, these tactics aimed to let off steam and recuperate instincts that might otherwise lead towards self-organisation and collective action, and they did so successfully.

The technical composition of call centres maintains a certain core similarity across different environments. The larger recompositions of the industrialisation of service work (Marshall and Richardson 1996) and the spatial centralisation and intensification of customer service work via technological means (Ellis and Taylor 2006) both set the scene for the particular technical composition of FinServ. However, a specific analysis of this workplace does highlight some significant factors. The labour

process at FinServ is responsive to external demand, requires significant levels of problem-solving skills, and is evaluated on an individual level. Overall, the system of control combines direct control and responsible autonomy in a way which successfully precluded collective action through the integration of informal work group structures into the firm. The core/periphery distinction within the workforce also served to bifurcate the workforce into two parts: a core of older and more committed long-term employees who are retained using bonus schemes and higher wages, and a periphery of less-committed agency workers. The contradiction between staff retention (and corresponding skill retention) and cost was successfully managed. Antagonisms were generally directed outwards towards customers through significant margins of tolerance for down time on the job, venting, and a strong emphasis on developing commitment to FinServ values and the company as a family unit.

The community of (dis)interest

The first wave of call centre research merged simultaneously with a series of call centre strikes. For Taylor and Bain it was the British Telecom strike of 1999, which saw 4,000 workers from 37 different call centres across the UK walk out on strike over issues including the introduction of individualised targets for call handling times (2001). For Kolinko, it was the German Citibank call centre strike of 1998 (2001). These strikes belong to that genre of collective action which demonstrates the potential for a new political composition amongst a technically and socially recomposed section of the working class.

Since the 1997-2201 moment, however, this initial wave of militancy has abated. There are no obvious parallels to those strikes in our contemporary UK context. Public sector call centre workers employed by the Department for Work and Pensions and organised into the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) struck

for short periods of time at multiple sites in 2011 and 2019 (BBC News 2011; PCS 2019). The Communication Workers Union began an organising drive in EE call centres in 2018, claiming that up to 500 workers joined the union nationwide in just one week (Lezard 2018). By 2019 this drive had resulted in the union being consulted on the company pay offer, and negotiations on the details of a recognition agreement (CWU 2019). However, these campaigns remain limited both in their actual scope and political potential compared to earlier examples. In general, the militancy of call centre workers has faded, to the point that much of the experience of call centre work today is one of profound working class defeat – of “doing your time”, in a carceral metaphor used by a Paypal call centre worker reflecting on their experience (Elliot 2019). The challenge facing this inquiry is to try and identify some of the underlying factors in this general quiescence in our specific example.

Asked to summarise what strategy for self-organisation he thought would be viable at the beginning of the inquiry, Tom summarised his ideas as follows:

> I think the way it’s going to be successfully approached is to begin with temp [agency] workers and generally improving the security of people at work. Like, taking on the penal use of stats, and making people feel that they’re more secure and there’s less turnover. [We could win the right to more] sick days and stuff like that, giving people more comfortable employment and reducing the way in which it feels like a war of attrition with the work. As for the really integrated [non-agency workers], I don’t think you can start with them. Maybe they’d be interested if you took control of the workplace because they complain about stuff not being efficient.

From an outside perspective, this strategy appeared sound. It located specific problems with the labour process which could be changed by management, it identified a layer of peripheral staff who would be sympathetic to the approach, and it identified some of the obstacles that would have to be overcome in order to be successful. In fact, it even aligned with the emerging strategy that Taylor and Bain

(2001) identified out of the experience of the 1997 BT strike, which aimed the demands of collective action towards defending against managerial encroachments on the frontier of control within the workplace. But nonetheless, Tom's attempt to organise with other workers at the call centre failed comprehensively, with no significant material outcomes being achieved or forms of self-organisation generated.

Instead, the situation remained as Mulholland identified in her study of Irish call centres, where "workers engage in a recipe of collective informal practices that are organically borne out of their daily work experiences" (2004). Mulholland identified four varieties of resistance practice in her study: skiving, scamming, smoking and leaving – but significantly, not striking. These resistance practices prove that class struggle is never over, that the capitalist dream of total control is never achieved, but they do not constitute the basis for a significant contestation of the mode of production because they are not fully collectivised, and do not make the leap into politics. Whilst individual resistance can be part of an effective working class tactical repertoire, it is unlikely to ever replace the strike (Moody 2013). This problem of individualised refusal is not just limited to Brighton's call centres. Whereas in other national contexts, dynamic non-union forms of collective self-organisation have emerged in call centres to pursue collective action despite all the obstructions (Tartanoğlu 2015) no such British example exists. As Lloyd (2018) identifies, British call centres today do appear to exist under the reign of successful capitalist realism. That is not to say that they always will, but rather to frankly and honestly admit that the deep defeat in the sector showed no sign of abating in this workplace, and that no obvious way forwards for self-organisation presented itself throughout the course of the inquiry.

The single greatest barrier to the process of self-organisation was the way in which, despite a highly-cooperative labour process, FinServ's system of control

managed to prevent the formation of informal work groups beyond managerial control. These groups were fostered and mediated by management, rather than allowed to grow autonomously – and as such they were disarmed and internally manipulated. The problem facing Tom as a workplace militant was how to collectively refuse the incorporation of workers into the cross-class FinServ “community of interest” – and he had no answer for it. In addition, the potential for organisation beyond the call centre never manifested itself – workers on the phones were part of a cooperative whole that involved thousands more employees in other functions, but Tom has no substantial connections to them. A mass workplace of thousands of workers was successfully broken up into near total internal isolation, but all the time under the banner of the FinServ community of interest. The experience of work was the experience of being alone, together.

What, then, can we learn from this inquiry into FinServ? There are two particular lessons, both of which emerge from the study of a highly-successful system of control. The first, as argued above, is that the apparently contradictory combination of commitment-focused responsible autonomy with technically-complex direct control can produce a powerful system with a significant ability to prevent the spread of combative working class self-organisation in the workplace. The second is that the depth of the decomposition of self-organisation in some workplaces is such that it is not immediately reversible by the efforts of convinced members of the militant minority.

Methodological reflections

I argued above that workers’ inquiry should be understood as a subjective, interventionist, and process-focused methodological framework that generalises from the concrete processes of production to the abstract mode of production and aspires to undermine the hierarchy between researcher and research subject. It is defined by

its commitment to combining the process of research with the process of working class organisation. This commitment is, as argued earlier, a significant strength, but it also generates potential hurdles. The largest of these is that a workers' inquiry is not an *independent* process.

That is to say, the data collection involved in a study relies on a process of cooperation between researcher and research subject. Such cooperation cannot take place under controlled conditions, but has to happen in the existing workplace, as part of the existing struggle. Being linked to the actual process of self-organisation expands access, reveals insights, generates data that the researcher could not collect otherwise, but it also makes the process of research vulnerable to the unpredictability of struggle itself. The methodological problem this generates is that when self-organisation fails, that failure also shuts down the capacity for an inquiry to collect the data that would allow for a wider reflection on that failure. This case study faced exactly this problem. The failure of self-organisation at the call centre which is the subject of this study left the research process stranded. Unlike the innovations of McCormack et al. (2013), I did not manage to find a way around this blockage.

The grounded theory concept of "saturation" is often used to define the adequacy of sample sizes in qualitative studies. In short, a study is seen as having reached saturation when additional interviews do not result in data with a significant new component. Saturation can be achieved after ten interviews or after ten thousand, depending on the kind of research questions being asked and the depth of engagement with participants. As a result, qualitative studies which define their end point by referencing this concept do not begin with a premeditated *n* value, but instead actively determine if they have reached saturation through ongoing reflection during the study. However, this process of reflection is often sub-optimal, leading to studies

being guided by real or perceived external pressure rather than by the actual state of the data (M. Mason 2010). Saturation has been usefully reinterpreted by some theorists as a matter of degree rather than a final state to be achieved (Corbin, Strauss, and Strauss 2008), and studies pursued with this redefinition in mind may well prove to be more resilient when faced with external pressure. Long-term studies which rely on a deeper engagement between researcher and subjects, such as this one, can reach saturation with much lower participant numbers than studies which rely on superficial interviews with a larger number of participants. Because an inquiry is a political relationship, sampling has to flow through political relation between subjects and researchers, and so, again, saturation cannot be pursued independently.

This case study, therefore, reached a lower level of saturation because of the relatively lower level of working class self-organisation in the workplace. If workers' inquiry is a method which seeks to see past apparent working class inertia, then it has to be one which is capable of dealing with workplaces where that apparent inertia is very pervasive and impacts heavily upon sampling. On reflection, the method of this thesis is best suited to hot inquiry. I attribute this peculiarity of design to drawing my experiences of inquiry almost entirely from hot inquiries (Cant 2019). My practice of inquiry has always previously been more about bringing a dictaphone and a notepad to the picket line, and less about quietly discussing problems over a coffee. This imbalance proves a weakness in a context where researchers are faced with more failures than successes.

Cold inquiry has to be specifically designed to deal with the difficulties of access where projects of self-organisation are not ongoing. Ethnographic methods, such as those used by Woodcock (2017) to carry out a cold inquiry into a call centre, have proven more effective in this regard. Because of their ability to collect data through the

action of the researcher, the process can proceed even if the levels of working class self-organisation are lower.[78] So, on reflection, one of the additional outcomes of this case study is that it demonstrates precisely the need for cold inquiry methods, which can be applied as and when it becomes evident that the kind of self-organisation involved in a hot inquiry is not going to emerge in the timeframe of the inquiry in the site concerned.

[78] However, even ethnographic studies are less effective than they could be when self-organisation does not emerge and develop into collective action, because when it does the resulting struggle produces a huge amount of information on the balance of forces that might otherwise have proved impossible to collect. Conflictual processes provide us with unique insights into the underlying relations out of which that conflict emerged.

Ch.7 Deliveroo

In February 2017, Brighton's Deliveroo couriers went on strike for the first time. Over a hundred workers crowded into Jubilee Square to hold an open meeting. There, they voted unanimously to unionise with the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB), a small non-Trade Union Congress (TUC) affiliated union of approximately 3,500 members with a history of active campaigning and a pre-existing platform courier branch based in London. The Brighton branch would begin a campaign for the following demands: first, an increase in piece rates to £5 per delivery; second, a hiring freeze; and third, no victimisation of striking workers. The campaign would go on to win two of these demands (a hiring freeze and no victimisation). It was an auspicious start for a trade union branch. The IWGB appeared to be the institutional representative of an active, confident workforce engaged in collective action from the start. But just six months later, the local union branch was all but dormant. This case study examines that process of failure, in which an independent union managed to relate closely to an ongoing struggle and its associated structures of self-organisation – but failed to translate those structures into a durable form. It locates the difficulty of creating a stable form of trade unionism on the basis of platform worker self-organisation in both the social and technical composition of the workforce and argues that this difficulty presents us with as many challenges as it does opportunities.

Much of the collective experience that forms the basis of this chapter is described in my recent ethnographic book *Riding for Deliveroo* (2019). However, this chapter asks new questions of that experience, and expands its scope to the long aftermath of the 2017 campaign. Its primary focus is on the question of transition between structures of informal self-organisation based on patterns of cooperation and

more durable trade union organisational forms in the specific context of platform capitalism – and, subsequently, how organisational forms might be modified to best suit the class composition of a platformised working class.

This case study is unique in the context of this thesis, in that I use data from two different cities. Whilst I remain consistent with my general methodology in placing my main focus on Brighton, I found that the focus on the relationship between self-organisation and trade unionism in this case study necessitated a slightly wider comparative perspective. As such, this inquiry draws on a series of interviews with two different workers between late 2018 and late 2019 (see Appendix 1), both of whom were centrally involved figures in their local Deliveroo IWGB branches: one worker from Brighton (Gary), one worker from Bristol (David). This choice excluded a city where collective action amongst Deliveroo workers has repeatedly hit a fever pitch: London. I made this sampling choice because the size of the London workforce and its particular dynamics as a highly concentrated and profitable workplace made comparisons with smaller regional cities less reasonable. This has allowed for this chapter to offer the initial components of a cross-urban comparative analysis and reflect on the experience of multiple processes of organisation and translation in an attempt to identify key patterns.

It is also unique in that it focuses on the retrospective evaluation of successful attempts at self-organisation in which I myself played a part, rather than the real time discussion of those attempts as they are in process. As such, it takes inspiration from what I earlier called Lane and Robert's "retrospective inquiry" (Lane and Roberts 1971) in interviewing key members of the rank and file about disputes involving strike action which had recently come to an end. This characteristic did not lead to any methodological modifications, but it did noticeably shift the tone of my interviews.

Because of my pre-existing familiarity with the labour process and the dynamics of self-organisation in the workplace, I found that our conversations were able to move much faster from descriptive to evaluative discussion. In line with other studies of food delivery platforms in the UK (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020), my sampling approach faced one significant problem: gaining access to the moped workforce, which was made up of predominantly older and migrant workers who worked more hours a week for the platform. Rather than let this frequently-encountered barrier to qualitative research prevent me from developing an analysis of the issue of migration with reference to Deliveroo, however, I have decided to take a theoretical approach to the problem, and attempt to illuminate the social class composition of this segment of platform capitalism via a discussion of migration under capitalist social relations and the UK border regime more generally. This is, however, only the first step in addressing a wider failure of the literature.

Understanding platform capitalism

Research into food delivery platforms began as part of a wider literature on the emergence of the “gig economy”. This literature, often contained within legal journals, initially focused on the challenge of the spread of independent contractor classifications to the status quo of labour law in much of the global north (G. Friedman 2014; De Stefano 2015), on the potential for consumer benefits and social costs presented by “creative destruction” (Rogers 2015), and on the technological developments of algorithmic management (Lee et al. 2015). Additional technical research focused on the surge pricing mechanism and its fairness (or lack of) for consumers (Chen, Mislove, and Wilson 2015). Initial critical analysis of the emerging sector focused mostly on the contradictions of exploitative sharing and the possibilities of the cooperative form (Scholz 2014a; 2014b; 2015) and the problems of

transparency, informational asymmetry and black boxing in both production and consumption contexts (Pasquale 2015; Rosenblat and Stark 2016). Dyer-Witheford's *Cyber-proleteriat*, a sweeping analysis of the global recomposition of labour that had been catalysed by the development of digital technology, was an early Marxist framing that grappled with these developing questions (Dyer-Witheford 2015). However, a literature focusing on food platforms specifically would only emerge out of this larger context when their potential as a particular site of conflict became evident in August 2016.

A week-long strike involving hundreds of Deliveroo "independent contractors" exploded in London over a proposed change to the payment scheme (Woodcock 2016). Soon after, UberEats workers facing similar conditions also took strike action (Cant 2016). It became obvious that within the larger category of the gig economy, the apparently explosive dynamics of food platforms deserved specific attention. The London strike was swiftly followed by the publication of Srnicek's *Platform Capitalism* (Srnicek 2017) which began to develop, for the first time, a distinctively Marxist critique of the notion of the "gig economy", and propose in its place a contextualised analysis of platforms within the history of capitalist development.

This process of analysis was led by a series of workers' inquiries, which primarily focused on the technical, social and political class composition evident within these platforms (Waters and Woodcock 2017; Goldmann and Cini 2018; Briziarelli 2019; Gent 2019; Cant 2019; Cant and Mogno 2020). These accounts provided detailed analysis of the labour process of food platforms and the individual and collective resistance strategies workers employed to defend against continued attempts by platform managers to drive down wages and worsen conditions. These analyses largely share a theoretical stance that could be characterised as "digital

workerism" (Englert, Woodcock, and Cant 2020), in that they endeavour to understand this new composition of capital from the point of view of the working class, and use this renewed materialist focus on the social relations of capitalist production to identify strategies for class struggle which are appropriate to the specific context of the social formation. Additional Marxist work focused on the dynamics of local campaigns and the initial patterns of collective action (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; 2017; Cini and Tassinari 2018).

Vandaele's study, "Will trade unions survive in the platform economy?" (Vandaele 2018), was one of the first analyses to take a general approach to the question of worker self-organisation in platform capitalism. His conclusion, that "the new technical fix of the platform economy seems to 'generate' organisational experimentation and 'new' forms of collective representation, at least on paper" (2018, 27), is a useful first premise from which to approach further research. Additionally, Vandaele's analysis of food platform workers and their mobilisations has highlighted three relevant dynamics which bear on the potential for worker self-organisation: the existence of dense in-person and digitally-mediated communication networks, the use of direct action strategies, and the expanding importance of discursive anti-platform strategies. Furthermore, he identified two distinct logics of representation operating at the European level – the "logic of influence" embodied by long-standing unions acting within national frameworks as labour market regulators, and the "logic of membership" embodied by grassroots unions and similar organisations acting as collective organisers and mobilisers (2018, 19). This case study focuses precisely on how that logic of membership operated in Brighton amongst this kind of grassroots union.

Further research into platform capitalism more generally has covered topics of algorithmic management (Warin 2017; A. J. Wood et al. 2018), health and safety (Christie

and Ward 2018), gender and race (van Doorn 2017), employment relations (Healy, Nicholson, and Pekarek 2017; Poon 2018), inequality and variability in labour conditions (Schor and Attwood-Charles 2017), the extraction of knowledge in the workplace (Briken 2020), the applicability of classical European industrial relations structures (Kilhoffer et al. 2017), the platform management model (P. V. Moore and Joyce 2019), the relevance of labour process theory (Gandini 2019), overviews of the labour process (Veen, Barratt, and Goods 2019), the return to prominence of the "cash nexus" (Joyce 2020), the relevance of class composition theory (Englert, Woodcock, and Cant 2020), and communication between platform workers (Maffie 2020), to mention just some of the directions of travel in this rapidly-evolving field.

The result of this relatively extensive early research has been to foreground the experience of workers and the class composition of food platforms. Many accounts have discussed common technical and social phenomena: algorithmic management; black box labour management systems; variable job pricing and piece rates; migrant workers and urban surplus populations; independent contractor status; digital self-communication networks; the inapplicability of trade union law; direct action strategies; new forms of informal collectives beyond the trade unions, and so on. Tassinari and Maccarrone's summary of their findings in a comparative study of Deliveroo organising in London, Brighton and Turin is a useful representation of the current state of the Marxist study of the dynamics of class conflict within food delivery platforms:

Figure 4. Modelling Solidarity in the Gig Economy (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020)

In summary, "[platforms] have recruited large numbers of young and migrant workers, connected them via smartphone applications, ordered them to meet in specific places, attempted to immiserate their conditions without any space for negotiation, all the while claiming not to actually employ any of them" (Cant and Woodcock, forthcoming) – resulting in widespread self-organisation and collective action. Importantly, these workers are managed by a highly-developed, part-automated system of coordination and supervision in the form of a black box app. The job structure offered by the platform is completely flat – with all workers in one city on the same conditions and with no hope for promotion, leaving, as Joyce has noted, the sale of labour-power reduced to a pure cash nexus (Joyce 2020) governed by an authoritarian system of algorithmic direct control.

Given the developed state of the field, I will not use this case study to cover familiar ground with regards to the outlines of the technical and social class composition in the sector. Instead, I will focus on one specific sub-question which has,

to date, received little attention. Given that food platform workers have successfully generated self-organised structures and taken part in collective action in many different places at many different times over the past four years, we might expect the significant organisational capacities generated by that process to have taken on some enduring institutional form. However, this cannot be taken for granted. In fact, there has yet to be a significant study of the opportunities and barriers facing workers who attempt to form long-term structures that can solidify their self-organisation and help it endure beyond a series of specific instances of collective action.

Story of a union branch

The first meeting of the Brighton Deliveroo IWGB branch was in January 2017.[79] This meeting had been built on the back of angry discussions of deteriorating pay and conditions at the zone centre, a surplus labour accumulation point built into the technical composition of the Deliveroo platform so that riders could respond quickly to surges in demand. Twenty workers met with an IWGB representative and a few supporters at a left-wing social centre, the Cowley Club, to plan an organising drive. The strategy formulated at that meeting was to begin a long-term process of building towards collective action. The initial idea was to win support amongst the workforce for a uniform cover-up, whereby workers would present Deliveroo with demands, and threaten to obscure the logo on their uniform in order to deprive the company of free advertising until those demands were met.

This plan, however, was soon overtaken by an initiative which emerged from an influential group chat of Brazilian migrant workers. These workers decided that the appropriate response to deteriorating pay was, in fact, a strike. They began to forward

[79] For more on this process see *Riding for Deliveroo* (Cant 2019, 103-139).

messages calling for strike action to other group chats made up of Deliveroo workers. Bit by bit, all the different networked chats started to hum with discussion. The new IWGB activists, myself included, made a quick decision to back the call, and a strike was organised for early February, as mentioned above. A large majority of the core workforce stopped work, meaning that the platform's ability to continue deliveries suddenly collapsed.[80] The significant internal workplace leverage was evident in the chaos spreading across the city's kitchens as orders piled up, waiting for a rider. The strike assembly, led by the IWGB general secretary Jason Moyer-Lee, successfully identified the energy of this action with the organisational form of the union. Membership forms were handed out by the handful, and it seemed that a successful fusion between informal work groups and formal union branches was in motion.

In the short term, their collective action began to produce results. Boost payments (temporary increases on the £4 per delivery piece rate) become more frequent. Following a series of further demonstrations called by the union branch to continue the momentum of the strike, a hiring freeze was implemented. Support by community organisations and John McDonnell (the then Labour shadow chancellor) led to a significant degree of external associational power being used to complement the internal workplace power of the workforce. However, fewer workers were turning out for each successive demonstration. The members of the Brazilian group chat which had called the first strike began to become disengaged with the branch as changes in pay and conditions produced divides within the workforce which exacerbated existing fractures built into the technical and social composition. The last

[80] Whilst overall active workforce participation in strike action in food platforms tends to be around 15-25% (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020), the "core" workforce (who work the most hours and do the most deliveries) is usually disproportionately committed to collective action, meaning that whilst strike action is actively supported by a numerical minority it can still result in a withdrawal of a significant majority of the labour-power used by a platform .

significant action called by the union branch was on May Day 2017. It had taken just four months to go from the first meeting to a first strike, then some intermediate victories, and a gradual decline of cohesive union organisation. This was not the end of struggle in Brighton - another strike, once again led by workers outside the union branch, took place in November 2017 over similar issues. But it was the end of the union.

Organic leaders and networked communications

Reflecting on the failure of a durable IWGB branch to emerge in the city in the months following the February 2017 strike, Gary expressed his understanding of the main problem with our attempt:

> [You need] people who are working long term for Deliveroo, who are respected by the fleet as a whole, who are good activists, and who have a clear vision of what they want and how they're going to get it. And in Brighton we didn't have that.

To put this insight in theoretical terms, the process of self-organisation being led by members of the IWGB failed to recruit a sufficiently broad base of key organic leaders who had been self-selected by informal work groups across the workforce. Despite significant effort to recruit representatives from all sectors of the workforce, organic leaders amongst the migrant moped workers in particular were not convinced to become long-term participants in the union structure. When activists tried to generate connections in person, they remained non-committal, and WhatsApp messages went unanswered. This lack of engagement made gaining access to this population and understanding the specific reasons for their decision difficult, but broad factors can be inferred without such access. This failure partly emerged from the cleavages in the social composition of the workforce. Those organic leaders who had irregular migration status were subject to forms of pressure which disincentivized them

from participating in the process of building a union branch. These pressures will be the subject of substantial discussion below. There were also clear situational distinctions between that part of the workforce who worked part time as cyclists, and those who worked full time as moped drivers (see Cant 2019). But there were also technical causes for this failure, and a discussion of them reveals a lot about the double-edged nature of digital communications as a tool for worker self-organisation.

Coordinated collective action that bypasses formalised organisations has repeatedly emerged over the post-crisis decade, from the London riots to the Arab Spring. Organisations theorist Rodrigo Nunes has argued that it does so because of the communicative structure of this social formation: “It is what people already do on a daily basis … independently from and before doing politics” (Nunes 2014, 9). He has also identified the way in which networked many-to-many communication can lead to “affective synchronisation”: the near simultaneous spread of emotional responses at a massive scale. When this shared affect is linked to a specific form of associated behaviour, collective action can scale at great speeds, as networked individuals see people with whom they have social ties participating in action as part of a large group, all of whom appear from the outside to be sharing the same affective state. This potent combination lowers the threshold of participation and can rapidly bring more and more people along with it, as can be observed in the case of digitally-mediated social movements (2014, 22). Certain points within these networks can become particularly influential when they take on vanguard functions and operate to direct the focus of the network’s collective action in specific ways by setting the form of action associated with a particular affect. That is to say, they determine the terms of the phrase: we feel *x*, therefore we do *y*.

This tendency has not only been theorised in social movements. Wood (2015) identified how “mass self-communication networks” created openings for trade unionism to emerge at Walmart, and Maffie’s study of the Web 2.0 communities of ridehailing platform workers found that “more frequent [digitally-mediated] interaction with other ridehail drivers is significantly associated with greater interest in collective representation.” This finding provides empirical support for the claim that: “Web 2.0 digital communities are associated with workers’ interest in joining a labor organization and presents initial evidence of a new organizing tool for labor, the online worker network” (Maffie 2020, 3). Workers use the communicative technology available to them to generate highly-complex networks, and participation in said networks creates organisational opportunities that can open the way for collective action. In terms of this thesis, it is also particularly important to note that the informal work groups that arise through the cooperative process of production almost universally produce their own group chats and many-to-many communications infrastructures. This means that a network map of the digital communities associated with a workplace could almost double up as a map of the informal work groups within that workplace.

Eric Blanc’s work on the 2018 teachers’ strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona demonstrated how the militant minority of “individuals with a class struggle orientation, significant organising experience, and a willingness to act independently of (and if necessary, against) top union officialdom” (2019, 104) could use these networked many-to-many capacities to catalyse successful illegal strike action from the rank and file. By using Facebook groups to set up a positive feedback loop of communication and “real life” organising, strikers could build highly effective strike movements that combined features of classical union activity and networked collective action. However, as Blanc identifies, this methodology of self-organisation is not

without its flaws. Sometimes the growth of strike movements using digitally-mediated communications in this way can occur so rapidly that the movement that results experiences a lack of structural integrity. The same factors identified by Nunes, which allow for the rapid but shallow growth of networked collective action as social movements, can also apply to worker self-organisation in the workplace - but affective synchronisation behind a vanguard node did not necessarily lead to the creation or reinforcement of specific infrastructures through which democratic decisions could be made and a process of political formation take place. This was a significant barrier to the growth of class self-consciousness through these movements. Power also concentrated in the hands of unelected group moderators who could control the settings and policies of many-to-many communication infrastructures without any accountability. Finally, an overemphasis on the role of digital communications could also lead to a dearth of organising efforts on the ground, leading to organisational weaknesses (Blanc 2019, 116-17). In the terminology of this thesis, the role of networked communications in our contemporary social formation offers the proletariat a structural capacity which can be organisationally developed in order to lead to novel variations in the form of self-organisation and collective action - but these variations are not a panacea, and they are in fact as complicated and conflicted as the forms they replace.

One of the key features of the strike movement in an era of networked collective action is a tension between the mobilising dynamics of mass self-communication and the mobilising dynamics of trade unions. Whereas trade unions branches tend to direct and oversee the development of mobilisation towards collective action from one central point, networked collective action has many such directing centres, which can each play the role of vanguard nodes at different points in time. The distinction

between these two dynamics is parallel to the distinction between the logic of collective action and logic of connective action made in the context of social movements by Bennett and Segerberg (2012). In their analysis, they identify how, alongside these pure forms, there also exists a hybrid form and logic of movement. The distinction between different logics or dynamics is never an absolute one, which permits for no cross contamination – instead, actors develop complex and contradictory hybrids as they organise and mobilise. In this case, we can see how the Brazilian group chat initially called a strike via the mass self-communication networks generated by informal work groups, bypassing the union and acting as a vanguard node as it did so. However, when it came to the strike itself, the union was returned to the status of broker, with the union general secretary acting as chair during the assembly of striking workers. So, we must see the emergent potentials for networked collective action in the workplace that are being generated by this technical class composition not as completely replacing previous forms of action, but rather as modifying them on the fly. As Tassinari and Maccarrone have argued, the transition from embryonic solidarity to mobilisation takes place via historically specific mechanisms (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020) – and, to go further, in this social formation the modality of that transition is shaped by the existence of many-to-many communication networks which are simultaneously based on informal work groups.

This modification is particularly evident where the role of the union as a central broker is not only challenged by new communications technology, but also by the bypassing of the employment relation or right to strike entirely, such as in the cases of platform workers or West Virginia teachers. Extra-legal strike action has no need for the union as an actor who can formalise the collective action of workers within the boundaries of legality, and there is less of a role for a union as a mediating negotiator

between capital and labour. In such circumstances, it is hard to identify what function a trade union can play which is not already being fulfilled by workers themselves through their mass self-communication networks. Trade unions, in these circumstances, may find themselves side-lined by a lack of functional relevance.

One of the only possible routes towards relevance for trade unions in the context of platform capitalism is to use their institutional consistency not to pursue collective action, but rather to finance and support legal cases which attempt to use the mechanics of bourgeois legality to contest the form of bourgeois exploitation, often on the assumption that this mechanism will allow for a return to the "normal" employment relation in which the union has an established functional relevance. If an attempt to engage with and channel the self-organisation of platform workers is consistent with the "logic of membership" which Vandaele identified as being common to small, grassroots unions in the platform economy, then this form of action follows "the logic of influence" which Vandaele identified as common to the repertoire of large and well-embedded unions (2018). The association of this logic with less use of the strike weapon is borne out in the first global-scale empirical study of platform resistance, which has shown that "Mainstream unions rely more frequently on legal challenges, while unofficial unions rely more frequently on strikes" (Joyce et al. 2020, 6). As a result, in the conditions of platform capitalism, collective action is often fully or partly abandoned by unions because they recognise that they cannot effectively broker it in a context of networked collective action, and that strike networks are performing a mobilising role via a dynamic with which they struggle to keep pace.

The role of a union, as classically studied from a Marxist perspective, is: "as an agency and a medium of power. Its central purpose is to permit workers to exert, collectively, the control over their conditions of employment which they cannot hope

to possess as individuals; and to do so largely by compelling the employer to take account, in policy- and decision-making, of interests and priorities contrary to his [sic] own" (Hyman 1975, 64),. As such, when another, parallel medium of power emerges which can fulfil the same function of collective mobilisation in a significantly more direct manner, the functional centrality of the union is challenged. Furthermore, when the exclusion of trade unions from legal processes by the abandonment of the employment relationship is combined with a complete refusal on the part of capital to negotiate with labour via a union, then the ability of the union to act as a collective bargaining agent is doubly-challenged.

Within the scope of this study, when workers wanted to improve their wages or conditions they withdrew their labour first and asked questions later. The assumption was that causing economic damage to capital by exerting their significant internal workplace power would lead to capital indirectly granting concessions in the form of better wages by introducing more boosts in the weeks and months that followed. This was, in effect, the platform equivalent of that "collective bargaining by riot" that Hobsbawm identified as being the *modus operandi* of the Luddites (E. J. Hobsbawm 1952, 59). Despite there being no formal channel of communication between the two parties, workers knew that wrecking the platform could elicit results. This was particularly evident beyond Brighton and in examples after February 2017, where trade unions were often completely absent but strikes took place and indirect concessions were won nonetheless. As a result, those workers who were interested in collective action and indirect forms of negotiation-by-strike largely remained committed to the networked form of action which emerged out of the experience of the labour process and did not see the need to use union infrastructure to mediate their actions. By and large, only those with either a pre-existing commitment to trade unions

as institutions or a desire for more centralised control of the mobilising process were invested in union mediation.

However, in the case of the IWGB, union branches tended to try and pursue a hybrid form of action which mixed the logics of influence and membership by pursuing both centrally-coordinated legal cases and networked collective action. As Però has identified, “indie” unions like the IWGB are very effective at mobilising coalitions to support workers and provide significant associational power to their campaigns (Però 2019). Despite the problems faced by unions in this composition, this strength still holds true. The series of demonstrations that followed the first strike showed just this skillset. With advice and help from the national union, the local branch used the slogan #RideWithUs to encourage supporters to join workers on large “critical mass” style demonstrations (Boal and Carlsson 2009). On May day, the final protest called by the union (during the 2017 general election campaign) brought together a hundred workers and supporters for a “Precarious Mayday” as part of a coalition that ranged from the Labour parliamentary candidate for the Brighton Kemptown constituency to an anarcho-syndicalist organisation. This demonstration, which drew on the history of the EuroMayDay mobilisations that had been part of the alter-globalisation movement in the 2000s (Foti 2009), was the final one before the union branch dropped its campaign for the last remaining unmet demand of £5 a drop shortly after the Conservative election victory. This demonstration, however, had shown the potential for the struggle to leap from a fight for immediate to fundamental interests. By bringing together workers from different workplaces on Ma Day under a banner of precarious working class unity during a strongly-polarised election campaign the workers’ campaign bordered on making the leap into politics. The associational coalition built around the workforce had been stronger than ever, but the failure to recruit key organic

leaders had meant that workers had stopped participating in the campaign in significant numbers. Union activists were arguing that: “we need to start a war, it’s not going to be easy” (Gary) – but their message was not winning the kind of support amongst workers that it needed to if the campaign was to continue. Reflecting on the period of the campaign (perhaps with an excess of self-deprecation), Gary commented on the problems of leadership: “I don’t think we did much well. It’s difficult, right, we were one of the first cities to do stuff. Eventually it was like me leading it and I’m a fucking computer man”.

The situation in Bristol was similar. At first, workers there self-organised without any union at all and were able to win concessions of the platform as a result: “it works by forming an informal organisation and striking to show your power. And I think you can see, in a really informal way, that the wildcat strikes that happen all the time, and the sort of response from Deliveroo to pump up fees in response, as bargaining. Temporary increases are the response” (David). Collective bargaining by riot/networked collective action was, in fact, the normal state of affairs in the city. After a period of using networked collective action to achieve these temporary victories, one courier described the rationale behind the decision of a group of early key organisers to get in touch with the IWGB: “We thought a union would be more of a lasting organisational structure, so that if key people dropped out, it wouldn’t be such a big blow to everything, because through membership of this larger structure there would be people ready to help keep the ball rolling and the momentum going.” David hoped adopting a trade union structure would allow for the development of institutional permanence in a high-turnover sector - but critically, he didn’t mention the union as giving the workforce any additional capacity to mobilise. They had already been doing that just fine for months.

David also experienced a disconnect between the union branch and certain key groups of organic leaders: “We don’t have a strong enough base amongst moped riders, for sure. We still need to recruit more into the actual core organising group, and then into the IWGB. We had two moped riders signed up to the IWGB - one was from Poland, one was from Brazil, like a lot of the guys in Bristol - the Polish guy has left and the Brazillian has got another job. We need to get moped reps in to replace them, because I think what we need is a closer link to the scooter guys.” The problem caused by key organic leaders moving on and leaving the job was a constant one: “the churn is absolutely nuts. We’ve heard a figure, quoted from someone in Deliveroo, that 50% of riders quit within 6 months. You need an intense amount of perpetual organising to counteract that.” The degree of labour turnover necessitates a constant process of reorganisation. Ultimately, trade union structures proved not only difficult to build, but also very difficult to maintain.

One result of this hybrid collective action dynamic was an increase in the complexity of processes by which workers achieved class self-consciousness. Gary described the way in which the union functioned as a forum for education. He went from believing that Deliveroo would compromise with workers once they realised their demands were reasonable, to understanding the reality that this was a struggle between two parties with opposed interests: “you start out bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and then it [the reality that workers and bosses have opposed interests] gets slowly bashed into you by a comedically large mallet.” At first, he had negatively identified other activist workers he had spoken to as “tankies” - that is to say, as caricatured Soviet Communists - and only through the process of conflict had he realised that he sympathised with their political opinions. This is one example of successful agitation, in the classical sense of Martov and Kramer, but it was an

isolated one. Without the trade union providing a stable institutional context, and with the larger group chats moving so fast and with so many different participants, there is no easy context for agitators to undertake the kind of discursive processes that can build self-consciousness amongst organic leaders and win them over to the idea of a unified economic and political struggle against the mode of production.

This goes to prove a point discussed earlier in relation to political composition: that spontaneous self-organisation which remains at the level of spontaneous self-organisation will not make a full leap into politics. Instead, the self-organised structures produced in workplaces need to be built into longer-lasting structures of class organisation if fundamental interests are to be pursued in a viable way. This does not necessarily mean that these structures have to be incorporated into trade unions (although that has often been the case historically), and this process could equally take place through a whole variety of forms, from shop stewards' combines to soviets. But this case study reinforces the theoretical point: spontaneous struggle which remains on the wrong side of the political leap is doomed to fail to advance the cause of the working class as a whole.

The technical composition of food delivery platforms poses challenges for trade unions. They must adapt to deal with differences in the mobilising dynamics of networked collective action, and deal with a serious problem of parallel structures and functional redundancy. The IWW network model (discussed in more depth in Cant 2019, 169-173 and Davies 2020) was an initial attempt to answer this question which met with some success, as was the IWGB's pursuit of legal action against platforms alongside hybrid campaigns on the ground in cities like Bristol and Brighton. However, whilst these problems might be uppermost in the minds of trade unionists, they are not necessarily uppermost in this thesis. Workers in the sector have found a form of action

and organisation that allows them to wage a struggle against their bosses, even if it seems unconventional and difficult to engage with. The challenge facing socialists is less to fit this new form of militancy in with the infrastructures of the trade union movement as they currently exist, and more to find a way of agitating effectively within this context of networked collective action so as to turn the struggle for better wages and conditions into a struggle against the mode of production. Bulletins written by and for platform workers have had some success (Cant 2019, 106-112) - but further experimentation will be necessary to find the specific form of agitation that fits this technical composition.

Délocalisation sur place

A significant proportion of food platform workers are migrants, and evidence from previous inquiries indicates that they lead a significant proportion of strike action (Cant 2019). A systematic analysis of migration and its role in the contemporary social composition is therefore necessary if we are to understand the sector. One of the most acute conceptualisations of the composition of migrant labour in the global north today comes from Emmanuel Terray in his essay "The nation state as seen by undocumented migrants" [*L'état-nation vu par les sans-papiers*] (Terray 2008), and it gives us a basis on which to begin that process of analysis.[81]

Terray argues that there is a tension within capitalism between the expansive logic of the mode of production and the territorial logic of the dominant state-form within the mode of production. Whereas capital accumulation would be best served by a global labour market which operates seamlessly across nations, the nation-state is

[81] Thanks to Christina Gerantoni and Pablo Muyo for bringing Terray to my attention at *Historical Materialism Athens* in 2019.

reliant on a monopoly of legitimatised violence within a bounded territory and therefore on control over borders. “All that is solid melts into air” as Marx put it, but it only melts so far. This constitutive tension between systemic logic and state-form determines the specific form of migration under the capitalist mode of production.

The development of an increasingly globally-integrated division of labour dominated by finance capital following the neoliberal turn has led to further modifications of the social composition of migration in the global north. A large proportion of migrant workers arriving in the global north have been forced to move in order to counter the crises of reproduction caused by imperialism in the south. This migration results in a conflict between nation states and those crossing their borders. The power of the nation state - with its repressive apparatus of detention centres, barbed wire and armed guards - appears colossal. But as Terray argues, these apparatuses find that they are like elephants fighting ants: yes, those ants that find themselves under the elephant’s feet stand no chance, but lots of ants escape unharmed. The result of this conflict is a compromise, shaped by parts of the nation state in order to extract the maximum benefit for the location-specific fraction of capital. This compromise emerges out of what Terray characterises, after Peter Stalker (2000), as the “Stalker paradox”. Two factors, which are supposed by conventional logic to be inversely related, are increasing at the same time: the strictness of official national migration regimes, and the combined total of both official and unofficial migrants. The existence of this paradox implies an ongoing increase in unofficial migration.

So, borders increasingly act only as marginal quantitative restrictors on migration. Their primary function is, instead, to produce a qualitative change in status: borders produce irregular migrants as vulnerable subjects. The repressive apparatuses associated with the border, which threaten the undocumented with state

violence once they are inside the territory of the state, are more important than the line on the map. As Anderson has argued "…as well as a tap regulating the flow of workers to a state, immigration controls might be more usefully conceived as a mould *constructing* certain types of workers through the selection of legal entrants, the requiring and enforcing of certain types of employment relations, and the creation of institutionalised uncertainty" (Anderson 2010, 312).This subjective production of the undocumented through the operation of a hostile environment creates the conditions for what Terray calls "*délocalisation sur place"* [outsourcing *in situ*].[82] Location-specific industries (such as services, logistics, retail and construction) cannot relocate their operations to take advantage of the cheapness of labour-power in different national contexts. Where industries such as garment manufacture use hyper-mobility across borders to achieve the lowest possible cost for a sum of variable capital, these industries are forced to undertake measures that reduce cost whilst remaining geographically static. Outsourcing *in situ* serves this end.

Undocumented migrants, with the threat of the border regime hanging over their heads, can be paid wages substantially below the (often legally-mandated) norm, and sometimes even below the cost of reproduction. Worker self-organisation and appeals to the state for mediation are both partially foreclosed by the subjective operation of the border, and the existence of a vulnerable undocumented labour supply is guaranteed by the intentional "failure" of the border to act as an absolute barrier to that supply.[83] By using this source of labour-power, location-specific capital can gain the advantages of globalisation on offer to more mobile capitals. Following the argument

[82] A concept originally proposed in his essay "*Le travail des étrangers en situation irrégulière ou la délocalisation sur place*" (Terray 1999).
[83] This failure is, as Terray identifies, a fault line along which the far-right across Europe tend to attack the current policies of the state. The willingness of the elected wing of the state to allow for a compromise that benefits capital is painted as a concession to "globalism."

of Comaroff and Comaroff that: “the south cannot be defined, a priori, in substantive terms. The label bespeaks a relation, not a thing in or for itself” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 47), outsourcing *in situ* can be seen as a mechanism through which the cheapness of labour from the south can be internalised within the north and made accessible for those parts of capital which cannot geographically relocate production.[84] As such, social composition of migration acts in a similar way to the “spatial fix” capital employs to temporarily delay crises (D. Harvey 2006a; 2006b). This mechanism relies on a delicate balance: “… without repressive legislation, no vulnerability to exploitation; but without the flexible application of this legislation, no workers to undergo this exploitation” [*sans législation répressive, pas de vulnérabilité permettant l'exploitation; mais sans application souple de cette législation, pas de travailleurs pour subir cette exploitation*] (Terray 2008, 49). The maintenance of this compromise is by no means guaranteed, and Terray identifies the potential for a slide towards a more developed form of the process hinging on the creation of external-internal reservoirs of cheap labour along the lines of the South African Bantustans.[85]

Though I argue that our theorisations of migration have to consider the specific features of capitalist migration, the role of the politician in this compromise is usefully

[84] It is important to note that this argument has significant parallels in Anglophone debates, particularly in the U.S. context (De Genova 2002, 439–40).

[85] Capital accumulation in South Africa, and the subsequent development of the capitalist mode of production, was reliant on gold and diamond mining. In turn, the gold mines of the Witwatersrand and the diamond mines of Kimberley were totally reliant upon cheap migrant labour. Harold Wolpe’s famous analysis of this cheap labour system showed how the rate of surplus value production in the mines was kept high because the wages paid for the labour-power of black migrant workers fell below reproduction costs. This was possible because the pre-capitalist social relations in the reserve economy bore the brunt of the means of subsistence for migrant workers. When they returned home following the completion of a temporary contract, the family could reproduce the workers’ labour-power externally. As a result, the rural subsistence production beyond the mines was the precondition for the capital accumulation in the mines. However, over time the systemic imperatives of capitalism increasingly and unavoidably began to create a working class *within* the capitalist mode of production and destroy the pre-capitalist externality. Segregation policies, and later Apartheid, were introduced in an effort to prevent the formation of an urban black working class and the reduction in the rate of surplus value production. The developing social composition of the working class within capitalist social relation created a contradiction within South African capitalism to which apartheid was the brutal answer (Wolpe 1995).

understood with reference to a theorist of sovereignty from a pre-capitalist context: Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes' central argument in *Leviathan* is that the state of nature and the war of all against all is quelled into a state of peace through the multitude's recognition of their contractual subsumption below the authority of their one representative: the leviathan who stands above them and unites them in a commonwealth (Hobbes 2008, 84–115). On questions of migration, the stance of the contemporary political right has consistently been to, when in front of an audience of "native" citizens, play the role of a leviathan trying to defend the scarce resources of the commonwealth from the external threat of non-members, who would unjustly break the system of covenants that maintain peace within the commonwealth and return life to the state of nature: the state of war. To this end, the bourgeois politician is tempted towards using the ultimate power accorded to the sovereign, that is to say, to destroy the dissenter (Hobbes 2008, 117). To the dissenter, the migrant without papers, this threat is just the political expression of a border regime which constantly aims to produce fear, to scare them into quiescence, and to force them to accept whatever access to the means of subsistence they can achieve.

However, to return to a specifically capitalist context, the problem with destroying the dissenter is that you also destroy their labour-power, which prevents its utilisation by capital. As Immanuel Wallerstein argues, this "inability to expel" is one of the defining contradictions which the capitalist form of racism emerges to deal with (Balibar and Wallerstein 2011, 33). The bourgeois politician is only playing the leviathan. The capitalist state is not Hobbesian in material reality - as Poulantzas argued, we cannot reduce the state apparatus to state power and treat it as an appendage of the dominant classes (Poulantzas 2014, 12). Instead, the capitalist state is the contested by-product and reproducer of the relations of production and the

struggles entailed therein. Making real the threat of ultimate sanction against the migrant, and actually stopping all forms of migration through deadly violence would cripple a whole section of the social capital which relies on outsourcing *in situ* or a flexible labour supply. Therefore, the politician perpetuates the spectacle of the immigration crackdown, whilst in practice allowing for the continuation of the migration compromise. The form of racism that is dominant in our social formation today emerges in order to manage this contradiction and maintain consent amongst those sections of the working class who have bought into the Hobbesian rhetoric of the border regime.

Given this theoretical approach to migration, we can now turn to understanding the UK border regime in some depth, with specific reference to how it socially composes the workforce of platforms like Deliveroo. Gordon et al. (2009) estimated over a decade ago that there were 618,000 irregular migrants in the UK. These irregular migrants are irregular in different ways - from overstaying their visa to being refused asylum.[86] The border regime of the UK has an extensive history, from New Labour's panic about asylum seekers (who number in the tens of thousands) to the post-crisis Conservative's creation of a hostile environment for all irregular migrants (who number in the hundreds of thousands). The 2016 Immigration Act is particularly significant, because it created the criminal offence of "illegal working". This offence is committed when someone knows or has reasonable cause to know that they are disqualified from working in the UK but does so anyway. The offence carries a maximum prison term of up to six months, and earnings made whilst committing the

[86] For full typology see Corporate Watch (2018, 40).

offence can be confiscated by the state. As a result of the act, every single irregular migrant worker is criminalised.

However, despite this aggressive legal framework, the means of enforcement available to make this punitive regime a reality are limited. As of 2018, the state employed 8,000 immigration enforcement officers, split into 19 Immigration Compliance and Enforcement teams who completed 6,000 raids a year and arrest 5,000 people (not all of whom are eventually removed from the UK). At any one time there were about 3,000 detention spaces in the UK's migration prison system, in which people can be held without trial for indefinite periods as they are processed. The resources are meant to be sufficient to control a highly-fluid population of hundreds of thousands of irregular migrants (Corporate Watch 2018). Clearly, disciplinary control of migration is entirely unachievable on the basis of this repressive apparatus - and indeed, as Terray argues, it does not even appear to be the goal of enforcement. Instead, the creation of a leviathan-spectacle of the border regime is the major priority. Qualitative research by the Oxford University Centre on Migration, Policy and Society with irregular migrants in the UK has demonstrated that the threat of enforcement frequently leads irregular migrants to experience a high and constant level of stress, and, in response, to develop practices of resilience which aim to avoid "standing out" (Qtd. in Corporate Watch 2018, 199). Ethnographic work by Khosravi has also confirmed that the behaviour of irregular migrants is modified by their (justified) fear of disciplinary border regimes, leading to non-participation in political processes and an acceptance of what they might otherwise regard as objectionable conditions. Vitally, one of the common conditions that is accepted as a result of the disciplinary operation of the border regime is low wages (Khosravi 2010, 91). This making-precarious is not, however, only limited to irregular migrants. Even migrants with regular status are

obligated to continually prove their financial security to the Home Office, meaning that feelings of insecurity parallel to (if not the same as) those of irregular migrants may be present across a range of migrants with differing circumstances and statuses. The limited forces of the border regime may not succeed in applying the law, but they do succeed in achieving another goal: making both migrants doubly precarious.

Enforcement also fails to achieve its stated goals regarding punishment for businesses who employ irregular migrants. Employers can greatly reduce their liability for civil penalties through cooperation with Immigration Enforcement, and can resort to a statutory excuse if they carried out the proper right to work checks but were fooled by false right to work papers which it was not “reasonably apparent” were forged. Leaks from the Home Office have confirmed that Immigration Enforcement teams often gain access to staff records via employer compliance. One particular example of collaboration involves the outsourcing firm ISS. At the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, ISS were aware of a growing organising initiative amongst their cleaning workforce. Workers were called in for a meeting, only to find an Immigration Enforcement team waiting to conduct a raid and arrest migrants for removal from the UK. This was a profound example of union busting by border regime which demonstrates the way in which capital can use social composition as a terrain on which to launch offensives against worker self-organisation.

Large firms which contract out low wage labour like cleaning or warehousing to agencies and outsourcing firms also outsource the risk of being caught hiring workers without the right to work. The dissociation of outsourcing acts as a legal firewall to protect the major employer from the penalties associated with hiring irregular migrants. The supply chains of British capital are filled with workers being paid sub-minimal wages, often by outsourcing companies, and the civil penalties attached to hiring them

are both negligible in size and can be avoided via statutory excuse or reduced via cooperation with Immigration Enforcement.[87] As Corporate Watch have identified:

> Immigration enforcement does not stop people working illegally - but it makes people work fearfully. It helps maintain a segregated “two tier workforce” in which hundreds of thousands of workers have no access to the rights or safeguards available to others. Fear of raids keeps workers in the lower tier scattered, unseen and unheard. The threat of Immigration Enforcement provides the ultimate human resources tool to stop workers becoming “difficult” and organising to demand improved rights or conditions - as seen in the cases of Amey and ISS.
>
> It is important to see that this is not just an issue of a peripheral minority. Illegal workers are at the heart of the UK economy: building workers, office cleaners, food pickers and packers, warehouse lifters, drivers and couriers, the menials in every service industry. The “discount” on illegal workers makes a fundamental contribution to every business model. (Corporate Watch 2018, 80)

It is important, if under-theorised in their account, that nearly all of the jobs described in the above passage are in location-specific sectors: construction, agriculture, logistics, and services. These are precisely the industries which Terray identifies as having to make use of outsourcing *in situ*. Capital at large has an interest in this spectacle of enforcement being maintained because it offers them a competitive advantage to lower the cost of labour-power either directly in their production process or in their supply chain. Social capital benefits from the lowering of the cost of labour achieved by the border regime and its ongoing operation to terrorise migrant workers. We can perhaps detect the ongoing success of this lowering of the cost of labour-power in the unprecedented decline in real wages in the UK between 2008 and 2015 (Lavery 2017).

[87] See, for instance, the dark garment factories operating in Leicester which briefly became the center of attention as a result of their role in creating a hot spot during the Coronavirus pandemic (S. O’Connor 2020)

The social composition of food platforms hinges, to a large degree, on the process of outsourcing *in situ*. Two elements of “independent contractor” status, in particular, dovetail with the process to increase the degree of exploitation. The first of these is the legal capacity to “substitute”. That is to say, in the contract between workers and platforms there is a clause allowing for the contractor to substitute another service provider for themselves when working for the platform. In most cases, this clause is non-sensical. One of its primary functions is to act as a legal defence against claims that the relationship between workers and platforms constitutes employment. However, this substitution comes into its own with regard to migrant workers. When one worker substitutes and allows someone else to work on their account, the responsibility to check the right to work of the substitute worker is devolved from the platform onto them. In the same way that agencies and outsourcing firms take on the responsibility of performing right-to-work checks when they take on contracts from larger firms, individual workers who “rent” out accounts to irregular migrants do the same for platforms. In reality, these checks are rarely performed, allowing migrants to work on the platform even if they have no documents. The renting of accounts to workers *without* the right to work by other workers *with* the right to work is a common practice, usually accompanied by the account owner collecting a percentage in commission (Bryan 2019). Through this mechanism, platforms retain plausible deniability about their (self)employment of irregular migrants but get access to a pool of labour-power which can be paid at well below the minimum wage.

This low pricing is made possible through the piece-wage system. Food platform workers are predominantly paid per-delivery, meaning that the wages system usually contains no guaranteed hourly minimum. In Brighton, Deliveroo paid a flat rate of £4 per delivery before they introduced a variable piece rate in late 2018. This meant

that wages varied both with the number of drops and with the payment of those drops according to distance and relative labour supply. Particularly during quiet periods or when there was an oversupply of labour, wages could fall dramatically to below minimum wage and, often, below subsistence wage. This led to many workers not committing to working a certain number of hours but working until they made a certain amount of money. Particularly for those workers who use these platforms as their major source of income, full-time work meant spending a lot of time barely covering their costs, before a sudden surge in demand around mealtimes or on weekends dragged their average wages up. Immiseration was a constant possibility.

Platforms capitalise on the contemporary social composition of migration and the subsequent potential for outsourcing *in situ*. However, this social composition also presents opportunities for workers to launch their own counter-attacks. Undocumented workers have limited avenues through which to contest their exploitation. The option to just leave and get another job is not always open to them because they do not have the "right to work". The individual resistance mechanism of turnover is not a viable option for them, because this job is not a moment in their hyper-fluid journey through the labour market, but a very limited opportunity to work at all.[88] The foreclosure of individual resistance by their lack of full participation in the labour market forces them into collective action: they have a stake in the job that they cannot give up, and they rely upon it in a way that other workers do not. As such, this irregular section of the workforce can form a consistent core which can become organised and mobilised around informal work groups linked to mass self-communication networks.

[88] It is significant to note, also, that for these workers a change in legal status from independent contractor to employee would offer them no escape from precarity, but it might well lead to 'right to work' checks that put them out of a job.

On the evidence of observation and ethnography, these workers have formed the basis for many of the instances of collective action that have emerged since 2016 (Waters and Woodcock 2017; Cant 2019). Alongside larger actions such as strikes which have taken place cooperatively as part of coalitions including diverse groups of migrants with different national identities and non-migrant workers, there are also more specific forms of collective action which have emerged. Communication about the presence of Immigration Enforcement officers in an area is a much-reported feature of the mass communication networks established by platform workers: for instance, if Immigration Enforcement officers hung around a McDonalds hoping to document check UberEats riders there, messages would quickly circulate giving advance warning to anyone without proper documentation to avoid the restaurant. Additionally, one of the actions which created the conditions for the London 2016 strike was a collective boycott of orders from Byron Burgers after their management collaborated with Immigration Enforcement to detain kitchen workers who were found to have irregular migration status (Cant 2019). Evidently, the social recomposition of this workforce has produced a layer of the platform workforce which is simultaneously vulnerable and willing to take powerful collective action to defend their collective immediate interests. However, whilst many of these workers are happy to demonstrate and strike (usually with their identities protected by covering their faces), they often do not continue to participate in long-term formalised self-organisation. In part, in line with Khosravi's ethnography, it seems likely that this is due to the disciplinary operation of the border regime and a perception that the risk of visibly participating in a trade union or other form of worker self-organisation is a different kind of risk to participating in a singular instance of collective action or ongoing processes of self-defence.

Discussion of the “autonomy of migration” (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos 2008) has been characterised by the view of migration as a social movement: that is to say, as an agentive form of collective action. But the social movement of migration continues in the conflict against the border regime even after the destination of migration has been reached. The ongoing battle against the hostile environment in the UK is a struggle that takes place over the terrain of social composition, in and beyond the productive sphere of the economy. As Mezzadra has argued: “irregularity is an ambiguous condition that forms a key political stake in contemporary social struggles around capital and migration” (Mezzadra 2010). The class composition of precarious work in Europe today is, in part, an extension of some of the conditions which were already common to irregular migrants: enforced hyper-flexibility, wages on or below subsistence levels, and a lack of state-guaranteed rights. Irregular migrants who work for food platforms therefore experience a kind of precarity squared: they are technically composed as precarious by platforms and simultaneously socially composed as precarious by the border regime.

The analysis of the social composition of migration in this inquiry has to remain on a level of abstraction because of the difficulty of sampling the experiences of migrant workers locally. My access to irregular migrant workers was highly limited by my language skills and the same kind of perception of risk that Khosravi identified. In the same way that irregular workers are less likely to participate in trade union structures, I also found that they were less likely to participate in my research. Again, the limitation of the process of self-organisation also operated as a limitation of my research design. Future research must urgently grapple with this difficulty. Borrowing recruitment strategies from other studies of irregular migrant labourers seems like the avenue most likely to produce significant results (see, for example, Valenzuela Jr.

2002). However, this lack of local data should not preclude us from drawing the above conclusions and then making the assumption (on the basis of Waters and Woodcock 2017; Cant 2019; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020) that similar dynamics apply in Brighton.

The employment of undocumented workers by food platforms takes advantage of the possibility of outsourcing *in situ*. Indeed, it is arguable that platform capitalism a new class composition that is ruthlessly efficient at capitalising on the precarity and vulnerability of migrant labour. However, this exploitation is not one-sided. As ever, the development of a new strategy for valorisation by capital is met by a new strategy of refusal advanced by labour. But these developments in wildcat strike action are not necessarily easy to synthesise with longer-lasting institutional forms of self-organisation. The theoretical argument made above makes it possible to see how the recruitment and retention of migrants as leaders and members in trade unions is difficult because of the operation of the border regime that functions to place migrants in a state of double precarity and turn distinctions within the working class into divisions.

Where this challenge has been met and overcome by “indie” trade unions like the UVW and other IWGB branches in London it has been because of the existence of what Però has called “communities of struggle” (Però 2019), and this is perhaps one of the illustrative contrasts between the two instances. In the case of these early food platform organising efforts no such communities linked to the union were created, partly due to the high-turnover nature of the work, but more likely because of the lack of language skills amongst those attempting to organise the branch: both in terms of the ability to speak, for instance, Brazilian Portuguese, Polish or Romanian – but also in the form of experience of organising across a linguistic boundary.

Conclusion

The available evidence of global platform worker protest shows a decisive upward trend in the number of protest events. (see figure 5) This direction of travel could be explained by many factors, including the growth in the size of the sector. But regardless of the precise causation, the overall trajectory demonstrates the growing significance of understanding class struggle in platform capitalism as part of the task of understanding contemporary class struggle as a whole.

Figure 5. Global total of platform worker protests, Jan 2019-July 2019 (Joyce et al. 2020)

Source: Leeds Index.

This case study has contributed both to that wider task of understanding how food platform workers organise and what challenges they face, as well as to this thesis' orientation towards a specific class fraction. In particular, through this case study, I have shown the importance going further into the social and technical trends in composition which have been identified by the first round of platform research from below. Further research into the use of mass self-communication networks highlights

how they both allow for the emergence of a new variant of networked collective action and, at the same time, problematise the formation of stable trade union branches with strong connections to the organic leaders peer-selected by informal work groups. Above all else, these changes demand that the militant minority reformulate their agitational tactics in order to provoke the transition into a politically-composed working class against capital. The form of the leap has been decisively changed by these developments in the form of collective action.

In addition, the development of stronger theorisations of the role of migration in this social formation allows us to better understand the social composition of the platform sector and begin to identify the way in which the double-precarity faced by migrant workers can play a key part in the balance of forces. As such the border regime is no longer seen as an external question, but instead understood as being a regime of power with deep implications for the way in which surplus value is produced and extracted and the contradiction of indeterminacy managed by capital. The failure of platform worker self-organisation to be converted into long-term, durable forms has both social and technical roots.

But if the last two chapters have focused on the combined difficulties of generated and sustaining self-organisation amongst this class fraction, the next will demonstrate exactly how workers can successfully overcome those challenges.

Ch.8 J D Wetherspoon

J D Wetherspoon, the largest centrally-managed pub chain in the UK, currently operates nearly 1,000 pubs across the UK and employs over 40,000 people. The ubiquitous brand is one of the most profound examples of how consumer services have been continually recomposed over the last two centuries. Its sites of production are large pubs operated by managers obsessed with extracting every ounce of value possible from the labour-power employed there. The company has never accepted a collective bargaining relationship with any trade union, and Tim Martin, its multi-millionaire chairman, has a history of vigorously opposing increases in the minimum wage (Farrell 2016). Trade union membership density amongst employees in the accommodation and food services sector is the lowest of any sector in the UK, falling from 7.9% in 1995 to just 2.5% in 2016, before partly recovering to 3.3% in 2018 (ONS 2019d). These pubs, with their sticky tables and overheated kitchens, are the site of a profound confrontation between capital and the working class

This case study examines the processes of working class self-organisation which took place at two Wetherspoon pubs in Brighton, The Post and Telegraph (PT) and The Bright Helm (BH), between October 2017 and late 2019. This period saw the formation of a trade union branch, on-the-job collective action, and the first ever strike by Wetherspoon workers, as part of a wider coalition of service workers in October 2018. The chapter begins with a discussion of the historical emergence of the chain that situates Wetherspoon within a wider socio-economic terrain and examines the process of development that led to the company's emergence. Then I will discuss the specifics of the technical composition of the workplace, before abstracting to discuss the larger question of the education of labour-power. On this basis I will then move

onto an account of the processes of self-organisation and strike action, before concluding with an evaluation of the implications of this experience.

The data presented here were primarily gathered through interviews conducted over a period of eighteen months with seventeen Wetherspoon workers from the two pubs (see Appendix 1). These interviews took different formats at different times: from a series of up to six one-on-one interviews with three different workers, to one-off strike day interviews with five workers, two group interviews with groups of four and six workers respectively, and a reading group of two workers and myself that discussed Marx's *Wage Labour and Capital* (Marx 1847), and *Value, Price and Profit* (Marx 1865), and Paul Romano's first section in *The American Worker* (Romano and Stone 1947). This interview data was supplemented by my observations over the course of the inquiry - for instance, attending meetings in the run-up to strike action and visiting picket lines and demonstrations. Throughout all of these encounters, I stayed committed to the method of active, interventionist inquiry discussed in part one above.

The historical development of the centrally-managed pub company

The existing literature on J D Wetherspoon and firms like it is primarily focused on customer perceptions of chains (P. Jones et al. 2002), the impact on employee relations of transformations in the structure of ownership (S. Gordon, Valerie, and Preece 2002), and the demands of the sector on managers (Pratten 2005). Pratten's further research has gone on to locate the high street pub chain within the historical development of the pub industry more generally (Pratten 2007c; 2007a; 2007b). This literature is profoundly inadequate for our purposes in a variety of ways. First and foremost, it has been developed entirely from the point of view of management,

leading to a total failure to consider the workers' experience of work, the labour process, the expression of wider structural antagonisms within the high street chain context and so on. As it stands, the dominant academic literature can tell us almost nothing about what it is like to work in one of the largest segments of the urban hospitality industry. What writing does fill this gap by approaching the centrally-managed pub company from the workers' point of view has mostly come from workers' self-analysis of their conditions (Kearsey 2018). Some initial analyses in an academic format have begun to be developed (Kearsey 2020; Cant and Woodcock 2020) that build on and cooperate with this self-analysis. These initial approaches have used workers' inquiry to analyse the class composition of the industry generally, and focused on: forms of embryonic solidarity, organisational misbehaviour and the refusal of work in the pub context, and examples of strike action in the sector.[89] As of yet, however, these analyses have not touched on the development of the pub as a workplace over the course of decades. In order to begin to ground this inquiry and develop a systematic account of class composition in a centrally-managed pub chain, we have to go back to the start and look at the history of the pub. So, I will ground this new approach in an account of the development of pubs under capitalist social relations.

The integration of pubs into the capitalist mode of production was an uneven process. In his *Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels describes the networks of public-houses, beer-houses, jerry shops, hush-shops and secret distilleries that ran through every street in Manchester (Friedrick Engels 2009, 152).

[89] Additional interesting research includes a body of work on the expanding commodification of social life and the role of binge drinking in social control from the 90s onwards (Measham 1996; 2004b; 2004a; Measham and Brain 2005; Moses 2020) which has developed upon critical analyses of the Criminal Justice Act 1994 (Fyfe 1995), and indicates the initial points of connection between an analysis of the pub as a workplace and the pub as a cultural institution – that is to say, as a site of production, consumption and reproduction

These small establishments were the basis of an almost wholly decentralised pub system, tightly embedded within local communities and barely regulated by the state. This changed with the consolidation of capital in the sector, which began in the mid-to-late 19th century. Over the coming decades, breweries increasingly bought up these local institutions and transformed them into guaranteed sales outlets for their beer. By 1913, 95 per cent of licensed properties were brewery-owned (Pratten 2007a). Another wave of consolidation of brewery capital took place in the period following the Second World War. By the late 1950s a small group of brewery firms had begun to gain an increased market share. For the next forty years these firms pursued a strategy of vertical integration and conglomeration. Eventually, just six brewers came to dominate the market (Pratten 2007c). Capitalism had transformed a decentralised system of petty commodity production and consumption into a monopolistic, centralised sector of mass production and consumption.

Pubs were controlled by these breweries in one of two ways. “Managed houses” were directly managed by brewing companies, with a salaried manager. Between 1973 and 1988 these amounted to 30% of UK pub licenses. Most of the other 70% had a tenancy agreement known as a “tied house”. Under the terms of this agreement, pub landlords rented their pub from the brewery and were tied into buying part or all of their alcohol from the brewery. There also remained a small percentage of free houses which kept their independence from all breweries. In managed houses, the value produced by the production of commodities and the serving of those commodities both went directly to the firm. In tied house tenancies, the value produced by the production of commodities went directly to the firm and was supplemented by a rent extracted from the value produced by the serving of those commodities. These two models, therefore, offered the big six breweries a combination of two sources of

surplus value (production, service) or one source of surplus value (production) and one source of rent (service).

This strategy came to an end in 1989, when the competition commission made a decision that the current organisation of capital in the sector was monopolistic. In response, the Thatcher government passed the Beer Orders. These orders aimed to break up brewery/pub ownership and allow for greater competition by dividing the market between alcohol producers and pub operators. The big six brewers were required to either stop producing beer or relinquish ownership over any pubs they owned over the 2000-pub limit (Pratten 2007c). In short, the beer orders forced capital in the sector to choose between extracting surplus value either by producing alcohol or by running pubs. There would have to be a bifurcation in models adopted by capitalists within the industry. Most of the sector opted to sell off their excess pubs and focus on their alcohol production business rather than focusing on the trickier proposition of producing value through alcohol service. As a result, huge amounts of fixed capital changed hands and pub ownership temporarily deconcentrated. This created an opportunity for a new approach to alcohol service to emerge - one which relied on maximising the productivity of the pub as a workplace.

The rise of Spoons

J D Wetherspoon is perhaps the paradigmatic of a centrally-managed pub chain which aimed to fill this gap by using the disruption in ownership patterns caused by the Beer Orders to recompose capital in the sector. Whereas most brewers were focusing on alcohol production, Wetherspoon would focus on alcohol service: on the surplus value generated by the use of labour-power to produce service commodities in the pub. Rather than just an outlet to realise value produced elsewhere, pubs would be made into workplaces that were productive in and of themselves. The old managed

house and tied house arrangements would be scrapped, and replaced with a centrally-managed, standardised, chain. The strategy was a good one, and the company expanded from just two pubs in 1979 to 44 by 1992, three years after the Beer Orders came into force. A successful flotation on the London stock exchange in 1992 raised £24 million, and Wetherspoon's expansion continued from there (Shepard 1992). All in all, the number of pubs run by the company increased by 1200% in the decade between 1992 and 2002.

The success of Wetherspoon was predicated on the forced disintegration of vertically-integrated capital in the sector. This created the opportunity for the firm to recompose the pub as a workplace from production outlet which allowed for the realisation of value produced in the brewery into a site where the provision of service-commodities had to become viably productive in its own right. This entailed a massive increase in the attention paid by capital to the productivity of labour-power in the pub: as it was the only possible source of a surplus, it had to be maximised. With no manufacturing profits to fall back on, Wetherspoon and companies like it lived or died on the value produced by workers on the bar and in the kitchen. As such, this new model was hyper-sensitive to the cost of labour-power, and devoted significant resources to developing a sophisticated system of control. As this case study will show, this technical intensification has led to the development of a concomitant political intensification in the relationship between classes in the pub industry.

Consciousness deflation

The rapid growth of Wetherspoon and the centrally-managed company model coincided with a material-cultural offensive of wider significance. Mark Fisher's unfinished *Acid Communism* offers us a theoretical lens through which to understand that process. The argument of the finished book was to be that the dominance of

“capitalist realism” (Fisher 2009) on the terrain of the subject was enabled by material processes of “consciousness deflation”, implemented by the state and capital. This strategy of deflation took aim at those nascent forms of oppositional subjectivity which had begun to emerge through the counterculture of the 1960s and 70s and the resulting escape trajectories from capitalism as a system of social and economic domination that they indicated (M. Fisher 2018).

In the growth of J D Wetherspoon we can see, in more concrete terms, how the material process of consciousness deflation (and the inevitably associated capital valorisation) came to pass, particularly with reference to rave culture. Rave culture’s emancipatory potential as a partially decommodified culture based on the chemically-induced mass experience of empathy and altered consciousness was evident from its emergence in the late 1980s (Collin and Godfrey 1998; Measham 2004b). Its impact as a cultural phenomenon can be measured in part by the concomitant reduction in participation in more dominant cultural practices: between 1987 and 1992 pub attendances fell by 11% (Cited in Hadfield 2006, 58). However, the oppositional potential of rave culture as a form of consciousness inflation was never to be fully realised. Some of Fisher’s most direct writing on rave culture comes via the artist Burial. Fisher sees Burial’s music as articulating how “rave dreams” were “crushed by a series of dead end jobs” (M. Fisher 2014a, 98), and how this crushing leaves the generation that follows, the “interpassively nihilist kids”, haunted by a “present absence” that they never experienced, an alternative future foreclosed before they ever had a chance to experience it (M. Fisher 2014a, 99–107). This foreclosure was achieved through a combined offensive by the state and capital using mechanisms of both coercion and co-optation to capture the energy of rave within binge drinking.

More exactly, the 1994 Public Order act (Goodman 1995; Fyfe 1995) was combined with increasingly aggressive policing leading to the repressive apparatus of the state coming into direct conflict with the counter-institutions of the emerging culture. This policing strategy was combined with a “paradigm shift in regulatory culture” on the level of local government which aimed to release the restrictions on night-time culture that had produced rave in the first place (Hadfield 2006, 50). The stick of repression was to be combined with the carrot of a new freedom to consume. Local government found a willing partner in this enterprise in the alcohol industry, and the two cooperated to promote city centre binge drinking as a substitute for raving (Fyfe 1995; Measham 1996; 2004b; 2004a; Measham and Brain 2005). For elements of the state, on both local and national levels, this process offered increased social control and revenue, and for the alcohol industry it offered increased profits as young people shifted the relative balance of their consumption away from taking pills and towards drinking high-strength alcoholic drinks (Brain 2000). Through this process the escapist desires of rave were forcibly reintegrated within normative bounds.

Wetherspoon was a large part of this development of city centre binge drinking. As Moses has identified, the firm relied upon the circumstances of Thatcherism for its success, and developed as a chain partly because it resolved the contradiction between Thatcherite values (individual choice and the emergence of new iconoclastic consumer types) and Thatcherite economics (the increasing limitation of working class recreational budgets) whilst remaining within normative bounds in a way rave did not (Moses 2020). This reintegration, however, also involved a qualitative transformation. The pubs and bars to which the ravers returned were not the same sites of working class identity (with all their negatives and positives) that they had fled from in the late 80s and early 90s (A Class Act To Abolish Classes 2012). Instead, they were

reorganised sites of hedonistic-but-bounded consumption, under the control of a new form of capital – the centrally-managed pub company – which was more intent than ever on making sure that money was being made. As Moses argues, Wetherspoon was particularly successful at marketing itself to this new and returning customer base. It "rode the wave of class dealignment" to position itself as a dynamic leader in the "'24-hour city" economy which offered a simulacrum of the pub as it used to be but at new scale and with an entirely different organisation of labour (Moses 2020).

In his ethnographic study of consumer behaviour in Wetherspoon, Moses identifies how the combination of individualised consumer autonomy and an easily-attained sense of belonging produces a customer base undertaking a significant diversity of activity and expressing a range of identities but all at a low intensity. That is to say, lots of different kinds of people go to Wetherspoon for lots of different reasons, and all of them feel like they fit in but none of them really belong. The pubs are not really *for* anyone, but they nonetheless can claim some degree of popular consumer legitimacy. Linked to this process of passive belonging is the transformation of the primary unit of the pub from the *room* to the *table*: in a Wetherspoon, more traditional pub-specific modes of collective social interaction are inhibited, with tables operating as customer silos rather than parts of a wider interpersonal network (Moses 2020). As such, pub chains like Wetherspoon became dual sites of working class subordination: both through newly recomposed exploitation of labour-power, and the newly centralised commodification of the intoxication often used to recover from the exploitation of labour-power. With the turn of capital's full attention to the pub there was no longer a social function enabled by commodities, but a commodified social function. Engel's world of back alley hush-shops was long gone. Spoons, as it's known by its customers, is emblematic both of technical recomposition of the pub as a

workplace, and also of the social recomposition of the pub as a site of consumption. In both regards, its existence is a material reminder of working class defeat. But whilst Spoons is the graveyard of a certain kind of acid (house) communism, it is also a site of conflict, from which a new communism might emerge.

Concentrated drinking

Despite the technical recomposition of the pub sector following the Beer Orders and the growth of centrally-managed pub chains which are entirely reliant on the surplus value produced in the pub as a workplace, the UK pub industry as a whole is still characterised primarily by small workplaces, low pay, and low concentrations of capital. In 2018 70% of the total pub workforce was paid less than the living wage, as determined by the Living Wage Foundation (£10.55 an hour in London and £9 an hour elsewhere). The median number of employees per workplace was 8. At a sectoral level, the industry has stabilised after a period of sharp decline following the crisis of 2007-8, with cash turnover rising slightly year-on-year in the period 2009-16. Total employment in the sector nationally was around 450,000 in 2018, up from a low of 385,000 in 2011. In Brighton specifically, there were around 3,000 pub workers in 2018 (ONS 2018a).

However, there is evidence that the growth of centrally-managed pub companies has led and is continuing to lead to the concentration of capital in the sector. The Office for National Statistics classifies pubs with over 50 employees, like the PT and BH, as “very large”. In 2018 there were 35,000 workers in the UK employed in such very large pubs. Large national pub chains (owning over 250 pubs) have increasingly focused on developing these larger workplaces and expanded, sold off or closed their smaller pubs, leading to an ongoing concentration of both workers and capital in the sector (ONS 2018). Whilst turnover and employment has increased in

the pub sector, the number of active (alcoholic and non-alcoholic) beverage service enterprises has declined from 48,280 in 2013 to 43,035 in 2018 (ONS 2019a). The logistical support for Wetherspoon's concentrated pub network is provided by DHL, which operates a huge Wetherspoon-specific warehouse and fleet of trucks in the midlands logistical hub of Daventry. The company exerts power over its suppliers by creating a Walmart-inspired distribution network in which information is shared up and down the chain and Wetherspoon acts as the coordinating agent (Wilding 2018; Phillips and Rozworski 2019).

Figure 6. Pubs owned by enterprises with 250 or more units, by employee numbers, UK, 2001 to 2018 (ONS 2018)

As argued above, the reliance of Wetherspoon on the surplus value produced through the production of service-commodities in the pub entails an increase in the managerial attention to pub work. The efficiency and intensity of this workplace suddenly becomes a central concern of capital under this new arrangement. One of the central features of capital's strategy for intensifying labour is to prevent the creation of overt solidarity amongst the workforce through the implementation of an internal labour market which includes all the features of job-stratification as a labour management strategy rather than a necessary part of production that Stone identified in the U.S. steel industry c.1900, as discussed above (Stone 1974). The system of

stratification at Wetherspoon includes a significant variable element of pay. Separate bonuses are paid to all staff based on three criteria: if they exceed quarterly profit targets, if they perform well in an audit, and if they meet CQSMA (cleanliness, quality, service, maintenance, atmosphere) standards. These three bonuses are paid in different ways, and workers openly admit to not understanding the system as a whole (as is perhaps the intention of management). The most substantial bonus, which workers' pay the most attention to, is the quarterly profit bonus. This bonus is paid to all employees amounting to a percentage of their total wages. Associates get a 2% bonus, shift leaders get a 10% bonus, shift managers get a 15% bonus, and pub managers get a 40% bonus. As a result, the incentive structure is such that lower tier workers get little reward for exceptional performance, but managers can earn an additional £16,000 annually. A huge proportion of the potential pub manager wage therefore becomes reliant on quarterly profit targets. So this bonus structure, whilst appearing in company propaganda to act as a redistributive mechanism to pay back profits to hard-working staff, is actually a way of incentivising pub managers to maximise profits by any means necessary.

Figure 7. The Internal Labour Market at PT for Workers over the age of 21, as of October 2017 (group interview with Charlie, Rosie, Anna, Darran, Mike)

In 2017, the pubs in this case study had 9 different directly-employed job roles within the pub and two outsourced job roles (cleaners and door security). The majority of directly-employed roles are filled by people who have begun at the bottom of the internal job ladder. Positions like shift leaders and managers are not externally advertised, meaning you have to have survived what Rosie called the “machine of the company” to end up in them. As a result, all supervisors have developed pre-existing affective relationships during their time as associates that can then be utilised in supervisory ways when they are promoted. Supervisors are always somewhat integrated into informal work groups, leading to the pub being crisscrossed with complicated friendships which span different rungs on the job ladder. As Andrew put it: “I guess everyone starts in the same place, but then it kind of destroys any cooperation you have … it's not just like “fuck my supervisor” because your supervisor actually was your friend”. This complicated situation is added to by the fact that the exact job roles of these middle strata are highly confused. Anna reflected that she didn’t even think the pub manager knew exactly what each layer of supervisor was responsible for. These confused responsibilities meant that during service, “they

disappear quite a lot". The complications of the internal labour market were not justified in functional terms, and some most workers understood the relatively arbitrary nature of the distinctions between associates and team leaders: "I think it's just some kind of faux attempt to say you can progress in your career because it's 10p difference between each level [sic.] and you're doing the same thing" (Andrew). As such, promotion above the role of associate didn't mean that workers automatically acted in concert with the pub manager: the employees who occupied those middle rungs often expressed divided loyalties.

This multi-faceted confusion led to differing attempts to identify the contribution of supervisors to the balance of forces within the pub. Once workers are promoted beyond shift leader, they become annually salaried and wear a different uniform. This is the point in the hierarchy where some bar associates like Joe identified the beginning of a "massive rift" or class distinction, within the internal labour market. Kitchen workers, like Charlie and Andrew, as a result of their specific labour process and conditions, sometimes came up with a different identification of the rift as emerging between kitchen and pub managers. All in all, most supervisors were evaluated on a case-by-case basis by the wider workforce. The only job role to which the associates all identified themselves as implacably opposed was the pub manager.

Finally, opportunities for internal promotion could be allocated on the basis of the pub manager's preference, leading to the creation of more loyal supervisory cliques. However, this restriction of promotion could also result in deep dissatisfaction. The feeling of being victimised and locked out of training and promotions by a managerial clique turned some workers against managerial authority (Joe). Conversely, some workers deliberately refused promotion to team leader (Charlie, Darren). Many associates saw the extra stress implied by the role as not worth the

extra 20p an hour it paid unless you intended to stay at the company and get further up the ladder. Moving up and down the ladder was always a contentious issue, with some workers wanting to get higher up faster, and others not wanting to step off the bottom rung at all.

The labour process

The pubs contained two very different kinds of labour process: bar work and kitchen work. Some workers are cross-trained, particularly those who had been working at the pub for a while, but most work predominantly in one or the other. In the PT, interviewees told me that the kitchen is staffed by between three and six workers, with four or five working a standard Friday evening shift. An average shift will differ in length from anything between six and ten hours, sometimes finishing as late at 3am (or 5am if workers are forced to work unpaid overtime in advance of a kitchen audit by regional office). Opening shifts in the kitchen start at 5am, and closing shifts start at either 3pm or 6pm.

On arriving at work, kitchen associates described how they get changed in the unheated staffroom, before putting on their personal protective equipment (PPE), primarily steel toecap boots. They can only clock in once they have changed. Then they head into the kitchen, listen to a handover, and start to do prep. In the morning that prep is more varied, ranging from splitting things into portions to labelling food and cutting salad. In the evening it just means getting the breakfast stuff out to defrost. If it is a closing shift, the team will then use this lull to take their breaks and make sure they are as ready as possible for the 6pm rush. When workers at the PT take their fifteen-minute statutory breaks they head to a room in the pub basement. Their smoking area is a small outside yard with netting stretched over the top surrounded on all sides by high walls and covered in bird droppings.

During service the kitchen is set up with three “stations” on the outside: the deep fryer station; the microwaves, ovens and toasters station; and the deli/salad station. In the centre of these three is the final plating-up station. Orders come in via a screen which displays the information entered by bar workers on the electronic point of sale (EPOS) tills or via the “iOrder” system where orders are placed directly from a customer-facing smartphone app, alongside a timer indicating how long ago the order was placed. The target is to get every order out of the kitchen within ten minutes of it being received – if it takes longer than that, the item goes red on the monitor. Notes can be added to orders by bar staff (e.g. “no salad”). This EPOS-mediated one-way communication is one of the only forms of cooperation between the two workforces during normal service. Each outside station responds to the orders appearing on the monitor by producing the part of the meal that falls within their remit, and then passing these components towards the central plating-up station. Once food is plated up, it is then given to other workers or low-level managers who “run the floor” and deliver food to tables. During service, the kitchen operates as a self-contained unit within a wider production system. The integration of EPOS and iOrder technology with a visual monitor which includes performance targets means that this cooperative process with low levels of fixed capital investment is overseen by both human managers (who may or may not have split loyalties) *and* a rudimentary automated system of coordination and supervision. The self-contained kitchen work process means that workers resisted interference from the pub manager whenever possible and maintained that when they were out of the way the whole pub ran better.

Kitchen workers describe this labour process as like an assembly line. When the process flows, it requires little to no skill. Every order elicits a routinised response. All food items are already pre-prepared, thus reducing the culinary skillset required to

that of fast food work. This deskilling led to the creation of in-jokes, like the replacement of the verb “cook” with the phrase “ding ding”: the sound a microwave makes when it is finished. However, when something goes wrong, things can get stressful as the team work double-time to get back on track. Work intensity on this assembly line is maintained by drinking cans of highly-caffeinated energy drink, bought from the bar at a 20% discount. Some workers go through four cans a shift, or more if they are battling through a hangover (as they often are). The pace of work means that accidents are common – usually burns, cuts and falls. But these accidents are not allowed to slow things down. Andrew reported that the response to serious burns was not to break out the first aid kit, but instead to carry on: “which ethically is so fucked up, but that's how the system works. It's a sweatshop and you deal with it”. After service, workers clean in order to prepare the kitchen for the next shift. In general terms, the labour process in the kitchen at the BH is analogous, with the exception that the temperature gets much higher in summer. Kitchen associates at the BH tole me about workplace temperatures reaching as high as 36 degrees Celsius during the summer of 2017. The picture of hot, dangerous, exhausting work that emerged from these interviews were not far removed from the narrative accounts of automotive manufacture produced by the JFT, discussed in part one above.

The most senior management in PT and BH kitchens are kitchen managers, on approximately £20,000 p/a. Whilst these managers are treated as distinct from the rest of the workforce and paid on a salaried rather than hourly basis, their role as supervisors can be undermined by the technical composition in which they find themselves. Some associates described the kitchen environment as horizontally organised, despite the fact that there was a very clear notional hierarchy of management within them (Charlie, Andrew). The informal work groups which form in

the enclosed space of the kitchen are very strong. Their close teamwork leads to embryonic solidarity forming very quickly. This feeling of collective identity is one of the major things kitchen workers relied on to cope with the difficult parts of the job: “I think the solidarity developed in the kitchen makes work feel less like work” (Andrew). Kitchen managers find it either difficult or undesirable to assert their hierarchical authority against this collective solidarity, and so often go with the flow and act as a member of the team with additional responsibilities, rather than as a supervisor. So, within the kitchen, the internal labour market fails to maintain the divisions between workers it is intended to produce. As Andrew put it: “it doesn't function unless you cooperate, and because you're like closed in, you’re pretty much all the same person. Everyone's like a cog in the system to make it work. It's like my kitchen manager - he’s not like looking over me like in the bar. You know, there's always somebody watching them in the bar. He's literally working hand-in-hand with me. It's easy to forget who's a team leader and who’s a shift leader.”

By contrast, the labour process on the bar is much more individualised. On arriving at work in the morning, bar workers do basic prep: putting ice in the ice tray; cutting up fruit; putting speed pours on the spirit bottles after taking off their original caps and so on. Once that minimal prep work is done, bar workers described how the pace of work is almost entirely dictated by customers. If there are not enough customers, the bar manager is likely to reassign workers to cleaning tasks. When there are customers, a bar worker serves one customer at a time, meaning there is almost no requirement for cooperation. They take orders, pour drinks, and take payment via the EPOS system over and over again. Workers are made to tap-in to the EPOS system when taking payment using a personal key fob in order to maintain an

electronic record of payments. When service finishes, they close the bar down before clocking off.

As a result, informal work group formation on the bar is much weaker. Where embryonic solidarity does develop, it is through snatched moments of conversation whilst waiting for drinks to pour, rather than through the demands of teamwork. However, the frequently understaffed nature of the labour process on the bar means that most of the time workers are too busy for extensive conversations. Due to the openness of their workspace the potential for constant supervision is much higher, and as a result individual resistance strategies can be more risky. It is not uncommon for bar associates to be fired without much of a reaction from their co-workers: someone has a disciplinary, leaves a group chat, and is never heard from again. This does not mean that no informal work groups form at all, but rather that they are more fragmentary. Contrasting the experience of solidarity in bar and kitchen work, Darren said: “on the bar there are a few different groups, but the kitchen *is* the group”. As Moses identifies, these bar staff have an unusual relationship to their patrons. Wetherspoon bar staff are treated more as company lackeys than as the more conventional authoritative “arbitrators of the invisible queue” (Moses 2020, 130). During observation I noted how this lack of status means that customers frequently interrupt bar workers when they do anything interpreted by the customer as reducing their speed of service. Slowdowns and unauthorised breaks have to be achieved under the surveillance both of management and the customer.

Patterns of scheduling mean that the same bar staff often opened and closed together. In this context, solidarity could develop, as “openers” and “closers” worked together before and after service on completing a specific and constant list of tasks. These work groups developed specific skills which allowed them to complete the open

or close faster than other, non-specialized associates could. More importantly, however, bar workers who closed together were able to take advantage of the opportunity for group socialisation offered by their shared end time by taking part in the few hours of frantic drinking at an Irish pub across the road from the BH that follows most Friday and Saturday night shifts. This was their major chance to form informal work groups with deeper internal connections, away from managers and customers.

As a result of these differences in labour process, there were more structural capacities for self-organisation available to kitchen workers than bar workers. In practice, this meant that the pub kitchens acted as incubators. The efforts at self-organisation in both pubs started there, before spreading to the bar later in the process, because the technical composition of the labour processes offered those workers greater structural capacities.

Pub as prison

The metaphorical language workers used in interviews to describe their workplace drew heavily on prisons. Charlie in particular described the break room as a “cell” with barred windows, the smoking area a “prison yard”, the experience of work akin to being “trapped in solitary confinement” and so on.[90] This carceral atmosphere is understood as having a causative agent: the pub manager and any allied sub-managers. Class division, in this context, first mapped onto the question of managerial authority. In this context, most self-organisation was intended to resist the immediate reality of control by the pub manager. Wages and conditions were a secondary

[90] These workers were, intentionally or not, echoing a long lineage when they did so. Marx ends section 4 of chapter 15 of *Capital* approvingly citing Fourier’s description of factories as “tempered bagnos” (“mitigated jails” in other editions) (1967, 1: 402), and Stan Weir recorded that workers on the line in the Ford plant at Point Richmond after WW2 used exactly the same metaphor when describing their work (Weir 2004, 245). The dominant history of the linkages of the disciplinary regime of the workplace and the prison remains, of course, Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1991).

concern, despite the fact that the hourly pay for associates was well below the living wage. This lack of antagonism was the result of low expectations: “no one gets paid much” (Simon), so anything more than minimum wage was a bonus. The workers know that the “the lowest down get the hardest work” (Kate) and describe the pub in general as “hierarchical and dehumanizing” and an “authoritarian environment” (Joe). CCTV is installed all over the pubs – not just in customer-facing areas, but also in staff-only areas. Electronic surveillance is a key part of the overall system of control applied by pub managers.

The strict disciplinary processes applied by management, in particular, are both absurd and a constant source of anxiety. Workers told me how their colleagues had been “charged” with destruction of company property for using a marker to make notes on a whiteboard rota. The evidence gathered to inform these kind of cases includes everything from CCTV footage to screenshots of personal social media accounts. As Charlie put it, “it would almost be funny if they didn’t have power over your life”. At times, this domineering control by managers could escalate, such as when a kitchen manager engaged in homophobic bullying against an associate and then had the subject of the bullying disciplined when they snapped and retaliated physically. In the BH, workers also reported that their manager systematically failed to deal adequately with reports of sexual harassment – a failure which was only made possible due to the insulation of managerial authority from both regional management oversight and accountability to the workforce.

One of the other immediate avenues for the exertion of managerial authority was via rotas. All workers have contracts which stipulated guaranteed minimum hours, and these were meant to be about 75% of the average hours that worker did a week (although these contracts often became inaccurate over time as workers’ hours

shifted). The remaining 25% were not contractually guaranteed but instead offered on a variable basis by pub management. As a result, workers earning potential week by week constantly relies on the goodwill of the manager drawing up the rota. Although outright individually punitive restrictions were rare, the potential always exists. The question of authority was a key battleground in the pubs.

Mike Davis has argued that “resistance to workplace despotism … has always been the pilot light of the modern class struggle” (Davis 2018, 52). That is to say, practices of control that are perceived to be unjust have historically often caused a reaction from workers that leads to a process of mobilisation that escalates its focus from that one practice of control to the entire system of control and then to a mode of production predicated on such systems. Given that the indeterminacy of labour-power and the subsequent necessity for a system of control is a deep-seated contradiction within the capitalist labour process, struggle between classes over the existence of a system of control can become a struggle over the capitalist labour process itself. This potential was evident in this inquiry, particularly because the intense system of control within the pubs is a necessary feature of the Wetherspoon business model. Because of the precarious nature of value production through service provision, relatively low levels of refusal can have very direct impacts on the profitability of the labour process.

At the start of the inquiry, the major forms of resistance to managerial despotism were individual. The most popular of these in the workers’ repertoire included: stock shrinkage; escaping from supervision whilst on shift; calling in sick; drinking on the job; turning up late; taking smoking breaks; and, finally, quitting. Workers I interviewed were regularly given warnings, final warnings and fired for using these individual strategies during the period of the inquiry (Rosie, Darren). Every worker I interviewed discussed having participated in at least one of these practices, suggesting a high

level of “organisational misbehaviour” (van den Broek and Dundon 2012) and a substantial substratum of individual refusal. However, this individual refusal was not straightforwardly converted to collective refusal.

There were two competing theorisations of refusal latent amongst the workforce: first, “why work to get nothing out of it” (Lola); and second, “we work for each other, not them” (Kate). The first theory implied an unconditional refusal of work, whilst the other implied a refusal of work insofar as it was possible without dropping other workers in it. Different workers adopted different theories, with associates on the bar and those who did not intend to be in the job for long tending to support the first, and kitchen workers, team and shift leaders, and anyone who intended to stick around generally opting for the second. As a result, individual resistance was unevenly pursued across the two labour processes due to their different levels of collectivism.

For those workers who adopted the second theory, the collective informal work group (*each other*) opposition to the pub manager and their allies (*them*) had to be expressed collectively. These workers would not skive off necessary tasks on shift if doing so would pile up more work for someone else down the line on the closing shift. As a result, their opposition transitioned much more smoothly into self-organization for collective struggle in the medium to long-term. On the other hand, short-term bar associates tended to take a more direct approach and ran into more headlong collisions as a result. Darren, who was involved in initiating my first contact with workers at the PT, had a habit of turning up five minutes late to every shift. He often arrived at the pub on time but would stand outside smoking until he was five minutes late, every single shift. He had a second job, to which he was always on time, but he refused to do the same at Wetherspoon. His lateness was his way of proving to the pub manager that he had some autonomy, and he stuck to it – even though it

eventually got him fired. On his final shift, he gave away a £14 round for 50p. Perhaps not coincidentally, Darren had read into the concept of alienation in the early work of Marx – a process which he freely acknowledged made him a "bad worker."[91] His prioritisation of individual resistance, however, prevented him taking part in more developed collective action further down the line. The most strident refusers were not always the best organisers.

By far the most popular individual form of resistance for workers across the pub was quitting. Over the course of the year-long process of organisation that led to the first strike, relatively high levels of union density were reached in the pubs again and again, only for a cycle of turnover to force the organisers to start over. Workers tended to quit in batches – once the first member of an informal work group left, others from the same group would frequently follow. 50% of the group of workers I interviewed in the early stages of the inquiry had been fired or left the job after just three months.

The workforce that was formed through this technical composition were keen to do something, even before they knew exactly what this something was. The workplace was entirely greenfield, with no union branch having been formed there before and no collective bargaining agreement reached between Wetherspoon and a union nationally. The dominant ideas of how workers could change their conditions were kept alive through a kind of oral history, passed on (and no doubt modified) from worker to worker despite the constant turnover. This history primarily involved stories of how draconian pub managers had been forced to leave in the past through mass

[91] Marx's ability to turn people into bad workers cropped up one other time in the inquiry. During a discussion of Marx's *Value, Price and Profit*, whilst focusing on the themes of alienation and workers' control, Charlie and James recalled the instructions of their pub manager: "don't think your own thoughts" and "put your business head on." Throughout the course of the reading group, it became evident that Marx's account of the capitalist mode of production actively explained aspects of their everyday life and gave them the theoretical lens necessary to understand their struggle in a wider context.

complaints to regional management. When I was conducting my inquiry at the pubs, stories were still circulating about events that had happened years beforehand.

Sometimes, this opposition to subjection also expresses itself in an antagonism with customers. Paul argued that “we should be allowed to call customers cunts.” The customer, with their irrational and/or unreasonable demands, capacity to create mess, and general drunkenness mostly featured in interviews as a constant mild irritant, rather than as a decisive agent who could either be an ally or opponent.

The daily processes of cooperation and self-organisation required to get work done and defend against the authority of the pub manager and their allied supervisors formed the workforce into a collective agent *in potentia*. The informal work groups of kitchen workers, in particular, had the potential to become the basis for an expanded process of self-organisation that took on increasingly overt and collective forms. In addition to this objective scaffolding of self-organisation, workers who decided to push in the direction of mobilisation could also call on a deep and profound sense of subjective dissatisfaction amongst the workforce. As Paul put it:

> It’s fucking shit. You go to work, you work forty hours a week and you get nothing out of it, and you struggle to pay your rent, pay your bills, and that’s your life

The graduate without a future

“The kids are getting smarter but the rent ain’t getting cheaper”

- Squid, “Houseplants”

Throughout *Capital*, Marx frequently makes assumptions in order to advance his analysis. For instance, he will assume that one factor in a process will remain constant, in order to allow him to interrogate the interactions of others. Where there

are holes in his analysis, they often result from this methodological approach: Marx will assume a factor remains constant, draws conclusions on that basis, but never returns to interrogate what changes if that assumption is not the case. This is precisely how the gap which we will now address emerges. In his analysis of the value of labour-power, Marx analyses how the costs of educating labour-power are accounted for in the value of labour-power. However, in order to do so he makes the assumption that labour-power will never be over-educated, that is to say, educated beyond the degree necessary for its employment in the workplace.

> In order to modify the human organism, so that it may acquire skill and handiness in a given branch of industry, and become labour-power of a special kind, a special education or training is requisite, and this on its part, costs an equivalent in commodities of a greater or less amount. The amount varies according to the more or less complicated character of the labour-power. The expenses of this education (excessively small in the case of ordinary labour-power) enter *pro taunt* [to that extent] into the total value spent in its production. (1967, 1:168-69)

Marx recognises that elements of the bourgeoise (particularly French senator Garnier) worry about educating the working class and fear that it undermines the overall division of labour, and that Adam Smith recommends education only “prudently, and in homeopathic doses” (1967, 1:342) - but never actually explores how the excessive education of the working class might undermine the relations of production by failing to create the unskilled workers on which capitalism relies, those that make “speciality out of the absence of development” (1967, 1: 331). It is to this question that we now turn, in order to understand how this underlying assumption has been dramatically destabilised by the evolution of education and its role in the social composition of our contemporary social formation.

In 1950, the Higher Education participation rate in England was 3.4% (Bolton 2012). University education served to reproduce a ruling class through the pursuit of

education as an end in itself. Over time, this began to change as industries demanded more and more specialised labour-power. Writing in 1970, when the participation rate had increased to 8.4%, E.P Thompson discussed the way in which the newly-founded Warwick University operated as an appendage to the giant (and often transnational) firms which organised production in Britain. Skilled labour-power and research facilities were to be provided, at a state-subsidised rate, to industrial beneficiaries who were deeply embedded into the governance structures of the new institution, which he termed Warwick University Ltd. (E. P. Thompson 2014, 41). These increasingly corporate universities began to educate a stratum of the working class for white collar job roles - and this change was one of the major factors in the emergence of student radicalism throughout the following decades. Thompson's analysis still fitted with Marx's assumption, however, because this specialised form of education was offered to a few future workers in order to specifically develop their labour power for the needs of industry. Only with the next step in the changing role of education in our social composition did that assumption begin to be tested.

Anthony Giddens, one of the chief theorists of the Blairite "third way", argued that the social democratic state's investment role should be reconfigured from a welfare state pursuing the post-production redistribution of wealth to the creator of a new mixed economy with an entrepreneurial culture which could achieve the redistribution of "potential" (Giddens 1999, 99–128). He argued that demand for unskilled labour was in terminal decline due to the development of information technology, and so mass higher education needed to be made an option available to the bulk of British society in order to allow them to respond to the changing demands of the labour market. Students would be the responsible risk takers who, because they were paying fees to access education, would make sound and rational individual

investment decisions based on their conception of their human capital and the state of the labour market. Their collective investments would create that redistribution of potential and give everyone access to social mobility through individual investment choices rather than top-down, state-led social democratic approaches. Unlike the industrial capitalists of Warwick University Ltd., he accorded education a partial autonomy - rather than specific skill training for corporate needs, he placed an emphasis on the development of cognitive and emotional competence that could adapt to different environments. As the inevitable expansion of high skill labour continued, the students who proved to be rational investors in human capital would reap their rewards in the form of a larger range of possibilities for advancement through the labour market. It is in this light that we can see the two signal Blairite reforms of higher education: the raising of the cap on student numbers and the introduction of tuition fees. Higher education was now an individual form of investment in the future, rather than a corporate-directed programme of skill development or a pursuit of education as an end in itself.

However, this expansion developed in ways which fell far outside the theoretical framework Giddens provided – from the most abstract levels of government policy, down to the concrete reality of work in a pub. His giddy proclamation of the “final discrediting of Marxism” (1999, vii) blinded him to resources that might have helped him see the contradictions of his approach. The most obvious development which Giddens failed to account for was that expanded access to higher education immediately became factored into the social wage. These Blairite reforms allowed a much wider layer of people to access what used to be the privilege of (intertwined) class and academic elites. As such, it was a significant concession to the working class, for whom mass higher education became a viable possibility for the first time.

As long as increased levels of education fitted the demands of the labour market, this concession was one which served the interests of both labour and capital. Giddens envisaged it as one of the interventions of the “entrepreneurial state”, which could successfully mediate between the divergent interests of classes in order to produce universally beneficial outcomes. However, should the future labour market require less educated labour power, a contradiction could potentially emerge. If students failed to act as entirely rational economic actors interested only in the viability of their human capital long term and continued pursuing education even if the “graduate premium” started to evaporate in the labour market, then the over-production of graduate labour-power would result. Too many people would be receiving too much education for capital’s needs.

Retrospectively, discarding the assumption that students would act as utility-maximising rational actors seems obviously flawed. Instead of turning off the tap themselves, potential students facing this crisis of overproduction might continue piling into higher education for many reasons: because you think you’ll be one of the lucky ones; because university offers a temporary holiday from the reality of the job market; because, shockingly, education offers something more than just an expansion of human capital but in fact an expansion of human potential *beyond* capital. In such a situation, rather than a safe investment, higher education would increasingly become a risky bet - and yet the self-regulation mechanism of rational economic choice might still fail. But should this happen the state would then lack an external regulation mechanism that could be applied without withdrawing the concession of mass higher education and attempting to radically reduce the social wage offered to young people. Reapplying or reducing the cap on student numbers to halt the crisis of overproduction would become the only rational approach from the point of view of the capitalist class

in production taken as a whole, and yet it would be a politically difficult task, because a government cannot withdraw that concession without admitting that actually this mode of production structurally requires a large class of proletarians whose human potential is deliberately limited and who are made to toil in boring, low quality work for their entire lives.[92] A strange dynamic might emerge, in which capital would be unable to utilise the volume of educated labour-power that society produced. Quite apart from the excess cost of such mass higher education, this development might also ultimately hurt the social division of labour in just the way Garnier and Smith identified - by creating a class of workers with access to theoretical resources and ideas beyond their station.[93]

These problematic dimensions of Giddens' approach became profoundly evident following the 2007-8 crisis. Given the ongoing process of in-work immiseration, higher education became an increasingly attractive holiday from full immersion into the labour market *at the same time* as unskilled work began to expand as a proportion of total employment, particularly for young people. These two contradictory dynamics combined to produce a rapid escalation in the overproduction tendency. The response of the coalition government was to go further than the Blairites had done in strengthening the incentives to self-regulate access to education by increasing the downsides to an investment in higher education via the introduction £9,000 tuition fees

[92] Randall Collins identifies this "credential inflation" as a major cause of young service workers' alienation: "the mass inflationary school system tells students that it is providing a pathway to elite jobs, but then spills most of them into an economy where menial work is all that is available unless one has outcompeted 80% of ones' school peers" (Collins 2013, 52). He identifies the impetus driving the long term trend towards the massification of higher education as technological unemployment, with the expansion of HE functioning as a covert neo-Keynsian labour scheme. This is a very similar argument to mine here, but it seems to me that Collins, in his deterministic reading of technological unemployment as a political motive force, fails to account for the way in which the expansion of higher education was a result of the balance of forces between classes.

[93] Previous examples of the over education of labour-power can probably only be found through working class autodidactic development, rather than mediated through the state in this way (see E. P. Thompson 2013).

(later amended to rise with inflation). These fees would be covered by government loans under relatively generous conditions, for the time being, but further changes to those conditions were not ruled out. The coalition government also totally lifted the cap on student numbers, leading to a removal of the state as even a partial mediator of the number of students entering education. The goal of these reforms was to create a fully-marketized sector, at which point it was assumed students would start behaving like proper rational actors. The failure of young people to act like consumers was to be solved by increasing marketisation.

However, a significant movement amongst university students and staff was able to partly block further progress towards this long term goal (Myers 2018). There was no market in tuition fees because the cap on fees was never entirely lifted, and the repayment of the loans offered to pay fees were conditional on your earnings being above a threshold, meaning that there was still a residual protection for students whose investment failed. The resulting higher education system was half-way to a full market, but still so non-functional that it had to be backed through huge levels of state finance in the form of student loans. With no cap on student numbers, the state's partial withdrawal had removed one of the key levers available to policymakers through which they could have directed the rudderless sector without replacing it with a functional alternative. When, as in the UK, education is conducted on a social scale by institutions with in-built formal autonomy from capital and with varying forms and levels of insulation from the kind of pressures which produce a Warwick University Ltd., then this potential for the overproduction of graduate labour power expands significantly.

Rather than becoming a rational investor in a state-backed entrepreneurial scheme, the student was now remodelled as a rational consumer in a supposedly

marketized education sector, but still the concession of mass higher education could not be walked back. In 2017, the rate of initial participation in higher education reached 49.8%. Before long, if trends continue, a majority of young people will participate in higher education of some form before the age of 30. This is a seismic shift in both the raw number and social background of those experiencing higher education in the UK. For the first time, university education has become accessible for a huge proportion of this generation of working class kids, despite the fact that such education is increasingly irrational from the point of view of capital and continues to be deliberately disincentivised by successive Tory governments through the loading of a huge debt burden onto graduates. There is a disjuncture between a technical composition which is increasingly reliant on the young as a precarious and immiserated service sector workforce and a social composition which offers them vastly expanded opportunities to pursue education – all as the result of a Blairite concession which is proving particularly difficult to reverse.

The degradation of work post-crisis and expansion of employment in low-wage precarious jobs means that many of these graduates are being sent into a labour market where they are much more educated than they need to be for the work they end up doing. British higher education now produces, to use a phrase which provoked much debate when it was coined in 2012, a huge number of “graduates without a future” (P. Mason 2012) for whom the promise of education has decisively failed. The class fraction which this thesis studies is at the forefront of this dynamic. 34.2% of all students who graduated in or after 2007 are overqualified for their current job role (ONS 2019c) and, from 2013 onwards, there were more skill mismatches caused in the UK economy by over-skilling than by under-skilling:

Figure 8. Overeducation overtook undereducation as a cause of skill mismatches in the UK in mid-2012, % of all mismatches (OECD 2017)

Rather than the contradictions of the labour market and the forceful proletarianization necessitated by capitalist class structure always being realised on exiting school, many workers now experience this moment of class formation at the point of exit from higher education (be that via graduating or dropping out). Will you be a graduate without a future, or one of the lucky ones? Will the cost of education be realised in an increased value of labour-power, or not?

Many of the workers involved in this inquiry are those for whom the answer is negative. At any one time in the inquiry, the kitchens of the PT and BH contained workers who either held or were studying for Bachelors degrees in politics, criminology, biomedical science, and ecology, to name just a few. A near-majority of the Wetherspoon workers at the BH and PT were, to some degree, university-educated. This group were either still students, dropouts, or recent graduates. In part, this is a feature of Brighton being a university town with a high concentration of students - at the time of the 2011 census, students in further or higher education made up 14.1% of the city's population, compared to an English average of 8.2% (BHCC

2014).[94] The impacts of this social class composition will vary across the terrain of production, but one of the major impacts of over-education on the workers' experience of work is to reduce motivation and productivity (Allen and Van der Velden 2001), or in our terms, to exacerbate the refusal of work that arises out of the experience of exploitation. Just as Garnier and Smith feared, over-education tends to produce workers who are more reluctant to accept their role in the social division of labour, and more likely to have access to the kind of ideological resources which legitimate and articulate this refusal as part of a wider political project.[95] Darren articulated this dynamic when he explained his exceptionally low productivity via his reading of Marx's 1844 manuscripts: his understanding of the concept of alienation acted as a philosophical justification for his individual refusal of work. Other workers who variously referenced their readings of Marx, Noam Chomsky, Paul Mason and Slavoj Žižek during our interviews also made the same point clear – their everyday

[94] This is not to say, however, that this is an isolated phenomenon. There is significant evidence of workers' experiencing the same thing elsewhere, including worker writing from people like Mohamed-Ali Semlali who experienced unemployment following completing a masters' degree before ending up at Spoons'spoons. He describes his first meeting with a job coach when applying for Job Seekers Allowance (JSA). The coach said, in blunt terms: 'welcome to the real world, it's nothing like university'. When he did find work, it was as a kitchen porter: 'I'm washing piles of dishes, whilst sliding across the slippery floor. My arms ache from continuously loading trays full of chips and hash-browns into a tall furnace. I'm sweating and the only respite from the heat is the walk-in freezer …' (Semlali 2016; 2017).

[95] Whilst this tendency is accurate on the larger scale, the exact degree to which any one individual student experiences this will vary. Different courses and universities will offer more or less opportunities to interact with these ideological resources – for instance, a heavily vocational course in led by an academic with no interest in assigning Marx, Butler or Foucault to their undergraduates will be a very different experience to studying criminology at the University of Brighton (where students are taught all three in their first year). Academics often end up engaged in their own forms of struggle when trying to include emancipatory and critical ideas into the courses they teach in the face of an increasing drive to emphasize "employability" and optimize education for the ends of capital in the way EP Thompson identified. In this sense, the contested technical composition of university workers and the social composition of the education system is uneven, and we can't present overeducation as a smooth, undifferentiated phenomena.

experiences of work were changed and their forms of actions influenced by their broad understanding of political ideas.

The wider significance of the overproduction of graduate labour-power for the workers' movement deserves substantial further engagement, but in the context of this inquiry it suffices to say that a significant proportion of the pub workers involved in this inquiry had experienced a moment of traumatic class formation in which they realised that the their position in the social division of labour meant that they could expect their working life to consist of years, decades, or even a lifetime of drudgery. Their access to higher education, however, gave them the means to legitimate their angry response to this reality with political ideas and ideological resources which might not have otherwise been available to them. The contradiction of our social and technical class compositions resulted in a flammable mixture.

It all started with a rota

In October 2017, a number of members of staff at the PT got a nasty shock. Their contracts stipulated a guaranteed minimum number of weekly hours, which was meant to amount to 75% of their average week. But for anyone who had started working more regularly over the course of the last few years, a delay in the updating of contracts meant that this hourly number was inaccurate. Many were still on contracts that guaranteed them just 8 hours of work a week, even if they regularly worked more like 20-40 hours.

The new rota turned this inaccuracy into a serious problem. Hours had been cut right down, with some workers given only their contractual minimum rather than their habitual shifts. That meant that some worker faced cuts of between 12 and 30 hours a week, leaving many worried about their ability to make rent that month. A small

group of five workers, (Charlie, Rosie, Anna, Darren, and Mike) one of whom had a past affiliation with anarcho-syndicalist politics (Charlie), had previously considered attempting to form a union at the pub. Now, they decided, was the time to put their ideas into action. Rather than just moving on and finding another job, they decided that there was “no point jumping ship” and that it was “time to stop running away” (‘Spread the Spoons Strike’ 2018). They would collectivise their antagonism with management and start to build a serious organisation that could challenge the balance of class forces in the workplace. They put feelers out, looking to get in touch with people who could help them. Darren asked a friend at their second job if they were aware of anyone who knew about trade unions. My name came up, and I met with the self-organised group for the first time at a small table in the PT.

After our initial conversation, they began their process of self-organisation by getting in touch with the only trade union with some history of organising at Wetherspoon pubs: the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU). Their initial discussions with the union were conducted over the phone, and they were told that the best strategy for them to adopt would be to recruit a majority of the workforce (“50%+1”) and then the union could begin the process of seeking statutory recognition and a formal collective bargaining agreement. They were sent paper membership forms to fill out and return. Initially, they were given no guidance or training on how to have organising conversations with colleagues, nor any idea of how the nascent union branch could build power in the workplace.

Despite this less than promising start, the nucleus of workers demonstrated that they were well connected to informal work groups and key organic leaders by rapidly (and covertly) signing up a much wider group of employees, so that within the month roughly 30% of the workforce was in the union. Andrew told me the story of how he

came to be recruited to the branch later down the line: “[Name] was like all discreet and asked: ‘are you pissed off? and I was like, yeah, then he was like, ‘we've got something going on.’ I was like, okay tell me about it. And then I realize there’s like 20 people in [the union branch] already”. As workers were recruited to the union, they got added to a members-only Facebook Messenger group chat. But despite lots of successes along these lines, they were still 20% short of the target they had been given by the central union.

However, another month down the line, three out of five of the workers who attended the initial union meeting (Darren, Anna and Mike) were under disciplinary investigation. This was part of a wider managerial crackdown on minor infringements across the pub, which appeared to have no clear motive. As far as the union members were aware, their organising initiative was still under wraps. Nonetheless, a number of workers were sacked for offences varying from unauthorised absence to taking a drink on shift without paying, whilst others were forced onto “Performance Action Plans” and given warnings. The growing self-organised structure responded to these disciplinaries by discreetly organising for union members to be accompanied to their hearings by experienced workers who had been through disciplinary processes before. Whilst some were sacked, others left of their own accord - choosing to take the individual option of “quittin’” rather than relying on self-organisation to improve the situation in the workplace (Mulholland 2004). This constant turnover meant that the nascent union branch was focused on defending its existing members as much as it was recruiting new ones, and so struggled to reach 50%+1 density. It felt to key branch activists like Charlie as if they were trapped in a cycle of collecting dues on the promise of eventually building collective power, but that power was nowhere to be seen. During this period Charlie described doing union work as “organising where you take

instructions", and was wary about the potential of "exchanging one set of bosses for another … ideally the union should be an appendage to us rather than us just giving them the numbers." In addition to these strategic problems, there were some significant practical obstacles – the BFAWU had no online joining form, so the only way to become a union member was to fill out a paper form. It was hard enough to convince young workers to go through the jarring process of filling out and posting a paper form, but to make matters worse a number of completed membership forms that were sent to head office were lost, meaning that some people who thought they were members were in fact not at all. The campaign seemed close to collapse very soon after it had started.

In January, hours were further cut in the PT, leading to a reduction in wages for all the associates. Some associates had the official length of their shift cut from six to five hours – but the same amount of work needed to be done, and so they were forced to do an hour of unpaid overtime. Bar associates were regularly working for an additional hour and a half unpaid every closing shift, as well as missing their statutory breaks and, they suspected, having their clock-out times retrospectively edited by the pub manager. For some, this had a significant impact on their ability to pay rent and bills. If the negative changes continued month-on-month, Charlie said, "we could be in trouble." In an attempt to deal with the discontent, the bar manager was forced to call a meeting, which carried on for an exhausting three hours as workers questioned him and asked for reassurances that hours would return to normal. But the manager avoided giving any firm commitments.

Workers from the PT and BH were often in contact as staff frequently swapped between the two. So, it was not a surprise when workers at the BH decided that they too would begin to self-organise. Their grievances particularly centred on the

authoritarian pub manager, and the way in which he had formed a clique of male workers around himself who were allowed significant disciplinary leeway. Some workers believed them to be using cocaine while on shift with the knowledge of their manager, whilst everyone else was threatened with the sack for trivial offences like serving themselves a Pepsi on their break and not paying for it. This group were also allegedly prioritised for promotion and then not held to for account when they failed in their new responsibilities. After the first conversation Andrew had about potentially joining the union, he was invited to a meeting with the workers who were organising in his pub. When he turned up, he was convinced to join with a simple argument: “when we first started, it wasn't about joining a union to get 10 pounds an hour. It was down to that fucking asshole. Let's get rid of him. How can we do that? Join a union? Sounds good.” Once again, the fight for control was acting as the pilot light of class struggle. As well as getting rid of the pub manager, their goals included the preservation of a (undefined) set of “rights”, and an increase in the “fairness” of the internal labour market. They workers involved intended to achieve these goals through strike action, which they saw as the most direct way of “[sticking] it to the man” (Kate). They also began to build towards the 50%+1 density target, although the division within the workforce between the favourites of the pub manager and the union branch led to more difficulty recruiting, as many workers were keen not to be seen taking sides.

After six months of organising, all the while becoming increasingly convinced that the union’s current strategy was a dead end, the workers at both pubs were amazed to see McDonalds workers organised with the BFAWU striking on the first of May - and the strike being swiftly followed by a pay rise. Activists at the PT

spearheaded the preparation of a collective letter to send to the union, demanding a change of strategy:

> We saw the McStrike on the 1st of May. We know that at some of those five stores just a couple of workers were actually on strike. But they still managed to win their biggest pay rise in ten years. Our branches are better organised than that. We think we could win a pay rise. So, we demand that we are balloted immediately for strike action, and when that ballot is successful we want a 24-hour strike for £10 an hour to be called as quickly as possible.

However, before the letter could be sent, BFAWU transferred the two Wetherspoon branches to another part of the union: the Fast Food campaign. This was the campaign which had organised the McStrike. They would be following exactly the strategy they had just observed. The Fast Food campaign within the BFAWU draws heavily on the experience of the *Fight for $15* in the United States, and adopts a similar organising model (A. J. Wood 2020). Strikes were used as communications opportunities, designed to win both conventional media and social media attention and inflict damage on the brand of the companies involved. However, in order to simplify the narrative that would be communicated on the day, the initial demands developed by the self-organised branches around rotas and management would be placed below the demand for "£10 and a union" that was central to the campaign's communications approach.

Alongside this headline-grabbing approach to strike action went a systematic approach to workplace organising. In many ways, this approach was closer to the techniques of self-organisation that had organically emerged before the trade union had become involved. As Charlie described it, "it's the kind of thing we were trying to intuitively do anyway." Shop-floor organisation was to be built through solidifying relationships of mutual support and gathering signed pledges from workers to strike for £10 an hour (rather than union membership forms). For the first time, the workers

were involved in properly mapping the workplace. They identified supporters, neutrals and opponents and considered how to convert key organic leaders through systematic organising conversations. BFAWU provided experienced support from full-time campaign organisers who had been employed by the union after leading strikes at the McDonalds branches in which they worked. This support proved invaluable and led to shop-floor workers and the self-organised structure identifying itself closely with the union for the first time. Key active workers sensed that not only would this new approach clarify the route to achieving workplace power, but also that building a cross-company campaign could increase the general significance of their actions: “there is potential to turn it into a bigger campaign – something that could turn into a movement” (Charlie). Earlier discussions about the political need to organise alongside high-leverage but disorganised workforces like those in supermarkets had indicated that this potential was of interest from the start, but now it began to feel practically achievable. Some of the key activists in the pub also gained a sense of confidence from their involvement with the ACORN community and renters union branch in the city. The ACORN branch began with a group of a few students and workers connected to University of Sussex in 2017, and grew rapidly after a series of victories, from rent strikes to successfully blocking evictions (Cant 2018). These activists saw how “ACORN runs like fucking clockwork” (Charlie), and this gave them a sense that “doing the work will actually get us there” (Rosie). For the first time in our interviews, organisers began to express serious confidence in the organising process.

The initial branch activists had successfully convinced a new layer of organic leaders across the pubs to become involved. These organic leaders, who had been informally peer-selected by their informal work groups, were those who maintained an attitude that “we work for each other, not for them” and were already involved in

spreading embryonic forms of solidarity and collectivism. This development was helped by the fact that BFAWU changed tack dramatically to promote a robust of plan of action up to and including a strike – and with that change, organic leaders were convinced that the union was trustworthy.

This mindset was in sharp contrast to that of another group of workers, mostly in other pubs across the UK. Through a large Facebook group, tens of thousands of Wetherspoon workers were able to communicate with one another. The group mostly consisted of memes and jokes about dealing with customers or the hard parts of the job, but as the union came into the open ahead of a strike ballot in 2018 it became a forum for furious discussion. Whilst many were supportive of the goals of the unionising pubs, others argued – often angrily – with union workers that they were just pint-pullers and didn't deserve more than the slightly above minimum hourly rate Wetherspoon paid. Often they would compare the wages and conditions found in the job to others in the sector, and claimed that Wetherspoon workers had it easy and deserved nothing more than they got. As an outside observer, it was profoundly depressing to see how they had internalised their own low status and lowered their own expectations. Sennett and Cobb identified the same self-abasement in the face of managerial domination amongst industrial workers just prior to the neoliberal turn (Sennett and Cobb 1993), so such a mentality cannot be uniquely attributed to the impacts of consciousness deflation as a subjective project, but the "responsibilisation" of issues was profoundly concordant with Fisher's analysis. This section of the workforce seemed to view their hard work and their generosity towards their employer as validating their personal self-worth, and any implication that the relationship between employer and employee was exploitative necessarily imperilled their idea of themselves as equal partners with Tim Martin. The fact that they were paid less than

£10 an hour whilst Martin is a multi-multi-millionaire didn't seem to register. As Silva identifies in an American context, many service workers end up believing that "if they had to survive on their own, then everyone else should too" (Silva 2015, 84) and actively rejected solidarity with other working class people. This approach was colloquially referred to by unionised Wetherspoon workers as "bootlicking": that is to say, a subservient attitude managerial authority.[96]

Overcoming this bootlicker mentality was a key subjective development that resulted from the turn from individual to collective worker resistance. Rather than pretending that they were equals with management or putting themselves in the role of passive victims of management exploitation, the workers who collectively self-organised for action instead created a subjectivity for themselves as legitimate antagonists, or in more colloquial terms, as angry workers who had power and were not afraid to use it. This subjective position allowed them to both recognise exploitation and reject passive victimhood. This subjective transformation was only made possible by the fact that these workers were building a union *in order to go on strike*. In this workplace, collective action was not just a calculated exertion of bargaining power, but also a more deeply affective expression of the desire to take the fight to their bosses. On this subjective level, the leap into a general class struggle was easily comprehensible – and as a result, the experience of strike action would be an intensely politicising one for many of the workers involved.

[96] For a further discussion of a very similar "psycho-cultural phenomenon" see Williams and Read on negative solidarity (Williams 2010; Read 2013). Williams's description of "an aggressively enraged sense of injustice, committed to the idea that, because I must endure increasingly austere working conditions (wage freezes, loss of benefits, declining pension pot, erasure of job security and increasing precarity) then everyone else must too" is an accurate description of the sentiment expressed in these online communities. It is also important to note that the expression of pro-union and pro-strike sentiment was doubtless hampered by the fact that this Facebook group was a very open forum, with the various strata of Wetherspoon management rubbing shoulders with associates. The potential for victimization facing any workers

Before discussing collective action directly, however, there is one more narrative point to make. During the strike ballot, Wetherspoon brought forward an annual national pay award by six months. This early concession did nothing to deter the workforce at the two balloting pubs, and soon after they returned a 100% vote for strike action.

Experiences of strike action

At midnight on October 4th 2018, a group of workers walked out of the PT. They had been scheduled to remain on shift until 4am to help clean the pub after service, but now they were officially on strike. A group of supporters, including the newly-elected Labour MP for Kemptown, had snuck inside the pub ten minutes beforehand, and cheered them as they left. I was there too, in my capacity as participant observer. A group of suited men, identified by strikers as managers from Wetherspoon head office, shuffled awkwardly by the bar. Outside, the workers were met by an even bigger crowd. To chants of “I believe that we will win” they marched to the BH and greeted another group of strikers coming out of work early. Together, they marched to the seafront, where Ian Hodson - president of their union - gave a speech, before going to bed. They would meet again in just a few hours. Their action was taking place as part of a wider “Fast Food Shutdown”, which combined strike action by workers at McDonalds (also members of BFAWU), TGI Fridays (Unite), and UberEats (IWW and IWGB) with significant public support from the Labour party and particularly its strongest internal faction, Momentum.

When I joined them on the coach to their central London demonstration early the next morning, workers were busy discussing what a general strike was and learning the words to “Solidarity Forever” (an anthem of the 20th century IWW). Workers identified an expansive sense of (class) solidarity that they felt with other fast

food workers and discussed the conversations they were having with other friends in similar jobs. There was a sense of taking part in an adventure. For many of them, last night had been one of their first ever political experiences. They had never seen a picket line until they were on one. Whilst discussing their decision to take action, one worker I had not interviewed before, Tom, made an interesting analogy to video games. In linear video game design, progression through the narrative is often marked by a series of increasingly difficult “boss fights”. Each victory moves the player closer to completing the game. Take the highly popular Pokémon Gameboy franchise, the first and second generations of which were released between 1996 and 2002. For British children born from the late eighties through to the late nineties, playing this series was often a formative cultural experience. In these games, players fight bosses in order to earn badges and progress towards a final goal. In between these fights they move forwards through the game area, gradually improving their Pokémon collection as they do so. However, these more exploratory phases are always just an interlude between the major set-piece confrontations that open up new parts of the game area. The general design principle of the series was that, as Tom put it, “if you’re coming across enemies then you’re going in the right direction” - and he directly applied this principle to the strike. *Because* the action provoked resistance from the company, *therefore* it must be a good strategic move on the part of the workforce.

In this conception, it is remarkable that the management of Wetherspoon feature only as bosses to be defeated and not as potential collaborators. But it is also important to note that the implication of the allegory is that after defeating this boss, the workers will be left to confront another and then another until some end goal is reached. That end goal - implied but undefined - was a constant spectre in interviews during the course of the inquiry and particularly on the strike day itself. The general

consensus position in group interviews was that “capitalism is bad on the bottom” (Reece). Workers recognised the union as providing an opportunity to realise existing desires to “stick it to the man” (Kate) – an opportunity they had never had before, as none of the interviewees had ever been members of an active trade union branch before.

But over time, key organic leaders in the pubs expressed more advanced socialist political consciousness. This consciousness often went further than an aspiration for parliamentary socialism alone. The experience of the strike showed workers what the balance of forces at the level of the workplace was, and how decisive it could be in shaping wider outcomes across the social formation. As Charlie said, “it’s one thing to vote for Jeremy Corbyn [then the leader of the Labour party], but this is where the battleground will be”. The strategy which emerged out of the experience of strike action was very much about building a wider workers’ movement. Interviewees reported that the demobilising fear of being isolated abated following the strike, and instead was: “replaced by the reality that there are many more workers in the same position as us, and a growing number organising to fight back. And a belief that all of us deserve better wages, better conditions and the power to make it happen” (Andrew). They aspired to organise alongside workers in the same industry across the city, as well as other low-paid workplaces like supermarkets. During our discussion of Marx’s *Value, Price and Profit,* both Charlie and James, who took part in the reading group expressed their agreement with Marx’s argument (discussed in chapter five above in relation to the leap) that the slogan of the trade unions ought not to be “a fair day's wage for a fair day's work!”, but instead “abolition of the wages system!”.

Once in London, they demonstrated alongside striking workers from McDonalds, TGI Fridays, and UberEats in Leicester square, where the rally was

addressed by the then shadow Chancellor John McDonnell: “The message to every exploitative employer in this country is that we’re coming for you. We’re not tolerating low pay, insecurity or lack of respect. We will mobilise as one movement, the Labour and trade union movement, in solidarity. And I guarantee you this: with strength, determination, courage and solidarity, we will win.” Following a short meeting with workers from other striking workplaces, the Wetherspoon workers got back on a coach and headed home to Brighton, and their workplaces.

Now they would turn to the actual job of picketing. Whilst the central London demonstration had been organised and their attendance mandated by the Fast Food campaign within the BFAWU, the local pickets and demonstrations were left more in the hands of the workers themselves. They organised a community demonstration that drew 300 supporters to the city centre, before splitting the crowd in two to hold mass pickets of both pubs. Crowds of supporters, from anarcho-syndicalist and Trotskyist organisations to the trades council and the Labour party, swarmed round the doors. This picketing was highly successful in making entry to the pubs difficult. Customers trying to cross the picket line required a police escort to do so. The chants included: “Shut it down, shut it down, Brighton is a union town”. When it came time for some of the strikers to go back into the pubs for the hours of their shift which continued past midnight, the managers informed them that both pubs had closed early, and that they would be getting paid for the rest of their shifts anyway. This shift of focus from a symbolic demonstration in London, which marched past a Wetherspoon, a TGIs and a McDonalds without taking any kind of disruptive action, to a mass picket of a striking workplace allowed different power resources to be exerted.

While walking away from the Leicester square demonstration, Andrew argued that he had “wanted to do more damage” by focusing their collective action on the

workplace instead of abiding by the decision of the central union and getting on a coach to London. There was an implied belief amongst workers that they had more associational and workplace leverage that could be exerted at the point of production than the union staffers who designed the strategy had given them credit for, and that if they had been making their own decisions they might have stayed in Brighton all day to use that leverage. After all, the pubs only remained open during the day because of scab labour being brought in from as far away as Eastbourne and Portsmouth. This highlighted a tension between the sometimes contradictory approaches to both tactics and communications during the strike advocated by the central union and the local branches. In general, whilst the central union wanted to push media-friendly forms of action and use universally-understandable issue frames, the local branches tended towards high-leverage forms of action and grievances specific to their own workplaces.

In the wake of this strike action, Wetherspoon granted national concessions (although not through direct negotiation with the BFAWU): they gave all workers a 60p per hour pay rise (on top of the annual pay rise being brought forward); scrapped the 18-20 year old pay band; and introduced a £1 an hour bonus for night shifts. Local concessions also followed, with night shifts being scrapped entirely, rota issues being resolved, and pub management at the BH being changed following formal grievance procedures. It was these local concessions, which were foregrounded in little if any of the national and international media coverage of their strike, which made the most significant difference to the workers involved over the coming months. Andrew told me that after the strike they had become so confident about the strength of the union that the collaborative team playlist played over the kitchen speaker system while they worked now included pro-union songs that they sang along to.

A few weeks after the strike, six Wetherspoon workers were on the streets again. This time, however, they were not picketing their workplace. They were defending a tenant from an illegal eviction, as part of an action organised by the local branch of ACORN community and renters" union. A month later they would be out on the street with ACORN again, this time successfully demanding compensation for a Wetherspoon worker, Charlotte, who had been living in a damp house for six months. These two initiatives are linked not only by common personnel, but also by the common antagonisms of contemporary working class life. The circulation of struggles across the terrain of production and reproduction links together the social and technical composition of the working class. On both terrains, these workers found their greatest success when they built associational forms of class power and applied it to their opponents using direct and antagonistic methodologies.

In the year after October 2018, the structures of self-organisation built at the pubs remained strong, intermittently winning further local victories, like the right to turn the grill off in the kitchens when the temperature gets too high and the refurbishment of the staffroom in the PT. However, despite their appeals to other Wetherspoon workers, the two branches remained largely isolated. Workers at the Brockley Barge Wetherspoon in South London joined the BFAWU and made open demands to management around health and safety, and pockets of membership likely exist at other pubs across the country, but so far the BH and PT are the only two pubs where Wetherspoon workers have taken strike action.

Class power in hospitality

In a recent study of worker resistance in the UK, Alex Wood has argued that hospitality workers cannot exert significant structural or associational forms of power, and therefore have to fall back on symbolic power if they want to bargain for better

wages and conditions (2020). By orientating their collective action towards the goal of damaging a company's public image (as mediated by the means of representation in the form of both conventional and social media) workers, in this account, gain power resources unavailable to them by other approaches. Therefore, *contra* Jane McAlevey, workers do not need to organise deeply-grounded union structures but can instead rely upon more superficial digitally-mediated mass self-communication networks. This approach has its root in the recognition that almost all fast food consumers are individuals occupying a similar class position as the workers serving them, and that evidence of exploitation is likely to change their consumption preferences given the high degree of consumer choice made possible by the broad range of options in the market.

However, the evidence of this case study suggests a contradictory conclusion: that systematic, McAlevey-style organising approaches can be central to the development of union structures in hospitality workplaces, and that hospitality workers can develop other forms of power to increase both their immediate bargaining power and to contribute to a political form of class power. Whilst the withdrawal of their labour did not lead to the immediate closure of both pubs due to scab labour being brought in from other parts of the country, the associational power of a mass picket was able to bring production to a halt.

As I have previously argued, this case study can be taken as a demonstration of the continuing relevance of Bronfenbrenner and Juravich's work on greenfield organising efforts in the United States (Cant and Woodcock, 2020). This work, which was discussed in chapter one above, analysed efforts to gain union recognition in both the public and private sectors in the U.S. during the 1990s and came to the conclusion that organising strategies which empowered the union rank and file in the workplace

and pursued collective action were the most effective (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1995; 1998; Bronfenbrenner 1997). In light of this research, I have argued that: “if the workers’ movement in Britain is to be revived, it will be through politically-informed organising methodologies which initially aim for action rather than representation, build from existing worker self-organisation, and empower grassroots workers to determine the course of the struggles in their workplaces” (Cant and Woodcock 2020, 7). This emphasis on empowering self-organised workers to set the direction of their own struggle is of significant relevance to debates over power resources, in that tactics that aim at the use of symbolic power often require centralised institutional control (usually by a communications and media team), whereas on the evidence of this case study associational power can be much more readily controlled by workers who are organised on the shop-floor and best connected to local working class organisations. Associational power therefore seems to be a form of power which more closely fits what Bronfenbrenner identified as the most effective methodology for organising in previously non-unionised workplaces.

The conclusions reached during this study echo those of two organisers, Cailean Gallagher and Sarah Collins, involved in Better than Zero - a Scottish campaign aimed at organising predominantly young, low-paid service workers (Gallagher and Collins 2018). Their experiences of working with this same class fraction echo my own. They found that while the campaign could win small, temporary concessions in specific workplaces by relying on symbolic power and threats of legal action, this did not result in the creation of long-term structures of self-organisation or a lasting shift in the balance of forces in the workplace. The core of activists who led the campaign often ended up acting as an external “hit squad” who descended on a workplace as reinforcements. This process of analysis led to a reorientation in the

campaign towards a deeper organising approach whilst actively utilising inquiry as a tool to accelerate the development of self-organised structures. The strategic implication was that workers involved in the campaign would shift from relying on symbolic damage and towards the exertion of internal workplace power. Associational power would not be deployed by an outside hit squad, but instead be developed by the mutually-supporting development of self-organised workplaces across a city.

This combined evidence suggests that a significant proportion of hospitality workers have potential access to forms of class power beyond the symbolic and legalistic, and that self-organised workers are keen to develop and use these in a "boss fight" against their employers. Olin Wright once hypothesised that in low positional power workplaces (as identified through Perrone's use of input-out matrices) high levels of organisational power should be associated with a high propensity to strike (E. O. Wright 1984, 423). In the language of this thesis, his hypothesis amounts to the claim that workforces with low external workplace power and high associational power are strike prone. Whilst not a representative study, this case seems to demonstrate exactly the dynamic which Wright hypothesised.

After the strike I sat down with Andrew, the worker who had, whilst on strike, said that he "wanted to do more damage". I asked him what he thought the prospects were for the spread of organisation into other parts of the Brighton economy, and what the end goal of such an expanded workers' movement would be. He perceived a common class situation in the city: "most people my age who live here go to university here. They all get paid the same shit. We all live in the same area and we will go do the same kind of work, precarious work. Like we don't all do the same job at the same factory, but everyone's in that position." To him, this class position creates a basis for understanding collective fundamental class interests: "it's a class struggle, and all the

other issues of our class, even if it doesn't affect me, that is my shared issue because it is the class I'm in." And whilst the workplace struggle he was involved in might have officially been over wages and conditions, he and his co-workers had a bigger vision: "'at the moment we're doing a short-term thing. It's to get a living wage, get ourselves on our feet, because at the moment we're destitute - but yeah, like fuck yeah nationalise Spoons, take the means of production, like everyone thinks on that horizon." Nationalise Spoons was a revealing half-joke, a slogan which sounded absurd because of the degree of ambition it expressed. But it was also a deadly earnest expression of the aspirations of many of the workers and supporters involved in the struggle. As for the kind of tactics they could employ in a fight to take the means of production, he did not have specific plans, but: "I like the idea of wildcat strikes and I like the idea of ignoring the law when it comes to flying pickets." Andrew's horizon for the development of class power was resolutely not limited to symbolic forms of power, but rather envisaged expanded forms of positional and associational power, which would be wielded not just to achieve better compensation for exploitation but threaten the basis of that exploitation altogether.

The form of struggle that successfully emerged out of the self-organisation of Wetherspoon workers was characterised by the conversion of embryonic solidarity and refusal of work into a drive to organise for the purpose of collective action, overcoming the "bootlicker" mentality in the process. For workers on the shop-floor, their one day strike was the climax of a concerted effort to use all available forms of class power - particularly associational power - to confront the company and win short term concessions, but then also to build wider alliances and a wider movement which spanned the terrains of both the workplace, the neighbourhood and the city.

Conclusion

The emergence of self-organisation amongst pub workers is not a feature of any previous wave of British working class militancy. This is a sector almost without a history of organisation, where trade union density is in the low single digits. And yet, it is also a site of working class recomposition. The bifurcation of the pub industry following the Beer Orders has created a new kind of pub chain with a technical composition specifically premised on the production of surplus value in the pub. To that end, chains like Wetherspoon design systems of control which maximise the intensity of the application of labour-power in the production of service commodities. Increasingly, they also concentrate more workers in one place and invest more and more in the fixed capital they work with. These concentrated workers are striated by a job structure which is meant to break up relations of solidarity, but often fails to do so. As a result, the embryonic relationships of solidarity developed in the labour process allow for the growth of self-organisation and the conversion of this informal structure into a trade union branch as part of a move from individual resistance towards collective action. In this case, some worker had particularly strong ideological resources through which to legitimate their refusal of work because of their experience of higher education. The workplace was, in this respect, an example of the kind of tensions generated by a much wider contradiction in this social formation between the social and technical composition of the working class on the issue of education.

When this process of self-organisation was combined with a union strategy premised on collective action it proved successful at allowing the branches to mobilise for one day of strike action. Despite tensions between the strategic priorities of the rank and file and the central union, this action was successful at exerting significant associational power and winning immediate concessions on both a local and national

level. However, the workers involved did not view this as an end in itself. Instead, they had developed a much more expansive consciousness of the role of their collective in a general context of class conflict. This development indicated a significant potential for the growth of movement amongst this class fraction which could pursue a strategy of refusal directed at the entire mode of production.

Part 4: Discussion

In Marx's argument on the method of political economy in the *Grundrisse* he claims that "the concrete is the concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse" (Marx 1993, 101) .So, even though observable reality seems like the *starting point* for conceptual analysis, in fact it is the *result* of a process of conceptual analysis. In this thesis, I began with the abstract categories which structure the capitalist production of commodities. Then, I moved from the abstract to the concrete by inquiring into the concentration of these categories and relations in the reality of commodity production in a specific social formation. Now, I will finish by moving back towards the abstract totality through a process of determinate abstraction (as discussed in chapter four, above) and articulating the key directions of travel found through the process of inquiry.

Ch.9 From doomers to militants

The three interlinked case studies above make up one inquiry into a specific class fraction in a specific context: young, low-paid, disconnected service workers in Brighton. At the start of part three, I laid out two questions that I wanted this inquiry to answer: what are the key features of the social and technical composition of this fraction of the proletariat? When this class fraction self-organises and takes collective action, how does it do so, and what potential is there within that action for a generalised leap into a new political composition? By answering these, it was hoped that we might advance closer to an answer to the big, overarching strategic question: where is the independent action of the working class which could turn this interminable period of decay into a period of crisis (with the potential for resolution and transformation that entails)? Now, it is time to develop my general answers to these questions, and in doing so provide an overview of the class composition of the fraction seen as a whole.

Key features in the social and technical composition of the fraction

In his study of the “new terrain” of class struggle in the U.S., Kim Moody uses Hal Draper’s schematic representation of the internal structure of the working class, which shows the core of the working class as those fractions that are both engaged in the direct production of surplus value and concentrated in terms of space/fixed capital - to illustrate the ways in which class composition has changed over the last half century. Moody argues that an increasing number of workers once considered to be members of “peripheral” fractions of the working class (nurses, call centre workers,

retail workers, and so on) are being concentrated in capital-intensive, large, urban workplaces which are supplied by vulnerable extended supply chains - and they are gaining increasing amounts of potential leverage over capital as a result. As such, they are no longer truly peripheral, but instead part of a recomposed core. Therefore, he argues, the role of these class fractions in the class struggle is likely to become more pronounced (Moody 2017, 37–41). In the section that follows, I will discuss the cross applicability of this thesis to the British context in order to clarify the key features of the social and technical composition of the class fraction which is the subject of this inquiry.

In the UK, over the period 2007-15, the number of workplaces where one enterprise employed over 750 people fell by 10%, and the number where on enterprise employed between 150-749 stayed flat. On the other hand, workplaces employing between 1-9 people increased by 31%, and 10-149 increased by 13% over the same period (ONS 2016). This indicates a significant decline in the number of very large workplaces and a significant expansion in the number of medium and small workplaces. A similar trend is evident in overall employment by business size over a similar period (2011-19). The share of employment accounted for by large (250+ employees) businesses in the UK fell from 41.2% in 2011 to 39.5% in 2019, whilst employment amongst medium businesses (50-249) stayed constant at 12.6%, and the share of employment in small businesses (1-49) rose from 46.2% to 47.8%. In absolute terms, however, the number of workers employed in large businesses increased from 9,631,000 to 10,868,000 (a 12.8% increase), because of overall employment growth (BIS 2012; BEIS 2020).

By examining the growth in employment costs for companies in the non-financial business economy, we get the following picture of investment by UK capital in fixed and variable capital over the crisis decade (2009-18):

Figure 9. Changes in % expenditure on employment costs and total capital for UK non-financial economy by enterprise size band 2009-2018 (ONS 2019b)

Growth in expenditure on variable capital was proportionally largest amongst enterprises employing 50-249 people, at 44%, whilst it was only 39% in those employing 250 and over. The concentration of fixed capital also seems to have accelerated faster in small businesses after the crisis, with net capital expenditure growth reaching 218% amongst small businesses with over 10 employees (ONS 2019b). The trend amongst fixed capital therefore looks to be a similar, if more pronounced, version of the trend amongst variable capital, with large business declining in relative terms compared to other parts of social capital, whilst absolute growth continued.

So, despite a relative reduction in the proportions of both the number of workers and the amounts of fixed capital employed in large businesses, it is still true in absolute terms that over the last decade the number of workers employed by large UK

companies has increased, along with the sum of capital put into circulation by those companies. As measured through expenditure, the post-crisis decade has seen a relative de-concentration of the UK's social capital but increasing absolute concentration of both variable and fixed capital at the level of the large firm.

These overall changes in the organic composition of social capital at a national scale, however, do not necessarily reflect the changes impacting upon the class fraction which is the subject of this inquiry. As discussed above, there is a tendency for centrally-managed pub chains to increasingly concentrate larger numbers of workers in larger workplaces, and the expansion of platform work has concentrated hundreds of thousands of workers in common work spaces and in a common relation to capital in ways that are not reflected in this data, because of their self-employed status. We cannot understand class composition purely by observing the composition of capital as presented in the statistical releases of the state apparatus, however much easier that would make our lives.[97] Instead, the role of inquiry is to approach questions like these from the point of view of the working class and with the kind of attention to detail which is facilitated by long-term qualitative research. So, in order to develop a fuller response to Moody's thesis, and in doing so elucidate the key features of the social and technical composition of this fraction of the proletariat, this chapter will focus on discussing the key questions of control, leverage and ideology which can provide indications of the core or peripheral status of this class fraction at a qualitative level.

[97] It is important to clarify that this analysis of national-level data is only a preliminary one. It focuses on concentration *as it is measurable through expenditure at the level of the firm*, and so only tells part of the story. The development of significant capital reserves by non-financial companies, which has been a pronounced feature of the post-crisis period, remains outside this discussion. Marx also distinguishes between the slow process of concentration via accumulation, in which a capital grows through valorisation, and the rapid process of centralisation through changes in ownership, in which capitals are lumped together through mechanisms like joint-stock companies and mergers (1967, 1:586). In the discussion above I focus only on the first of these two accumulative processes, thereby excluding changes in ownership structures, be they centralising or decentralising.

The first feature of note in all three of the studies presented here is the intensity of the system of control imposed by capital. The nature of service commodity production is such that increases in the productivity of labour via increases in the efficiency of the work process through investment in fixed capital that amplifies the power of labour-power's cooperation is difficult. In all three of the examples discussed above, the pace of work is set in a very direct way by the pace of demand. There is no use in capital accelerating the ability to answer calls, deliver meals and serve drinks if there is no customer ready to purchase that service-commodity. The exogenous limitation of demand is particularly spatially and temporally immediate in the service sector compared to, for instance, manufacturing - where, despite the developments of Just-in-Time management, the pull of the supply chain does not lead to the same kind of minute-by-minute variation. Investment in fixed capital which attempts to accelerate relative surplus value production by increasing the speed of producing a single commodity is therefore less rational for capital in these industries than elsewhere. As a result, firms' investment in fixed capital in all of the studies above predominantly aimed at increasing the intensity of labour-power's application to the labour process as and when exogenous demand justifies it, thereby resulting in gains in absolute surplus value production by destroying the space created by individual and collective tactics of refusal. Writing in the 1970s, Edwards identified a general trajectory throughout capitalist development towards capital eliciting consent from workers engaged in production (R. Edwards 1979). Today, that trend seems to have gone into reverse amongst this fraction of the working class, situated at the leading edge of capitalist development.

Deliveroo workers have their work directed by an evolving black box algorithmic manager, which concentrates knowledge and skill in the hands of a distant office-

based workforce. Wetherspoon kitchen workers are pushed to fulfil orders faster and faster by the combination of EPOS technology with a new online iOrder mechanism which allows customer demand to accelerate past the limiting capacity of bar workers to provide service and constantly monitors the time taken to fulfil each order. Tom at FinServ is constantly having his work redesigned by a combination of consultants and the program office, always looking for new ways to develop the hybrid ACD/IT system to maximise the intensity of the labour process. When this experience of intensified work was combined with small enclosed spaces, as was the case for Wetherspoon workers, it produced an experience of labour which led workers to think in terms of imprisonment: again and again, when using metaphorical language to describe their work, Wetherspoon workers reached for the language of prisons. At FinServ, Tom escaped to parks to try and create some mental space between himself and the desk. Evidently, work intensification is not a new feature of this technical composition - it is, instead, one of the underlying tendencies of capitalist development. But its relative importance is a pronounced feature of the experience of this class fraction. In a service-commodity production context, work intensification is achieved not through the speeding up of the assembly line, but through a tightening of the managerial screw.

The current wave of technical recomposition in the workplace particularly focuses on the use of algorithmic management technologies towards this end, as the examples above show. The augmentation of human supervision by information technology allows for both increases in the intensity of the supervisory regime and the complexity of the production process. Alessandro Delfanti's work on the emergence of "augmented despotism" at Amazon distribution warehouses identifies how the long-standing dynamics of capitalist control have been exacerbated by the development of new forms of management technology (Delfanti 2019). As Briken has argued, the

knowledge extraction dynamics of algorithmic management are an accelerated form of those that existed in previous forms of capitalist management. Just as Taylorism focused on the extraction of knowledge about the labour process from workers in order to remove their control over it, so algorithmic management technology extracts knowledge in order to eliminate forms of refusal and inefficiency. However, she draws on the concept of “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1988) to argue that algorithmic management has the potential to go further than previous forms of control by collecting and utilising data that is intimately connected to the subject, even at the level of non-explicit micro-movements (Briken 2020). This acceleration of knowledge extraction on the level of the individual subject has the potential to multiply the trend toward despotism Delfanti has identified, as the collection of situated knowledge allows for a qualitative shift in the relationship between the algorithmic manager and the worker. On this basis we can conclude that algorithmic management intensifies the already-existing contradictions between capital and labour in an attempt to solve the indeterminacy contradiction in favour of capital, and in doing so creates a qualitatively new dynamic in the class relation.

As Griesbach et al. have identified, not every instance of algorithmic management is equally aggressive (Griesbach et al. 2019). We cannot speak of one form of algorithmic management as if we were characterising a regime like Freidman’s direct control or responsible autonomy. Instead, algorithmic management is a component within systems of control, and a burgeoning tendency at the forefront of capitalist development. But this tendency is not uncontested. As Gent has shown, workers managed by algorithms often engage in “metic commonality”, a form of collective, subversive and intelligent action that undermines the operation of

algorithmic management systems (Gent 2019, 223).[98] Rather than algorithmic management acting as an ultimate technical recomposition which allows capital to realise its fantasy of total control, it is just another escalation in the long process of capitalist development, and it is inevitably met by both informal and formal forms of working class resistance. The emergence of metic commonality as one of the latest forms of refusal out of which self-organisation can be built is evidence that the structural capacities of this class fraction are not being exhausted, but are in fact always in the process of being renewed.[99] Whilst certainly not all applications of algorithmic management are identical in terms of composition, the direction of travel observed within this inquiry is clearly towards more and more intense forms of direct control.

The most effective system of control studied in this inquiry was at FinServ, where capital incorporated elements of responsible autonomy and direct control management strategies alongside one another. However, this was largely due to the tension within that technical composition between staff retention (and associated skill development) and the cost of labour power. The quality/cost contradiction which has long been a part of call centre research was, again, a key feature. FinServ needed workers to complete high-quality calls, which necessitated skilled labour power and therefore forced them to innovate in their system of control. Responsible autonomy requires conceding the ability to organise work to workers themselves. This entails strengthening their own bonds of cooperation, allowing them to develop a monopoly of skill and knowledge over the labour process, and increasing the opportunities for

[98] Gent is here drawing on the Greek work 'metis' (μῆτις), which is usually translated as 'cunning intelligence' (2019, 224).
[99] In fact, some forms of algorithmic management are being built with the express intention of combatting the drive towards self-organization. Some more extreme examples, such as those deployed by Amazon-owned Whole Foods in the United States allegedly contain anti-union surveillance components (Peterson 2020).

refusal, none of which can be afforded if the intensity of labour is to be increased. Therefore, in other workplaces where the skill development dynamic of service-commodity production is less pronounced due to deskilling, there is no such incentive towards preventing turnover, thereby allowing for firms to implement much more draconian systems. As Moore and Joyce have identified, many platforms share a very common managerial model (P. V. Moore and Joyce 2019). This is a model which is very heavy on direct control, with almost no traces of autonomy for the workforce. The result is likely to be both higher rates of exploitation, and more intense class conflict. If systems based on or incorporating elements of responsible autonomy are being withdrawn in favour of more disciplinarian direct control via algorithmic management as a general tendency, then the indication of this inquiry is that it is likely to produce conditions which are more favourable to worker self-organisation in the long term.

We might characterise the potential direction of development in service-commodity production identified in this inquiry as heading towards systems of direct control (potentially via an expansion of the platform management model) imposed on an immiserated, concentrated and massified workforce, with the state no longer acting as a significant regulator of the employment relationship. This direction of development has the potential to be one in which worker self-organisation could more easily emerge to contest the carceral nature of work, and potentially escalate the pitch of class struggle in the workplace. But how might it do so?

Alongside the development of more authoritarian systems of control and the concomitant emergence of new forms of refusal and self-organisation, another technical trend evident in this inquiry is the emergence of a structural capacity for novel approaches to self-organisation. In the two case studies where the process of self-organisation got off the ground, the key informal work groups communicated via group

chats. In the case of Deliveroo workers these represented a particularly important way of grappling with the specific spatial dynamics of their labour process and were a primary forum through which to express and develop the embryonic solidarity on which collective action relies. When it came to mobilisation, both the pub chats and the Deliveroo chats would prove to be vital forums for winning support and making plans. Above, I explored how platform workers in particular can use these many-to-many communications methods to bypass unions which are used to acting in legally-recognised mediating roles. This problematisation of the role of unions in new technical compositions is not an entirely new phenomenon - the problem of expansion into non-unionised greenfield workplaces and sectors has long been discussed by labour researchers. However, this long-term challenge is taking on a new form in the context of the platform sector. Trade unionists interested in answers could do worse than to recognise that even if the role of unions as mediators is less prominent in this context, there is another potential role available to them, in which they act as agitators. The trade union structure that did emerge at Deliveroo in Brighton, whilst not ultimately successful, was built through exactly that kind of fast-moving, conflict-orientated approach.

So, as well as the acceleration of class domination in the workplace, the experience of precarious service work is also increasingly defined by the reorganisation of the organic structures produced by workers through their cooperation. That embryonic solidarity which acts as the substrate of working class self-organisation is now increasingly expressed through networked many-to-many communication. In this composition, the group chat emerges as a vital forum for informal work group formation and mobilisation. Whilst these group chats present challenges for the institutional mediation of self-organisation, particularly with

reference to platform workers, they can also provide vital infrastructure through which to scale and coordinate solidarity. Should renewed self-organisation emerge in service sector workplaces, these chats are likely to play a vital role.

This class fraction is likely to be increasingly managed by authoritarian means in order to maximise absolute surplus value production. The technical recompositions it is subject to in the workplace are introducing new algorithmic management mechanisms as a modality of long-existing features of the capital relation in production. In this regard, then, these workers are subject to the tendencies that characterise the forefront of capitalist development, and they are developing forms of self-organisation and refusal which respond to this new composition. As such, their conditions seem less like the “peripheral” service workers of previous social formations. As the production of service-commodities becomes increasingly central to the operation of social capital, so do the producers themselves.

On the social front, this class fraction is highly influenced by two key features of its composition. The first of these is the division of the working class along the lines of nationality through the operation of the border regime., and the second… The creation of a doubly-precarious migrant section of the working class through the operation of an increasingly draconian and authoritarian “hostile environment” allows outsourcing *in situ,* and represses the antagonistic self-organisation of this section of the class. This creation of an internal fracture within the class is not only a product of a single party or wing of the state, but instead a much broader project that has been pursued by many varied agents over the course of decades. It is, as things stand, an immense barrier not only to collective action but also to active and conscious self-organisation, with many non-citizen workers feeling unable to put their head above the parapet and risk the attention of the Home Office, even if they have supposedly stable

statuses. This trend is not at its most pronounced in this fraction, but it is a factor for many workers. This is not to say, however, that the working class is fundamentally split along lines of social composition. As successful struggles of migrant-led unions in the UK and the wider tendency towards the inclusion of migrants within working class structures show, this distinction along lines of nationality is always itself precarious when faced with class solidarity (Però 2019; Alberti 2016; Hugrée et al. 2020).

In education, the development of a crisis of so-called “over education” is a particularly novel factor. A contradiction has emerged between the social and technical composition of this fraction of the working class, with an increasingly large layer of young people being educated to “unnecessary” levels. The intended use of young workers by capital has become disconnected from the systematic reproduction of labour-power. Whilst capital wants young workers to function as a reserve of cheap labour-power for employment in low productivity sectors under authoritarian management, the social formation continues to produce more and more graduates. In our social formation, the model of accumulation and the model of education are in contradiction with one another.

I discussed in chapter three above how a specific layer of workers, the militant minority, construct a fragmentary counter ideology which legitimates their refusal of work on both individual and collective levels and acts as an ideological resource for self-organisation (Armstrong, Goodman, and Hyman 1981). In historical context, many British militants constructed this ideology through programs of autodidactic education, such as those extensive programmes undertaken by early members of the British Communist Party (Rée 1984; Samuel 2017). This kind of militant formation has collapsed in the face of both a social recomposition in the form of the expansion of higher education and a political recomposition in the form of the defeat of the workers’

movement. However, in this inquiry it was possible to discern analogous processes underway in our social formation today. The expansive potential for encountering ideas via the internet, and the educative function of platforms like YouTube and media such as podcasts increasingly allows a new generation of working class autodidacts to develop their own ideological resources. This potential, first identified by Fisher and Fisher (P. Fisher and Fisher 2007), is available with or without university education – but in the course of this inquiry I met many workers who had taken their introduction to the critical method via higher education as a jumping off point from which to undergo rapid processes of politicisation. As such, this social composition creates an underlying structural capacity for the working class via access to a wider range of sources of ideological resources, even without the coordinating function of strong class institutions.

Associational amplification

To understand the political composition of this class fraction, I will begin with a discussion of the power available to them in the form of structural capacities and workplace power, then move onto a discussion of organisational capacities and associational power, before discussing onto two wider questions of political composition, in the form of the interrelationship between economic and political struggle amongst this fraction and the relationship of class struggle in the workplace to the mediating political institutions of our social formation. In the course of this discussion, I will propose that there is a tendency within the political composition of the fraction towards associational amplification.

In *Forces of Labour*, Silver presents an analysis of how capitalism results in shifts in the industrial sectors that play a leading role in development as part of a “product fix” (2003, 103). In her discussion of the potentially emergent leading sectors

of the twenty-first century, she discusses producer services and personal/reproductive services (amongst others) and the prospects for working class power in each of them. Applying her categorisation to the three case studies above, FinServ is a producer service and Deliveroo and Wetherspoon are personal services. That is to say, call centre workers at FinServ produce a service-commodity which is a fundamental supportive component of a wider financial services business, whilst Deliveroo and Wetherspoon workers produce a complete and final service-commodity which is sold directly to consumers and is the primary focus of their respective firms. As such, the three case studies all represent parts of this class fraction with different access to structural capacities and sources of power. We cannot generalise about one kind of service worker power without engaging in an untenable abstraction from the specific technical and social compositions examined above. However, we can talk on an abstract level about the political composition of this specific class fraction, if we accept that this abstraction will always be modified by the concrete compositions that exist across the social formation.

Personal service workplaces are located in the same areas as their customer base, meaning that instead of being concentrated in production hubs served on the one hand by a supply of raw materials and on the other by a logistical system for the distribution of commodities, they are spread out in a spatial distribution that is roughly isomorphic to the spread of their customer base. This does not mean that service workplaces are never concentrated - for instance, the PT and BH are just ten minutes' walk apart - but rather that the pattern of spatial concentration is determined by the social composition of the consuming workers. As a result, producer services are often clustered in city and town centres and cannot be easily relocated – a fact and this is the source of what little structural power Silver does accord workers in the sector

(110).These workplaces exist as the final expression of much longer logistical chains that stretch back by road to the logistical clusters of the Midlands, then back again to the ports of entry (Tilbury, Dover, Heathrow and so on) and generally provide non-essential services, meaning that isolated strikes have little knock-on effect on the wider social division of labour and therefore that workers in them have very limited external workplace power. Alone they cannot generate the kind of “stopping power” necessary to seriously interrupt the activity of the productive sphere more generally.

However, the experience of strikes at both Deliveroo and Wetherspoon demonstrate that, *contra* Silver, the internal workplace power of personal service workers should not be underestimated. The consistent failure of the literature to understand the potential internal workplace power of reproductive service workers is perhaps reflective of an over-identification of workplace power with its external aspect, but it leads to much analysis missing one very obvious fact: that majority strike action in almost any industrial context is highly disruptive to the immediate process of commodity production. The capacity to halt production at that work site, even if this is not multiplied by a knock-on impact on other sites, is a very significant weapon in the hands of the working class. Particularly given the balance of forces more generally in our current social formation, the capacity of this class fraction to withdraw their labour is a relative point of strength, even if a failure of the market to deliver personal services is not likely to have a spiralling impact on the valorisation of capital on a social scale.

However, Silver is absolutely correct to identify that in the industrial contexts of both producer and personal services, the relative importance of associational power is significantly increased. Discussing the example of hotel and restaurant workers, she argues that “waves of labour unrest in this industry during the twentieth century have invariably taken place together with widespread labour unrest in the city or region in

which these workers are situated" (2003, 120) and that campaigns in producer services inevitably adopt organising models which prioritise associational over workplace power: "with workers spread amongst multiple work-sites and employment relations characterised by a high degree of contingency and turnover, organising individual workplaces could be a Sisyphean task", and so worker organisation refocused on the use of associational power on the scale of the city rather than just the workplace (2003, 110). This inquiry has made abundantly clear that the struggle of service workers cannot be successfully pursued on a narrow basis. Whilst self-organisation in these workplaces builds from the embryonic solidarities and forms of refusal which emerge out of the labour process, when it reaches the stage of collective action in both the Deliveroo and Wetherspoon case studies workers looked to construct bigger alliances on a broader scale to support their action by combining immediate and fundamental grievances to produce a coalition based on common, class interests.

The politicisation of a struggle can function as a way of enlarging the coalitions that have a stake in it - thereby bringing in more allies, but also potentially more opponents. As such, it tends towards turning a skirmish into a pitched battle in a process I will call associational amplification, in which the development of a movement (which is to say the organisational capacities required for the exertion of associational power) leads to an expansion of the issues at stake in a struggle from the conditions of exploitation in one workplace to more fundamental questions about the structure of class society. Such amplified struggles by no means end in guaranteed victory. One only needs to look at perhaps the paradigmatic politicised strike of the British 20th century, the miners' strike of 1984-85, to know that. However, given the reliance on associational power amongst this fraction, politicisation is worth the risk of bringing in

more enemies if it means they avoided isolation, disempowerment and inevitable defeat. As a result, these studies indicate that the pursuit of the merger formula and the politicisation of workplace struggle is not a by-product of class power, but in fact constitutive of its development.

It is illustrative to contrast this reliance on associational amplification with what has often been called sectionalism: a particular form of trade-union-only-ism which prioritises the immediate interests of a part of the working class over the whole by pressing the minimised claim of a narrow workforce. Sectionalism is, evidently enough, completely opposed to the merger formula and the development of self-organisation in a socialist direction. The class fraction involved in this inquiry, however, did not avoid sectionalism for reasons of principle. Instead, sectionalism was just not an option for them. When workers have very high internal and external workplace power, they do not need to generalise a struggle or consider how to build a class-wide coalition in order to pursue their goals, they can just use their leverage to pursue their own immediate interests. The insight gained from this contrast is that reliance on associational power necessarily precludes sectionalism, and leads to struggles taking on a collective dynamic, being pursued by a movement, and coarticulating themselves alongside others.

In short, the experience of struggle in the workplace progressively teaches this class fraction that they can only bargain successfully if they are part of a movement - but being part of a movement also starts to push them beyond the idea that they can reach a successful conclusion through bargaining over the conditions of their exploitation. Whilst they might lack the kind of external workplace power associated with high-leverage workforces, whose action can have ripple effects across the social division of labour, that lack also prevents their strategy from becoming sectional. That

is to say, it stops them fighting for the narrow immediate interests of themselves and their industry, and instead ties their fates more closely to the wider political movement of the working class. Associational amplification is fundamentally incompatible with the sectional pursuit of limited demands.

If producer and personal service workers want to access significant external workplace power, they have to form coalitions with other workers - most obviously on an industrial scale. This kind of associational linking is not just about coarticulating these grievances with other workers in order to reach larger audiences and winning over “public opinion” but also about bringing other fractions of the working class into the fight. Horizontal industrial linkages, between workers with the same approximate position in the supply chain, were most evident in my case studies – with Wetherspoons workers forming an alliance with other food service workers during the Fast Food Shutdown. However, vertical links up the supply chain might also prove feasible in further instances of collective action. Whilst food service and food logistics workers experience different kinds of work and are located in different geographical spaces, the associational amplification of their struggles together would be extremely powerful. One step up the supply chain from the PT, for instance, and you arrive in the Midlands logistics hub of Daventry, where DHL warehouse workers occupy a more crucial node in the social division of labour and potentially command significant external workplace power. The coarticulations of these two different fractions as having a collective interest, and the forging of a common form of power between the two, would only be possible via the creation of a class movement that relies on politicised forms of association. These forms might vary based on the political composition of the workforces involved, but in the case studies above this role was taken up by the Labour Party, with John McDonnell in particular supporting both

Deliveroo and Wetherspoon workforces at important moments in their collective action and using his mediating capacity to articulate their struggles at a formal level. This fraction is objectively reliant upon associational amplification in order to be able to fight for their interests, and therefore we should see them as a potential basis for wide coalitions based on the pursuit of fundamental working class interests.

But this is not only a question of power resources. The spatial concentration of this class fraction in city and town centre workplaces is one of the defining features of their technical composition. As Mike Davis argued, the city historically "provided the principle form of shell for the economic, as well as the political and cultural, organisation of the working class across craft boundaries" (2018, 83). The streets of a city are a febrile environment for working class self-organisation. In particular, this fraction is gifted a range of opportunities to organise for associational power by the fact that their concentration in city centres fits with the concentration of young people – precisely the demographic which has proven to be the base for the new left in the post-crisis decade. The spatial crossover between the workplaces of this class fractions and areas of strength for the left offers this class fraction a significant opportunity. The growth of trade union density in this sector would be classified as "distant expansion" in the terminology of industrial relations (in the sense that it is a process of organisation of non-union workers in sectors and workplaces without existing union branches) but in spatial terms these workers are not necessarily distant at all – they are in all of the metropolitan hot spots where concentrations of young people have led to the emergence of significant working class political organisations: in constituencies like Sheffield Central (median age 26.1), Cardiff Central (26.3), Leeds Central (27.1), Manchester Central (27.4) and Brighton Pavilion (32.2) (ONS

2018).[100] Kier Milburn has analysed the role of age in political movements in the advanced capitalist democracies to show how the contemporary class composition of those social formations has led to the creation of a political generation, “generation left”, which has moved rapidly to the left (Milburn 2019). His analysis proceeds primarily through an analysis of voting behaviour, and this thesis serves to extend his idea with specific reference to the workplace. Although generation left has not found its feet in workplace struggle in the same way that it has in electoral politics, the same compositional effects hold true. Below the surface, this class fraction is part of the same generation - the form of action which allows for generation left to find their voice beyond the ballot box has just not yet emerged.

As discussed in chapter five above, every form of self-organisation emerges with adaptations which allow it to respond to its technical and social compositional context. The challenge of the analysis of political composition is to see, on a general level, the potential to escalate the strongest tendencies towards politicisation and adapt the political forms of the socialist movement so that they correspond with the forms being generated through self-organisation. This analytical process is one of determinate abstraction, the same as Negri identified as being Lenin’s primary methodological contribution. My preliminary attempt at this task will follow in the conclusion below, but for the moment it will have to suffice to recognise that there is a subterranean potential in the composition of this fraction.

The associational amplification of struggles is one of the logics behind the growth of the labour movement in leaps. The service industry has at least some of the

[100] In mid-2017 the mean of the median age of a UK electoral constituency was 41.1. In the 2019 general election all of these constituencies returned Labour MPs with 60%+ of the popular vote, with the exception of Brighton Pavilion, which is the only constituency represented by a Green Party MP in the UK.

conditions to be one of the tinderboxes from which such leaps arise - although without representative studies it is hard to tell how widespread these conditions are. Further research could attempt to detect the prevalence of these conditions across the UK service sector - although, of course, questionnaires are unlikely to elicit the same kind of data as inquiry, and crucially, they may prove unable to catalyse the kind of interventionist process that gave me access to this data in the first place. On the basis of the empirical work above, however, we can conclude that the political composition of this fraction adds up to create a situation in which the potential for associational amplification and the growth of self-organisation through a broad and politicised workers' movement appears significant. Whilst current levels of self-organisation and collective action are at historic lows, a compositional analysis demonstrates that many of the conditions required for a wider upsurge are present. The major obstacles facing this development are twofold: first, the implementation of effective systems of control, discussed above, and second, the subjective challenge. It is to this second question that I will now turn.

The Line Cook Doomer

When I first began interviewing Wetherspoon workers about their lives and their work, one thing stood out very clearly: they all experienced the same problems. In their own way, each of them was dealing with poverty, precarity, sleep deprivation, work intensification, and a pervading sense of anxiety. But every single one of them rationalised these problems on entirely individual terms. Everything that went wrong in their life, be it the introduction of night shifts at their pub, getting stuck in a minimum wage job, or dropping out of an alienating university course – it was all the result of their laziness, their naivety, their personal inadequacy. They were bad people who

made bad choices, and bad outcomes were the natural result. They truly believed they were, in the words of Mark Fisher's essay, "good for nothing" (M. Fisher 2014b).

These findings partly mirrored those of Silva's study of American workers' attitudes. She describes how a generation of American workers have tried and failed to reach a set of socially-determined markers of adulthood, and then as a result of their inability or unwillingness to use collective explanations, blamed themselves for this failure rather than, say, the housing market. She characterises these workers as having: "low expectations of work, wariness toward romantic commitment, widespread distrust of social institutions, profound alienation from others, and an overriding focus on their emotions and psychic health" (Silva 2015, 143). The major distinction to draw between Silva's results and my own is that I saw no overriding focus on emotions and did instead find a pervasive sense of impending, multi-faceted crisis (environmental, economic, social, and political) which often involved sophisticated understandings of its collective and systemic causes. Other significant UK qualitative research amongst non-unionised young workers paints a picture of a fraction of the working class which is status-driven, ideologically non-committal, and prioritises individualistic modes of competition and refusal over collective self-organisation and action (Bates 2016; Furlong, Goodwin, and Hadfield 2018; Coatman 2020). Yet more similar findings can be added to the pile, courtesy of Berry and McDaniel in their study of young people's attitude to work in the post-crisis decade, this time with an increased focus on social problem causation in the form of the "labour market":

> There was clear anger expressed at the way in which current economic conditions of the post-crisis environment, including the legacy of the economic crisis and phenomena such as Brexit, negatively impact upon their position within the labour market, there was little sense that it is possible to bring about change within the labour market. (14) At the same time, however, our analysis highlights a resignation to a situation wherein precarity is largely immutable. In general, the young adults engaged by

> this research view their current difficulties in the workplace, or in finding work, as a product of heightened labour market competition – too many people for too few jobs. Notwithstanding the accuracy of this sentiment, it overlooks the structural context within which competitive relations are shaped. Accordingly, it seems many young people understand the prospect of improving labour market outcomes in terms of personal development and their ability to successfully navigate this more competitive environment (Berry and McDaniel 2020, 15)

Evidently, workers use varying interpretive frameworks to make sense of the negative phenomena they experience in the workplace. They can identify these problems as having either individual or social causes, but regardless of that attribution they often identify no avenue for solutions through social change or collective action and instead focus the potential for problem-solving entirely at the level of the person. As a result, individual-level solutions often involve: various forms of informal refusal and organisational misbehaviour; additional investment in their "human capital" (despite the problems identified above with over-education); and optimising their competitive behaviour in order to beat other workers in the fight for better prospects. But self-organisation with the aim of pursuing collective action is not such an obvious step - particularly given that many "young core workers" have not heard of trade unions and are unable to provide a definition of them when asked (Coatman 2020).

However, even when workers overcome individualist analyses of the slow crisis of the post-crash decade, that does not guarantee they will become militants pursuing a new society. To understand this potential, it is useful to refer to the kind of jokes young workers make about themselves. A "doomer" is a meme character that acts as the ironic inversion of the "boomer". Whereas a boomer is a member of the baby boomer generation (born in the 1950s or 60s), a doomer is one of the youngest millennials or oldest members of Gen Z (born in the 90s or 00s). A doomer has lost faith in a number of the foundational assumptions that allow boomers to function: that they can plan their life knowing that the social system they live under will both survive

and provide them with predictable (if not entirely fair) access to the means of subsistence; that most of the time, things get better; that the world is basically fine; that they have a future. The resulting sense of despair is not linked to a political project - for it to be politically mobilised it would have to be linked to a sense of political agency, and the defining characteristic of a doomer is that they believe that a better future is impossible (or at least impossible for them to experience or create). The doomer has an acute analysis of the crisis to which our mode of production has brought us: they are often represented as seamlessly interweaving ecological and social critiques of capitalism. They understand the social causes of individually-experienced problems. But this acute analysis is linked to a deep nihilism, rather than a revolutionary project. My interest in the doomer stems from the fact that it seems to represent a part of the experience of the service worker in a period of defeat.

Figure 10. A meme, titled "The line cook doomer", shared by an interviewee

Overcoming doomer subjectivity requires a sense of positive political agency - the capacity to transform things through your actions, which Kelly called “personal efficacy” (Kelly 1998). This sense of fungibility, of the potential for change, is difficult to maintain when young workers have lived most of their lives under a crushing capitalist realism. Those who were born in the same year as me, 1994, saw 9/11 and the beginning of the war on terror aged seven, the invasion of Iraq (following the largest anti-war protests in world history) aged nine, the financial crash at thirteen, the election of a coalition government and the implementation of austerity aged sixteen, witnessed university tuition fees increased to £9,000 aged eighteen, and then lived through outright Conservative party general election victories at ages twenty one, twenty three and twenty five. Add in a growing awareness of the seriousness and pace of climate change, and you have a heady recipe for nihilism. Given this context, positive agency can be hard to come by. Interventions by the militant minority - those with a theory of both the social causation of individual problems and how political agency can be exerted through collective action – seemed to be the most common way of sparking such agential sentiment amongst other workers. As argued in chapter three, this layer can provide the legitimating resource of counter-ideology to their fellow workers, convincing them both of the social causation of problems and the viability of collective action as a response. As articulated by mobilisation theory, organic leadership structures play a key role in cultivating the sense of collective of interest and agency required for mobilisation (Kelly 1998). In addition, the leaders who populate these organic leadership positions are increasingly formed through new autodidactic channels. The young, low-paid, disconnected service worker is often an individualist or a doomer - *until* they experience self-organisation, at which point their

approach can very rapidly change.[101] The development of an expanded sense of possibility that emerges from the experience of self-organisation is a vital, if more intangible, element of the process of overcoming quiescence amongst this class fraction.

So, *contra* Coatman's research for the TUC (and its output, an app called WorkSmart which attempts to lure workers into joining a trade union by providing "career coaching"), we have to recognise the fundamentally malleable nature of collective consciousness amongst young workers (Coatman 2020). Whilst, no doubt, the vast majority of workers are not currently organised or even interested in becoming organised, this is not a permanent state of affairs. Organising does not involve asking workers about their opinions on these things called "trade unions" in a focus group or survey - instead, it involves a range of micro-sociological processes that can rapidly elicit commitment and change attitudes towards self-organisation. That the TUC designs its strategy for developing union organisation amongst young workers via totally atomised questionnaires that only sample workers' pre-existing views without any intervention is not only bad social science, but terrible politics. By contrast, workers' inquiry's use of intervention and varied methods of data collection has never looked so vital, as it is only through such intervention that we can understand the varied subjective progressions between individualist, doomer and militant.

The threefold processes of progression and regression across these categories of subjectivity is always underway within the contemporary working class, often at a

[101] Marx and Engel's comments in *The German Ideology* ais as appropriate as ever: "Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is, necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew" (Marx and Engels 1845).

remarkable speed. During the course of this inquiry I met workers who went from a vague sympathy with varied forms of emancipatory politics to hardened class struggle Marxists in less than six months as a result of their experience. In a tentative manner, then, I would like to suggest that the militant minority *in potentia* is not such a minority amongst this class fraction. Not only are “generation left” leaning towards radical solutions to the crises facing the social formation on a general level, but there are also a number of specific factors accelerating the development of this layer in the workplace. First, as discussed, autodidactic forms of education (which may build on the massification of higher education) play an increasingly important role in creating workers with access to the ideological resources to legitimate self-organisation. But two further factors come into play. The widespread extra-workplace repertoire of working class struggle in the post-crisis decade has often formed militants whose experience of politics is entirely outside the sphere of production: Corbynites, anti-fascists, climate strikers (all of which were chosen forms of political identity amongst the workers I interviewed), and the like. These people might never have engaged in collective action *as workers*, and instead tended towards the position of participants within only implicitly class-based movements, but when a process of self-organisation begins in their proximity they often possess the skills and ideological resources necessary to make a rapid and outsized impact. If these workers can be convinced to bring their radicalism from formal politics or social movements back into the sphere of production, they could be the source of many rapid developments. In addition, the reliance on associational amplification discussed above does not only guard against sectionalism – but actively teaches workers the lessons of militancy. Class-based ideologies of struggle can very easily result from the deployment of the power resources available to this fraction. Gallas has discussed the internal politicisation of

strikes as a tendency in the post-crisis decade, and I think it is likely accurate to propose that this tendency is particularly evident amongst young, low-paid, disconnected service workers (Gallas 2018). Should these trends towards the formation of a militant minority continue, then this fraction within a fraction could prove to be of historical significance.

Ch.10 Conclusion

In his seminal lecture *The forward march of labour halted*, given in 1978, Eric Hobsbawm identified that the workers' movement in the decades since WW2 had increasingly slid into sectionalism. Whilst the movement on the shop-floor was undoubtedly powerful, militant and led by the left, it usually fought to increase wages rather than to transform society, with the exception of the period 1970-74. In part, he argued, this was due to the state's increasing role in regulating the economy, which shifted the target of strike action from owners of capital to the state itself. This sectionalism led to increasing failures of class solidarity, which Hobsbawm suggested might harm the future of the movement as a whole.

In our contemporary class composition, the problem Hobsbawm identified is inverted: instead of a tendency towards trade-union-only-ism in the context of widespread workplace self-organisation, we have a tendency towards the merger of economic and political struggles in the context of widespread workplace disorganisation. We might well hope that this inversion implies a fundamental difference in the trajectory of the workers' movement in our respective contexts: whereas Hobsbawm was speaking on the precipice of decline, maybe we are at the beginning of an upsurge. But hope alone is not enough.

In the chapter above I have laid out some of the trends in the class composition of this fraction, and it is these trends which will have to act as a material scaffold for our hopes. Because whilst I am not arguing that this fraction is the "new" revolutionary subject, I do think that there is significant evidence that workers who are composed in the ways described above could make important contributions to an upsurge.

Contribution

This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge on two fronts. First, I have developed a detailed and synthetic theoretical framework for the analysis of class composition. This framework is based on a 3-part model of technical, social, and political composition.

On the technical front, I have used a close reading of Marx alongside a wider range of theorisations of the capitalist labour process to flesh out the concept of technical composition, with particular reference to the way in which cooperation produces relations and structures of embryonic solidary that form the basis for the emergence of self-organisation and collective action. I begin for the argument that what I have called 'the indeterminacy contradiction' is the wellspring of class struggle in the sphere of production. Labour-power's external subjective control by the working class compels capital to develop systems of control which seek to prevent the refusal of that external subject, and ensure the continuity of production under bourgeois class domination. Within the capitalist mode of production, however, there is no definitive solution to the indeterminacy contradiction – hence the technical composition of the working class is rendered permanently volatile in response to the shifts in the balance of class forces within a social formation. The internal nature of class forces and their involvement in production can only be understood through a close appreciation of Marx's concept of cooperation, which can be worked out in more detail with reference to the empirical study of the actually-existing capitalist workplace. Referring to this empirical tradition, I develop an account of how the working class self-organises to pursue its interests in the workplace by using bonds of embryonic solidarity to construct informal workgroups and then select organic leaders out of these groups. Here I make a critique of a popular theorist of working class organisation, Jane

McAlevey. Her desire to categorically distinguish between activist workers and organic leaders, I argue, leads to a failure to consider the vital overlap of the two groups. It is this layer of organic leader militants which have historically proven crucial in providing legitimising ideological resources and identifying both immediate and fundamental class interests in many workplace contexts. To attempt to theorise worker self-organisation without allowing for the central role of this militant minority is to miss out on an absolutely essential form of agency. So, my understanding of the concept of cooperation is one which develops from Marx to identify a fundamental object of study in the form of working class self-organisation and vital conceptual materials to use in understanding that object: embryonic solidarity, informal work groups, and organic leadership. This is the detail of what Marx refers to as the 'animal spirits' of the working class as cooperative collective subject, or what we might think of as the deep structure of the working class as it is composed through the capitalist labour process.

I then move on from this detailed discussion of cooperation to analyse Marx's genealogy of modern industry as a first example of compositional analysis. By closely reading through his account of the progression of the organisation of production over the course of two centuries from handicraft production to manufacture and onto modern industry (and the corresponding development from detail labourer to collective labourer to factory labourer) I find an example of how the analysis of the shifting sands of the social formation is vital for an accurate account of the historical reality of a mode of production. This precedent established, I close my discussion of technical composition by considering a problem with Marx's account, in the form of the undeveloped understanding of the relationship between the multiple drivers of technological development in production. Drawing on insights from Volume 3, I introduce a distinction between the primary driver of development that results from

inter-class contradictions (that is to say, capital developing technology to improve its system of control and dampen the working class refusal of work) and the secondary driver that results from intra-class tensions (that is to say, capital developing technology to gain relative surplus value production advantages over other capitals in its branch of industry). On the basis of this hierarchy of developmental drivers, I then articulate my agreement with Tronti's own autocritique of the 'Copernican inversion' theory of development that has shaped many accounts of technical composition, and argue that the crisis tendencies of the mode of production can result in an inversion of the inversion. I conclude by laying out a vision of the technical composition of the working class which moves from the indeterminacy contradiction at the heart of the mode of production to the ever-multiplying forms taken by this contradiction in the myriad of capitalist workplaces which makeup the productive sphere of the social formation.

On the social front, I provide a first extended discussion of the concept of social composition and elaborate it in relation to both: historical and contemporary feminist debates over the nature of social reproduction; and a Marxian system of categories. By doing so I aim to increase the capacity of workerist-inspired analyses to analyse and account for extra-production forms of class composition. By diverging from the *Lotta Feminista* approach of treating indirectly market mediated domestic labour as if it were directly market mediated commodity production, I take on the spirit of their critique of workerism's central narrative without engaging in the kind of analytical inaccuracy correctly identified by firstly the early social reproduction theory tradition, and later feminists like Benston. After clarifying my position on this debate, I move onto the progressive development of the concept of social composition. Beginning with an articulation of the relative determination of the totality by the sphere of production,

I undertake a rereading of Tronti's concept of the social factory, arguing that it refers to the way that this relationship of determination intensifies as social relations in general become increasingly subsumed under the capital relation. This understanding reached, we can then see how social recomposition can occur in a manner analogous to technical recomposition. Working class imposed shortages of labour-power, the capitalist exhaustion of labour-power, and the desire to undermine the combativity of the working class through a "social path to repression" all feature as drivers of this process, and I illustrate them with reference to the historical case of black proletarians in the United States across three cities in the 20th century. I also argue that structural capacities can arise out of the relations that make up the social composition of the working class, and that, in line with EP Thompson, we should take seriously the task of analysing struggles with their roots in markets and neighbourhoods (even if such a task falls beyond the bounds of this thesis). Having reached this understanding of social composition as both determined by and determining the forms of class struggle and the shape of the social relations within production in a social formation, I move onto place the concept within the constellation of Marxist categories. Using the formula C(LP)>M(W)>C(MS)/C(LP) to identify precisely the social relations covered by the concept of social composition, I close with an articulation of how this understanding will be applied in this thesis to deepen our analysis of the workplace.

On the political front, I undertake a close reading of Lenin in relation to class composition in *both* a contextual and expansive sense that clarifies the relationship between economic and political struggle, the nature of self-organisation as a political phenomenon, the role of the party, and the nature of political composition as a category. I argue that Leninism should fundamentally be understood as a political method aiming at the discovery of the compositionally-adequate Marxist strategy in a

determinate social formation. One of the major barriers to understanding Leninism accurately in this way comes from the seriously mistaken reception of *What is to be done?* which has been repeatedly misrepresented as the core of the Leninist theory of organisation. By returning to the context of the Russian Social Democratic movement over the transitional years from 1895 to 1902, we can achieve a much clearer understanding of the Leninist method. The result of this contextual approach is an understanding of Lenin's strategic perspective as one based on the absolute priority of achieving a merger between the workers movement and socialist politics through agitational activity that takes the forms of working class self-organisation that emerges from the pursuit of immediate class interests and makes the connection to the more fundamental struggle against the mode of production. Political and economic struggle should be, in this perspective, completely indivisible.

This clarification duly achieved, I go on to articulate what modifications were made to the Leninist framework by Tronti and Negri, writing as part of the workerist current. The Lenin of *operaismo* is a fundamentally compatible theoretical figure with the contextual Lenin, but the two readings make a number of progressive steps in articulating the Leninist methodology. Despite varying emphases, they develop a method based on focusing obsessively on the leap from struggling for immediate working class interests into the struggle for more fundamental ones. As part of this focus, they both identify the fundamental importance of the party – understood of the tactical instrument of the class, which is already in possession of the fundamental strategy of self-organisation – in turning struggles developed out of the immediate structural capacities available to the working class into a political fight for power at the scale of the totality. Analytically, this understanding is essential for both understanding the proper scope of the concept of political composition (which is, at least in aspiration,

class struggle at the scale of the totality) and the orientation of the study of self-organisation. I close by making a critique of the power resources approach based on its failure to learn these key analytical lessons, and laying out the schema through which I will understand power and the leap into a struggle over fundamental interests in the empirical work to come.

The theory of class composition arrived at through these three chapters is one with significant novel content. From a wholesale reinterpretation of Tronti's famous arguments on the Copernican inversion and the social factory, to a new reading of Leninism's relationship to class composition, via the first extended articulation of the concept of social composition on a theoretical level, I establish a theoretical basis that significantly diverges from comparable studies. This extended theoretical account of a class compositional framework builds a foundation on which the empirical work that makes up my inquiry can advance. And, indeed, it seems to me that it is this yoking together of theoretical and empirical work that has allowed me to avoid the pitfalls encountered by many attempts to develop the insights of the workerist tradition that have emerged from the anglophone academy in the past few decades. By developing an abstract theory of class composition at the same as undertaking a series of inquiries into concrete situations, I have been faced with the entirely welcome challenge of explaining whatever idea I was developing at the time to the people whose actions had provoked it. Following in the footsteps of the original workerists, I have embraced the living unity of theoretical and practical work (Anastasi 2020b, 6).

In the second part of the thesis, I present the results of an inquiry into the experience of a specific class fraction. Young, low-paid, disconnected service workers are part of the recomposed core of the British working class. They experience labour processes governed by intense systems of control, created by a capitalist class who

are forced to increase the productivity of labour-power by increasing the intensity of work, as a result of the limited opportunities for fixed capital investment and the external limitation of customer demand. Often this intensification is achieved through forms of direct control, increasingly implemented via algorithmic management and the automation of labour process supervision and coordination. When the platform management model is applied to this organisation of work, the removal of the employment relationship means that the state withdraws from its classical mediating role – leaving workers and bosses to face off across the cash nexus. At the same time, workers have begun to develop new forms of self-organisation which build on the structural capacities made possible by many-to-many communication networks. The relationship between trade unions and these organically generated structures is complex – particularly within the platform context – and this lack of institutional coherence can lead to an unevenness of political development. However, the developmental tendencies of capitalism are not mollifying the class struggle – in fact, if anything, this technical composition seems more prone to conflict than the one it replaces.

Socially, this class fraction is divided by a border regime. The capitalist form of migration and its internal policing has produced migrants as doubly precarious workers, which can lead to significant problems with organic leader recruitment for more formalised self-organisation attempts. Where communities of solidarity are not produced through self-organisation, the task of recruiting leaders from amongst migrant communities can prove borderline impossible. For another (only partially overlapping) part of the fraction, the expansion of mass higher education has led to a contradiction between their level of education of the demand for cheap labour-power in the sphere of production. This mismatch combines with new channels of

autodidactic development to produce a layer of workers with significant ideological resources to facilitate their refusal of work.

In terms of class power, this fraction often relies upon the combination of internal workplace power and associational power. As a result, “sectionalism” is not a readily available bargaining strategy, and developing more power as a fraction inevitably means undertaking a process of associational amplification through which these workers integrate themselves into a wider class-based movement and make wider class demands. This amplification is a highly politicising process, which tends towards the achievement of the merger formula from below (working class struggle + socialist ideology = socialist movement). The urban nature of this class fraction further assists in the creation of these movement-based organisational capacities. When this fraction self-organises, the leap into political struggle is always a tangible possibility.

Subjectively, however, disorganised members of this fraction often remain deeply individualist and convinced of their own failures. Such defeated isolation is only reversible through the collectivisation of grievances, the articulation of social causes to those grievances, and the creation of a sense of political agency to act to overcome them through the pursuit of class interests. Through the process of self-organisation itself, the militant minority can intervene and bring these workers from their positions as individualists and doomers into the militant fold. And perhaps most significantly, it seems as if this militant minority is not really such a minority at all. Political auto-didacts, formed in movements outside the workplace and sharpened by the lessons of struggle within it, make up a proportionally larger part of this fraction than might be expected, and will play a crucial role in the realisation or non-realisation of the potential of this fraction. They are a sub-fraction upon which so much depends.

The challenge facing the militant minority

The contradiction that arises as a result of the indeterminacy of labour-power in the capitalist process of production is the explosive foundation upon which every capitalist social formation is based. There, in the hidden abode, lies the capacity of the working class to blow the whole thing sky high. And yet, the existence of such a potential is no guarantee of its deployment. The fuse still has to be lit. The process and struggles through which a collective movement can approach that end goal are historically-specific, with the political composition of the class on a general level is constantly undergoing processes of recomposition as the social and technical composition of the social formation is conjecturally modified. The Leninist political method, as discussed in chapter five above, consists of an attempt to find how to catalyse the leap in the goal of self-organisation from struggle over immediate interests into struggle over fundamental interests in this specific class composition, and in the process merge the political struggle for socialism with the workers' movement. Such an approach makes use of the tendencies within capitalist development to generate a party-as-instrument out of the embryonic solidarity of the self-organised class and the wider array of social forces aligned to that self-organised class. This party-as-instrument then has the challenge of finding the tactical route, through which explosive potential is turned into a new social reality.

If that complicated process is successfully navigated, then we might see the emergence of that difficult third factor in Lenin's definition of a revolutionary crisis: "the independent action of the popular classes". Without it, this terminally unreal post-crisis decade looks set to close with a decline into anomic disarray. The exact methods employed by the minority to catalyse the potential emergence of independent action

are up for much wider debate, but the central principle is simple enough. As Charlie, an associate from the Post & Telegraph put it:

> You can't separate politics from economics in trade union organising, and you ought not to … fundamentally we're talking about building power to oppose our class enemies.

Further work

The recent emergence of workerist-inspired research which utilises workers' inquiry (amongst other methods) to try and generate an accurate picture of our contemporary class composition means that this thesis is by no means alone in its approach. Editorial groups like *Notes from Below, Viewpoint, Into the Black Box, Officina Primo Maggio, Anker Mag, Plateforme d'Enquêtes Militantes, Invisíveis Goiânia* and others make up an expanding international network which increasingly represents a cohesive current that straddles the academy and the movement and makes a unique contribution to the wider field of Marxist research. As a result, the directions of study opened up by this thesis should be seen as part of this wider project.

Empirically, research into other key fractions of the British working class could do much to illuminate the bigger picture. Migrant logistics, food processing and manufacturing workers concentrated in the urban periphery have already been engaged in a long term inquiry (Angry Workers of the World 2020a). Research into the formation and action of the Si Cobas union in the logistical hubs of Italy has been fascinating in showing how workers can use their external workplace power to launch politically impactful struggles (Cillo and Pradella 2018b; 2018a; Cini and Tassinari 2018). Research into a similar class fraction in the UK might build on the rapidly expanding field of Marxist studies of Amazon (Briken and Taylor 2018; M. Harvey 2018; Goldmann and Cini 2018; Gent 2019; Delfanti 2018; 2019) to identify the

potential for self-organisation amongst distribution centre workers here. Given the rapid expansion of employment in adult social care evident in Britain, it too is an important frontier of class formation that deserves extended attention.

Inquiries which take social composition as their primary focus might also play a very significant role, particularly any which could advance research into the existing and potential connections between housing and workplace struggles in the context of the contemporary British city (for some preliminary materials, see Gray 2013; 2018; 2019; Cant 2018; Clare 2019; 2020; Robbins 2018; Robertson 2017). On a political level, further investigation into the nature of the ideology that dominates amongst the emergent militant minority within this fraction (and potentially associated with the Corbynite turn more widely) might offer us a significant opportunity to pin down exactly what ideas and forms of self-organisation are being generated processes of concrete self-organisation, and how these might be utilised by a collective political subject going forwards. Theoretical discussion of the model of class composition, particularly development of the concept of social composition, might also significantly advance our capacity to interpret the results of these processes of inquiry. There are also other theoretical avenues, particularly the development of the Lenin of *operaismo* through a full encounter with Tronti's conceptualisation of the autonomy of the political and the wider Marxist study of political mediation, which could extend the work presented here. Finally, large-scale empirical analyses of the British economy from the perspective of the workplace, along the lines of Moody's *New Terrain*, are essential if we are to place investigations into the composition of certain fractions within a larger context and understand the state of our social formation in more detail.

In the context of a pandemic

This bulk of this thesis was written up over the period of December 2019 to May 2020. Over almost exactly the same period, Coronavirus spread from the first recorded case in Wuhan, China to a global pandemic. As I have been writing, it has become increasingly apparent that this pandemic will have a profound effect upon the organisation of society - in the language of this project, it will lead to a sustained recomposition, and the conjectural modification of the social formation on a colossal scale.

It will be some time before we are able to understand the exact nature of this recomposition. The social metabolism of any exogenous crisis is not a linear process. For the time being, only the very initial outlines are visible, as social distancing measures lead to massive restrictions on the normal functioning of the mode of production and result in a peculiar form of capitalist crisis-via-hiatus.

This thesis cannot provide any substantial analysis of how the class fraction which is its subject will respond to this crisis, nor how they might cope with being forced into relative poverty or thrown into the rapidly expanding surplus labour force. That will have to be left for future inquiries. What it does provide, however, is an analysis of the class composition of this fraction at the outbreak, as it has been formed by the post-crisis and pre-pandemic decade, alongside some theoretical tools that could be taken up by those future inquirers.

Our social formation now faces not one identifiable destabilising factor, but many overlapping and mutually reinforcing ones: the pandemic, the rapidly accelerating process of climate collapse, and a new global economic depression, to name just the most prominent. It seems like the unreal interregnum might finally be

coming to an end. In the struggle to come, which will determine the outcome of this destabilisation, the class fraction which has been the subject of this thesis will play a vital role. Fortunately for the rest of us, they're up for a fight.

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Appendix 1. Details of Interviewees

Chapter 6. Finserv

Interview ID	Workplace	Period of engagement in inquiry
“Tom”	FinServ Brighton	November 2018 – September 2019

Chapter 7. Deliveroo

Interview ID	Workplace	Period of engagement in inquiry
“Gary”	Brighton	April 2019
“David”	Bristol	April 2019

Chapter 8. J D Wetherspoon

Interview ID	Workplace	Period of engagement in inquiry
“Charlie”	PT	October 2017 – December 2019
“Rosie”	PT	October 2017 – February 2018
“Anna”	PT	October 2017 – October 2018
“Darren”	PT	October 2017 – February 2018
“Mike”	PT	October 2017 – December 2017
“Kate”	BH	February 2017 – October 2018
“Joe”	BH	March 2017
“James”	PT	March 2017 – December 2019
“Sarah”	BH	September 2017
“Oliver”	BH	September 2017
“Tom”	PT	July 2018
“Lola”	PT	August 2018

“Andrew”	BH	October 2018 – December 2019
“Simon”	BH	October 2018
“Reece”	PT	October 2018
“Charlotte”	PT	October 2018
“Lawrence”	BH	October 2018
“Paul”	PT	October 2018