

# What Is the Working Class?

Kevin Van Meter

November 2, 2017

# Contents

Workers' autonomy . . . . .	3
Broadly defined working class . . . . .	6
Is the working class a structure or category? . . . . .	7
Refusal of work . . . . .	7
Class composition . . . . .	9

”The working class struggles against capitalism because its objective conditions of life force it to, not because it is educated to some ”higher” consciousness by some outside force such as a political party. It would seem, also, that the struggle against capitalism includes all forms and levels of struggle, from individual to collective, from local to national (or international), from economic to political. In fact, it would be hard to conceive how the more general or radical forms of struggle, such as general strikes, factory occupations, or workers’ councils, could occur without the preexistence of more limited forms of struggle: sabotage, local strikes, the organization of unions, and the like.”<sup>1</sup>

-Martin Glaberman and Seymour Faber, *Working for Wages: The Roots of Insurgency*

*Drawing on Autonomist Marxism, both in its American and European guises, the following excerpt from Guerrillas of Desire: Notes on Everyday Resistance and Organizing to Make a Revolution Possible (AK Press, 2017) offers a conception of the working class that seeks to augment vague definitions of class and reinvigorate class politics in contemporary US revolutionary movements. However, a substantive, broad, and grounded definition is insufficient in-itself. Rather, an expanded and enhanced conception of class will require a process of workers’ inquiry and radical organizing to result in a strengthening of working class power vis-à-vis capitalism and the state-apparatus, or what autonomists call class recomposition. For the working class, as Glaberman and Faber’s note, is already struggling and it is the role of the organizer, the revolutionary, the militant to encounter, record, amplify, and circulate these struggles.*

[...] Autonomists define the working class as such: autonomous from both capitalism and the official organization of the Left [political parties, nonprofit organizations, progressive religious groups, foundations, etc.], broadly including all those who work under capitalism, based in relationships between workers rather than as a structural component of the economy or sociological category. Autonomists focus on the refusal of work and how the class is composed. Let us review each element in kind.

## Workers’ autonomy

”The working class,” Glaberman and Faber suggest, ”struggles against capitalism because its objective conditions of life force it to.”<sup>2</sup> Since capitalism requires that individuals work for wages or access income through state or familial sources (partners and children access income indirectly through the wage earner), the working class *must* struggle against capitalism to obtain resources beyond its initial, meager wage. Class struggle emerges directly from the point of production of commodities, be it widgets or labor power, and in the battles around the length and intensity of the workday. But what does the working class confront?

Capitalists by definition control capital. Capital includes the means of production (tools, factories, raw materials, energy, etc.) and financial resources (money) that are part of the production cycle, which is set in motion in order to produce commodities. ”The individual commodity,” in Marx’s assessment, ”appears [as capitalism’s] elementary form.”<sup>3</sup> [Autonomist Harry Cleaver...] believes that ”the generalized imposition of the commodity-form has meant that forced work has

---

<sup>1</sup> Martin Glaberman and Seymour Faber, *Working for Wages: The Roots of Insurgency* (New York: General Hall, 1998), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), 125.

become the fundamental means of organizing society-of social control.”<sup>4</sup> Since capitalists cannot create value with the means of production alone, even with automation and machinery, labor power must be employed in the production process. Labor power and means of production are brought together to act upon raw materials to produce commodities that contain both use-value (practical utility) and exchange-value (quantity of commodities that can be exchange for said commodity). Commodities are improved as labor power acts upon them, adding value to them in the process (which becomes surplus value). Then capitalists sell commodities in the sphere of circulation. The surplus value they obtain is the value produced by workers over and above the cost of production. And each commodity contains residue from deposited labor power, as if the commodity has captured bits of a worker’s life force and energy in the production process.<sup>5</sup>

Marx’s tenth chapter in *Capital*, volume 1, “The Working Day,” provides the impetus for the focus on labor power: “Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the worker works is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labor-power he has bought from him. If the worker consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist.”<sup>6</sup> In effect, without the deployment of labor power as living labor in the production process capitalism cannot produce commodities. To cite biblical scripture, “the blood is the life.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, living labor is the principal, necessary force in the production process; it is the host that capital, as dead labor, must have in order to live. The working class can rob capitalists, become Sabbatarians, or living labor can escape capitalist command and expend itself in cooperative, common endeavors. In this sense, at the point of production, at the very moment that the commodity is being produced through the expenditure of human labor power, the working class as living labor is an independent force, in operation autonomous from capitalism. And there are other moments during which it breaks free of capitalist discipline and the imposition of work entirely.

Capitalism attempts to maintain control over labor power at the same time as it efficiently exploits workers’ ability to work.<sup>8</sup> To extract surplus value and hence profit, capitalism must organize the means of production and raw materials (what Marx called constant capital) and labor power (variable capital) in appropriate ratios. Since constant capital is used up at a relatively consistent rate, capitalists must pay workers less than the value they transfer to commodities in the course of the workday. It is in capitalists’ interest to deploy labor power efficiently, periodically using labor-saving technologies such as automation to decrease the number of workers needed or replacing skilled workers with machines and unskilled ones.

Marx argued that the workday could only “vary within certain limits” and that hence the struggle around the workday was grounded in working hours, a “normal working day,” and wages due for the rent of labor-power. Capital’s interest “is purely and simply the maximum of labor-power that can be set in motion in a working day. It attains this objective by shortening the life

---

<sup>4</sup> Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* (Leeds: Anti/Theses; San Francisco: AK Press, 2000), 82.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that I am speaking about capitalist production in an abstract, ideal way. Furthermore, this immediate process of production does not address financial commodities or financialization.

<sup>6</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 342.

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 12:23.

<sup>8</sup> For Mario Tronti, exploitation is necessary since “the conditions of capital are in the hands of the workers” as “there is no active life in capital without the living activity of labor power,” hence “the capitalist class ... is in fact subordinate to the working class.” Mario Tronti, “The Strategy of Refusal,” in *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 31.

of labour-power” as part of its “unmeasured drive” to accumulate capital.<sup>9</sup> A conflict emerges over the length and intensity of the workday, what Marx called absolute and relative strategies for creating surplus value. Relative surplus value strategy covers both the efficient exploitation of labor power and the use of machinery and ways of reorganizing production to increase the intensity of the exploitation of labor power. At times the working class has been successful in limiting capitalism’s absolute surplus value strategy (winning the eight-hour day and weekend) and addressing relative surplus value (preventing automation and the replacing of skilled workers with machines and unskilled ones). Additional conflicts erupt between the amount of time needed for workers to gain enough wages to ready themselves to work another day, in addition to how that time is spent, and the time capitalism rents the worker to produce surplus value.<sup>10</sup> At these points of conflict the working class is struggling against capitalist authority. But Marx is only speaking about commodities as products here. He does not adequately address a particularly important commodity for capitalism: that of labor power itself.

”In Marx’s account,” Federici argues, ”No other work intervenes to prepare the goods the workers consume or to restore physically or emotionally their capacity to work. No difference is made between commodity production and the production of the workforce. One assembly line produces both. Accordingly, the value of labor power is measured by the value of the commodities (food, clothing, housing) that have to be supplied to the worker, to ‘the man, so that he can renew his life process.’”<sup>11</sup>

In orthodox Marxist (and adjacent workerist traditions) the emphasis on the production cycle ignores the cycle of reproduction of labor power, which arguably is the most important commodity in the capitalist system. Autonomists since *Wages for Housework* focus not just on the production of widgets but on the commodity of labor power. While the reproduction of labor power might appear to be a realm of relative freedom in the privacy of the home, especially with the feminist initiatives that have sought to reorganize social reproduction along more cooperative lines, capitalism and the state apparatus have launched countless counterattacks (wage freezes and reductions, welfare cuts, etc.) to exert control over this sector.

For capitalism the working class is simply labor power. Cleaver argues in *Reading Capital Politically* that the ”working class as working class-defined politically-exists only when it asserts its autonomy as a class through its unity in struggle against its role as labour-power. Paradoxically, then, on the basis of this distinction, *the working class is truly working class only when it struggles against its existence as a class. The outcome ... is not the creation of a pure working class after the revolutionary overthrow of capital but rather the dissolution of the working class as such.*”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 1, 376-77.

<sup>10</sup> Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia; London: Pluto, 1991), 72; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 341. Negri is also referring to Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 282-89.

<sup>11</sup> Silvia Federici, ”The Reproduction of Labor Power in the Global Economy and the Unfinished Feminist Revolution,” in *evolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012) , 93. Federici is referring to Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 376-77.

<sup>12</sup> Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, 83-84. Emphasis in original.

## Broadly defined working class

[There are three] ways that autonomists define the working class. First, the class can "craft new ways of being and new forms of social relations."<sup>13</sup> In this it can force capitalism and the state to develop along new lines in addition to causing crises in these systems. Second, the working class is the primary antagonist in class struggle rather than simply being reactive to capitalism, and it is autonomous from capital, the state, and the official organizations of the Left. There is also a third general attribute that requires attention.

Autonomists define the working class broadly to include not only those working for wages (waged workers) but also those who obtain income through state benefits (welfare recipients) or are striving to obtain wages or income (the unemployed, disenrolled welfare beneficiaries), those whose work is unwaged (including students and housewives), and those who work to directly obtain basic needs for subsistence (such as slaves and peasants). It is important to acknowledge that while slaves are included in the expanded definition of the working class, African slaves in the Americas, as black proletarians, to use W.E.B. Du Bois's apt phrase, had a fundamentally different relationship with capitalism due to their bondage.<sup>14</sup> And in the same sense, peasants and landowners comprise classes, as "peasants are exploited by capital in the sphere of production."<sup>15</sup> While slaves and peasants are not generally understood to be part of formal, normal class relations, at least to Americans, they have been incorporated into contemporary strategies for accumulating capital.

In effect, as Glaberman and Faber contend, "workers work for others, who control the means of production," which is a social relation, and, as the Zerowork collective clarified, the working class is "defined by its struggle against capitalism and not by its productive function."<sup>16</sup> That is, "from capital's perspective" the working class is only a "factor of production" but from a working-class perspective it is a dynamic and complex agent, capable of its own liberation.

To summarize: in addition to what is considered the traditional manufacturing base, the industrial proletariat, this expanded notion of the working class includes students, housewives, slaves, peasants, the unemployed, welfare recipients, and workers in the technical and service industries. Hence the working class is defined in relation to *work* -be it waged or unwaged, productive or reproductive, material, immaterial, or affective-and to one another. But of course the owners of the means of production, as the owners of capital (i.e., capitalists), and their representatives-overseers, supervisors, bosses, managers-are directly defined by their relation to work, whereas bureaucrats, tax collectors, police, and security guards play key roles in disciplining the workforce and hence impose work indirectly upon the class as a whole. To differentiate between social

---

<sup>13</sup> Harry Cleaver, "Kropotkin, Self-Valorization, and the Crisis of Marxism," *Anarchist Studies* 2, no. 2 (1994): 119

<sup>14</sup> The phrase "black proletariat" is from W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935). For an autonomist take on the matter, see Ferruccio Gambino's "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Proletariat in *Black Reconstruction*," Libcom.org, <https://libcom.org/library/w-e-b-du-bois-proletariat-black-reconstruction-ferruccio-gambino>. Historian of slavery and capitalism John Ashworth suggests, "We may define class relationally in terms of the relationship between two groups at the point of production, where one group is seeking to appropriate to itself some or all of the labor of the other. On this definition slaves and slaveholders comprise classes." John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*, vol. 1, *Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Ann Lucas de Rouffignac, *The Contemporary Peasantry in Mexico* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1985), 55.

<sup>16</sup> Glaberman and Faber, *Working for Wages*, 13; Zerowork Collective, "Introduction to Zerowork 1," in *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War 1973-1992*, ed. Midnight Notes Collective (New York: Autonomedia, 1992), 111-12. Emphasis in original.

classes, the specific relation to work needs to be identified. And a few issues need to be resolved: How is the working class composed? How and in what way is the working class "defined by its struggle against capitalism"?

## Is the working class a structure or category?

What Autonomous Marxists and others are trying to accomplish with the concept of the working class is to explain the complexities of a set of human behaviors using a social classification. The time, energy, and very lives of the majority of the human species over the past five hundred years have been converted into labor power. Some individuals purchase this labor power, others manage and discipline it, and still more reproduce it. In a recent attempt at a definition of "class," Joanna Brenner offered, "Although the concept of class has not dropped from use, its contemporary meaning has become restricted to describing social stratification. Even in this sense, in which 'class' denoted a hierarchy of 'differences' (e.g., of income, education, culture), there is no agreed-upon meaning of class categories."<sup>17</sup> To delineate social stratification-working, middle, and upper class, with sub-demarkations such as lower-middle class-produces definitional and empirical problems. In this sense, class becomes an unchanging, fixed structural element in the economy or a sociological category applied universally to complex relations. Conceptions of class can be applied too rigidly or too vaguely as a form of individual prejudice.

Notions of class privilege and classism can make class seem just another item on the list of constraints imposed upon individuals. Class, Brenner writes, "risks being enveloped in a liberal discourse that focuses on individual transformation (e.g., 'recognizing one's privilege') while advancing moral imperatives (e.g., achieving more equal relations among people)."<sup>18</sup> Hence a contingent concept of class that considers the working class's level of integration into the production process must account for "historical specificity and try to account for the struggles over class."<sup>19</sup>

To address these problems anarchists and Marxists have argued that class is about power. In a similar fashion, Kathi Weeks postulates in *The Problem with Work* that class "is not a sociological category but a political one, and its boundaries depend on its particular composition at specific times and places."<sup>20</sup>

## Refusal of work

The image of the working class comprising manual factory workers, usually white and male, disappears upon recognizing the refusals of slaves, peasants, prisoners, housewives, students, and office and service workers. The stereotype has always been a fiction, a narrow misrepresentation that has historically limited the potential of class struggle. According to autonomists, the dynamic, broadly defined working class becomes a class, a social actor, in relation to work only

---

<sup>17</sup> Joanna Brenner, "Class," in *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle*, eds. Kelly Fritsch, Clare O'Connor, and AK Thompson, (Chico: CA: AK Press, 2016), 80.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>19</sup> Stanley Aronowitz, *How Class Works: Power and Social Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 62.

<sup>20</sup> Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 94.

insofar as it is refused. The class makes itself through refusal and self-activity, against and beyond capitalism's attempt to make workers into commodities, nothing but labor power and potential labor power. Hence autonomists are interested in how the working class is composed vis-à-vis its struggles. That is, through the refusal of work, the working class becomes autonomous from capitalist command, the state apparatus, the party, and the union. At times these refusals force capitalism to develop new technologies and strategies to attack working-class power. Crises erupt within capitalism, or a "new era of social relations" is instituted as capitalism is restructured (as happened after the US Civil War, during the Green Revolution, and with the onslaught of "neoliberalism").<sup>21</sup>

Refusal specifically refers to acts of ignoring, disobeying, circumventing, countering, rejecting, or pilfering by employed and unemployed, waged and unwaged, and productive and reproductive workers, as well as those whose work is affective and immaterial. These workers neither control their work nor choose the what, when, where, and how of their work until they refuse it or decide to reorganize capitalist relations entirely.

However, questions arise: What about those who accept the regime of work or even relish it? Aren't there some workers who don't resist? What about structural unemployment? How can you refuse work when there isn't any? The concept of the refusal of work draws our attention to phenomena and is not a claim about all workers or all people everywhere. Within the social aggregate of the working class, as with any population, there is a diversity of opinions, experiences, and desires. The working class becomes more than labor power for capitalism when it refuses the imposition of work. Moreover, work is imposed on two scales: by the boss on the individual worker, as well as on the sector of the population that must access work to obtain income in a capitalist society. The individual worker must perform tasks in the course of the workday under the direction of the boss, but work is also imposed upon employed, unemployed, and those of piecemeal or precarious employment due to the need to obtain money to survive. The inability to access work and hence a wage is part of the imposition of a regime of work that requires an "unemployed reserve army of workers" or "relative surplus population."<sup>22</sup> To refuse work as an unemployed person is to refuse the imposition that requires one to receive a wage to obtain the necessities of life. Moreover, the refusal of work is not necessarily a conscious activity. Employees routinely work to rule (follow rules in minute detail) in order to slow down productivity, take longer than allowed lunch breaks, and ignore instructions from a supervisor in order to accomplish a work task. Each of these is an act of resistance.

If the working class is defined in part by its refusal of the imposition of work, then what can be said of those bosses and bureaucrats who impose work in one instance and refuse it in the next? Are these too part of the working class? The IWW adage that "the working class and employing class have nothing in common" is apropos here, and Wobblies exclude from membership those who have the power over wages and hiring or firing. In this definition an individual boss clearly imposes work upon individual workers, but bosses also impose work upon the general population as part of the aggregate capitalist class. Members of the working class, due to their position, have work imposed upon them that they cannot redistribute in the realm of production. (Historically, however, male workers were accustomed to redistributing work to wives, children, and

---

<sup>21</sup> Antonio Negri, "Potentialities of a Constituent Power," in *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 273.

<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, trans. David McLellan, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 96; Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 794.



unwaged workers performing the work of social reproduction. If working husbands' wages were cut, often wives were forced to do the same with less. Due to the struggles of women, gender-nonconforming people, and others against the patriarchal, nuclear family, this redistribution of household work has become less common.)

The working class becomes an active, possibly revolutionary subject, rather than simply an economic category or an inactive structural element in production, when it creates counter-communities and refuses work through everyday resistance, overt rebellions, and aboveground organizing. The working class as structure or category is made by capitalism, whereas the working class, in its own making, is a dynamic, active, and autonomous force.<sup>23</sup> But a worker's having relationships with other workers does not automatically include one in the class. If a worker is part of the structural imposition of work-not in the modest sense of setting schedules, taking breaks, or making minor production decisions but in the sense of imposing work and ensuring the effective exploitation of labor power-then they are not part of this autonomous class, regardless of relationships with other workers. Further, the relationships of the autonomous class are determined in situ: in relation to particular regimes of work, specific forms of resistance, and precise relationships between members of the class. The composition of the working class, where battle lines are drawn and positions are taken, is ascertained in the context of working-class struggle in particular times and spaces. Therefore, determining working class composition, its boundaries and limitations, in autonomist parlance begins with "reading the struggles" of the refusal of work and the kinds of relationships taking place therein, with due consideration to the divisions and forms of oppression.<sup>24</sup> In these contexts, the new society is established and recorded with the possibility of other arrangements of productive, reproductive, cooperative, and creative activities, ones that address real human needs and desires, can be forged.

## Class composition

One of the larger questions before us, and which encompasses this definition of class, is how to understand everyday resistance under different regimes of power (*potestas*). Periodically systems are replaced with new forms and capitalism is reorganized, partly in attempts to attack working-class power (*potentia*). It is important to understand the relations of power, production, and social reproduction as capitalism and the state apparatus seek to coordinate, capture, and impose. To produce and expand upon an analysis of workers' activities, an approach has been developed from the perspective of the working class in struggle, that of class composition. "By political recomposition," the Zerowork collective states, "we mean the level of unity and homogeneity that the working class reaches during a cycle of struggle in the process of going from one political

---

<sup>23</sup> As Cleaver offered, "The struggle against the imposition of work has been central to the history of the making of the working class, from the initial resistance to the original imposition of work in the period of primitive accumulation through the long centuries of resisting and avoiding the expansion of work time (longer, harder hours) to the more recent aggressive struggles to reduce work time and liberate more open-ended time for self-determined activity." Harry Cleaver, "Theses on Secular Crisis in Capitalism: The Insurpassability of Class Antagonisms," paper presented at Rethinking Marxism Conference, Amherst, Massachusetts, November 13, 1992; <https://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/secularcrisis.html>.

<sup>24</sup> George Caffentzis has used the phrase "reading the struggles" in numerous public presentations over the past two decades (I can attest to this). See also Caffentzis, *In Letters of Blood and Fire: Work, Machines, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013).

composition to another. Essentially, it involves the overthrow of capitalist divisions, the creation of new unities between different sectors of the class, and an expansion of the boundaries of what the 'working class' comes to include."<sup>25</sup>

In an article titled "Marxian Categories, the Crisis of Capital and the Constitution of Social Subjectivity Today," Cleaver grounds the concept of class in concrete social relations, and brings us closer to the contemporary period. Class composition, he writes, is "explicitly designed [by autonomists] to grasp, without reduction, the divisions and power relationships within and amongst the diverse populations on which capital seeks to maintain its domination of work throughout the social factory-understood as including not only the traditional factory but also life outside of it which capital has sought to shape for the reproduction of labor power."<sup>26</sup>

Autonomists begin with a workers' inquiry by "reading the struggles," recording everyday resistance and overt rebellions, as the working class creates new relationships and new subjectivities, escapes capitalist command (even temporarily), and is recomposed (and often decomposed) vis-à-vis its struggle with capitalism and the state apparatus. The working class politically recomposes itself through the refusal of work and the "craft[ing of] new ways of being and new forms of social relations." As the working class acts in its own interests it goes through a process of political recomposition. Then, as capitalism and the state attack working-class power, they seek to decompose the class through cutting wages, undermining union organizing efforts and worker legal protections, instituting technological developments, imposing "austerity," raising the costs of reproduction, and fomenting divisions along lines of race, gender, sexuality, national origin, age, and ability, among others.

As Nick Dyer-Witheford notes, "The process of composition / decomposition / recomposition constitutes a *cycle of struggle*."<sup>27</sup> These cycles of struggle accumulate, furthering the contradictions and crises of capitalism. In this sense, according to Antonio Negri, the working class is a "dynamic subject, an antagonistic force, tending toward its own independent identity."<sup>28</sup> In this way, the working class is "defined by its struggle against capitalism." While it has thus far been implied, autonomists do not view the working class as a structure or category of social stratification. In the *The Making of the English Working Class* E. P. Thompson argued,

By class I understand a historical phenomena, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. I do not see class as a "structure," nor even as a "category," but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships. More than this, the notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship. Like any other relationship, it is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomize its structure.... A relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context.... If we stop history at a given point, then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men [sic] over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns

---

<sup>25</sup> Zerowork Collective, "Introduction to Zerowork 1."

<sup>26</sup> Harry Cleaver, "Marxian Categories, the Crisis of Capital and the Constitution of Social Subjectivity Today," in *Revolutionary Writing: Common Sense Essays in Post-Political Politics*, ed. Werner Bonefeld (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2003), 43. Originally published in *Common Sense* ("Journal of the Edinburgh Conference of Socialist Economists"), no. 14 (1993): 32-55.

<sup>27</sup> Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 66. Emphasis in original.

<sup>28</sup> Toni Negri, "Archeology and Project: The Mass Worker and The Social Worker," in *Revolution Retrieved: Selected Writings of Marx, Keynes, Capitalist Crisis and New Social Subjects, 1967-83* (London: Red Notes, 1988), 209.

in their relationships, their ideas, and their institutions. Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition.<sup>29</sup>

Accordingly, class is neither a structural component of the economy nor a sociological category. Seeing class as structure limits the working class to a mere position within the economy rather than a dynamic force. Class as a category relegates it to income or education level, waged industrial work, or sector of the population defined by party apparatchiks, union bureaucrats, wonky academics, or nonprofit do-gooders. Perennially someone will yell out at a radical meeting or gathering, "We have to get workers involved!" While ignoring the simple fact that all those assembled *are* workers, this is using class as an a priori sociological category. To define the working class relationally requires a rigorous inquiry and analysis of the contingency, subjectivity, and internal dynamics of a social aggregate of individuals ("sectors of the class") that must obtain wages, income, or subsistence directly (waged work, welfare, payment in goods and services) or indirectly (children, partner's wage). Hence the working class can be seen as the sector of the population that experiences the imposition of conditions that make work necessary. Through the refusal of this imposition, internal class relations are furthered, the class politically recomposes itself, and the possibility of a new society beyond capitalism is fostered. Then, of course, the working class comes into conflict with forces that control the means of production (capitalists), manage these means (overseers, landowners, supervisors, bosses, and managers), and maintain larger social relations that enforce the mode of production in the society in which capitalism and the state are functioning (relations with the likes of bureaucrats, tax collectors, police, and security guards). All must work, even capitalists. As Henry Ford boldly declared, "I don't expect to retire. Every man must work, that's his natural destiny."<sup>30</sup> For the bourgeoisie, what was once referred to as the "professional-managerial class," escaping the worst violence of these relations is possible through the coordination and imposition of work on others, even as it is imposed upon their own bodies.<sup>31</sup> In order to better control the working class, police and security guards are drawn from among the working class. As police and rental cops, members of the working class gain authority and a small degree of escape from their own powerlessness. Through their management and control of the working class outside of the factory, work is imposed upon the population in addition to the on-the-job impositions. Each social class has a complex set of internal and external relations such as these.

To suggest that the working class is defined by its relationships requires three things: "reading the struggles," determining the divisions that exist within the class, and ensuring that sectors of the working class aren't omitted from our conceptions and organizing. Agricultural and domestic workers were excluded from the Wagner Act, which passed in 1935 and serves as the foundation for labor law in the US. The exclusion of agricultural workers was tacitly accepted by sectors of the union movement until the rise of the United Farm Workers, which eventually led to the passage of the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act in 1983. Domestic workers would have to wait until the development of a workers' center campaign that pushed for the 2010 Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights in New York State, with a few other states following. Housewives who did not earn a wage were also not considered working class. Autonomists sought to overcome these exclusions conceptually since the working class itself had endeavored to over-

---

<sup>29</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 9-11.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Ford, quoted by Willis Thornton, *New York World-Telegram*, July 24, 1933.

<sup>31</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," in *Between Labor and Capital*, ed. Pat Walker (Boston: South End Press, 1979).

come these organizationally and politically. In this way, the concept of the working class can be carefully extended further to address other forms of exploitation and oppression, domination and control as it pairs with other conceptions in revolutionary theory.

An autonomist theory of class requires broad definitions of workers' autonomy and work refusal *and* an inquiry into the composition of the working class vis-à-vis capitalism. By beginning with a wide-ranging description and striving to understand class dynamics and struggles in particular contexts, revolutionaries can approach the working class as it is rather than as they imagine it or wish it to be.

Autonomists view the working class as all those who are refusing the imposition of work—employed and unemployed, waged and unwaged, productive and reproductive, material, immaterial, and affective. Not just those toiling in fields, factories, and workshops but those working in offices and coffee shops, kitchens, bedrooms, and classrooms. To review, work is simultaneously imposed on the population and upon individual workers. These workers face specific hours, wages or lack of wages, and pace on the job, and if they quit or are fired the need to work to obtain income is ever present. The "guerrillas of desire," as I see them, are those refusing the imposition of work on the terrain of everyday life both as individual workers and members of the working class. Theft of time and materials, feigned illness, sabotage, arson, murder, exodus, and the myriad of other forms this refusal takes—as well as the process of creating counter-communities—can be found in everyday life. In his classic *Workers' Councils*, Dutch Marxist Anton Pannekoek states that "every shop, every enterprise, even outside of times of sharp conflict, of strikes and wage reductions, is the scene of a constant silent war, of a perpetual struggle, of pressure and counter-pressure."<sup>32</sup>68 It is through Pannekoek's lens that we begin to see the guerrillas of desire not only as a historical subset of slaves, peasants, and workers in the industrial and social factory but as a subset of the working class today struggling against the general imposition of work. By subset I mean that these guerrillas do not represent all of the struggles of the working class or the entirety of the struggle against the imposition of work but resist outside the gaze or comprehension of capitalism and the state apparatus. It is from the concepts of the working class and everyday resistance that the metaphor of the guerrillas of desire is derived.

Kevin Van Meter is an activist-scholar based in the Pacific Northwest. He is coeditor of *Uses of a Whirlwind: Movement, Movements, and Contemporary Radical Currents in the United States* (AK Press, 2010) and author of the recently released monograph *Guerrillas of Desire: Notes on Everyday Resistance and Organizing to Make a Revolution Possible* (AK Press, 2017).

---

<sup>32</sup> Anton Pannekoek, *Workers Councils* (Oakland: AK Press, 2002), 8.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Kevin Van Meter  
What Is the Working Class?  
November 2, 2017

Retrieved on May 13th, 2018 from  
<http://www.hamptoninstitution.org/what-is-the-working-class.html>

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**