

# Structural crisis of the capital, machinefactory, and the degradation of work – the social issue in the 21st century

Crise estrutural do capital, maquinofatura e precarização do trabalho  
– a questão social no século XXI

GIOVANNI ALVES\*



**ABSTRACT** – We will discuss the new determinations of the degradation of work in the historical conditions of the 21st century. Thus, considering the determinations of the structural value appreciation crisis and the prevalence of machinefactory as a new form of capital production, the degradation of work sets itself not only as wage degradation but also as existential degradation, changing the historical records of the social issue in the 21st century. We will briefly explain the concepts of global capitalism, machinefactory, structural value appreciation crisis, existential degradation, just-in-time way of life, and ideological work.

**Keywords** – Work. Capitalism. Social issue. Work degradation.

**RESUMO** – O objetivo do texto é expor as novas determinações da precarização do trabalho nas condições históricas do século XXI. Deste modo, tendo em vista as determinações da crise estrutural de valorização do valor e a vigência da maquinofatura como nova forma de produção do capital, a precarização do trabalho põe-se não apenas como precarização salarial, mas precarização existencial, alterando os registros históricos da questão social no século XXI. Explicaremos, de modo sucinto, o significado dos conceitos de capitalismo global, maquinofatura, crise estrutural de valorização do valor, precarização existencial, modo de vida just in time e trabalho ideológico.

**Palavras-chave** – Trabalho. Capitalismo. Questão social. Precarização do trabalho.

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\* Doctor of Social Sciences by Unicamp, Sociological Theory lecturer. Professor at Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho (UNESP-Marília), Marília/SP – Brazil. *E-mail:* [giovanni.alves@uol.com.br](mailto:giovanni.alves@uol.com.br)  
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The purpose of this paper is to discuss the category elements required to understand the nature of the social issue in the 21st century under the global capitalism conditions. We are going to bring out a set of indispensable concepts to critically discuss the capital from a historic-dialectic materialist standpoint. We are going to briefly explain the meaning of the concepts of global capitalism, machinefactory, structural value appreciation crisis, existential degradation, just-in-time way of life, and ideological work. They are the product of a study conducted in the past few years to understand the capital's production restructuring complex based on the "Toyota system" and critically looking into the changes in the social morphology of work and the capital's socio-metabolism under the conditions of its structural crisis (ALVES, 2001; 2007). Understanding the essential nexus of the Toyota system as a "capture" of subjectivity has effectively led us to unveil the degradation or work as existential degradation (ALVES 2011; 2013).

First of all, it is important to highlight the meaning of the global capitalism concept. In our critical studies, it has been used quite accurately in the sense of worldwide capitalism in the capital's structural crisis stage. The concept of global capitalism implies a complex of multiple social-historical determinations said to be the capitalism of the capital's new production restructuring complex under the Toyota system or the new spirit of capitalism (ALVES, 2011; BOLTANSKI; CHIAPELLO, 2009); or the capitalism that finances the capitalist wealth under the financial capital's hegemony (CHESNAIS, 1996;1998;1995); or yet the capitalism under the domain of neo-liberalism as a historic block that conditions and constrains the policies of the capital's political State (DUMÉNIL; LÉVY, 2011); and the post-modernist capitalism as a cultural rationale imbued with social irrationality (JAMESON, 1996). Besides, last but not least, global capitalism is the manipulative capitalism in its utmost form, considering the network society's new technical base.

Over these past thirty years of global capitalism development, two determinations we consider to be essential for and the foundation of the capital's new historical temporality have emerged: the creation of a new form of capital production, which we call machinefactory, and the development of the structural value appreciation crisis, which is manifested mostly in the financialization of capitalist wealth and the financial capital's hegemony in the value accumulation dynamics. These new structural determinations posed by the historical time have effectively changed how work has degraded.

The degradation of work is a structural trait of the capitalist mode of production; however, it has forms of being in the plane of historical reality. By nature, labor-power as a commodity is immersed in a wage degradation that may take on the form of either extreme or regulated wage degradation. The shades of wage degradation are determined by the correlation of force and power between the social classes. Therefore, it is a social and political degradation.

However, in the past decades of global capitalism there have been two major historical events that impacted the degradation of work's historical way of being: the emergence of machinefactory, a product of the late capitalism's technological revolutions, and the emergence of the structural value appreciation crisis, fundamentally stemming from the increase in the capital's organic composition. Our main hypothesis is that those two historical facts – machinefactory and the structural value appreciation crisis -, which are reduced to mere technological and economic facts, have definitely changed the degradation of work's terms and ways of beings under the global capitalism. Those two facts have even helped the degradation of work to first take on the characteristics of structural degradation of work, and later, the social statute of existential degradation, or yet, the degradation of the working man.

## Machinefactory

Machinefactory as a new form of capital production, stemming from the development of manufacture and large-scale industry, has emerged as a determination by the technical base of the commodity production system and inevitably implies the establishment of a new man x nature

relationship. From the historical-materialist standpoint, technique as technology, or rather, technology as a social form of technique, is a necessary mediation of the social metabolism. In the capitalist society's case, the technical base of the commodity production system acquired certain social forms characterized by Marx as manufacture and the large-scale industry (MARX, 2013). We can consider them social-historical forms within which the capitalist mode of production takes place. However, manufacture and large-scale industry are not merely critical categories of the capital's political economics but sociological categories that require some *socio-metabolic control form* that emerges along with the capital's modern civilization.

Right at the beginning of chapter 13, book I of *Capital*, Marx says: "In manufacture, the revolution in the mode of production begins with the labor-power, in modern industry it begins with the instruments of labor" (MARX, 1996).

In this short and interesting passage, Marx highlights the "beginnings" of the revolutions in the capitalist mode of production. It is an ontological remark about how the capital's social production takes place. As previously noted by Marx and Engels, "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society" (MARX; ENGELS, 1998): manufacture, as it established cooperation and the manufacturing division of work, revolutionized the labor-power; the large-scale industry, as it introduced the machine system, revolutionized the instruments of labor.

Our hypothesis is that machinefactory, a synthesis of manufacture and large-scale industry, revolutionized the man-machine relationship by setting management as the essential nexus of capital production. Hence, machinefactory is a new technical transformation in the production of social life that changed the control over the social metabolism under the conditions of the form-capital domination. In fact, the revolution in the mode of production *increasingly* implies the revolution in the *way of life*, that is, the revolution in all social relationships (the 1844 Marx would say: the revolution in the "species-life" [*Gattungslieben*] in its abstract, alienated form (he says: "Life itself appears only as a means to life" – herein lies the true meaning of wage labor).

Therefore, the beginning of machinefactory is neither the revolution in the labor-power (like in manufacture) nor the revolution in technique (like in large-scale industry), but rather the revolution in man-and-technique, or the revolution in the very man-technique relationship. To that end, the ideology of management under the informational network conditions was devised.

As a new technological form of capital production based on the informational network, machinefactory set the need of management as "capture" of the living labor's subjectivity, the essential nexus of the Toyota system as an organizational innovation. On the other hand, management as "capture" of man's subjectivity as living labor posed the need of production as a social totality (the dissemination of the Toyota system throughout the instances of social reproduction, loci of the social subjectivizing process).

In short: every form of capital production (manufacture, large-scale industry or machinefactory) implies, as a prerequisite of the technical base, a given *labor organization form* or management and a given *way of life* suited for social reproduction (that is true for both manufacture and large-scale industry and machinefactory). Machinefactory, which emerges from a new technical base (information technology), poses, as an actual prerequisite, the "capture" of people's subjectivity by means of the Toyota spirit, thereby intensively and extensively leading to the social reproduction process of living labor. Hence, the emergence of machinefactory changes the terms of the social estrangement given by the lifespan/length of work ratio and the creation of a new way of life: the just-in-time way of life.

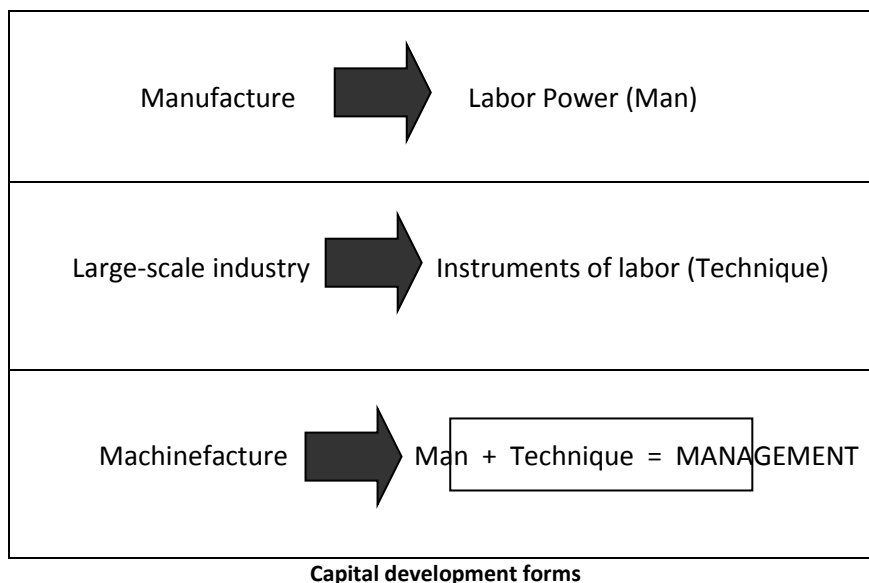
However, it is important to note that, in onto-methodological terms, that "prerequisite" means "determination" instead of "determinism", which in turn means that the relationship between machinefactory (as an informational network) and the new ways of social estrangement (given by

existential degradation as work degradation) does *not* imply some technological determinism, considering that the technical base – in this case, the informational network – merely offers virtualities developed (or not) by the capital as mediation of the socially-historically determined form. In short, it is not the technical base that causes social estrangement but it is instead the capital-form and the social relations of capitalist production, mediated by class struggle, that make machinefactory's informational technical base to establish the Toyota system and its essential/organizational nexus as a suitable form to organize social production.

In a society free of the capital's rule, the new informational technical base would *not* imply a Toyota-like organizational form along with its just-in-time way of life, where one's time alive is reduced to labor time. A society of self-organized producers would develop other virtualities in a technical manner, bringing forth another way of organizing work and another way of life. Therefore, it is not the technical form of the new networked machines that makes us sick (caused by the "capture" of the living labor's subjectivity), but instead the capital's social relationships as a movement of self-appreciation of the value.

Under other historical conditions in which humans take back the objective and subjective conditions of social production, the new informational technical base would help, on the contrary, to reveal a new, more fully developed humankind, considering the affirmation of the network as the prerequisite material base of the human genericity's being-in-itself.

Machinefactory, like manufacture and large-scale industry, is a historical form of capital production. In a radically new historical age, the networked informational technical base would have another category denomination capable of expressing the true meaning of social emancipation: the communism of men instead of things.



### Structural capital valuation crisis

The concept of structural valuation crisis actually poses the *economic base determination* understood as the new objective condition for the accumulation of capital or surplus value extraction. Much like the way the machinefactory position is not merely a technical position, the position of the structural value appreciation crisis is not merely an economic position. They both include the establishment of a new correlation of force and power between the social classes in the world of capital.

On the one hand, machinefactory founded a new way to subsume labor to capital, which Ruy Fausto, as he devised his “post large-scale industry” concept (a concept similar to machinefactory), called *formal-intellectual or spiritual subsumption of labor to capital* in contrast, for instance, to formal subsumption (manufacture) and real subsumption (large-scale industry) (FAUSTO, 1989). On the other hand, the structural value appreciation crisis poses the inevitable need for a new level of depreciation of the labor-power as a commodity (which Mészáros is going to identify as the structural degradation of work) (MÉSZÁROS, 2002).

In the historical time of machinefactory and the structural value appreciation crisis, the so-called “existential proletarian condition” expanded (ALVES, 2007; 2013), which implies – under the existing ideological conditions of the manipulative capitalism that prevents a class consciousness from forming – *not* the emergence of the “class” as a historical subject but the emergence of the “crowd” and the “people”.

As the structural value appreciation crisis sets in, the degradation of work appears as *wage degradation* along with its impacts on jobs, career, wages, and work conditions. That explains the *new wage degradation* stemming from flexible work changing the wage conditions (wage-based employment, compensation, and work hours). At the same time, as machinefactory imposes itself, work degradation also appears as *existential degradation*, given that the management of the new man-nature relationship changed the working man's social metabolism in a qualitatively new manner, considering the information technology and the adoption of the Toyota production system. That means the just-in-time/kanban method and automation as the living labor's spiritual-motivational willingness in the workplaces of restructured capitalist companies have helped increase, in terms of intensity and amplitude, the ideological load and pressure to achieve goals and results (it is related not only to production but also to the totality of social life, which means the emergence of the just-in-time way of life).

### **Just-in-time way of life**

For us to understand the meaning of “just-in-time way of life” it is important to learn the meaning of the just-in-time/kanban method from the standpoint of Toyota-like management. For instance, Toyotism creator Taiichi Ohno says just-in-time means that, in an industrial production flow process, the proper parts required for assembly reach the assembly line at the time they are needed and only in the exact amount. Here is the just-in-time: production at the right time. Ohno believes a company establishing this flow throughout can approach zero inventory. Additionally, behind the zero inventory principle, we find there is lean production. From the capital's standpoint, zero inventory requires reducing the number of workers at the manufacturing plant (OHNO, 1997).

However, Ohno found that “it is extremely difficult to apply just-in-time to the production plan of every process in an orderly way. An upset in prediction, a mistake in the paperwork, defective products and rework, trouble with the equipment, absenteeism – the problems are countless.” He concludes: “Therefore, to produce using just-in-time so that each process receives the exact item needed, when it is needed, and in the quantity needed, conventional management methods do not work well.” In short, just-in-time as a revolution in the production of goods implies a new production management method.

Taiichi Ohno attempted to solve the just-in-time problem by rethinking the production flow and setting up a new management method under which the production flow was reversed: a later process goes to an earlier process to pick up only the right part in the quantity needed at the exact time needed. In fact, Taiichi Ohno found that the secret to just-in-time is actually *communication*, that is, clearly indicating what and how many parts have to be withdrawn for the production process, thereby creating a *sign board* capable of controlling the amount produced – that is, the amount needed (in this case, communication is reduced to a sign board).

Therefore, the Toyota system stands on two pillars: autonomation and just-in-time/kanban, where just-in-time is the *system*; kanban, the [communication] *method*) and “autonomation”, the *spiritual willingness* [living labor] (CORIAT, 1994). In other words: the method of the just-in-time system comprises *communication reduced to a device to indicate production needs*; and as the essential prerequisite of the just-in-time system and the very kanban method we would have autonomation as the *living labor's spiritual willingness to collaborate*. Such is the ontological meaning of Ohno's categories.

The parameters of the Toyotism spirit included in the just-in-time/kanban system/method and autonomation – that is, *lean production, instrumental communication and living labor collaboration* – impact the social totality, and in this case require the formation of human subjects (living labor) *spiritually willing to collaborate*, a necessary requirement of autonomation in capitalist production.

Our hypothesis is that the just-in-time way of life implies a greater load of pressure on the working man's psyche, considering he operates the phenomenon of *reduced life*. As Toyotist production becomes a social totality, it imbues social life with value-assigning elements of capitalist production. The abstract work that emerges at the factory is disseminated throughout the bourgeois society. That is why we have been pointing out that, under the global capitalism conditions, the reach of abstract work into social life, with the value-derived forms, promote the phenomenon of “reduced life” (ALVES; VIZZACCARO-AMARAL; MOTA, 2011).

“Reduced life” driven by the just-in-time way of life is contrary to the “meaningful life” (Lukács) that the working man is unable to have in the capital's social system (HOLZ, H., KOFLER, L. e ABENDROTH, W., 1969). Through reduced life, the capital subdues the social individuals' possibility of human-personal development as the capital occupies people's living time with the logic of estranged work and the logic of commodities and unbridled consumerism. “Reduced life” produces men immersed in “particularist” attitudes (and behaviors) created (and encouraged) by the existing social institutions (and values). That is why the social existence conditions that emerge from the social metabolism of restructured work in global capitalism help exacerbate the phenomenon of “estrangement” in the bourgeois society.

## Reduced life

Reduced life means fast, signaled, lean, captured and reversed life. Those are its fundamental characteristics under the conditions of the just-in-time way of life. Reduced life is fast life to the extent that networked production, using information technologies under the Toyotist management requirements, intensifies the capital turnover movement and, therefore, the production process as a social totality. Under the conditions of the structural value appreciation crisis, the eagerness to appreciate the capital is exacerbated, thus enhancing the turnover movement of the value appreciation circuits. What happens is what I. Mészáros called the increase in the rate of descending use of the commodities' usage value or yet what David Harvey called space-time compression (MÉSZÁROS, 2002; HARVEY, 1992). As the networked society constitutes itself, the subsumption of the social totality to the capital production becomes real subsumption. Labor's increased commodity output leads to the increased speed of the social organism's vital circuits.

At the same time, reduced life is *signaled* life (evaluated and qualified) to the extent we are not only facing the alleged “society of communication” but also the society of communication-reduced-to-signs, much like what happens in the Toyotist management method's kanban, for instance. In the media society formed by networks, communication contains an element that signals instrumental procedures and requirements that inevitably involve the individual. This is the new fabric of the ideology of communication, the communication of the ideology as signs/marks capable of manipulating the living labor's subjectivity not only in the plane of production but also in the plane of daily life.

Reduced life is “*captured*” life to the extent the capital's fetish-values are introjected in the individual that collaborates. In fact, social traffic is besieged by value-images that, like fetishes, imposed

themselves to the subjectivity of working men and women. The networked society is the society of the power of ideology that operates in the plane of human subjectivity. Late capitalism was called manipulative capitalism by Lukács (HOLZ, H., KOFLER, L. and ABENDROTH, W.,1969). "Captured" life is life intensely and extensively manipulated in a wide variety of social life spheres. Advertising and marketing, the images of desire imbued in mass media, the linguistic interpellations that sow new concepts in the phraseology universe (for instance, workers are associates), aim at "capturing" the working man's subjectivity.

However, it is important to note that the word "capture" is put in quotes considering the process of "capture" is intrinsically contradictory and virtual in the sense that a capture does not actually take place (a life actually captured is death itself). Therefore, the individual that collaborates is consciously or unconsciously struggling with himself, as he resists his own human-generic loss of realization. The individual that collaborates under the conditions of the new wage degradation and its burning social contradictions is torn by inner conflicts. As we are going to see later on, the spirit of Toyotism that "captures" the subjectivity is a farcical spirit where the farce is the way the capital deals with its living contradictions (freedom is slavery; war is peace; total quality is total waste etc.).

Reduced life is also "lean life" to the extent people's lives tend to be reduced to the parts required to "put together" the system's demands. In the just-in-time way of life, the time of life reduced to time of estranged work foster lean life. The meaning of instrumentality is imposed on those who organize their free time: "I do *not* do that which allows me to enjoy life but that which is useful for my professional career." The time of life is reduced to the activities needed for one's professional career and the alienated requirements of consumption and social status. Lean life stems from the existential pragmatism where the value-assigning requirements of estranged work invade the free time people have for themselves, thus shortening the time for relationships with friends and family. On the other hand, as a reaction to the lean life logic, some people choose, as the opposite to existential pragmatism and its instrumentality devoid of meaning, to merely enjoy it without a care, thus affirming what Paul Lafargue called the right to be lazy, that is, to idle life (LAFARGUE, 1978).

<b>The reduced life phenomenon</b>	Fast life
	Signaled life
	Lean life
	"Captured" life
	Reversed life

Finally, reduced life is reversed life to the extent that the initial process of the vital flow, as Ohno says, goes to the final process, that is, the future time is reduced to the present time and the chronic presentification sets in, the times of human formation (childhood and adolescence) are reduced/reversed to the time of affirmation in the systemic sense (adult life) – which perhaps explains the death of infancy and the chronification of youth. The space-time compression is also the generational compression in the sense it speeds up the development of discardability conditions (which Mészáros called the increase in the rate of descending use of usage values, with men and women reduced to the labor-power commodity form). The chronification of youth or its chronological extension is, in and of itself, a way to abolish it as a social construct. Under the conditions of the new wage degradation, the passage into adult life becomes a civilization problem. In more advanced capitalist societies, the pillars of adult socialization (employment and a professional career, family as personal fulfillment and consumption as enjoyment of life) are

corroded by the inability of the capital's production system to productively incorporate the number of highly trained young people. Precariat is the social layer of proletariat that exposes the radical limits of social reproduction in the world of capital. That is one of the burning contradictions of the hyper-late bourgeois order, as we are taught by I. Mészáros in his book *Beyond capital* (2003).

### **Capital and the contradictions of the just-in-time way of life**

The organization of the just-in-time way of life carries living contradictions that tend to definitively deny the logic of the Toyota system. Here is the logic of capital and its living contradictions. That means the spirit of Toyotism as a farcical spirit mediates intrinsically contradictory categories. That is why the individual that collaborates is the individual that gets frustrated or sick. In flexible capitalism, everything flows and nothing flows as it should. For instance, in large cities the just-in-time way of life coexists with the accumulation of vehicles that cause urban chaos in the circulation of people and goods. The urban crisis is the crisis of the just-in-time that becomes a farcical ideality. The exhaustion of automobility causes stress in the collaborating individuals (work hours go on longer owing to the stressful commute). The paradox of the just-in-time way of life is stirred up as production intensifies (fast life) and circulation comes to a halt (urban crisis). At the same time, the collaborating individual gets stressed by the growing manipulation aimed at producing superfluous needs ("captured" life), and is recurrently urged to purchase goods. The time of life perversely becomes a time of consumption manipulated as consumerism. However, the new wage degradation, which decreases the wage masses' purchase power, turns collaborating individuals into frustrated ones. Collaboration becomes mere make-believe of the spurious consent mediated by one of the human soul's regressive affections: fear.

Therefore, as the spirit of Toyotism disseminated across social life, the way of life has become imbued with the logic of the production system/method, considering the very circulation, distribution and consumption become components of production at large. Hence, the way of life incorporated the systemic logic of the commodity production and disseminated value-derived forms in social life, which incorporation/dissemination are radically contradictory to the extent there is, as noted above, ontological discrepancies between the spheres of life and systemic ones. The farcical dimension contaminates the flexible capitalism's social categories. That means the just-in-time way of life concept contains a contradictory strain intrinsic to the capital production between estranged work and human life.

In fact, the flexible work organization and the just-in-time way of life under the farcical capitalism conditions mean the estrangement phenomenon is heightened for personal individualities involved in the social process of capital production, a deeper estrangement aspect characterized by an intense psychological pressure that contributes to make the working man sick (what we discussed in the book *Dimensões da precarização do trabalho*) (ALVES, 2013).

Because of increased risk and hazard as one of the traits of the modern proletarian condition, such heightened estrangement derives from the reduced vital flow becoming a commodity production flow. In this case, we have an element of existential degradation whose organic core is the degradation of the working man, a manipulated man submerged in reduced life.

### **The ideology of management**

*Management* is actually an ideological act. Ideology is everything which has an effect on man's subjectivity. To us, using the first Freudian topic, man's subjectivity implies consciousness, pre-consciousness and unconscious. The late capitalism society is the society of the power of ideology where fetish-values, dreams, expectations, and market values are disseminated. Management as ideological practice "captures" the subjectivity and has an ideologically stressful effect on the working man's



subjectivity, thereby corroding the dimension of the generic being of man as a species – such is the degradation of the working man.

Existential degradation is not reduced to the ideological stress caused by the degradation of man as a generic human being, but it also regards the degradation of the living labor's living conditions in the territory of metropolises and public spaces of human development, that is, the social reproduction conditions such as circulation, territoriality, consumption, and leisure. In fact, the ideology of the market is disseminated as the new form of capitalism development (flexible capitalism) and the capital's historical block enter into effect. The structural value appreciation crisis and the acceleration of the capital appreciation crisis operate the extent of the value-derived forms which turn social activities into abstract virtual modes of work. Abstract virtual work breaks into a wide variety of labor activity instances – from the manufacturing industry to services and public administration (ALVES, 2013).

There is a material base for the ideology of the market to operate under the neo-liberal capitalism conditions: the alleged prevalence of the commodity form. Only a society mediated mostly by the commodity form allows for the neo-liberal ideology to take effect, and therefore imbues the social totality with the commodity fetishism and derived forms of value/abstract virtual work. The expansion of the value form to human activities foreign to the capital production logic makes them "productive" activities, and embeds alienation/estrangement determinations typical of estranged work in them. That strengthens the organic interconnection between work and estranged life with impacts on the working man's subjectivity (mind and body).

The split of work degradation into *wage degradation* and *existential degradation*, the latter having the working man's degradation as its organic core – is merely heuristic. As a rule, one implies the other. As the living labor degrades as a commodity work force (wage degradation or degradation of the exploitation conditions because of the new wage degradation), the living labor also becomes degraded as a generic human being (degradation of the conditions of human existence as related to the working man's objectivity-subjectivity/intersubjectivity). The reverse is true as well – for instance, the degradation of human consciousness (certainty of oneself, perception and understanding) and the process of class desubjectivation has an impact in the class struggle capability, a key element for the correlation of forces between capital and work in the confrontation aimed at setting up the wage conditions (conditions of work force sale and purchase). The degradation of the working man is actually the degradation of human consciousness, a defining trait of man's generic being and which sets him apart from other animal species.

## **Ideological work**

In a more developed human society, the service industry expands and becomes the prevailing work activity. In fact, machinefactory occurs under the conditions of an extended services society, where the ideological work as the prevailing mode of concrete work characterizes the majority of work activities in developed capitalism. Ideological work is work that requires a communicative action onto other men and even oneself. For instance, the work of a teacher, the work of a social worker, or even the work of a judge are essentially examples of ideological work to the extent that they perform an ideological action onto other men and themselves (the degree to which subjectivity is involved in ideological work is higher than in concrete work forms where the working individual performs an action solely on the raw material aiming at producing use values per se).

Ideological work is a mode of concrete work that emerges from the civilizing process (as concrete work under the conditions of the capitalist mode of production may take on the form of abstract work and become ideological work with an estranged implication). It has a crucial particularity: ideological

work, to the extent it requires a social action onto the other and oneself, involves (and stresses, in estranged implication situations), the working man's subjectivity.

Considering the civilizing process that expands the preparatory activities of social production and reproduction, ideological work tends to be permeated/imbued in the multiple work activities in late capitalism – not only service activities but also industrial activities under the Toyota-like management (for instance, kanban and automation are ideological devices that operate communicative actions in work teams at the Toyota factory). Therefore, management as a mediating practice of the new way to produce capital (machinefactory) is essentially ideological work that has an estranged meaning to the extent it requires the rationalization of instrumental means in order to obtain purposes foreign to the social needs and humans' extreme wants. Management as a social disease, as Vincent de Goulejac would say, actually has an ideological meaning that stresses the collaborating individual (GOULEJAC, 2007). In fact, ideological work is imbued in the immaterial materiality of machinefactory (some call it “cognitive work”, which is an improper term because it sterilizes the incisively ideological meaning of the communicative action in flexible capitalism).

### **Dimensions of degradation and social issue in the 21st century**

The social issue that emerged in Western Europe in the 19th century and designated the phenomenon of growing material poverty among members of the working class is historically put at first as relating to the condition of exploitation and social inequality stemming from countless numbers of industrial workers excluded from sharing in social wealth. It emerges at the dawn of industrial capitalism in the 19th century with the working class alienated from the emerging capitalist civilization's consumer products. Back then, wage workers had no rights. The original wage degradation took on extreme, unregulated, coordinated forms, at the most dynamic core of accumulation, with modes to dispossess men, women and children. The factory was the hub of wage brutality, where degrading work, child labor for long shifts, and compensation below the line of subsistence ruled. In those historical conditions, poverty expressed the mode of intensive and extensive exploitation of the labor power, and constituted that which we call the *first generation of work degradation*.

Hence, the budding industrial capitalism explicitly carried within it the degradation of humans, considering it segregated proletarian masses coming from the countryside to working class neighborhoods in undignified conditions. The original industrial capitalism created social poverty. The entire working class-turned proletarian and impoverished by competition was seen as being the proletariat. In the 19th century, there were no labor rights or unions capable of negotiating better wages and working conditions. In short, the social issues as the radical contradiction between capital and labor mixed together with the issue of social revolution.

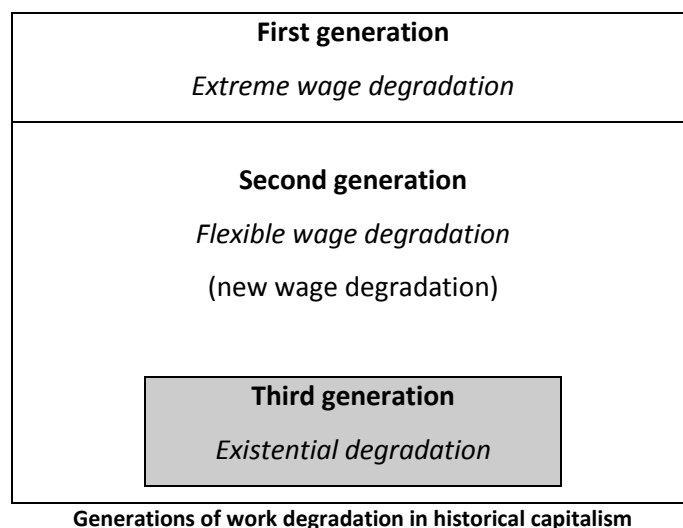
However, the nature of the social issue changed – or at least acquired a more complex content in its social and political dynamics – with the development of monopolistic capitalism and the prevalence of relative surplus value, which allowed the production system in imperialistic capitalist countries under political and social pressure to redistribute wealth and ensure, for an organized mass holding bargaining leverage, better working conditions and living standards. Hence, as social poverty decreased in more developed capitalist countries by means of social policies and social and political regulation of wage work (labor legislation and the right to collective bargaining), the meaning of work degradation in imperialist countries in the course of the 20th century changed. Degraded work turned into informal work, without rights; work deemed atypical and demeaning. ILO's very concept of “decent work” incorporated the change in the meaning of wage degradation: decent work means regulated work, that is, work carrying rights.

As the meaning of degraded work changed, there emerged what we call the *second generation of work degradation*. As a result, work degradation meant the corrosion of the regulated wage statute, a

"return" to the original form of exploitation, where the first generation of work degradation was in force in its form of extreme wage degradation. We use the word "return" figuratively, because strictly speaking it is not a return. Extreme wage degradation under the developed capitalism conditions has a more demeaning sense than the first historical forms of labor exploitation, considering the level of civilization development and the high level of development of the work's social production power. The estrangement became sharper and deeper with the wage degradation under the more developed capitalism conditions, or high labor productivity capitalism.

In the age of the capital's historical ascent, the adoption of labor legislation and Labor Law granting the State the power of control and social policies, the primitive or dispossessing forms of work degradation reduced or became marginalized in the scope of exploitation and capital accumulation. In the case of some industries, chains of production that used, for instance, degraded forms of work, many of them in farming or more backward areas, relocated to peripheral regions of the world market, where such inhumane practices were allowed or invisible. Imperialistic relationships made it possible to export primitive forms that had never disappeared in the developed bourgeois society. After all, historical capitalism developed by placing and replacing historical ways of work degradation and wage degradation forms comprising a spectrum of concrete situations that ranged from extreme degradation to regulated degradation.

In fact, the modes of wage degradation have become more complex to the same extent the classes' ability to fight and lay down obstacles to the capital's exploitation rage changed. That is why today, more than ever, we see a diversity in wage degradation situations in the world of work, bringing together archaic forms – deemed atypical – and modern forms of exploiting the labor power (hence, work degradation appears as the typification of the atypical under the conditions of more developed monopolist capitalism).



### The new wage degradation and the third generation of work degradation

The social world of work has always been made of an ill-assorted complex of work situations whose original trait was lack of security and contingency, distinguishing characteristics of the original proletarian existential condition. Social poverty is an ontogenetic trait of the capital's civilization. However, as we previously highlighted, the existence of surplus value deeply changed how exploitation operated (NICOLAUS, 2006).

The working class' social and political struggle in the latter half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century expanded, into the organized world of work, the economic and social rights whose effects under the conditions at the time of the capital's historical ascent did not compromise the accumulation of capitalist wealth. In the first half of the 20th century, social poverty decreased in imperialistic countries. Increased labor productivity, the workers' organized fight, and the State's political action made it possible to, for instance, achieve shorter work shifts, higher wages, and better working conditions in more developed capitalist countries.

The imperialist position in central capitalist countries enabled the emergence of a working aristocracy. However, the improvement to the organized working class' living standards did not prevent that in more developed capitalist countries a contingent of the non-organized working class comprising mostly black immigrants remained in a situation of poverty under extreme wage degradation conditions. That is to say that even in the golden age of Fordist-Keynesian capitalism, the world of work contains a no small number of wage workers in a situation of extreme wage degradation submerged in poverty and alienated from the Welfare State.

In the last decades of the 20th century and stemming from the capital's structural crisis, the second generation of work degradation, or strictly speaking wage degradation, which is different, for instance, from the original work degradation connected to the extreme wage degradation form, expanded in central capitalist countries. In the past 30 years of global capitalism, regulated wage degradation has coexisted with atypical forms of paid labor that impose themselves on account of the new flexible accumulation regime. A type of new social poverty emerged. Because of the worldwide competition circumstances, that which used to be the typical standard of labor power exploitation turned into something atypical and unsuited to the new condition of the capital appreciation crisis.

At the same time, because of the new form of capital production – machinefactory –, a new work degradation dimension surfaced as existential degradation considering that, in the networked society, estranged work as abstract work increasingly seeps into social life and imbues the social totality with *value-derived forms*, thereby reducing the time for living to time for working.

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Therefore, we can say that a *third generation of work degradation* emerged in the core of the new flexible wage degradation, which is not reduced to the corrosion of the wage statute (which characterizes the second generation of work re-creation), but is instead related to the degradation of man as a generic being and the degradation of the human existence conditions in a more developed stage along the civilization process, characterized by the reduction of natural barriers. Therefore, the degradation of the human person has taken on new dimensions of meaning in the sense that the exploitation of the labor power and the dispossession of living labor take place in the more developed stage of the capital's civilization (which differentiates, for instance, the degradation of the human person under the conditions of the first and second generations of work degradation – after all, any and all forms of work degradation, in any historical time, have degraded the human person).

The crucial problem of the social issue in the 21st century is to explain the capital's notorious contradiction between developing the human capabilities and demeaning the human personality. In the historical age in which the human person achieves greater civilizing efficiency, at least in the objective realm of possibilities to develop one's essential attributes (individuality, subjectivity, and distinctness), because of the structural capital appreciation crisis and the emergence of machinefactory, the obstacles against the development of the human personality build up, and people's situation of degradation/manipulation worsens.

Therefore, the capital's new historical temporality vehemently brings up again the social issue that appears not only as revealing the new wage degradation, where the degradation of work becomes a structural element in the capital's world order, but also disclosing, within the capital's new social metabolism, the degradation of the human existence conditions befitting the new civilizing development

stage or a reduction of natural barriers. The social issue comes forth as a human issue in the broad sense as well. The new social poverty reveals itself as spiritual poverty in the sense of the human-generic loss of realization (which is what we call social barbarism).

Therefore, the age of social barbarism once again poses the social issue proper, and gives it new dimensions that expose the very limits of the capital as a civilizing force. We do not mean to say the capital has lost its civilizing force but that it – the capital's civilizing force – has been definitively and terribly reduced in the sense of fully and radically revealing its historical limits.

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<sup>1</sup> With the intense, enhanced dissemination of value *derived forms* in the hyper late bourgeois society, the fetishism of commodities and the multiple forms of social fetishism tend to become imbued in human-social relationships and actually hinder the formation of the necessary class consciousness, and therefore the formation of the proletarian social class. We make a distinction between value "constitutional forms" and "derived forms." For instance, abstract work and exploitation are categories pertaining to work that produces value. Therefore, they are value "constitutional forms." Hence, they make up the value form embedded in productive work in the capitalist mode of production. However, as it develops, the value form tends to disseminate through non-productive instances of the capitalist mode of production. That is why abstract work and

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exploitation appear as value "derived forms" in the instances of "unproductive" work inside or outside the production of capital. As value derived forms, abstract work and exploitation are merely "fictitious forms" that do not objectively contribute towards the formation of value, much less to its appreciation (ALVES, 2013).