

Chronic unemployment and relative surplus population: notes based on the critique of political economy

Desemprego crônico e superpopulação relativa: apontamentos a partir da crítica da economia política

ADILSON AQUINO SILVEIRA JÚNIOR*

CLARA MARTINS DO NASCIMENTO**



ABSTRACT – This paper addresses the contemporary problem of chronic employment from the perspective of the critique of political economy by Karl Marx. It seeks to understand the historical and categorical connections between chronic unemployment and movements to recompose relative surplus population in capitalism. The analysis was conducted through a bibliographical study of the main texts in which Marx presents the genesis and development of the capitalist society. It also investigated the work of current analysts who have delved deeper into the reproduction of this sociality in the context of its structural crisis. The recomposition of relative surplus population is linked to the ways in which capital endeavors to resume accumulation, thereby deepening its structural contradictions as the crisis unfolds.

Keywords – Chronic unemployment. Relative surplus population. Capitalist accumulation. Structural crisis of capital.

RESUMO – O artigo aborda a problemática contemporânea do desemprego crônico a partir da crítica da economia política de Karl Marx. Busca apreender os nexos históricos e categoriais entre o desemprego crônico e os movimentos de recomposição da superpopulação relativa no capitalismo. A análise foi realizada através de um estudo bibliográfico dos principais textos onde Marx apresenta o processo de gênese e desenvolvimento da sociedade capitalista. Recorreu também a analistas atuais que aprofundam a investigação sobre a reprodução dessa sociabilidade no contexto de sua crise estrutural. A recomposição da superpopulação relativa é vinculada às formas pelas quais o capital busca retomar a acumulação, aprofundando suas contradições estruturais no evoluir da crise.

Palavras-chave – Desemprego crônico. Superpopulação relativa. Acumulação capitalista. Crise estrutural do capital.

* Master of Social Work. PhD in Social Work from the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE). Recife / PE – Brazil.
E-mail: j_r1987@hotmail.com

** Social Worker. Master of Social Work from the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE). Recife / PE - Brazil.
E-mail: asclara88@gmail.com

Submitted on: May 2013. Approved on: June/2013.

Chronic unemployment as a dimension of the crisis of capital

In this paper we will address the issue of "chronic unemployment" (MÉSZÁROS, 2009) from the perspective of the critique of political economy developed by Karl Marx. Our intention is to identify the concrete historical nexuses that were created between this phenomenon and the movement of relative surplus population, established by the bourgeois civilization. These nexuses refer to the dynamics and structural contradictions of the social reproduction processes dictated by the capital relation itself. This work required an examination of two fundamental Marxist texts: *The Grundrisse: - Economic Manuscripts from 1857-1858*, and his first book *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. We also brought to the fore the contributions of contemporary analysts who have developed and deepened the elements found in Marxian social theory in order to understand the latest trends related to the movement of capital – especially István Mészáros and Ernest Mandel.

Through a literature review, we were able to identify how the contradictory tendencies of capital are expressed and particularized nowadays. Our objective was only to locate the theoretical mediations that help make the problem of "chronic unemployment" more understandable. Therefore, in the notes that follow, we will not delve into the particulars of this phenomenon in the Brazilian social formation of peripheral and dependent capitalism – which would be necessary to further develop this discussion. We will provide an initial overview of the essential theoretical-methodological and historical elements for examining the issue of "chronic unemployment" within a broader level of abstraction.

One of the most problematic aspects among the current contradictions faced by globalized capitalism is the issue of "chronic unemployment" (MÉSZÁROS, 2009). This movement poses problems in terms of the feasibility of the continued reproduction of the system, as well as the survival of increasingly broader swathes of the working class. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon. The aspects that comprise it began to take shape more decisively in the context of the crisis experienced by capitalism during the last decades of the twentieth century.¹ During this period, the capitalist accumulation process entered into what Mandel (1982) described as a "long wave with an undertone of stagnation". The deleterious social consequences of the contradictory tendency of capital to eject large numbers of human contingents from labor processes, even in key capitalist countries, have been evident for several decades. In a lecture given in January 1971, Mészáros (2009) highlighted the devastating panorama:

[...] the problem is no longer just the plight of unskilled laborers but also that of large numbers of *highly skilled workers* who are now chasing, in addition to the earlier pool of unemployed, the depressingly few available jobs. Also, the trend of "rationalizing" amputation is no longer confined to the "peripheral branches of aging industry" but embraces some of the most developed and modernized sectors of production – from ship-building and aviation to electronics, and from engineering to space technology. Thus we are no longer concerned with the "normal", and willingly accepted, by-products of "growth and development", but with a fundamental contradiction of the capitalist mode of production as a whole which turns even the latest achievements of "development", "rationalization" and "modernization" into paralyzing burdens of chronic underdevelopment. And most important of it all, the human agency which finds itself at the receiving end is no longer the socially powerless, apathetic and fragmented multitude of "underprivileged" people but all categories of skilled and unskilled labor: i.e., objectively the *total labor force* of society (p. 1005, emphasis added by the author).

That the possibilities of resuming "full employment" policies, under the social reproduction conditions of global capitalism, have been exhausted – policies that, even in their original configurations, were restricted to certain core capitalist countries – is presented as a virtually consolidated fact on the historical horizon by those seeking a way out of the crisis. This is occurring even in the case of

personifications of capital, who have an apologetic and mystifying vocation for approaches based on adhering to the "line of least resistance". Celso Furtado is unequivocal when he recognizes:

Today, even in Europe, there are no prospects in sight for a relative harmony based on full employment. To maintain the level of aggressiveness of capitalist economies, it has become necessary to abandon employment policies. Increased productivity has been divorced from beneficial social effects. This represents the largest mutation that I've seen in contemporary capitalist economies (cited by TEIXEIRA, 2009).²

In his depiction of the contemporary crisis, Jorge Beinstein (2009) refers to the report provided by the U.S. Navy from James Rickards – a key figure in the U.S. intelligence apparatus during the Bush administration and formal financial advisor to the Office of the Secretary of Defense – which, at the end of 2008, heralded, among its predictions regarding the future of the United States, an "[...] 'Existential collapse', forecasting a prolonged depression with an approximate 35% reduction in GDP over the next six or seven years, and unemployment that would soon reach 15%, etc." (p. 63).

The problems related to the question of "chronic unemployment" take us back to a historical phenomenon posed by the capital relation, whose expressions attest to a structural contradiction of this mode of production. This contradiction is reproduced as an inexorable requirement for the viability of the social metabolic dynamic "directed toward expansion and driven by accumulation" (MÉSZÁROS, 2009): on the one hand, the need to extract value (and the expanded reproduction of value) based on the expropriation of living labor; and on the other, the need to expand the means and modes of this extraction via cutting back on living labor power, through the increased productivity afforded by changes in the organic composition of capital – which create, in increasingly larger proportions, workers as superfluous elements for production. The crisis in the capitalist mode of production stems, fundamentally, from this structural contradiction between the socialization of production (added to the exponential accumulation of the social product of labor) and the concomitant process of impoverishment (absolute and/or relative) of the producers, resulting from their expropriation and the private accumulation of the economic surplus, allocated for the expansion of value by the bourgeois class. The mode of operation of capital involves, therefore, the antagonistically structured and necessarily conflictive relationship between these basic social classes.

Categorical, methodological and historical elements of the critique of political economy

In *Capital*, the "organic composition of capital" analyzed by Marx (2008) expresses a close correlation between "value-composition" (the sum of constant capital and variable capital) and "technical composition" (the sum of the mass of the means of production employed and the amount of labor required for their employment). In other words, the "organic composition of capital" represents value-composition in its reciprocally determined relationship with technical composition. Changes in the organic composition of capital are evidenced to the degree in which the need to create value (and combined extraction between absolute and relative surplus value) lead to the scientific and technical improvement of production – modifying the means of production (machinery and tools) and the organization of work processes – causing a reduction in the mass of "necessary labor" required, reflected in fewer working days. The creation of a quantity of "surplus labor" through increased productivity requires, in this process, increasingly less "necessary labor".

"Chronic unemployment", as a constitutive dimension of the structural crisis of capital, must be understood as a manifestation of the most important structural contradictions of this mode of social metabolic control – more specifically, of the historically created relations, in the course of the

reproduction of capital, between "necessary labor" and "surplus labor" and between "necessary population" and "surplus population", in relation to the need for increasing the value of capital.

In his analysis of surplus population in the *Grundrisse*, Marx (2011) commences with the historical condition assumed by the labor force within the relations of bourgeois production. The concept of "free laborer" posited on the overcoming of the "feudal" relations in which the labor force was immersed, i.e., the concept based on political emancipation (Marx, 2010) achieved in bourgeois relations, implicitly contains the reality that such a laborer is a "pauper" or "virtual pauper" (Marx, 2011). According to Lessa (2007),

[...] "feudalism" imposed, at the time of birth, practically insurmountable limits to the development of individuals. Born noble, noble he would die; servant, this would be his fate until the grave. The fate of the individual was inextricably linked to his community for the simple reason that his social being was unable to exist outside it. [...] This definition of the individual within the community was dictated by the State, which fixed the "elements" of everyday life, such as property, family, type and mode of labor (p. 36).

The process of primitive accumulation, which leads to the alienation of labor from the means of production and subsistence, transforms the producers, in terms of their economic conditions, into mere "living labor capacity" and places them in a state of necessity in all the fundamental aspects of their reproduction. The status of "free" individual and "owner", achieved under the bourgeois regime, places the worker – expropriated of the conditions for realizing his labor power and the means by which to ensure his subsistence – in a state of economic dependence on capital. This dependence is expressed in the means of production and value that enables the worker to acquire the resources necessary for his subsistence as property of the capitalist, as capital in opposition to labor. This paper initially focuses on determining this peculiar condition that labor (living labor power) has in the civilization of capital.

According to Mészáros (2009), the relationship between material production and its control in the basic production units of the pre-capitalist formations were characterized by a high degree of "self-sufficiency".³ In other words, the socio-economic units were primarily geared toward production and direct consumption of the use value. The rupturing of this self-sufficiency, through progressive changes for broader metabolic reproductive connections, demonstrates the advance of the control mode of capital (with the inherent diffusion of alienation and reification) related to the generalization of production geared toward increased value, thereby subjecting human needs to the demands of accumulation.

Along these lines, different from the pre-capitalist forms, the social metabolic mode of control of capital cannot recognize borders (not even its own insuperable structural limits) since its socio-economic units do not need (neither are they capable of) "self-sufficiency", but demand the formation of a global system, overcoming all obstacles to its (permanently enlarged) reproduction. Therefore, Mészáros (2009) shows that it was necessary for capital to free itself from the subjective and objective restrictions of "self-sufficiency", from production geared toward use values. And it did so in an entirely reified manner, with all the mystification inherent to the idea of "free wage labor", formally governed by relationships between equal individuals and owners. "Wage slavery" is internalized by workers through primarily economic pressures, thereby not requiring its permanent constant external imposition under the form of political domination, except during times of grave crisis (MÉSZÁROS, 2009).

A passage from the *Grundrisse* is particularly expressive (and Mészáros refers to it a few times) of the changes in these socio-historical conditions. In this passage, Marx (2011) points out the change in the medieval proverb *nulle terre sans maître* (no land without its lord) to *l'argent n'a pas de maître* (money has no master), which, in terms of everyday relationships, denotes a radical turnaround, whose final consummation is seen in the fully developed capital system. The last proverb corresponds to the

conditions in which alienation prevails in all occupations and aspects of life. Mészáros (2008) states that some elements of capital can be identified, albeit in embryonic form, many centuries earlier:

Although money, unlike land in its fixed relationship with the feudal lord, does not have a permanent master, in principle it cannot also be confined within artificial limits in regard to its potential circulation.* Likewise, the confinement of merchant capital to small areas can only be temporary and artificially imposed, and shall therefore be eliminated sooner or later (p. 101).

Thus, the bourgeois order, in order to fully govern social reproduction, endeavored to remove the obstacles and overcome the fundamental characteristics of all modes of pre-capitalist production. The original labor contract (capitalist) requires that the two parties involved (worker and capitalist) partake, fundamentally, of three main conditions: both parties must be free, equal and owners. In the first place, they do so without there being a legal and political obligation; and secondly because they exchange equivalents between themselves; and thirdly because each wields ownership of certain assets (the worker, labor power; the capitalist, the necessary capital and means of production) (LESSA, 2007). The particular socio-historical way in which the capitalist order evolved – and the historical struggles established between the social classes – made these relations possible without, however, surmounting their elementary contradictions. This occurred through political emancipation, which expresses the formal legal equality (characterized by the abstract concept of the citizen) of individuals before the State.

Therefore, the government of capital is different from all forms of pre-capitalist political power due to the fact it is not based primarily on external economic pressures of coercion and dependence. The bourgeois order is fundamentally based on formally "free" relationships of exchange that cloak the economic dependence and subjection, and confers upon them the appearance of freedom and equality – even though the state, as the "political command structure of capital" (MÉSZÁROS, 2009) plays a vital role in the continued and expanded reproduction of accumulation.

Within this "economic dependence and subjection" Marx (2011) argues that if the capitalist is unable to use the "surplus labor" of the labor force as a means of increasing the value of his capital, the worker cannot perform his "necessary labor" and is therefore unable to produce his means of subsistence or obtain them through exchange. And if he does obtain them, it is only through crumbs of income allotted to him in the form of alms or aid. As a salaried worker, the producer only survives as long as he exchanges his capacity to provide labor for part of the capital that forms the labor fund, i.e., that part of the capital which is converted into the payment of wages. However, the nature of production based on capital is that the worker must increasingly produce "surplus labor", so that more "necessary labor" is continually reduced (always relatively). Consequently, the likelihood of the worker living in conditions of pauperism increases. Marx (2011) shows that under the conditions of bourgeois production, the development of "surplus labor" is related to the development of "surplus population".

It is inherent to the capitalist mode of production that "pauperism" – expressed in human contingents of workers who comprise the surplus population⁴ – is the result of labor itself, of the development of the productive forces of labor. The development of the productive forces necessarily posed by the capital relation through changes in the organic composition of capital – which lead to increased productivity – is based on increasing the ratio between "surplus labor" and "necessary labor", which results in decreasing the fraction of "necessary labor" required for a quantum of "surplus labor". In these terms, considering a certain same quantum of labor capacity, the proportion of "necessary labor" it uses will continuously decrease. That is, a part of that labor capacity becomes superfluous, since a smaller fraction of it is sufficient for performing a quantum of "surplus labor" that previously required a larger quantum of capacity for labor, or labor-power.

The very term "surplus population" refers only to labor-power, the "necessary population" for the production of capital. Or, more precisely, to the surplus of "capacity for labor", arising from the nature of capital; from the fact that under the capital relation, labor-power can only carry out its "necessary labor"

if its "surplus labor" has value to capital, if it is useful to the process for increasing value (MARX, 2011). The "surplus labor" of a part of the working population consists of the "necessary labor" that another party could perform, but does not, turning it into labor-power that exceeds the value needs on the part of capital, which extracts the necessary and surplus labor from the part it employs. The formation of a certain fraction of labor-power as superfluous is the necessary consequence of the growth of "surplus labor" in relation to the "necessary": "[...] the decrease of relatively necessary labor appears as an increase of relatively superfluous labor-power - i.e., as the positing of surplus population" (MARX, 2001, p. 507). Underlying this "positing of surplus capital" are the following historical conditions:

1) It requires a growing population in order to be set into motion; if the relative population it requires has become smaller, then it has itself become correspondingly larger; (2) it requires a part of the population which is unemployed (at least relatively); i.e. a relative surplus population, in order to find the readily available population for the growth of surplus capital; (3) at a given stage of the productive forces, the surplus value may be present, but not yet in the proportions sufficient to be employed as capital. Not only a minimum of the stage of production, but posited for its expansion. In this case surplus capital and surplus population. Likewise, a surplus population may be present, but not enough, not in the proportions required for more production. (MARX, 2011, p. 508)

In the pseudoconcreteness (KOSIK, 1976) posited, when strictly appearance is considered, the phenomenal expression of the social processes, the movements of accumulation are presented as though they were determined by the dynamics of the natural (biological) reproduction of the population. However, the issue of surplus population in capitalism is not about excess population arising from a supposed lack of control of biological reproduction (natural) by men and women. Rather, it has to do with the movements of the accumulation of capital and the ways in which these movements absorb or repel, from the accumulation of value, a part of the working population.

To understand the formation of this surplus population, we need to note that the capital relation can only be developed through the constant pursuit of change in the organic composition, or as Marx and Engels (2010) point out in the *Manifesto*: "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" (p. 43). The conclusive studies found in *Capital* demonstrate that, by changing the organic composition of the course of expanded accumulation, there is a relative decrease in the variable part of capital, which is that part allocated for the purchase of the commodity of labor power. Given the structural foundations of the capitalist system, the course of accumulation necessarily leads to a point where development of the productivity of social labor becomes the most powerful driver of accumulation. It should be added that this degree of productivity is shaped by the historical conditions of the bourgeois order itself: it is expressed by the relative value of the means of production that a single worker, at a given time, transforms into product, with the same expenditure of labor power (with the same socially necessary labor time). That is, the same amount of labor, in the same space of time, producing more and, hence, consuming more means of production and raw material (MARX, 2008).

The change in the technical composition of capital afforded by increased productivity (increase in the mass of the means of production, compared with the mass of the labor power that vivifies them) is reflected in the composition of the value of capital, with an increase in the constant part (mass of the means of production) at the expense of the variable part (the amount of labor required). To the extent that the organic human exchange with nature is subverted by the alienated objectification of the capital relation, the actual productivity of social labor is not oriented towards the satisfaction of collective needs, but its main purpose is the expansion and accumulation of existing values. Thus, the relations of determination between accumulation of capital and productivity of social labor are shaped: under the principles of capitalist production, all methods for increasing the productive social power of labor are at

the same time methods for raising the production of surplus value, i.e., they are methods for producing capital and accelerating its accumulation (MARX, 2008).

According to Marx (2008), the accumulation of capital necessarily occurs: 1) as growth in the magnitude of capital that enters the production process and becomes the basis of production on an expanded scale; 2) and with the development of methods to increase the productive power of labor and accelerate the production of surplus value. Composition-value (and its alterations) does not assume, however, a passive position in the relation of determination with technical composition. It operates actively, as accumulated capital (both concentrated and centralized), providing the means for large individual capital investments of colossal magnitudes. Such investments become a requirement for increased productivity within the realm of large-scale mechanized industry, for the technical and scientific improvement of machines, tools and work processes, and for the purchase of labor power in greater proportions. With the accumulation of capital (concentration and centralization), the specifically capitalist mode of production is developed (based on the constant development of the productivity of social labor and on the combination of forms of absolute and relative extraction of surplus value); and, with the specifically capitalist mode of production, the accumulation of capital unfolds. These two aspects, in the combined proportion of the impulses that mutually occur, modify the technical composition of capital and thus the variable part becomes smaller in relation to the constant part.

The assumptions, so that the reproduction of capital assumes these characteristics, is revealed in the processes of concentration and centralization. In the first, accumulation appears: on the one hand, through the growing concentration of means of production and control over labor; and, on the other, through the reciprocal driving back of many competing individual capitals. As a result, the concentration process takes on two characteristics: 1) the growing concentration of the means of production in the hands of individual capitalists is limited by the extent of growth in social wealth; 2) the portion of social capital located in each branch of production is divided among many capitalists who confront each other as producers of goods, independent from one another and competing among themselves. However, the dispersion of social capital into many individual capitals, or the repulsion between their fragments, is countered by the force of attraction between them. In the most developed sphere of the reproduction of capital, Marx (2008) identifies the centralization of capital that occurs through the concentration of already-formed capitals, the suppression of their individual independence, the expropriation of one capitalist by another and the transformation of many small capitals into a few large capitals. This process only presupposes a change in the allocation of capital that already exists and is operating, and is not limited to the absolute growth of social wealth or the absolute limits of accumulation.

The centralization of capital completes the task of accumulation, enabling the industrial capitalist to expand the scale of his operations. Marx (2008) claims that the increased size of individual establishments is the starting point for a vaster organization of cooperative labor, which it uses for the wider development of its material forces. That is, for the progressive transformation of isolated and routine production processes into socially combined and scientifically organized production processes, thus enhancing productivity.

By expanding and accelerating the effects of accumulation, centralization expands and accelerates, at the same time, changes in the technical composition of capital, which increase the constant part at the expense of the variable part, thus reducing demand in terms of labor. The absolute reduction in labor demand which necessarily results from this process will be all the more, the greater the movement of centralization that combines capitals undergoing this process of renewal. Consequently, the additional capital formed during the course of accumulation attracts, relative to its amount, fewer and fewer workers. And the old capital which is periodically reproduced with a new composition increasingly dispenses with workers it previously employed (MARX, 2008).

In Marx's view (2008), the processes of concentration and centralization that bring about increased productivity always focus on the production of surplus value, on the maximum possible extraction of surplus labor and on the accumulation of capital, thus necessarily generating a portion of

the mass of the working population that becomes extra, superfluous, a "relative surplus population". The drive for relative surplus value induces capital to "define as not necessary" many workers. The tendency to increase the number of hours of surplus labor, through the reduction of necessary labor, takes the form of reducing the number of necessary workers.

The tendency of capital, of the specifically capitalist mode of production, is link up absolute with relative surplus value. Capital aims to achieve the "[...] greatest stretching of the working day with greatest number of simultaneous working days, together with reduction of necessary labor time to the minimum, on one side, and of the number of necessary workers to the minimum, on the other" (MARX, cited by ROSDOLSKY, 2001, p. 212). The first process requires an absolute increase in the working population, while the second implies its relative decrease, even though, in absolute terms, it remains the same or grows. The union of these contradictory tendencies occurs in machines, which "[...] reduce necessary labor time and increase surplus labor, and for this reason prove to be the most powerful means for producing both relative and absolute surplus value" (ROSDOLSKY, 2001, p. 212). Thus, all the contradictions in the modern (that is, bourgeois) theory of population stem from the fundamental forms of surplus labor.

It can be seen that the ambiguous law of capital – of combining greater absolute mass of necessary labor and greater relative mass of surplus labor – corresponds to an equally ambiguous law: on the one hand, turning the largest possible part of the population into proletarianized population; and on the other, permanently transforming a portion of this population into surplus population, a momentarily useless population, until the time it may once again prove useful to capital (ROSDOLSKY, 2001). Marx (2001) conceives the industrial reserve army as the result of a dialectical process of simultaneous creation and suppression of necessary labor by capital: "It is equally a tendency of capital to make human labor (relatively) superfluous, so as to drive it, as human labor, towards infinity" (p. 216).

According to Marx (2008), with the growth of global capital, its variable component also grows, that is, the labor force incorporated therein, but in a continually decreasing proportion, due to the changes in the composition of capital brought on by developing the productivity of social labor. This relative decrease of the variable component, accelerated by the growth of global capital, appears, on the other hand, conversely, as absolute growth of the working population. In the course of accumulation an additional relatively superfluous or subsidiary working population is constantly being produced, with respect to the necessity of its use by capital. The result of this relationship alienated from work is presented to the working class as follows: the working population itself provides the accumulation of population, at the same time that it produces, in an ever-increasing volume, the means for its relative surplus. This is a law of population that is unique to the capitalist mode of production, just as each historical mode of production had its particular laws of population that are historically valid.

On the other hand, if a surplus working population is a necessary product of capitalist accumulation, this surplus population, in turn, becomes a driver of capitalist accumulation and a condition for the existence of this mode of production. This surplus working population constitutes an industrial reserve army that provides – for the shifting needs related to increasing the value of capital – human material always ready for exploitation, regardless of the limits of actual population growth. For example, within a context of expansion of capital accumulation, large masses of people need to be available for immediate use in decisive locations, without breaking the scale of production in other spheres; and surplus population provides them (Marx 2008).

The oscillations of the industrial cycle recruit surplus population, which consequently becomes the most powerful agent of its reproduction. In Marx's view (2008), the typical life course of modern industry (cycles of expansion and stagnation) lies in the continuous creation, greater or less absorption and recomposition of the industrial reserve army or surplus population. The surplus labor of the employed segment of the working class increases the ranks of its reserve, while, conversely, the greater pressure that the latter exerts on the former forces it into surplus labor and submission to the dictates of capital. Marx shows that, to a large extent, the general movements of wages are exclusively regulated by

the expansion and contraction of the industrial reserve army, corresponding to the periodic changes in the industrial cycle. Therefore, the mass of labor power provided by natural population growth is not enough for capitalist production. It needs an industrial reserve army independent of this natural barrier, which is created and maintained by the established social relations.

In his critique of political economy, Marx (2008) assumes a posture of absolute historicity in his analysis of modern population theories. In a passage from *Capital* he even argues that "[...] an abstract law of population only exists for plants and animals, provided humans beings do not interfere historically" (MARX, 2008, p. 735). Likewise in the *Grundrisse* (2011), the author provides some other theoretical and methodological elements for this critique. In this text, he asserts that in different modes of social production there are different laws governing population increase and surplus population. These different laws refer to the different ways in which the individual relates to the conditions of production, or – in regard to the living individual – with his own reproduction as a member of society, since man only works in society and appropriates the results of his activity. The dissolution of this relationship for any individual, or a part of the population, places them in the state of surplus population. At all stages of society, a given production base determines both what is appropriate population and what is surplus population.

In his critique of the theory of population of T. R. Malthus,⁵ Marx (2011) reveals the main characteristic features of the approaches that take on the point of view of capital. The Malthusian concept is entirely false in its presentation, according to Marx (2011), first, because it considers surplus population in the different stages of economic development as something of the same kind and transforms the historically distinct relationships into an abstract numerical relationship. The different laws that govern population growth and surplus population, inasmuch as they fit within the "history of man's nature," are "natural laws", and also "natural laws of man" based on a certain historical development, with a particular development of the productive forces, conditioned by its historical process.

The theory of Malthus compares, in an abstract way, a certain quantum of people to a specific quantum of means of subsistence, causing Ricardo himself to (immediately and correctly) respond that "[...] the quantity of grain is completely irrelevant to the worker if he has no employment, which puts him into the category of surplus population" (quoted in MARX, 2011, p. 505). In the Marxian concept, this needs to be understood in a more general way and refers, strictly speaking, to the social mediation by which the individual is related to the means of reproduction and creates them – and, consequently, to the conditions of production and his relationship with them. The invention of surplus workers, i.e., people without property who work, pertains to the era of capital.

Never a relation to a *non-existent* absolute mass of *means of subsistence*, but rather relation to the conditions of reproduction, of the production of these means, including likewise the *conditions of reproduction of human beings*, of the total population, of relative surplus population. This surplus purely relative: in no way related to the *means of subsistence* as such, but rather to the mode of producing them. Hence also only a *surplus* at this state of development. (MARX, 2011, p. 506, emphasis added by the author).

In the interest of class-based apologetics, the English minister separated current development trends from their social determinants, seeking to address inherently historical issues about the "why" and "how" populations change under "a natural law" that is mechanical and foresees catastrophes. According to Mészáros (2009), the manner of conducting an analysis through fetishistically designed absolute values could be considered absolutely meaningless, if it did not have an apologetic ideological function (and material power emanating from the rationality itself of capitalist production and the mystifying appearance it generates). In the view of this author, it is precisely the apparent natural force of the absolute magnitudes which helps legitimize the existing order, as though limited only by natural boundaries, and therefore exempt from any censure or possible social correction. A clear ideological

objective is presented: to exonerate the historically established socioeconomic system (and, therefore, historically variable in principle) of any guilt imaginable.

The Malthusian theory provided a rational justification – meant also to convince workers – of the legitimacy and validity of the established order, suggesting that all improvements should be approached strictly within the supposedly natural and eternal structural parameters of this order (MÉSZÁROS, 2009). The pseudonatural Malthusian law of population growth could be complemented by Malthus himself, with the structurally unchangeable pseudonatural order of the capitalist society. Marx (2011) asserts that “[...] Malthus transforms the immanent, historically changing limits of the human reproduction process into outer barriers; and the outer barriers to natural reproduction into immanent limits or natural laws of reproduction” (p. 505).

The intent of this theory of population, through its ideological inversion, was consent for the acceptance of the subordination and degrading conditions in which the working classes lived, through the conformation of a practical conscience tailored to the interests of the ruling classes. Furthermore, the logical consequences of its "rational" arguments provided the groundwork for attempts to restrict the public welfare measures demanded by workers, as well as the acceptance of these restrictions by the latter. What appeared to be political and social injustices for these human contingents would only be (in Malthusian terms) the result of the "principle of population", i.e., the catastrophic increase in the number of people that need sustenance. This conception blames labor itself for its degrading conditions and exempts the mode of production based on capital (and its individual personifications) – a priori considered an immutable natural order which tends invariably, through the "invisible hand" of the market, to harmonize conflicting interests – from the structural problems contained in its contradictory dynamics of operation (MÉSZÁROS, 2009).

Not coincidentally, Marx (2008) denounces the words of a capitalist, aimed at superfluous workers, cast out on the street by the additional capital they themselves created: "We manufacturers do what we can for you, whilst we are increasing that capital on which you must subsist, and you must do the rest by accommodating your numbers to the means of subsistence" (HARRIET MARTINEAU cited by Marx, 2008, p. 738). In Mészáros' view (2009), the false definition of these problems and the optimistic projection of solutions superimposed upon them are due to not being able to challenge the perverse internal dynamics of the system, such that the "solutions" always have to follow the line of squaring the circle, the "line of least resistance", even taking into consideration the contemporary context of social barbarism of capital in its structural crisis.

We have seen, therefore, that "surplus population" or "redundant population", utilized in approaches that warn about the dangers of "population explosion", cannot be regarded as generic categories characterizing "too many people", because these are defined by very precise social determinations. What we call in the current context "surplus population" increasingly means "superfluous labor". Current "surplus" or "redundant population" refers to "surplus in relation to necessities" not met for the majority of mankind who depend on selling their labor to survive (MÉSZÁROS, 2009).

Final considerations

We will return now to our starting point. According to Mészáros (2009), we are currently witnessing the impacts of a contradictory process, inherent to the form of production dominated by capital: the large masses of people who from a wide range of fields of labor continue to be ejected from the labor process (and are considered "redundant" by the imperatives of profitable expansion) cannot be considered superfluous as consumers who ensure the continuity of the expanded reproduction and self-valuation of value. This fact ushers in an extremely uncertain perspective regarding the future, if "the line

of least resistance" is followed. In the current context of structural crisis, the previous solutions which adhered to established socioeconomic parameters (expansionist movements, militarist production, introduction of a differential rate of exploitation, state intervention to drive up employment levels⁶) are becoming increasingly restricted and unfeasible. This is because they were based on the dynamics of capital during the period of its historical rise. The situation dramatically changes within the context of structural crisis, in which the expansionist dynamic of traditional displacement become problematic.

The author above states that we are seeing an offensive against the working class today on two fronts (and not only in "underdeveloped" parts of the world, but also in core capitalist countries): on the one hand, unemployment that grows chronically in all fields of activity, even when disguised as "flexible labor practices" – a euphemism for the policy of fragmentation and destabilization of the workforce; and, on the other, a significant reduction in the standard of living even in that part of the working population that is necessary for the operational requirements of the production system and who are working full-time. The main problematic elements that lie at the heart of the social metabolic dynamics of capital in the context of structural crisis, which undermine the previously viable expansionary displacement, are highlighted by Mészáros (2009) in the following excerpt from his book:

This is true [the problematic character of the expansionist dynamic] not only in regard to the contradiction between transnational capital and national states, as well as the invasion of the natural environment due to the imperatives of self-reproducing reproduction, but also in relation to the absolute structural limits due to the transformation of the traditional "labor reserve army" into an explosive "superfluous labor force" – nevertheless and at the same time more than ever necessary to enable the reproduction of capital – with particularly ominous implications for the entire system due to the destabilization of its core. Regarding the demand for substantive equality [of women] – which capital is absolutely averse to – it is a different, but no less serious problem. Since demand has been irrepressible in recent decades, bringing in its wake insoluble complications for the "nuclear family" – the microcosm of the established order – and, thus, prohibitive difficulties for ensuring the continued reproduction of the system of value of capital (p. 334).

Chronic unemployment, resulting from the structural contradictions immanent to the civilization of capital (with its social metabolic dynamics oriented toward accumulation and multiplication of exchange value as the ultimate end to be achieved), is nowadays a major obstacle to the continuity of social reproduction itself. The needs of accumulation, which led to the combined extraction of absolute and relative surplus value, prompted the development of technical and scientific production and the very expansion of consumption (fetishistically manipulated), through mass production resulting from the processes of concentration and centralization of capital. This movement is accompanied by a reduction of living labor and the creation of a portion of (relatively) superfluous working population for the purpose of increasing value.

During its historic rise, capital could use a variety of different resources to offset these contradictions: expansionist movements, militarist production, the introduction of a differential rate of exploitation and state intervention to drive up employment levels. However, in the context demarcated by a "long wave with an undertone of stagnation" (MANDEL, 1985), the spaces for previously viable displacements are becoming limited, and alternatives within the framework of the "line of least resistance" more problematic, resulting in increasingly meager impacts in terms of resuming the levels of accumulation during the phase of ascension. This is reflected in the difficulties of state policies to reverse the established situation, with no viable long-term solutions in sight.

These principles are necessary for us to grasp the historicity of the phenomenon of "chronic unemployment", understanding it within the metabolic dynamics of capital. The categories presented above help reveal the immanent movement of bourgeois relations in the contemporary world and the

concrete-historical nexuses they have, along with their mystifying phenomenal expressions. The critique of political economy therefore plays a strategic role in the analysis of the superstructural mediations activated by the State, the material interests in question and the limits of the alternatives set in motion, encompassing the bourgeois civilizing horizon. Indeed, this essential critique needs to be deepened and further developed in order to obtain the fundamental determination of the ideological forms required by the classical agents of the forces at work. The determination of the socio-historical totality of capitalism in crisis requires a comprehensive analytical perspective that incorporates production and social reproduction into the concretely existing, reciprocally determined relations.

References

- BEINSTEIN, Jorge. Las crisis en la era senil del capitalismo: esperando inútilmente al quinto Kondratieff. *El Viejo Topo*, Barcelona, n. 253, feb. 2009. Disponível em: <http://www.rebellion.org/docs/82165.pdf>. Acesso em: 12 maio 2013.
- KOSIK, Karel. *Dialética do concreto*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1976.
- LESSA, Sergio. A emancipação política e a defesa de direitos. *Serviço Social & Sociedade*, São Paulo, Cortez, n. 90, p. 35-56, jun. 2007.
- MANDEL, Ernest. *O capitalismo tardio*. São Paulo: Nova Cultural, 1982.
- _____. *A crise do capital: os fatos e sua interpretação marxista*. São Paulo: Ensaio, 1990.
- MARX, Karl. *O capital: o processo de produção do capital*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2008.
- _____. *A Questão Judaica*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2010.
- _____. *Grundrisse: manuscritos econômicos de 1857-1858: esboços da crítica da economia política*. São Paulo: Boitempo; Rio de Janeiro: Ed. UFRJ, 2011.
- _____; ENGELS, Friedrich. *Manifesto do Partido Comunista*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2010.
- MÉSZÁROS, Istvans. *O século XXI: socialismo ou barbárie?* São Paulo: Boitempo, 2003.
- _____. *Filosofia, ideologia e ciência social*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2008.
- _____. *Para além do capital: rumo a uma teoria da transição*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2009.
- RODOLSKY, Roman. *Gênese e estrutura de O capital*. Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto, 2001.
- TEIXEIRA, Francisco. A crise na era da destruição predatória. In: SEMINÁRIO CRISE CAPITALISTA, QUESTÃO SOCIAL E QUESTÃO URBANA, Fortaleza, UECE, mar. 2009.

¹ Important analysts have argued that the historical configurations noted as of the 1970s, in particular, demonstrate a structural crisis of capital, a systemic crisis (MÉSZÁROS, 2003, 2009). Beinstein (2009) has referred to this period as capitalism's senile era, or senile capitalism. These analysts point out that the historical possibilities of expanding the established global system have been exhausted. Beinstein (2009), in a recent publication, introduces five significant indicators of the structural crisis of capitalism in the contemporary world: the U.S. crisis; the interaction between financial hypertrophy and deceleration in the long term of the world economy; the energy crisis, also tied to the food and ecological crises; the state-military degradation; and the urban crisis that has increased exponentially.

² Francisco Teixeira (2009) points out that Juan Somavia, Director-General of the International Labour Organization (ILO), does not believe that economic growth can generate enough jobs to put an end to unemployment. According to him, in 2004, the unemployment rate of the world economy, which was approximately 5.1%, only resulted in a 1.8% increase in the number of persons employed. However, this does not reflect the entire issue. By 2015, says Somavia, around 400 million people will be added to the workforce. This means that, even if there was an accelerated growth in employment capable of producing 40 million jobs a year, the unemployment rate would only decrease by 1% in 10 years.

³ The reference of this author, as with Marx, is both the primitive tribal communities as well as the domestic economy of early slave societies, besides the feudal system itself from the Middle Ages.

⁴ It should be clarified that there are circumstances, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx (2011), where the industrial reserve army is equivalent to the "sphere of poverty", while in *Capital*, this sphere, inhabited by people in extreme poverty and members of lumpenproletariat constitutes "the lowest levels of relative surplus population" (MARX, 2008).

⁵ Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834), an Anglican minister, laid the foundation for an extremely conservative approach to population growth through his *Essay on the principle of population, as it affects the future improvement of society, with remarks on the speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and other writers*, first published anonymously in 1798. In his

prognosis, he declares that the world population would grow at a rapid pace, which he likened to a geometric progression, and food production would grow at a slow pace, likened to an arithmetic progression. Thus, after a period of only two centuries, population growth would have been 28 times larger than the growth in food production.

⁶ Mészáros (2009) conducted a deep analysis about the impossibility of resuming these strategies in the context of the structural crisis of capital.