

THEME SECTION

# Rethinking “surplus populations” Theory from the peripheries

## Theorizing peripheral labor Rethinking “surplus populations”

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*Abstract:* Critical scholarship on twenty-first century capitalist development has called attention to certain structural limits on employment growth. Large populations excluded from formal employment are seen to eke out a precarious subsistence in informal economies, seemingly “surplus” to the needs of capital. This article, by contrast, aims to recast labor in the “peripheries,” not as an externalized quantity redundant to emerging economic formations, but rather as integral if often hidden features of capitalist value extraction. Rethinking, in this way, “surplus populations,” we argue for particular attention to the heterogeneity of contemporary capitalist labor arrangements and to associated patterns of ideological devaluation, which underpin capitalist markets in the South and East as well as in peripheralized spaces in the North and West.

*Keywords:* capitalism, informality, labor, surplus population, value

Present debates concerning capitalist development in disparate regions around the world trace a story of grand social and economic transformation over the past 40 years, from planned and/or Keynesian economies dominated by labor-intensive sectors to neoliberal globalized finance and real estate-driven economic growth. Noting, for instance, a decline in stable employment alongside a surge in financial sector dividends since the turn of the century, Antonio Negri (2017: 63) argues that capitalist profits have become “radically separated from labour.” Such narratives paint a picture of an ontologically bifurcated socio-economic landscape:

gated islands of “immaterial” capitalist value extraction sharply screened off from supposedly non-capitalist peripheries, including peripheralized sites in the Global North, where populations *seemingly* redundant to capital eke out a precarious economic subsistence. Accordingly, the “surplus” inhabitants of these non-capitalist margins are commonly conceived as “cultural others” and as the enemy-objects of populist identity politics—re-embedded into the social through increasingly nativist political agendas and natalist welfare programs.

These debates have instructively pushed us to consider new forms of marginalization, de-



valuation, and externality explicit to contemporary rounds of capitalist development. However, falling out of view is an examination of the relational mechanisms, through which labor is made to *appear* superfluous to capital accumulation, and the precise devaluing work that assertions of labor's superfluity do for capitalist projects. This leaves us with an understanding of whole sectors of labor in "peripheral" spaces, who exhibit seemingly "alter-cultural" properties, as always already ontologically constituted outside the boundaries of capitalist value. Such a position disregards the enduring role that labor arrangements other than the "Standard Employment Relationship" have continuously played in shaping emerging capitalist landscapes. It also ignores the key function that historical and variable forms of abjection, rejection, dispossession, and disenfranchisement play in the uneven expansion of capitalist value relations. In short, it obscures the deeply social and political terrain upon which unevenly valued labor, in both the material and discursive sense (Kalb 2023a), is secured and contested.

This introductory article seeks to recast "peripheral" labor not as an externalized quantity redundant to ruling economic formations, nor composed of informal "hustlers" spontaneously navigating "non-capitalist" economic life, but rather as an integral if often obscured feature in the social processes and circuits of capital accumulation. Rethinking "surplus populations" in this way, we argue for particular attention to the proliferation of novel forms of de- and revalorization (and their social, spatial, and ideological foundations), which underpin (emerging) capitalist markets in the South and East as well as in peripheralized spaces in the North. As a recurring component of value expansion, processes of uneven valorization regularly eject forms of labor that are (e)valuated as surplus, waste, external, unwaged, and marginal. We are told that these various "surpluses" somehow *describe* labor "otherwise" to capitalist production. However, we argue here that "surplus" is better understood as an *analytic* that reveals the constitutive remainders at the heart of value-genera-

tion. Surpluses, we assert, following Marx (1976: 784), provide the "condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production" itself. We are thus primarily concerned with "informal" and "non-standard" labor in peripheral sites of capital accumulation. We note the spatial and conceptual overlap implied by the contemporary concept of "Global South" and the earlier notion of "periphery," as developed by dependency and world-systems theorists. But we stress here that there are always "peripheries in the core and cores in the periphery" (Buzan and Lawson 2015: 9). We are thus concerned with capitalist dynamics not only in the South but also in peripheralized sites in the North. Wherever they may be, such spaces are not ontologically autonomous. They are relationally constituted. Consequently, our use of "peripheral" denotes less a spatial location than a relational political perspective.

Pursuing this line of inquiry, the articles included in this Theme Section engage the "surplus" debate from a variety of empirical and analytical angles. Doing so, the authors address the material and ideological devaluations of (often dispossessed) labor, how such devaluations act to divert labor organizing efforts away from such workers, and how such outcomes in turn enable the deepening of value extraction from a growing portion of "peripheral" labor, while simultaneously keeping pressure on those who labor "inside" capital. Although such "peripheral" labor is organized in arrangements other than the so-called Standard Employment Relationship, it is, we stress, majoritarian in the global system as a whole.

To establish the conceptual stakes of this debate, we sketch in this introductory article two broad "camps" on the subject of capitalism and externality. On one side, a diverse body of scholarship has deemed non-standard forms of labor and livelihood as variously *outside*—that is, external to the circuits of capital accumulation, to the mechanisms of capitalist reproduction, or to capitalism *tout court*. On the other side, scholars and activists have sought in various ways to understand, *as capitalist*, non-standard labor and

livelihood arrangements beyond that of the contractually employed “free” wage worker. It is with the latter approach that our own position aligns. In so arguing, we foreground the material-symbolic effects of devaluing such laboring segments as superfluous. This is a recurring process within capitalism that one of us has called “double devaluation” (Kalb 2023a). In other words, we understand capitalist labor as *necessarily* heterogeneous. Taking the argument further, we note that populations publicly devalued as “surplus” and thus redundant to capital are more often than not engaged in such non-standard capitalist labor arrangements, while their livelihoods are often constructed within and against histories of ongoing dispossession and devaluation. Consequently, by “rethinking surplus populations” we mean to argue, first, that populations so construed are integral to processes of capital accumulation, and second, that characterizations of superfluity and cultural alterity perform ideological work in devaluing the labor of said populations, thereby enabling ongoing accumulation on the backs of the individuals so devalued. After setting out the terms of debate, we argue that Marxist theorizing around “waste,” “surpluses,” and uneven development provide a situated reading of capital’s fickle relationship to the so-called Standard Employment Relation. Finally, we consider some of the political implications of attending to the ideological devaluation of peripheral “non-standard” labor arrangements and associated livelihoods. For ultimately, the relevance of devoting a journal Theme Section to the question of surplus populations lies less in advancing academic debates than in grasping the possibility of an emancipatory politics-in-motion among affected individuals.

### That which lies outside

Emerging out of debates on the transition to capitalism in the formerly colonized world, leftist theorists and revolutionaries sought, beginning in the 1960s, to grasp the persistence of agrarian smallholding and other non-waged or

bonded forms of labor in newly independent countries. Not simply a question of academic interest, the ensuing debates were to shape how leftist parties engaged the peasantry—whether as a feudal hangover or as a class already constituted by capitalist relations (Foster-Carter 1978).

An initially influential position held that present-day petty agrarian livelihoods operated as a non-capitalist mode of production, which then, in a functionalist reading, “articulated with” and subsidized capitalist industry in the cities. Among proponents of this position were Claude Meillassoux (1981) in anthropology and Harold Wolpe (1972) in sociology. An overlap with anti-dialectical Althusserian structuralism is evident: non-capitalist modes of production retain their distinct character irrespective of the wider relations (of circulation, for instance) within which they are embedded. The latter analytical position echoes that of Althusser’s Parisian contemporary, Gilles Deleuze, for whom “relations are external to their terms . . . [and] a relation may change without the terms changing” (Deleuze and Parnet 2002: 55).

Concurrent with debates over modes of production, anthropologist Keith Hart, drawing on research in Ghana, introduced the *informal sector* as a category in 1973. The informal sector, in Hart’s usage, comprised diverse forms of ad hoc entrepreneurial activity—from tailoring and shoe making to street hawking, night-soil removal, sex work, and petty theft—taken up by rural-to-urban migrants unable to gain entry into the formal labor market. For Hart (1973: 68), the distinction between sectors—the formal and informal—was “based essentially on that between wage-earning and self-employment.”

Albeit reworked in new terminology, this classificatory bifurcation of economic modes and sectors persists in the present, as do the specters of Althusser and Deleuze. Yet, the modes of production debate is nowadays rarely invoked (for important exceptions, see Banaji 2010, 2020; Kalb 2020, 2023b; Neveling and Steur 2018). With, for instance, the ascendancy of post-structuralist thought across the social

sciences in the 1980s and 1990s, economic geographers Julie Gibson and Katherine Graham (2006a), publishing under the singular pseudonym J. K. Gibson-Graham, argued for a notion of economic difference grounded in Althusserian and Deleuzian categories. Capitalism, in Gibson-Graham's (2006a: xxiv) conception, was limited to the economics of direct exploitation by capital of free wage laborers. Any relationship diverging from this arrangement was thus, necessarily, and in and of itself, non-capitalist. Gibson-Graham reduced capitalism to "economics" rather than seeing it as an encompassing social formation that produced "bourgeois economics" as a determining form, which then dominates an assortment of other ongoing forms and relationships.

Such a circumscribed notion of capitalist labor is shared by "political Marxists" like Benno Teschke. "Once a capitalist property regime is established," writes Teschke (2003: 141), "direct producers are no longer coerced by extra-economic means to . . . work for a lord—since workers are politically free." For this reason, Teschke (2003: 256) adds, capitalist labor is limited to "civil contracts among politically (though not economically) free and equal citizens subject to civil law . . . [in] a non-coercive 'economic economy.'" Yet, Gibson-Graham (2006a: 35) go further, positing non-normative economic forms as both outside capitalism and autonomous of capitalist logics. As illustrative examples, they point to self-employment, indentured servitude, slavery, and workers' cooperatives—the latter being, in their assessment, an instance of present-day *post-capitalism* (Gibson-Graham 2006b: xiii).

A quarter of a century on, Gibson-Graham's framing remains influential. In anthropology, Anna Tsing (2015: 66) invokes Gibson-Graham to label as "non-capitalist" the work of informal mushroom collectors laboring in the forests of the northwestern United States. Yet, these laborer's are refugees displaced from Southeast Asia by imperialist and counter-imperialist violence, who have since become embedded in transnational capitalist supply chains. In other

words, they are living labor whose presence, histories, and practices are deeply marked by overwhelming capitalist logics and attending class struggles.

Antonio Negri provides an ironic parallel here—ironic because Tsing (2012: 37) elsewhere critiques Negri's "unified" conception of Empire for its inability to accommodate "economic difference" in the spirit of Gibson-Graham. Yet, Negri (2017: 45) likewise grounds his analysis in Deleuzian categories and follows the latter in shifting the locus of radical transformation from dialectical relational struggles to affirmative ontological desire. Of more specific relevance for our current argument, Negri (2017: 63) writes that the late twentieth-century expansion of "immaterial" labor has freed the cognitive worker from exploitation in the wage relation. This, along with expanded financialization, means that profit is now "radically separated from labour" (ibid.). Brian Massumi doubles down on this argument. He invokes Negri to advance a Deleuzian reading of late twentieth-century labor restructuring, such that increased outsourcing to self-employed contractors means "class no longer exists" as a relation of value extraction, and therefore, within the capital-labor relation, "contradiction has been abolished" (Massumi 1992: 202–204). So understood, "creative cognitive labour" poses as the end of class (c.f. Mateescu and Kalb, forthcoming).

In this spirit, Paul Mason cites Negri to argue that technological advances—the digital revolution, in particular—have, without need of popular revolution, produced post-capitalism in the here and now. Post-capitalism, Mason (2015: 141) argues, is a "new mode of production" based on collaborative, peer-to-peer activity—a "sharing economy" made possible by mobile technology, which coexists at this very moment *alongside* capitalism. Arguing in sync is Aaron Bastani (2019), for whom labor-displacing technology is in itself creating conditions for *fully automated luxury communism*.

It is notable that these present-day utopian post-capitalist imaginaries incline toward a

North Atlantic parochialism. In the Global South and East, by contrast, attention to capitalist restructuring since the late twentieth century has more often attended to the growth of surplus populations, whose precarious exclusion from formal labor markets less easily lends itself to utopian imaginaries. Yet, in their intellectual genealogy, these otherwise diverging schools of thought partly overlap. Kalyan Sanyal, for instance, takes up J. K. Gibson-Graham's theorization of capitalism's outside as a point of departure for his own analysis—arguing that present-day postcolonial capitalism is marked by rural dispossession without a commensurate increase in formal employment, thereby rendering growing populations *surplus* to the needs of capital accumulation. The informal economy, in the postcolonial urban slum in particular, is thus, in Sanyal's (2007: 259) view, characterized by “classlessness,” as ex-peasants arriving in the city pursue informal livelihoods outside direct relations of exploitation. Sanyal is here restating a common conception of informal labor and urban slums as extraneous to the formal capitalist economy. In this regard, he follows Mike Davis (2006), who presented the urban slum, the informal sector, and surplus populations as virtually synonymous (c.f. Endnotes 2010). Offering a more concrete and recurring example, Brenda Chalfin (2019) draws on ethnographic research in urban Ghana to identify informal waste collectors—individuals engaged in the collection and resale of discarded items—as a “surplus population”, due to the exclusion of such collectors from formal labor markets.

It should be pointed out that Marx (1976: 794–797) understood surplus populations—whether floating, relative, or latent—as those individuals who, when not recruited into “productive” (surplus-value producing) labor, lacked adequate remuneration for their own reproduction, and were considered, given their lack of formal employment, as economically “useless” by bourgeois economists.

But this raises certain questions: Can individuals laboring outside of “regular” waged employment produce surplus value—that is, can

they be “exploited”? And if bourgeois economists deem productive workers laboring outside normative arrangements of capitalist labor as superfluous, what ideological work does this do? What, moreover, of unremunerated laborers who, producing no direct surplus value for capital, nevertheless produce use values necessary for overall capitalist reproduction, or even exchange values absorbed by overarching labor processes (such as “waste” often does)? Should they too be accepted, for analytical purposes, as redundant to capital following the logic of bourgeois economists? Might not such claims of economic redundancy simply be serving to devalue non-standard labor arrangements and the people doing such labor? These are questions we seek to address in the following section.

### The heterogeneity of capitalism

The analytical approaches sketched in the preceding section variously locate non-normative labor arrangements, and the laborers involved, outside either the circuits of capital accumulation, the mechanisms of capitalist reproduction, or capitalism as such. In contrast, an assortment of heterodox interventions, many within the global history and anthropology of labor and class, have re-centered non-standard labor arrangements *within* constitutive capitalist relations (e.g., Breman et. al. 2019; Campbell 2022; Carrier and Kalb 2015; Kasmir and Carbonella 2014; Lazar 2023; Mezzadri 2017; Prentice 2015; Van der Linden 2008). Despite deviating from a modern ideological norm of “standard” capitalist employment, such labor arrangements are internally re-constituted along capitalist lines when they are embedded in wider capitalist relations and histories—of, for instance, production, circulation, or state rule. Noting this capitalist character of sundry “non-standard” labor arrangements is analytically relevant. But a further and more significant question remains: What implications do claims of superfluity, deviation from an ostensible norm of capitalist employment, and characterizations of cultural

otherness have for the exploitation and exclusion of the laborers affected? Among other outcomes, such (de)valuation undermines possibilities for solidarity, other than in a limited philanthropic sense.

Jairus Banaji's critique of the articulation of modes of production argument provides a useful starting point for elaborating a more dialectical conception of economic difference. For Banaji (2010: 359–360), rather than, say, “feudalism” being articulated with “capitalism” in a trans-continental colonial order, such that distinctly non-capitalist logics persist in diverse forms of bonded labor within colonized territories, capitalist production in the colonial metropole instead “integrate[d] diverse forms of exploitation and ways of organising labour” based in the colonized world, and thus “wrought changes” in colonial labor regimes. Colonial production, in other words, entailed a re-constitution along capitalist lines of various forms of exploitation other than that of “free” wage labor. This historical heterogeneity leads Banaji (2010: 359) to argue: “Capitalist relations of production are compatible with a wide variety of forms of labour, from chattel-slavery, sharecropping, or the domination of casual labour-markets to the coerced wage-labour peculiar to colonial regimes and, of course, ‘free’ wage-labour.” But the colonial relation went both ways: African slavery and Asian indentured servitude served as conditions of possibility for the reproduction and expansion of “free” wage labor regimes in the European metropolises (Mintz 1986; Williams 2000 [1944]).

That forms of exploitation other than “free” wage labor are compatible with capitalist production is an argument that goes back to Marx (1976: 1020–1038). As he elaborated regarding labor's historical subsumption to capital, offering England's early modern textile industry as an illustration, putting-out arrangements (whereby merchants advanced production materials to peasants engaged in cottage industry) already entailed a subsumption of labor to capital. This subsumption remained “merely” formal because merchants did not directly manage

production and were thus unable to directly mechanize the labor process. When, however, industrialists shifted textile production to the factory floor, managers were able, as a result of the now “real” subsumption of labor to capital, to directly intervene in production in order to mechanize and regiment the labor process, and thereby increase surplus value. It has been the full-time employment of “free” wage labor under these latter conditions that has come to be seen as the capitalist norm. But labor arrangements subsumed “merely” formally—from putting-out work to contract farming—persist in the present and are even expanding in some sectors, as capitalists seek to evade labor laws (Campbell 2017; Harootunian 2015; Mies 1982; Watts and Little 1994). Nor does such “formal subsumption” prevent capital from disciplining labor (Banaji 2020; Cowan 2022; Kalb 1997; Kriedte et al. 1982; Lazar 2023).

The conceptual bifurcation of labor into distinct economic “sectors” also obscures much waged labor under conditions of real subsumption. This is because, as Jan Breman (1976) argued in a critique of labor market dualism, the so-called formal sector frequently relies on informal labor arrangements, such as when formally registered enterprises disregard legal labor protections, or subcontract tasks to outworkers not covered by existing labor laws. As a result, the so-called formal sector is often informal in practice (Chang 2009; Hann and Parry 2018). Sharryn Kasmir and August Carbonella (2014: 24) thus contend that the present-day informal economy constitutes not “the ‘outside’ of capitalism, but, increasingly, its center.”

Informal waste collectors are an illustrative example. Such collectors are often bound by debt to monopsonistic relationships in which their purchasing-depot-cum-creditor retains the power to set the price of sale—an arrangement often referred to as disguised wage labor (e.g., Gill 2009). But even where such monopsonistic relations are absent (e.g., Millar 2018: 144), collectors continue to labor in vertically integrated production chains (Banaji 2016; Bernstein 1977), as the plastics they collect are subsequently

broken down and resold as raw materials to industrial manufacturers elsewhere. In contrast, therefore, to Chalfin's characterization of waste collectors as a surplus population redundant to the needs of capital, Kathleen Millar (2018: 8) argues that if these collectors are deemed "superfluous to capital accumulation, then it becomes impossible to ask how the materials they collect are tied into a 200-billion-dollar global recycling industry." What needs to be added is the fact that petty producers laboring outside of waged employment are also commonly exploited through debt and rental relations, and through unequal terms of commodity exchange (Harriss-White 2014: 982).

Finally, the claim that non-normative labor operates "outside" the relations and logics of capital has long served to devalue and demobilize unwaged labor, and, often, to protect "insider populations" potentially threatened with such a discursive-material "double devaluation" (Kalb 2023a). Similar processes were also noted on the terrain of gender by feminists involved in the wages for housework campaign in the 1970s (Della Costa and James 1972; Federici 2012). Whereas bourgeois ideology had, the latter argued, construed the home as a non-capitalist sphere organized according to love and familial obligation, this ideology in fact served to underwrite women's unwaged domestic labor while masking its exploitative character and obscuring the ways it was structured by state intervention. Although subsequent debates questioned whether unwaged domestic labor produces, in a technical Marxian sense, exchange value or solely use value (Vogel 2013), the crucial role of such labor in capitalist reproduction is now widely taken for granted.

All of this is to say that capitalist labor is necessarily heterogeneous. Alongside the "free" wage worker with a regular, full-time labor contract are assorted casually remunerated labor arrangements, along with a host of "unfree", unwaged, and wholly unremunerated forms of labor, much of it within the informal economies of the Global South and East, but increasingly in the North as well. And yet, in an ideologi-

cal move, those who labor outside the Standard Employment Relation are commonly devalued as being redundant to capital.

### **Uneven development and the rhythms of capitalist value**

The othering of capitalist labor arrangements that violate the ideological norm—that is, the demarcation of certain labor arrangements as "external", "without value", and "superfluous"—has long been integral to capital's uneven development. Capital's rhythmic expansion across frontiers has necessitated the generation and reproduction of under-commodified resources that can be absorbed and abstracted into the commodity form, but that can also be spat out again as surplus if markets so require (Cowan 2021a; Moore 2000; Wright 2006). As Diane Elson (1979) reminds us, abstract value-making is fundamentally a social and historical process: it requires the piecing together and pulling apart of use and exchange values in harmony with broader market dynamics. Thus, accompanying capital's drive toward ever-expanding valorization are attendant historical processes of de- and re-valorization. Elson's "value theory of labour" calls attention to this sociohistorical dynamic, attending to the ways capital seeks to abstract, homogenize, and differentially segment resources (here: living labor) in response to internal demands of accumulation. Attending to this rhythmic movement of valorization and valuation requires we do away with analyses that view "capital" as a homological, determinate, and stable economic structure with a defined "inside" and "outside" and pushes us to instead consider the fraught and contingent construction of values required for capital's own survival—in other words, to consider the social, ideological, and material work that "double" devaluation does within the accumulation process, which is conceived not just as "economics" but also as history.

David Harvey's (1982; 2006) geographical analysis of capital's "creative destruction" is use-

ful here. For Harvey (2006) the survival of capital depends upon—and is ironically torn apart by—the “creative destruction” of previously valorized resources. What geographer Neil Smith (1984: 200–201) termed the “seesaw” dialectic of capitalist abstraction and differentiation, proceeds through the cyclical movements of territorial abandonment and valorization, and of capital’s movement through unevenly valorized spaces. Indeed, we find ideological and material devaluation across diverse moments of the accumulation process. The confected externality of un(der)commodified territories, resources, and labors contain the germs of capital’s present possibility—through, for example, the composition of assortments of unevenly subsumed labor power; and its future expansion—through, for example, the disposal of redundant laborers and their reabsorption into different regimes of value. These devaluations are at once material (emerging from social, ecological, and historical limits of accumulation) and ideological. That is, they are discursively deployed by capitalists and aligned “aspirant” classes who are under pressure to naturalize certain people, labors, and resources as “worthless” and “superfluous” (Kalb 2022, 2023a; Cowan 2022).

As feminist Marxist and social reproduction scholarship has differently shown, the “surplus” quality of labor is neither pre-set, nor naturally occurring (Federici 2012; Fortunati 1995; Mezzadri 2019). It is produced through class struggle, “struggles over class” (Harriss-White and Gooptu 2001) and by capitalist regimes tasked with forging new pathways of accumulation. While this process of devaluation is a recurrent “requirement” for accumulation, it can equally lead to crises—of capital stuck in unprofitable locations, of workers rejecting devaluation, broken supply chains, and diving consumption. In these contexts, capital must keep moving at all costs—fleeing over-extracted wastelands or abandoning long-exploited populations, that will, at some point, become frontiers of renewed accumulation. In this regard, the jobless or underemployed masses said to have been shucked in capital’s transition to an immaterial order

are, we argue, also likely to be the grounds of future value struggles. Today’s “waste” sets the conditions for tomorrow’s value (Corwin 2018; Knapp 2016).

The production and resolution of surpluses takes on numerous historically and geographically specific forms. Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (2007) *Golden Gulag* shows, for example, how California’s ballooning prison industrial complex is facilitated by the production of land, labor, and finance capital surpluses. Gilmore shows how the dramatic abandonment of urban and rural communities and lands in the 2000s, followed by a crisis of surplus accumulation following the early-2000s recession, brought together surplus inner-city populations, surplus rural lands, and surplus finance that found resolution in what Gilmore calls the “prison fix.” This fix involved the revalorization of “superfluous” inner-city racialized communities as carceral labor power, and the capture of devalued rural land for prison construction. Gilmore’s “prison fix” provides a spatiotemporally contingent example of how value is kept in motion through the production and revalorization of surpluses. Surplus, thus, can be seen as both a constitutive part of capitalist accumulation and a key problematic for capital’s survival.

Of course, the labor surplus deployed for the “golden gulag” relies on the work racialization does to differently value laboring populations. As recent scholarship on racial capitalism argues, the enjoinder of “race” to devalued forms of labor and territory has long been an enabling condition of capitalist development (Bhattacharya 2018). Kristóf Szombati (2018) and Gabor Scheiring (2020), for example, show how the production of a racialized Roma “criminal underclass” served to facilitate and stabilize a new authoritarian regime of accumulation in post-socialist Hungary.

Elsewhere, Melissa Wright’s (2006) work on *Disposable Women*, shows how ideologies of gendered disposability and entropy serve to (de)value global export workforces in highly competitive global markets. Wright explores how labor-management in global export factories is



conceived as a task of managing the workforce's time-sensitive movement from value to superfluity. The shift of capital from Mexican to Chinese export factories is viewed as a consequence of Chinese managers' successful management of women workers' disposability (Wright 2006: 24), similar to what happened historically in European export manufacturing (Kalb 1997). It underlines capital's vital interest in "managing waste" while keeping the motor of accumulation in place, and the vital role differentiation plays in this task (see also Kasmir and Gill 2022). All of this is to say that our attempt to rethink "surplus populations" is being done in a context wherein "superfluous" becomes a marker of the contingent arrangements and struggles required to produce and distribute value. This dialectical movement of devaluation and revaluation should be seen as a political task for capital, the capitalist state, and its underlying popular alliances, set to the fraught, spatiotemporal rhythms of competition and class struggle. As Harvey notes, the principal role of the state in contemporary capitalism is to orchestrate these devaluations in ways that enable the ongoing circulation of capital "without sparking a general collapse" (Harvey 2006: 155).

Yet, the production of surpluses also points toward conditions of political possibility that are often precluded in debates around surplus populations. For Vinay Gidwani and Rajyashree Reddy (2011), capital's dependence on producing surpluses or "waste" represents more than simply an external frontier, or capitalist "value-in-the-making". For waste concurrently forms a principal impediment to the realization of capitalist surplus. Like "waste," the concept of "surplus" marks that which exceeds and evades capital's direct subsumption: "confounding capital's attempts to discipline and contain life within the domain of utility and accumulation" (Gidwani 2015: 781). As both a non-value to be disciplined into commodity form, and a necessary by-product of the circuits of capital accumulation, superfluity points to the anxieties and points of rupture at the heart of capital's own reproduction. The reproduction of superfluity

is a necessary condition of accumulation, but not all social and economic activities of surplus populations are useful for capital. Surpluses must be carefully managed. It is for this reason that so-called surplus populations are routinely subject to further measures of violence, from vagabondage to incarceration, austerity, and dispossession. Thinking "surplus populations" in this way means attending to not only the various ways superfluity acts to forge new pathways of accumulation but also how these pathways often come to form impediments and points of excess that resist capital's logic.

Critical labor scholarship has, for example, explored how the conditions of labor mobility that holds workers in constant movement between precarious waged and unwaged jobs are frequently appropriated by workers themselves, who wager their superfluity against their workplaces, moving in and out of waged employment—effectively de-valorizing their own labor—outside the strict temporalities of accumulation (Breman 1996; Cowan 2021b; Schling 2019). Here superfluity—the very condition that devalues labor and controls its tentative subsumption into waged labor—is mobilized to disrupt accumulation.

At stake here is, first, an understanding of capital's sheer heterogeneity and, second, what Bhattacharya (2018) calls "workers, almost-workers and sometimes-workers" as expressions of capital's contingent and variable forms of subsumption. Our critique of a priori assertions that individuals outside the Standard Employment Relationship are necessarily outside capital is not a reification of capitalist totality. It is instead a recognition that capitalist claims of economic redundancy have long been employed to devalue non-normative labor arrangements in order to reduce the cost of such labor for capital and to de-politicize some of its core contradictions. As Marx (1976: 797–798) highlighted, those who persist precariously outside formal waged employment *do* often face crises of reproduction, particularly when capitalist states violently discipline the conditions of superfluity, which they routinely do. Nevertheless,

as we have argued herein, and as the articles included in this special section show in detail, the absence of formal employment does not in itself indicate complete exclusion from the circuits of capital accumulation, or complete redundancy to capitalist reproduction. Ultimately, this is an empirical question. But beginning to see that capitalism is not just “economics” or a “standard” employment contract with productive capital is a necessary conceptual step. Instead, capitalism is a deeply differentiated and spatially uneven, multi-scalar global social formation, with shifting observable ensembles of domination and exploitation variably soaked in the always evolving “rule of value”, which encapsulates personal and collective lived histories that are never separate from the histories of accumulation and class struggle.

### Politics and the “fact” of surplus life

Debates concerning surplus populations have pointed political consequences. As we have argued, there is an irony that (certain) critical scholarship appears content to reaffirm the redundancy and superfluity prescribed by capital to racialized and gendered laborers. “Superfluity” becomes a social fact untethered from its historical, material, and discursive conditions of possibility.

Indeed, a key thrust of the current literature on surplus populations moves quickly from affirming the fact of “surplus life” to considering what this superfluity might mean for political agency and state legitimacy (Doshi 2019; Li 2017). Tania Murray Li sees an emergent politics of the surplus centered around questions not of production but of distribution—a struggle, writes Li (2017: 1253), “over who will access a share of global wealth and income, on what grounds, and who will be excluded.” Others, such as Sapna Doshi (2019), argue that, in lieu of class struggle, the politics of surplus populations increasingly plays out across a cultural-nationalist terrain, whereby choices over who is deserving of (re)distribution is increasingly

shaped by incorporation into ethno-nationalist modes of governance. The “jobless masses” become, in this view, a useful vanguard of capital’s emergent neo-fascist form. There is certainly merit in understanding the hegemonic politics of entitlement, deservingness, and distribution increasingly saturated in ethno-nationalism. Yet, this cannot be untethered from questions of production. This requires that we ask how emerging compositions of capital and state seek to enlist certain groups while rendering others “surplus” in order to sustain the class coalitions required for flexible accumulation.

In contrast to our argument, Ian Shaw and Marv Waterstone (2021) exalt the “economically redundant” as the vanguard of a perhaps utopian “beyond-capitalist” world. In this account, surplus populations form part of a lucky few shorn of the drudgery of waged labor, able to forge new solidarities and collectivities free of capitalist interference. Notwithstanding the sheer ahistoricism of this latter account, which, echoing the frontier-trick, understands surplus populations in isolation of the social-historical forces that iteratively forge surplus conditions, this approach also disregards the actually existing political struggles—against complex forms of exploitation, and involving resistance, consent, and reform—that today shape undulating capitalist formations, and their undoing (Kalb and Mollona 2018). If the purpose of studying surplus populations is simply to confirm labor’s redundancy to capital, we risk—as critical scholars—merely narrating a well-run story of capitalism’s innate malevolence, depoliticizing actually existing struggles, and naturalizing labor’s internal divisions and antagonisms.

In this Theme Section, we argue that focusing on capital’s heterogeneous and contingent formations—that encompass but never entirely subsume waged and unwaged, valued and devalued labors—allows us to attend to the far more messy and complex political struggles waged by laborers in non-normative arrangements *within and against* capital and to the possible alliances they can forge. By accounting for heterogeneity, we can understand how waste-pickers at the

bottom-end of global recycling industries, or gig economy workers, or homeworkers feeding into garment-export chains, sustain and sometimes disfigure capitalist projects. We are interested, in other words, in the complex articulation of heterogeneous forms of labor and life within capitalist regimes, arguing that the making of both waged and surplus life is a constant concern for capital's own uneven development.

The articles included in this Theme Section variously engage these issues in novel ways. In his article on ocean and land "grabs" in Ghana, Jasper Abembia Ayelazuno argues that the dispossession of coastal fishing communities following the country's discovery of offshore oilfields produced a population excluded from formal employment. Affected individuals then sought incomes as artisanal miners (*galamsey*) and informal porters (*kayayei*). These labor arrangements, writes Ayelazuno, are "some of the riskiest, most demeaning, drudgerous, and energy-sapping jobs that one can do for survival in Ghana." Yet, this labor is, Ayelazuno argues, fully incorporated into domestic and international circuits of accumulation.

Yewon Lee, in her article on tenant shopkeepers in Seoul, shows how individuals excluded from salaried employment due to a lack of higher education credentials, have sought alternative livelihoods as precarious tenant shopkeepers, a position that has been called the "entreprenariat." These individuals labor outside of a direct wage relation. However, in the Korean context, they have, Lee observes, come to see themselves as aggrieved workers—their labor exploited by "greedy" landlords who increasingly raise rents to a point that tenants are effectively pushed out of their rental units.

In his article on brick kiln laborers outside Delhi, Pratik Mishra writes that the laborers he studied spend many days at their worksites unable to undertake remunerative work as they wait out rainy conditions or construct without pay the onsite dwellings they will use for the duration of their employment. Such involuntary "idle time," writes Mishra, is advantageous to employers, who manage and leverage these

unwaged periods to reduce the costs of workers' social reproduction, cultivate relations of debt bondage, and stave off overproduction.

Enikő Vincze, in her article, writes of post-socialist de-industrialization in the Romanian city of Baia Mare—a process, she argues, fueling a racialization of Roma who once held stable employment in socialist factories. After the end of socialism, the affected Roma were excluded from formal employment, shorn of earlier socialist subsidized housing, and priced out of the city's gentrified urban housing market. Yet, this "surplus" Roma population, notes Vincze, nonetheless remains incorporated, through their low-waged, informal labor—as waste collectors, for example—into local circuits of accumulation.

Finally, Henry Bernstein surveys Marx's writing on surplus populations, along with more recent writings by individuals critically engaging the surplus populations concept. Bernstein finds that, in much recent analysis, there has been a conflation between the "extra-economic" or "non-economic" mobilization of labor, on one hand, and an ostensible "outside" of capitalism, on the other. In advancing his analysis, Bernstein underscores that the capital-labor relation is not limited to waged employment.

In all, the articles collected in this Theme Section provide a critical unpacking of the surplus population category. All contributors agree that the concept productively highlights the limits of the so-called Standard Employment Relationship. Yet, they also make clear that the ideologically devalued labor of such "surplus" populations is more often than not firmly integrated, albeit in various "non-standard" ways, into the circuits of capital.

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