



The centrality of work in the so-called information era

A centralidade do trabalho na chamada era informacional

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Abstract: This article addresses how, from transformations in the productive sphere (post-1950), the first theses regarding the end of the centrality of work began to gain substance. Firstly, it seeks to explain the meaning of the thesis of the centrality of work, understood here as a *model of social praxis* (or a protoform of social life) - something much broader than the reduction of live work in the industry. Secondly, it broadly addresses some of the main (and early) theses that approached the loss of the key importance of work (and its agents) in the reproduction of society, its consequences, it also places the significance of this at the beginning of the 21st century considering the *structural precariousness of work* in the so-called informational-digital era.


Keywords: Work. Centrality of work. Productive restructuring. Precariousness. Uberization.

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Introduction

The transformations that occurred in the material production of consumer goods some three quarters of a century ago led sociologists and thinkers to assert that the long period in which societies had been governed by human labor – and, consequently, the prominence of the role exercised by its executors – had come to an end¹. The increasingly widespread use of technologies (automation, etc.) in production processes – the so-called information era² - would generate a decreasing need for the use of human labor in the process of creating useful goods through the transformation of nature (work). Societies would enter a new, post-industrial³, era, whose central characteristic would be the use of technologies and the reduced number of manual workers in industry (the secondary sector). Consequently, these societies would experience an increase in service sector activities with a corresponding increase in the number of workers in this, tertiary, sector⁴.

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¹ Among many others, mention should be made of Claus Offe (1989), in an article entitled “*Work as a fundamental sociological category?*”, and André Gorz with his *Farewell to the proletariat* (1982).

² See: are Adam Schaff, *A sociedade informática* (1990), and Jean Lojkin, *A revolução informacional* (1995).

³ See: Daniel Bell, *O advento da sociedade pós-industrial* (São Paulo: Cultrix, 1987), and: Carmo (2007).

⁴ On the differences between labor and other salaried workers, productive work and unproductive work, the debate among Marxists can be found in Braverman (1987), Antunes (2003, 2009, 2018), Lessa (2007a), Lessa and Tonet (2012), Iamamoto (2012, 2013), Castro (2012). Alternative readings regarding the transformations

In this context, work, as the cornerstone of the theory of society – seen differently in the classics of sociological thinking⁵ by Karl Marx (as the work process and appreciation process⁶), Max Weber (as technical rationality and economic-co-strategic rationality) and Émile Durkheim (as solidarity and ‘organic’ social integration) – should be sociologically questioned: “[...] what we have to ask is whether today we can still sustain these assumptions [...] of the classics of sociological thought⁷” (OFFE, 1989, p. 14).

Accepting the veracity of all these approaches to the functioning of modern societies founded on the capitalist mode of production, might appear anachronistic: I) that work, as a human activity that transforms nature, is no longer the mainstay of society’s reproduction/maintenance; II) that the working class, as the class directly producing material wealth, would lose its central relevance, since its progressive replacement by machines (automation, robotics, etc.) would result in a constant reduction of its significance⁸; III) the thesis that surplus value – taken from the work invested in products through the appropriation of a share of the working day that is not paid to its direct producer – is at the base of capitalist production, would lose validity, since it would no longer be the workers who are primarily responsible for the effective production of material wealth, but machines⁹; IV) that the role of science, which would become the main productive force (HABERMAS, 1975), would supplant the Marxian law of value¹⁰ – that is, that the value of a commodity is determined by the socially necessary labor time for its production – it would, however, have to be an extremely sophisticated machinery in order to determine the level of production. Under the impact of this technological revolution, there will be, simultaneous with the quantitative reduction in the number of traditional workers, a qualitative change with the presence, in some sectors, of

of contemporary capitalism can be found in: Mészáros (2002), Harvey (1994), Antunes (2003, 2009, 2018), Gounet (1999), Lessa (2007a), Vasapollo (2005), Frederico and Teixeira (2010).

⁵ In Marx, the division of society into classes has been a decisive criterion in the exploitation of labor of one class by another, in Weber (2009), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, discipline to work is rewarded, and best used if combined with frugality, savings. In Durkheim (1981) the individual recognizes his dependence on society through the division of labor, which is the main source of social solidarity.

⁶ See: Marx (1983, 2012).

⁷ “This questioning is confirmed when initially observing the thematic tone of research, conferences and current publications in the social sciences [...] the examination of documents from the field of social sciences, such as catalogs of publishers, programs of foundations of scientific promotion, indexes of theses and monographs, allows us to find several indications for the *negative finding* that *work and the position of the worker in the productive process* is **not** treated as the main organizing principle of social structures [...]” (OFFE, 1989, p. 16, emphasis in italics and emphasis in bold by the author).

⁸ In France, according to data from *Economie et Statistiques*, in 1962 the working population represented 39% of the active population, while in 1989 it dropped to 29.6%. In the USA, between 1980 and 1986, Frank Annunziato observed a reduction in the number of workers in manufacturing industry, as well as in agriculture and mining – the latter reaching almost 30%; in turn, there was a significant growth in the service sector, such as small and large businesses, finance, insurance, hotels, restaurants, etc. In Italy, workers in industry represented 40% in 1980, ten years later this figure dropped to just over 30%. In Canada, Adam Schaff cites the *Science Council of Canada Report* (n. 33, 1982), which reported “[...] [a] 25% rate of workers who will lose their jobs by the end of the [20th] century in *consequence of automation*” (author’s italics). Schaff also informs us that the Japanese business community planned to “[...] completely eliminate manual labor from Japanese industry [...]” (SCHAFF, 1990, p. 28) by the end of the last century (information taken from Antunes, 2003). On the other hand, there are authors who claim that this trend towards a reduction in the manufacturing proletariat in Western countries would have been offset by the migration of industrial plants to Asian countries.

⁹ Regarding this process of the “[...] de-proletarianization of industrial, factory, manual work [...]” (ANTUNES, 2009, p. 207), especially in countries of advanced capitalism, André Gorz wrote: “[...] in the main industrialized countries of Western Europe, the number of workers employed in industry represented about 40% of the active population at the beginning of the [19]40s. Today, its proportion is close to 30%. It is predicted that it will drop to 20 or 25% at the beginning of the next century” (GORZ, 1990, not paginated).

¹⁰ See the discussion on this subject, the critique of Jürgen Habermas’s theses, developed by Antunes (2009) in *The senses of work* (Ch. VII and VIII).

more highly qualified workers, an “[...] intellectualization of manual work¹¹”; V) finally, as the activities of workers lose importance they, as an agent of change, are not sufficiently representative, surplus value is no longer the decisive criterion for the accumulation of wealth, the Proletarian Revolution, as an alternative project for changing society, would then, be condemned to history, since the main pillars on which it stood would have collapsed. In summary, the entire Marxist explanation of the functioning of capitalist societies would be in ruins and, therefore, another theoretical framework for explaining social reality would be necessary. This article focuses on the legitimacy of these theses, correlating them with current transformations in the sphere of productive (informational-digital age).

Work as a model of social praxis – or the ontological centrality of work

In 1968, György Lukács (1885-1971, born in Budapest, Hungary) organized a conference for the World Philosophical Congress, held in Vienna. At the end of the decade, he was immersed in writing what would be his last major work, *Towards an ontology of social being*, which would be published posthumously. The conference was titled, *The ontological bases of man's thought and activity*, and included some of the main theses that he had been developing with the intention of restoring what he understood as genuine Marxian thought¹².

In this book, Lukács set out that *work* is the dynamic-structuring basis of a new type of being. For him, the essence of *work* is precisely that it goes beyond the stabilization of living beings in biological competition. The essential differentiation lies in the role that conscience starts to play, and not in the development of products (a variation from the view advocate by mechanistic-determinism); it ceases to be an epiphenomenon of biological reproduction. With work, he argues, there is, on an ontological level, the possibility of a superior development for workers¹³. For this reason, work becomes not just a fact by which the new peculiarity of the social being is expressed; but on the ontological level, it becomes the model of every new form of being. He says: “The greater the precision with which we observe its functioning, the more its character becomes evident” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 230).

Work, as a model of social praxis, is constituted by teleological positions that, in each concrete case, put *causal series*¹⁴ into action. In a society that has become really social, he says, most of the social activities that together set the whole in motion certainly derive from teleological positions, but their real existence is made up of causal connections that are in no sense

¹¹ “The reduction of the variable dimension of capital, as a result of the growth of its constant dimension [...] offers, as a tendency, the possibility of converting the worker into a supervisor and regulator of the production process, according to the Marxian abstraction present in the *Grundrisse*” (ANTUNES, 2009, p. 208).

¹² Since the 1930s, Lukács has remained convinced that Marxism is a *universal conception of the world* and, as the founders of historical and dialectical materialism had left nothing specific written (aesthetics, ethics, etc.), it is for their successors develop, based on the “[...] list of solid truths [...]” (LUKÁCS, 2008, p. 50) present in the body of work of the two German philosophers, and not complete (something that has become instructive for those who advocate a combination of different theoretical conceptions with Marxism – which is, in itself, often contradictory –, a process known as ‘methodological pluralism’, or simply eclecticism). This becomes the thrust of all Lukacsian production from the first half of the 1930s onwards – see: Lukács (2008), Castro (2019, 2018).

¹³ For a systematic discussion of work in the Marxist tradition, see: Engels (1984, 2020), Marx and Engels (2009), Marx (2015), Childe (1966), Konder (2009), Netto and Braz (2011); and: Huberman (1976), Mandel (1978).

¹⁴ See: Infranca (2014), Lessa (2002).

teleological¹⁵. According to Lukács, since praxis is a decision between alternatives, every social act arises from a decision between alternatives about future teleological positions. For him, this was the meaning of the Marxian statement according to which men are compelled by circumstances to act in a certain way “[...] under pain of ruining themselves” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 231). From this ineliminable human condition, all the real problems of that complex of problems called *freedom* – freedom of choice between alternatives, or even, the nexus between work and freedom (here, one sees that a vision that regards work as a model of social praxis is so much broader).

The subject who achieves the teleological position, consciously poses it, but without ever being able to know all the conditioning (or the consequences) of the activity itself¹⁶. Lukács asserts, “It is obvious that this does not prevent men from acting [...]. In fact, there are numerous situations in which, under penalty of ruin, it is absolutely necessary for man to act” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 232). Regarding the *work* itself, he argues, man is often aware that he can dominate only a range of surrounding elements; however, he also knows that he is able to accomplish it in some way because the need is urgent, and that the work promises to satisfy him. This situation has two important consequences. Firstly, from the constant observation of the results of the work and, consequently, from the increase in knowledge of the range of surrounding elements, the work is perfected, through its internal dialectic. As a result, work becomes more and more varied, “[...] it covers ever larger fields, it increases in both extent and intensity” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 233). Secondly, insofar as the facts underpinning the total understanding of the circumstances cannot be eliminated by this improvement process, this way of being of work awakens a sensation of a transcendent reality (the objective basis for the emergence of religion, magical thinking, etc.).

[...] work is not only the objectively ontological model of all human praxis, but also [...] the direct model that serves as an example of the divine creation of reality, in which all things appear as teleologically produced by an omniscient creator (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 233).

As it develops, work generates social products of a higher order. One of the most important, although relative, differentiations is the increasing autonomy, even in concrete work itself, of preparatory activities¹⁷ (knowledge). Lukács continues, before becoming autonomous fields of knowledge, mathematics, chemistry, geometry, physics were originally part of this preparatory work process; and despite their development, he argues, they have not entirely lost this original function. “[...] the more they [sciences] grow, intensify, etc., the greater the influence of the knowledge thus obtained on the purposes and means of carrying out the work becomes” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 234)¹⁸, [this is the nexus between science and work].

¹⁵ Polemic with distorted views on Marx who claimed – wrongly – to be a defender of a teleological (and deterministic) view of history. On social reproduction, see: Castro (2011).

¹⁶ See: Castro, 2011.

¹⁷ Seen from the point of view of totality, the nexus between material work and intellectual work is verified here, its scope transcends surveillance and control and encompasses preparatory activities for knowledge of nature – p. e.g. science. From the point of view of totality, genuine science can never have a development independent of the demands posed by the social soil (this is what, for other reasons, in the contemporary world, is called the 'applicability' of knowledge). Moreover, it is evident how misleading is any attempt to understand a reality that emphasizes the part, disregarding the whole.

¹⁸ Think, for example, of the relationship between chemistry and something as elementary as cleaning products, or even the relationship between Newtonian physics and the ability to launch and maintain artificial satellites in orbit for diverse human purposes (communication, etc.), etc. It is also worth noting that, although

Such differentiation is, for Lukács, a relatively perfected form of division of labor, a division that is, however, the most elementary consequence of the development of work itself. He maintains that this phenomenon is verifiable. As all work can only have a single main purpose, it is necessary to find means that “[...] guarantee this unitary character of the purpose in the preparation and execution of the work” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 234). Here, therefore, arise teleological positions that no longer aim to transform nature according to human purposes (a primary teleological position), but rather to induce a man to carry out teleological positions according to a *predetermined*¹⁹ way (a secondary teleological position). “[...] with the birth of social classes with antagonistic interests, this type of teleological position becomes the spiritual-structuring basis of what Marxism calls ideology” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 234). Once again, a relationship between work is noted – as it is the basis (along with the division of labor) for the birth of these new teleological positions – with a pure social complex, as in the case of ideology (a broader view of the centrality of work, or in the sense of work as a model of social praxis).

Lukács tells us that in these conflicts, involving the totality of social life in an ever-deeper way, the basic structure is preserved. He says that just as in real knowledge about natural processes in each concrete case at work, to successfully develop the organic interchange between men and nature, knowledge about the nature of human beings is necessary, knowledge of their reciprocal relationships social and personal is indispensable “[...] to induce them to carry out the desired teleological positions” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 235). He writes:

The whole process through which, based on knowledge arising from vital necessity (which initially took the forms of custom, tradition, habits, and myth), rational procedures were subsequently developed, even including some sciences, this whole process is, in Fontane's words, an ‘immense field’ (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 235).

Here the Lukacsian methodology is verified, as it genetically demonstrates the path by which the highest forms developed from the simplest ones. Lukács distinguishes the knowledge that influences the organic exchange with nature from that which is directed to influencing other men or groups of people, because the former is more easily dissociated from the teleological positions that conditioned its appearance. This differentiation, which indicates a distinction between human and natural sciences, in relation to the specific objects of each, and the consequences of the treatment based on the distinct materiality to the results of each of them, should in no way lead to what he calls gnoseological exaggeration, i.e. “[...] identifying or absolutely differentiating the two processes” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 235)²⁰. “These are common or

few contest the fact that the explanation of the natural world gains rationale in the context of science, this does not mean that science also has total autonomy in relation to society in its sense, not rarely, establish as starting points (intuitions, etc.), through observation, facts derived from mere practical, everyday experience, which are often already used as a mechanism, but not yet elevated to a concept (and developed).

¹⁹ According to the author, all human social life can be reduced to these two types of teleological acts: primary and secondary. While primary teleological acts aim to transform nature to satisfy the material needs of society (work), secondary teleological acts are all those aimed at convincing other human beings (or society) to act in a certain way, and not another (must-be), examples range from education, ethics, law to politics, advertising, philosophy, cinema, etc.

²⁰ Polemics that include, for example, the positivist’s view which defends the application of the model of the natural sciences to the study of society, or even those who, unilaterally, rigidly, and antithetically separated the social field from nature, starting to designate the problems that emerged from it as linked to the realms of the spirit.

diverse ontological elements, which are present simultaneously and which can only find a solution in a concrete historical-social dialectic” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 235).

Lukács states that the global processes of society are causal processes, they have their own laws, but they are never objectively directed towards the achievement of ends²¹. Even if a group of people were able to define their aims, the results often produce something different from that intended – note the way in which the development of productive forces in antiquity led to the destruction of that society by periodic capitalist crises provoked by its own development. The Lukacsian methodological proposal – an approach based on the social being in the genetic sense – becomes more evident when he outlines some general thoughts regarding the development of society. His aim is to clarify “[...] a little more broadly [...] the more general connection of this genetic beginning of society and history with its own development” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 237). Firstly, he says, that the economic necessity – posed by Marx – is not a “[...] natural necessity” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 237). The fundamental ontological reason – claims Lukács – is the causality set in motion by alternative teleological decisions. Following this thread, he states that economic development to date (1968) had been permeated by the presence of three evolutionary trends, only understandable *post festum*. These trends, have occurred in an evident, albeit uneven, way: 1) a constant tendency to reduce the socially necessary working time for the reproduction of human life; 2) an increase in what Marx called the “[...] retreat of natural barriers [...]” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 238), which would make this reproduction more and more clearly social, examples of which are the increasingly social character of sexuality and nutrition (natural aspects); and 3) the integration of society by the world market, which lifts singular societies out of their isolation and unify humanity, at least in the most general economic sense²² (here he highlights the harsh conflicts arising from this integration). It is because of these tendencies – with their respective internal and external transformations of the social being – that the human being leaves behind his condition as a natural being and ascended to the condition of human person.

This whole process is the product of the causal series that arise in society as a whole without, however, ever achieving an end point. Because of this, its development towards higher levels contains the activation of contradictions of ever higher forms. In this sense, progress is certainly a synthesis of human activities, but not their improvement “[...] according to any teleology” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 239). For this reason alone, such development continually destroys the primitive results that, although beautiful, are economically limited: “[...] therefore, objective economic progress always appears in the form of new social conflicts” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 239).

This is how, from the primitive community of men, apparently insoluble antinomies, that is, class oppositions, arise, so that even the worst forms of inhumanity are the result of this progress. In its beginnings, slavery constituted progress in relation to cannibalism; today, the generalization of man’s alienation is a symptom of the fact that economic development is in the process of revolutionizing man’s relationship with work (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 239).

²¹ Lukács is dealing here with social reproduction – the unfolding of the foundational act of society, work. He deals with these two complexes of social being – work and social reproduction – in chapters I and II, volume 2 of his *Towards an ontology of social being* (various editions in: Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, English, etc.). For a systematic presentation of reproduction, see: Castro, 2011.

²² Humanity’s universal-historical development, severely conflicted, and contradictory, cannot be confronted by abstractly one-sided worldviews (so-called decolonial thinking, etc.); it must be understood in the light of the historical process, which includes all its phases. Here, it is valid to read the dialectic between the singular, the particular and the universal under the materialist prism constant in chapter 3, *The particular in the light of dialectical materialism*, from the book *Introduction to a Marxist aesthetic*, by Georg Lukács (2018).

So far, it is clear that the ontological centrality of work – or the understanding of work as a *model of social praxis* – is broader, and more diverse, than the theses that claim the importance of work in society subordinated to the number of manual workers who carry out the production of material wealth through the transformation of nature in factories²³. Seen from the point of view of totality (and making use of the genetic methodology, *post festum*²⁴), the role of work as the foundation of human sociability is not only clear (in all human communities, regardless of their cultures) as an organic exchange with nature²⁵, its connection with other social complexes²⁶, is revealed: work and freedom, work and science, work and ideology, work and the must-be, etc. In other words, the Lukacsian thesis states that work is the *model of social praxis* because problems that present themselves in a dematerialized, subtle, and abstract way, such as freedom, in higher stages of social development are already contained *in nuce* in the simplest act of work, as in the simple choice of a stone²⁷ in the Palaeolithic. Here, then, the genetic link between work and the must-be (ethics, etc.) is revealed – problems that in other modern philosophies appear to be unrooted.

It is not by chance that in the very first stage of the work we have given so much weight to the moment of freedom in deciding between alternatives. Man must earn his own freedom through his own action. But he can only do so because all his activity already contains, as a necessary constituent part, a moment of freedom. [...] If this moment did not manifest itself continuously in the course of human history, if it did not preserve in it a perennial continuity, it could naturally not play the role of a subjective factor even during the great turning point (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 242-243).

Finally, a few words about the supposed contradiction between the decrease in the number of factory workers and Marxism. One of the tendencies described by Marx, according to the Lukacsian analysis, is the decrease in the socially necessary working time for the reproduction of human life. Marx states, in *Capital*, that the realm of freedom – where “[...] the development of human forces occurs as an end in itself [...]” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 242) – has to be based on the “realm of necessity” (the economic-social reproduction of humanity). However, the former can only flourish when in the latter, human activity has ceased to be imposed externally, to be seen “[...] only [as] a means of life [...]” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 242) – that is, “[...] only when humanity has overcome any coercive character in its own self-production” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 242). Since this is the criterion by which humanity can be enabled to attain a higher level of development (the realm of freedom), and to increase *available time* by reducing socially necessary working time, it makes no sense to seek, within the scope of one of these conditions (the decreasing of working time), any reason to justify the impossibility – and the supposed anachronism – of the theory, which proposes overcoming the current state of affairs, becoming effective.

²³ Kurz (1992), Jappe (2006). In another direction, we have: Antunes (2003, 2005, 2009), Lessa and Tonet (2012), Lessa (2007a), Duayer (2011), Castro (2014), etc.

²⁴ This principle is based on the Marxian assertion according to which “[...] The anatomy of the human being is a key to the anatomy of the ape [...]” (MARX, 2011, p. 58), or even, “[...] the bourgeois economy provides the key to the ancient economy” (MARX, 2011, p. 58).

²⁵ Although, during development, there is what Marxism calls “[...] retreat of natural barriers [...]” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 238); the issue addressed is that of “[...] organic exchange with nature” (LUKÁCS, 2007, p. 235). We cannot forget, either, that human activity (work), as a praxis, transforms nature, but also retroacts on the subject that operates the transformation; therefore, such relationship, society-nature, does not cease its effects with the decrease in the expenditure of physical force exerted by manual workers.

²⁶ This nexus, during its development, ceases to be immediate and becomes increasingly mediate.

²⁷ See: Castro (2018).

The 'end of the centrality of work', so-called post-industrial society and the informational-digital era

From the middle of the 20th century, social analysts began to question the thesis that work is the central activity of societies. In the light of transformations in the sphere of production (industry, etc.), they have become convinced of the decreasing relevance (or 'centrality') of work in the dynamics of society. The decrease in manual workers in factories, resulting partially from the progressive use of highly sophisticated machinery and technology (automation, etc.), the growth of service activities and the corresponding increase in workers in this sector, supports the phrase uttered by sociologists as contemporary societies entered the so-called post-industrial era (D. Bell, etc.). The thesis of work as a transformation of nature to satisfy the material needs of society (reproduction) therefore became the object of innumerable questions.

From Mallet to Lojkin, from Belleville to Ricardo Antunes, a wide range of theories have relied, implicitly or explicitly, on the thesis that technological development would be the determining moment in the development of productive forces [...]. In more than one of these moments, the hypotheses that the working class would become extinct or on the verge of extinction, or that it would merge with wage earners as a whole, are based on a thesis according to which the introduction of new technologies such as automation or computerization would alter the foundation of relationship between social classes (LESSA, 2007a, p. 39-40).

Changes in the sphere of production have led to an observable decrease in manual work in relation to intellectual work – “[...] physical fatigue becomes nervous fatigue [...]” (MALLET, 1963, p. 12 -13) – and, with the advance of new technologies in factories, the traditional working class is being replaced. Consequently, the class struggle could be over, as well as the traditional parties and unions, as the working class is in a process of rapid transformation. We could be moving towards “[...] ‘factories without workers’ automated, remotely controlled and supervised via television screens in the technical offices of Parisian management” (MALLET, 1963, p. 139-140). Based on investigations of assembly lines (Bull, Caltex Refinery, etc.), Serge Mallet arrives at the understanding that we are seeing a ‘new working class’ (the title of his book is *A Nova Classe Operária*, 1963). In this new reality, technological criteria begin to determine the class situation. So, the engineer becomes ‘proletarian’, just as office workers have been transformed into productive workers, given that “[...] office services [...] prepare the conditions for production itself.” (MALLET, 1963, p. 13).

Another important aspect of the ‘new working class’ highlighted by Mallet is the fact that this means no longer living “[...] separately”: “skilled workers, technical staff, salaried workers in the tertiary sector and self-employed professionals [...]” would enter a “[...] process of homogenization” (MALLET, 1963, p. 9). This ‘new working class’, in Mallet’s view, would be increasingly closer to the middle class, given the fact that they own the same cars, live in the same neighborhoods, spend their holidays on the same beaches: he writes, “[...] the young metal workers share the ‘Tahitian’ bungalows with the directors, daughters [...]” (MALLET, 1963, p. 9).

In 1963, another author, Pierre Belleville, published a work intending to account for these transformations: *Une Nouvelle Classe Ouvrière* (A new working class). Belleville argues that both the thesis that defends the homogenization of the working class with the middle class and the one advocating its proletarianization (PCF) have specific political objectives. The first, he

says, is an instrument of the anticommunist struggle, the second, conversely, serves to defend the historical relevance of the PCs. Belleville argues that the working class is mutating not because it is on the verge of disappearing, but because it is expanding. However, the difference between his thesis and Mallet's thesis ends here. In both cases, manual labor ceases to be the criterion for defining social class: the “[...] reference to manual labor is no longer sufficient to delimit the working class [...]” (BELLEVILLE, 1963, p. 11). The explanation for this is in the new definitions of productive and unproductive work determined by the advent of new technologies. “Engineers have ceased to be an intermediary body between management and workers to turn them into productive employees [...]”, comments Lessa (2007a, p. 42). For Belleville: “[...] engineers, students, researchers [...] are just as salaried as the others, paid for work that, above all, should result in profits. They discover the subordination of their professional demands to the demands of capital” (BELLEVILLE, 1963, p. 194). The ‘new working class’, for Belleville, consists of “[...] all categories of salaried workers” (BELLEVILLE, 1963, p. 316). For both Mallet and Belleville, changes in the productive sphere, the growing use of new technologies give rise to a new working class, so that the boundaries between the traditional working class and other salaried workers is increasingly tenuous, fluid, and fading. The criterion for designating the proletariat, for both of them, becomes salary²⁸.

The effects of automation bring about significant changes in the factory organization and even reverses the phenomenon of alienation (Robert Blauner and Joan Woodward). This is because automation in factories supplants the division of tasks typical of Taylorism, and softens the processes of control and surveillance seen previously. Relations in the factory environment are reorganized because production is now organized into small teams that are relatively autonomous, and repetitive work is performed by automated machines. So that: “[...] not only the antagonism between the workers and the factory hierarchy is overcome, but the alienation of work itself as, now, the worker would recognize himself in the final product” (LESSA, 2007a, p. 43).

Another important author who sought to address the effects of automation in the manufacturing process is Pierre Naville. In *Vers la automatisme social? Machines, informatique, autonomie et liberté* (Towards social automatism? Machines, information technology, autonomy, and liberty), Naville argues, contrary to Blauner and Woodward, that automation would result in an increase in the alienation of work. “Automation leads to the final rupture between the producer and the product. It strips the worker of all contact with the raw material and destroys any residual sense of a personal relationship with the machine” (GALLIE, 1978, p. 21). Taking stock of these authors’ understanding of these transformations, Lessa writes:

Despite the obvious differences, all these authors share a common theoretical nucleus. The post-war period should have launched humanity onto a *new level of development with such significant transformations in production and consumption* that social classes should either be undergoing rapid and profound transformation or even disappearing (LESSA, 2007a, p. 44). -45, author’s italics).

²⁸ On the thesis that differentiates proletarian work and other wage earners, see the book *Why Social Service is not work*, by S. Lessa (2007b). On the expanded notion of the working class, see chapter VI of *The Meanings of Work*, by R. Antunes (2009), or, on the so-called ‘service proletariat’, *O Privilégio de Servitude* (ANTUNES, 2018), by the same author.

According to the same investigation,

[...] the *new technologies should be converting engineers, scientists, technicians from the most varied sectors into “productive workers”* and abolishing the boundaries between manual and intellectual work. And... [still] such transformations require a new concept of class, let us say, more current than Marx’s (LESSA, 2007a, p. 45, author’s italics).

Still analyzing such changes, in 1974, in the USA, Harry Braverman published his *Work and Monopoly Capital*. In it, Braverman, in addition to highlighting aspects of the degradation of work in the 20th century (the subtitle of the book), sought to analyze the consequences of the Taylorization of office work and intellectual work. From a new reading of the meaning of productive and unproductive work in the conditions of monopoly capitalism, Braverman concluded that both productive and unproductive workers are dominated by capitalist production relations, both are exploited by capital. “[...] *almost the entire population became employees of capital*. Almost all worker associated with modern business, or with its imitative branches in governmental or so-called non-profit organizations, took the form of buying and selling labor power” (BRAVERMAN, 1987, p. 342, authors’ italics).

The alienation and uncertainty that were exclusive to the proletariat have spread to the new salaried earners. Instead of the lifting of the proletariat to the middle strata (Mallet), for Braverman a proletarianization of the intermediate sectors is occurring. In this way, salaried work is expanding to cover a greater number of activities, in the same way as the proletariat is expanding and assuming a new configuration. So that: “The worker who builds an office building and the servant who cleans it every night produce value and surplus value in the same way [...]” (BRAVERMAN, 1981, p. 374); both would be equally productive, since the difference between one activity and another becomes secondary²⁹.

So, the working conditions of productive and unproductive workers would be so similar (both are exploited by capital) that what “[...] has weight in society [today] is whether the individual is, or is not, salaried” (LESSA, 2007a, p. 46). In Braverman’s words:

Although productive and unproductive work are technically distinct, although productive work has tended to decrease in proportion to the increase in its productivity, while unproductive has increased *only as a consequence of the increase in surpluses spurred by productive work* – despite these distinctions, the two masses of work are by no means in stark contrast and need not be pitted against each other. They constitute a continuous mass of employment which, today, and unlike the situation in Marx’s day, have everything in common (BRAVERMAN, 1987, p. 357, author’s italics).

Lessa draws attention to a consequence of Braverman’s understanding. According to him, there are wage earners who are not workers, such as executives, and even fewer proletarians. Aware of this, Braverman observes that the remuneration of company directors is not just an exchange of work for money – “[...] an exchange of goods [...]” (BRAVERMAN, 1987, p. 343) –, but represents “[...] a share in the *surplus* produced in the company” (BRAVERMAN, 1987, p. 343; author’s italics).

²⁹ Once again, the basic debate here is related to the difference between proletarian work and other salaried workers, productive work, and unproductive work, or whether some of these differences have ceased to exist due to the increasing technological in factories.

Another influential author in the contemporary debate around transformations in the productive sphere is André Gorz (1982). In 1980, he published the book *Adeus ao proletariado*. It contains his main theses on the effects of these transformations on the proletariat. Considering the debate that took place until the 1970s, Gorz believes that the European proletariat has integrated into the bourgeois world. By having become an integral part of capitalism, the proletariat has lost its revolutionary character as a social class. According to him, the development of capitalist productive forces, the basis for another mode of social organization, only serves capitalist rationality, just as the working class, another condition for the realization of that mode, has been integrated into capitalism.

The logic of Capital that led to this result at the end of two centuries of ‘progress’, that is, of accumulation of increasingly efficient means of production, cannot give anything more and nothing better than this. More exactly, the industrial-productivist society can only perpetuate itself by doing more and worse at the same time: more destruction, more waste, more repairs to the damage, more programming of individuals to their very core. ‘Progress’ has passed a threshold which changes the signal: the future is full of threats and devoid of promises. The advances of productivism lead to those of barbarism and oppression (GORZ, 1980, p. 93).

The proletariat, denied ‘autonomy’ as a class because it is organically linked to the capitalist mode of production, would seek, each individually, a way out of their particular situation. This fact “[...] undermines the capacity that the proletariat has, if all its members unite, to expel the bourgeoisie from power and put an end to class society” (GORZ, 1982, p. 47). Gorz, (1982) argues that a new historical grouping would become the bearer of social transformation: the “non-class” of “non-workers”. This “non-class” of “non-workers” “[...] is not produced by capitalism or marked by the stamp of capitalist relations of production; *it is produced by the crisis of capitalism and by the dissolution, under the effect of new productive techniques, of the social relations of capitalist production*” (GORZ, 1982, p. 87, author’s italics).

This “non-class”, according to Gorz, is composed of “[...] the group of individuals who find themselves expelled from production by the process of the loss of work, or underemployed of their abilities *by the industrialization* (that is, by automation and computerization) of *intellectual work [...]*” (GORZ, 1982, p. 87-88; author’s italics). This would extend to “all layers of society” and would oppose “[...] the class of stable workers, unionized, protected by an employment contract and a collective agreement” (GORZ, 1982, p. 88); the latter would then be a “[...] privileged minority” (GORZ, 1982, p. 88). Gorz states: “*The new post-industrial proletariat not only no longer finds in social work the source of its possible power, but also sees in it the reality of the power of the apparatuses and of its own non-power*” (GORZ, 1982, p. 91, author’s italics).

Taking stock of the changes initiated in the 1970s and 1980s – productive restructuring, the advent of the Toyotist model and *flexible accumulation*, the so-called financialization of the economy – at the beginning of the 21st century, the Brazilian sociologist Ricardo Antunes asserted that theses around the *end of work* and the *working class* advocated in the last quarter of the previous century had been refuted. However, instead of financialization being inserted into a labor world based on legislation designed to protect labor law, what has been witnessed is the advance of a brutal dismantling of labor relations, which Antunes calls the *structural precariousness of work*.

A few decades ago, in the mid-1980s, the thesis that the working class was in retraction on a global scale gained force. With the United States and Europe at the forefront, the idea of a machinic, jobless capitalism expanded and even consolidated, gaining wide adherence in the academic, Union, and political universe in various parts of the world (ANTUNES, 2018, p. 26- 27).

Considering that the transformations in the sphere of production begun in the 1970s altered and generated a *new morphology of work*, Antunes considers that the decrease of the traditional working class in the central countries was compensated for by an expansion - notably in the service sector, but not limited to it - in Asian countries (China, India, Korea), and Latin American countries (Brazil, Mexico).

Although it seems that the industrial proletariat, heirs to the Taylorist and Fordist era, has been reducing in various parts of the central capitalist world, there is also a strong *countertrend*, given by the exponential expansion of new contingents of male and female workers, especially in the service sector, but also in agroindustry and industry, albeit in different ways in several countries in the South (ANTUNES, 2018, p. 27, author's italics).

To illustrate the current trend of what he calls the structural precariousness of work, Antunes cites an example from China, or more precisely from Foxconn, an outsourced company that assembles electronic products for multinationals including Apple, Nokia, and others. Citing a study by *Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior* (Sacom), Antunes reports that Foxconn workers, in 2010, worked an average of 12 hours a day and received demeaning wages. As well as reporting cases of suicide, he informs us that during that period the company employed, in China alone, 1.4 million workers. “[...] since the late 1970s, China has established Special Economic Zones to attract foreign capital, which led Apple to seek out these large outsourcing companies to reduce costs and expand markets (ANTUNES, 2018, p. 28)”. The secret of the so-called ‘Chinese miracle’ is revealed.

In recent decades, ‘lyophilized and flexible’ companies, according to Antunes’ understanding, and driven by informational-digital expansion, have produced a destructive tripod regarding work. In a recent writing, he describes the current situation as follows:

Outsourcing, informality, and flexibility thus became inseparable parts of the lexicon and pragmatics of the global corporate enterprise. And, with them, intermittence has become one of the most corrosive elements of labor protection, which resulted from historical and secular struggles of the working class in so many parts of the world (ANTUNES, 2020, p. 11).

Citing an example of these new (and more precarious) types of work, which have appeared recently and most notably at the beginning of the 21st century, he writes:

[...] The *zero hour contract*, for example, was born in the United Kingdom and spread around the world, allowing the hiring of available male and female workers, from the most diverse activities, to a ‘platform’. They wait for a smartphone call and, after they receive it, they earn only for what they do, receiving nothing for the time they were waiting (ANTUNES, 2020, p. 12).

This perpetual availability for work is accentuated by ‘online work’ and ‘apps’, which have broken down the old boundaries between time spent *at work* and *outside* of it. This has had the effect of making large global corporations invisible. For Antunes, these new service

proletariats³⁰, who are subject to this logic of total precariousness, find themselves in the unenviable situation of having to choose between total unemployment or what he calls the privilege of servitude – if, of course, nothing intervenes to stop this trend. Regarding one of the best known of these corporations that has adopted these practices, he writes:

Uber is another more than emblematic example: workers with their own cars, that is, with their work tools, bear the costs of insurance, vehicle maintenance, food, cleaning, etc., while the ‘app’ – in fact, a global private salaried company disguised in the form of deregulated work – appropriates the surplus value generated by the drivers’ service, without worrying about labor duties historically won by the working class³¹ (ANTUNES, 2018, p. 34-35).

This scenario, in Antunes’ thinking, tends to get worse with the advancement of so-called *Industry 4.0*. For him, production is on the way to becoming ever more predominantly automated, robotized, carried out by digital machines, and commanded in an informational-digital way. With this, he argues, and resulting from this new form of a *flexible and digital company*, there will be an expansion of *global intermittent*, and an immeasurable increase in the surplus and unemployed workforce.

Industry 4.0, marks, according to its formulators, a new phase of industrial automation, which differs from the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century, the leap taken by the automotive industry of the 20th century and the productive restructuring that was developed from the 1970s. These three previous phases have been succeeded by a new one, which will consolidate, according to the corporate proposition, the informational-digital hegemony in the productive world, with cell phones, tablets, smartphones and the like, controlling, supervising, and commanding this new stage of the 21st century cyber industry (ANTUNES, 2018, p. 38).

Within these new realities, such as the recurrent use of intermittent work contracts, *zero hour contracts*, *turnover contracts*, telephone working and/or home office working, *pejotization*, etc., Antunes identifies the common trait of these new modalities of work as ‘flexibility’.

The foundation of the pragmatics that have invaded the global universe of work is evident. In the ‘modern’ company, the work that capital demands is the most *flexible* possible: without predetermined working hours, without defined working space, without fixed remuneration, without rights, not even that of union organization. Even the ‘goals’ system is flexible: those for the next day must always be greater than those obtained the day before³² (ANTUNES, 2018, p. 36, author’s italics).

Faced with these changes, Antunes argues that contrary to those who claim that there has been a retraction of the law of value, it has in fact undergone a strong expansion of its operating

³⁰ Antunes (2009, 2018) does not differentiate between workers and other wage earners, just like Lessa (2007a, 2007b) and Lessa and Tonet (2012). The author of *The privilege of servitude* adopts, for the new morphology of work, an “expanded notion of the working class” (ANTUNES, 2018, p. 89). See also: Iamamoto (2004, 2012, 2013).

³¹ Here, the debate is about productive work. It is worth mentioning that, although every worker is a productive worker, the opposite is not true (see the example of the schoolmaster cited by K. Marx in *Capital*). Antunes does not make this distinction. Furthermore, the use of the term “more value” here has the same meaning as the term surplus value.

³² “An increasingly minoritized group will be top wage earners. Instability could lead to their collapse in the face of any fluctuation in the market, with its times, movements, spaces, and territories in constant mutation. Added to them is a mass of ‘entrepreneurs,’ a mixture of *bourgeois-of-itself and proletarian-of-itself*” (ANTUNES, 2018, p. 34, author’s emphasis). See also: Antunes (2019).

mechanisms, incorporating new forms of surplus labor generation - as observed, according to him, in outsourced work, and informal work, etc. (It doesn't matter here whether such activities are more manual or more intellectual³³). According to him, in the financialized capitalism of the information age, we are witnessing a growing symbiosis between productive and unproductive work, so that the make-up of the working class becomes as follows:

A contemporary design of the working class must encompass, therefore, all salaried workers, men and women who live by selling their labor power in exchange for wages, whether in industry, agriculture, and services, or in the existing interconnections between these sectors, such as agro-industry, industrial services, service industry, etc. Given the profound metamorphoses that have occurred in the productive world of contemporary capitalism, the *expanded concept of the working class*, in its new morphology, must incorporate all male and female workers [...] regardless of whether the activities they carry out are predominantly material or immaterial, are more or less regulated (ANTUNES, 2018, p. 31, Author's italics).

Finally, Antunes' "expanded notion" of the working class does not distinguish between proletarian work and other salaried workers, such as those in the service sector, unproductive workers (public service, etc.), or even productive non-worker wage earners (schoolteachers, etc.). This is because, according to Lessa's arguments, manual labor is no longer the criterion for designating social class - a criterion that differentiates the working class from other wage earners³⁴ (in the case at hand, this criterion became wage earning). In Lessa and Tonet's words:

It is correct to say that proletarians and salaried workers share a common purpose, the struggle for higher wages. [...] However, as wage workers live on the wealth produced by the workers ["the material content of social wealth", R. C.], as their wages have their origin in the capital produced by the proletarians, they share with the bourgeoisie the fact that they are members of the portion of society that parasitizes proletarian work (LESSA; TONET, 2012, p. 43).

Final considerations

This article addresses the approach towards *work* supported by the theses of the philosopher György Lukács (2012, 2013, 2016), in his *Towards an ontology of the social being*, which claims that work activity is a necessary and indispensable mediation that human beings carry out with nature (organic exchange) - and: the *model of social praxis*. Seen from the point of view of totality, the interrelation between society and nature (work) persists even with the (supposed) decrease in live, manual work; as for society to reproduce itself it needs to transform nature - and it continues to be transformed - and this is enough to confirm the structuring role of this activity within the social organization of society. Moreover, work as a model of social praxis goes beyond the exchange with nature, since, as we have seen, it contains within it, moments of social life - such as freedom, value, etc. - which in higher stages of social development present themselves in an abstract, dematerialized way. Without the reference to work (seen from the point of view of totality), the link between it and science, or between work and value, etc., would be beyond human understanding.

³³ Another point here is a similarity between manual work and intellectual work. For the record, this is not a controversial issue. Furthermore, it is worth learning about another controversy: the difference between material and immaterial work. See: Antunes (2009, 2018) and Lessa, (2005).

³⁴ Ver: Lessa: (2007a, 2007b), Lessa e Tonet (2012), Antunes (2009, 2018) e Castro (2012).

From the second half of the 20th century, authors such as Serge Mallet, P. Belleville, André Gorz, Jean Lojkin – and others, such as Adam Schaff, Nicos Poulantzas, and Claus Offe, – have offered different reflections about the role of work in society, as well as analyzing the effects of transformations in production on corporate organization. A common trait is the loss of importance of (manual) work in the reproduction of society and an increase in the technological and informational role in production. The adoption of such theses will, therefore, have enormous repercussions on the most powerful theoretical edifice of the explanation of the capitalist mode of production, Marxism, causing strong shocks (but apparently, not cracks).

Another current of thought at the beginning of the century, with less reverberation but equally hostile to the structuring role of work, advocates that it does not have a transhistorical centrality and, along with the increase in dead work (machinery), begins to mark it as a “corpse to be buried” (R. Kurz (1992), A. Jappe (2006), etc.). For them, the main contradiction of the current era is between value and social life.

The balance struck by Ricardo Antunes at the end of the second decade of the 21st century is revealing. Based on studies of new zones of commodity production (notably Asia, with emphasis on India and China), the theses defended, in the last quarter of the previous century, the end of labor overthrow in the face of the appalling situation in which workers in these regions find themselves (12 working hours a day in China, etc.). Surveying new work modalities – guided as they are by flexibility, outsourcing, informality, intermittence, uberization, pejetization, in other words, by the *structural precariousness of work* –, Antunes arrived at the realization that we are sinking even further regarding the dismantling of labor rights, driven by the capitalist crises that began in the 1970s. Industry 4.0 promises to make the already chaotic working conditions of the working class even worse. As Antunes explains in an article in the book *Uberização, Trabalho Digital e Indústria 4.0*, the main consequence of the implementation of Industry 4.0 for workers will be the expansion of dead work via digital machinery – artificial intelligence, 3d printer, *big data*, etc. According to him, the technological-organizational-informational process will increasingly eliminate “[...] an incalculable amount of the workforce, which will become superfluous and surplus, without jobs, without social security” (ANTUNES, 2020, p. 14). So, the worker will continue to hold, paraphrasing the words of the author himself, the *privilege of servitude*.

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