

## Decline of the Centrality of Work? Critique of a Contemporary Ideology

Work, Employment and Society

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Ricardo Antunes

#### **Adeus ao trabalho? Ensaio sobre as metamorfoses e a centralidade do mundo do trabalho**

São Paulo: Cortez, 1995, €49.55 pbk, (ISBN: 8524905557), 155 pp.

#### **O privilégio da servidão: o novo proletariado de serviço na era digital**

São Paulo: Boitempo, 2018, R\$100 pbk, (ISBN: 8575596292), 325 pp.

#### **Coronavírus: o trabalho sob fogo cruzado**

São Paulo: Boitempo, 2020, R\$15 pbk, (ISBN: 9786557170014), 51 pp.

### The 'lucid narrator' of the transformations of labour

Ricardo Antunes is an author who is still relatively unknown in the mainstream sociological scene, despite the importance of his work *Adeus ao trabalho? Ensaio sobre as metamorfoses e a centralidade do mundo do trabalho* (Goodbye to work? The transformations and centrality of work in globalisation), published by Cortez, in 1995, and his much more recent, but equally important, *O privilégio da servidão: o novo proletariado de serviço na era digital* (The new service proletariat in the digital age) and *Coronavírus: o trabalho sob fogo cruzado* (Coronavirus: work under fire), published by Boitempo, in 2018 and 2020 respectively.

Considered by some to be one of the greatest experts of Marx's work in Latin America; he may be defined, more appropriately, as the 'lucid narrator' of the 'cataclysm' that has swept through labour and, specifically, wage labour, during the era of (neo)liberal globalisation of capitalist social relations.

### Critique of a contemporary ideology

The first volume by the passionate and impassioned Brazilian sociologist presented here, meticulously analyses the framework of the radical transformations that have occurred in

the organisation of work and labour market, in the regimes of control and employment and in the ideologies of workers, at a global level, over the last fifty years; that is, the transformations of capital or, to put it better, of the *relations of production*, within the framework of what could be defined as the liberal and neo-liberal phases of the capitalist system. Above all, on the basis of solid empirical research and articulated theoretical reflections, as well as on the solidity of objective data, Antunes deconstructs the fallacy of the theories and predictions put forward, mainly in the final thirty years of the last century, by a growing number of scholars, about the presumed ‘end of work’ and the supposed advent of a ‘post-industrial’ society and a ‘cognitive capitalism’, within which material production would leave room for ‘immaterial’ work. In the author’s view, these are ideological attempts to distort material reality and mystify or discard possibilities for radical change.

Observing sociologically the ‘cataclysm’ that has affected labour from the end of the *Trente Glorieuses* to the present day, and using the tools of Marxian analysis, Antunes formulates a radically different hypothesis: on the one hand, living wage labour has not gone downhill and disappeared, but has become all the more precarious the more it is exploited. On the other hand, ‘immaterial’ labour has not been replaced by material labour, but has been combined with it. The consequence of these processes of profound transformation, which have taken place and are taking place on a global level, is the emergence of a *new morphology of work*, a complexification of work and an even greater interconnection of its components on a global scale, not a disappearance of work which, on the contrary, remains central to the life and reproduction of societies and individuals.

In *O privilégio da servidão: o novo proletariado de serviço na era digital*, Antunes goes into greater detail and gives a more articulate account of the process of further fragmentation and precariousness of work and the consequent new class formation, that is, the further segmentation and ‘heterogenisation’ of the workforce, within the process of (continuous) restructuring of the capitalist system.

Specifically, the author observes how Taylorism-Fordism has ceased to be the main model of productive organisation, starting to merge with more flexible forms of accumulation and focuses on the ‘infoproletariat’ of services in the digital era and on the intense and globally extensive process of the ‘uberisation’ of work, i.e., the unlimited combination of informability, flexibility, precariousness and, therefore, overexploitation and dispossession. His analysis focuses on workers in services and underlines that it would be a progressively more heterogeneous and fragmented segment of the working class, multi-functional, which must be exploited in a more intense and sophisticated way, at least in the productive sectors characterised by greater technological progress.

Moreover, in this work, the Brazilian sociologist takes up and develops the Marxian theme of the *process of value production within the process of circulation of goods and activities that incorporate immaterial labour*. To do so, he takes up *Book II of The Capital* and starts from the assumption that industrial capital transcends strictly material production, as is evident in his characterisation of the transport industry (and other branches such as storage, warehousing, communications, etc.).

Finally, for Antunes, of course, the real possibilities of such a rupture and overcoming of the logic of capital still find, in the *class-that-lives-from-labour*, the collective subject

capable of enacting them. Although more heterogeneous, more complex and more fragmented, this is the only social being still ontologically capable of writing a new page of history.

*Coronavirus: o trabalho sob fogo cruzado* is a short book, capable, however, of illuminating quickly and with great lucidity, the changes that the pandemic has entailed, is entailing and will entail in work. In other words, it is a precious text that analyses the dizzying acceleration in the transformation of work caused by the explosion of the pandemic crisis, which is thus adding to and aggravating the current economic crisis. This further exacerbates the conditions of the working class, which is already under attack. In other words, the pandemic crisis is increasingly consolidating, even in the 'Global North', the process that has been going on for a longer time and in a more intense manner in the 'Global South', that of 'uberisation', precariousness, fragmentation and individualisation of work, expanding the ranks of the 'service proletariat of the digital era' and intensifying its exploitation.

## Cross-cutting issues and analyses

It is difficult to separate and push within rigid boundaries the reflections, readings and applications of Marxian thought contained in the work of Ricardo Antunes. Therefore, a brief account of his reflections on some of the issues addressed *across the board* in the three works at the centre of this review will follow.

First of all, Antunes argues and demonstrates in his texts that work has not disappeared, and in doing so the author refers primarily to the theory that the category 'work', due to the decrease in the number of factory workers, no longer constitutes a basic element of either the production process or human social organisation. If the restructuring of the capitalist mode of production has led to a rupture with the worker-mass of Fordist (and Taylorist) memory, i.e., with the increase in the constant part of the organic composition of capital, and, therefore, a significant reduction in living labour, a significant weakening of the world of work and the increasingly fragmented and composite *class-that-lives-from-labour*, this does not mean that labour and its class have disappeared.

The Brazilian sociologist points out, the – fallacious – thesis concerning the expansion of the immaterial productive activities of contemporary capitalism is a 'Eurocentric' prerogative or, to put it better, of the countries of the North of the World and has no real ontological basis if we take into consideration the totality of world production, therefore, including the 'Global South', endowed with an enormous and growing contingent of labour. In order to understand work, in its global scope, it is necessary to look beyond the mere (western) national case, and to take note of the formidable and objective growth in the number of wage workers on a global scale.

Antunes takes up what Marx said in *Book I of Capital*, with respect to the industrialisation of manufacturing and agriculture, the real subsumption of labour to capital, to describe the process of subordination of services to capital and the consequent explosion of the service proletariat. In other words, it is a reflection that allows us to place the theme of immaterial labour within a framework in which it is *combined* with material labour, in a structured and structuring system of modes aimed at extracting the maximum quantity and quality of value from living labour.

A further important theme that runs through the theoretical and empirical path of Ricardo Antunes lies in his reflections on the process of *production of value within the process of circulation of commodities*. Though, for the author, the basic assumption of Marx's thought that *surplus value is created in production* remains undoubtedly firm and unquestionable, taking up *Book II of Capital*, he also stresses that capitalist production is not summed up in industrial production in its strict sense (and invites one to think of capitalist industrialised agriculture); industrial capital transcends strictly material production (and invites one to think of the transport industry and its allied industries); production is also consumption and vice versa, i.e. production, distribution, circulation, exchange and consumption are part of a single *global* process. Especially in exceptional situations (e.g. in the case of perishable goods, which require special forms of transport and/or storage), the circulation and storage of goods produce – or, rather, '*preserve*' – surplus value. Production time, therefore, includes actual production *and* circulation. Hence: the more the time of circulation of the commodity is reduced – that is, the more the metamorphosis of circulation of capital takes place under ideal conditions – the greater the productivity of the labour required for its production, the greater the profit and surplus value generated. Here, then, the phenomenological reduction of the industrial activity (assuming that, globally, this is and has been the case) does not entail a reduction in surplus value and value extraction from living labour, exploitation and the working class itself. Even if the service proletariat does not play a primary role in the creation of surplus value from production, it does play a role in the creation – or '*preservation*' – of surplus value from the reduction of circulation time.

The 'uberisation' of work directly recalls the ideology of self-entrepreneurship (with its neo-language made up of meaningless and sweetening expressions such as 'platform economy', 'gig-economy', 'co-working', 'smart-working' and other apologetics of 'resilience', which transform subalternity into 'synergy' and the waged worker into 'collaborator' or 'self-entrepreneur'). This is a metamorphosis, *accelerated by the pandemic*, into which the proletariat of the 21st century is pushed, thus formally becoming a 'service provider', leading to their progressive exclusion from what still survives of the legislations of social defence of rights in work, the intensification of the rhythms and hours of work, the offloading onto the workers and, therefore, the savings for the companies, of the costs of supply and maintenance of fixed capital. This, in turn, contributes to a monumental increase in the precarisation and informalisation of work.

In other words, the new morphology of labour is reflected in subjectivity and poses a major challenge to the *class-that-lives-from-labour*. For capital, just as necessary as the exploitation of labour itself is the *ideological mystification of exploitation*, the presentation of exploitation and self-exploitation in the positive terms of self-valorisation, i.e., the concealment of material conditions and their reduction to the single responsibility of the individual. The 'uberisation' of labour, therefore, is the most radical and extreme manifestation of the mystified self-representation of labour and the falsified self-representation of workers. Through the *compulsion* to live one's material condition as a condition of 'autonomy', under the ideological veneer of mystification that represents it as dependent, 'autonomous' work, easily combinable and reconcilable with other productive and reproductive activities, the highest level of external *determination and subordination* of one's existence is obtained. In other words, in the forms of labour exploitation

of the last phase of capitalism, archaic forms of employment and exploitation reappear: the labour exploitation of the digital era is strikingly reminiscent of the labour exploitation of 'early industrialisation', showing that capitalism, having reached this stage, can only survive by pushing back the conditions of existence and the way of life of the working class and society. That is, 'uberised' work imposes a reality of extreme precariousness and, within it, a drive towards the maximum devaluation of work, which can be achieved through its maximum atomisation and the false consciousness of being 'entrepreneurs of oneself'.

In his writings, Antunes deconstructs this ideology and defines these new modes of work as an *extension* and *enlargement* of the law of value, at the hands of companies (Amazon, Uber, Glovo, Deliveroo, Airbnb, etc.) which, especially in the era of the pandemic, are gaining incredible strength, assuming the role of the vanguard in the current phase of capitalism. A fundamental thesis of Ricardo Antunes' work, therefore, is that the law of value, instead of waning, has intensified, widened and deepened its vigour: going, on a global scale, from industry to all the activities of production and reproduction of social life, inserting itself in the interstices of the production process, clearly visible today in the so-called 'industry 4.0'.

The process of informalisation of work and, in general, precariousness, Antunes points out, addressing a further transversal theme of the books presented here, does not constitute a specificity of our time or of the contingent phase of the 'capitalist' system, but is in the nature of the capitalist social, production – and life – system itself. He posits, therefore, that the present capitalist phase, in which platforms and algorithms regulate a huge part of work processes, in ways encouraged and commanded by large global corporations, is nothing more than something increasingly resembling the original essence of capitalism. That is, it is a tendency that is born with the very creation of wage labour in the domain of capital – and which can intensify, more or less rapidly, on the basis of the resistance of the working class and social conflict. Marx and Engels had already shown how the exploitation of labour was inversely related to '*relative overpopulation*': the surplus labour force that could be used by capital as a lever to intensify the levels of exploitation and, consequently, the precarisation of labour. In the current phase of the capitalist economic and social system, the '*relative overpopulation*' takes on new dimensions and configurations – including, of course, migrant workers, but also workers in the peripheries of the 'world system', involved in the redrawing of the international division of labour and the processes of productive delocalisation. In other words, the '*industrial reserve army*', at a *global level*, as part of the *class-that-lives-from-work*, also acquires a *new morphology*. At the same time, the progressive accentuation of precariousness entails a lengthening and greater unpredictability of working hours, in the industry as in services. The implementation of certain work organisation and control practices, above all in the services sector in the digital age, which have spread and been normalised at a dizzying pace in the pandemic era, constitute genuine experimental laboratories – for example, the home office, smart working, remote working or, in the world of education and training, 'distance learning'. In other words, these practices risk being standardised and adopted in practically all areas of production and management, with obvious advantages for capital: the individualisation of work, greater social and trade union distancing and the breaking up of solidarity networks in the workplace, the progressive overlapping

of life and work times and of productive and reproductive work, the reduction of the workforce and the intensification of the workload on employed workers. That is, capital is taking advantage of the pandemic crisis that is affecting the planet and humanity (and the capitalist system itself), to reorganise itself and normalise the mechanisms of labour exploitation, starting with the service sector and extending to all sectors of the economy. Once again, the weight of the crisis is transferred onto the working class: more flexibility, more precariousness, more intermittency, more underemployment, more outsourcing, more pervasiveness of capital in all the interstices of social life. It will be the social conflict, the consciousness-raising and self-organisation of workers, or the lack thereof, that will determine the (near) future yet to be written.

Finally, a further dimension explored by Antunes relates to technique, in reference to the alleged 'platform capitalism': a linguistic expression – also an ideological one – that supports a supposed 'neutrality of technique' for which a capitalism would be born in which the technical means dominate over capital, while it is capital that *hides behind* the technical means, in order to attribute to extra-social reasons, embedded in the mechanisms of production and circulation of goods, a determined relationship of subordination, increasingly totalising, of living labour.

In none of his writings presented here does Antunes leave the reader in the grip of despair, pessimism and hopelessness, but he obviously does not lose sight of the role that the *class-that-lives-from-work* has in the struggle for a possible social, political and economic transformation. While outlining the contours of the current capitalist phase as one in which we are witnessing the most totalitarian form of domination of capital (over labour) possible – or, at any rate, the most totalitarian in the history of the capitalist system to date – Antunes does not eliminate social conflictuality from his analytical horizon: on the contrary, even in times when it seems belied by naive and immediate empiricism, he emphasises the irremediably dialectical dimension of materiality. The Brazilian scholar, while warning us about the need not to underestimate the totalitarian, pervasive and destructive power of (the domination of) capital and while stressing the fragmentation, heterogeneity, high level of ideologisation and 'false consciousness' that characterise the working class today, highlights how the progressive and objective overall deterioration of its conditions of existence and the downward convergence of the conditions of existence of workers from the Global North and the Global South can lead to an objective unification of the *class-that-lives-from-work*.