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## Dismodernizing the Working Class and Social Reproduction, After the Pandemic Lumpenproletariat: Towards an Autonomist Disability Perspective

Arianna Introna Dr  
The Open University, [arianna.introna@open.ac.uk](mailto:arianna.introna@open.ac.uk)

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## Dismodernizing the Working Class and Social Reproduction, After the Pandemic Lumpenproletariat: Towards an Autonomist Disability Perspective

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## Introduction

Under capitalism relations of production are normatively centred as what the working class must have some connection to, whether in the form of engagement in waged work or of performing labour that reproduces productive labour. Work as the centre of capitalist production performs the role of a universalist institution (Balibar 2020) which disperses across society a series of universals: the position of productive labour as the hinge of both society and class struggle, the othering of subjects which entertain a non-relation to the sphere of production, and the subsidiary position social reproduction fulfills in relation to production. Amongst the 'others' produced by these universals are the socioeconomic and political phenomena of the lumpenproletariat and disability. Materially and symbolically marginalized vis-à-vis capitalist relations of production, the lumpenproletariat and disability exist as life at 'the edges of capitalism', where collective survival is best pursued through 'relations of mutual aid instead of market competition' (O'Hearn and Grubačić 2016 p.147). Arguing for the usefulness of assuming a perspective of struggle internal to the lumpenproletariat and disability as the others of capitalist society, this article will explore how work-based universals haunt Marxist theories of class struggle and social reproduction, and how they can be challenged through the development of an anti-capitalist politics of social reproduction that originates from outside the *working* class.

The first half of my exploration considers the ways in which work-based universals penetrate the categories of analysis used for studying class antagonisms. I will specifically engage Marxist autonomist theory as a theoretical tradition which takes a perspective of struggle as its starting point of analysis. Although I will also refer to positions closer to 'negative autonomism', I will focus on the 'positive autonomism' (Grubačić 2016) of operaism and post-operaism because their concern to trace the evolving configuration of the working class as a positive pole of struggle against capital registers the persisting dominance of worker status as *the* condition from which anti-capitalist organizing emerges. I will also discuss a broad range of theories of social reproduction to grasp the ways in which they navigate the straitjacket of thinking social reproduction within the context of a society which is not autonomous of capitalist relations of production. Both in relation to autonomist

Marxism and theories of social reproduction, my analysis does not set out to provide any exhaustive overview or critique, but to make visible the persistence of the idea of a universal *working* class as that to which we are all assumed to belong as we struggle against capital.

Disability as a socioeconomic phenomenon produced through its othering from the 'norm', which disability theorist Lennard Davis traces in a historical overview of the construction of 'normalcy' and disability as a single process (1995), offers an angle from which to think beyond work status as what defines anti-capitalist social forces in struggle. A political standpoint internal to disability foregrounds the othering of disabled people based on the intractability that bodyminded non-normativity presents to exploitation within capitalist relations of production as constitutive of 'capitalism normalcy' and the work-based universals it proliferates. As disability theorist Paul Abberley famously stated, 'whilst children as potential workers, and elderly people, as former workers, may be seen as able to assume status in a paradise of labour', the 'impaired' or body-minded diverse resist any easy integration within it (Abberley 1998, p.69). It is precisely its uneasy relation to capitalist relations of production that, I will argue, renders disability generative of a vision that 'rejects work as crucially definitional of social membership' (Abberley 1987, p.89), and from this perspective critiques the 'workings of capitalist society' (Goodley 2016, pp.190–191). The third and fourth sections of this article develop this insight by connecting the anti-capitalist power of the pandemic lumpenproletariat to that of disability as a socioeconomic and political phenomenon.

I will suggest that both the pandemic lumpenproletariat and disability politics can be seen to provide a challenge to the work-based universals of capitalist society because of the potential they possess to invest class struggle with a wholly other content vis-à-vis that which capital posits as proper to workers' demands (Tronti 2019). I will argue that this wholly other content consists in the overturning of the priority of capitalist production over social reproduction. This overturning is entangled with the struggles of the pandemic lumpenproletariat and disability in proportion as they carry the revenge of the biological real, as the ever-present possibility of bodyminded breakdown and the inescapable existence of bodyminded non-normativity, into the heart of capitalist society as *the* lever to universalize social reproduction as the telos of class struggle.

I will consider this universalisation first as associated with the phenomenon of the ‘universal’ pandemic lumpenproletariat that, under the impact of the biological real of the pandemic, overspilled from an othered position into a generalised condition for the working class, necessitating an expansion and re-valuation of social reproduction beyond the confines of its subordination to the sphere of production. Secondly, I will use the ‘dismodernist’ optic introduced by Davis, which reads impairment and bodyminded non-normativity as ‘a common phenomenon’ within society (Davis, 1995, p.7), to propose ways in which the encounter with a disruptive biological real can be politically chosen to reproduce pandemic politics of social reproduction in post-pandemic times. An anti-capitalist dismodernism starts from the symbolic universalisation of disability and the symbolic dismodernization of the working class to gesture toward a dismodernized form of social reproduction that is the other of, and incompatible with, capitalist social reproduction. An ‘autonomist dismodernism’ theorises this ‘other’ form of social reproduction as the telos of class struggle that choosing disability orients us towards. Both an anti-capitalist dismodernism and an autonomist dismodernism are expressions of the autonomist disability perspective that this article works towards.

## **I. The Universal *Working* Class**

Étienne Balibar proposes the concept of ‘universalist institutions’ to theorise institutions ‘whose function and responsibility are the institution of the universal’ (Balibar 2020). Under capitalism employment is entrenched as the institution around which economic relations turn by the economic compulsion generated by the class structure of capitalist society. According to Vivek Chibber, this structure enforces a division ‘between those who control society’s productive assets and those who have none’ and assigns to the latter the universal role of being in employment to earn a living (Chibber 2022, p.22). *Working* is the universal status that individuals who do not possess the means of production are expected to possess as the *working* class. This is what makes capitalist society a work-based society which politically centres work both as the basis for inclusion within the community and as what constitutes the community as harmonious: in the words of James Chamberlain, ‘the value of employment in contemporary society far exceeds

its function of distributing material rewards and enabling us to satisfy various needs and wants' (Chamberlain 2018, p.2). This indexes a regime of normativity analogous to that which underpins 'the equivalence between essence and norm, the essentialization of social norms and the normative interpretation of the essential characteristics ascribed to human nature' that, according to Balibar, is operated by the institution of the universal (Balibar 2020). Employment is the universal that in a capitalist society enacts the equivalence between the perspective of human essence and that of the norm, and because the coercion to work 'is built into the structure of choices itself' (Chibber 2022, p.33) wage labourers who decide to opt out of work 'are deviations from the norm, not the norm itself' (Chibber 2022, p.23). *Working* is what defines the working class as its essence and as a moral injunction.

Being in employment as the universal condition associated with the *working* class has a counterpart in its centrality to the forms of antagonism that are associated with it. For Chibber, universal antagonism as well as universal resistance are the facts of capitalist society because jobs are 'a lifeline as well as a threat' (Chibber 2022, p.59); hence, 'just as capitalism has a universal tendency to impose its demands on economic actors, so, too, the tendency to resist their subordination to it will also be universal' (Chibber 2022, p.60). Italian autonomism in its variants of operaism and post-operaism provides key insights to understand how conceptions of this universal antagonism articulate with its conceptualisation as work-based. Although, as I will discuss below, differences exist between the theory and praxis of 1960s *operaismo* (translated as 'operaism' or 'workerism') and those associated with 'post-*operaismo*, or the *autonomia* movements of the late 70s and after' (Tronti 2012), both approach class as defined by how it struggles: in the words of Mario Tronti, 'it is necessary to understand what the working class is; this is not possible without seeing how it struggles' (Tronti 2019). This logic reverses the polarity which puts 'capitalist development first, and workers second' so as to 'start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class' (Tronti 1964). The revolutionary potential that the autonomist perspective of struggle affords, however, is limited by a universalism which positions worker status as grounding the anti-capitalist power of the working class. As I will trace in the next two paragraphs, in studying the ever-changing composition of the working class both operaism and post-operaism wire it deep into association with a universal *working*

class that expands at an 'extensive' level to include 'within its sphere of influence, or within the domain of obedience ... the maximum number of individuals and, ideally, all of humankind', but that also operates at the 'intensive' level by detaching 'individuals from their traditional affiliations and subordinations' (Balibar 2020).

Operaist critique perpetuates an intensive work-based universalism by annihilating any economic, social and political existence individuals may possess beyond their economic, social and political role as workers. For Tronti 'the effective development of the political power of labour really begins from the moment that labourers are transformed into workers' and within this framework 'the political power of workers is intimately connected to the productive power of wage labour' (Tronti 1966). The working class has power as 'the only living, active, productive element of society, as the hinge of social relations' (Tronti 2019) and this gives struggle starting from the sphere of production political primacy vis-à-vis other dimensions of class antagonism: for Tronti 'The production process, the act of producing capital, is contemporaneously the moment of the working-class struggle against capital: the specific moment to which all the other generic levels of the struggle are compelled to refer in order themselves to become productive' (Tronti, 2019). Within the framework of this intensive universalism the potentiality the working class wields to perform a refusal of work depends on the prior definition of the subject of struggle as being a worker: 'stopping work does not signify a refusal to give capital the use of one's labour power, since it has already been given to capital once the contract for this particular commodity has been signed. Nor is it a refusal to allow capital the product of labour, since this is legally already capital's property'; rather, it is a momentary 'blockage of the work-process and it appears as a recurring threat which derives its content from the process of value creation' (Tronti 1966).

Post-operaism develops intensive work-based universalism into an extensive work-based universalism which expands involvement with work as a condition that defines every section of the working class. This move is called for by the sensitivity to the changing composition of the working class that is the legacy of operaism. As Antonio Negri notes, 'in workerist writings you do not find any teleological, finalist or positivist historicism... History is the historicity of its subjects, seen as being in a state of continuous transformation' (Negri 2022a, p.1). Operaism engages in continuous exploration of how 'new cloth must be woven, cut and sewn into the

expanded horizons of today's workers' struggles' by asking 'How is the working class composed, internally? How does it function within capital? How does it work, how does it struggle?' (Tronti 2019) Post-operaism too attends to the transition 'from the multitude that lives within the crisis to a new working class that is rising up' (Negri 2022a, p.8). In so doing, it illuminates changes in the 'highly variegated, but nonetheless integrated, global assembly line' that rules contemporary processes of valorization and exploitation, as well as evolving and 'diverse practices of social production and reproduction ... across disparate spaces and temporalities' that these processes set out to subsume (Hardt and Negri 2019). The definition of working class derived from the post-operaist framework is one which presents the working class as both changing and heterogeneous. For Sandro Mezzadra living labour, and its struggles, are defined by 'a panoply of subjective figures, juridical and nonjuridical regulations, "skills", knowledges and "cultures" and heterogeneity and multiplicity are key features of this composition across diverse geographical scales' (Mezzadra, 2018). Significantly, the extensive work-based universalism that informs the (post-)operaist definition of working class allows for 'a more extended discussion of heterogeneous political recomposition beyond the formal workplace' (Gray 2022, p.3) that dovetails with the investigation carried into the composition of the working class by theories of social reproduction.

Theories of social reproduction possess the theoretical tools needed to provide a Marxist engagement with relationalities on the order of autonomous practices of mutual aid which center the reproduction of life against and beyond the dictates of capital. However, efforts to include reproductive labour within an expanded conception of the *working* class as a positive pole of anti-capitalist struggle under capitalism tie it to the work-based framework of capitalist society, in which production determines social reproduction. The first way in which they do so is by foregrounding the function of reproductive work to reproduce labour-power as the basis of gender oppression but also anti-capitalist resistance. David McNally and Sue Ferguson observe that 'social reproduction feminism reveals, in the first instance, that labor-power cannot simply be presumed to exist, but is made available to capital' (McNally and Ferguson 2015). For Martha Giménez too 'Domestic labour is necessary labour; no mode of production is conceivable without it because it comprises basic tasks involved in the social and physical, daily and generational



reproduction of social classes' (Giménez 2018, p.262). The second way in which theories of social reproduction militate against the unmooring of struggles for social reproduction from work-based universals is through a re-evaluation of reproductive work as internal to the process of capital accumulation. As Ferguson explains, by acknowledging the '*internal relation* between reproductive and productive labour' (Ferguson 2016, p.48) social-reproduction feminism introduces 'the conception of labour as broadly productive – creative not just of economic values, but of society (and thus of *life*) itself' (Ferguson 2018, p.48). Silvia Federici challenges 'an exclusionary concept of work and revolutionary subjects that ignores the strategic importance of domestic work in the process of capitalist accumulation' (Federici 2021, p.2) and argues that 'housework is actually work for capital' because 'capitalism is built on an immense amount of unpaid labor' (Federici 2010). In a similar spirit, Alessandra Mezzadri develops a 'value theory of inclusion' to render 'the centrality of all labour to value-generation; accounting for different forms of exploitation; and stressing the dynamic interpenetration of production and reproduction in processes of labour-surplus extraction' (Mezzadri 2020). As Kirstin Munro notes, theories of social reproduction tend to be animated by 'a revolutionary strategy aimed at correctly identifying the working class' as not exclusive of reproductive labour (Munro 2021, p.2). In assessing the configurations of the relationship between capitalist production and social reproduction, social reproduction theorists and feminist Marxists locate the possibility for its overturning within the remit of reproductive labour as labour on which capital depends. However, unless we identify a position of struggle around social reproduction that is unrelated to capitalist relations of production, we are bound to reproduce the work-based universals that determine the priority of the former over the latter.

## **II. The Work-Based Universals of Capitalist Society and their Others**

The openness to the emergence of new social subjects is a key strength of autonomist Marxism, marked as it is by the 'desire to not preclude in advance the emergence of new social subjects' (Shukaitis 2016, p.1).<sup>1</sup> In proportion as it connects class struggle to the productive labour of a universal *working* class, however, it entrenches the othering function which the institution of work-based universals works

through. As Chamberlain suggests, ‘the specter of the work society’ haunts theorists such as Negri precisely because the view of community they propose remains ‘constructed by work’ (Chamberlain 2018, p.16). Theories of social reproduction are subject to a similar haunting. This limits their ability to refuse the institution of work-based universals, and the exclusions which are foundational to this institution.

Balibar’s examination of the universal as defined both by historicity and through exclusion illuminates the dynamics through which the latter emerge. On the one hand, the enunciation of the universal is ‘situated within a geographical and historical framework ... that affects it in both its form and content’ (Balibar 2020, p.vi). The historicity of the work-based universals of capitalist society is constituted by evolving configurations of the capital – labour relation. On the other hand, the enunciation of the universal ‘unites only by dividing’ (Balibar 2020, p.vi), and this divisive function in the case of the work-based universals of capitalist society functions by defining the *working* class as opposed to socioeconomic subjects who are defined by their non-relation to capitalist relations of production. In the case of the lumpenproletariat, it becomes the other of a community of workers who hold power over the progress of capitalist civilization, the universal *working* class, as an effect of the drawing of ‘an a priori frontier between barbarism and civilization’, which for Balibar is foundational to the institution of the universal (Balibar 2020, p.6). At the same time, Balibar tells us, the universal establishes the ‘ideal and norm’ of the community as ‘fundamentally a collective homogeneity’ (Balibar 2020), and disability emerges as the other of this ideal and norm under capitalism by breaking the collective homogeneity of a work-based society. In the rest of this article, I will explore the lumpenproletariat and disability as associated with subject positions that are decentered vis-à-vis the various locations of the productive hinge of capitalist society, and that on this basis are othered but also possess anti-capitalist power.

The lumpenproletariat is the ‘subhuman remainder’ (Balibar 2020) that is the other of the working class that carries forth the progress of capitalist civilization. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx describes it as ‘The “dangerous class”, the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society’ (Marx 1848). Clyde W. Barrow renders the historical othering of the lumpenproletariat within Marxist theory starting from Marx and Engels’ own theorisation of the

lumpenproletariat as expressing a 'dystopian logic' whereby 'the proletariat is actually destined to decay into an ever-burgeoning lumpenproletariat and surplus population' as a result of post-industrial capitalist development (Barrow 2020, p.14). The lumpenproletariat is an economic, cultural and political category respectively defined 'by its *nonrelation* to economic production and by its position outside capitalist relations of production' (Barrow, 2020, p.14), by the resulting 'particular style of life at the margins of capitalist society' this non-relation condemns it to, turning it into 'a population rife with sickness, disease, poverty, starvation, filth, physical disability, orphans, absinthe and other cheap alcohol, opium dens, brothels, violence, and degradation' (Barrow 2020 p.15), and by its inability to engage in 'independent political action, because of its dependent position at the margins of capitalism' which leads it to being used 'by the ruling class as a counterweight to the proletariat's superior numbers' (Barrow 2020, p.17). Marx, as Barrow underlines, thus considers the 'conditions of life' of the lumpenproletariat as responsible for preparing it 'for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue' (Marx 1848). As I will argue in the next section, those very conditions of life are instead what can originate a reversal of the priority that the work-based universals of capitalist society assign to production over social reproduction, and that is reproduced by Marxist theories of class struggle which see this as the remit of a universal *working* class. They do so by calling for a Marxist theory that centers the inability to contribute to, or enable, production, as the most powerful barrier to the reproduction of capitalist relations of production and social reproduction.

As for the othering of disability, this is rooted in disability being constructed as the other of the order of normalcy, on which capitalism is parasitic. For Lennard Davis disability and normalcy, or 'the political-judicial-institutional state that relies on the control and normalization of bodies' (Davis 2002, p.107), originate simultaneously through the constitution of disability as a deviation from, and problem vis-à-vis, the norm. Davis stresses that 'the "problem" is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the "problem" of the disabled person' (Davis 1995, p.24) through the separation of able-bodied (or temporarily able-bodied) people from the severely disabled 'so that they cannot be seen as part of a continuum of physical differences' (Davis 1995, p.7). The development of the concept of norm on which normalcy relies is inseparable from the

rise of industrial capitalism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is not challenged by Marx, however, who merely registers its functioning through the theorization of the totality of productive labour-power as a 'homogeneous mass of human labour' composed of individual units of labour-power each of which is 'the same as any other, to the extent that it has the character of a socially average unit of labour-power': this is what allows the possibility to calculate 'the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in [a given] society' and organize for the extraction of surplus-value (Marx 1976, p.129). Marxist critique fails to challenge the fiction out of which capitalist normalcy emerges in proportion as it reproduces Marx's reliance on the 'notion of the average man in a discussion of the labor theory of value', which 'is based on the idea of the worker constructed as an average worker' (Davis 1995, p.28). The decentered position that disabled people occupy with respect to temporarily abled workers under capitalism underpins the social marginalization of disabled people. Disability theorists have examined how exclusion from wage labour 'lies at the core of disabled people's oppression in every aspect of modern life' (Russell and Malhotra 2019, p.6). It is being 'denied the opportunity to work, to make a material contribution to the wellbeing of society' that translates into disabled people's becoming perceived as "other" or "useless" (Oliver 1999).

Alongside the lumpenproletariat and disability, the third other of the work-based universals of capitalist society is social reproduction decoupled from its function to reproduce productive labour for capital. As Camille Barbagallo, Nicholas Beuret and David Harvie note, 'In societies dominated by capitalism, people are reproduced as workers but also, at the same time, they are reproduced as people whose lives, desires and capabilities exceed the role of worker' (Barbagallo, Beuret and Harvie 2019, p.5). On this basis we could interpret 'social reproductive labour as capitalistically productive (that is, value-producing) labour, on the one hand, or as capitalistically unproductive (use value-producing only), on the other' (Ferguson, 2020 p.5). However, social reproduction under capitalism is constrained by capitalist horizons of productivity. For this reason, Giménez argues that under capitalism we cannot talk about social reproduction in general, intended as 'the social relations and institutions surrounding the reproduction of the population and the social groups, classes, strata within classes and any other divisions characterizing the population in a given society' (Giménez 2018, p.15). Under capitalism social reproduction is

always 'capitalist social reproduction' because it 'takes place under historically specific conditions in which production *determines* reproduction' (Giménez 2018, p.24). The biological and social reproduction of people in separation from their reproduction as actual or prospective workers is a telos that is othered into invisibility by the primacy of production over social reproduction that constitutes one of the work-based universals of capitalist society. The double character of social reproduction, that which is involved in 'the creation of human beings and our reproduction of them as labor-power, as future workers' (Giménez 2018, p.25), is lost through the assertion of this primacy at the level of theory as well as praxis. I will argue that the possibility to think and fight for social reproduction as the universal telos of social relations and class struggle is facilitated by the relocation of the perspective of struggle from one exclusive to the universal *working* class to one that emerges from its others, the lumpenproletariat and disability, as associated with forms of existence that are neither capable nor worthy of reproduction under capitalism.

In being the others of the work-based universals of capitalist society the lumpenproletariat and disability create positionalities from which to challenge these universals. Routing our conceptions of class struggle through their othered existence it becomes possible 'to reconfigure the value and place of paid work in our lives' by abandoning 'the view that community is constructed by work, whether paid or not' (Chamberlain 2020, p.3). If the work-based universals of capitalist society would have us believe that under capitalism 'The only relationships ultimately realized between people ... are those buried under the relations of production' (Adorno 1968), the lumpenproletariat and disability, through being at best contingently related to the sphere of capitalist production, provide an alternative starting point for organizing society, class struggle and social reproduction. As far as class struggle is concerned, they promise a different outcome to that envisaged by Aaron Benanav and John Clegg as following from moments when 'In order to sidestep antagonisms internal to their class, workers often grope toward some other position, external to their existence as workers'; for Benanav and Clegg, when they do so workers encounter a barrier in their 'limited ability to break into zones of production – a rupture that remains a fundamental precondition of the abolition of class society and the advent of a communist era' (Benanav and Clegg 2018, p.1936). My contention is

that the rupturing of capitalist relations of production carried by the others of the work-based universals of capitalist society works against the ways in which these universals vitiate understandings of class struggle. Analysis of this rupturing can enrich postoperaist mappings of ‘how particular operations of capital “hit the ground”’ (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019, p.3), as well as autonomist critique rooted in a negative dialectics that attends to how ‘In a world that dehumanises us, the only way in which we can exist as humans is negatively, by struggling against our dehumanisation’ (Holloway 2011).

I will now explore the formation of a pandemic lumpenproletariat, the symbolic universalization of disability and the symbolic dismodernization of the working class as starting points for the untethering of class struggle from the work-based universals of capitalist society, and for the centering of the primacy of social reproduction as the telos of class struggle that comes with it. Section three will examine the politics of social reproduction that developed during the pandemic as what materialized the anti-capitalist effects that the combination of a universal lumpenproletariat and the power of the biological real can unleash. Section four will delineate how a conception of disability as a universal reality and choice can provide the horizon for political organizing that pushes the class struggle beyond the limits set by the universals of a work-based society.

### **III. The Pandemic Lumpenproletariat as a Universal Category of Social Reproduction**

In ways that confirm the extent to which disability is a threat to the norm and fiction of the average worker of capitalism, as its other, the work-based universals of capitalist society were challenged by the spectre of a universal breakdown of health that haunted capitalism during the pandemic. The anti-capitalist moment that the pandemic represented was overshadowed by how existing inequalities were deepened in proportion as ‘COVID capitalism’ sustained itself by ‘accelerating and amplifying inequality and profit’ (Nail 2022, p.328). For disability theorist Shelley Tremain ‘it is by and through the contingent apparatus of vulnerability and other apparatuses that certain members of the population are vulnerableized’ (Tremain 2020), and the others of the work-based universals of capitalist society were caught

within patterns of differential vulnerableization. Widespread loss of work was unequally distributed across the working class. It hit in particular the precariat, already 'characterized by chronic insecurity, detached from old norms of labour and the working class' (Standing 2014). When the precariat encountered the pandemic, it became the pandemic lumpenproletariat, vulnerableized as a viral underclass through a series of 'related social vectors that enable the relationship between viruses and marginalization' (Thrasher 2022). Disabled people too were especially vulnerabilized during the pandemic. Starting from the fact of high death rates of disabled people and seniors, disability theorists denounced how Covid-related deaths were produced by socio-economic relations and structures. For Davis, the pandemic exposed the pervasiveness of eugenics within both society and the medical establishment because medical protocols which warranted the disposability of disabled lives met with societal approval. He argued that 'Any metric used for determining who should get limited resources' would 'inevitably be drawn into a eugenics sinkhole' (Davis 2021, p.138) which determined the extent to which 'In the battle between letting live and letting die, there really [was] only one grand loser—the person with a disability or two'; the only issue that mattered was 'the grand bargain of choosing those who appear normal—not those who are seen as weakened, abnormal, debilitated, less than' (Davis 2021, p.140).

At the same time, the pandemic was a conjuncture in which capitalism was 'altered' through its encounter with the virus. The 'Virocene', or an epoch transformed by a novel 'intensity of virogenic activity as an embodied force of nature' (Fernando 2020, pp.636-7), created its own universals out of the disruption of capitalist relations of production and social reproduction. Benjamin Bratton captured this through the concept of 'the revenge of the real', which describes the impact that the biological exerted as 'reality ... in the form of a virus, of our vulnerability to it, of our inadequate governing responses to it—crashes through comforting illusions and ideologies' (Bratton 2021, p.1). If the 'revenge of the real' is a 'non-negotiable reality that upends comfortable illusions' (Bratton 2021, p.3), what was upended in the Virocene was the fiction of the universal *working* class. The shedding of precarious labour, mediated by a widespread self-conscious encounter with the breakdown of abled identification, turned the possibility to enter the other(ed) conditions of the lumpenproletariat and disability into a new universal for the working class. This, in

turn, generated ‘Emphasis shifts from personal experience and toward responsibilities couched in the underlying biological and chemical realities that bind us’ (Bratton 2021, p.34), which called forth practices that detached social reproduction from the work-based universals of capitalist society that ground social reproduction within the remit of productive labour. The pandemic lumpenproletariat became a universal category of social reproduction in proportion as it was its expansion under the impact of the revenge of the real that powered the unmooring of social reproduction from subordination to the sphere of capitalist relations of production.

This was evidenced by how the pandemic mainstreamed the centrality of the principle of life over that of profit (Pitts and Dinerstein 2021, p.169) and of the crisis of the ‘reproduction of life’ over the crisis of the capitalist mode of production. Globally, mutual aid projects proliferated and for the most part of the pandemic the provision of social welfare became more generous, and conditionality was suspended. Focusing on the social mobilisation that flourished around issues of social reproduction, Ana Cecilia Dinerstein suggested that it created ‘concrete utopias that enhance[d] the capacity to negate, affirm, contest and reshape the relationship between individuals, society and the rule of money, value and the capitalist state’ in the here and now (Pitts and Dinerstein 2021, p.142). This happened, most notably, in the form of burgeoning initiatives of mutual aid. Crucially, mutual aid departs from capitalist social reproduction in all its defining aspects: its end is to reproduce people as people, not as workers; it is performed collectively outside the private space of the household; it does not aspire to be valued as labour but positions itself antithetically to the sphere of production. It also indexes the interconnection between the primacy of social reproduction and world transformation. As Dean Spade notes, mutual aid initiatives address the conditions that shorten people’s lives, while also providing a ‘transformative alternative to the demobilizing frameworks for understanding social change and expressing dissent that dominate the popular imagination’ (Spade 2020, p.131). Within a more general scenario of flourishing mutual aid initiatives, specifically ‘crip mutual aid’ (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2021) *kept* happening alongside, if off the radar to, its abled counterpart. As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha wrote, ‘disabled people kept each other alive during COVID-19. We were keeping each other alive before COVID



and we will continue to keep each other alive' (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2021). This was thanks to the fact that disabled people are 'geniuses of staying alive despite everything' through 'disabled-specific ways of surviving' (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2021) in work-based capitalist societies which are not structured for the biological or social reproduction of disabled people.

The universalization of the primacy of social reproduction that was entangled with the expansion of the pandemic lumpenproletariat demands theorisation through Marxist theory which explicitly centers the need to go beyond a production-based arena of class struggle. A starting point is offered by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concepts of the social strike and social unionism. The social strike 'creates or, better, reveals the circuits of cooperation and the potentially autonomous relationships of social production that exist inside and outside waged labor' (Hardt and Negri 2017, p.150). But it is not enough. The primacy that social reproduction struggles assumed within a framework of universal lumpenproletarianization during the pandemic instantiated an alternative to the forms of class struggle recognized by work-based universalisms. Through this optic it is possible to see that 'social reproduction struggles – such as struggles around food, land, care, education, water, housing – are "instances of class struggle"' (Dinerstein 2020, p.34). During the pandemic not only did social reproduction become thinkable as the telos of social relations; so did social reproduction organizing. This shifted the attention onto sustaining social reproduction struggles as what allows the simultaneous non-reproduction of capitalist society and continuance of reproduction of life beyond it: gesturing towards this scenario Federici argues that we 'need to build a movement that puts on its agenda its own reproduction. The anti-capitalist struggle has to create forms of support and has to have the ability to collectively build forms of reproduction' (Federici 2010, p.26). Tellingly, re-evaluation of social reproduction as the basis for a reworlding of the deadly world of capitalism was contemplated by Federici as what the legacy of the pandemic could be. She explained 'when I speak of 'revaluing reproduction'... I mean that to place the focus on reproduction is to embrace a different logic from that which moves the capitalist system... It means to revalue our lives and refuse to subordinate them to the accumulation of capitalist wealth... We need to make this moment a moment of change. There's no normality to go back to' (Federici 2020).

#### **IV. From Universalizing Disability to Dismodernizing the Working Class and Social Reproduction**

The revolutionary possibility of holding onto the materialization of the priority of life over capitalist accumulation that was produced by the revenge of the real during the pandemic was blunted by the three forms of fear that the Virocene evoked: the fear of sickness, the fear of ‘resistance against capitalism taking an aggressive turn’ held by the economically and racially privileged, and the fear ‘marginalized social groups’ shared of ‘an alternative world order’ (Fernando 2021, p.639). These fears signal the ways in which the possibility to challenge the work-based universals that capitalism is sustained by passes through modes of encountering the ‘real’ of biological disruption that did not materialize during the pandemic. This alternative approach is what is implicated in a perspective of struggle that emerges out of disability politics. In place of the forced encounter with Bratton’s revenge of the real, disability as an ‘active, dynamic, and substantive materialization’ (Mitchell, Antebi and Snyder 2019, p.4) can offer the starting point for embracing biological otherness, non-normativity and unpredictability as the ground for anti-capitalist organizing. This is a ‘real’ close to Ricardo Espinoza Lolas’s conception of what defines the human as a ‘mortal and historical structure that articulates itself in permanent liberating tension’ by being ‘always in movement, in transit, with each other, with everything, in the real itself’ (Lolas 2022, p.271); for Lolas, ‘here lies the very possibility of dissolution of capitalism, that is, in our human way of being viable in the world by being physically and materially open from our body’ (Lolas 2022, p.290). Thinking disability as a collective choice, namely collectively choosing to organize society with disability at its center rather than margins, represents an alternative to the passive exposure to lumpenproletarianisation that the pandemic lumpenproletariat was defined by. As Rod Michalko contends, ‘Any political struggle involving disability and any connection we make between identity and disability necessarily begins with a conception of disability as a choice’; this is a move that challenges the universals that dictate the ‘ways in which a collective conceives of what it means to be human and how it makes a place for the individual in what it socially organizes as a human community’ (Michalko 2002, p.14). On this logic, once

disability is 'understood as a choice and as a life worth living' (Michalko 2002, p.16), it becomes possible to also see 'exclusion as an oriented and thus political act' that we can collectively undo. Thinking disability as a collective choice prepares the ground for a more sustained and sustainable undoing of the work-based universals that constrain the possibilities of social reproduction and class struggle alike.

Universalising disability as already living within the working class serves this function by expanding the conception of disability beyond a focus on the individual or the biological body in isolation to make visible its social relevance and presence. Disability affects and pervades the whole of society because society is defined by a continuum of physical differences and a plethora of different impairments: 'Able-bodied (or temporarily able-bodied) people safely wall off the severely disabled so that they cannot be seen as part of a continuum of physical differences' but cannot undo the fact that 'impairment of the human body is a relatively common phenomenon' (Davis 1995, p.7). This separation has material consequences in proportion as the 'normal' people construct 'the world physically and cognitively to reward those with like abilities and handicap those with unlike abilities', Davis points out (Davis 1995, p.10). On this account, capitalist relations of production determine the differential exclusion of non-normative bodyminds in proportion as capital needs to perpetuate the fiction of a universally abled working class. By undermining this fiction, the collective choice of disability that plays out through its symbolic universalization functions as a reminder that capitalist normalcy and the work-based universals it proliferates are erected on unstable foundations. This *memento mori* that the collective choice of disability represents for capitalist normalcy and work-based universals belongs within the wider field of operation which disability traverses as 'always an actively repressed *memento mori* of the fate of the normal body' (Davis 1997 p.1). Against the work-based universals of capitalist society, disability reminds us that the normal body on which relations of production relies is an unstable construct. Seeing the construction of disability as the other of the *working* class as the product of a political constitution of society around relations of production is what allows us to turn it, as the other of a work-based capitalist society, into its *memento mori*. It provides a central starting point for a form of class struggle that breaks from work-based universalisms and pursues the non-reproduction of the capital-labour relation. If, as Endnotes lay out, 'the history of the reproduction of the

capitalist class relation ... is that of the reproduction of capital as capital, and — its necessary concomitant — of the working class as working class', class struggle must work towards 'the possibility of its *non-reproduction*' (Endnotes 2010). Universalising the memento mori that disability brings across society transforms the act of choosing disability into the basis for a 'struggle which carries *the direct non-reproduction of the class relation* in its immanent horizon' (Endnotes 2010). Universalising disability in order for it to function as the memento mori for capitalism operates as a form of universalism that works through, but does not end with, disability as the other of capitalism. Such a model of universalism shares the undoing of the dichotomy between the particular and the universal that defines Nivedita Majumdar's 'radical universalisms', or universalisms that are 'deeply anchored in lived experience' of the particular in a way that 'encapsulates the universal' (Majumdar 2021).

A second path for choosing disability as universally involved within class struggle is provided by Davis' concept of 'dismodernism'. Dismodernism conceives of 'disability as a descriptive term and not as an absolute category', and on this basis as the only starting point for thinking 'in theoretical and political ways about [the] category' (Davis 2002, p.8). Dismodernism contests the artificial boundaries through which normalcy walls off sections of society and extends this contestation to the division erected by essentialist conceptions of disability. For Davis normalcy has a stake in perpetuating assumptions that 'obscure or repress the fact that disability is not a static category but one which expands and contracts to include "normal" people as well'; for this reason, even if 'people with disabilities, rightly, have seized on the term in an attempt to control its usage ... it is necessary to remember that the term still serves at least two masters' (Davis 2002, p.xv). A better scenario for Davis is one in which the identity of disability is not 'predicated on categories constructed by an ableist culture' but is grounded in the conceptual leap one makes 'to label oneself disabled — and even individuals with disabilities must make that leap, including themselves in the category for the purposes of a political movement' (Davis 2002, p.xvii). Dismodernism provides 'a critique of and a politics to discuss how all groups, based on physical traits or markings, are selected for disablement by a larger system of regulation and signification' (Davis 2002, p.29) by grasping onto the instability that marks the category of disability to extend it as existing across society 'as a civil right for all—the right to be ill, to be infirm, to be impaired without suffering discrimination

or oppression' (Davis 2002, p.1). Dismodernism is a form of universalism that is closer in spirit to Madhavi Menon's queer universalism, or a universalism which 'militates against an identity politics in which inhabiting a particularity defines our place in the world' to insist 'on straddling, on standing athwart ontological categories that divide up the world and the people in it' (Menon 2015, p.126).

Both the universalization of disability and the dismodernization of the working class raise the spectre of the non-reproduction both of the working class as *working* and of capital as the relation which depends on the *working* class to reproduce itself. On the one hand, choosing disability as universal within capitalist society can be figured as central within class struggle conceived within the framework of Holloway's idea that 'the current crisis of capitalism arises from people saying no, we are not willing to – or maybe we are just too stupid or backwards – to satisfy the demands of capital' (Holloway 2015). This misfitting is crucially a 'central aspect of existence in a capitalist society, because capital is the pushing of human lives into forms within which we cannot possibly fit' (Holloway 2011). On the other hand, a class struggle rooted in choosing the misfitting of capitalism that disability embodies is implicated in a politically embraced possibility to *be* the revenge of the real. As such, it provides a counter to the work-based perspective of struggle of workerism that Franco Bifo Berardi refuses by pointing out that refusal of work should not refer to 'the obvious fact that workers do not like to be exploited, but something more. It means ... withdrawal from exploitation, of the rejection of the obligation to produce surplus value and to increase the value of capital by reducing the value of life' (Berardi 2009, p.75). In ways that resonate with the dismodernist rejection of ontological essentialism, Berardi's concept of class is vectorial, not ontological: in Bifo's words, 'we should speak of the process of becoming subject. Subjectivation takes the conceptual place of subject... the concept of social class is not to be seen as an ontological concept, but rather as a vectorial concept' (Berardi 2009, p.74). Combining vectorial definitions of class and disability through an 'autonomist dismodernism' is what, ultimately, would materialize Tronti's scenario of a form of working-class organization that 'refuses to function as an articulation of capitalist society' (Tronti 2010). It is class struggle that lives within the 'plural horizon of immanence, populated by infinite ways of existence, therefore with infinite capacity of singularities to build the world, not as solitary individualities but as multitudes of

singular ways' (Negri 2022b, p.436) that for Negri constitutes a 'communist ontology' (Negri 2022b, p.437). An autonomist dismodernism is what can prove that autonomist thinking is capacious enough to allow for the centering of a dismodernized working class within the horizons of anti-capitalist subversion and world re-making.

An autonomist dismodernism from this derives an affirmative imagination of how societal reproduction can unfold outside and against the frameworks defined by work-based universals. Dismodernism asserts that 'We are all nonstandard' and that 'it is under that standard that we should be able to find the dismodernist ethic. What is universal in life, if there are universals, is the experience of the limitations of the body' (Davis 2002, p.32). This entails both recognizing that 'we are all disabled by injustice and oppression of various kinds' (Davis 2002, p.31) and organizing against it. And indeed, dismodernism extends across society bodyminded difference as much as the universal right to support it predicates: if 'Impairment is the rule, and normalcy is the fantasy. Dependence is the reality, and independence grandiose thinking. Barrier-free access is the goal .... Universal design becomes the template for social and political designs' (Davis 2002, p.31). Dismodernism proposes a new ethic of the body that assigns to the dimension of 'care about the body' priority over the capitalist and medical dimensions of 'care of the body' and 'care for the body' respectively (Davis 2002, p.27). Caring about the body is concerned with achieving 'human rights and civil rights' for disabled people and other identity groups alike (Davis 2002, p.28) in ways that call for the universalization of the primacy of social reproduction against and beyond capitalist work-based universals. If the emergence of the pandemic lumpenproletariat and the re-organization of social reproduction that was entangled with it were brought on by the virus, a dismodernist politics of social reproduction offers a route to retaining the primacy of social reproduction in post-pandemic times, and an autonomist dismodernism provides the theoretical tools to study the challenge this poses to work-based universals of capitalist society.

## Conclusion

The universals of a work-based capitalist society, namely the universal *working* class, its struggle and its social reproduction, are undone in what Denis O'Hearn and Andrej Grubačić call 'exilic spaces' of social and economic life at 'the edges of capitalism' (2016 p.147). The political pursuit of autonomous social reproduction by which these spaces are characterized is what I have suggested was achieved to some extent during the pandemic, and what can be pursued through an autonomist dismodernist perspective beyond it. A major limitation of my analysis has been the failure to adopt a global perspective that distinguishes among the operation of work-based universals, and forms of resistance to these, in industrialized and peasant-based economies. What can be concluded in general terms, however, is that the pandemic lumpenproletariat and disability are phenomena that challenge the work-based universals that oil the wheels of the reproduction of capitalism by substituting for capitalist social reproduction a dismodernist politics of social reproduction. With the widespread lapsing of people's relation to the sphere of production under the pressure of the pandemic real, the lumpenproletariat and the primacy of social reproduction expanded across pandemic society. The phenomenon of the pandemic lumpenproletariat, however, materialized anti-capitalist universals as natural occurrences within an ableist framework that distanced them from disability politics. Nowhere was there the intention to universally embrace the biological real as a starting point for upsetting the work-based universals through which capitalism materially and symbolically reproduces itself. I have argued that this intention can be realized through the symbolic universalization of disability as a memento mori for capitalism and through a dismodernist perspective which challenges work-based universals in capitalist society and class struggle alike, orienting the latter towards the primacy of social-reproduction over capitalist production as its telos. Universalizing disability and dismodernizing the working class to embrace a dismodernist ethics of social reproduction is an anti-capitalist political move which necessarily comes *after* the pandemic lumpenproletariat because it builds on the unmooring of social reproduction from the straitjacket of work-based universals that the pandemic mainstreamed, but also departs from the invisibilisation of disability politics that did not abate in pandemic times. Dismodernizing the working class,

ultimately, comes after the pandemic lumpenproletariat because it travels through the politically staged encounter between class and disability politics that was not made real by the pandemic, but that can be made possible by our organizing.

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