

Superexploitation, the Race to the Bottom and the Missing International

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There have been many opportunities for people with radically different conceptions of the world system to see their basic suppositions and truths, often untouched by the conjuncture, reborn in the face of the post-2008 world.ⁱ This has been particularly stark in recent accounts of the apparent flip in fortunes of ‘the west and the rest’, as the layers of structurally unemployed and precariously employed historically associated with the Southern periphery now appear to be regular features of advanced capitalist societies, particularly in Europe; while at least initially, the full effects of the global financial crisis seemed to be forestalled in emerging economies, particularly those rich in natural resources.ⁱⁱ

In crude relief, consider two recent national anecdotes back to back. In December 2010, with the official unemployment rate at the historical low of 5.7%, Brazil’s outgoing president Lula da Silva declared the country to be on the verge of reaching full employment (IBGE, 2010; Partido dos Trabalhadores, 2010). The discourse that followed has linked the country’s relatively healthy rates of GDP growth to the growing purchasing power of a burgeoning young workforce; millions of workers having ostensibly joined the ranks of a new ‘middle class’ on the back of rising real wages, labor market participation and formalization (for example, Maia Junior, 2012; cf. ILO, 2013). While emphasizing favorable conjunctural elements including the global sellers’ markets for Brazil’s main commodities and auspicious macroeconomic conditions, this discourse downplays continuing structural contradictions that become clear once this ‘new middle class’ is put back into the context of

Brazil's class structure overall; one which continues to be characterized by historical problems associated with Brazilian dependent development, including structural unemployment, a massive relative surplus population, low wages and over-reliance on credit, income inequality (Duarte, 2012), and new degrees of displacement, and concentration and denationalization of land (Teixeira & Gomes, 2013, particularly the essays by Teixeira and Sauer).

Meanwhile in Europe, certain commentators see even an imperialist power like Britain on the road to becoming a 'developing country', as it slips down the rankings of key competitiveness indicators in relation to Asia (Chakraborty, 2013).ⁱⁱⁱ Conveniently ignoring the historical and continuing provenance of the City of London's 'natural resources' in value transfers from the global South (Norfield, 2013), the head of the Guardian's economics desk writes that,

In Britain, we have become used to having our resources skimmed off by a small cadre of the international elite, who often don't feel obliged to leave much behind for our tax officials. An Africa specialist could look at the City and recognise in it a 21st-century version of a resource curse: something generating oodles of money for a tiny group of people, often foreign, yet whose demands distort the rest of the economy.

These blinkered accounts of the forward march of history (in the latter case, suddenly going into reverse) have found widespread expression on the left. In Western Europe, many sections have proposed a renewal of the post-war Keynesian social consensus both to preserve historical working terms, conditions and living standards in an extremely hostile environment, and as an exit to the current crisis more generally. What has been lost in this appeal are the global dimensions of accumulation that partially sustained the original

post-war consensus, even following the end of formal empire, and the social contradictions between sections of the working class globally through which such accumulation continues.^{iv}

The objective of this essay is to locate an alternative starting point from which to speak about the global crisis of labor in the current phase of imperialism; that is, not from the standpoint of the neoliberal crisis of work, labor rights, trade unions and living standards in the global North (and indeed, around the world), but by reflecting on the resurgence of superexploitation in the global South. Theoretical treatments of the phenomenon emerged in the context of the Marxist strand of dependency theory, whose use is still largely confined to Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and South Asia. The reasons for its continuing significance (or in some quarters, revival) in the current period lies in its ability to provide the conceptual tools for reckoning capital-labor relations (and so, struggle) within a regional and global framework. Such tools are badly needed to overcome the limitations of anti-capitalist strategies that remain tied to the trope of the local or nation in the imperialist age; and particularly those emanating from the industrialized North.

The essay is broken into three sections. It begins by reviewing the episodic treatment of **superexploitation** and a related phenomenon, **labor segmentation**, in Marx's *Capital*. While Marx noted that the retention of superexploitation in the midst of higher degrees of labor productivity was key to the development of the prototypical English industrial revolution, he neglected to incorporate either superexploitation, or labor segmentation more broadly, into his labor theory of value. Two political upshots of this elision have been an insistence on the undifferentiated laboring subject on much of the left and, as we saw in the two earlier anecdotes, an abstraction of 'class struggle' from the global patterns of accumulation in which they take place today.

The essay then moves on to consider the work of the Brazilian Marxist dependency theorist Ruy Mauro Marini. Marini (2005a, 2005b, 1978) examined one dimension of the extension of labor segmentation within an imperialist division of labor during the classical free trade era and, in this context, developed the arguably most rigorous treatment of dependency from a labor (or production) standpoint in the context of works such as *Dialéctica de la dependencia* (or *The Dialectics of Dependency*, originally published in 1973). Recovering a key contribution of the dependency perspective, the essay argues that accumulation in the imperialist age, rather than creating conditions for the emergence and generalization of 'modern' modes of labor productivity, has driven the reproduction of labor superexploitation in dependent economies like Brazil. It suggests more generally that whether under formal empire or neo-colonialism, imperialism has been characterized by global accumulation on the basis of the combination of different rates of exploitation.^v By way of example, the essay turns to examine the resurgence of superexploitation in one of the most dynamic and globally integrated sectors of the so-called new 'Brazilian miracle,' the sugar/ethanol industry. Here, despite recent improvements in real wages and job formalization, higher rates of profitability were in fact made possible a decade earlier by the neoliberal restructuring of the labor process, job markets and regional production following trade liberalization.

The final section returns to Marx, and to the implications of this argument for class struggle. It revisits the discussion of the general law of accumulation in *Capital Volume I* (Marx, 1974, ch.25) to comment on particular and general forms of exploitation in the global crisis of labor. The essay ends with the argument that the structural divisions within and contradictions between sections of the global working class need to be deliberately

addressed, if the global left is to construct an international that is able to effectively challenge global capitalism.

SUPEREXPLOITATION IN THE LABOR THEORY OF VALUE: FROM MARX TO MARINI

Superexploitation, broadly defined as a mode of extracting an 'extra' degree of surplus value involving recourse to extreme exploitation, is best understood in the context of a division of labor involving *varied* rates of exploitation, or labor segmentation. With few exceptions, neither superexploitation nor labor segmentation have been addressed in the labor theory of value in any systematic way.^{vi} Rather, in many ways, the phenomenon is caught in the empirical realm. In anthropology and cognate disciplines, for example, recourse to systematically higher rates of exploitation in Southern economies is often explained in cultural terms: for example, with the argument that capital in the export-processing zones embed forms of exploitation in existing culturally-specific forms of inequality (based, for example, on gender, kinship and regional hierarchies) to order and control highly exploitative labor processes (for example, Ngai, 2005; Ong, 1987; Granovetter, 1985; cf. Heyman, 1998).

Throughout *Capital I*, Marx himself (1974) observed the continuing use of outmoded, exhaustive forms of exploitation in the shift from absolute to relative surplus value that underpinned the industrial revolution in England: in the gendered and age-related division of labor that saw women and children performing labor-intensive tasks in early industrial factories (Chapter 15, p.422);^{vii} and in the production and leveraging of the relative surplus population to increase the rate of exploitation in formal labor settings (Chapter 25).^{viii} In both instances, Marx noted that the segmentation of the workforce (in the first instance, "forms of organization of labor rendered obsolete by the very development of capitalist

production,” and in the second, the periodic cycling of workers through formal employment and out again) was crucial to accumulation (Catephores, 1981, p.274).

Although then, technically speaking, the old system of division of labor is thrown overboard by machinery, it hangs on in the factory, as a traditional habit handed down from Manufacture, and is afterwards systematically remoulded and established in a more hideous form by capital, as a means of exploiting labor-power (Chapter 15, quoted in Catephores, 1981: 274).

However, Marx neglected to elevate these instances of superexploitation (and more generally, of the combination of differentiated rates of exploitation) to a high level of abstraction in *Capital*, and ultimately assumed that the rate of exploitation would equalize across a given society (Catephores, 1981; Higginbottom, 2012; Sotelo, 2014, p.541). As others have suggested, this is arguably one of many heuristic devices Marx used in the course of elaborating the labor theory of value crucially, for example:

Assuming that labor-power is paid for at its value, we are confronted by this alternative: given the productiveness of labor and its normal intensity, the rate of surplus-value can be raised only by the actual prolongation of the working-day; on the other hand, given the length of the working-day, that rise can be effected only by a change in the relative magnitudes of the components of the working-day, viz., necessary labor and surplus-labor; a change which, if the wages are not to fall below the value of labor-power, presupposes a change either in the productiveness or in the intensity of the labor (Marx, 1974, p.511, emphases added; cf. Marini, 2005b, p.187; Bueno & Seabra, 2010, p.71).

While perhaps a valid analytical step, as Bowles and Gintis (1997) argue in an otherwise problematic analysis of labor segmentation, “the assumption of equal rates of exploitation is in no way required by historical materialism and is inconsistent with a critical Marxian concept: uneven development” (p.176). This elision was also historically problematic in the setting of the original industrial revolution, during the extension of global capitalist relations in the same period, and in the context of neo-colonialism (Cope, 2012, Part I). In the context of classical imperialism, both Lenin and Bukharin observed that the division of labor enabled the production of super-profits in the colonies through the superexploitation of colonial labor (Higginbottom, 2012, p.253). If we understand imperialist expansion in this period as a response to contradictions between capital’s drive to expand production and stagnating rates of profit in the last quarter of the 19th century, then the ordering and articulation of a new division of labor between diverse sections of slaves (until 1888 in Brazil) and other forms of unfree labor, unpaid domestic labor, rural and urban workers, and peasants in the colonial (and, in relation to Latin America, neo-colonial) periphery and those in the metropolitan core should be understood as an epochal key to their resolution. Decades later, a key contribution of the Marxist strand of dependency theory would be to illustrate this dynamic in a world system now organized around of formally independent nation-states. In this vein, I would suggest that the combination of differentiated rates of exploitation (including superexploitation) is a key characteristic of class formation and accumulation under the consecutive stages of imperialism, including neoliberalism.^{ix}

From the genocidal displacement of Indigenous communities in the early 16th century and the equally genocidal import of enslaved Africans, to the marginalization of freed Africans in the transition to a wage-based economy and their displacement with

immigrant labor, labor segmentation has been intrinsic to the formation of Brazilian capitalism, which itself “cannot be understood separately from its globally-informed structure and function” (Marini, 2005a, p.138a; Duarte, 2012, pp.196-9; Lockhart & Schwartz, 1984, 198-201). Commenting on the revival of superexploitation in the auto sector of greater São Paulo at the end of the so-called Brazilian Miracle (1968-73), Souza (1974) closely echoes Marx’s observations of the modern factory above.

In all its stages, the economic process instituted in Brazil was based on the co-existence of advanced forms of capitalist exploitation and the most backward forms of production. The basis ... of this development was the intensive exploitation of labor power and not the utilization of technology. However, these two forms complemented each other, and only when the world system required the more advanced forms of production (agricultural or industrial) were they introduced (p.2; see also Humphrey, 1980; Pinto, 1965; Sotelo, 2013, p.543).

It is in this context that the contribution of Ruy Mauro Marini (2005a, 2005b) to the labor theory of value, in the form of his thesis on superexploitation, is significant, in so far as it offers one of the most rigorous treatments of this apparent ‘backwardness’ to date (see also Bueno & Seabra, 2010; Osorio in Almeida Filho, 2013; Sotelo, 2014). While many use the term figuratively or descriptively to talk about a variety of low-wage, physically exhausting and often dangerous work, Marini examined the historical function of superexploited Brazilian labor, unfree *and* free, in the 19th century in the production of particular use values for consumption in the metropolitan core. On this basis, he began to theorize a new modality, if not a discrete form, of surplus value; one which Marx may have observed in concrete settings but which, as illustrated above, he declined to fully integrate

in the labor theory of value.^x Superexploitation involves the extraction of an extra degree of surplus value through any combination of techniques (for example, the extension of tasks or hours in the working day, the intensification of the labor-process) which amount to qualitatively higher degrees of exploitation, rather than through the development of the worker's productive capacity (that is, without an increase in the technical composition of capital) per se (Marini, 2005a, p.156; Marini, 2005b, p.189; cf. Furtado 2007: 232-3).^{xi} In other words, the improvement of productivity through new technology and techniques of production is neglected in favor of intensifying the physical labor process, often to the point of complete exhaustion.

However, superexploitation also by definition involves a reduction or suppression of the worker's wages to the point where it falls below the level necessary to produce her or his labor power in a given social formation (Marini, 2005a, pp.154-5; Bueno & Seabra, 2010); an additional portion of the worker's wages have been converted into an extra degree of surplus value that is appropriated by the capitalist. This third element in fact speaks to a point Marx makes in a latter section of *Capital Volume I*, in which he actually amends one of the problematic working assumptions flagged earlier and so, makes conceptual space for superexploitation as a general tendency in English capitalist development of the time:

In the chapters on the production of surplus-value it was constantly pre-supposed that wages are at least equal to the value of labour-power.

Forcible reduction of wages below this value plays, however, in practices are too important a part, for us not to pause upon it for a moment. It, in fact, transforms, within certain limits, the labourer's necessary

consumption-fund into a fund for the accumulation of capital (Marx, 1974, p.599; see Higginbottom, 2012, pp.263-4).

Marini (2005a) locates superexploitation at a specific position in the global system (as a characteristic of the development specific to dependent economies) shaped by imperialism, rather than as a universal historical stage; specifically, in export-oriented economies of Latin America (and elsewhere) where, in contrast to advanced capitalist countries, workers were not expected to fulfill their second function as consumers of the use values they produced (pp.154-5, 165). Rather, this kind of exploitation marked sectors which rely on the extensive and intensive use of labor (namely, extractive industries and plantation agriculture) and consequently, in which there was little need for high or continuing reinvestment of constant capital. Finally, Marini suggests that the tendency of plantation oligarchy to resort to superexploitation explains why the supply of prime materials and food in Latin America increased in the very period that their terms of trade diminished (pp.153, 156).

The systemic reliance on superexploitation draws our attention to the structural contradictions within which the global working class took shape in this period. Marini argues that the superexploitation of Brazilian labor underwrote a qualitative shift in English industrial development (from 1840 onwards), with the production of cheap foodstuffs and raw materials supporting the shift from the generalized production of absolute surplus value to that of relative surplus value (2005a, pp.142-7; Sotelo, 2014, p.540); in other words, to a stage of expanded production based on higher rates of productivity which would only be approximated in Brazil itself a century later, and to date, never in a generalized way.^{xii} Thus in the bid to develop the productive forces of one core region, he argues that imperialism accentuated and relied upon different rates of exploitation overall: "... the combination of

forms of capitalist exploitation are carried out unevenly throughout the system, engendering distinct social formations according to the predominance of one form or another” (Marini 2005b: 189).

With echoes of Marx’s deconstruction of the bourgeois origin myth of primitive accumulation, this element of Marini’s work undermines yet another origin myth: that the shift to relative surplus value in England was entirely the product of *national* class struggle, a common element of eurocentric histories of the classical industrial revolution. What he offers is a single case (for now, abstracted from a more general picture of the global system of the period) that illustrates the continuing reliance of core industrial development on profits raised through superexploitation, albeit now through the arm’s length relations afforded by free trade and dependency.

SUPEREXPLOITATION UNDER THE NEW BRAZILIAN MIRACLE

Adding to the effort of those attempting to revive Marini’s contribution in analyses of this latest phase of imperialism (for example, Almeida Filho, 2013; Amaral & Carcanholo, 2009; Bueno & Seabra, 2010; Duarte, 2012; Higginbottom, 2012; Marini, 2008; Martins, 2011; Osorio, 2004; Sader et al., 2009; Sotelo, 2009, 2014), I suggest that labor segmentation has become one of the key challenges to Brazilian class struggle over the past generation, in the context of the restructuring of production, the labor process, labor markets; in other words, in the context of the neoliberal crisis of labor (Latimer, 2014; cf. Duarte, 2013). Like the historical segmentation of labor markets and the tendency towards superexploitation, certain elements of this crisis are not new. However, the perennial tension of structural divisions within the working class took front and centre stage during the neoliberal period. The deepening of divisions within the working class (writ large to include rural and urban

wage earners, informal sector workers, semi-proletarianized peasants, and the increasingly complex reserve army) have enabled the resurgence of superexploitation in already labor-intensive sectors, and particularly those which benefited from the opening to deregulated trade and direct investment flows in the 1990s, financial deregulation, and constant demand for minerals and raw materials in the new century (Duarte, 2013, pp.198-201).

Perhaps nowhere is this trend clearer than in agribusiness, the sector now celebrated as the core of a new 'Brazilian Miracle' (cf. Amann & Baer 2012). According to the Economic (2010), the source of this model lies in its smart use of the country's abundant land base and resources; the state's attention to developing new technologies rather than to subsidies, regardless of the new monopolies that have developed around them; the successful introduction of GM crops, championed by capital and the central government after a protracted battle with land-based social movement, NGOs and certain dissident state governments throughout the 1990s; and the embracing of trade liberalization, competition and capital-intensive farming through economies of scale. Echoing similarly myopic visions of the previous 'miracle' (1968-73), the new conditions of labor and land relations which have made this boom possible have been sidelined altogether. Take, for example, the conditions faced by day laborers in the sugarcane fields of São Paulo state which came to light following a series of work-related deaths. Brazil is now the largest global producer and exporter of sugarcane and sugar-based ethanol, and one of the largest domestic markets for biofuels. In 2006, the highly modernized sugar/ethanol sector of São Paulo accounted for 55% of the value of sugarcane production in the country (DIEESE, 2007, p.2; IBGE, 2009, p.734). The *paulista* sector saw heavy capital investment in technology throughout the 1990s, accounting for 75% of all mechanization in the sector, while 32% of the national workforce in the sector discarded in the same period (DIEESE, 2007, pp.19-20). Traditional

sugar oligarchs, now in partnership with multinational subsidiaries in sectors that use sugar(-based) inputs, claim that the new technology has allowed them to move from production on the extensive margin (that is, bringing in additional land under cultivation, often through recourse to the illegal but established habits associated with *grilagem*, or land-grabbing) to intensive production (including the *cerrado*, or scrublands, which extends over nine states including São Paulo), reducing the social basis of land-related conflicts.^{xiii} However, increasing productivity margins have allowed agribusiness complexes to push smaller farms out, exacerbating land inequalities and adding to the reserve army (DIEESE, 2007, pp.5, 24; IBGE, 2009, p.111).

This is a highly modernized sector which entertains an 'ideology ... that tries to negate the existence of human labor on sugarcane plantations' (Silva, 2011). And yet researchers and activists have pointed to a resurgence of superexploitation at the interstices of a segmented workforce, falling real wages, and extreme hikes to the physical demands placed on workers (Alves 2006; DIEESE, 2007, p.20; Mendonça, 2009; Silva & Martins, 2010). A recent study by DIESSE (the Inter-Union Department of Socioeconomic Statistics and Studies, 2007) shows that rural unions in the *paulista* sector has made gains recently, in the form of an overall increase in the number of formalized workers; that is, those working as registered workers (with a signed workers' card that provides access to labor rights under federal legislation) and under collective agreements. However, these gains have been offset by the effect of waves of newly-come migrants from the northeast (most recently, the state of Maranhão) and nearby Minas Gerais, most of whom have been added to the workforce as unregistered workers. Amongst registered workers, average wages fell 26% between 1992 and 2002 to R\$310 (US\$140) monthly, less than the current minimum wage.

Since 1992, workers harvesting the cane manually have also faced sharp increases to their daily quotas: in contrast to the average national daily quota of 6 tons in the 1980s, workers are now faced with daily quotas of 7.4-10.7 tons just to meet the grade of 'regular to good' productivity, and up to 13.4 tons daily to meet the 'optimal productivity' target. According to the Inter-Union Department of Socioeconomic Statistics and Studies (DIEESE), this is 37% higher than the daily output expected of workers in the northeast, while workers in the *paulista* sector are paid only 15% more (DIEESE, 2007, p.23). The physical costs to the worker are profound. To meet the medium range target of 10-15 tons daily, workers must deliver "30 strikes [of the machete] per minute for eight hours per day," according to one researcher (Mendonça, 2009, p.72).

Beyond insufficient dietary conditions – caused by low salaries, from excess heat, from the elevated consumption of energy due to the extremely strenuous tasks involved – the imposition of the quota (that is, the ever-increasing daily amount of cane cut) has set the pace increasing labor productivity since the 1990s, when machine harvesters became employed in increasing numbers. The rate affects not only migrants but also local workers. For this reason, these capitals require a young workforce, gifted with great physical energy to perform this activity. And so, the turnaround has become very high by virtue of the constant replacement of labor consumed during the production process (Silva & Martins 2010: 213-4).

All told, heightened rates of exploitation have been observed across the board, often to the point of death (Silva & Martins, 2010, pp.213-4; also Alves 2006). In 2005 alone, a Regional Labor Delegation registered 416 deaths in the state due to workplace accidents

(including burning to death), heart attacks and cancer (Mendonça, 2009, p.73). It has also resulted in the rise of working conditions which labor activists and the Ministry of Labor and Employment (MTE) identify as *de facto* debt slavery. Several of the largest exporters of sugar/ethanol have been recently added to the government's 'dirty list' of firms whose holdings have been found to use forced labor; including the Cosan Group, Copertrading, the Moema Group, Louis Dreyfus Commodities, the Noble Group/Usina Cerradinho (ONG Réporter Brasil 2011; also Instituto Observatório Social 2004).

Industry in São Paulo has seen a three-fold increase in the tonnage produced annually between 1991 (144.6 tons) and 2011 (406.5 tons) by these means, rather than simply by technological improvements to productivity alone (Instituto da Economia Agrícola, 2012).

The first thing to note here is the significance of transnational class relations in the reproduction of this pattern of exploitation which (despite clear resonances with the description of superexploitation provided by Lockhart & Schwartz, 1984, in note vii) should be understood not simply as a backward survival of an earlier stage of development, but rather as an inherent feature of accumulation in a *modern*, dependent economy (Marini, 2005b, p.192). These processes are driven by northern and emerging nations' demand for cheap agricultural, energy and industrial inputs, which include US, EU and Japanese markets for biofuels (Franco et al., 2010, Mendonça, 2009). They have also been enabled through Brazil's active marketing of the same and trade liberalization, new speculative markets in land and agricultural commodities (particularly since 2008), measures to facilitate the commodification and marketing of biotech inputs (seeds, fertilizers), and those to facilitate the domestic and foreign concentration of land ownership (Teixeira & Gomes, 2013). While such measures trends have allowed increasing control to be centralized by multinational

agribusiness giants and finance capital, the externalization of the most labor-intensive stages of production to subcontractors enables companies to deny knowledge of any rampant human and labor rights violations (Instituto Observatório Social 2004: 12). In this sense, the logic of outsourcing that shapes transnational capitalist class formation (that is, alliances between Brazilian and northern capital) provides the mirror image of the segmentation of labor (cf. Marini, 2008, p.254); however, *both* are necessary for superexploitation to occur. Finally, while working communities around the world have experienced some version of the neoliberal crisis, these rates of exploitation are (generally) not found in countries of the industrialized north. Taken as a whole, these points should put the particularities of Southern labor back on the agenda of class-based, anti-imperialist struggles.

THE GENERAL LAW OF ACCUMULATION AND THE RACE TO THE BOTTOM

To-day, thanks to competition on the world-market ... we have advanced much further. 'If China,' says [John Stapleton], M.P., to his constituents, 'should become a great manufacturing country, I do not see how the manufacturing population of Europe could sustain the context without descending to the level of their competitors.' ... The wished-for goal of English capital is no longer Continental wages but Chinese (Marx, 1974, p.601).

There is one more aspect we can take from Marx (1974) on the issue of labor segmentation; namely its implications for class struggle. This comes, in embryonic form, in the context of his discussion of the general law of accumulation (chapter 25). At moments of accelerated accumulation (rather than crisis), he observes

an apparently absolute increase of the labouring population, an increase always moving more rapidly than ... the means of employment. But in fact, it is capitalistic accumulation itself that constantly produces, and produces in the direct ratio of its own energy and extent, a relatively redundant population of labourers ... (p.630).

The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and, therefore, also the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productiveness of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army. The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, develop also the labour-power at its disposal. The relative mass of the industrial reserve army increases therefore with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour-army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus-population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to its torment of labour. The more extensive, finally, the Lazarus-layers of the working-class, and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.* Like all other laws it is modified in its working by many circumstances ... (p.644, emphasis in the original).

Using the concrete example of the shift to a generalized regime of relative surplus value in England, Marx argues that capitalist accumulation tends to produce a population that is contingently and then absolutely unnecessary to its reproduction.^{xiv} Ultimately in volume III, Marx (1977) positions this essential, “immanent contradiction” as a response to the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (chapter 13; Mattick, 1983, p.94), in so far as the

weight of the reserve population can be used to temper workers' demands for better wages and working conditions and so, bolster the rate of profit.^{xv}

It is in this context where Marx best captures contradictions between social layers of the working class (in his discussion, within a single social formation) that actually facilitate capitalist reproduction from one generation to the next (Latimer, 2014). The various layers of the reserve army in chapter 25 are not, I would argue, significant in and of themselves; nor were they intended to be understood as something extraneous to exploitation and productivity in the formal labor process following capitalist expansion. Rather, the law speaks to the unity of the working classes, or the intrinsic link between the active layers of workers and those so-called 'ex-workers'; in countries like Brazil, many of them also recently, or occasionally, 'ex-peasants'.

In this sense, the concept is a good way to think through the contemporary 'race to the bottom'; or the general social relation that links national and sub-national segments of workers across borders with "profound inequalities of labor-powers" (Higginbottom, 212, p.252) and which, rather than leading to an equalization in rates of exploitation, tends to tie each to the other in a downward spiral of working terms, conditions and living standards. The previous section illustrated that superexploitation continues to be a modern feature of class formation, and response to the particular way Brazilian agribusiness has entered the global system in the neoliberal period. The general law of accumulation helps to clarify the intrinsic connection between such particular forms of exploitation and the general crisis of labor amongst working peoples (of the generalization of precarious labor arrangements, for example); and so, the capacity of capital to leverage the fortunes and gains of one layer of workers against others (for example, the pitting of jobs in extractive industries against acts of Indigenous sovereignty around land and resources in settler colonies).

Marx himself never developed the general law of accumulation to its logical conclusion – in other words, its implications for struggle – but there are kernels. If the general law is the central contradiction of the capitalist mode of production, the only issue of equal importance was that of how workers would address this ‘secret’; in other words, whether workers could achieve means of common struggle predicated on the recognition, not of an undifferentiated subject and class interest, but rather a long-term common fate across vastly different realities (including the violence intrinsic to class formation in a colonial setting) (see also Lindberg, 2014).

As soon, therefore, as the labourers learn the secret, how it comes to pass that in the same measure as they work more, as they produce more wealth for others, and as the productive power of their labour increases, so in the same measure even their function as a means of the self-expansion of capital becomes more and more precarious for them; as soon as they discover that the degree of intensity of the competition among themselves depends wholly on the pressure of the relative surplus population; as soon as, by Trades’ Unions, &c., they try to organise a regular co-operation between employed and unemployed in order to destroy or to weaken the ruinous effects of this natural law of capitalistic production on their class, so soon capital and its sycophant, Political Economy, cry out at the infringement of the ‘eternal’ and so to say ‘sacred’ law of supply and demand. Every combination of employed and unemployed disturbs the ‘harmonious’ action of this law (Marx, 1974, p.640).

But, on the other hand, as soon as (in the colonies, *for example*) adverse circumstances prevent the creation of an industrial reserve army and, with it, the absolute dependence of the working class upon the capitalist class, capital, along

with its commonplace Sancho Panza, rebels against the 'sacred' law of supply and demand, and tries to check its inconvenient action by forcible means and State interference (ibid.).

CONCLUSION

As may already be apparent, there isn't much in this essay that is actually new (see for example Veltmeyer 1983), although there is much that has been systematically sidelined or dismissed in contemporary debates on left and left labor strategy. As exemplified by Chakraborty (2013) at the outset, the current crisis affecting European workers (expressed in terms of austerity measures, harder and longer working lives, mass unemployment, destitution and elder neglect, weakened unions, and the end of the welfare state) has given rise to easy comparisons to the plight of workers in the global South under neoliberalism. However, without trivializing the hardships faced by working class communities in the North (particularly racialized youth, migrant workers and women), superexploitation as it appears in an emergent Brazil has not existed in Europe for more than a century (cf. Sotelo, 2014, p.549).

Using a case from Brazil, this essay sought to use the resurgence of superexploitation in the global South as an alternative starting point from which to consider the global crisis amongst working people. It is positioned as a contribution to current efforts to grapple with the particular and general forms of exploitation in the global crisis of labor, and the structural divisions and contradictions between sections of the global working class that have crippled organized labor and communities in resistance to global capitalism. In adopting this tact, the essay is not intended to be a celebration of the fragment, or part of some conspiratorial assault on Marxist analysis by post-structuralism, but simply a call to

attend to the ways that workers have been put in order historically and geographically by capitalism in its imperialist phase. In this context, 'backward' forms of exploitation continue to be reproduced, not because of the inadequacies of class struggle in a closed social formation, but in the first instance, because they continue to be profitable and functional to global accumulation at the hands of both national and international capital. In dependent countries, workers are forced to contend not only with 'their' national capital but also structures controlled by capital of advanced capitalism under which they operate; this still holds true, despite the recent rise of export-capital from emergent economies like Brazil (Bueno & Seabra, 2010). If the general law of accumulation can be argued to hold beyond national borders, these forms arise because they are possible in the absence of a viable international struggle for socialism, rather than the current forms of accommodation.

Early works from the dependency perspective were often positioned with an eye to understanding why, following the globalization of capital in the first phase of imperialism, a worker's international capable of challenging capital at a structural level had not followed suit. In the North, it is discouraging to see the degree to which efforts to theorize capitalism in its latest phase of globalization (it bears rephrasing: theories which emerged in the very moment that global production moved *en masse* to the South) have systematically attempted to sideline both the global (class) dimensions of accumulation and the particular role of Southern labor within. For this reason, I expect that the challenge of labor segmentation, which this paper argues has become a central challenge to class formation in the neoliberal age, will be solved through the practical efforts of workers, not in theoretical debate. No more compromises.

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ⁱ A preliminary version of this essay was presented as "The Modernity of Superexploitation: labour segmentation and the struggle for unity in the Brazilian movement against the FTAA" to the First International Meeting on the Labour Theory of Value and Social Sciences at the Universidade de Brasília in October 2012. I am thankful to both organizers and participants of this event (many of whom are working to expand Marini's ideas in a systematic way, and for the first time, in his country of birth) and to anonymous reviewers of this project for their valuable feedback, as well as to Andy Higginbottom for a supportive and patient ear, and his own recent ideas on the subject. All translations and errors in this text are my own.

ⁱⁱ Jan Breman (2013) discusses this trend in his outstanding critique of Guy Standing's 'precariat' thesis.

ⁱⁱⁱ This entry treats 'imperialism' as the broad period of global accumulation beginning in the 19th century. This period is by no means monolithic. Whether in the context of ascendant finance and monopoly capital observed by Lenin, or hegemonic circuits of productive and financial capital in post-1945 and -1970s versions of globalization, what unifies the period is the degree to which the social relations of countries in the global South have been reproduced to sustain the extraction and external accumulation of surplus value; and since the early 20th century, despite being formally independent (Latimer, 2014, p.2; Bresser Pereira, 1984, pp. 50-4). In the latter context of dependency, this has not precluded the emergence of domestic bourgeoisies. National capital may achieve a degree of relative autonomy so that these economies emerge as "medium centers of accumulation", but they nonetheless remain subsumed to the circuits of accumulation set out and controlled by grand international capital. Marini denoted this as a stage of development, particular to that of the periphery, as "subimperialism" (see Bueno & Seabra, 2012).

^{iv} This elision has been reproduced in current debates over the implications of an eventual Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the European Union and US. Staying with the British example, traditional left currents, environmentalists and unions have recently voiced concerns that such an agreement may threaten the standards associated with an already beleaguered social Europe, by submitting them to competition with US (more openly) free market norms around labour and union standards, competition policy in the public sector, intellectual property norms, environmental regulations, and investor rights, all at a time when economies on both sides of the Atlantic are struggling to recover. But these very legitimate fears stand in stark contrast to the general silence (with some exceptions) that greeted the negotiations of similar, but many would argue neo-colonial, treaties that the EU has carried out with the periphery over the last twenty years; including the Africa-Caribbean-Pacific Islands (ACP) group, Latin America and India, amongst others.

Similarly, the latest wave of criminalization and forced removal of migrant workers from Western European countries has been marked by an unfortunate lack of outrage and meaningful action by the traditional left as, either overtly or *soto voce*, it retreats into protectionism over jobs and housing for its own working class; rather than, alternatively, fighting the very mechanisms which are driving the crisis faced by workers everywhere. Over the last generation, increasing numbers of workers have become ‘free trade refugees’: part of a trend that sees people moving from southern countries devastated by neoliberal trade and investment agreements to the very co-signatories to these agreements which, in partnership with their national bourgeoisies, have facilitated the latest phase of underdevelopment. Hence, the recent revival of a slogan from anti-colonial struggle in the UK in relation to the horrifying story of Isabella Acevedo, the former cleaner of a one-time Tory immigration minister who was criminalized and deported in July 2014: “We are here because you are *still* there” (see Oldfield & Naik, 2014; Ordoñez 2014). The erasure of global structures like trade agreements and immigration controls that pit the interests of workers and oppressed classes (rather than nations, per se) against one another would seem to signal a tactic acceptance that working class interests in the North are in fact served by these structures; in other words, of the alignment of these interests with those of their nation (in other words, national capital). In the imperialist nations of the North, this can only be reactionary.

^v This entry is intended to provide a brief introduction to Marini’s thesis on superexploitation, and a doorway to current debates amongst dependency theorists in Latin America related to the current conjuncture in Brazil. It does not attempt to place either in the context of historical or contemporary debates around dependency, which are addressed elsewhere (Kay, 1989; Sotelo, 2013; Prado, 2011).

^{vi} Previous attempts to theorize labor segmentation include the work on structural heterogeneity developed by *cepalista* structuralists (for example, Furtado, 2007; Pinto, 1965), the Bowles/Gintis and Morishima debate around heterogeneous labor in the late 1970s and, most recently, global value chain analysis.

^{vii} The extraction of absolute surplus value involves extending the absolute length of surplus labor-time, without changing the duration of necessary labor (i.e., the time committed to draw a wage that is capable of reproducing a worker’s labor for another day), which has the effect of increasing the length of the working day. Relative surplus value, on the other hand, involves increasing surplus value by means of increasing the productivity of labor by intensifying the labor process (through mechanization, reordering productive tasks) to lower unit-labor costs, or reducing the cost of living so as to lower wages (Marx, 1974, ch.16).

^{viii} In the latter setting, for example, Marx observed that young men were “drained of their strength while still at a tender age, after which they were treated as useless and left to perish” as members of a floating surplus population (Catephores, 1981, pp.275-6). Illustrating how segmentation may constitute “a barrier to the expansion of the productive forces to the extent that it restricts the supply of labor, [and] limits the development of labor power” (Bowles & Gintis, 1979, p.179), this occurred in the very life stage when, in earlier forms of industry, young men might have been taken on as journeymen and apprentices and trained for adult tasks. While beyond the scope of this essay, many contemporary authors have also tried to mediate the often over-wrought distinction in Marxist debate between exploitation and oppression in advanced capitalist societies, by looking to the role of segmented labor markets in facilitating the superexploitation of particular sectors of the

workforce; namely, women (for example, Dixon, 1977; Valiani, 2012) and/or racialized or migrant labor (for example, Heyman, 1998; Ness, 2005; Walia, 2010).

^{ix} In this context, this entry was conceived in part as a contribution to a broader research project examining the role of labour segmentation and differentiated rates of exploitation in global accumulation strategies in the imperialist phase, which to date counts on such valuable works as Rodney (1981), Nash & Fernández-Kelly (1983), Sanderson (1985, particularly the essays by Nash and Bonilla & Campos), Tomba (2007), Cope (2012).

^x The relation of superexploitation to the two modes of surplus value identified in *Capital* is a current subject of debate. In Marini's work, the concept cannot be reduced to either absolute surplus value, with which it is often conflated (cf. Salama, 2009; Cardoso & Faletto 1979), or to relative surplus value, although it may occur in combination with either. Starting from Marini's work, Bueno and Seabra (2010) argue that the concept "brings together diverse modalities of extracting surplus value, centred on the evasion of the law of value in relation to the labour-power commodity" (p.74) in so far as they negate the exchange of commodities of equal value (p.71). For Higginbottom (2012), superexploitation constitutes a third mode of extracting surplus value which became dominant and in fact characterizes surplus value extraction in the global South in the imperialist phase of capitalism. I accept the position of Sotelo (2013) which allows for the gamut of exploitation faced by workers in low-wage *and* emerging economies like Brazil: "[s]uper-exploitation as a production regime [that] is not negated in dependent countries when relative surplus value emerges, even to a limited extent, and [which] imposes its logic – though not its hegemony – in the production and accumulation of capital" (p.5).

^{xi} The technical composition of capital refers to the proportion of capital invested in the purchase of labour power (wages) to that of constant capital (means of production). The concept "rests on a technical basis, and must be regarded as given at a certain stage of development of the productive forces"; namely, the shift to (relative) surplus value based on higher labour productivity (Marx, 1977, p.145). It is the generality of this shift in a *discrete* social formation which is put into question with Marini's treatment of superexploitation (see Duarte, 2013, pp.194-96).

^{xii} This involved both enslaved African and free labour in this period; despite efforts by the British government to force Brazil to end the slave trade by 1830, in a bid to level the playing field with its own Caribbean colonies, the transition (in law) would only take place in 1888 following (amongst other things) decades of unceasing slave uprisings and republican movements of the 19th century. Nonetheless, trade continued with an economy based on arguably the harshest slave regime of the period. "Slave owners estimated that a slave could produce on the average about three-quarters of a ton of sugar a year. At the prices of the period, this meant in effect that slave would produce in two or three years an amount of sugar equal to the slave's original purchase price and the cost of maintenance. Thus if the slave lived only five or six years, the investment of the planter would be doubled, and a new and vigorous replacement could be bought" (Lockhart & Schwartz, 1984, p.218).

^{xiii} 'Grilagem' refers to the historical practice of grabbing of public, indigenous, or otherwise occupied land by large landowners using false documents to 'prove' legal title (cf. Mendonça, 2009, p.68). On the use of the Land Law, beginning in 1850, to restrict the access of land to freed African slaves, as well as their access to education and the job market in general, thereby forcing them into the ranks of *moradores*, "a new rural category,

juridically free but usually attached to a plantation or ranch”, see Duarte (2012, pp.196-97) and Lockhart and Schwartz (1983, pp.402-403).

^{xiv} In terms of the issue of what extent the ‘general law’ of accumulation actually constitutes a law, I agree with Veltmeyer (1983) who sees it as referring to “certain tendencies rooted in the basic structures of the capitalist mode of production” which can be modified through particular historical circumstances, and certainly by class struggle (pp.218-219). Since Marx’s time, various authors have highlighted the ways in which such circumstances were created by imperialism, including the welfare legislation established in the post-WWII period in core nations to offset the potential for social instability in times of long-term hardship (Mattick, 1983, p.97); the leveraging of the rate of profit in manufacturing following its collapse in the 1970s through the internationalization of production and increased competition between regional workforces (Marini, 2008, pp.253-54; Sotelo, 2009, ch.2; 2013, p.2; Latimer, 2014); and the current appropriation of surplus value from the South through new financial instruments and markets (Norfield, 2013). And so, while “the modifications the system undergoes in the very course of its development may set aside the general law of accumulation ... and thus meet the optimistic expectations of the ruling class and raise doubts among the exploited classes about capitalism’s vulnerability [they] do not affect its general validity” (Mattick, 1983, pp.95-96).

^{xv} In this section, Marx (1974) admits (“only empirically”) that the tendency of the rate of profit to fall can be mitigated by, amongst other things, paying workers a wage below the value of their labour power (p.235); in other words, by recourse to superexploitation. Once again, the working assumption is that the rate of exploitation will remain constant (p.212) and that we are considering the extension of these social processes across a single (national) social formation.