

## **The revenge of the remainder**

*By Camille Barbagallo & Nicholas Beuret*

Invoking memories of impoverished lawyers in Paris during the French Revolution, Paul Mason articulates his contemporary revolutionary figure: the graduate without a future<sup>1</sup>. This figure stalks the world stage, bringing down regimes in North Africa and spearheading resistance to ‘Structural Adjustment’ and austerity in Europe. Yet a closer look at the actual life of this figure reveals it to be just one instance of life as a *remainder*. A condition endured by the mass of surplus bodies living without future, living the general condition of being without hope that neo-liberal capitalism has brought into being.

Over the last 40 years the world has seen the birth of a new kind of worker - a worker bereft of work. Workers who inhabit precarity and are deemed to be superfluous to the requirements of capital<sup>2</sup>. Be they the excess of educated and work-ready bodies in the world’s metropolises, or the multitude of hungry and feared bodies in the slums that encircle the urban centres of the post-colonial world, these bodies are surplus to requirements - they are the remainder of capital’s calculus<sup>3</sup>. We can trace this surplus mass of bodies, its contours and manifestations. In doing so, the act of tracing reveals something fundamental about ‘being surplus’. The form, specifically the *body* that comes into focus, is a part of the unfolding crisis in which we find ourselves, as both subject and object, its reason and its consequence.

### **contours and shadows...**

Nearly half of the population in Britain who are aged between 18-65 are ‘precarious’<sup>4</sup>. Which is to say that their work and social life is increasingly uncertain, poorly remunerated, causal and subject to sudden change<sup>5</sup>. They live in a world of permanent underemployment and insecurity. This precarious population includes around one third of all recent university graduates<sup>6</sup> and an army of working poor, including a quarter of a million workers who are paid less than the minimum wage<sup>7</sup>. We live in a period of increasing ‘necessary unemployment’, characterised by the rise of the informal economy<sup>8</sup>. The informal economy is posited in this instance as the economic sphere beyond the formal capitalist realm. It is estimated to be worth upwards of £137 billion per year, providing employment for as many as 3.6 million people in Britain.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, more than precarious, almost one quarter of the British population aged 18-65 are ‘economically inactive’ – that is to say, excluded from waged work<sup>10</sup>. This figure includes the one million women who have left or been expelled from the labour market since global economic crisis began in 2008. This abandonment by capital manifests most dramatically in those classified as ‘NEETs’ – people who are “not in education, employment or training”. One in six 16-24 year olds (and almost one in five 18-24 year olds) fall into this population, which is currently one million strong and set to rise<sup>11</sup>. The problem is certainly not confined to Britain, within the ‘wealthy countries’ of the G20, the last three years has seen 20 million more bodies added to the category of the unemployed<sup>12</sup>. This growing population who are left without work, coupled with a hidden informal workforce and the precarious bodies of

graduates and the underemployed constitute the emergence of a permanent surplus population – a reminder.

The rising insecurity and precarity of life is also apparent in the new forms of poverty that have emerged in Britain as capital and the state try to explain that they can no longer afford us all. Five million households live in ‘fuel poverty’, unable to afford heating, ‘water poverty’ affects four million households<sup>13</sup> and a new ‘food divide’ defines who can eat what, with dramatic implications for their health<sup>14</sup>.

Beyond the ever more militarised borders of Europe lies a world increasingly determined by the growing volume of surplus bodies and by the battle to contain them. Over 1 billion people now dwell in the world’s slums and the number is likely to grow to 2 billion by 2030<sup>15</sup>. The informal economy accounts for the economic activity of almost three quarters of the world’s workforce outside of the centres of wealth accumulation (and also for 15 percent within them). In addition to this space of the economically marginalised, the global unemployed now number over 200 million, with many more not officially counted. Ultimately, we can trace the shape of this surplus life in the sheer mass of the hungry. There are 930 million malnourished bodies throughout the world, not for lack of food but for lack of money: there exists enough food to feed them all one and a half times over.

### **too many, too much**

Even though it is radically differentiated depending on where in the world the body is found, beyond the sheer volume of surplus bodies there exists a simple and common relation – of waged work to survival. Which is to say that the millions of bodies who are the surplus population need the wage to survive, but they lack sufficient work, or sufficient guarantees of work, and as a result their lives sit precariously balanced between life and death.

Start from the beginning. Each year, year after year, fewer workers produce more commodities as labour becomes more productive. Productivity is a curve, arching towards the sky, cumulatively reducing the number of workers needed for any one process or workplace. A simple example: last year ten workers were needed to produce one shoe. This year only eight. And so it goes, on and on. Hence, if capital stands still, if it fails to continue to expand there emerges a problem, one of a shrinking number of workers/consumers, and a growing mass of unsold commodities and unutilised capital. Accordingly, year after year, the number of workplaces, markets and consumers must grow. Grow or die; such is capital’s imperative<sup>16</sup>. If capital doesn’t expand, the unsold, unused and unemployed will only grow while waiting for an eventual crisis to sweep it all away in an orgy of destruction. So more – more factories, more commodities, more markets – must be created. But it is also workers who are dependent on capitalist expansion in the form of more jobs. If capital stands still it not only produces a growing mass of unsold commodities and unutilised capital but also a shrinking number of jobs. As labour increases its productivity it makes itself redundant, and can only find more work in new industries, factories or territories. If it can’t, then it is free to starve. For the workers of capitalism are those bodies who have been ‘freed’ from any other means of subsistence than the wage.

Let's come at it again. Capital needs bodies to work, to produce and ultimately to consume. It can only encounter those bodies if there exist bodies who *need* to work and *must* buy in order to consume. Until relatively recent times, the vast majority of the world's population produced, under different regimes, enough to subsist. They did not need to go out to seek a wage to buy the means of their own reproduction. The process of creating capital's workers is the bloody process of destroying other means of life: appropriating or destroying the means of reproduction outside of the wage relation<sup>17</sup>. The enclosure of communal lands and the destruction of indigenous civilizations had to occur and must continue to occur in order for capital to grow and therefore survive. It must destroy those rights that exist in opposition to the only rights recognised by capital: the right to work, the right to starve and the right to choose between them. The on-going process of dispossession creates workers simply because, dispossessed, they must work for a wage to survive. It also creates a steady stream of wealth (be it gold or oil; fish or knowledge) that fuels the fires of accumulation. This dispossession sows the seeds of capital's growth. Capital chases itself around the globe, destroying other ways of life in new territories, opening up the possibility of new markets in which to sell commodities where once there was subsistence, and in doing so reaps the harvest of capital beyond the limits of existing markets.

This expansion takes place not just in space but also in time. Here debt enters into the calculus, as a mechanism that allows capital to move between the future and the present. Debt provides the means by which workers can buy today what they will earn tomorrow. Just as capital seeks to harvest new territories, debt enables a harvesting of the future. But, at some point, the books must balance and the debt must be paid or *look as though* it will be paid. The present must return in the future as more of the same. It is the balancing of the books that drives the system into crisis. For while a frontier exists - more bodies, resources and territory and so a balance of forces can be maintained through on one hand, growth and expansion and on the other, ever more productivity. But without an outside to incorporate, an outside that continues to exist, it is impossible to keep the books balanced<sup>18</sup>. Because no growth means no new markets and also no new investment opportunities, jobs or avenues of development. Without a frontier, capital ends up exhausting the possibilities of the spaces it already inhabits, eventually entering into crisis. It is precisely this moment of impossibility that we have arrived at, and not for the first time<sup>19</sup>.

### **return to the start**

An ever-growing mass of surplus bodies find themselves starving amidst plenty, while capital runs out of profitable avenues of investment. Mountains of debt pile up next to unused machinery and unsold products while workers are unable to find work, piling misery upon misery as all kinds of poverty abound and grow. What was this moment's genesis? Forged in a series of trends, tendencies and circumstance, the current situation we find ourselves in was brought into being when a threshold was crossed in 2006 with the subprime debt crisis in the USA.

This tipping point was produced by three factors. First, a greater global demand for the raw materials of production and consumption combined with a reduced supply of them increased the basic cost of living in the USA (though, to be sure not only there).

Second, massive inflows of speculative capital into a range of different markets, most importantly into those that ‘managed’ housing mortgages (especially the so-called ‘sub-prime’ mortgages) and basic commodity markets, looking for returns free from the fetters of decreasingly profitable material production (again increasing the cost of living and the cost of doing business). And third, a greater reliance on the market by the world’s population with the reduction of non-market mechanisms of reproduction (such as the welfare state or exchange, barter and subsistence). All three of these factors led to a squeeze on incomes – waged and unwaged - to create a surge in the cost of living<sup>20</sup>. This led directly to the collapse of the ability of the USA working class to pay its debts, especially that section of the working class that were always precariously balanced on the edge of poverty. This collapse, coupled with volatile and deregulated international markets, set off a chain reaction of panic and uncertainty as to the actual ‘worth’ of the pile of debts, derivatives, futures and other arcane financial instruments in the world’s financial markets that has yet to completely play itself out.

A growing world population reliant on markets for their every need hit a limit: only so much raw material, only so many factories and refineries, so much oil, food, water, etc can be created. There is only so much world to put to work. It was certainly not a lack of bodies but a lack of materials for those bodies to work with that started to drive up prices, especially of food and basic commodities. The massive increase in the hungry, homeless and poor in the lead up to and through the crisis speaks to the successful destruction of economies outside of capitalism. To be sure, feedback mechanisms such as climate change, desertification and pollution all helped squeeze the ‘environmental supply’. Financial speculation played its part too. But it is ultimately the combination of the need for growth and the lack life outside of capitalism that caused so much hunger. This lack of raw materials also hints at the reasons for the explosion of speculative and financial activity.

Ours is a world running out of profitable avenues for investment, one in which speculation reveals itself as the only place left to generate profit. The future is mortgaged, but payment always comes due. And this payment plan requires bodies to work, to consume, to create debts and ultimately to pay when the bill is due. This mortgaging of the future ran ahead of itself, got too far beyond what would ever be earned or could ever be paid. Without the space to expand, or the consumers to spend, there was no hope of loans being honoured.

The spark that lit the fires in the streets was both the neo-liberal assault on the future prospects of a large part of the population in the world’s wealthy countries and the further impoverishment of the precarious and surplus bodies of the world. It was the combined effects of too much capital, too many workers and not enough new frontiers for expansion that caused a shortage of raw materials and the means of reproducing life. It is this spark that connects Somali pirates, driven to piracy by the destruction of their fisheries, to the food riots around the globe in 2008, to the revolutions in North Africa, to the demands for higher wages in China, to the riots in Britain and across much of Europe. This crisis – a crisis of the very relationship between labour and capital – signals the reaching of limits, of processes that have come to their terminus and given birth to the figures of the *remainder* we see stalking the world stage today – which includes the graduate without a future to be sure, but also the surplus population that dwells at the margins that are quickly becoming the centre of our world

## **a question of control**

At the edge, bereft of frontiers for expansion or opportunities to invest and with a decline in the need for labour, the question that haunts capital is no longer how to put bodies to work, but how to control and contain those bodies excessive to the work available. For us, workers without wages or security of income, the question is no longer seizing the means of production – production as it stands only renders us superfluous and undermines life itself. For us the question is how do we once again reproduce ourselves beyond the wage. This world of control is characterised by the rising importance of a politics of abandonment and containment, which according to Achille Mbembe can be conceived of as ‘necropolitics’ - where death and not life is the function of governance<sup>21</sup>.

With a surplus population, managing death is the core concern of political activity. One of the key political tasks is allowing them to die without endangering the section of the social body that must remain productive. Surplus humanity – the bodies dwelling in slums, ghettos, refugee camps, prisons, old people’s homes, remand centres, disaster zones like New Orleans and Fukushima<sup>22</sup> and of course all those existing in the informal economy that are beyond any utility for capital – it is these bodies that are abandoned at as little cost as possible. This is necropolitics: the politics of containment and abandonment in a world without resources beyond the market.

This practice of allowing people to ‘fall behind’ operates through a range of practices and discourses centred on a kind of Darwinian racism: a purity of ideas perfectly matched to the rhetoric of neo-liberalism and the ‘right to be unequal’ held so dear. Necropolitics operates through diffused institutions – private companies, aid and disaster relief bodies, personal militia’s and government agencies. It creates a series of fragmented territories that disable mobility – territories in both the physical (slums, estates and prisons) and social sense (as in the idea of hoodies or welfare cheats).

Walled off and policed, these territories are maintained separately from those spaces deemed productive. Through a permanent state of siege the borders are maintained by either post-colonial policing (racial profiling, stop and search powers, ASBOs, anti-gang activities etc), economic exclusion (such as redlining, or lack of educational facilities) or ideological public campaigns of shame and stigmatisation (against the unemployed, the migrant, the diseased or disabled). For all the differences that exist between exclusion through ASBOs vs containment via migration regimes or precarious service industry work vs informal micro-credit debt, the underlying logic is the same: contain, fragment, isolate and abandon. Kept apart as less than fully human, as not able to contribute, as a threat and contagion, these bodies are then allowed to die. Slowly. Inch by inch. Through hunger, ill health, disaster, gang violence, poverty and disease. This is the fate outlined by capital for one third of humanity today.

## **revenge**

Contrary to the story of disaster relief operations, just wars and those that would put ‘more cops on the streets’, this crisis cannot be solved through legitimate means; justice will not prevail. A balance of forces cannot be struck because there is a limit to justice. The limits to justice are ultimately configured by what it is: an ethical practice, grounded in the exercise of some *legitimate* authority, aimed at restoring a

balance, or business as usual. But what sort of justice can be entertained today when the processes at work either destines us to a life abandoned, awaiting a meaningless death, or balanced precariously on the edge? There can be no hope of bringing back some kind of Keynesian social pact, nor should we want one. For it was built on the unwaged and devalued labour of women, the underwaged labour of bodies in the post-colonies, not to mention the existence of an environmental abundance of resources that no longer exists. No, there is no going back, nor is there any kind of deal that can be struck. Justice is not possible.

Only revenge is possible. By revenge we mean the inflicting of wounds so grave that our enemy suffers more than we do. A hatred of capital is necessary, but a rage to injure and inflict revenge from below is also required. Yet alongside this necessary violence, a process of salvage is needed. At this juncture, the question must no longer be one of better terms within a system that will only confine us to an ever-worsening condition, but one of escape. An armed escape. We must return to the fundamental question of life beyond the wage. We must seize the means of reproduction, violently, and with a hatred of a life enslaved.

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## Bibliography

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/paulmason/2011/02/twenty\\_reasons\\_why\\_its\\_kicking.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/paulmason/2011/02/twenty_reasons_why_its_kicking.html)

<sup>2</sup> However, contrary to Mason argument, organised labour remains a force actively resisting the rule of capital. Many of the recent revolts, from Egypt to the occupation of Tory headquarters at Milbank, intimately involved union organisation and the labour movement. Beverley Silver argues in *Forces of Labour*, that the proportionally dwindling formal labour workforce is still organising and is still a force to be reckoned with. See for the example of truckers in China: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2011/apr2011/pers-a30.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> There have been an increasing body of work that addresses the concept of a surplus humanity, including Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, Kalyan Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development*, Michael Denning, *Wageless Life* and Endnotes, *Volume 2*. In *The Second Contradiction of Capital*, James O'Connor develops the idea of the necessity of an abundance of bodies outside of the formal capitalist economy in connection with the concept of an environmental surplus.

<sup>4</sup> <http://precariousunderstanding.blogspot.com/2007/01/05/precarious-precarization-precariat/>

<sup>5</sup> This destabilization of life where there was once security under the welfare or developmental state is not simply a return to an earlier epoch of Capital; or, rather, it is both a return and a departure, as we will see. It is the development of a mode of life far from past avenues of escape (to new towns, workplaces, frontiers or colonies) or non-capitalist modes of subsistence (from communal land to familial relations). This lack of open space and other means of life, as well as a massive increase in environmental degradation and transformation, mark this situation as one different to past periods of generalised insecurity. See note 18 below.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2656219/One-third-of-graduates-do-not-benefit-from-having-a-degree-report-says.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=591>

<sup>8</sup> International Labour Organisation, <http://www.ilo.org/infeco>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.futurematters.org.uk/drivers/informaleconomy.asp>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=12>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/feb/24/young-people-neets-record-high>

<sup>12</sup> "Report warns of deepening global jobs crisis", <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2011/sep2011/jobs-s28.shtml>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/feb/20/water-poverty-uk-scarcity-bills>

<sup>14</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4652801.stm>

<sup>15</sup> Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*

<sup>16</sup> David Harvey, *Limits to Capital*

<sup>17</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, Midnight Notes, *New Enclosures*, David Harvey, *Limits to Capital*

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<sup>18</sup> One of the most significant ‘outside’ spaces constructed through the capitalist mode of production is the household, where unpaid work reproducing life, primarily performed by women, is captured by capital in a process of mediated through commodity production – in particular, the commodity of labour-power - see Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community*

<sup>19</sup> It’s important to note that a surplus humanity has come into being in pervious epochs. The creation of a surplus humanity is both a cyclical and secular process – that is, it continually reoccurs, but reoccurs in ever-greater numbers and proportions. It comes into being when the limits of an existing world-system are reached (the physical limits, for expansion and reinvestment as well as with regards to resources), so that whatever space constitutes the limits of a system that cannot, for that moment, be expanded, are completely consumed, obliterating all non-capitalist space, making further grow impossible.

<sup>20</sup> Commodity prices started to creep up in price in 2003, then took off just prior to the sub-prime crisis in 2006, resulting in a food crisis in 2007/8 and again now in 2011, as well as fuel and other basic living cost crisis around the globe.

<sup>21</sup> Achille Mmembe, *Necropolitics*

<sup>22</sup> On disaster zones as areas governed by necropolitics see Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis, *Must We Rebuild Their Anthill? A Letter to/for Japanese Comrades*, and Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*