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Class in the Age of Global Capitalism: The Case of Post-1980 Turkish Privatization

Cemil Boyraz

This study, based on the particular case of the privatization experience of Turkey since the 1980s, is firstly an attempt to analyze the subjective experiences and perceptions of this structural transformation by the workers themselves; secondly, how the internationalization of capital phenomenon (namely, hyper-mobility of capital beyond borders) introduces new challenges to the collective struggle of labor unions against neoliberal globalization; and thirdly, how all these political-economic processes are theorized as well as what kind of counter-discourses are developed within leftist political circles and the labor movement in Turkey. The importance of such an attempt lies in the belief that theoretical answers and political strategies against the multi-dimensional effects of neoliberal globalization processes could be developed by means of an accurate analysis of how working-classes and labor organizations experience and perceive this process in the new era of capitalism.

Calling Back Thompsonian Analysis: Understanding Class in the Neoliberal Era

After the 1980s, as a result of acceleration of the internationalization process of capitalism and hegemony of the neo-liberal policies targeting welfare-state policies and organized working classes, one could argue that a massive transformation emerged in capital-labor relations in national and international levels. This process also initiated a reconfiguration of the role of the state-society relations and future of the nation-state has been a field of academic interest much more than before. On the other hand, it is still hardly difficult to find comprehensive studies representing class reality in the age of neoliberal capitalism and how class formation and consciousness is shaped during these structural dynamics. In such a result, the reality that many scholars started to focus on the rise of the identity politics in last two decades is having crucial importance. Analyzing class formation and consciousness is mostly considered now as a too old phenomenon.

This paper attempts to bridge an analysis of the structural transformation of the capitalism by the 1980s with that how these processes are experienced in subjective and collective terms by the working classes. For this purpose, privatization case in Turkey is chosen as a subject matter to understand new political economy with a different outlook. Paper calls back Thompsonian analysis back to understand working-class reality and new reconfiguration of the state-society relations in the neoliberal age. It is suggested that rather than falling into economic reductionism and class essentialism, a new reading of the neoliberal transformation, balancing between the importance of the development of economic relations and subjective experiences, is possible with reference to the writings of E. P. Thompson's analysis on the class reality.
As one of the most important figures within British Marxist historians, E. P. Thompson, in his *The Making of the English Working Class*, brilliantly analyzed class formation and consciousness processes in an age of rapid transformation of class structures coming out with the industrial revolution. The originality of Thompson’s analysis lies in the fact that he could meet subjective experiences of working classes with structural processes and approached to class phenomenon in a relational way. The narrative of Thompson in the *Making* underlines the necessity of an analysis bridging between subjective dynamics and objective elements without giving priority to the latter. Criticizing technology-deterministic and anti-Marxist sociological analyses explaining the social change after the Industrial Revolution, Thompson argues that class positions could only be analyzed within a totality of social relations and come out of a historical process by experience. Thus, class is a social reality for Thompson that cannot be understood within historical fixities and it is a peculiar form of a social relation shaped by experiences and political struggles of workers against the hegemony of capitalist order. Class as a relation and process underlines the importance of an analysis of the antagonisms and experiences (experience as another important category to understand social constitution of the workers) during the class struggle. This theoretical perspective also narrated in the *Poverty of Theory*, is not only important to understand and analyze peculiar characteristic of the class formation and consciousness processes but also developing respective alternative political formulations for social change.

Focusing on the tragic results of the Industrial Revolution, Thompson does not only deal with the stories of the oppression in subjective terms but also with the reality of exploitation experienced commonly by the workers in objective terms. For example, with a focus on longer working hours for further surplus creation and capital accumulation, organization of the working day and leisure time, increasing specialization and destruction of the household economy, Thompson also provides a detailed analysis of objective conditions of disciplining workers. Against objectivist, and inherently economistic definitions of the working class, Thompson argues that both structural and action-based or experiential accounts could be found in Marx’s writings: “class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences, feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against those whose interests are different from theirs” (1970, p. 9).

It is not a deniable fact that Industrial Revolution transformed class relations in general and working classes in particular; however, workers are not a passive element in this transformation process. Working class consciousness and politics emerge at the same time with having important repercussions on the development of productive forces. This is the main reason why Thompson underlines the importance of how structural processes are experienced and perceived by workers since the content of the political struggle against the economic order is shaped by these dynamics.

For Thompson, while analyzing the post-Industrial Revolution conditions, importance of an analysis of working class experiences and perceptions also lie at the fact that it makes easier to understand increasingly fragmented and complicated class structure. Shared experiences and commonalities are the most important elements of the class formation and consciousness processes. This point is highly important to understand class reality in the neo-liberal age through which decomposition of the working classes and reconfiguration of the state-capital and state-society relations have come out by the 1980s.
Condition of Working Classes in the Neoliberal Age: Pressures of Competitive Nationalism

Before analyzing the effects of neoliberal globalization or the internationalization of capital on working classes and labor unions, some further theoretical and conceptual clarifications are necessary to understand what is meant by neoliberal hegemony after the mid-1970s and the internationalization of capital that gained rapid ground after the 1980s, as well as the reconfiguration of the role of the state and class balances. Neoliberalism emerged in the wake of the deep crisis of the early 1970s, took the form of Thatcher-Reagan doctrine in the 1980s, and was further consolidated in the 1990s with the setting up of institutional free trade forums such as the WTO (World Trade Organization) and the IMF (International Monetary Fund). Altvater rightly argues that the project of neoliberal hegemony began with the end of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates in 1973 and the following liberalization of financial markets in Margaret Thatcher’s Great Britain in 1979 and Ronald Reagan’s USA in 1981. Neoliberalism is thus identified with a specific capitalist regime of accumulation, characterized by the dominance of finance capital over productive capital. It is usually argued that a weak state that is unable to resist market forces was the necessary condition for the execution of neoliberal policies. However, in this study, I conceptualize the neoliberal state as functioning as a market facilitating state. To put it in another way, as Bonefeld argued, for neoliberals not only does the free market require the strong, market-facilitating state, but it is also dependent on the state as the coercive force of that freedom.

Thus, I also underline that neoliberalism is not simply related to the economic realm but also the political realm, meaning a new configuration of the state-class relations and antagonistic class relations. This point is central to my argument because of the fact that the execution of neoliberal policies and the implementation of the respective theoretical foundations of contemporary neoliberalism are based on the idea that free economy require a strong state for its ‘facilitation’ and protection. In this perspective, neoliberalism is conceptualized not as an attack on the nation-state but working classes, thus the struggle against it must take on a class character, rather than focusing on a mere defense of the nation-state.

What were the outcomes of post-1980 macro-economic processes on workers and labor unions on national and international levels? To begin with, the substantial structural transformation of the state in line with the principles of market-oriented internationalization, post-Fordist transformations that promote a vertical disintegration and fragmentation of production, neoliberal economic policies (such as deregulation, financial liberalization, trade liberalization, the rolling back of the welfare state, the privatization of a number public services and remarkable cut downs in social expenditures after the 1980s) brought up increasing sentiments of “fear”, “anxiety”, “insecurity”, “suspicion” and “anger” amongst working classes. Secondly, these selfsame factors have led to “fragmentation”, “decomposition” and “dispersion” among working classes through subcontracting, poor working conditions, competition among workers in the labor market as well as a decline in labor union membership and the bargaining and organizational power of labor unions. As P.Meiksins (1998) argues, the rise of global capitalism, increasing capital mobility, the shift towards “flexible” production, technological change, and a series of other developments have transformed the occupational structure and stimulated the development of a variety of “new” employment relationships.

The result of these processes has been disaggregated and disorganized working class and failure of labor unions to resist them. Increasing competition and fragmentation becomes
crucial in this context given that competition among workers functions as a means of control over workers, due to “the reserve army of labor”. In addition, increasing labor migration is another factor intensifying competition among workers; hence if immigrants are willing to work for lower wages than resident workers, then this can drive down the salaries of the latter or even cost them their jobs. This unfortunate fact proves that building and developing solidarity among workers especially in countries with high immigrant population is very difficult because resident workers in those countries consider immigrant workers as the main reason for the decreases in their wages and the precarious working conditions they experience, rather than comprehending this situation from the perspective of class relations.

Obviously, in political terms, reactions against migrant workers can easily assume a nationalist and even racist character and they are easily manipulated around nationalist discourses and policy formulations. Not only competition among workers, but also casualization of labor, divisions between temporary (and sub-contracting) and long-term workers, between mental and manual workers, etc., have been used and continue to be used as means of dividing workers. What is more, pre-existing and increasing social, cultural and ethnic divisions after the 1980s should not be forgotten to understand the composition of working classes today. Therefore, although collective production activities of workers are increasingly interconnected through the internationalization of capital, their labor remains divided in the many and complex ways already described. To put in another way, in a world of multiple workers and firms in multiple places, classes in-themselves are geographically fragmented.

This study argues that the ongoing unmaking and making of working classes brings a tendency for workers to draw non-class boundaries as a basis for claims for protection from the maelstrom, a special treatment in terms of nationness. Nationalist reactions and nation-based political formulations against privatizations in different country cases could be understood within this framework. Workers seek for a refuge to escape from the maelstrom of neo-liberal globalism in many Third World and developing countries, the first and foremost case being Latin America but also in the USA and Canada as advanced capitalist countries, recent anti-neo-liberal strategies are mostly taking the form of “left economic nationalism and populism” and “national developmentalism”. This study claims that in many the opposition to “globalization” discourse usually seeks a return to national capitalism and developmentalist protectionism. The Turkish privatization case constitutes the prime example of such problematic formulations, workers’ dislocations due to neo-liberal policies and massive sale of state economic enterprises to different capital groups at different scales. In the Turkish case, both labor unions and leftist intellectuals suggested that nationalist approach could still be instrumental in the struggle against the effects of neo-liberal globalization.

The Turkish Privatization Case: Learning by Experience

Until the electoral victory of the AKP in 2002, privatizations in Turkey were limited to small and medium-scale privatizations with the only exception of the block sale of Petrol Ofisi (POAŞ, petroleum products and distribution agency) in 2000. It should be remembered that a great deal of the privatization of the companies in the portfolio of ÖİB was completed by 2010 under the strict execution of privatization program by the AKP. Since 2003, completed privatizations are as follows: 100% of the shares/stakes held by the government/state in 55 companies; partial divestitures in 6 entities; 58 plants, 8 hotels & social facilities, 3 vessels; transfer of operational rights of 6 seaports/harbors and concession rights of 2 public
services. Moreover, over 1000 real estates/assets/properties were sold off during the aforementioned period. The total of overall privatization proceeds realized by the Turkish Privatization Administration have reached 41 Billion of USD as of today and 80% of this revenue was realized under the AKP government between 2003-2010. 15.6 billion of USD revenue has been generated from the privatization of blue chip companies, which included Turk Telecom, Tüpraş (oil refinery), Erdemir (iron & steel production) and Petkim (petrochemical industry).

The first result of the study concerned the justification process of privatizations in Turkey. Since the mid-1980s, debates on the economic rationality of privatization have been influential during the privatization process of the SEEs. To get public support for privatizations, state economic enterprises were shown in the public as sources of corruption, patronage relations, unprofitability, non-productivity. Moreover, a call for a strong and stable government was made by both large capital groups in Turkey and also international actors and financial institutions (especially the EU and IMF). This was mainly caused by the limitations of the constitutional framework on privatizations and thus the cancellations by the courts and weak coalition governments of the 1990s failing to insist on a stable privatization program. This was especially criticized by TÜSİAD (Businessmen Association of Turkey) and the association pioneered the campaign to justify its demand for privatization by claiming to represent the general interests of the country. Based on their concerns for increased competition due to the involvement of foreign investors in the process, the same association would criticize the participation of foreign investors since they are totally against “national sovereignty.” Thus, the national interest discourse provides them a fertile environment to be a part of the process or tenders. Finally, despite several differences, there was a common ground between the discourses of left-nationalists and large capital groups in Turkey. Nationalist discourse was always dominant, yet the same cannot be said for a debate on the future conditions and rights of workers after privatizations.

The second result is that the effects of neo-liberal policies on working conditions in general and the privatization process in particular brought about the decomposition and fragmentation of workers, which obstructed the prospects for a collective struggle against privatizations. In addition to the differences within labor processes (such as between skilled and unskilled workers and white collar and blue collar workers), the division between permanent and subcontracted workers was highly salient. Moreover, the historical construction of the division of interests between public and private sector workers had the most negative effect on the mobilization of a collective resistance against privatizations. Similar to the perception of the SEEs in the public, it is known that private sector workers also criticize relatively higher wages of public sector workers and this makes the organization of a collective struggle the most difficult task. In terms of the effects of such divisions, two further issues should be underlined: one is that the increasing disappearance of the division of “public sector-private sector workers” with the privatization process in Turkey may bring some opportunities in the future for the construction of shared material interests and benefits among workers. The second one is a more negative effect. Similar to the general dynamics within the labor market in Turkey, workers have a fear of the general tendency of developing sub-contracting relations in their factories. This would mean for workers much more pressure on wages and other social rights, or namely the end of their so-called “privileged status”.

When other effects of privatizations such as collective dismissals, declining rates of union membership, flexible form of production (such as flexible types of production, flexibility in
working hours, i.e. temporary working, flexibility in wages) are also taken into account, it could be argued that privatizations led to the increasing fear and insecurity for workers. I argue that this sense of insecurity and concerns about future working conditions provides a fertile environment for inciting nationalist reactions to the maelstrom of the internationalization of capitalism and neo-liberal attack on workers’ conditions. These nationalist perceptions are not only stemming from workers’ perceptions about structural processes but also socially manipulated by capitalist groups to put a veil on class contradictions. Similar to the functional role of religion in Turkey in normalizing the destructive effects of neo-liberalism, the increasing precariousness of working conditions stemming from structural economic processes and the resulting sense of insecurity among workers are also cured through a moral authority or cultural hegemony in nationalist terms suggesting that “we are in the same boat” and “work for the nation”. This is not a discursive construct that could be considered as imposed on workers but a crucial component of working relations reproduced every day.

The third result is the disorganized character of labor unions in Turkey and their pragmatic use of nationalist-etatist discourse. Labor unions have only become a mechanism workers remember when they are faced with the reality of the privatization campaign. Workers were caught in privatization unprepared and it was evident that unions had no collective plan to mobilize workers before privatizations. The fieldwork also shows that “degree of workers’ relation with labor unions is not a qualified one”. In this result, unions’ failure and inability to adapt to the changing dynamics in working relations, to develop alternative strategies to the pressures of the rise of unemployment, social insecurity, and flexible forms of production and the effects of technological innovations in the production process have been influential. Moreover, in terms of trust index in social organizations, this study and other studies show that the level of workers’ trust in labor unions remains too low. A significant amount of workers in the study also think that labor unions should not engage in political activities due to concerns on different political motivations of workers and the dangers of such political relations in terms of relations with the anti-union AKP government. Workers also believe that unions simply have a concern about protecting their number of members and to continue union activities after privatization, rather than collective resistance to the effects of privatizations. Indeed, during privatization campaigns, unions mostly considered legal mechanisms as the most viable option to resist privatizations with the claims of “violation of national interests” rather than organizing a resistance. Moreover, the “national interest” discourse replaced class; the struggle against privatizations is considered as a “national duty” and “defending the past and the future of the country”. This could not be only related to the etatist-nationalist tradition of unions in Turkey but also to unions’ organizational structure, which remains national with weak international ties. More importantly, unions considered the use of the national interest and national strategic importance of the SEEs discourses as an alternative to attract mostly disinterested public attention. Thus, as a historical legacy, nationalism with realpolitik reasons replaced the idea of class struggle.

The fourth result of this study indicates that in order to resist neo-liberalism in general and privatizations in particular, we should come to terms with workers’ perception that the privatization project has started because of the “decline of the nation-state” and constitutes a threat to “national sovereignty” – an “imperialist” plan executed by “foreign powers”. Workers suggest more roles to the state in economic life and the management of their factories. As a matter of fact, a reduced role of the state is equated with less material benefits and social security, with the potential removal of social safety nets by the private sector. In
such perception, the role of labor unions and left-nationalist intellectuals should not be underestimated. The state is considered as a mechanism “having the power and capacity to control the internationalization process of capital for the sake of national sovereignty rights”.

This statist discourse also corresponds to a nationalist discourse and the question of workers’ material interests finds an answer in this nationalist logic. As mentioned above, the absence of a discourse to resist privatizations beyond “nationalist claims” also leads workers to give reference to the “nation” and “state” as “higher ideals” to be defended. Finally, workers’ feeling of insecurity due to the absence of a collective and organized struggle against privatizations and incapacity of unions to organize such a struggle affects their perceptions and discourses, as well as solution proposals.

In terms of workers’ reactions and perceptions on privatizations, as well their experience during the process, this study shows that the aforementioned justifications for privatization have also been influential among workers. For example, a significant amount of workers think that unproductive and non-profitable state economic enterprises can be privatized. Workers also point to the difficulty of finding support for anti-privatization campaigns at the local level. Increasing difficulties and competition to find a job in the Turkish labor market (thus low wages) lead to a reaction against workers in those SEEs who have relatively higher wages and called as “labor aristocracy”. In recent studies on the conditions of workers in Turkey, it is generally observed that a significant amount of private sector workers support privatizations because of these higher wages compared to their average wages. This is also associated with popular discourses regarding the so-called “productivity and profitability” problems of the SEEs as well. This shows that hegemonic attempts of capital groups since the 1980s and especially the current AKP government’s neo-liberal project to justify privatizations have been successful among workers in different sectors. Therefore, in such a political atmosphere, many workers felt a need to underline during the interviews that “this struggle is not for their material class interests but for the interests of the nation as a whole” to justify their anti-privatization stance. In such failure of anti-privatization campaign, losing the struggle at the discursive level is thus highly important.

It needs also to be mentioned in this context that workers mostly think that privatizations of the SEEs are implemented with “imperialist concerns” and “the pressure of international capital”. It is also stated that “SEEs should not be privatized to protect economic and political independence” and “Privatization tenders of state economic enterprises should be obtained by national companies”. Here, it is obvious that workers are highly influenced by the division between “foreign capital” and “national capital” which dominated debates on privatization in Turkey, similar to the debates in many countries open to the foreign direct investments and the internationalization of capital movements. Moreover, the “national strategic importance of the SEEs” discourse championed by left-nationalists and unions has also been popular among workers to find a legitimate base to resist privatizations. In such terms, privatizations are considered as a strategy of imperialists and foreign powers on Turkey. In such a result, in addition to other factors mentioned above, a point made by workers to the effect that “they were not organizationally prepared and aware of the effects of privatizations” has also been crucial. In their words, they “are caught in a storm”. It is also accepted by union professionals that championing such discourses was the easiest way for unions which had concerns to protect the status quo, not to confront the strong government of the.

In terms of perceptions of workers about the privatization process, it should be stated that privatizations are considered as “foreignization of domestic sectors”. For a significant amount of workers, “accelerated foreign investments in Turkey are dangerous” and this is
considered as a threat to their material and working conditions. For many workers, if it is a “national company” winning the tender, privatizations is not something rejected in principle. For that reason, views championing national companies’ ownership of the state economic enterprises have been quite influential to divide workers during protests. On the other hand, both union professionals and workers also stated their disappointment and anger about the alliances between international companies and tender winning national companies. Some also stated that they are “now aware of the illusion” and “privatization of the SEEs have been possible with first transferring the ownership to a national company and then opening them to international actors”. In other words, “behind the veil of being against foreign capital, the scene was set for the sale of state economic enterprises to an international capital.” As noted during interviews, labor unions also feed the fertile environment for nationalist and chauvinistic tendencies and some of them openly declared “national companies are better and should win privatization tenders”. It should be also stated that the differences among workers have also been manipulated during privatization struggles. For example, pro-government workers supported the policy of the government, but only if SEEs are sold to “national companies” with the “right prices”.

In terms of degrading and decomposing effects of privatizations on workers, privatizations affected the working conditions of workers, their collective organizations (pressures on unionization, decrease in union members, weakening power of unions for collective bargaining), and the employment structure of the labor market (increasing number of laid off workers due to privatization). The introduction of performance-based systems and flexible forms of production not only threaten conditions of safe working but also intensify the competition among workers which constitutes one of the most dangerous factors leading to the decomposition of working classes overall. On the other hand, increasing relations of subcontracting, the introduction of performance based evaluation systems; lowered wages and declining social rights were not the main concerns of workers. On the contrary, it was their factory with which they identify themselves and the “nation” under threat. So the existence of the factory and continuity of production was highly important for workers, which meant that they would not lose their jobs and “both them and country will continue to win”.

On the other hand, in SEEs where much more traumatic experiences were observed, such as Petlas and Tekel with workers who are forced to work under the 4/C status, this picture has partly changed. Especially Tekel protests could be considered as a landmark. Tekel workers who were subjected to same precarious working conditions under the 4-C status had joined forces for the struggle, with the hope of changing their current status. Nationalist slogans, flags and symbols were again visible (“Tekel Workers are the Vanguard of the Nation”). Therefore, it cannot be suggested that such feelings of despair, insecurity and anger do not incite nationalist reactions against privatizations. However, this time, workers against such conditions shared a common place for resistance and a tendency to define the main source of the problems in class struggle appeared. Firstly, in the eyes of Turkish society, workers showed their reactions against social inequalities and delegitimized many justifications of pro-privatization government representatives. A battle to “win the hearts” and having the upper hand at the discursive level were important. This “moral struggle” to change the direction of ideological processes is highly important in a conjuncture where collective forms of solidarity are dissolved; workers are more directly under the pressure of market mechanisms, without having job security, social security and under increasingly flexible working conditions.
Secondly, beyond their ethnic (Kurdish and Turkish workers), regional, religious (Alavi and Sunni workers) and gender identities, workers shared a common language, although many communication problems between workers were visible, to resist injustices and social inequalities in class terms. Thus, the principle of hope was there as the increasing precariousness of working conditions among workers in different sections of the Turkish economy brought such forms of solidarity enabling workers “to become aware of themselves as a class”, as E. P. Thompson underlined. Moreover, rather than simply relying on the power of labor unions (which were nominally non-existent to a great extent) and considering civil servant employment as a “never ending job status”, workers now have an understanding of the fact that “their fate is in their hands” and “they have to get into a coalition with different sections of the society” to resist macro-economic dynamics. Tekel workers’ resistance proves that while the internationalization of capitalism and privatization of the SEEs incite nationalist reactions; the increasing precariousness of working conditions and blurring distinction between public and private sector may lead to a unified collective struggle against those dynamics.

The Tekel case also shows that the experience of “different forms of solidarity through struggle” may lead to the development of a “collective will to resist and share a common ground for struggle”, rather than display nationalist reactions which partly stem from the disorganization and fragmentation of workers’ and their demands as well as expectations and fears for the future. Therefore, with the increase of struggles against macro-economic dynamics that negatively affects workers and “the struggle experience itself” may bring such dominance of the reproduction of “foreign enemies” discourse among workers and unions to a halt. This way, “struggling for rights” may replace the so-called “struggle for the nation”. Moreover, through sharing a common space, they may become aware of the difference between the struggle for their rights as members of working classes and the struggle for their other identities and political thoughts.

One final result of the study is that the experience of privatization by workers showed that “workers now realized the problems they experience are about the political-economic system and would not change even Islamists or Turkish nationalists come to power”. Moreover, their perceptions about the role of the state, legal mechanisms and unions have started to change after such an experience: regardless of their ideology, political stance and the employment status (public sector employment as having more guarantee for “job security and rights), workers are subjects of the same political economic dynamics executed after the 1980s, having shared “problems and degradation”. In theoretical terms and political formulations, for the Left, the privatization process also brought the need for a new approach beyond economic reductionism and class essentialism.

This brings a new consideration of the internalization of the tensions stemming from the internationalization of capitalism, the effects of these dynamics on working class composition and politics, and the prospects or problems for an international solidarity of workers under these global dynamics. As a matter of fact, while it is possible to see new forms of solidarity among workers in different national contexts emerging, such nationalist reactions to the internationalization of capitalism and increasing competition among different national interest conceptions constitute one of the most important factors undermining such solidarity. Therefore, this study suggests that a new praxis needs to be developed to understand the complex relation between nationalism and class, and that the theoretical pitfalls within Marxism should be reconsidered in the light of reactions to the
privatization process and political formulations suggested to escape from the maelstrom of neo-liberal policies in general.
The Making of the Global Left:
Thompsonian Political Formation
and the Worldwide Sitdown Strike Movement of 1936

Joseph Fronczak

Though E. P. Thompson’s great subject was a national class, I want to argue that his tools are pointedly useful in making sense of a global political formation. There are two shuffles here: from national to the global, and from class to the political. Yet, it strikes me that Thompson’s airy, open-ended emphasis of agency and process applies to a political formation perhaps more smoothly even than for a class formation. And, much more importantly, it strikes me that Thompson’s fluid, informal imagination provides a template for making sense of the global even more profoundly than it does for the national, as it is on the global scale, beyond national frontiers and thus beyond the limits of most formal organizations, social structures, and political systems, that more structural frameworks collapse. The dilemma of transnational history, particularly when expanded to a global scale, is to explain connections precisely beyond the boundaries of formal political systems, beyond institutional limits.

To pursue these claims, I want to sketch a Thompsonian history of the making of the global left, a political formation in need of a history. To imagine historically a global left, we need something like a Thompsonian approach—at least if we are not to rely on cold war configurations—to make sense of common cause across great space. If we are substituting “the global left” for Thompson’s “English working class,” let us use the sitdown strike movement of 1936 as our proxy for Thompson’s 1832, our moment of revolutionary possibility that did not yield revolution, but did cement, through direct assertions of autonomous agency, a collective consciousness, an epic cultural construction of a vast, yet elusive, historical collectivity.

The Global Social Explosion
With the concept of the global left in the backs of our minds, consider the forgotten globality of the sitdown strike movement of 1936. In 1936, in a matter of months, sitdown strikes went, broadly speaking, from happening almost nowhere, to happening—again, broadly speaking—almost everywhere. The best-known examples, in the factories of Flint and around Paris, were themselves imitations of less famous sitdowns that had bubbled up in the spring of 1936 in nearby factories, firms, and mines. During what the incoming French prime minister Léon Blum with some ambivalence called the “social explosion” of June 1936, more than two million workers occupied their workplace in the Paris region alone; strikers occupied their workplaces across the country, from the mines in Pas-de-Calais to the cafés of Provence.
The combustible elements of the sitdown, what made the practice spread across France, also allowed it to circulate beyond France, across the entire world economy. Sitdowns hit textile mills in Pondicherry, French India, and in Bombay and Indore, British India, and in Alexandria, Egypt, sugar mills in Casablanca, rubber tire factories in Akron, Ohio, and Clermont-Ferrand, France, and rubber plantations outside of Saigon, Indochina. The variety of industries hit is as remarkable as the geographical reach of the sitdown movement: a tobacco factory in Salonika, a rubber works in Krakow, the Río Tinto mines near Huelva, Spain; mines in Slovenia and in Hungary; a general sitdown strike of the cork factories of Algeria. Construction workers occupied their worksites in pre-Civil War Madrid. And of course, in Barcelona, after a rash of sitdown strikes earlier in the year, revolutionary workers outright collectivized factories such as Ford Ibérica and General Motors Peninsular.

In June 1936 a leaflet appeared amongst Indochina workers: “Comrades, workers in France by the millions have occupied the factories. Let’s emulate them. Let’s rise in revolt, in the factories, on the plantations, in every province and village.... Seize the property of the rich. Long live the revolution in Indochina.” And workers in Indochina did emulate, to the tune of a strike movement of 400 strikes in the 10 months after November 1936; how many of these were sitdowns remains unclear. Alongside the occupations of rubber plantations, such as at the Michelin plantation at Ben Cui, cane cutters built a sitdown movement that swept through the sugar plantations in the Cochinchina province Thuolamot, north of Saigon. (The largest of the sugar plantation sitdown movements, however, was two years later, starting on May Day 1938 in Jamaica, and spreading island-wide through a long, bloody month.) At Mỹ Thọ, the largest of the Mekong Delta’s commercial ports south of Saigon, dredgers, who did the dirty work of unmucking the river, sat down—inside the dredging firm, not in the river—by the hundreds in a pair of strikes during the final weeks of 1936.

Finally in Flint, on the last day of the year 1936, workers occupied Fisher Body Plant Number One, setting off the epic General Motors sitdown strike chronicled by the American labor historian Sidney Fine. The new year saw the movement spread quickly to Trinidad, Jamaica, Brazil, and Argentina, even as more sitdown strikes took place—often in the same factories, with the same strikers—where they had already hit in 1936.

The global sitdown movement was a movement of movements. Locally, sitdown movements generated their initial power in the heavy, metallurgical, industries—such as aviation around Paris, automobiles in Detroit—before spreading across entire local economic landscapes. Tellingly, some of the most immense occupations of department stores were in Paris and Detroit, heavy industry centers. Similarly, it was in the global industries, those most directly hard-wired into global chains of production and consumption, that the sitdown idea was transported long-distance—indeed, the transport industry itself provided the sitdown with its longest shipments, port to port, with dockers sitting down on the docks of Algiers and Bombay, Kingston, New York City, Marseille and Montevideo, across the world market. Once dockers unloaded the sitdown tactic in a local harbor, local workers circulated the practice through the local and regional economy—after a dockers’ sitdown in Oran, sitdowns in local workshops and vineyards followed.

As more and more sitdowns took place, the variety of settings in which a sitdown could be waged became more and more apparent. And the improvisational readings of the sitdown text performed by local actors came to vary as dramatically as did their stages: in Blumfontein, South Africa, laundry workers occupied their laundry works; geisha in Osaka
staged a citywide general sitdown strike; in Ontario, where the influence of the automobile industry sitdowns was pervasive, nurses performed “a ‘lie-down’ strike” on hospital beds to protest working conditions; in Perth Amboy, barbers sat down, not where they themselves worked, but rather in the chairs of competitor, anti-union, barber shops; along the Nile, Coptic monks excommunicated for disobedience staged a militant sitdown strike inside a fortified monastery, drawbridge raised; in Sydney, Australia, a circus performer known as Captain Flager staged what reports recognized as “a novel ‘sit-down strike’” when he refused to leave the lion cage in which he tamed lions.

In a development relevant to the claims I will pursue toward the end of the paper, the sitdown practice spiraled not only from heavy industries and global industries across entire local economies; it spiraled beyond the workplace altogether, across the entire social landscape. Jarrow marchers attempted what they called a stay-in strike inside Westminster at the end of the October 1936 march on parliament. Unemployed people in Tel Aviv staged “a sitdown strike” inside Town Hall, occupying the building for days. What participants and observers understood as “a sit-down strike” inside the Minnesota statehouse saw an unruly crowd occupy the state senate chamber. In Rio de Janeiro, in January 1937, four of the officers behind the November 1935 popular front coup attempt staged a sitdown strike in their jail cells, refusing to appear in court, or even to stand and dress. This was only one bodily tactic that Rio leftists used reminiscent of the sitdown strike—as one correspondent writing out of Rio observed, “The idea is now spreading.”

With the exception of France, nowhere were there more sitdown strikes than in the United States. By June 1937, 1.5 million U.S. workers had made sitdowns. Even in the city of Flint, the UAW workers were not the first to sit down—the municipal bus drivers had sat down only weeks before the famous sitdown at Fisher. Neither was Fisher the first UAW sitdown strike, as UAW workers had already sat down in Atlanta and Cleveland. Steel workers had already sat down in Detroit and in Racine, Wisconsin. Ship workers tied up the national transport industry in 1936 with sitdowns in the harbors of Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Newark, and New York City, infuriating Maritime Commissioner Joseph Kennedy. WPA art students and theater-project workers sat down in New York, glass workers in Ottawa, Illinois, bakers in Detroit. Before the Flint auto sitdown, in December 1936, the New York Times already marvelled at “the latest thing in strikes” to have “cropped up in several parts of the country. Judging from surface impressions, it has certain advantages over the orthodox kind of strike, although its illegality in the seizure of property and its revolutionary implications are obvious.”

A Global Perspective

This global social explosion merits explanation from a global perspective. Part of the explanation has to do with that the globe of 1936 had joined Thompson’s English weavers and croppers in Adam Smith’s pin factory. The mass-production factory, where the sitdown tactic was most logical, where it was most practiced and perfected, had colonized the world by 1936. Thompson recognized this when he was writing The Making of the English Working Class, suggesting hopefully, “Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won.” Ubiquitous across the world of 1936 was what Thompson called “the familiar landscape of disciplined industrial capitalism with the timesheet, the time-keeper, the informers and the fines”: whether in Detroit, or an industrial suburb of Paris or Pondicherry or Saigon, this industrial landscape was a homogenized,
Taylorized, Fordist one of high-walled, often turreted, factories, with the familiar exterior of the factory gate and factory clock, and with the common interior of discrete departments organized for delicately synchronized, deskill division of labor.

I’ve said the heavy industries—especially metallurgy, like the Italian factory occupations of September 1920—were the vanguard of the sitdown movement; it is more to the point to recognize them as the New Industries, the industries made big and concentrated by Fordist mass production: automobiles, auto parts, rubber, oil. Two aspects were critical: these New Industries operated according to the logic of the assembly line, and, as new industries, industrial relations here were radically unsettled—employing proletarianized labor to perform unprecedented tasks in freshly-built factories, without custom to mediate conflict between management and labor. Consider the first major sitdown strike in the world to take place during 1936, the impromptu protest staged by assembly-line workers in the tire department in the Firestone Tire & Rubber Company factory of Akron, on January 29.

The sitdown began at the distinctly Fordist work-hour of 2:00 AM. With the precision sacralized by the assembly-line method, the workers stepped away from their machines at the moment the factory’s omnipresent clocks struck the new hour.

Building tires at 2:00 AM is Thompsonian task-orientation to a utopian degree, and it suggests that not only had the industrial revolution of Thompson’s England expanded geographically across the twentieth-century Fordist world, it had of course intensified, too: with the invention of the night shift, far more than Saint Monday was now consumed by company time. Many of the personal conflicts that led to sitdowns in 1936 were about work-pace, of course with workers criticizing Taylorist speed-ups, but also with management accusing workers of covert slowdown strikes. Such accusations may well have been reactions to actual collective efforts to slow down labor, but in this era of time discipline, for which the speeding up of labor was crucial, such accusations also worked as offensives in the Taylorist campaign in which a customary pace became, relatively, slow. And if mass production defined modern times, certainly so too did the relativity of time.

If the new managerial régime was sure to provoke protest, that does not explain, however, why workers took up the specific protest form of the sitdown. To understand the explosion of sitdowns, it is crucial to understand that workers found the sitdown effective in the new world of assembly-line production and streamlined structure precisely because it answered to this world’s prevailing logic: even those who had not struck at 2:00 were stuck without work. As the Akron sitdowns’ local historian, Ruth McKenney, pointed out, the sitdown strike had “dealt a brutal fatal blow” to “the delicate mechanism of mass production.” Like the strike’s plotters, she saw the tactic’s logic as rooted in the logic of Fordism itself—the logic of time discipline and division of labor that Thompson would write about in its embryonic form. “Engineers had worked for years to synchronize every labor process in the great factory,” McKenney wrote. “The most remote departments were dependent on the flow of materials from some other faraway corner of the great plant. But once the line was broken, factory operations came to an uneven jerking halt.” Again, time-discipline here seems a utopian project, as it finally becomes clear that not only was it, as Thompson made so clear, an attempt to use time to discipline workers, it was an attempt to discipline time itself.

And to discipline space as well. Fordism coordinated far more space than a factory, as impressive as that achievement was: entire industries, even multiple interrelated
industries—connecting rubber plantations in the Dutch East Indies and oilfields in Trinidad and Algeria to rubber factories in Akron and auto parts plants in Minneapolis and automobile factories in Detroit—so much space synchronized by McKenney’s “delicate mechanism.”

Yet its streamlined efficiency was Fordism’s weakness. The sitdown, with its unique affinity to Fordism, showed this. Sitdowns squeezed rationalized mass production’s choke points, and arrested the flow of production across global production systems. One sitdown of a handful of workers in one department in one factory in Cleveland shut down not only the whole factory—impressive as that achievement was—but also factories in Akron and Detroit. Even strikers themselves were taken aback in the wake of the February 1936 Goodyear sitdowns in Akron as they realized they had derailed the entire workings of the largest rubber corporation in the world, with reverberations, it is not too much to say, the entire economic world order. Fisher Body Plant Number 1 in Flint contained one of only two sets of dies in the entire General Motors empire to produce the bodies of all Buicks, Cadillacs, Oldsmobiles, and Pontiacs. “It’s like a game of bowling,” one sitdowner explained. “Knock one pin down and they all come down.”

The Making of the Movement

It is with this, the understated simile of a game of bowling, that I think we ought to turn to thinking explicitly in the terms pursued by E. P. Thompson, for it was common people, acting autonomously, overwhelmingly without organized labor leadership—often directly against union leadership’s orders—who knocked down the pins.

Each performance of a sitdown strike was a complex, improvisational, and contingent event, a far more intellectually robust affair than suggested by a term such as “reception” or “circulation.” Consider the June and July 1936 sitdown strikes in the textile mills of Pondicherry, where unions were prohibited. Hardly remembered by historians, the Pondicherry sitdowns, when they are mentioned, are objectified as “echoes” or “imitations” of the Paris sitdowns. I can’t offer here the detailed ethnography that would best show how much tactical thought, how much spatial maneuvering and countermaneuvering, how much bodily intelligence and sense of place was involved in making and sustaining these sitdowns, but imagine the effort of orchestration to even launch an occupation of vast compounds containing thousands of workers, without management’s discovery in time. The strikers set up covert food supply lines, organized guards at the gates, built barricades, arrested armed managers, self-governed the goings-on inside—the authorities’ description of a “workers’ soviet” no longer sounds so polemical. In light of the mental labors performed in making and sustaining even a single sitdown—the tactical choreography, the sleights of hand, the patching together of internal communication systems—the balance of intellectual heft involved in the transmission of the sitdown idea tilts toward the receiving end, which, considered thus, no longer resembles the metaphor “reception.” The lesson of Pondicherry is that each act of reception was its own production.

Like production, transmission is a distinctly Fordist metaphor, seizing on the notion of a transfer of energy. If the lesson of Pondicherry was that participants produced the sitdown movement sitdown by sitdown, let me turn to Trinidad for a parallel lesson about the movement’s transmission. In his world-spanning 1938 A History of Negro Revolt, C. L. R. James mapped out a global black left connecting Saint Domingue slave revolts in the age of revolution to the Depression years’ black labor uprisings. Among the most recent
insurgencies James recorded were the sitdown strikes that ripped across his homeland island Trinidad in 1937.

James emphasized that the interwar rise of “large-scale industry,” namely oil, on the island had transformed local popular politics. Like rubber, oil was one of Fordism’s New Industries, the energy source of the new economic order: Fordist coal. When oil was found around Fyzabad, southwest of San Fernando, during World War One, the oil industry rapidly paved over southern Trinidad’s peasant agricultural economy. In Depression-era Trinidad, oil was king.

Unsurprisingly, the Trinidadian sitdowns began in the oil fields.

James, who wrote familiarly of the strikers and mentioned at one point having “information from the spot,” suggested that the oil workers had “eagerly read” news reports of the sitdown movements “in France and America.” The comment draws out two critical, albeit implicit, aspects of James’s rendering of the Trinidadian sitdown movement’s making.

First, it was the oil workers who did the reading. James interpolated no broker into the mediation of the global and the local—no intellectual, no formal organization, no movement leader. Unlike accounts of sitdowns elsewhere that canalize cosmopolitan knowledge into the heads of leadership, like Walter Reuther in Detroit, James understood a collective engagement of the oil workers with sitdown text, like latter-day Painite free-thinkers in their taverns, fairgrounds, and congregations. Nor did James then channel the work of putting this knowledge into action to any leadership, formal or otherwise; rather, for James, the turn to occupation tactics was a tacit effort of collective intellection, achieved by countless instances of workers reading not only the newspaper, but also reading each others’ actions, grasping the choices being made, choosing to further the plan-planned-in-motion with one’s own acts. So tactile was the making of sitdowns that some sitdowners described strikes being launched without even an informal declaration being necessary, simply the result of each worker’s reading of each other’s movements.

Second, it was the news that the workers read. Rather than a prepackaged polemic of ideologically predetermined propaganda authorized by a vanguard party, news reports of distant sitdowns, likely from the popular press, provided reading workers all the blueprinting they needed to reimagine the workings of a sitdown in their own surroundings. Through a mass medium such as the newspaper, though also via radio and newsreel film, common people around the world learned of the sitdown idea. Through such transmitters, knowledge of the sitdown reached vast audiences of potential strikers, provided they could interpret the diffused idea and imagine it into a local reconstitution. Even hostile accounts in the bourgeois press, filled with ideological denunciations of disrespect for property and phantasmal conspiracies of Soviet subterfuge, had smuggled within them detailed descriptions of the nuts and bolts of sitdown striking—fragments of tactical intelligence that could be readily decoded if the text was read against the grain.

None of this, of course, is apparent in national histories. And none of it is clear in formal political histories of the left. Indeed, this is a global left very different than one of Socialist and Communist Parties. To trace the spread of a popular practice such as the sitdown gives us a way of imagining the global left as common participants made it, rather than from the vantage point of party headquarters.

Thompson’s approach translates to the global in even more profound ways. Rather than simply trading in national structures for the handiest global structure, the world economy, a Thompsonian attention to the small popular acts of transmission allows us to
see not only the making of the political left as an act of agency, but also to see this transmission—the *globalization* of the left itself—as an act of assertion, an accomplishment in its own right of the self-made left, a globalization accomplished in Thompsonian manner.

**Cultural production**

The cultural production that took place with the sitdowns is reminiscent not only of E. P. Thompson, but of the broader New Left interest in Bakhtinian carnival, of ruptures when the world turned upside down. A counter-culture was produced in motion during the sitdowns themselves—group social experiments conducted in realtime—providing the explosion in the social explosion, the joy of being what one sitdowner called masters of our own house, at least for a day; the joy that Simone Weil famously described seeing among the les ouvrières metallos—the women metallurgists—in Renault factory. As if still mass-producing, sitdowners around the world made makeshift upside-down worlds: parallel carnivals, with dancing, parading, chanting, singing, and gender-bending leveling. Women danced with men and men danced with men and women wore blue jeans and made economic demands ranging from wage equality to paid maternity leave.

The sitdowns concentrated Thompsonian agency into a flash “moment of madness.” They showed culture not simply as a reservoir to be tapped for the formation of a collective, but as, to use Thompson’s word, a happening. If the sitdowns themselves were evanescent affairs, the cultural practices they contributed to did not. Raymond Daniell, the perceptive *New York Times* labor correspondent, wrote in 1937 that Detroit was a “laboratory of social change,” explaining, “Here one feels the shape of things to come is taking form not only in the laboratories and the machine shops but in the minds of the men and women who make up its population.” Labor writer Mary Heaton Vorse explained in *The New Republic* that “the sit-downs of little girls in five-and-tens, of the pleasant, obsequious staffs of big hotels” were “even more shocking” than the Chrysler sitdown. In the face of mass insubordination, Vorse wrote, Detroit élites found their “worst fears” realized: “Revolution indeed was at hand—or rather this proved that there had been a revolution all the time.” Shook by the run of raucous sitdowns in the retail stores, in which overwhelmingly women workers occupied their workplaces, Detroit élites were afflicted by “the jitters,” Vorse wrote, using a word born of the anxious kinesis of modern times.

Though historians largely recognize only the social revolution of 1936 Barcelona, the social explosion was treated as social revolution the world over at the time. Not fooled by the “good humor” and the singing and the “innocent diversions” of the sitdowns, *Echo de Paris* concluded, “All revolutions begin thus. Paris has the sense quite clear that a revolution has begun.”

The joy that *Echo* feared, the joy that Weil knew and that washed over the sitdown movement, lies at the heart of Aristide Zolberg’s classic 1972 essay of political theory, “Moments of Madness.” The word *joy* appears sixteen times in Zolberg’s short piece on the municipal memory of uprising in Paris’s past since 1789. For Zolberg, joy makes revolution, and revolution makes joy. Zolberg’s imagination runs far from revolution as political project, toward instead the pandemonium of upheaval, akin to a carnival.

And though Zolberg articulates his subject as France and in practice confines his claims further, to the city limits of Paris, the non-specialist finds striking that his dates are epochal not only to national history but to a revolutionary history that spans the globe: 1789, 1848, 1936, and 1968. Indeed, Zolberg’s sympathy for unforeseen outbursts of

unstructured politics—for the “moment of immense joy, when daily cares are transcended, when emotions are freely expressed, when the spirit moves men to talk and to write, when the carefully erected walls which compartmentalize society collapse”—takes on greater meaning, exponentially so, when extended around the world. The facility of informal politics to surge rapidly beyond where established structures and networks exist, the discharge of lightning-wild electricity that Zolberg describes pulsing through the streets of Paris, is critical to understanding how a moment of global revolutionary possibility can happen. Indeed, though Zolberg takes French history as “the most interesting case,” he states that he does so ultimately to use “the French case” as “an inviting starting-point” to make sense of “a political phenomenon shared to a greater or lesser extent by all modern societies.” Considered across space and across time, then, these carnival flashes of the world turned upside down are for Zolberg, rather than vestigial gasps of premodern village prepolitics, endemic to modern times.

The Global Left

This endemism is what I want to conclude with.

In Culture in the Age of Three Worlds, cultural theorist Michael Denning places Thompson’s Making of the English Working Class at the center of his understanding of the global left as the sum of on-going subterranean popular movements that burst into view during global moments of madness. Denning points out that between Making’s classic preface and conclusion of epic coming to consciousness, a much “stranger and more interesting book” is hidden within, a book of lost revolutionary chances—like 1819 and 1832—that nonetheless leave shards of social revolution in the soil, like land mines, that explode only later; their impact revealing finally in retrospect a radical culture connecting Paine, Blake, and Southcott to the new left present, with Noam Chomsky, Denning suggests, the new Tom Paine.

Certainly, the revolutionary implications of the sitdowns connect the global social explosion of 1936 to previous moments of madness like 1789. The sitdowners’ poaching of factory grounds signified an incursion of the Enlightenment left upon the Burkean hierarchy that remained intact in the factories—an attempt at social democracy, to press the democracy won in the political sphere into the economic sphere, into society’s retrenched bastions of privilege and subjection, reinforced and secured by the workplace’s enclosure as private property.

Denning’s reading of Making, however, also pulls the book forward to Thompson’s new left. One of the aspects about researching the sitdowns of ’36 that charmed me was that the sources kept comparing them to Gandhi’s 1930 Salt March: civil disobedience, direct action, sitting passively in the way of what you’re protesting. I took it all for armchair comparative sociology until I happened upon mention that an inspiration of Gandhi’s was a sitdown strike—when he was in South Africa, 1890s, he was involved with miners who protested by staging “stay-down strikes” in the mines. Then, I started finding “sit-down strikes” scattered in the years after the social explosion, small actions that sustained popular radicalism in its lean years, like the sitdown of braceros in an Idaho cherry orchard in 1945. Most striking to me was that in the late ’30s, and thru the ‘40s, African Americans staged “sitdown strikes” in places that weren’t their worksites—already, at the tail end of the social explosion, in 1939, African American lawyer Samuel Tucker staged a sitdown strike the Alexandria, Virginia, public library, to protest Jim Crow; Tucker’s defiance, when
remembered now, however, is recognized not as the sitdown strike it was called then, but "the nation’s first sit-in."

When the Greensboro sit-ins started at Woolworth’s in 1960, initial press accounts were as likely to call them sit-down strikes as sit-ins, and some included comparisons to the ‘30s sit-down strikes—and of course references to Gandhi. There actually had been sitdown strikes in Woolworth’s during the social explosion, led by the women who worked at Woolworth’s, rather than potential consumers.

The centrality of occupation tactics, epitomized by the sitdown, to a longue-durée global left, connecting the old and the new left, began to appear evident once one had connected sitdowns to sit-ins. In 1966, Dick Leitsch from the Mattachine Society staged a sip-in at the Julius on West 10th Street to protest the liquor code’s ban on serving homosexuals, openly declaring he was a homosexual and asking to be served nonetheless. In ‘68 and the years that followed, students at countless colleges in countless countries staged sit-ins, including at Thompson’s Warwick. Students occupied administration buildings and campus chemistry labs tasked with research related to chemical warfare agents. Around Paris, the sit-ins happened in tandem with renewed sitdown strikes by industrial workers. The logic of occupation remained the same for the rest of a long twentieth century, even if the place of occupation shifted with the power source being challenged, from Gdansk Dockyard to Tiananmen Square, to Tahrir Square and to the Wisconsin state capitol, and Zucotti Park around the corner from Wall Street.

This all is the handiwork of crowds, Thompsonian crowds, radically unorganized and informal: direct actions, autonomous assertions of common people. Predictably, even sympathetic criticism of these ephemeral movements from the institutional left has focused on their lack of leadership, structure, and organization; precisely the conclusions reached by previous historians about Thompson’s subjects.

The same was true of the sitdowns of 1936. The sitdowns’ lack of leadership and formality that contemporary intellectuals condemned was actually the sitdown tactic’s direct-action evasion of structured hierarchy. Acknowledging the potency of the sitdown, journalist Willis Thornton warned, “Danger of the sit-down strike is that it is almost too easy to instigate.” Popular political assertion met opposition from formal political players. Such a radically democratic power, available to common workers on the shopfloor, unmediated by any parliamentary process, caused widespread disturbance. “That is why,” Thornton noted, “responsible union leaders have been scarcely less concerned than employers in watching ‘the sit-downs of 1936.”’ The condescension of posterity has its roots in the condescension of contemporaries.
The Bright Young Things of the Holocaust:
The Terezín ghetto as a society of inequalities

Anna Hájková, University of Warwick

Introduction

The Holocaust has been usually interpreted as a place outside of the social and historical concepts; many scholars seemed to assumed that such an extraordinarily violent, tragic event happened outside the confines of our usual social mechanism, calling for special sets of analytical categories (in Israel, there are entire separate course for disciplines of the Holocaust). Yet others were apprehensive analyzing the victim society in the Holocaust through usual concepts such as class or gender would somehow make it more banal, would fail to explain the monstrosity of the event. These issues turned even more delicate when the scholars moved to the victims’s society.¹

Yet the Holocaust society was very much part and parcel of larger history; like every other society, the various societies and communities in the Holocaust differentiated, created social hierarchies based on different access to resources, status, and prestige. These differentiations were based on the characteristics and circumstances of the settings at hand, but were also influenced by the society before the war. The main difference to our “normal” society would be the consequences: small disparity in access to food or job assignment translated into life and death, or the time point of dying.

In order to grasp and theorize the stratification dynamics of a society under duress (indeed, any society), we have to observe and understand it very closely, discerning the cultural traits, rituals, habits, and mentality. History of everyday life owes much to The Making of English Working Class, and EPT’s reading of culture set standards in what too is culture. Holocaust victims -- the overwhelming majority of whom were murdered without any testimony -- are a prime example of the “little forgotten people.”² The fact that they have been slaughtered should not divert us from analyzing their social mechanisms, agency and mentality; focusing on class structure and differentiation can answer this inquiry.

In this paper, I show how the inmate society in Terezín became stratified and on what base class was negotiated here. Just like EPT suggested fifty years ago, the class in the ghetto was relational. I have been using the Terezín ghetto as a springboard to analyze larger issues of human behavior under duress, class formation in a moment of perhaps the largest sustained transnational encounter in the modern Central European history. Working with the theory of Pierre Bourdieu, I include the concepts of habitus, social, symbolic, and other forms of capital, social field etc, in studying emergence of class, going

¹ Analyzing the perpetrators with tools of social sciences was established more quickly: James Waller, Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002).
beyond solely economic definition. With the help of EPT, Bourdieu, and other theoretical footing I demonstrate how social hierarchy was fed by ethnicity, habitus, culture, age, and access to resources. People’s former class belonging was at best only a weak factor; their former cultural taste and habitus, on the other hand, became quite defining. Ethnicity [or nationality, if you want], habitus, and social capital in particular, I believe, are new factors to our understanding of class formation. Not only does society always differentiate in social hierarchy; ethnic, cultural, and racial differentiation is equally prominent. Ethnically homogenous settings are rare in history, but in addition, my research suggests that class differentiation goes hand in hand with ethnicizing differences. When thinking about class, we must also think about ethnicity and conceptualize how the triple unit of race/ethnicity/culture interplays with social differentiation.

When thinking about class analysis and the Nazism, the classic analysis would be the conservative Marxist approach, explaining the rise of Fascism out of imperialism and capitalism. For decades, this interpretation was the dictated framework for scholars beyond the Iron Curtain who wanted to work about the persecution of Jews (which never was exactly a hot topic). Whether the rise of National Socialism, race hatred and Nazi persecution of the Jews was an effect of class structure and capitalism is not in the focus of my topic -- and I believe that such super focus must miss and obscure the explanations. Rather, I concentrate here on the social dynamic of a forced, interethnic society consisting of former Central and Western European middle and upper middle class. I argue that in analyzing their dynamics, we can learn much about the social and cultural history of the long mid-century.

Background Terezín

Terezín (or Theresienstadt in German) was founded in November 1941 as a transit camp for Jews of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. It’s an old garrison town, located on half way between Prague and Dresden. Since June 1942, the SS send also the elderly and merited e German and Austrian Jews here. The function of Terezín changed into that of serving as a ghetto for the elderly, and as a “camp for the privileged.” Later still, the SS fashioned Terezín into a propaganda camp to be shown to an international delegation of the Red Cross. While this aspect dominates public perceptions what is ignored, however, is the rather minor impact that the Red Cross visit and the subsequent propaganda film had on daily life in the ghetto. Prisoners died of malnutrition, were surrounded by dirt and vermin, and lived with the ever-present threat of deportation to the East, which they feared to be deadly. The SS used Terezín as a transit ghetto: transport came in and out. The deportations were first directed to the Riga ghetto, later to ghettos and killings sites in Belarus and Eastern Poland, and from late October 1942, only to Auschwitz-Birkenau. From the 87,000 people who were deported from Terezín to the East, only about 4,000 survived. Nearly 34,000 people died in Terezín of diseases related to malnutrition, the

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4 Karel Lagus and Josef Polák, Město za mřížemi (Prague: Naše vojsko, 1964); Miroslav Kárný, “Konečné řešení”: Genocida českých židů v německé protektorátní politice (Prague: Academia, 1991). Kárný was a lifelong Marxist and followed this worldview on his own.
majority of them elderly. Terezín was the only ghetto to stand until the end of the war, when on May 9, 1945, ca 15,000 of the veteran inmates were liberated.

Altogether 148,000 Jews were transported to Terezín, of these almost 74,000 came from the Protectorate, over 42,000 from the Germany, and over 15,000 from Austria. These “large” groups were followed by smaller groups of Jews from the Netherlands (4,900), Denmark (471), and towards the end of the war, also Slovakia and Hungary (1,400 and 1,150, respectively). Families lived separated, men and women in different rooms with bunk beds for between eight to sixty inhabitants. Most children were accommodated in Czech and German-language youth homes. Terezín fell under the administration of the SS, but with only thirty members present, the SS was thinly represented; Czech gendarmes did the actual guarding. The Nazis were largely absent from the face of the ghetto. Several prisoners remarked that weeks could go by without meeting a SS man.

The ghetto had a Jewish self-administration, a combination of different “national” (Czech, German, Austrian, etc.) and “ideological” (Zionists, Czecho-Jewish) streams. The self-administration was headed by an “Elder of the Jews” together with a “Council of Elders,” the Terezín version of Jewish Council. The self-administration created a complicated system of departments in charge of every single branch of life in the ghetto. In this respect, Terezín was rather over- than under- organized. Unlike Lodz and other places, Terezín never became a labor ghetto. Due to the run-down conditions of the town and high percentage of elderly, 90 percent of the labor was used to maintain the town’s infrastructure. There was general labor duty for everyone between sixteen and sixty years of age, though the age boundaries shifted throughout the duration of the ghetto.

Czech Jews were the first to be deported to the ghetto, and by seven months’ difference were the pioneer group. They were also the largest group in the ghetto, and the only one with a sizeable young and middle-aged population: the Czech Jews were the only group deported to Terezín in its entirety. The later arrivals often perceived the Czech Jews as homogeneous. The “foreigners” remarked on their shared characteristics, looks, and cultural traits.

Genesis of young Czech Jews as veterans

The first two transports were deported to Terezín from Prague in November and early December 1941 were called Aufbaukommando (construction detail) and included 1,342 men between 18 and 50 years of age, according to the order of the Central Office for Jewish Emigration. Many of these men were registered with the Jewish community as technicians, engineers, and other practical professions. Their task was to prepare from the empty barracks to accommodate the incoming prisoners. The Aufbaukommando members had set the technical necessities such as electricity and water. As the transports from Prague and Brno started arriving, it was the task of the Aufbaukommando to make sure people were

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8 Paul Stux, YVA, O1, 288.
accommodated and got by. In the beginning, the conditions were horrifying, with the organisation only emerging, in the cold, without a hospital or washing rooms. Although the men from the Aufbaukommando were in Terezín only a few weeks, sometimes only a week longer than others, it was enough to lay basis for differentiation. Aufbaukommando members were perceived as someone informed about the infrastructure, in good humor, and as source of strength. Eva Mándlová, a young woman from Prague, met her former acquaintance, an Aufbaukommando member: “I spoke to Mio. It made me so happy. He was here with some suitcases. He looked fabulous, but I almost did not recognise him. He's big and strong and seems to be doing well.”

The transports out of Terezín started within six weeks of its foundation; the members of the Aufbaukommando were however protected, as a promise of the SS commandant. The SS made the Council of Elders set up the lists for deportations, according to given orders: the toll was given, and special demands or categories for protection, such as German Jews, TB sick, or orphans (sometimes these categories were protected, later the exactly same were marked for deportation). The deportations defined core families (spouses with children under 18 years of age) as an entity. The Aufbaukommando members were allowed to extend their protection to their core families. As a consequence, the men from the Aufbaukommando became much sought after partners. The protection as Aufbaukommando member was the best safekeeping of a large group in Terezín; even if some of the members were deported before September 1944 (some of whom joined their relatives when they were sent away). In fall 1944, the SS took over the organization of the transports and sent two thirds of the prisoners to Auschwitz.

As more people arrived, the Aufbaukommando’s importance grew: they were the most senior among the inmates and most had very good positions, which meant better access to food. They were friends with one another and built solid social networks. But some of the prestige of the Aufbaukommando stretched beyond its boundaries, because the members shared their characteristics with their friends and relatives who arrived after them -- other young Czech men (and in a different way also women). The external looks of these people were the same: young relatively well fed men who spoke Czech or German with Czech accent. These were the people whom the Aufbaukommando members included in their community and offered help. Viktor Kosák, a young physician from Prague, who arrived in January 1943, summarized his settling in in the ghetto: “Friends are one’s best luck.” Arnošt Klein, who was almost 65 when he arrived in May 1942, made a similar experience when he fell ill and then met a “good acquaintance,” V. S., who had arrived with the second Aufbaukommando: “Here I could find out what a great and fine guy he was, and we became good friends. VS tows me...into the infirmary room, softly pats the behind of the nurse, and as if it was the most natural thing in the world, places me into the best spot in an immaculate bed.”

The Aufbaukommando members gained advantageous positions such as cooks, butchers, agricultural workers, physicians, youth care workers, technicians, or good administrative positions. The jobs in the kitchen facilitated the appointees a better access to food, be it by better food rations or stealing, the latter ended the employees with a high

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9 Eva Mándlová Roubíčková’s diary, copy at the archive of the Terezín Initiative Institute, Czech translation by EMR, entries for December 1941, especially December 23.
10 Viktor Kosák to friends, January 10, 1943. Private archive.
11 Arnošt Klein’s diary, undated (first entry for May 1942), ŽMP, Terezín, 324.
prestige. Many of the advantageous jobs offered some protection from the deportations. When filling the toll for leaving transports, the numbers would be delegated down to each department (as well as nationality group), which then reported its “dispensable” and “indispensable” workers. Thus the definition of protection was both positive and negative. This protection played little role for the Aufbaukommando members, but it did indeed for other young Czech men.

The food supply in Terezín was insufficient and included almost no fruit, vegetables, or proteins: the majority of those who died succumbed to diseases caused by starvation. The self-administration introduced a complicated food categorization system which divided workers into roughly three categories: hard laborers (often those who did jobs considered indispensable) were entitled to more food rations than either normal workers or non-workers. Both men and women were categorized as hard laborers. An overwhelming majority of the hard laborers, who were treated as paragons -- similar to the Aufbaukommando veterans, were Czech Jews.

The prisoner community in Terezín, in spite of the many ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and generational differences, was surprisingly coherent -- unlike the much more fragmented ghetto societies in Lodz or Warsaw. The inmate society produced several key perceptions. There was a strong notion of labor ethics which stressed the virtue of everyone's responsibility for maintaining the infrastructure, keeping the ghetto working. Indeed, some testimonies portrayed Terezín almost like a (Jewish) city state, prisoners as citizens. The community acknowledged that Aufbaukommando veterans did some of the most important work. A key element of that coherence was a unifying master narrative produced already in the ghetto, according to which Terezín was the Holocaust site where Jews, banished from their homes and marked as pariahs, proved they could salvage something good from something bad. In Terezín, this narrative maintained, Jews demonstrated that they could excel at manual labor, take care of the most vulnerable (children), and produce outstanding cultural events. This master narrative -- which in a somewhat modified form shaped the reception of Terezín today, the “legend of Terezín” -- in turn produced corresponding memories.

Living space in the overcrowded ghetto was another coveted asset. Families lived apart, men and women in different rooms with bunk beds for eight to two hundred inhabitants. Prisoners strove to live with their family in a room of their own. For those who were single, their own room represented a chance to have an intimate life. Terezín had a lively sexual and romantic life: intimacy and attachment were major coping mechanisms in

\[12\] Jan Grauer describes the line of action for Productions: testimony on Rudolf Freiberger from January 5, 1945 (sic, actually 1946), AMV, 305-633-1, p. 289; Šalom na pátek, August 13, 1943, explanation of “šuclyste”, YVA, O64, 64; Petr Erben on the monthly indispensability lists in the Youth Care in his Po vlastních stopách (Prague: Kalina, 2003): 46 and 51.

\[13\] Circulair of the Labor Center, January 28, 1944, YVA, O64, 34.


\[15\] Letter of Elly and Ernst Michaelis to anonymous friends (1945), LBI, AR 11148.
Panel 6: Anna Hájková, “Terezín ghetto as a society of inequalities” 6

a place where everyone was surrounded by hunger, filth, insects, and fear of deportation. Finding a romantic or sexual partner offered a sense of physical solace. People dated, fell in love, sought protection and emotional comfort, and did not want to be alone in the ghetto. Some fortunate inmates, usually those with connections and sufficient resources for barter, such as cooks or butchers, built themselves so-called kumbáls [a cubbyhole in Czech].

A kumbál was a tiny room, usually self-built from wood in an attic, which in the social field of Terezín involved much more than “just” an accommodation. When a man could mention to a lady acquaintance his ability to invite her to his kumbál, it significantly improved his chances that she might accept the invitation. This consequently changed his social position among his friends: He was a man with a kumbál, and a man receiving ladies’ attentions. Moreover, his less fortunate friends would ask him if he could sublet it to them, in exchange for favours or food. Franz Hahn, a young Viennese physician, recalled how revered the men of the Aufbaukommando were -- and that one of the key moments of higher status was independent accommodation:

Theresienstadt was built up by the Czechs from Prague. There was the so-called AK1 and AK2, Aufbaukommando 1 and Aufbaukommando 2. These were the people who built it up under the most difficult conditions. Well, these people were privileged...Well, when someone from the AK1 came, for us, he walked on water. People from AK held such and such important positions. They had it better, they had a small room, and if one had even the tiny hole of one’s own, that was already...

Sexual and romantic life in Terezín reflected its social and gender hierarchies. As so many other things of the ghetto, intimate encounters underlay a set of rules of conduct which were pronoucedly economic in nature. Before a relationship was established, or if the sexual encounter was not lasting, the man was expected to bring the woman something to eat, a morsel. Conversely, having an intimate life boosted man’s status. When Ernst Michaelis, an elderly Berliner, complained about the corruption at the distribution of food, he pointed out how those in charge of food and food magazines dealt with stolen goods, bought golden watches, and “had the prettiest girlfriends.” Being intimacy with an attractive female was a means of displaying status, but at the same time also confirmed it.

Cultural life, the one aspect perhaps the most closely associated with Terezín, reflected just as much the social hierarchies and differences. Concerts, theater plays, and lectures became a Terezín fixture: cultural activities had a number of functions for the prisoners, not least were a serious option what to do in one’s spare time in a place without cinema, dancing halls, or possibility to go for a hike. Cultural life moreover became popular because it affirmed the cultural ties of the prisoners: for the Czech and Danish Jews in their Czechness and Danishness, respectively, for the German and Austrian their continuing status as educated bourgeoisie. Certain cultural events, in particular vocal music and opera, acquired a particularly desired position as “it activities.” Parents of young children

16 Malka Zimet to her brother, November 1, 1945, YVA, O7, 381.
or people who were supporting dependent family members usually did not have time to go, and so it was usually either the elderly or the younger and single people who attended. Fritz Silten, a German-Dutch chemist, reminisced after the war about the performances in a letter to his fellow inmate Fritz Rathenau (cousin of Walter’s) how many people worked hard and were too tired in the evening to go to an events. Moreover, one needed relationships to the right functionaries to get one’s hands on the tickers, and so in the end, the audience was always the same people.  

A particularly well-known production was Raphael Schächter’s Requiem by Giuseppe Verdi. The second premiere of Requiem took place in January 1944 with representatives of the Council of Elders in attendance. The show was so popular that most interested people did not get in; one of the less fortunate hopefuls was Eva Mändlová, a popular, young, Czech woman with a “good” position as a shepherdess, and someone most likely to secure tickets. Schächter was roommate in a kumbál of Edgar Krása, a head cook. Krása (who is still alive and lives in a suburb of Boston) was deported with the Aufbaukommando and as a 18-year old one head cook was named head in one of the eleven centralized kitchens. He acted as a patron to several artists, bringing food to musicians and painters. (The provisions were not from his rations but from kitchen supplies). Interactions such as these went beyond the seeming “simple” support of the arts: in looking after the artists, or offering the immensely beloved, charismatic Schächter to become his flatmate, in associating with the beloved, revered artists, Krása exchanged economic capital for symbolic.

To sum up, the social elite of beautiful young people led, to the extent possible in Terezín, a comfortable life: they had “good” jobs, were relatively protected from transports, lived in a kumbál or a room shared with friends, had access to sufficient food, were comparably well-dressed, and had access to the desired cultural events. The young men played soccer, admired by thousands of onlookers, and the players received extra food from the kitchen supplies from befriended cooks. Young Czech women were also part of the social elite, yet their membership was defined relationally. They were someone’s partners, friends, or sisters; or they were members because their behavior was gender-appropriate for young Czechs. The social elite of young Czech Jews flirted, dated, and had access to a space where they could be intimate with their partners. Their privileged position was legitimized in the master narrative, even though some noticed the blatant social inequalities. Fellow observant inmates named them the “jeunesse dorée,” displaying humor with a touch of criticism. The phrase, describing the golden youth in times of transition (both the end of the French 18th century as well as the youth of the Roaring Twenties), is perhaps better known in English as the Bright Young Things. Their youth happened to take place in the ghetto, and thanks to a number of factors, they were able to make the best of it. Most of the Terezín Bright Young Things were eventually deported to Auschwitz, albeit on average at a later point than others. Thanks to the shorter time they had to survive in the

21 Fritz Silten to Fritz Rathenau, October 22, 1946, NIOD, 250n Adler, 13b/52.
22 Eva Mändlová-Roubičková’s diary, entry for December 20, 1943 (the entry is probably misdated and is from early January 1944).
24 Šalom na pátek, nr. 4, 1943, YVA, O64, 64; Irma Semecká, Torso naděje (Prague: Antonín Vlasák, 1946): 92.
camps and also to the fact that as childless and young, they had a chance to survive the selection upon arrival, a “large” percentage of them survived. Indeed, a disproportionate part of the Terezín survivors belonged to the social elite, coloring how they remember and narrate their youth in the ghetto -- and accordingly the continuing legend of Terezín.

In order to contextualize their narratives and recognize the social elite as such, it’s momentous to look how did the life in Terezín look like for the other prisoners. People outside of the social elite were on a hierarchical scale which we could think as a uneven pyramidal tube rather than a ladder. Three factors defined the social position of an individual: age, ethnicity/culture, and social capital (both access to networks and other forms) (a fourth factor, albeit a weaker one, was seniority).

On the bottom were the elderly, that is people over 60 years of age. There was a general labor duty for all ghetto residents, from 14-18 years (the boundaries shifted throughout the three and half years of the ghetto) to 60 (after November 1944, 70) years of age. The food categories of the self-administration differentiated food rations according to the worker status, between hard laborers, normal workers, and non workers. (Children and sick received yet different portions) In 1943/44, the daily portions were assessed at 2,141 kcal for hard labourers, 1,630 kcal normal workers, 1,759 kcal children, and non-workers 1,487 kcal. However, these rations were only the ideal amounts. The non-workers also received the smallest variety of food: they were given no meat, milk, flour, potatoes, or barley. Access to additional food rations changed over time. Moreover, there were also bonuses, Zubussen: for hard laborers, children and mothers, and convalescents. It is important to note, however, that the above overviews are not entirely reliable. Portions of the non-workers were often the source for additional extras for the workers. Moreover, most of the employees in kitchen and bakeries enriched themselves, some to support their families, others to impress artists, and a few kitchen workers dealt in large scale barter.

The elderly usually received inferior accommodation (organized by the department of Space Management). In the first weeks, sometimes months in the ghetto they were assigned in the attics, the least habitable (and hence still empty) space in the town, without electricity, beds, or washrooms. If they survived this period, most elderly were allocated to the small civilian houses (as opposed to the large barracks) where the infrastructure was not as fixed up. The elderly did not have to work, and were often too weak to try to become part of the workforce. But work represented at the same time an opportunity to make new acquaintances, see new space, and often have an access to surplus food -- for instance as potato peelers, or doing a job where the worker could gain something that could be bartered. The combination of these factors, small and inferior portions, absence of opportunities to get to alternative access to food, and particularly menial, unhygienic accommodation led to massive mortality: 84% of the elderly population (of those who were not deported further to the East) died in Terezín. The overwhelming majority (92%)
of the 33,600 dead of Terezín were people over sixty years of age. Only 2.7% of the dead were people younger than 45 years of age. No other group (defined by age or ethnicity) had more than a 12% likelihood to die in Terezín. The following table shows the mortality of Czech, German, and Austrian Jews born in 1890, 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of birth</th>
<th>% mortality Czech Jews</th>
<th>% mortality German Jews</th>
<th>% mortality Austrian Jews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>6.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The elderly died of diseases caused by malnutrition. Some of the old people noted that sleeping became uncomfortable because they could feel their bones. Louis Salomon, a 74-year-old Berliner, was amazed that he could lose 48 kg and still be alive. In spring 1943, Karl Loewenstein, the head of the Ghetto Guard, visited the pathology department. He was shocked: “The corpses of those who died, whom I got to see here, were only bones covered by skin. These dead had literally starved to death. I saw corpses who were no heavier than a small child.” When he inquired about the situation, the physicians confirmed that such corpses were the norm.

Most of the deported German and Austrian Jews were old and arrived to Terezín without their children (who had emigrated or had been deported elsewhere). In the perception of the younger Czech inmates, the elderly are uniformly depicted as sick, begging, emaciated, irritingly German figures. The interesting part is that the Czech elderly, whose children and grandchildren were present, had nearly the same mortality rates -- and are remembered similarly, or most often: not at all. The social elite lived in

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30 Counted at the point of liberation.

31 I took the birth years 1890 etc. as samples. I excluded those who died in the Small Fortress or were executed by the SS (four Czech men born in 1920). I did not include the Jews from the Netherlands or Denmark because most of the former spent less than nine months in Terezín; the material conditions of the Danes improved significantly after March 1944. Silvia Goldbaum Tarabini Fracapane, “Wir erfuhren, was es heißt, hungrig zu sein:” Aspekte des Alltagslebens dänischer Juden in Theresienstadt” in Der Alltag im Holocaust: Jüdisches Leben im Großdeutschen Reich 1941-1945, eds. Doris Bergen, Andrea Löw, and Anna Hájková (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2013): 199-216.

32 Marie Klánová’s notes, 1943, APT, A, 344.

33 Diary of Louis Salomon (written in May 1945, this entry is hence written retrospectively), YVA, O33, 1560.


36 Interview J. F., ŽMP, Vzpomínky, 172; Miloš Pick, Naděje se vzdát neumím (Brno: Doplněk 2010): 35.
their own bubble, they registered the deprived but did not consider them part of their world, similar to the mechanism described by James Vernon.  

There is much to be said about the famine situation in Terezín and how using Amartya Sen’s model of misdistribution helps understanding the mechanism at hand. Yet the point I want to make here is how strong was the category of age (when as high age) in differentiating the prisoner community -- a factor much stronger than any else. The elderly were often perceived as not a lesser members of the community; some even characterized the old people in a way as beings outside of the community, in Agambean sense *homo sacer*, biological as opposed to social life. The elderly, on the other hand, when they did not die in the first weeks, were often engaged observers and keen participants in the inmate community. They internalized to the master narrative, considered the jeunesse dorée of young Czech Jews beautiful and worth the admiration. If they survived, the old German, Austrian, and Czech Jews often authored the first reports about Terezín, while their fellow young survivors were usually busy rebuilding their lives. However, the reports of the old have not made it to the canon of how Terezín is written about and remembered.

Ethnicity in Terezín became a key differentiating factor in processes of ex- and inclusion. Alongside to the ethnicizing in the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia, where national indifference and amphibians were disappearing and the inhabitants shifted more saliently Czech (or German), this process continued with the Czech Jews in Terezín. (These were people who, especially the older generations, were bilingual or spoke German, and not all of them had a Czech groupness.) They spoke increasingly Czech. Many, whether consciously or unconsciously, exercised their sense of belonging in connection with matters they understood as fundamentally Czech: reciting the poetry of Karel Hynek Mácha and František Halas, listening to the music of Smetana and Mozart (whom Czech tradition adopted as a Czech composer), relating to Czech lieux de mémoire such as the Prague Castle or Tomáš Masaryk, and finally, in a distinct aesthetic sense. A refrain among Czech cultural activities was the (triumphal, happy, wise) return home – theatre plays, children’s drawings, even graffiti. Under a map of Czechoslovakia pinned on a wall, someone scribbled, echoing a poem of Josef Sládek, “We have been and we shall be, we


came and we shall go.”43 A production of Bedřich Smetana’s Bartered Bride, opera traditionally coded as an expression of Czech patriotism, was staged to raving emotional reactions. This turn to Czechness had probably a multitude of reasons: a continuation of the ethnicized processes from the Protectorate (reaction to the German occupation) but also the existential humiliation and distress of being deported -- and perhaps also experience of Czech antisemitism.44 Finally, after half a year in Terezín, since June 1942 came the “foreign” Jews, whose presence contributed to the homogenization of Czechness of the Czech Jews. Previously, Czech-German ethnic struggles had been negotiated according to certain fixed categories: language, for instance, was a defining category of belonging; class, culture, and kinship were secondary.45 Removed from this setting, Czech Jews could no longer define their groupness via language or class. In Terezín they negotiated the categories of ethnic belonging alongside culture and kinship. At the same time, this ethnicized undertone came to the fore in depiction of others. When the Czech inmates described the German, Austrian, or Dutch prisoners, be it old people or young, or even sometimes prisoners who were of partially Jewish background (Geltungsjuden, children of mixed parentage categorized as Jews), they depicted them as markedly socially and culturally different, and differing also physically and behaviorally. The only moment when the “foreigners” were depicted as “normal” was when integrated in Czech context: for instance, when Cologne youngsters were dancing with Czech partners, as described in the memoir of rabbi Richard Feder: Their [Czech youngsters’] singing attracted the German youth and infected them. They also started singing but for obvious reasons they sang only Hebrew songs. And so the Czech and Hebrew singing followed one another. And then someone brought a harmonica, played a waltz, and Czech boys asked the German girls to dance, and so did the German boys, and so they became friends. They had a mutual fate. The German and later the Dutch youth learned a lot of Czech, and I met girls from Berlin and Amsterdam who were fluent in Czech. They liked the Czech songs and they particularly loved singing ‘Kolíne, Kolíne!’46

German and Austrian Jews employed a similar mechanism, portraying the Czech prisoners in consistently ethnicized terms, as strikingly non-Jewish looking, a “far-reaching, assimilated,” and “beautiful race.” This “assimilated” look was sometimes interpreted as Slavic, for instance by Otto Bernstein: “A beautiful race. Splendid boys – well-built young women. A pasture for the eyes. The Slavic type was prevalent; assimilation in Czechoslovakia seems to be far advanced.”47 Such looks were also classified as “Germanic.”

43 Theatre plays: “Ben Akiba lhal” [Ben Akiba lied], Willy Mahler’s diary, entry for August 14, 1944; drawings: Helga Weissová-Hošková, “The birthday wish I & II,” Zeichne, Was Du Siehst, 94-95, 98-99; testimony of Jiří Borský, BTA, 66 (“Byli jsme a budem, přišli jsme a půjdem.”) The last word of the inscription, půjdem [we will go], referred to the return home rather than leaving on a transport, endowing the slogan with a heroic rather than an ironic note.


46 Richard Feder, Židovská tragedie: Dějství poslední (Kolin: Lusk, 1947): 52f.

47 Testimony of Otto Bernstein.
Rosa Salomon from Berlin noted: “The Czechs are an entirely different sort of people than we are. The women are of a proud posture and astonishing height, true Valkyries; the men Siegfrieds and Gunthers. I haven’t seen such people even in Sweden.” This ethnicized gaze very much reflected the social hierarchies of the ghetto. The German and Austrian narrators viewed the Czech Jews in markedly ethnic and physical terms, as tall, athletic, and “non-Jewish.” This perceived lack of Jewishness was always interpreted as beautiful, non-Jewish looks were positively coded. Ethnicity in these depictions -- and indeed mentality -- was interconnected with culture; the boundaries between racial/national/ethnic turn to be, I believe, artificial.

Prisoners with high social capital -- prisoners with good social skills, ability to blend in and gain friends, attractive women, and people with access to network could counteract their ethnic and sometimes also age differences. Belonging in Terezín was negotiated according to ethnic boundaries. The Zionists in Terezín had hardly any “foreign” members. Leo Säbel, a young Danish-German man of the Youth Aliyah, described the Hechalutz members in the ghetto: “no, you could not be a part of it, they kept apart.”48 Two German Jews who were considered members, Berthold Simonsohn and Sonia Okun, were accepted only after much effort on their part; Simonsohn also dated a Czech Zionist, Truda Guttmannová from Olomouc.49 One of the few Austrian members, Aron Menczer, who formerly organized the Youth Aliyah, was accepted because the Hechalutz leadership knew and liked him from before.

Interethnic romantic and sexual relationships were a poignant imprint of power hierarchies. If a Czech man did start a relationship with a non-Czech woman, she was often integrated into his social circle and learned Czech.50 Usually the “foreign” women were very attractive or in some other way particularly feminine; these relationships were nearly always sexual.51 The “foreign” women invested social capital in the form of attractiveness and a readiness to fit in within the social field of their partner. The Czech men invested symbolic and economic capital.

Conclusion:

To come back where we began: the victims’ society in the Holocaust was a class society too. Using Terezín as an example, this paper has demonstrated how stratified, fragmented, and interconnected the prisoner community was. Applying class is fundamentally helpful in understanding the societal mechanism, because the factors behind the emergence of classes were central to the very nature of Terezín. Which is something what made EPT’s work so important and makes it relevant today, fifty years later: writing about class and its making, we write about the most important aspects of a society.

48 Interview of the author with Leo Säbel, January 22, 2010, Charlottenlund.
The inmate society in Terezín was not just and was not equal (even though it is remembered and often depicted in historiography as such), but analyzing the social differences should not confuse us that it was not the German state organizing and implementing the genocide. The Jews in Terezín behaved like people always do: they created distinctions and made friends, fought for resources and shared them with those whom they considered their close one. What these distinctions and resources were and how these friends were chosen was specific to the ghetto, and these specifics than shaped the social field. Analyzing class in the ghetto brings agency and individuality back to the people of whom we otherwise only know that they were slaughtered. It also gives complexity to a place usually narrated as a sentimental cliché.52

What may appear to us as very small differences or privileges, things such as accommodation, a bit of food, or theater tickets, were a major social statement in this context. Here I find Bourdieu’s take on social capital particularly helpful. Economic capital was important,53 but not defining: social capital, status and prestige, the specific set-up of the ghetto, age, ethnicity, the mix of the people present, the preceding culture -- all these factors contributed to genesis of class.

Ethnicity is very much part of how stratification takes place and in many ways translates to class. Instances how ethnicity was negotiated in Terezín (which I could sketch here only briefly), demonstrate how crucial the construction of ethnic/cultural difference is. Distribution of economic capital is not the only factor that characterizes stratification of a community: ethnic and cultural differences play also a role. Various class group are often characterized not only as socially, but also ethnically (and connected to this, culturally) different. Terezín was a transnational place, perhaps somewhat artificial in the scale and intensity of the encounter. At the same time, the transnationality of the ghetto should remind us that ethnically homogeneous histories (as they have long been written) are perhaps more rare than we have acknowledged.54 And what I find perhaps even more interesting: Terezín, a nominally Jewish place, created ethnic difference rather than a (Jewish) togetherness. As constructionist anthropologists have been suggesting, the everyday society creates, constructs, and employs ethnic, cultural, and social differences and belongings.55

The Poverty of (Marxist) Theory: Peasant Classes, Provincial Capital, and the Critique of Globalization in India

D. Parthasarathy

Introduction

It is a matter of academic curiosity that studies of class formation by scholars and activists have tended to focus mostly on the working class, to a lesser extent on the ‘middle class’, and the least on the classes that own or control capital, the elite. This is despite the fairly wide acceptance (at least among scholars with a Marxist orientation) that classes, class formation, or class consciousness cannot be studied in isolation, that class, as Thompson pointed out “is a social and cultural formation’ which cannot be defined abstractly, or in isolation, but only in terms of relationship with other classes” (Thompson 1978, p.938). And yet, over half a century after Thompson argued that “class itself is not a thing, it is a happening”, we continue to churn out monograph after monograph, study after study, which emphasize the degradation of labour, the pauperization of the working class, the proletarianization of the peasantry, and the wretchedness of workers in the informalized sectors of the economy, without ever identifying the character and nature of the dominant classes which have played such a significant role in these processes. Brilliant monographs from the subaltern studies stable in India ignore ‘indigenous repression’ and hierarchies, while emphasizing the role of colonialism in processes of impoverishment and pauperization (Roy, 2005).

Contemporary Indian critiques of agrarian crisis, poverty, and social marginalization privilege discourses of neo-liberalism and globalization over careful scrutiny and analysis of class domination, class differentiation, and the transformation of political power and economic processes in the country.

This paper argues that any meaningful critique of emancipatory politics in / for India ought to factor in the rise and influence of provincial capital, owned and controlled by sections of the peasantry who are politically powerful, and increasingly influential in determining the political regulation of neo-liberal economic policies and the management of global economic linkages.

Whether it is the issue of agrarian crisis, food security, and rural indebtedness, or problems of exclusivist urbanism and infrastructure development, or the over-dependence of the Indian economy on the informal sector, it is imperative and crucial that we comprehend and address the role of provincial capital in enabling or thwarting economic, development and welfare policies of the state, in facilitating or constraining the working of domestic and global markets and capital flows.

The Indian historian Raj Chandavarkar’s work (1994 and 2009) perhaps most closely approximates Thompson’s “The Making ...” in his studies of capitalism and the working class in colonial and post-colonial Bombay / Mumbai. He argues that the “conceptual originality of The Making was ... to have represented class as a historical, rather than a structural, fact, and the outcome of agency and struggle, experience and consciousness” (Chandavarkar, 1997, p.179). In similar fashion, the ruling elite or the dominant class also need to be represented as a historical fact, their origins need to be
constructed historically, something that has been done for the merchants and traders, and industrial elite of India, but not for the provincial capitalists whose origins as peasants continue to define their capitalist enterprises. Earlier work on provincial capital by this author (Parthasarathy, 1997) and the work on fraternal capital and peasant workers turned capitalists by Chari (2004) remain isolated attempts and have not affected mainstream theorizing of the dominant classes in India.

The critique of globalization has become such a central trope in the social sciences that it has begun to obscure many other discourses, modes of inquiry and streams of theorization that hold promise, and that have proved their utility in the past in helping us understand historical trajectories in the long run, but also India’s economic change in the recent past. A closer look however reveals that contemporary criticism centred around globalization has a genealogy that links past and present perspectives, and that lacks a sociological understanding of Indian history; as such, rural and urban, agrarian and industrial, peasant and capitalist, - these have become binaries; the local gets directly linked analytically to the global without an understanding of mediating agencies; causality of distress is always explained as originating from above; the tropes of globalization and liberalization become all encompassing, and stifling.

Marxists activists and scholars, and critics of globalization in serious journalism alike (Sainath 1996), make globalization into this great spectre that is haunting us. From farmers’ suicides and agrarian distress to land grab for Special Economic Zones and infrastructure projects, from the nature of exclusivist urbanization to the privatization of social and physical infrastructure and services, - the trope of globalization and global capital is deployed almost as a matter of habitus in critiquing all of these. The changing agrarian relations in the ‘rural’, the nature of ongoing processes of peasant differentiation, rural-urban connections, cleavages, and conflicts, the massive movement and flow of people, goods and services across diverse regions – all these seem to count for little in these critiques. The concepts of ‘rich peasant’ and ‘peasant caste’ have been unique Indian contributions to the field of agrarian studies and social science in general, and yet the notion of peasant has all but disappeared from our lexicon. It is farmers who commit suicide, farmers who launch protest movements, who become capitalists, and who demand remunerative prices. Peasants have all but ceased to exist for scholars and academics. It is a tendency that has a history. It is not a bit surprising if ironical that some of the scholars who explain current agrarian distress as an outcome of exploitative globalization and neo-liberal policies were also involved in the ‘mode of production in Indian agriculture’ debate in the 1970s (Patnaik, 1990), a debate which ignored the important linkages between rural and urban economies, mediated by the state and by the caste and kinship based social structure.

This paper attempts to bring the peasant back in, into critical research. The purpose is to develop the rudiments of a theory that can explain the rise and significance of provincial capital and its role in ongoing processes of economic change. If we are to explain new forms of rent seeking behavior of peasants, we cannot avoid the conceptual reality of the caste-class nature of the peasantry that sustains agrarian relations and political action in India today. These new forms are crucial in explaining agrarian crisis and debt linked suicides, the struggles over land alienation, the crisis of Indian cities, the problems of primitive accumulation and capital formation, and the broad nature of the processes of change that are taking place in the secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy. Theorizing the peasantry and provincial capital is essential if we are to develop explanatory frameworks for understanding diverse kinds of peasants entering the highways and by lanes of global capital. Elsewhere (Parthasarathy 2011, and Bunnell, Thompson and Parthasarathy 2013), I have discussed the significance of the rich peasants and provincial capital for understanding the nature of Indian capital and urban processes in India. This paper is a follow up.
The sense of unease with dominant discourses extends to questioning the academic rigour and political wisdom of over-emphasizing global inflows of capital as well as global crisis in analytical frameworks used by academics and activists, pointing to a pressing need to re-look at contemporary crises and struggles in India from a more complicated rural-urban interaction perspective. The spectacular implosion of Satyam (one of India’s largest software firms), especially the land and real estate dealings of its promoter Ramalinga Raju and his family were fairly well known to those familiar with the rise of the software sector in Hyderabad and yet much of the analysis has tended to focus on governance issues, or standard criticisms of capitalism. In the ongoing controversies around land grab and land alienation of the peasantry for promoting economic growth, what if any is the role of rich peasants in the push for Special Economic Zones (SEZ) even against stiff opposition? Why is the Lavasa development (a resort town in western India) explained purely in environmental or land grab terms without going into the role of the Maratha rich peasantry in real estate dealings in the state? In the analysis of the Telangana movement (for a separate and autonomous federal state), a fundamental question is rarely raised – why does the rich peasant castes of Andhra need the city of Hyderabad to ensure its political dominance and economic ascendancy? How does one begin to theorize the ways in which diverse peasant castes occupying positions at different levels of the caste hierarchy ranging from the toiling Gounders, the toddy-tapping Gouds, the enterprising Kamma farmers, and the co-operativising Marathas have accumulated capital and used state policies to enrich themselves while ensuring their upward mobility? How does one begin to frame research questions regarding the emerging investments in real estate, education, infrastructure, and small scale industries in Punjab, Haryana, and western UP, predominantly from erstwhile land owning peasant castes? Does capital accumulation occur in ‘modern’ and ‘globally-linked’ peasant owned enterprises? If so what is the nature of accumulation?

The objective in raising these sorts of questions is to bring out certain strands of analysis, identify selected processes that might help us conceptualize the role of peasants in India in generating and extending provincial capital within and across regions and nations. The economic history of colonial India had a significant focus on both business groups and the peasantry. The economic role of the peasantry in economic expansion is rarely the subject of study or political theorizing, in post-colonial India. The study of peasant differentiation in India has suffered from being too empiricist (Balagopal 1986 and 1988, Shanin 1977), has paid little attention to rural-urban, peasant-capital linkages; the role of the state in facilitating peasant transitions beyond agriculture, and the part played by politics in enabling access to state or bureaucratic capital, is also not well researched. Geographers and economists of Marxist persuasion have tended to use the structural geographical approaches derived from Althusserian formulations, that ignore concrete analysis of class, and that was critiqued quite savagely by Thompson.

Given the pre-dominance of the small scale and informal sector in India, and its huge growth in a context of fairly recent urbanization, it is also surprising that studies on MSMEs (Medium, Small, and Micro Enterprises) in India have not taken account of provincial capital, and have instead been reduced largely to policy and advocacy research. The effort here is to develop some propositions based on existing research and my ongoing research, on the nature and characteristics of provincial capital in India, without going into larger questions of the evolution of Indian capitalism, but pointing out its contemporary implications for selected issues and processes. In doing so, the paper develops three broad sets of arguments pertaining to: a) developing a ‘provincial capital’ frame of analysis for understanding contemporary struggles and conflicts, and problems of exploitation, distress, and deprivation; b) seeking to comprehend current debates about the urban and the region in India from the perspective of rural-urban networks and flows, the role of peasant capital and dominance in cities, and in delineating new ‘regions’; and c) explaining informal wage labour in India from a ‘class formation’ perspective.
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The argument for theorizing provincial capital that is advanced is not about its economic or financial aspects; the argument is for a political understanding of provincial capital that is rooted in class and caste conflicts and competition. The propositions that are advanced, and that would help in theorizing provincial capital in India are offered as heuristic devices that may be fashioned into new researchable questions using more rigorous techniques and modes of analysis. These propositions are:

1. The emergence and spread of provincial capital is to be explained in terms of the politics of peasant differentiation in which competition and conflicts between rival castes at a regional level are deeply implicated.

2. Struggles around regional autonomy, and urban struggles over space, livelihoods, and identity, indicate the need for rich peasants and upwardly mobile peasant caste individuals and groups to take control of cities and state capitals in competing with other groups over power and domination.

3. The expansion of provincial capital is not necessarily linked to processes of capital accumulation. Status, social security, the maintenance and extension of socio-political domination, and the intrinsic nature of provincial capital explain its expansion.

4. Urban processes cannot be explained purely in terms of the working of global capital and financial flows. Provincial capital and peasant politics ally with global capital, and take advantage of the opening up of new regional trade routes which account for urban processes in metropolitan cities, and the processes of urbanization in the countryside.

5. Current accounts of agrarian crises, problems of malnutrition and hunger, and rural indebtedness resulting in large-scale suicides by peasants, need to be qualified by drawing out the role of rich peasants in regions where such problems stubbornly persist.

6. Informal wage labour and self-employment in cities need to be studied in terms of the continuing peasant status of the workers, and in terms of their simultaneous subjection to political and economic domination by rich peasants in cities and villages.

These propositions are in the form of working hypothesis and both derive from and contribute to the discussions in the rest of this paper.

A. Agrarian Crisis and Distress: Globalization or Rich peasant dominance?

Caste has a much more significant influence on domestic capital than is usually given credit for, and a clarification of some of the controversies in contemporary India (SEZ, agrarian distress and ‘farmers’ suicides, movements for regional autonomy, land alienation) cannot be obtained without adopting a combined caste-class and rural-urban perspective in analyzing capital flows, capital linkages and their implications for new spatial practices. Existing formulations usually elide the crucial impacts of agrarian classes and agrarian capital in influencing state policies of intent and neglect working in conjunction with transnational capital.

The case of the state Maharashtra exemplifies this. The large number of farmers’ suicides and general agrarian distress in the Vidharbha region of the state has been explained by activist-journalists and scholars as an effect of neo-liberal globalization. This overlooks Maoist political views that locate the region’s economic ‘backwardness’ within a larger semi-feudal, semi-colonial social formation. Also ignored is the fact that the Western Maharashtra region with a poorer and more marginal resource endowment compared to Vidharbha, and with greater linkages and exposure to the global economy is much more economically dynamic and socially well developed. A long history of state capture by the region’s agrarian elite with implications for ‘rural development’, social reform movements, and processes of urbanization aided by educational development,
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investments in agro-processing, and diversification of local economies – all these point to a
different and more complex process of transformation than is explained by simplistic ‘neo-liberal
globalization’ criticisms. Also, the region’s peasant elite has strategically influenced state policy to
link / limit global linkages and reoriented agricultural patterns to benefit themselves and raise
income levels for agricultural labour in the region. Such processes are conspicuously absent,
despite the presence of a provincial peasant elite in the Vidarbha region. As pointed out in more
careful analysis of rural transformations (Srivastava, 1995) “it is possible to discern some
differences both within the dominant proprietary classes, and between these classes and the
intermediate groups (the new rich and middle peasantry)” in many parts of India, and it is the
political mobilization and collective action of the middle or upper peasantry that determines the
nature, contours, and trajectories of agrarian change, including the problem of agrarian crisis.

Bremen’s long term study of agricultural labour and informal labour circulation India leads him to
articulate that the “misery of the Halpatis (landless labour) can be understood only by tracing the
dynamics of their subordination to the village elite.” Despite this recognition, the processes of class
formation and transformation of the village elite is not clearly spelt out, nor does he look at the
middle ranks in the countryside and how this affects the changing rural class structure.

Distinguished studies by Bremen and Prakash on debt bondage likewise identify the subjection of
indebted landless labour and small peasants to the village elite, but do not throw much light on the
class character of this elite, on how provincial capital emerges to dominate and subject the landless
workers to various forms of bonded and attached labour. These failures parallel the long debates
among Indian Marxists scholars on the agrarian problem – the tendency has largely been to engage
in the technical and mathematical identification and measurement of the modes and relations of
production, on the capitalist or feudal nature of agriculture and agrarian relations, on the nature of
exploitation and rent, and on processes of peasant differentiation. The studies largely deal with
agriculture, peasants, economies and classes in the abstract, with few cases of actual classes being
cited even if only for illustrative purposes. They reflect Thompson’s (1978) concern in ‘The Making ...
that for many historians, economists, and sociologists, “the working class … can be defined
almost mathematically, so many men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production.”

Studies on neo-liberal reforms and their impacts on agriculture from the 1990s onwards research
capital formation, declining public investments, adverse impacts of market linkages, contract
farming, corporate investments in agriculture, and rising costs of cultivation. Marxists and left
scholars, activists, and journalists blame these for the agrarian crisis, rising indebtedness, suicides
by farmers, and problems of food security. Rare are the studies which link upwardly mobile
peasants to the fortunes of the agricultural sector as a whole ate the regional scale (Rao 2009).
Commoditization linked to globalization are frequently blamed for the crisis without looking into
the role of rich peasants in processes of marketization and commoditization, or the tendency of rich
peasants to seek rents or unproductive profits as was of protecting their interests; the persistent
refusal of rich peasants to develop skills owing to fear of higher wages and labour emancipation, or
their penchant to seek state subsidies for tiding over income deficits are also not analytically
incorporated into critiques. The emphasis on agricultural exports must be understood not simply as
part of neo-liberal policy shifts, but also in terms of the demands of a section of the peasantry
which benefits from better prices in global commodity markets. The opposition to food security on
fiscal and monetary grounds likewise comes not just from neo-liberal economists but also from big
farmer lobbies who fear lower prices and greater bargaining power of agricultural labour. Long
term field work in contrasting regions of Vidharbha and Maharshtra revealed that the agrarian
crisis in the former is despite a more favourable climatic and resource environment relative to the
semi-arid, less fertile regions of the latter. More interestingly, the globalization induced cropping
patterns which are blamed for the crisis by Patnaik and others are actually more intense, the shift
away from food crops is on a much larger scale in the so-called fraught prone areas of western
Maharashtra. However, the agricultural transition has been managed better by the provincial elite leading to greater profits from themselves and more stable livelihoods for the smaller peasants who also gained from infrastructure growth and market linkages, and the landless labour who gained more employment opportunities.

Current trends of agrarian crisis and agrarian distress in parts of India may well be caused by neoliberal policies resulting in the marginalization of the peasantry, and of agriculture in general (Vasavi, 2009). However sections of the peasantry have a role in this marginalization. If peasants are unable to unite to arrest trends of marginalization and distress, it is as much because of peasant differentiation with caste playing a complicating factor, as it is due to their inability or unwillingness (as in the case of Vidharbha) to deploy capital in more productive ways. This ability can be acquired only if there is a willingness to transform agrarian relations, and relations of production in new investment sectors. It is a sign of the depth of the agrarian crisis that rich peasants in India continue to be involved in land dealings irrespective of the nature of agrarian distress, or the possibility of greater profitability in rural non-farm and urban secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy. Peasant differentiation in India has proceeded so far ahead, that even the non-landlord section of the peasantry colludes in exploiting and expropriating other sections, for that is the only way it can survive and prosper.

If with Thompson, one believes that “class itself is not a thing, it is a happening”, the ‘happening’ of the peasant classes in India needs to be theorized in terms of what it is doing with land, and how it is transforming itself in the process. A basic question needs to be asked at this stage. Why has real estate and land acquired such overwhelming importance as to be almost the fulcrum of economic transformation in post-liberalization India? Rich peasants have invested huge amounts in real estate development in new expansions of cities (the NCR region, Cyberabad), in satellite towns, in private planned resort and entertainment cities (Lavasa). Peasants are also selling prime land all over the country, and non-cultivating peasants are acquiring agricultural land as well. The huge crisis of and conflicts around land can only be explained as an outcome of typical peasant attitudes towards land – as an aspect of social security, as a provider of social status, and as an asset that can easily be traded, mortgaged, pledged, sold, and bought. Also, as Srinivas shows, the capital of the peasants “was perpetually on the move, exploring possibilities and shifting from one speculative investment to another”. Apart from the character of easy liquidity which makes investment in it attractive, investment in land is the speculative investment par excellence. The emergence of provincial capital is then a political process, linked to peasant differentiation, and processes of agrarian change involving entry and exit of groups at different levels of the caste-class hierarchy. While the Gounder domination of the knitwear industry in Tiruppur is attributed to toil (Chari 2004), it cannot be forgotten that the Gounders were / are landowning castes, that they were / are not marginal to the village political economy, and their takeover of the hosiery sector was facilitated by the exit of Chettiar owners. Attwood (1979, 1985 and Baviskar 1987) have described in great detail and rigour the struggles through which small peasants in dryland Maharashtra opposed bourgeois capital, to establish and successfully manage agro-based industries. Political competition between castes and classes is posited in their studies as a key element in their successful evolution as peasant-capitalist. The rich and poor are both shown to be mobile in the stratification system. The absence of sugarcane plantations in India, the growing of cane on small-holdings, and processing of cane in cooperative sugar factories are explained as an outcome of the ability of peasants and regions in Maharashtra to resist external pressures from urban business interests. As Balagopal (1986) argues, empiricist approaches to the peasantry will show up whatever theory one wishes to read into the data. Rather than assume that peasants of whatever hue are either progressive and become farmer-capitalists, or are unable because of their caste-class feudal origins to transform surpluses into productive capital, it would perhaps be more useful to track the diverse origins of provincial capital among different sections of the peasantry, and the roots of these in the
agrarian relations of a caste based social structure. The absence of absentee landlords in Maharashtra (Atwood 1985) is as likely to lead to the rise of provincial capital, as an increase in the number of non-cultivating peasant households in Andhra (Vijay, 2012).

While agrarian distress, acute labour exploitation, and land alienation are in part an outcome of processes of peasant differentiation in India, the exploitation of one section of the peasantry by another, and the non-productive use of provincial capital, - these are transforming cities and urban processes, and redefining and realigning regions in India in new ways.

B. Peasants and Provincial Capital: Redefining and restructuring the urban

I have shown elsewhere that the formation of new economic, political, and social regions is influenced by the spatial forms taken by caste, class, and capital in India. I have argued for a notion of intermediate urbanism and dispersed urbanization, resulting from the confluence of provincial capital and global finance.

In India, at the political level, maintenance of social dominance through sustaining access to power is key to explaining both the kind of labour relations that prevails, and the nature of capital investments, the forms of economic organization, the mode of surplus extraction, the changes in the means of production, and the nature of Indian capitalism itself. All these are uniquely linked to the caste structure that is such an important aspect of its social formation. Maintaining political power requires alliances with fellow caste members and other strategic caste allies. Once political power is attained, these allies have to be placated with government contracts, handouts, licenses, and permits.

The spatial aspect of the economic behaviour of Indian capital, especially its agrarian fraction is seen in its choice of sectors for investment, choice of techniques, and choice of locations - all determined not by ‘market’ conditions, but by the need to maintain social, political, and economic dominance using state intervention and extra-economic methods (Parthasarathy, 2011). This entails and leads to considerable rural-urban nexus in the process of state intervention in the economy. Scholarship on state capitalism in India shows that it was not just the urban industrial bourgeoisie who benefited from it. The dominant rural landed class extended its influence to cities, facilitated by democratic politics, and by siphoning off government funds for its own political expansion and economic rise. With the exception of a few scholars studying the regional dimensions of economic liberalization in India (Baru, 2004), the consequences of the rise of an agrarian elite and of its investment strategies and business decisions is not much deliberated.

The role of the state, and of its institutions (located in cities) for regional capitalist classes cannot be overemphasized. Baru’s (2004) analysis of the regional inequality dimension of the rise of regional capitalist classes is insightful, but a specifically urban focus of this process enables us to add other dimensions to his analysis. In the case of Andhra Pradesh, while Baru’s interpretation of the urbanization and economic prosperity of the coastal Andhra region vis a vis the relative backwardness of the Telengana region is largely accurate, one must also ask why the Andhra elite chose to develop the city of Hyderabad located in the Telengana region rather than cities in their own backyard. The answer lies in the dire dependence of regional agrarian elites on state institutions located in the capital city of Hyderabad, for their survival and economic rise. Similar processes have been at work with respect to agrarian elites from the western Maharashtra region using the capital city of Mumbai for their economic survival, status maintenance, and political dominance. Baru does bring in the use of caste and kin networks in the rise of agrarian / regional capitalists, but we need to work out in greater detail the larger implications of a caste based state
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capitalism. Firms like Satyam, obliterate any distinction between capitalist and pre-capitalist
classes, and economic historians of modern India have shown that in fact most big business houses
in India have their origins in feudal exploitation especially through usury. Land dealings have
always been a key asset providing liquidity to firms in times of crisis in India, but it is much more so
for peasant origin firms indicating perhaps little faith or self-belief in their own capitalist abilities
or in modern capitalism itself.

This author and others such as Sharad Chari (2004), have shown how “agricultural specialization
and regional agro-industrial linkages” produced a “regional mosaic of rural-urban development”,
and gave rise to ‘ordinary cities’ such as Vijayawada and Coimbatore, which in Jennifer Robinson’s
analysis, owe much to their historical trajectories even as they may develop global capital and trade
linkages. Carol Upadhya (1988) also points to the “integration of town and countryside” alongside
the development of a commercialized agrarian economy, and the rise of a rich peasant class in
coastal Andhra. However we do not as yet have a clear idea of the urban processes and patterns of
urbanization that result from rural-urban flows facilitated by peasant mobility and provincial
capital. Nor are we sure that agricultural surplus necessarily becomes industrial capital via trading
capital as Upadhya argues in comparing Andhra and Kongunad, or whether provincial capital is a
different form of capital that largely remains unproductive, and is channeled into sectors which
match the feudal styles of functioning and attitudes of their owners. In this section, I attempt to
respond to these gaps by discussing issues of dispersed urbanization, the importance of the city for
provincial capital, and the nature of provincial capital investment and its consequences.

Across India, especially in the capital cities of federal states, rich peasant castes and other rural
classes who hitherto did not have access to power in cities and state capitals, have through
democratic processes gained greater access to and control over cities as the seat of power. This
power has been used through consolidating their hold over their rural constituencies with
consequences for urbanization in their rural backyards. At the same time, these agrarian politician-
capitalists have also invested heavily in real estate and other easy to manage businesses (trading,
education, films and entertainment) in cities. This partly explains the sociology and politics of real
estate that characterize many Indian cities currently. Cities like Hyderabad which have seen a boom
in real estate and construction as a consequence of becoming an important node in global software
outsourcing, have also witnessed several real estate scams involving politicians and agrarian
capitalists, and struggles by those evicted from land in and around the city. The spectacular
implosion of Satyam attests to the weakness of a capitalism managed by rural elites, and also points
to the links between the ‘new’ economy, the politics of real estate, rural-urban networks, and the
role of the state in facilitating the growth of businesses which depend crucially on state support in
the form of land acquisition, incentives, subsidies, and contracts. This forces us to rethink the
traditional ‘terms of trade’ kind of argument, which scholars of development planning and the state
have used to focus on “antagonisms of interests between town and country” (Byres, 1994: 37)
rather than rural-urban connections which seem to be the reality.

The modernization of the Indian economy and enhanced global linkages have created new clusters
which export goods that can be produced more competitively in India due to lower labour costs,
and low technological inputs. The spatial manifestation of these has been in the form of a sudden
spurt in the growth of some larger cities and many smaller ones. While trading castes initially
entered these sectors, in southern states like Andhra Pradesh, as well as in northern states such as
Punjab, Haryana, and in the satellite towns of New Delhi, there has been substantial agrarian capital
which has entered the textiles, hosiery, and automobile spare parts industries. This agrarian capital
is itself diverse ranging from rich peasants who benefited from the green revolution and
commercialization in Ludhiana to those of more modest origin such as the Gounders in the
knitwear cluster of Tirupur (Chari, 2004). Provincial capital in coastal Andhra (mainly from the
Kamma and Raju castes) has been more into trade, entertainment and real estate, and recently into software and information technology, and infrastructure, rather than manufacturing. These enterprising agricultural castes transformed small towns and state capitals through their investments in the built environment, but also urbanized their own rural regions with profits from their urban investments. Their political power also gave them substantial infrastructure contracts which contributed to urbanization directly and indirectly. These fractions also linked to the global economy through retailing of global brands in smaller towns and cities. Not lacking in capital, and not having to borrow at market rates, entrepreneurs in small towns belonging to peasant castes used caste based fiduciary networks to evolve unique styles of economic action.

Long term field work in Maharashtra revealed another proposition regarding dispersed urbanization – rural areas still officially categorized as such acquire urban features, and the economic and social dynamism of many small towns. The economic and political rise of the agrarian elite and its spatial expansion brings about this kind of dispersed urbanization for which at least three factors can be identified. The first is the increased agricultural surplus that is extracted in those pockets where this elite class is powerful enough to influence state policy and divert sufficient finances into agro-processing. Increased demand from India’s burgeoning urban population, access to export markets, and links with Indian and multinational agri-food businesses have created dynamism and increased profits in selected pockets despite the general backwardness of Indian agriculture. This surplus itself transforms the built environment and transforms lifestyles in rural areas. Second, to cater to enhanced demands for education, healthcare and other services, and also because these are seen as profit heads in themselves, caste based agricultural communities have come together to set up private professional educational institutions which have a high fee structure and attract students from around the country. The location of these facilities becomes the centre for new urban units to develop and emerge as markets for labour and goods sourced from nearby rural areas. Third, as mentioned earlier, this class influences policy decisions related to development programmes, infrastructure development, agricultural prices, and in other areas such that public investment is concentrated in their areas of influence. This not only increases the general level of income, but more importantly diverts funds to construction and other firms in which this class has financial interests. This infrastructure brings in temporary and permanent populations, settlements, increased movement of people, and private investments – all leading to the areas acquiring quite urban characteristics and features. In all three cases, there are enhanced rural urban-commodity exchange linkages, and much higher viability and profitability of selected rural farm activities, since urban populations and establishments are now willing to pay a premium for agricultural products. This higher demand and preparedness to pay a premium itself has encouraged a large number of cooperative and private enterprises for agro-processing, many of these owned or started by rural based political leaders who need a stable source of income outside of politics).

The perspective outlined here enables us to develop a multi-pronged approach for better appreciating class, capital, and politics, and their spatial manifestations and implications in the Indian context. To begin with, one might seek reasons to explain the relatively greater global linkages and integration of cities like Mumbai, Hyderabad, and Bengaluru compared to cities like Kolkata or other Tier 2 cities in India, which were historically integrated into global production, trade, and financial circuits, but have since been in decline. Why and how do some cities gain entry into or fall out of global economic networks? Why did these cities, and not others, gain from the global outsourcing? Do local or regional factors influence which cities are ‘ripe’ to enter global economic networks? While several reasons can be identified in answering such questions, one way could be by locating such cities within rural-urban and urban-regional networks and tracing their emergence as nodes in global financial circuits. A focus on provincial capital provides us with an alternate perspective on urban governance and urban dynamics. Global financial circuits and
capital flows are important, but these are mediated through rural-urban struggles, networks, and transitions, and it is important that we map the spatiality of caste and class, as much as that of capital in our arguments. In tracking the origins and evolution of cities like Hyderabad and Bengaluru as software and outsourcing hubs for instance, one must consider the preparation of the ground by peasant castes – kammas, reddis, and rajas and vokkaligas and lingayats for Hyderabad and Bangalore respectively.

As cities like Hyderabad and Bengaluru or even Pune became important nodes in global software outsourcing, they have been subjected to increasing domination by rural magnates with a base in minerals and plantations, agriculture and agro-processing, by a landed rentier/political class with interests in real estate, construction, and finance. Devolution and democratic reforms, accompanied by the rise of backward castes, have created new political parties, factions and power centers, bringing in a new class of leaders who have established their base in these cities, and expanded their political and economic footprints in the urban as much as the rural.

The Special Economic Zones are also a vital aspect of the strategy through which rural elites and the rentier class are finally able to break through from small time real estate, cinema, education, and agro-processing businesses into the big league. This has been happening in the infrastructure sector – airports, highways, bridges, power, etc (eg. GVK, GMR, Shirke, the now defunct Maytas). Construction has been a major sector for the rural landed classes to invest their rent income and agricultural surplus, and thus enter the non-agricultural sector in a big way with low risks. This matches their feudal style of functioning and management. Middle and rich peasants and landlords in South Asia are also risk averse for historical reasons pertaining to their lower caste status, and unstable class positions, and there is a perhaps an ‘immoral economy’ of the rich peasant which explains a combination of risk aversion and techniques of repressive exploitation that result in specific kinds of investments and farm/firm management strategies. Since a majority of India’s politicians are drawn from the rural landed classes and peasant castes, for these and for a new generation of rural politicians who climb up the ladder by aligning with these castes, SEZs and infrastructure become an important source of income. It is no accident that a very large proportion of SEZ proposals across India are from real estate developers, not from manufacturing or service sector firms. A majority of these developers are politicians and the rural rich who are either making a rural-urban transition, are seeking to extend their political base, or are minimizing risks in their ‘investment portfolios’ through diversification in the context of increasing threats to their social and economic dominance. Policies for awarding contracts for infrastructure projects and SEZs clearly indicate mechanisms that enhance the politician-rich peasantry nexus, even as they provide an entry for foreign capital and firms to enter the Indian economy. SEZs, resort towns, new urban development extensions, satellite towns – all of these are avenues for investment and enrichment for the peasantry.

C. Informal wage labour and self-employment: class formation, culture and politics in Indian cities

For the past few years I have been involved in an ethnographic mapping of the urban, studying informal uses of space across Mumbai, Singapore, and Bangkok for religious, political and economic purposes by the urban poor. In doing so, I am seeking to map both spatio-temporal aspects of informality, as well as rural-urban linkages; in the process, tracing the flow of capital and people between the urban and rural involving rich and poor peasants and agricultural labour emerged as an important research problem. In my research I was guided as much by Thompson's The Making as be Lefebvre; Lefebvre was a fellow critique of structural Marxism, and shared Thompson's interest in humanizing Marxists analysis, and rescuing it from abstract structural theorizing. The
interest in Lefebvre was also because of my interest in the everyday, in the temporary and transient aspects of urbanism. Believing, with Thompson, that understanding the ‘experience of living men and women’ was key to critiquing dominant Marxist theorizing which substituted the built environment and circuits of capital for human life, for a real class analysis, I turned to culture – the political and religious life of the working classes. Again, going with the Thompsonian view of class being as much of a cultural as an economic formation, I attempted to avoid Althusserian base-superstructure ideas of culture, and instead studied religion and politics as aspects of the process of class formation, as in fact constituting class in actual practice. Recently Reed has attempted an unorthodox interpretation of The Making by reinterpreting the role of religion in class formation. My attempt was similar; especially as many of the religious forms and practices I studied were linked to lower class and lower caste religious traditions. It is only through a stronger focus on culture that I could seek to capture the “collective self consciousness and community values” of the urban poor as a class in the making. The industrial decline of Mumbai as a city had also led to a decline in trade unions and the community life in the mill areas that has been well documented. However there were new ‘rituals of mutuality’ that I discovered including ones which were remarkably similar to the ‘friendly societies’ that Thompson mentions, in the form of Mitra Mandals (neighbourhood friendship groups). By re-creating the life experience of the urban poor, could I come up with insights on the political consciousness and attempts at class formation of the rural poor who have been alienated from the rural, but who are yet linked in significant and persistent ways to their village ties through caste, kinship, class, and agrarian relations?

My focus in this section is primarily on the informal economic sector, as I have taken up issues of religion and politics elsewhere. Borrowing the research tools and techniques of Lefebvre and de Certeau and inspired by Thompson, I attempted an ethnographic mapping of informal economic activities in Mumbai and Bangkok. I looked at cobblers and knife-sharpeners, fakirs and beggars, watch-repairers and fruit and vegetable vendors, food hawkers and pan shops, hawkers of counterfeit and smuggled goods, of religious paraphernalia and political supplies. The informal sector in India (and the developing world in general) represents perhaps most accurately Thompson’s conceptualization of class as “a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomise its structure”. The informal can only be captured through informal modes of research because of its sheer transient and temporal nature, and as such cannot be captured by structural perspectives of capital flows which are rooted in the labour theory of value, and yet has no place for class analysis.

It was surprising to note that there were communities in processes of class across the colonial and post-colonial period, across industrial labour as a working class and informal wage labourers and self-employed as a working class. Similar to the findings of Chandavarkar, I found that labour migrants were drawn from the small holding peasantry but also from the landless labour. I was able to substantiate his insight regarding the inter-generational continuity in patterns of labour migration, which “makes nonsense of an evolutionary understanding of class formation”. Yet another continuity was with reference to the indispensability of urban employment for maintenance of the economic base of the migrant family back in the villages, and the mutual supportive role of community, caste, and kinship ties in times of (industrial) struggle and social distress. Against dominant Indian Marxist perspectives, all of this confirmed a more nuanced view of peasant “smallholders being a de facto Industrial reserve army of labour (Brass 1995). All of this yielded a different view of the informal sector in India, scholarship on which tends to reinforce Sasken’s global outsourcing approach to the understanding of informal economies in developing countries. The comprehensive Sengupta committee report (2009) by India’s leading experts on the informal sector provides no clue about the rural-urban linkages or the class position of informal workers. The section on employment strategy in agriculture lacks a concrete understanding of the class position of agricultural labour, or of the dominant classes in rural areas. Jan Bremen’s
voluminous work on labour circulation and informality in India is firmly based in an analysis of the agrarian question, and yet much of the work following Bremen tends to be bogged down in modeling informality in the context of trade liberalization, narrowly focuses on the sector as an ‘urban’ issue, or goes into technical measurement of employment, working conditions, and wages. The question of labour supply is rarely raised, nor are attempts made to identify the employers of informal wage labour as a social class – a significant proportion of whom originate in provincial capital. Studies of the inter-linkages between agriculture and manufacturing sectors with a view to understanding informality (Marjit and Kar) miss out agrarian investments in the formal and informal urban sectors.

Beyond the question of rural linkages of informal labour in cities, interviews also revealed the nature of the class structure in rural areas which created the agrarian crisis in the first place. In Indian cinema as in my interviews, the rural rich peasant was the primary villain, not globalization or neo-liberalism.

Provincial capital exacerbated the wretchedness of informality in the city in other ways too. The problem of informal housing was not simply an ‘urban’ issue. In Mumbai and Hyderabad as well as the cities of coastal Andhra I studied, a large part of the insecurity of housing, the constant threat of eviction came from increasing investments in real estate by rural rich peasants and rural political leaders in cities. In many cases the provincial capital employed techniques of eviction an activist-scholar referred to as ‘corporal punishment’, involving extreme forms of violence in land grab. The instability in housing itself contributed to the informality in wage labour and employment, as constant physical mobility made it difficult to hold on to jobs or acquire skills, or cumulate savings. At the other end, rich peasants in villages have increasingly turned to alien labourers for a variety of reasons leaving village labourers in a state of limbo as it were. It is this in-between status to which provincial capital is as much a contributor as forces of neo-liberalism, and the entrepreneurial urban governance that reflects the true picture of informality in India today. It is an informality however that is strongly resisted, not least through practices of religion and politics, and it is here that there emerges a real possibility of writing the history of class formation of the ‘informal working class’ as ‘a search for agency’ (Roy 2005), since the focus of resistance is on ‘indigenous repression’ not on abstract forces of globalization, capital, or neo-liberalism.

The focus on the ‘informal’ working class enables us to perceive the dialectical process of class formation. Provincial capitalists of peasant origin began constituting themselves as a class by expanding their footprint beyond the rural, and the class today I argue is characterized by its dual urban-rural location. It is a class however that constituted itself by also expropriating small peasants from their land holdings, by expropriating small peasants and land less labour from accessing resource commons, and by displacing village labour with alien labour imported from other regions. The formation of the working class in cities which is in reality a circulating rural-urban, multi-location household working class was similarly influenced both by their actions in cities and villages, and by the agency that is reflected in their work as well as in culture, religion, and political action. The very act of eviction from village labour markets and land gives them the agency to form larger networks, to reduce caste based labour dependencies. There is evidence to believe that while the initial impetus for labour migration or circulation may have come from ‘push’ factors, in the long term informal workers realize the social benefits of escaping caste dependence related labour with its baggage of attachment and bondage. The study of provincial capital in class terms provides a larger theoretical lens for us to understand the process of class formation contemporary rural and urban India.

Conclusion
I wish to suggest that the incorporation of provincial capital into our analysis will help us to better understand the making of economic actors and agencies in the post-liberalization period in India. It will add more nuances to our understanding of capital formation, investment strategies, organization of work, and labour processes. Much of the work (with important exceptions) on business groups and peasant-entrepreneurs in India have studied specific regions, families, or castes, and have tended to use an anthropological lens to look at transformations in the short term. Their findings have been fed into existing European origin theories about economic history, capital formation, capital accumulation, and transformation of agricultural capital into other forms of capital. This paper adopts a more political, caste-class perspective to understand peasants and provincial capital in India, and advises caution in deriving conclusions about the long term consequences of the expansion of provincial capital, and the increased geographic spread of the peasant footprint. Democratization, electoral politics, competition between and among elites and non-elites, class differentiation, struggles against caste hierarchies, agrarian crisis and distress, neo-liberal marginalization of agriculture, the politics of real-estate centred economic change, conflicts over natural resource extraction, and new forms of urbanization – all of these need to be studied in an integrated way to comprehend and visualize the long term effects of the rise of provincial capital.

In terms of the gains for economic history from an analysis of provincial capital and peasantry in India, one can do no more than to do away with the common assumption that peasantry exists only ‘historically speaking’. According to Shanin (1977) both Marxist political economy and neo-classical economics assumed that capitalism and de-peasantization go together. Whatever reasons one might adduce to explain the persistence of peasantry, the rise of sections of the peasantry in India to political and economic power, and their capacity to determine the future and nature of capitalist development in India through control and management of provincial capital, signify that we should exercise caution in charting future pathways based on our current formulations of economic history.

In his critique of the subaltern studies school Chandavarkar (1997) castigates the scholars for a reverse orientalism in homogenizing the west, which led “to the assumption that all of India’s troubles came from outside” (p.191). In supporting his view, I argue for the continuing importance of the agrarian question in countries like India, that perhaps the agrarian question is even “the central problem of theory” as Kautsky would have argued, that it is not adequate to talk of archaic agrarian relations, but in fact to work out how agrarian relations are in fact transformed from within, but also as a partial response to growing capitalist transformation. It may in fact be time to interrogate the concerns arising out of the ‘agrarian question coming to town’ (Chari 2004); to ask whether peasants in cities are indeed a paradox (McGee 1973); will the rise to dominance of provincial capital as a significant class fraction lead to a “capital, interrupted” kind of situation (Gidwani 2008), or will it result in a new “complex of capital and non-capital perpetually locked in a relation of contradiction and mutuality” and which forms the “post-colonial economic” (Sanyal 2007) in countries like India?

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