By all means

On Heide Gerstenberger's *Market and Violence*

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Heide Gerstenberger's sprawling 'analysis of capitalism as it has existed in history' is first and foremost a reminder of what we are dealing with.* In the terms implied by one of her underlying metaphors, to live in a world dominated by capital is to live at the mercy of a wild animal, a predator motivated by a single instinct – the drive to exploit labour and thus maximise profits by all available means. Wherever these means might include overt enslavement or the myriad forms of 'ersatz slavery' that came to replace it, capital will draw on them as much as circumstances allow. Left to itself, capital's exploitation of labour obeys one and only one imperative: accumulate as much as possible, as quickly as possible. To comply with this imperative, capital will simply do whatever it can get away with doing. There is then no 'inner rationality' or 'civilising tendency' internal to capital that might reign in its insatiable appetite for profits. From the sugar plantations of Saint-Domingue or Morelos to the forced labour camps of the Third Reich, wholly 'unbounded' or unrestricted exploitation [*entgrenzte Ausbeutung*] will suck all life and energy, as thoroughly as possible and as ruthlessly as necessary, from the people it uses or employs. The local imposition of political limits on its behaviour may temper its excesses, but no amount of social reform, economic development or historical 'progress' will ever tame capital as such.

The result of Gerstenberger's many years of inquiry into the historical functioning of capitalism, as she observed in 2018,

> can be summed up in a nutshell. It runs as follows: Exceptions apart, owners of capital make use of all the means to achieve profits which are open to them in a certain place and at a certain time. If direct violence is not one of the practices which are being made use of, this is not prevented by economic rationality but only by public critique and state activity.[1]

Given the nature of the beast, so to speak, Gerstenberger concludes that sovereign or state power alone has the binding force required to limit capital's recourse to violent exploitation. Everything then depends on the unstable balance of class forces that orients the use of state power in what plays out as an essentially zero-sum contest, a struggle to bend public priorities in favour of either labour on the one hand or capital on the other. In a 2014 article that distils the overall argument of her book, Gerstenberger boiled her main conclusions down to two points:

> Firstly: the domestication of capitalism hinges on the state safeguarding private and collective rights of labourers, and secondly: no level of economic development safeguards against the brutal use of direct violence against labourers. … Far from marking a certain epoch of capitalist development, violence is constantly hanging about in the wings of capitalist labour relations. It comes into the open when governments and societies refrain from decisive objection.[2]

Gerstenberger acknowledges, of course, that the objections made and sustained by organised labour in parts of Europe and then the rest of the imperialist core, from the mid-nineteenth through to the mid-twentieth centuries, did indeed succeed in limiting some workers' exposure to direct coercive force. In these places, as cap-

* Heide Gerstenberger, *Market and Violence: The Functioning of Capitalism in History*, trans. Niall Bond (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2023), 109; hereafter abbreviated as MV.

ital's workforce become more organised and more assertive, chattel slavery and child labour were phased out, trade unions were legalised, labour contracts were upheld, limits were set to the working day, and so on. Such achievements, however, were secured not by following or enhancing capital's own immanent tendencies but by opposing them. 'The history of capitalism has not confirmed the notion that capitalist forms of exploitation generally tend to overcome the violence which was present in historically earlier forms. If, in some places and during some periods, violence has indeed been reduced, this has always been achieved by political measures, and these have usually been demanded by widespread critique and opposition.'[3] Slavery in Saint-Domingue or the American South, for instance, no less than in Nazi Germany, was overcome not as a result of economic progress or rationalisation but by political confrontation, culminating in military struggle (MV, 410). By the same token, wherever openly forced labour persists or returns it should be understood not as an anachronistic remnant of pre-capitalist relations of production, let alone as some extra-capitalist aberration, but rather as a regression to capital's less 'bounded' methods of exploitation. On this score Gerstenberger might well agree with Maria Mies and Sylvia Federici: when the conditions are right, 'violence itself becomes the most productive force.'[4]

The persistence of direct violence

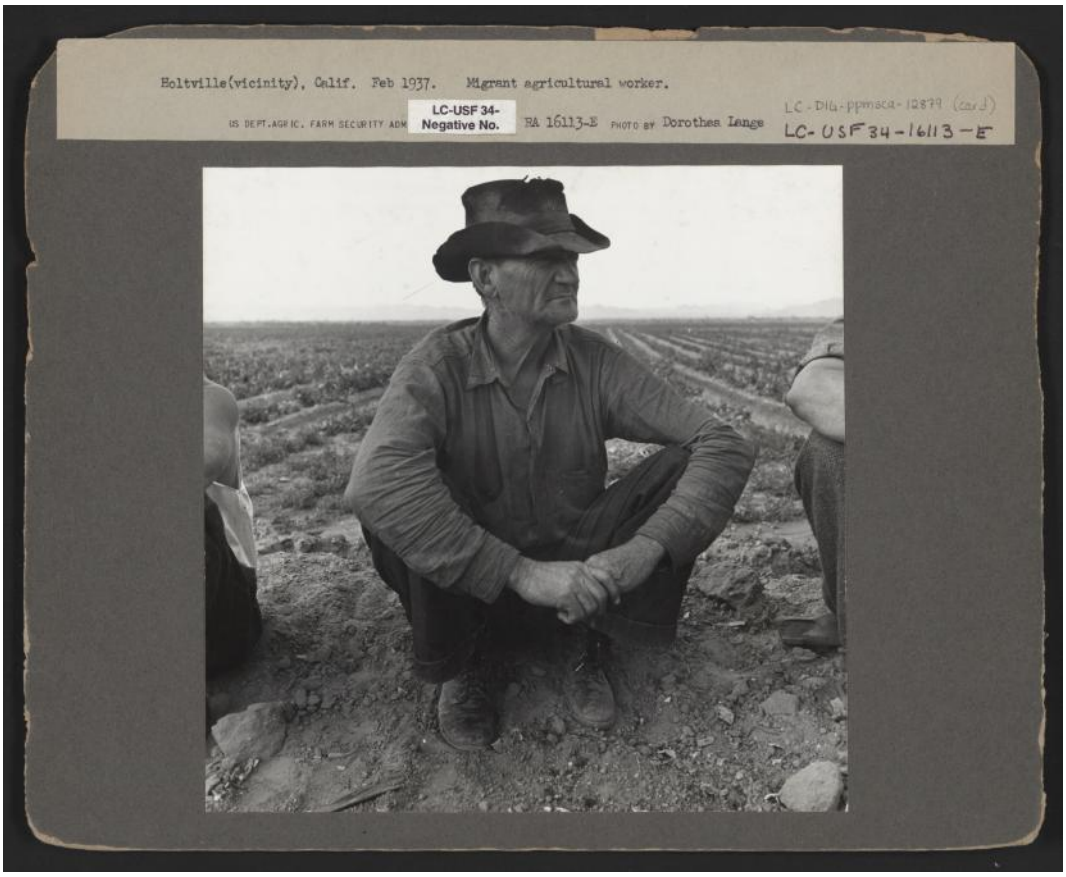
Best known in anglophone circles for another substantial and acclaimed book on the *History and Theory of the Bourgeois State*,[5] Heide Gerstenberger is generally reluctant to position herself in relation to current philosophical trends. She doesn't see herself as 'theoretically affiliated to any school of interpretation' (least of all what she dismisses as 'orthodox Marxism'), and only accepts broad characterisation of her work as archive-based 'historical sociology'.[6] Published in German in 2017 and issued in a much-anticipated though rather rushed English translation as part of Brill's Historical Materialism series in 2023, the bulk of *Market and Violence* consists of dozens upon dozens of detailed and harrowing studies of capital's more unrestricted sites of exploitation, ranging from the Assam 'tea gardens' to the mines of Rhodesia. The fruit of a lifetime's work and winner of the 2023 Deutscher Prize, Gerstenberger's book is sure to become an influential and controversial point of reference in a good many contemporary debates, both empirical and theoretical, about capitalism and its history.

Before we try to summarise Gerstenberger's account of this history it's important to emphasise that she approaches her task very much as a historian. She isn't herself interested in many of the more abstract debates that have absorbed Marxist attention in recent years. You'll find no discussion in this book of falling rates of profit, of capitalism's propensity to crisis, of recent forms of mechanisation or automation, of the differences between monopoly capitalism and techno-feudalism, etc. The phrases 'commodity fetishism' and 'value theory' do not appear in the text, any more than do detailed discussions of money, credit or financialisation. Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein are only mentioned in passing (with Braudel censured for over-estimating the importance of world trade and the merely 'psychological' factor of 'merchants' desire for profit' [MV, 34]). There are no references to Giovanni Arrighi or Moishe Postone, and only parenthetical notes on Robert Brenner or Ellen Meiksins Wood – if Gerstenberger agrees with the 'political Marxists" emphasis on relations of power and domination, she clearly resists their characterisation of (fully developed) capitalism as a mode of production that, by comparison with ancient or feudal alternatives, is uniquely able to rely on merely 'economic' or non-coercive means of extracting surplus labour from its workforce.[7] Gerstenberger offers no systematic discussion of feudalism, and seems to treat many aspects of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, or from manufacturing to industrialisation, as self-evident. For all her emphasis on capitalist recourse to violence, she stops well short of William Robinson's recent analyses of 'capitalism's extermination impulse,' or of its growing reliance on 'militarized accumulation.'[8] She has plenty to say about the relation between capitalism and slavery (of which more later), but she doesn't engage in a systematic assessment of, for instance, the 'New History of Capitalism' associated with Sven Beckert and Walter Johnson's recent work on the role cotton production played in the early stages of US industrialisation: for a long time Gerstenberger has taken the 'slave economy [to be] an integrated and profitable part of the process of capitalist development' (MV, 83n.80), and generally

interprets this too as self-evident. She is closer to Ellen Wood than e.g. Charles Post when she claims that, while capital will certainly make use of whatever means of discrimination might enhance its dominance over labour, 'it is not *constitutively* racist or sexist.'[9] As far as Gerstenberger is concerned, capitalism's inclusion of chattel slavery among its strategies of exploitation is a demonstrable and suggestive historical fact; theoretical arguments about whether capitalism *must* be racialised or gendered are secondary speculations.

In a recent discussion of her book and its initial reception, Gerstenberger confessed that when she wrote it she assumed she could take the general concept of capitalism for granted.[10] This assumption helps to explain why her first chapters don't include a succinct account of what makes capitalism distinct by comparison with previous modes of production. Her third chapter in particular, on the 'Historical Preconditions for Capitalist Accumulation', characterises the process in broadly familiar terms: these preconditions include the generalisation of commodity production, the 'pacification of transport routes' (i.e. military or political control over the principal avenues of domestic and international trade), the removal of feudal obstacles to the untrammelled exploitation of labour (e.g. restrictions posed by guilds and other corporate bodies, inherited privileges or exemptions, time-honoured traditions, etc.), the generalisation of market mechanisms and the consequent primacy of competitive pressures, and so on.

Gerstenberger has plenty to say about all these things, but her own particular focus is on *one* very specific question, and it's not a question that helps account for what makes capitalism different from previous modes of production – on the contrary. Her question is: what is the relation between capitalist relations of production and recourse to physical or direct violence against persons? Whether exercised or threatened by an employer, or by state agencies acting in support of an employer, as Gerstenberger defines it such violence includes all the means of causing bodily harm (or the threat thereof) that might compel people to accept limitations on their movement and their activities, including acceptance of abysmal working conditions, of wages paid at rates below the value of their work, and so on, as well as acceptance of their exposure to dangerous conditions and materials, acceptance of the expropriation of their lands or pos-



sessions, the theft of their collective resources, and so on (MV, 4-5). Gerstenberger is clear that she aims to limit the category to 'personal' and 'physical' forms of violence, thereby explicitly excluding both psychological and 'impersonal' forms of coercion. Framed negatively, Gerstenberger can thus say that 'direct violence consists in practices that theoreticians of capitalism regard as unnecessary if not indeed as harmful for developed societies' (3).

This then is the central argument that runs all through the book. From Adam Smith through Karl Marx and Max Weber to Pierre Bourdieu or Moishe Postone (to say nothing of Friedrich Hayek and any number of neoliberal ideologues), prevailing theoretical accounts of capitalism present it as 'a historically progressive countermodel to economies based upon the direct domination of labourers or upon predatory appropriation.' These accounts assume that older forms of 'personal' or direct coercion are made redundant by capital's reliance on less abrasive and more impersonal or market-mediated forms of exploitation. It is this that allows both critics and apologists of capitalism to celebrate it not only as more productive, innovative, efficient, and so on, but also as more 'civilised' and humane. Gerstenberger sets out to demolish this assumption. She aims to show that 'there is no developmental trend inherent to capitalism which is conducive to impersonal relations in economic dealings' (MV, xi).

In this sense, the whole of Gerstenberger's enormous work is 'limited to a single criticism: a criticism of the assumption that the practice of direct violence against persons occurs far less often in capitalism than in previous economic forms, because such violence is economically counterproductive' (MV, xii). Gerstenberger acknowledges, of course, that in many situations capital has no need to rely on direct violence, and that to threaten such violence might often be counterproductive. But this all depends on the situation, and on the way capitalists assess the prevailing balance of political forces. Gerstenberger's target is that widespread 'certainty concealed in mainstream opinion and economic analyses that the laws that dictate how capitalist economies themselves function are conducive to abstention from violence. To be more precise, my critique focuses on those aspects of a philosophy of history which have been passed down in both Marxist and liberal theories of capitalism' (xi-xii). Though she limits her critique to the past history and present operations of capitalism, it isn't hard to see how – not least in the increasingly authoritarian and militarised global context of 2024 – Gerstenberger's approach helps to anticipate aspects of its likely future as well.

If it's impossible to do justice here to even one of the many specific situations she investigates, the broad shape of Gerstenberger's alternative history of capitalism is easily sketched. After reviewing the legal measures that constrained the initial forms of waged labour in early modern Europe, she traces the prolonged transition from plantation slavery and debt peonage through to the global trade in nineteenth-century 'coolie' labour and its contemporary variants, illustrated as much by the Kafala system of the Gulf states as by the 'boundless exploitation of "foreigners"' in Europe and North America (MV, 438). The systematic use of prison labour in the post-Reconstruction (and then neoliberal) carceral system of the United States is another example among many more. If such open or unabashed assertions of private 'property rights over labour are rare today', at least in some societies, this is largely 'because the cost of obtaining replacements is very low.' The more disposable workers become, the more easily they can be harnessed and discarded in the machinery of 'just-in-time production', the less capital needs to respect rights won by previously-organised labour, or to rely on longer-term labour contracts. Although such hard-won contracts remain 'the historically legitimated justification of capitalist exploitation' (425), there is no trans-historical tendency, immanent to capitalist production itself, that compels it to respect the rights and 'freedom' of wage labour per se.

Sites most removed from public scrutiny and government oversight – for instance the export processing zones that dot the peripheries of the neoliberal world order (MV, 474), or the 'high seas' ploughed by international shipping and its 'flags of convenience' (466) – offer illuminating examples of what vulnerable workers may be subjected to when capital is fully let off the leash. Gerstenberger's earlier archival work on globalised and ultra-exploited maritime labour is re-deployed here to great effect – a recent lecture she gave on 'the political economy of seafaring labour' shows how, in recent decades, stripped of any meaningful means of organisation or self-defence, it has been wholly subsumed within 'cap-

italism at its purest.'[11] Though she doesn't discuss it in detail, another exemplary case would be the indescribable conditions that have long prevailed in the global meat industry (451). The most illuminating examples of all, however, remain those places where capital is not merely unencumbered by state regulations but actively enabled and enhanced by them – most obviously, these are the places colonised by European capitalists, and their neocolonial counterparts. For the British in India or the Germans in South West Africa, the colonies figure here as a sort of laboratory for exploring what untrammelled capitalist exploitation might be capable of, in circumstances that deprive workers of all significant political representation or rights. 'Nothing was as important for the political economy of colonial capitalism than the direct subordination of workers to state power', i.e. their exposure to 'radical extortion' without redress (207). By the same token, nothing remains more important to the political economy of neo-colonial capitalism, in the era opened up by the wars of national liberation in China and Vietnam, than the ongoing subordination of formerly colonised states to the power of international capital.[12]

The cumulative impact of Gerstenberger's lengthy inventory of capital's crimes and outrages is overwhelming, and her book is a devastating refutation of any residual attempts to portray capitalism as an essentially 'civilising' or progressive phase of human history. Although it is far more concerned with documenting specific labour practices than with engaging in abstract philosophical arguments, the book is also punctuated by ten parenthetical 'theoretical remarks', and intervenes in a number of important discussions that continue to divide Marxist circles. Three of these interventions are likely to generate particular interest among readers primed to agree with Gerstenberger's unequivocal condemnation of capitalist coercion, and perhaps the simplest way to introduce them is via her occasional and rather guarded references to Marx himself.

Command over labour

In the first place, Gerstenberger aligns herself with Marx by defining capital most fundamentally as a political relation of domination and command. Just as its natural i.e. unbridled economic tendency is towards consolidation and monopoly rather than 'free competition', capital's natural political form is autocracy rather than democracy; the more fully capital prevails, the more fully it imposes itself as a naked form of class dictatorship. What is most distinctive about capital as a social force, from this perspective, is then neither its alleged rationality nor an intrinsic orientation towards technological progress, but simply the depth and scope of its capacity to compel people to work for it. If the capitalist mode of production is indeed more profitable and innovative than earlier modes, this is primarily because capital has invented more far-reaching means of compelling its workforce. In particular, by comparison with its predecessors, capital has invented and exercised more compelling mechanisms of public or state power.

In his most concise and instructive definition, Marx characterises capital as 'essentially the command over unpaid labour.'[13] 'Capitalism essentially involves commanding the labour process' (MV, 208), echoes Gerstenberger, and 'while this is achieved in mechanised production by turning labour forces into "appendages of the machine" (Marx), in colonial production it was achieved predominantly through commands in the literal sense of the word and through discipline produced and maintained through coercion' (208). This is one of the several reasons why Gerstenberger pays special attention to the way the *colonial* state exercises its coercive power. 'Just as the state in Europe's Ancien Régime, the colonial state was an institution for the appropriation of property. And just as in the Ancien Régime, appropriation through armed violence was a central element of domination' in the colonies, as was reliance on caste-like privilege and 'factual legal inequality' between social groups (301-2).

What was most distinctive and symptomatic about the colonial state, by contrast with the (relatively) more law-bound machinations of the metropolitan states, is its relative freedom of manoeuvre. Capitalist colonies are places in which the dominant classes can do whatever they might want. In the face of popular resistances that might require inter-class negotiations back in Europe, colonial states could instead rely on expansive emergency provisions designed to crush them by all necessary means. Back in the days of Winston Churchill, Smedley Butler and other unabashed 'gangsters of capitalism', there was nothing subtle about such means.[14] Compared with its metropolitan counterpart, in other words, the colonial

state is a closer approximation to the kind of modern state that is *utterly* devoted to its primary role as enabler and enforcer of capitalist accumulation. Even acts of repression so severe that they eventually resulted in public debate – Gerstenberger considers the examples of the great Indian Rebellion of 1857 (suppressed with the killing of hundreds of thousands of Indians) and the 1865 Morant Bay revolt in Jamaica (suppressed with many hundreds of floggings and 439 executions) – could readily be justified as necessary for the preservation of that balance of terror upon which minority white rule relied (MV, 307-310).

So long as such rule could safely ignore the needs and concerns of the indigenous majority, the colonial state could continue to fulfil its most essential function: the conversion of this majority into a largely powerless and disposable workforce. Trade unions and mass suffrage campaigns eventually obliged metropolitan campaigns to restrict if not renounce the use of direct violence against European workers, but such coercive 'labour relations in the colonies remained part and parcel of political power until the very end of the colonial era.' Not only did the state itself continue to employ forced labour for its infrastructure projects, it also justified coercion as a social benefit – 'because "natives" were considered by nature lazy, unwilling to work, and obtuse, it was for their own good that they were turned into willing workers by means of forced labour (*travail obligatoire*)' (MV, 312). In short, whereas in Europe trade unions and popular political pressure succeeded in establishing at least a degree of separation between the exercise of state power and the economic interests of the dominant class, in the colonies no separation of society and the state was allowed to take hold, for the simple reason that 'society, understood as a sphere in which autonomous individuals become aware of their common interests through public (or if needed secret) debates, could hardly develop.' In the absence of social constraints, the colonial states were free to use whatever kinds of force and discrimination the requirements of super-exploitation seemed to demand. 'Colonial states remained apparatuses of violence designed to further private appropriation', and 'any and all attempts to claim that their nature was theoretically more complex are misleading' (313-4).

Back in a metropolitan country like mid-nineteenth-century Britain, pending the rise of organised labour and mass suffrage, comparable though less dramatic results could still be achieved via the combined effects of punitive poor relief and capital's ability to draw on the state's judicial apparatus to prosecute workers who, in their eyes of their employers, broke their contracts by escaping their place of employment or failing to fulfil their obligations with sufficient zeal (MV, 406-7). Through to the 1870s, British 'labour relations continued to be a relationship of domination sanctioned by the state. As late as 1823, in the middle of the development of industrial capitalist production, certain penal provisions of the Master and

Servant acts were even substantially exacerbated' and 'the punishment of workers who had not fulfilled their contractual obligations was considered a matter of course. They could be whipped or sentenced to prison or to forced labour or to a fine or to losing all rights to the wages they had previously earned' (60-2).

Throughout her book, Gerstenberger emphasises the role played by the state in both the emergence of capital and also its subsequent, partial and forever resisted 'domestication' – 'not only the historical constitution, but also the continuation of domesticated capitalism is based on state power' (MV, 408). More generally, and in contrast to approaches that prioritise the abstract 'logic' of capital's law of value,[15] one of the great virtues of Gerstenberger's emphasis on the state and its assertion of a monopoly on violence or coercive force is that it foregrounds specific class and institutional actors in ways that ordinary usage presumes – as she points out early on, 'violence (like the French term *violence* or the German term *Gewalt*) necessarily involves intent, and consequently actors who harbour this intent' (2). Even quasi-automated financial transactions, she reminds us, are still 'based on the decisions of concrete institutions and thus also real human individuals' (421). The relative and tenuous freedoms occasionally accorded to labour, in the capital-labour relation, were always won by specific groups of workers engaged in specific campaigns. 'Everywhere, political struggles had to be fought out and political decisions had to be taken to create the form of labour relations that now we have come to consider as being adequate for capitalist production' (110). In Britain, for instance, long-standing assumptions that employers could resort to state coercion in order to enforce labour contracts were only challenged and eventually overcome when large numbers of working people gained the right

to vote after 1867.[16] In France workers won certain rights and freedoms long before their British counterparts, and indeed well before the local development of capitalism itself, precisely as a result of the political pressures unleashed in the years that followed 1789. In France, 'the political necessity to decree that the two parties of a contract were to be equal before the law was brought about by the political necessity of constituting state power after the revolutionary demise of nobility. It was a direct result of the Revolution, and had nothing to do with any economic rationality.'[17]

Ongoing accumulation

There is a second way in which Gerstenberger's history of capitalism builds on Marx's account, while also challenging some of its central distinctions. Although she mentions it only once (on her opening page), Gerstenberger certainly agrees with the broad outlines of Marx's famous reconstruction of the origins of capital, his demonstration of how capital 'comes into the world … dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt' (C1, 926). Countering the 'idyllic' fantasies peddled by bourgeois political economists, the famous final part of *Capital, Volume 1* shows how the primitive or originary accumulation of capital was rooted in the expropriation of peasant farms, the conquest and enslavement of indigenous populations, and the theft of collective resources. Like some other readers of Marx, however, including Rosa Luxemburg, Sylvia Federici and David Harvey, Gerstenberger objects to the way that he tends to associate the role of violence ('conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force [*Gewalt*]' [C1, 874]) with the originary *rather* than the subsequent or routine accumulation of capital. Gerstenberger's own priority, of course, is to show how recourse to violence remains characteristic of capital at every stage. No less than Federici, Gerstenberger refuses 'to see the advent of capitalism as a moment of historical progress.'[18] She rejects, then, any account of capitalism that associates its development with any necessary reduction in direct violence against persons, and thus any intrinsic preference for the use of 'free' or uncoerced labour. Insofar as Marx and his readers are themselves committed to such an account, she rejects this too.

Of course Gerstenberger admits the *possibility* that capital might, under certain circumstances (i.e. under sufficient pressure from organised labour or a state sympathetic to labour), chose to rely on the 'impersonal domination' of market forces, rather than on more direct and intentional, i.e. 'personal', means of compulsion. As Gerstenberger explained to Jasper Strange in an illuminating 2018 interview, by focusing on the general law of value,

> Marx did not have to make capital owners responsible for all the evils inherent in capitalism. Once the capacity to labour of many men, women (and children) was transformed into a commodity, the violence inherent in the anonymous forces of the market could replace the practice of direct violence against labourers. Marx's theory of value enabled him to explain that even if nobody cheats and everything is exchanged according to its value, the productive capacity of labour power reproduces the capital relation, i.e. the class difference.[19]

Gerstenberger accepts that this 'focus on capitalism as a system … enabled Marx to explain that the reproduction of capitalism is possible without the use of direct violence against persons.' So far so good. However, 'whenever this historical possibility is mistakenly conceived of as historical necessity, the analysis of capitalism is transformed into a philosophical concept of history'.[20] This transformation subsumes empirical analysis in an unjustified teleological conception of historical development, one that orients capitalism towards the exploitation of free or uncoerced labour in the short term, and towards its own revolutionary self-destruction over the longer term. Faced with a choice between the analysis of 'actual history' and a dubious 'philosophical concept of history', Gerstenberger's preference is very clear.

So is her contribution to the ongoing debates regarding Marx and slavery, on the one hand, and the relation between plantation slavery and capitalism, on the other. As is well known, Marx recognised the fundamental role that plantation slavery played in the development of capitalism as a world system, most especially in the development of the industrial product par excellence, cotton. 'The veiled slavery of the wage-labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal' (C1, 925), just as 'the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of

India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production' (C1, 915). Marx also insists, however, that an essential part of capital's unprecedented ability to harness 'more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together' – its creation of 'wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals', etc.[21] – is its equally unprecedented ability to rely on economic and thus 'impersonal' rather than directly coercive forms of compulsion. Capital's distinctive reliance on market-mediated relations of production allow it to buy or rent labour-power as a commodity, rather than simply compel labourers to work by force. Capital's unique relations of production thus pit free capital against labour that is 'free' in a double sense – workers who have both been 'freed' of any ownership of their own means of production, and who are now free to be employed by one of several possible employers (C1, 271-3).

On this condition, Marx argues, 'as an agent in producing the activity of others, as an extractor of surplus labour and an exploiter of labour-power, [capital] surpasses all earlier systems of production, which were based on directly compulsory labour, in its energy and its quality of unbounded and ruthless activity' (C1, 425). Direct compulsion and repressive legislation against 'vagabonds' and 'idlers' was and is certainly required in order to establish these 'free' relations of production, and to drive workers into that dependence upon capital that will oblige them, eventually and reluctantly, to accept its new forms of subordination. But the key point about capitalist development, according to Marx, is that its consolidation generates means of commanding labour that are both more imperious and more insidious than those available to any previous mode of production.

> The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws. The organization of the capitalist process of production, once it is fully developed, breaks down all resistance. … The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases (C1, 899).

However much capital's production processes 'distort the worker into a fragment of a man', however much they 'degrade', 'torment' and 'alienate' him, however much they 'subject him during the labour process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness' (C1, 798), capital nevertheless confronts, over time, a working class that is more and more 'willing' to work for capital.

Gerstenberger accepts that the idea of 'free wage labour', based in apparently voluntary contracts and upheld by apparently neutral state and judicial institutions, is indeed an essential aspect of capital's 'magnificent legitimacy' (MV, 108). She argues, however, that Marx was too quick to treat this merely *ideological* dimension of capital's self-conception as a tendency of actually-existing capitalist exploitation. He was too quick to interpret the rise of 'free labour' as an economic rather than *politico*-economic tendency. It's true that 'there were economic prerequisites for creating conditions of production the constitution and maintenance of which was due to the coercion of conditions rather than direct private violence and state coercion', namely a sufficient supply of destitute would-be workers, and technological developments that made these workers easier to replace

and discard. But drawing in particular on the work of Robert Steinfeld and Marcel van der Linden,[22] Gerstenberger insists that 'nowhere has it been a purely economic process for free wage labour to became dominant in a society. Everywhere, political struggles had to be fought out and political decisions had to be taken to create the form of labour relations that now we have come to consider as being adequate for capitalist production.'[23] Such decisions may be reversed. Capital needs compliant workers who can be exploited for a profit, this is non-negotiable – whether their work is formally 'free', or not, is an optional extra.

Marx recognised that the exploitation of slave labour might be *compatible* with capitalism. He admits for instance that once the export of cotton was integrated into capitalist supply chains so then formerly 'patriarchal' relations between master and slave were replaced by a more 'calculated and calculating system. It was no longer a question of obtaining from him a certain quantity of useful products, but rather of the production of surplus-value itself.' (C1, 345).[24] Nevertheless, Marx clearly considered the direct exploitation of chattel slaves to be less efficient and less profitable than the exploitation of more willing and less threatening 'wage slaves', and some recent analysts of plantation slavery have likewise stressed the ways its labour practices (by replacing the purchase of waged labour-power with the purchase of bonded labourers themselves) remain pre- or non-capitalist.[25] Gerstenberger disagrees, firmly aligning herself with Robin Blackburn's 'irrefutable' conclusion that 'slavery was not overthrown for economic reasons but where it became politically untenable.'[26] Not only can it be shown (drawing among other things on Rebecca Scott's work on sugar production in Cuba) that 'slaves could be just as easily introduced and subjugated to mechanised production as free wage workers';[27] the widespread but mistaken 'conviction that slavery and capitalism are not compatible' is most directly refuted by recalling the practices of former slave owners who, in the wake of the Confederacy's defeat in 1865, 'developed all sorts of "Ersatz- slavery".' Even more than the harsh labour codes mandated by Toussaint Louverture and André Rigaud in the last years of colonial Saint-Domingue, the various 'Black Codes' that were passed in the South immediately after the end of the Civil War were intended to preserve plantation slavery in all but name. If these soon had to be abandoned in the face of strong Republican political pressure, 'vagrancy laws, the widespread use of peonage and the renting out of convicts more or less achieved the same goal. All of these forms bound labour to a certain employment. None of these forms hindered the development of capitalism'.[28] Once the temporary pressure from the Republican North eased off, over the 1870s, the spirit if not the letter of the Black Codes could be restored in full, and imposed by the combined force of the Ku Klux Klan, on the one hand, and Jim Crow legal rulings, on the other.

Likewise, once political and moral pressure finally made chattel slavery indefensible in Europe, capital in the Caribbean and then across much of the colonised world 'immediately invented and exploited legal forms of surrogate slavery. Amongst these was the extensive trade in labour contracts which bound Asian coolies to their places of work for a number of years and very often for much longer.' Once again, what eventually ended this trade was not its inadequate rate of profit but the domestic political reactions its abuses provoked.[29] In each case the key thing to understand, Gerstenberger argues, is that 'free wage labour is not the irrefutable and thus almost automatic result of economic development, but the result of specific state regulation' (MV, 109), itself invariably 'the result of long and fierce struggles' (426).[30]

In other words, the difference we have grown used to, between free and forced labour, 'is not virtually "natural" and a matter of course; this distinction was and remains defined over the course of history through conventions and laws.'[31] Capital's reluctant acceptance of such conventions, in the form of concessions to the growing political power of organised labour in the metropolitan countries, may have resulted in the partial 'domestication' of capitalism in those privileged places, complete with state-enforced minimum wage limits and legal protections for workers – but this, too, did not hinder the development of capitalism itself, nor limit its capacity to challenge or *reverse* these conventions wherever and whenever the balance of class power might allow it. Germany's National Socialist regime is only the most extreme case of what capital may be prepared to do if no political force is available to stop it. As Gerstenberger shows in compelling detail, Hitler's Third Reich 'was not a relapse into a pre-bourgeois epoch', but its labour regime certainly 'constituted a relapse into pre-domesticated capitalism. Consequently, strategies of appropriation

that had hardly been conceivable a few years earlier became possible, and even commonplace' (MV, 409). In the absence of any political (or moral) restrictions, liberated from even the most minimal requirements of social reproduction, Nazi managers were free to exploit their workers as an emphatically disposable resource.

If the aggressive strategies of appropriation developed more recently by neoliberal regimes have so far refrained from such extremities this is again best explained, Gerstenberger suggests, simply through reference to the evolving balance of class forces, rather than by appealing to any intrinsic tendencies or limitations inherent in the capital-labour relation per se. Gerstenberger hardly needs to stress just how lopsided this balance has become in recent years, as ever more authoritarian and neo-fascistic forms of capitalism compete with each other in situations of more or less open conflict.

Gerstenberger summarises the lessons of her empirical analyses in her last couple of pages. Since capital prioritises profits for the privileged few rather than 'a better future for all', it's a mistake to subscribe to any version of the old myth that a 'rising tide lifts all boats.'

> In metropolitan capitalist countries, the 'thirty glorious years' after the Second World War once again nurtured the expectation that it was possible to prevent crises through economic policy. The real development of globalised capitalism has not only disproved this expectation, but also laid to rest the hope for a general improvement in living conditions through continuous economic growth. It has also refuted the assumption that social upgrading of working conditions is an inevitable consequence of introducing technically sophisticated production processes. On the other hand, it has become emphatically clear that direct violence as a means of appropriation was not only used in the early days of capitalist development, but is still in use today. It is true that after the historical establishment of capitalist conditions in some countries, this practice was initially marginalised, both geographically and socially. However, this was only the result of economically rational calculation insofar as the need for a growing number of workers for industrialised production within the limits of the labour markets of the time gave clout to the demands of organised labour. Since the globalisation of capitalism has done away with previously existing boundaries of labour markets, direct violence has again become present within the spaces of established capitalism. This is not inevitable. If a closer look at historically existing capitalism confirms the hypothesis that owners of capital tend to use every means to achieve profit, which they are not being prevented to employ, it has also become clear that public opinion and governments can indeed prevent such practices (MV, 663-4).

The limits of class struggle

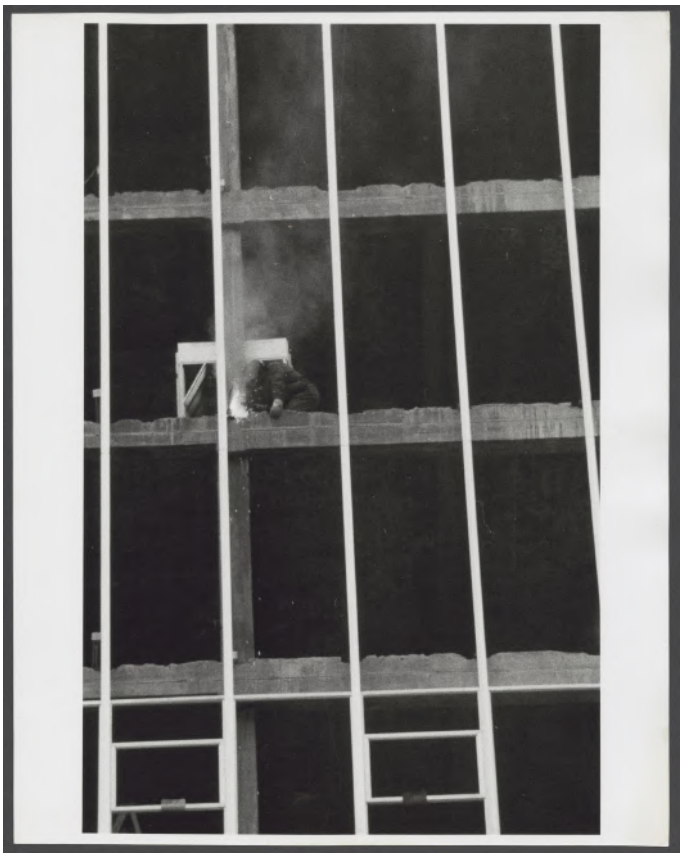
Gerstenberger's concluding appeal to 'public opinion and governments' points to the most obvious and far-reaching difference that separates her account of capital from that of Marx. However much Marx's later economic writings might focus on the intricate machinations of capital and its general 'laws of motion', his priorities remain, of course, political and revolutionary. If after 1850 Marx pays such close attention to capitalism's development, the main goal remains to illuminate the tasks confronting the class that is destined to challenge and overcome it. Like Luxemburg and Lenin after him, Marx remains confident that capital cannot avoid preparing and enabling the people it exploits to dig its own grave, and thereby 'begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation.' In the notoriously compressed lines that conclude the main argument of *Capital, Volume 1*, Marx reiterates his belief that, together with the consolidation and centralisation of capital, 'there also grows the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers, and trained, united and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production.' Eventually 'the centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated' (C1, 929).

Nothing about Gerstenberger's analysis of actually-existing capitalism leads her to embrace Marx's anticipation of its revolutionary overthrow. This applies to both the 'objective' and 'subjective' aspects of the question. Given her single-minded focus on the question of direct or physical violence, Gerstenberger's objective history doesn't do full justice to those corrosive and thus at least *partly* emancipatory social developments regularly associated with the eclipse of feudalism and the rise of capitalism – the growth of cities, of trade, of literacy, of less constrained forms of labour, and so on. Gerstenberger is surely right that capitalist employers would

rather employ diligent but submissive and disposable servants than genuinely 'free' workers, but the sociological gap (and with it the space for new forms of association, new forms of institution-building, new forms of political organisation) between ancien-régime service and the emergence of waged labour seems wider than Gerstenberger allows.[32]

Regarding the subjective side of things, Gerstenberger has even less sympathy for that heroic proletarian mission that Marx embraced as an article of faith in the 1840s, and that would later inform every stage of Luxemburg's or Lenin's political lives. Gerstenberger understands why the *Communist Manifesto* still appeals to anti-capitalist activists, but considers it 'historically more wrong than correct.'[33] Gerstenberger finds no evidence to support the idea that the working class, the class of all those people who are employed and exploited by capital, can be understood as a 'social actor' in the proper sense of that word, i.e. an actor motivated by a common purpose and equipped with a shared capacity to act on it. If the term class remains an essential category for understanding 'the fundamentally contradictory interests which are present in any labour relation', Gerstenberger insists that 'to talk of a global working class amalgamates description with the theory of revolution.' While such amalgamation may offer political encouragement (or consolation), 'its theoretical foundation is not tenable'.[34]

Following Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, Gerstenberger argues that 'class analysis arose out of the fact that at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century there were proletarian milieus which favoured the development of solidarities which then in turn allowed the development of a socialist and communist programmatic.' Even in those circumstances, however, "'class" was a fictive entity in so far as it was conceived as a social group which would act in a certain way. These milieus hardly exist in present day capitalist societies. If conflicts over the appropriation of the results of labour are present in any labour relation, this does not make them into parts and parcel of class struggle. In order to perceive a global conflict between classes we would have to assume that solidarity could overcome competition on a global scale'[35] – and today this assumption, Gerstenberger suggests, remains nothing more than wishful thinking.[36] 'Today, the working-class milieus that had once made class analysis plausible have largely disappeared', and while 'struggles over the appropriation of the fruits of people's labour exist in all capitalist societies, class struggles do not' (MV, 521-2). Organised and politically consequential forms of class struggle, Gerstenberger implies, exist even less.



Another standard term in the Marxist lexicon that doesn't appear in Gerstenberger's book is 'class consciousness'. According to her account of our situation as it stands, the conditions that might encourage the emergence of global proletariat, as a tendentially united and 'conscious' or purposeful political actor, simply haven't materialised. In these circumstances

> it is impossible to justify the theoretical construct of a global proletariat. If a child knocking stones in an Indian quarry, a worker constantly handling poison in a rose plantation in Ecuador, or a captive sailor on an Indonesian fishing boat are all indiscriminately assigned to the theoretical construct of a global proletariat, whose rage about their conditions can be heard in a 'cry', they are then not only being exploited by capital owners and oppressed or 'overlooked' by politicians, but they are also being disregarded by theoreticians. For although the very diverse forms of labour existing in globalised capitalism all share one aspect – that men, women and children have to employ their labour under conditions defined by cap-

> ital owners – the alternatives available to them on labour markets and the possibilities of resistance available to them differ so fundamentally that theoretical analysis cannot be allowed to simply lump them together under the heading of a globally existing social group of 'proletarians' (MV, 522-3).

The rebranding of 'proletarians' as 'the multitude,' she adds, in a sharp dig at Hardt and Negri, only adds another layer of obfuscation. Again, as she put it in a 2018 article,

> If the class relation exists in any form of capitalism, and if it is present in most social struggles of our time, the classes which Marx assumed would organize and teach themselves, thereby getting ready for revolution, are not present in globalized capitalism. There is then no social force which will induce capital owners to overcome short sighted practices of exploitation by creating labour conditions which, according to Marx, embody the historical progress inherent in capitalist social forms of production because they obliterated the brute force of exploitation characteristic of historically earlier forms of production and also because they bring about the preconditions for social revolution. The continuing presence of direct violence in capitalist social forms of production contradicts Marx's expectations of the history of capitalism. It thereby also contradicts his theory of revolution.[37]

Where Marx or Lenin sought to combine partisan commitment together with scientific investigation in a single revolutionary-scientific project, Gerstenberger insists that we should keep these two dimensions strictly apart. As social analysts, she says, 'we should look at the facts without being overwhelmed by hopes for a better future.'[38] Gerstenberger's sustained analysis of seafaring labour, for instance, leads her to accept what she calls, with a degree of understatement, a rather 'sober' judgement of its future. Asked about what the workers currently recruited by international crewing agencies might be able to do to resist their exploitation and fight for better conditions of work on the high seas, Gerstenberger's answer is stark: 'nothing'.[39]

Given her scepticism about the emergence of anything resembling a class actor that might be able to challenge let alone overthrow global capital, the terse and deflating tone of the concluding lines to Gerstenberger's long book is perhaps less surprising than a first reading might suggest. After reminding her readers that suitably informed 'public opinion and governments can indeed prevent' abusive labour practices and condemn 'unbearable conditions', Gerstenberger ends her empirical analysis with an insistence that what's at stake can only be a matter of relatively modest reforms. Nothing more. As things stand, our horizon of political possibility seems to be limited to campaigning for measures like appropriate taxes on financial transactions and on multinational corporations, and the enforcement of 'legal liability of enterprises for the working conditions of their labourers regardless of the location of their firms.' Such measures, Gerstenberger continues, 'clearly focus on the reform of capitalism. I do not know of any convincing strategic concept for the transition from capitalism to socialism nor do I know of any clear conception of the society to be built after the end of capitalism. But I do think that reform of capitalism is possible. And if such reforms will change the life of children, women and men for the better, then I think that they are worth fighting for'.[40]

The whole of Gerstenberger's final paragraph reads as follows: 'This study cannot serve as a starting point for discussions about reforms that would transcend the limitations of capitalism. Such discussions would have to address the fundamental structures of capitalism. What I have discussed here are excrescences of capitalism. They can be reformed. The political prospects such reforms might lead to are necessarily limited' (MV, 665). Nothing more. In case anyone should miss the point, Gerstenberger also adds a final and revealing footnote:

> The words I have chosen are also an appeal to abandon the optimistic view that capitalist production produces its own negation with the necessity of a process of nature [referring to C1, 929]. … Such optimism is not uncalled for because it is based upon delusions as to human nature, but rather because it is a teleological construct of human history, assuming that it necessarily aims at a certain goal. But if we dispense with a meaning of history under, over or in whatever sense outside the actual course of history, it is only consistent to dispense with a human nature outside history. What we in fact know about the potential and abysses of which humans are capable we know from history (MV, 665n.22).

Three questions

Readers who (like the author of this review) might be more impressed by Gerstenberger's general history of capital than by her reformist conclusions are entitled

to raise at least three questions of their own. The first concerns the limits of an historical approach per se. The sub-title of her book is important: this is very much a study of 'the functioning of capitalism *in history*.' As Gerstenberger would be the first to admit, indeed emphasise, such a study is very different from a 'critique of political economy', let alone a theoretical and strategic framework for transforming that economy. Gerstenberger's approach is also very different to the sort of histories written for instance by E.P. Thompson or Georges Lefebvre (to say nothing of Jean Jaurès or C.L.R. James), whose accounts of the making of a class capacity combine an analysis of its emergence with an avowedly 'engaged' or partisan investment in its political future.[41]

It should go without saying that any political confrontation with slavery, colonialism or colonial capitalism needs to be informed by the best available historical accounts of their origins and development. Nonetheless, no merely historical account of slavery, however lucid or thorough it might be, could ever have predicted let alone guided the actual political steps that were improvised and taken by the slaves who, over the long and bloody course of Haiti's revolution, rose up and overthrew it. No merely historical account of what Gerstenberger herself pointedly calls 'Ancien Régime' states could ever have predicted that abrupt and far-reaching break with such regimes that began in France in the spring of 1789. Similar points could be made about the revolutions that transformed Mexico, Russia or Cuba. In the same way, no merely historical account of what capital has done and has proved capable of doing can suffice to answer the questions future political actors might and indeed must one day ask themselves, about what in turn *we* should do about capital.

A second question concerns a limit to Gerstenberger's own particular history of capitalism, as a history that foregrounds its reliance on violence or coercive force. Recognition that 'capitalism essentially involves commanding the labour process' (MV, 208) certainly helps to show what it has in common with earlier modes of production, but Gerstenberger pays remarkably little attention to what might be called the distinctive 'psychopolitical' dimensions of capitalist command. These dimensions are fundamental to what makes capitalism both unique in comparison to earlier labour regimes and so difficult to challenge. Precisely because Marx is interested less in the past than in the future of capitalism, his analysis of these dimensions has lost none of its pertinence.

Marx retained the term 'wage slavery' in order to remind his readers of what it meant for workers to be 'dragged beneath the wheels of the juggernaut of capital' (C1, 799).[42] His account of capitalist command abounds in military metaphors and references to its 'despotism' and 'autocracy'. Marx knew perfectly well that originary accumulation is a prolonged process, and that 'centuries are required before the "free" worker, owing to the greater development of the capitalist mode of production, makes a voluntary agreement, i.e. is compelled by social conditions to sell the whole of his active life, his very capacity for labour, in return for the price of his customary means of subsistence' (C1, 382). But Marx was also careful to distinguish between the heavy and blatant chains of chattel slavery and the equally constraining but more 'invisible threads' that bind wage labourers to their owner (C1, 719). As we have seen, once thoroughly established, 'the silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker'(C1, 899). In the factory system, 'the capitalist formulates his autocracy over his workers like a private legislator and purely as an emanation of his own will', unchecked by that 'separation of powers' which serves to limit the scope of popular participation in politics (C1, 550). The workers used by capital experience their work and time as determined by 'the powerful will of a being outside them, who subjects their activity to his purpose' (C1, 450). As Marx understood perfectly well back in 1844, in capitalism 'man regards his will, his activity and his relation to other men as a power independent of him and them. His slavery therefore reaches its peak.'[43]

What's unusual about capital, in short, precisely *as* a form of slavery, is its capacity to compel its workforce not merely through violent coercion but also at the level of the *will*. A well-run capitalist economy can afford to replace the whips and chains of plantation slavery with less abrasive incentives, and trust the 'bony hand of hunger' to do the rest. Wherever capital is firmly in charge it can rely, to evoke Frederic Lordon's phrase, on an inexhaustible supply of 'willing slaves'.[44] Needless to say, the more willing and enthusiastic these slaves become, the easier it is to exploit them; the more they can be trusted to defer to their governments and pay their taxes, the more

capital can build up those networks of credit upon which it relies to fund its wars and investments. By focusing so much of her attention on coercive force Gerstenberger rightly foreground the stark brutality of capitalist exploitation, but as a result she (quite deliberately) pays much less attention to the psycho-political dimensions of the subjection that accompany it. Gerstenberger has little to say, in other words, in response to the question variously posed by La Boétie, Spinoza and Rousseau, and then rediscovered in different ways by Horkheimer, Adorno, Reich, Deleuze and Guattari – why might people submit to 'voluntary' forms of servitude, and collude in their own oppression? As Deleuze and Guattari put it in a much-cited page of their *Anti-Oedipus*, 'after centuries of exploitation, why do people still tolerate being humiliated and enslaved, to such a point, indeed, that they actually want humiliation and slavery not only for others but for themselves?'[45]

To confront a mode of production that operates at the level of people's wants, needs and desires must include, one way or another, a strategy for winning that political 'battle of wills' upon which our future depends. As Gerstenberger's own emphasis on the primacy of politics makes clear, arguments about what we should do about capital can hardly begin, let alone be resolved, before a sufficient mass of people come to *want* to do something about it, and then organise themselves into a force that is willing and able to act on what it wants.

Building on this basic point, my third and final question to Gerstenberger concerns her refusal to treat class as a 'social' let alone 'political' actor, i.e. as a collective actor that might come to share common desires or goals and organise common means of pursuing them. In the absence of a political account of class composition and class capacities, when Gerstenberger discusses the social forces that might induce the state to pass reforms limiting capital's excesses she refers instead to the shapeless pressures of 'public opinion' and of 'human beings' who stubbornly assert their dignity in the face of the most degrading abuses. 'Throughout the world', Gerstenberger tells us, 'there are more and more people who transcend their working conditions every day' (MV, 427) – and though this may well be true, it's one of the few declarations in her book that is backed up more by anecdote than by evidence.

As we've seen, Gerstenberger asks what an agrarian worker handling toxic chemicals in Ecuador might have in common with 'a captive sailor on an Indonesian fishing boat' (MV, 522). From a sociological perspective perhaps it's easy to answer: nothing at all. Despite obvious quantitative differences in distance and scale, however, there is no qualitative difference between such questions and the similar sorts of questions that could be asked, and were indeed pointedly asked, of the disparate occupational groups that contributed to the *political* making of a working class in England, Russia or China, or any place you like. As is well known, the French Revolution was in large part responsible for making the country that gives the sequence its name – but before they combined in enthusiastic defence of 'liberty, equality and fraternity', before they began to participate in local revolutionary organisations, before they enlisted in their new National Guard or citizens' army, what did Breton peasants really have in common with artisans in Rouen or labourers in Paris? On the eve of their own revolution in 1917, what did a landless day labourer in the Tambov countryside have in common with a textile worker on the outskirts of Moscow or a skilled metal worker in inner-city Petrograd?[46] Any attempt to answer such questions on the basis of 'historical sociology', however well-documented it might be, may not get very far in explaining the outbreak and course of the Russian Revolution – a sequence which allowed the diverse mass of groups demanding a transfer of 'all power to the Soviets' to find, in practice, that they actually had enough in common to turn their world upside down. Nor might such an approach make proper sense of those national liberation and internationalist projects that, in the wake of Russia's revolution, sometimes succeeded in organising widely divergent groups into a transformative political force.

Working as a historical sociologist, Gerstenberger may be entitled to *see* nothing in common between the objective situations of a captive sailor and a plantation labourer. To limit the category of class to observable sociological factors, however, is to remain blind to its political status and significance. Understood as one term in an asymmetrical relation of production, 'class' is not merely an expanded concept of occupation or livelihood, let alone a marker of social identity. The great and abiding value of the term 'working class' is precisely its explicit indifference to matters of occupation, geography or status. Nurses, coal miners, teachers and retail staff

obviously lead very different lives, but if they choose to do so they can all make common cause as exploited and precarious workers.

One of the virtues of putting things this way is that it helps to foreground the literally causal power such a class actor might acquire, should it succeed in organising itself as a political force. 'An adequate theory of agency must be a theory of the causal *powers* persons have', as Alex Callinicos notes, and 'intentional explanations of human action, invoking beliefs and desires as reasons for acting, are necessary because of the peculiar kind of living organisms human beings are.' If all actor- or action-oriented explanations of people's behaviour, furthermore, 'contain a hidden premiss referring to the agent's power to perform the action in question', the actual scope of such power varies with what Callinicos calls an actor's 'structural capacities.'[47] These capacities are themselves very largely shaped, of course, as Gerstenberger knows as well as anyone, by the way relations of production are structured under capital's command, and by the way such command is in turn resisted or challenged.

Despite its discouraging historical record, the enduring argument in favour of the working class – understood here in its original Marxian and inclusive sense, as the grouping together of all those who find themselves compelled to sell (or to try to sell) their capacity for work to employers who use and exploit them – as the only mass actor potentially powerful, determined and organised enough to challenge capital's grip over society is well summarised by Ellen Wood. Despite all attempts to co-opt, divide or distract it, the exploited or

> working class is the only social group possessing not only an immediate interest in resisting capitalist exploitation but also a collective power adequate to end it …. However difficult it may be to construct socialist practice out of popular consciousness, there is, according to this view, no other material out of which it can be constructed and no other socialism that is consistent with both political realism and democratic values. Perhaps the point is simply that socialism will come about either in this way or not at all.[48]

Gerstenberger concludes her book with a suggestion that, since no revolutionary actor is available to replace capitalism with socialism, so we should limit our political ambitions to legislative measures that might reform capitalism and reign in its tendencies to abuse its power. But Gerstenberger's argument in favour of reform today no more follows from 'the facts of *history*' than did Luxemburg's argument, more than a century ago, in favour of revolution.[49] How we want to live depends in the first place on what we *want* for the future, precisely, not on what has prevailed in the past.

Gerstenberger herself shows that even the most 'domesticated' forms of capital are not only liable but eager to regress into untamed predation whenever and wherever the opportunity might arise. The more we learn about capital's past and present the more reasons we have to conclude that our future requires something rather more forceful and transformative than new taxes and reforms. Nothing in Gerstenberger's account of actually-existing capitalism suggests that our most basic political choice has changed since it was first distilled by Kautsky and Luxemburg: if not socialism, then barbarism. The time to make up our minds about this is running out fast, and it's a mistake today, as it was yesterday, to believe that there will ever be a third option.

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Notes

1. Gerstenberger, 'Markt und Gewalt', *Historical Materialism* blog, 5 May 2018, https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/markt-und-gewalt-market-and-violence/.
2. Gerstenberger, 'The Political Economy of Capitalist Labour', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2 September 2014, https://viewpointmag.com/2014/09/02/the-political-economy-of-capitalist-labor/.
3. Gerstenberger, 'Heide Gerstenberger, Interviewed by Jasper Strange'," *Historical Materialism* blog, 17 October 2018, https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/heide-gerstenberger/
4. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 16; cf. Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Zed, 1986), ch. 5.
5. Gerstenberger, *Impersonal Power: History and Theory of the Bourgeois State* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009).
6. Gerstenberger, 'Heide Gerstenberger, Interviewed by Jasper Strange'.
7. See for instance Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Lon-

don: Verso Books, 1995), 20–21, 28–29.

8. William I. Robinson, 'Global Capitalism's Extermination Impulse,' *Philosophical Salon*, 19 August 2024, https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/global-capitalisms-extermination-impulse/ Cf. Robinson, *Global Civil War: Capitalism Post-Pandemic* (Oakland: PM Press, 2022); Robinson, *The Global Police State* (London: Pluto, 2020).

9. Gerstenberger, 'On *Market and Violence*,' presentation at the twenty-first *Historical Materialism* conference, London, 9 November 2024; cf. Charles Post, 'Racism and Capitalism: A Contingent or Necessary Relationship?' *Historical Materialism* 32:2-3 (2023), 78–103.

10. Gerstenberger, 'On *Market and Violence*,' presentation at *Historical Materialism* conference, London 9 November 2024.

11. Gerstenberger, 'The Political Economy of Seafaring Labour', Deutscher Lecture, *Historical Materialism* conference, London, 8 November 2024; cf. MV ch. 8, which draws in part on Gerstenberger and Ulrich Welke, *Arbeit auf See: Zur Ökonomie und Ethnologie der Globalisierung* (2008), along with their earlier collaboration, *Vom Wind zum Dampf* (1996).

12. A more detailed summary of some of the book's contents can be found in a helpful review of the German edition by Christian Lotz for *Marx & Philosophy Review of Books* (31 July 2018), https://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviews/16027_markt-und-gewalt-die-funktionsweise-des-historischen-kapitalismus-by-heide-gerstenberger-reviewed-by-christian-lotz/

13. Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 [1867], trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin and New Left Review, 1990), 672; hereafter abbreviated as C1.

14. See Jonathan M. Katz, *Gangsters of Capitalism: Smedley Butler, The Marines, and the Making and Breaking of America's Empire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2022).

15. See for instance e.g. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital* (London: Verso, 2023).

16. MV, 64-5, drawing on Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract, and Free Labor*, 239ff.

17. Gerstenberger, 'The Political Economy of Capitalist Labour', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2 September 2014; cf. MV, 58–59.

18. 'On the contrary', Federici continues, 'capitalism has created more brutal and insidious forms of enslavement, as it has planted into the body of the proletariat deep divisions that have served to intensify and conceal exploitation. It is in great part because of these imposed divisions – especially those between women and men – that capitalist accumulation continues to devastate life in every comer of the planet' (Federici, *Caliban*, 64).

19. Gerstenberger, 'Heide Gerstenberger, Interviewed by Jasper Strange'.

20. Ibid.

21. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, in Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 248.

22. Robert Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Marcel van der Linden and Magaly Rodríguez García, eds., *On Coerced Labor: Work and Compulsion After Chattel Slavery* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global History of Labor* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

23. MV, 110. Gerstenberger knows, of course, that 'in capitalist production, labour is used under conditions of competition. This became more possible on a larger scale in the first European countries to become capitalist when many people were forced to procure provisions for themselves and their families through wage labour. If they were legally free, they were able to offer their labour power to employers (in German, "'givers of work"', *Arbeitgeber*). However, contrary to widespread assumption, this did not immediately mean that labour was detached from control by authorities. That liberation had to be won through political struggle. It is not one of the founding characteristics of capitalism' (MV, 50).

24. David McNally, who is currently completing a book about Marx and slavery, raised some objections to Gerstenberger's account of slavery in his contribution to the online book launch for *Market and Violence*, hosted by HM on 30 Jan 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iwZEJ7HAP0.

25. See for instance Charles Post, *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class-Structure, Economic Development and Political Conflict, 1620-1877* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Dale W. Tomich, *Slavery in the Circuit of Sugar: Martinique and the World-Economy, 1830-1848* (NY: SUNY Press, 2016); Nick Nesbitt, *The Price of Slavery: Capitalism and Revolution in the Caribbean* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2022).

26. Gerstenberger, 'The Political Economy of Capitalist Labour' (2014), citing Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988), 520.

27. MV, 109; cf. Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

28. Gerstenberger, 'Heide Gerstenberger, Interviewed by Jasper Strange'.

29. Gerstenberger, 'Markt und Gewalt', *Historical Materialism* blog, 5 May 2018.

30. According to Gerstenberger, what prevents Marx and his more orthodox followers from understanding the ba-

sic continuity of waged and enslaved labour is their dogmatic investment in a teleological concept of history, one that includes both capitalism and socialism as necessary stages of a single sequence. No less than the bourgeois political economists they attack, Marx and his followers 'conceive of capitalism as a progressive stage in the history of mankind, not only because it was progressive in relation to pre-capitalist forms of economy and society but also because, according to Marx, the inherent dynamics of capitalism prepare the historical possibility of socialism.' Overall, Gerstenberger remains 'quite sure that it was [Marx's] concept of revolution which led to his refusal to accept that capitalism did not always and everywhere rely on the double freedom of labourers. Since he expected that labourers would organize and educate themselves in order to achieve the revolutionary transformation to socialism, he could not very well accept that slavery was a capitalist form of labour' (Gerstenberger, 'Heide Gerstenberger, Interviewed by Jasper Strange').

31. MV, 61, drawing on Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract and Free Labor*, 14, 315.

32. David Cunningham developed some aspects of this critique in his response to a first draft of this essay, in June 2024.

33. Gerstenberger, discussion with the author, London 9 November 2024.

34. Gerstenberger, 'Heide Gerstenberger, Interviewed by Jasper Strange'.

35. Ibid.

36. Cf. Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What's Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007). Gerstenberger made a similar argument in response to questions posed by David McNally at the online book launch for *Market and Violence*, 31 January 2024, https://www.youtube.com/live/6iwZEJ7HAP0?si=-di4wW-wXiD85jHH.

37. Gerstenberger, 'Markt und Gewalt', *Historical Materialism* blog, 5 May 2018.

38. Gerstenberger, discussion with the author, London 9 November 2024.

39. Gerstenberger, 'The Political Economy of Seafaring Labour,' discussion with the audience, 8 November 2024.

40. Gerstenberger, 'Heide Gerstenberger, Interviewed by Jasper Strange'.

41. I'm thinking here of E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* (1963), Georges Lefebvre's *Les Paysans du Nord pendant la Révolution française* (1924), Jean Jaurès's *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française* (1901-07) and C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938).

42. Cf. Bruno Leipold, 'Chains and Invisible Threads: Liberty and Domination in Marx's Account of Wage-Slavery', in *Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism*, ed. Hannah Dawson and Annelien de Dijn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 194–214.

43. Marx, 'Comments on James Mill, *Elements of Political Economy*' [1844], in Marx and Engels, *Complete Works*, vol. 3 (NY: International Publishers, 1975), 212.

44. Frederic Lordon, *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire* (London: Verso, 2014). Cf. Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (London: Verso, 2017); Peter Hallward, 'The Will of the People and the Struggle for Mass Sovereignty: A Preliminary Outline', *Crisis and Critique* 9:2 (November 2022): 143–219, https://www.crisiscritique.org/storage/app/media/nov-25/peter-hallward.pdf

45. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 29.

46. See in particular David Mandel, *The Petrograd Workers in the Russian Revolution: February 1917-June 1918* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Stephen A. Smith, *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories, 1917-1918* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017); Diane P. Koenker, *Moscow Workers and the 1917 Revolution* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1981).

47. Alex Callinicos, *Making History: Agency, Structure and Change in Social Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 274–77.

48. Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 103.

49. Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution* [1900], in *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Helen Scott (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008).