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What role for the privileged radical? Voluntary proletarianisation as a solution to the self-emancipation paradox

Abstract: Dara Bascara's Marxist republicanism centres the duty of the oppressed to self-emancipate. Dara had little to say regarding the duties attaching to members of dominant groups, other than the requirement to refrain from direct participation in oppression. The history of radical movements, however, is replete with figures hailing from the dominant classes, a tendency here labelled the 'self-emancipation paradox'. This paradox cannot be wished away, only managed. Challenging her assumption that class membership is immutable, this paper draws on Dara's Maoist background to posit a moral duty for the privileged to 'voluntarily proletarianise': actively seek – through a collective political vehicle – to leave their class, join the ranks of the oppressed, and absorb the struggle for self-emancipation into their life. The living practice of proletarianisation is brought into dialogue with various anti-colonial thinkers and radical movements to examine the ontological, epistemic and political possibilities and pitfalls of such a practice, a practice which may offer a solution to the current strategic impasse faced by the graduate-renter bloc of left-leaning youth in the Global North.

Introduction

An individual intellectual, like an individual capitalist, may join the proletariat in its class of struggle. When he does, he changes his character too.

– Karl Kautsky (1903)

Brazilian radical educator Paulo Freire once noted a striking historical trend. 'Certain members of the oppressor class,' he wrote, 'join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation.' Their participation is not marginal, but rather 'a fundamental role, and has been so throughout the history of this struggle' (Freire, 2017: 34). From slave revolts to anti-colonial rebellions, Communist parties to social democracy,[1] the 'leadership group' has often come from 'the

1 Of the first generation of Marxian intellectuals after Marx and Engels, 'Mehring was the son of a junker from Pomerania, Plekhanov of a landowner from Tambov, Labriola of a landowner from Campania, Kautsky of a painter from Bohemia'; of the next generation, 'Lenin was the son of a civil servant from Astrakhan, Luxemburg the daughter of a timber-merchant from Galicia, Trotsky the son of a farmer from the Ukraine, Hilferding of an insurance functionary and Bauer of a textile manufacturer in Austria'; of the founders of Western Marxism, 'Lukacs was the son of a banker; Benjamin of an art-dealer; Adorno of a wine-merchant; Horkheimer of a textile-manufacturer; Della Volpe of a landowner; Sartre of a naval officer; Korsch and Althusser of bank managers; Colletti of a bank clerk; Lefebvre of a bureaucrat; Goldmann of a lawyer' (Anderson, 1976: 5, 7, 26).

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social strata of the dominators' (*ibid*: 136).[2]

This phenomenon poses a fundamental problem for radical movements dedicated, in principle, to the *self-emancipation* of the oppressed. If such movements seek to be of and for those most directly affected by oppression, how can they allow intellectual and political leadership by dissident members of oppressor (or at least relatively privileged) groups? I call this the *self-emancipation paradox*.

Dara Bascara was a Philippine organiser and political theorist particularly attentive to the necessity of self-emancipation. As she argued, the self-emancipation of the oppressed is necessary for social progress; it is, she inferred, therefore a binding moral duty for oppressed persons. As such, she should be lauded for bringing the issue of self-emancipation to the centre of analytic philosophy. Her account, however, fails to provide a sufficient response to the self-emancipation paradox. Drawing on her own intellectual resources, particularly Maoism, I tackle her passing assumption that members of oppressor groups can never abandon their social group and join the oppressed. Through an examination of the theory and practice of 'voluntary proletarianisation' – the conscious changing of class position – I propose that members of oppressor groups have moral duties in excess of those suggested by Dara.

I first examine Dara's distinction between 'oppressor' and 'privileged' members of dominant groups and the limited moral duties pertaining to these members to merely refrain from exercising their capacity for arbitrary interference, finding it insufficient to deal with the self-emancipation paradox. In section 3, I disgard her assumption that group membership change is impossible, showing voluntary proletarianisation as a living political practice that seeks to manage the integration of privileged organisers into the ranks of the masses. Section 4 considers whether proletarianisation could apply where class and coloniality are tightly bound by juxtaposing the views of two mid-20th century anti-colonial thinkers, Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon, who both assessed the possibility of true, boundary-crossing solidarity emerging from within the coloniser's camp. Section 5 addresses the practice's underlying

2 Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the successful slave revolution in Haiti, owned slaves at the time of the outbreak (Bell, 2007). Amílcar Cabral, leader of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC, *Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde*) in the struggle against Portuguese colonialism, noted that the 'native petite bourgeoisie' 'take part in the creation and leadership of the liberation movement and are its main source of life', a situation he described as an 'apparent paradox in the challenge to colonial domination' (Cabral, 2016: 167, 173). Cabral himself had been educated in Lisbon as an agronomist and started his early career in the colonial civil service (McColloch, 2020: 2). Tony Benn, one of 20th century Britain's most radical social democratic politicians, was educated at the elite Westminster School and the son of a parliamentarian who inherited his father's peerage in the House of Lords (Adams, 2011). Such examples could be multiplied.

theory of how consiousness of interests is mediated by collective political interventions, emphasising the necessity of voluntary proletarianisation taking place within a collective political vehicle. The example of the Naxalites in India is used to illustrate the possibilities and difficulties of class redefinition. Section 6 examines the tensions inherent in proletarianisation as a child of Maoism, that most ambivilent 20th century legacy – and how these tensions can be managed, if not overcome, through the Maoist practice of criticism-self-criticism and the Christian-humanist Marxism of Paulo Freire. Section 7 argues that the practice of boundary-crossing can itself offer certain political and epistemic advantages. Section 8 brings these components together through an examination of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) organising efforts in Mississippi in the early 1960s. I conclude by proposing proletarianisation as a concrete political method for the left-leaning bloc of over-educated and under-employed young people facing the historic exhaustion of their attempts to change Global North society over the past decade a half.

In sum, I posit the Maoist practice of voluntary proletarianisation for members of oppressor groups seeking to assist liberation struggles – actively abjuring class privilege and seeking to join the oppressed, making the struggle truly their own – as a fraught, tentative navigation of the self-emancipation paradox. This path does not lead to an absolute solution but rather seeks to best traverse the rocky terrain imparted to us by the class tectonics of history.

2. Dara Bascara's republican self-emancipation and its limits

In her 2020 dissertation, Dara attempts to incorporate numerous axes of oppression, such as gender and race, into a republican Marxism. In rough outline, her theory states that oppression is based on a relation between two groups. Group A oppresses Group B when some members of Group A exercise that group's capacity to arbitrarily interfere with the members of Group B in a way that tracks the interests of the members of Group A and harms the interests of the members of Group B.

One of Dara's primary theoretical moves is to posit a moral duty of resistance on the part of members of oppressed groups, much as Simone de Beauvoir castigated Woman for her 'deep complicity' in her own subjugation and encouraged her to end her 'satisfaction' in 'her role as *Other*' (De Beauvoir, 2009). For Dara, 'self-emancipation is necessary and [...] relying on paternalistic emancipation is unlikely to fully alleviate oppression' (Bascara, 2020: 231). Since reducing or eliminating oppression is a key goal of moral theory, and oppression is historically reduced through the collective action of the oppressed – think of the Haitian slave revolution (James, 1989), the Civil Rights Movement, or

European labour struggles (Davis, 2018) – members of oppressed groups are the ones who can and should act to bring about a more just and equal society.

Although Dara does argue that '[e]veryone [...] has a duty to promote justice,' and that, 'Failure to do so is a failure of moral agency' (Bascara, 2020: 231), she has little to say about the moral responsibilities of members of the oppressor class, understandably focusing on the self-emancipation of the oppressed. If the capacity and responsibility for liberation lies largely with the oppressed, though, what 'duty' attaches itself to members of oppressor groups?

Dara divides members of the oppressor group in two: those who exercise their capacity for arbitrary interference (whom she calls 'oppressors'), and those who hold but do not exercise said capacity (whom she calls 'privileged members of an oppressing group' (*ibid*.: 139)). Since, she argues, members of oppressor groups 'do not choose the social groups they belong to, this means that they could not have done or could not have been otherwise' (*ibid*.). The moral duty of members of oppressor groups, at least in her dissertation, nowhere surpasses the necessity of refraining from exercising their capacity for arbitrary interference with the oppressed. This appears to give members of privileged groups an easy ride, placing the far more demanding duty of self-emancipation solely on the shoulders of the oppressed. The moral duties of the oppressed, in Dara's account, appear vastly greater than the moral duties of the privileged.

It is not clear exactly what Dara's position on the moral responsibilities of members of the oppressor groups is, since she also states that, 'the oppressors and the privileged have the primary duty to overcome oppression.' (*ibid*.: 218) She doesn't move beyond what she calls the 'prevailing narrative' of 'the duty of the privileged and the oppressors to relinquish their privilege' – which, in her account, would be only a duty of the *oppressors* to become merely the *privileged* (*ibid*.: 219). She has little to say about allyship or solidarity from quarters outside the oppressed group.

Dara's writings do not, then, solve the historic conundrum we began with. The history of social struggle has been indelibly marked by the problem of upper-class leadership, particularly in the realm of ideas, propaganda and strategy. So deep does this problem run in Marxist theory that sociologist Alvin Gouldner identified it as Marxism's central contradiction, one that undercuts its own materialist postulates (Gouldner, 1980). If, as central European Marxist Karl Kautsky once wrote, 'socialist consciousness' did not first arise within the working-class 'spontaneously,' but was 'introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without' by dissident members of the 'bourgeois intelligentsia,' (quoted in Lenin, 1999) how can Marxism claim to be a doctrine of self-

emancipation? Whether the 'portion of the bourgeois ideologists' that Marx noted 'cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class,' (Marx and Engels, 2002: 231) or the 'intelligentsia of the colonized' with its 'rational-adversarial potential' to resist colonialism (Therborn, 2022: 27), the historical reality suggests that the most oppressed often lack the ideational and practical resources to organise resistance completely unaided from the outside.

Dara is rightly concerned, though, that a resistance led by those outside the ranks of the oppressed is at constant risk of co-optation. It is not satisfactory to resign oneself to unreformed leadership by members of the privileged classes, as do some versions of Leninism with their theory of the vanguardism of Marxist intellectuals.[3] Some degree of participation and leadership by those who hail from privileged sectors may be unavoidable, even desirable, but only when carefully managed. Without collective practices controlling the manner of integration, dissident members of the oppressor classes risk carrying oppressive practices into liberation movements, acruing an undesirable degree of power, and being unresponsive to the needs and knowledge of the oppressed. Those hailing from such ruling groups have, then, a moral duty not just to refrain from oppression but to participate in the struggle for liberation. Their contribution is needed in the struggle for a better society. More than this, they have duties – in accordance with collective practices – to re-self-mould to make a helpful rather than harmful contribution.

One way to preserve the notion of self-emancipation would be for members of oppressor classes to fully evacuate their group, giving up their privilege and joining oppressed groups. If possible, this would allow dissident members of ruling groups to make the freedom struggle a question of their own direct liberation; within Dara's framework, they would have a concomitant duty to self-emancipate. Just such a solution is offered by the history of voluntary *proletarianisation*, practised by the Maoist movements Dara drew from and participated in.

My primary point of departure, then, is a critique of Dara's claim that members of oppressor groups 'do not choose the social groups they belong to', and that

3 Since history followed an objective teleology discoverable by critical inquiry, the intelligentsia would be best placed to raise itself, as Marx and Engels (2002: 231) put it, 'to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole'. With a leadership position legitimised by this claim on scientific knowledge, the intellectual-radical would have 'at his disposal the mighty forces of millions and millions of the working class' to direct to victory (Lenin, 1999). In large part, Lenin appeared to conceive of workers being raised to the level of the superior revolutionary intelligentsia: if workers could participate in working out an 'independent ideology' for the insurgent movement, they must do so 'not as workers but as theorists of Socialism' (ibid.). While his explicit advocacy of the intelligentsia's leading role cannot be found 'anywhere else in Lenin's voluminous writings' (Draper, 1990), these views were influential enough to be bitterly attacked by his contemporaneous left-wing opponents such as Leon Trotsky (1999) and Rosa Luxemburg (1999).

'they could not have done or could not have been otherwise' (Bascara, 2020: 139). Perhaps, for certain forms of oppression, it is possible for members of the oppressor group to not only refrain from exercising their latent power – *refrain* from being oppressors – but to give up their privilege and even become members of the oppressed group. It may be, then, that the moral duties attaching to members of oppressor groups are in fact *greater* than those attaching to the oppressed: they must vacate their membership of the oppressor group and seek to become a member of the oppressed class, thereby gaining the duty of self-emancipation.

3. Voluntary Proletarianisation

Central here is Dara's claim that individuals 'are born into [...] a hierarchical social world involuntarily' and 'are, practically speaking, unable to escape' (Bascara, 2020: 112); they cannot, therefore, be considered culpable for their membership of an oppressor group. Even if we grant that people can never 'choose [...] their skin color' and so cannot vacate membership of the oppressor group 'White people,' (*ibid*.: 139) this seems to hold less readily for socio-economic class. Even if people do not 'choose the social class they were born into,' (*ibid*.) they may be able to voluntarily change that class later in life.

Marxism has long been attentive to the social reality of movement within the class structure. Bourgeois society hangs a large part of its legitimacy on the possibility – real for a small number of people – of 'social mobility', the ascent *up* the class ladder. Descent is equally possible: in the *Communist Manifesto,* Marx and Engels wrote that, '[t]he lower strata of the middle class – the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicrafts men and peasants – all these sink gradually into the proletariat,' (Marx and Engels, 2002: 228) a process labelled *proletarianisation* within Classical Marxism.[4] It is this movement down – the shift from a relatively privileged or oppressor group into the ranks of the oppressed – that concerns us here.

We can distinguish two forms of proletarianisation: involuntary, based on economic disfortune, and voluntary, where an individual or group chooses to enter the ranks of the proletariat (or other sub-altern oppressed class). Within Maoism, a key strain of Dara's own intellectual background,[5] such voluntary proletarianisation is a key communist practice.

4 Granted, this is far from an iron tendency of capitalist development – but all I claim is that changing class position *can* and *does* occur at times.

5 Dara was a member of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines until her death, and in her thesis describes Maoism as holding 'utmost relevance' (Bascara, 2020: 29), in particular for agrarian countries in the Global South.

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Mao's crucial innovation was to hold the two-sided nature of revolutionary education in tension. Education emphatically does not mean 'raising the workers, peasants and soldiers to the 'heights' of the feudal classes, the bourgeoisie or the petty-bourgeois intellectuals' (Mao, 1967: 17); nor does it merely mean bringing intellectuals down to the level of workers. Developing Marx's (2002) insight that 'it is essential to educate the educator himself', Mao emphasised that, 'Only by speaking for the masses can [one] educate them and only by being their pupil can [one] be their teacher' (Mao, 1967: 23). Relatively privileged intellectuals, students and the like have a key contribution to make to the revolutionary process – but only once they have 'remoulded' themselves and shed their bourgeois modes of thought and living. They must, in short, 'change from one class to another,' (*ibid.*: 7) and 'gradually move their feet over to the side of the workers, peasants and soldiers, to the side of the proletariat, through the process of going into their very midst and into the thick of practical struggles.' (*ibid.*: 14) Those members of the oppressor class who, by their investment in intellectual reflection on the social structure and their role within it, come to identify with the struggle of the oppressed, have a duty to move out of the higher and into the lower classes. They must turn their abstract commitment to freedom into a living, breathing issue of self-emancipation. As Italian Marxist leader Antonio Gramsci wrote, it would be 'a tragedy [...] if the groups of intellectuals who come to the working class and in whom the working class places its trust, did not feel themselves the same flesh and blood as the most humble, the most backward, and the least aware of our workers and peasants' (quoted in Karabel, 1976: 123). They must *voluntarily proletarianise*.

This is linked in theory and practice to the mass line, mentioned by Dara in her thesis as a Marxist antecedent to feminist standpoint theory. In the mass line, Party organisers gather insights from the oppressed, synthesise this information within the over-arching framework and strategy of the Party, and return it to the masses for practical experimentation within their struggles. The process of proletarianisation complements the formation of the mass line, as Party organisers integrate themselves into the lives of the community. Students from privileged backgrounds, say, can be deployed in rural areas to live and work among the poorest parts of the population. In so doing they become acquainted with the reality of life for the majority, solidify their commitment to political struggle, and learn how to speak with and for the mass of the population. Crucially, individual proletarianisation takes place within a *collective political vehicle*, in this case a Communist party.

Such an approach is not idle political theorising but has been implemented within Maoist-inflected movements and beyond, from New People's Army

operations in the Philippine countryside (Chapman, 1987) to the New Communist Movement's attempts to integrate with the working class in the 1970s United States (Elbaum, 2018). We can define 'voluntary proletarianisation,' then, as *the attempt by members of oppressor groups to abjure their group membership and actively join the oppressed group, making the oppressed's struggle for self-emancipation their own.* It most readily lends itself to movement across class groups.

4. From class traitor to colonial dissident

It is not easy to escape mentally from a concrete situation, to refuse its ideology while continuing to live with its actual relationships.

– Memmi (2021: 64)

One might question the extent to which such movement from oppressor to oppressed group is truly possible. Can she who has been raised within the universe of the oppressors fully change her social group? Will not the capacity for arbitrary interference, one's socialisation into an oppressor role, remain?

Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon, colonised francophone intellectuals writing about mid-20th decolonisation efforts, addressed this question in relation to one of the most drastic forms of class division: the coloniser and the colonised. Could a White coloniser cross that most ardent of political-moral schisms, the global colour line? Their opposing answers allow us to tease out some of the promises and difficulties of proletarianisation.

Albert Memmi, a Jewish Tunisian observing the decolonisation of France's territories at the end of the 1950s, examined the figure of the 'colonizer who refuses,' the settler-dissident. 'Why not,' he asks, 'knock at the door of the colonized whom he defends and who would surely open their arms to him in gratitude [...] let him adopt the colonized people and be adopted by them; let him become a turncoat' (Memmi, 2021: 66). For Memmi, this changing of group membership – a form of anti-colonial proletarianisation – would truly demonstrate the coloniser's solidarity with the oppressed: 'What a decisive demonstration, to abandon a fourth of his income or disregard the favors of the administration!' (*ibid.*: 67).

Alas, for Memmi, such peaks of solidarity are unscalable. Colonial culture and modes of thought form part of the left-settler's very being – to change sides would be to renounce 'part of himself' (*ibid.*: 64), to desire his own abolition. In language reminiscent of Dara's thesis, Memmi writes, 'the colonial situation is based on the relationship between one group of people and another. The leftist colonizer is part of the oppressing group and will be forced to share its destiny,

as he shared its good fortune' (*ibid.*: 82).

Here, then, is an ontological challenge to the very possibility of such boundary-crossing. Since acculturation into a dominant group constitutes a person's fundamental subjecthood, shifting group membership and truly becoming one with the people would require an impossible 'moral hero' (*ibid.*: 67). One cannot seek to abolish those identities that lay at the base of one's 'interpellation' into the social structure (Althusser, 2006: 86-98).

Such a pessimistic view of the French left was understandable in the late 1950s: the French Communist Party was practically a supporter of the republic's empire, and quiet acquiescence largely marked the Left's stance on colonisation. By the early 1960s, however, solidaristic possibilities were expanding. French student groups 'channelled arms, funds and information to the [Algerian] FLN' (Halliday, 1969: 317; Fraser, 1988: 33), the French national student union formed open links with the FLN's student wing (Macey, 2019), and John Paul Sartre symbolised a radicalised section of the intelligentsia when he broke with Albert Camus and acknowledged the necessity of violence by the Algerian movement (Drake, 1999). These new horizons were reflected in the writings of Frantz Fanon, the Martiniquais revolutionary thinker who was more hopeful about the paths of renunciation dismissed by Memmi.

As the national liberation struggle develops, writes Fanon, the masses 'notice that certain settlers do not join in the general guilty hysteria [...] Such men, who before were included without distinction and indiscriminately in the monolithic mass of the foreigner's presence, actually go so far as to condemn the colonial war' (Fanon, 1963: 145). Indeed, 'it sometimes happens that you get Blacks who are whiter than the Whites' (*ibid.*: 144), and that, 'many members of the mass of colonialists reveal themselves to be much, much nearer to the national struggle than certain sons of the nation' (*ibid.*: 146).

It is perhaps unsurprising that Fanon held such a view, given his own traversal of global boundaries, adopting the Algerian people and their struggle as his own. He criss-crossed White French, Black Martiniquais and Brown Algerian society, seeing the possibility of mutual solidarity between progressive segments of each. Mao too celebrated such a possibility, writing a famous ode to Norman Bethune, a White Canadian who died serving the Chinese Communists' war against imperial Japan (Mao, 2004).

Memmi, who also thought it 'absurd' to ask 'left-wing intellectuals to ape laborers' (Memmi, 2021: 69), based his portrait of the sympathetic coloniser on a group of liberal academics at the University of Tunis, expecting an individual act of rebellion rather than an organisationally instituted practice

of proletarianisation. When institutionalised in mass movements, though, an individual's impossible heroics can become the quotidian horizons of collective transformation.

5. Why proletarianisation? Class position and class consciousness

To arrive at proletarian class positions, the class instinct of proletarians only needs to be educated*; on the contrary, the class instinct of the petty-bourgeois, and hence of intellectuals, must be* revolutionized.

– Althusser (1970: 4)

The practice of proletarianisation hangs its claim to value on the thesis that different positions within the social structure align with different interests, and to different interests can attach different forms of political consciousness. To a bourgeois social position attaches interests in the maintenance of inalienable property rights and the value structure of capitalist society; to a proletarian social position attaches interests in redistribution, social provision and the valuation of free time over profit. Individuals *tend* to have an insight into their position-dependent interests and *tend* to form beliefs and undertake actions in accordance with them. For a bourgeois individual to proletarianise, then, is to try to align his direct interests with the liberation struggle, to make the freedom fight a question of his own self-emancipation.

The thesis of voluntary proletarianisation holds that knowledge of one's 'transcendental interests' – interests based on an 'anticipation of a future that is not guarenteed – is insufficient to motivate a proper contribution to liberation.[6] At the highest level of abstraction, a bourgeois revolutionary can claim that his transcendental interests would be served by a future communist society, even if such a society may appear to harm his immediate material interests. Such a revolutionary cannot, though, claim that his 'actual' – 'real and existing' – interests are aligned with the communist struggle. This, for advocates of voluntary proletarianisation, matters.

Concretely, an upper-class revolutionary – or dissident member of some relevant oppressor group – who does nothing to address his class position risks accruing undemocratic power within a liberation movement, exercising residual oppressive practices, and prioritising individual career interests over the wider struggle. They will, in Dara's terms, engage in the limited and possibly harmful project of paternalistic rather than total emancipation (Bascara, 2020: 222—4).

6 Dara distinguishes between transcendental and actual interests during her discussion of the work of Frances M. Beal (Bascara, 2020: 232).

Conversely, oppressed subject positions may hold epistemic advantages, a position Dara holds during her discussion of the epistemology of oppression. A revolutionary who seeks a society that would benefit the poorer mass of the population can gain insights into their struggles, can better understand the prospects for collective organisation, and can more easily maintain her revolutionary commitment when she is embedded within that mass. The still-extant, Maoist-influenced Naxalite movement in India demonstrates this advantage. Alpa Shah, during her lengthy ethnographic work studying the guerrilla struggle, analysed how, despite their leaders often being 'of high caste, light-skinned and tall' (Shah, 2019: 137), the Naxalites have been able to integrate with and win over the Indigenous Adivasi, partially dissolving the distinction between themselves and their organised communities. The guerrillas' attacks on extortionate traders and highwaymen, creation of schools, and free health care provision helped grow their popularity, but 'the much deeper appeal of the Naxalites stemmed from the respect and dignity with which they treated the Adivasis, looking upon them as equal human beings' (*ibid.*: 142). Living among the Adivasi, learning their culture, and renouncing the petty privileges that high-caste outsiders often expect, the guerrillas have lessened the gap between party and people and given the movement a strength it could have never otherwise gained.

There is no one-to-one relation between class position and consciousness. Occupying a proletarian social position in no way guarantees full clarity about the nature, causes or routes out of oppression. This is, indeed, a basic assumption of the proletarianisation thesis, for members of oppressor groups must first gain a critique of the society that has benefited them and develop the desire to help end this situation. Between interests and consciousness lies *political mediation*. The organised efforts of both dominant and sub-altern institutions to shape the consciousness of the masses influences how they conceive of their interests. Emancipatory political efforts are attempts to raise collective consciousness by helping the oppressed to reform their desires based on the latent interests of their social position.

This is precisely why voluntary proletarianisation cannot be the venture of a lone radical. It can only be a collectively instituted practice, a form of political mediation between interests and consciousness. The practice is a coordinated intervention in the life of the masses, helping to bring the abstract consciousness of the enlightened revolutionary (perhaps not felt in his bones, perhaps infected with intellectual arrogance and inattentive to the difficulties of organising) and the often-inchoate desire of the mass (instinctually class conscious but prone to misdirection and myopia) into contact.

What is clear, though, is that such movement across social categories can never be complete. One will always carry, at the least, a childhood of alternate socialisation. The diachronic position of a life-long proletarian differs from that of a newly proletarianised subject, regardless of their now-identical synchronic position in the social structure. Shah also records how some Naxalite cadres, while successfully integrating themselves with Adivasi communities, bring attitudes from a more patriarchal upper-caste culture into a relatively more egalitarian Indigenous world. Shah (2019: 223—4) details numerous instances of Naxalite organisers inadvertently treating Dalits and others with subtle forms of prejudice carried over from their former lives.

There may always remain a difference between a university-educated radical who proletarianises and someone who dropped out of school and spent their early years cycling through the care and prison systems. The former has more opportunities to leave the situation and return to, say, a comfortable family life and a possible professional career, turning an early radical excursion in proletarianisation into a 'poverty safari' (Foster, 2017) in the mould of George Orwell (2014). But steps could be taken to partially rectify this inequality. In certain cases, familial connections may have to be severed; inheritance given away to a collective pool of wealth; public statements made that would harm any later inclination to abandon the struggle and join the professional-managerial class (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, 1977). Until societal inequality is pulled up at the root, though, displacement from one camp to another can never result in a newcomer's complete assimilation; in what Freire called 'true dialogue' between Self and Other, the gap between the two is narrowed, but not overcome (Freire, 2017: 62). There is no formula for such a problem, only – short of institutional coercion – a collective recognition of it and commitment to working through it. The practice of proletarianisation is precisely about recognising the reality of this problem and finding a process to carefully manage it in the interests of a future transformation.

6. Criticism-self-criticism and cultural synthesis

Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture.

– Freire (2017: 23)

'This process may,' then, as Mao wrote, 'involve much pain and friction' (Mao, 1967: 40). Such frictions are managed within Maoism, in part, by 'criticism-self-criticism', an institutionalised practice of collective critique which reinforces this constant process of revolutionary self-remoulding. Party or movement members hold regular sessions, guided by a trained individual, of reflection

on personal contributions and collective processes, undertaken, in principle, in the spirit of collective betterment, commitment to the cause, and love for one another. The process can help normalise self-reflection and manage some of the difficulties that occur in political organising when members of different social groups – including oppressed and relatively privileged – come into contact.

Criticism-self-criticism is used successfully in the Kurdish-controlled enclave of Rojava, where the revolutionary women's movement spearheads the practice as 'a space for reflection, improvement, and comradely honesty,' aiming to 'solve personal or collective problems and conflicts in a radically transparent and constructive way' – including integrating Westerners into the ranks of the struggle (Dirik, 2022). The results are widely lauded by observers and participants (Graeber, 2014).

The history of criticism-self-criticism, like Maoism in general, contains many warnings. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the second half of the 1960s, students and others were given free rein to subject all manner of supposedly petite-bourgeois social groups to criticism-self-criticism, sometimes degenerating into collective bullying and even violent excision of vilified social strata. The conclusion of the period demonstrates Maoism's internal revolutionary limits, after a time in which the population was encouraged to loosen the Party's sclerotic ossification and reanimate revolutionary fervour. By 1967, Mao and other officials were deploying the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to stamp out the radical energies churning at the bottom of Chinese society and restore 'normalcy' upon the populace. In Shanghai, where a worker and peasant democracy that paralleled the Paris Commune seized control of the metropolitan city (Jiang, 2010), Mao imposed a 'three-in-one' committee of workers, party officials and the PLA: 'proletarian autonomy was to be curtailed by the army and the party' (Karl, 2020). Across the country, radical students were disarmed and subject to a coercive form of proletarianisation, forced to vacate the urban centres to 'learn from the peasants' and 'humble themselves before the nation's workers' (Karl, 2010: 134—5). Many were never allowed to return to their former lives.

Whatever respect Maoism had for the masses, then, came up against its hard statist limits in Shanghai and elsewhere in the late 1960s (Badiou, 2015: 131-156), where proletarianisation was as much Party tool as revolutionary method. Such dangers encoded in the historical DNA of proletarianisation as a practice should prime us to fully appreciate its potential pitfalls.

Paulo Freire, the radical Brazilian educator, was particularly alive to the latent domineering power inherent in the relation between leaders and led,

between teachers and taught, between organiser and organised. He advocated the equivalent of proletarianisation for the privileged, what he called 'cultural synthesis': where 'the actors who come from "another world" to the world of the people do so not as invaders [...] but rather to learn, with the people, about the people's world' (Freire, 2017: 153). To 'become integrated with the people', Freire offers a series of moral affects, a sort of virtue ethics of the revolutionary, that organisers entering oppressed communities must centre in everything they do.

Drawing from his Christian humanist background and influenced by Amílcar Cabral (Melo, 2022), the Bissau-Guinean anti-colonial leader, Freire calls on organisers of more privileged backgrounds to cultivate humility, faith in humanity, trust, critical thinking and hope, in both them and others.[7] To 'renounce the class to which they belong and join the oppressed' is 'an act of love and true commitment' (Freire, 2019: 136). Organisers integrating themselves with the oppressed – proletarianising – must recognise their own ignorance, believe in everyone's capacity to act, trust in the people, and keep a fire of hope burning in themselves and others. Important above all, though, is possession of a 'profound love for the world and for people' (*ibid*.: 62).

Such reflections chime with a text from Philippine Communism, a movement that practices proletarianisation, in which revolutionary organisers are implored to 'whole-heartedly serve the masses and always strive to be close to the masses,' 'to rely on and trust the masses' while making the 'joys and struggles of their comrades' their own, being 'thoughtful and loving,' 'uniting and teaching one another' (Philippine National Democratic Movement, undated). Such an orientation must be at the heart of any organised attempts at voluntary proletarianisation.

7. Boundary crossing and the benefits of (in)voluntary marginality

Even when we are socialized into an identity as though it were a natural necessity [...] there remains the possibility of transforming, contesting, or critically overturning our understanding of who we are.

– Martin Hägglund (2019)

Whilst a source of potential danger, the ever-extant gap between Self and Other – the limits of group boundary-crossing, of total proletarianisation – can be a source of knowledge itself. It is precisely when this gap becomes close enough to light a spark that a current of new knowledge can flow.

7 These insights will, of course, apply to organisers from all backgrounds, but are particularly pertinent to the perils of proletarianisation.

Theodor Adorno once wrote of the 'independent intellectuals' who have 'defected' from their class, seeing in their gestures an attempt to escape 'the operations imposed by society' and fashion perspectives that 'displace and estrange the world' – perhaps as they have been displaced and estranged from it (Adorno, 2005: 21, 247). It is 'displacement,' then – according to Peter E Gordon's reading – that is Adorno's 'intellectual precondition for critical practice' (Gordon, 2022).

The revolutionary intellectual, a global figure from 1848-1945, based its power on such a combination of displacement, marginality, and critical reflection. Existing during 'the biggest upheavals of political modernity' brought on by mass proletarian organisation and ruling class instability in industrialising Europe (Traverso, 2021), the revolutionary intellectual was a déclassé, often with a foot in Bohemian society, and regularly an exile forced into international migration by political instability and repression. The era of Auguste Blanqui, Mikhail Bakunin and Rosa Luxemburg saw radical thinkers spurning formal academic jobs, instead teaching at 'party or voluntary schools for workers, as one activity among others in a life of militancy' (Anderson, 1976: 49). Existence was eked out on the edge, meagre incomes supplemented by freelance journalism.

Exile, mobility and the traversing of group membership may, then, offer a political and epistemological advantage. As Dara herself notes in her discussion of standpoint epistemology, the 'socially underprivileged can inhabit a privileged epistemic standpoint, where such a standpoint *is achieved through political engagement*' (Bascara, 2020: 168, my italics). If social categories such as race and class are forms of reification – 'the conversion of abstractions into putative real entities' (Gould, 1996: 48), when 'man forgets that the world he lives in has been produced by himself' (Berger and Pullberg, 1966: 61) – then by transgressing or transcending such categories one de-reifies them, making their ultimate dependence upon human intentionality plain. Crossing boundaries, whether of the nation-state, class, or the law (Duff, 2017: 102—6), could help one see the contingencies of the current order, could bestow insights into power's functioning and the chinks in its armour. If we reject an essentialism of social categories, proletarianisation could allow former members of more privileged groups access – if partial and particular – to these insights. Such is the benefit, to take an example outside of class categories, of 'gender bending' and sexual experimentation.

As Berger and Pullberg write, 'situations of culture contact and the ensuing "culture shock" can [...] produce a de-reifying impulse,' and 'individuals or groups existing in a state of social marginality' tend to possess a 'de-reifying

proclivity' (Berger and Pullberg, 1966: 70). Indeed, Berger and Pullberg hint at the solution preferred in this paper: 'such marginality may actually be sought by individuals with precisely the motive of penetrating the false consciousness of their society that may have become revealed to them as a result of one or another biographical accident' (ibid.). The biographical accidents of the privileged radical that revealed to them society's false consciousness can lead them to the path of proletarianisation, a self-imposed marginality. Marginality not for its own sake, but to expand the mass struggle.

8. Community organising in the shadow of slavery

Modern-day north-west Mississippi has been nourished by 'millennia of nutrient-rich sediments deposited by the Yazoo and Mississippi Rivers' (Freshour and Williams, 2023: 1563), creating a highly fertile soil in the now-named Mississippi Delta. Such a natural blessing was turned into a curse as planters combined 'black labor and white capital' in the second half of the 19th century, ripping down forests to create a vast 'cotton kingdom' (Giesen, 2009). The planter elite kept the Delta's Black population in place with the racial terrorism of Jim Crow, as sadistic social sanctions kept cotton and other crops grown in formally capitalist conditions barely distinguishable, for the workers, from the slavery of the past.

After a boll weevil beetle invasion had weakened the cotton industry in other regions of the South, the Great Depression finally started its decline in the Delta, traditionally the highest-yield cotton area of the United States. But the African American population remained an overwhelming majority in many parts of the region. Amidst these conditions in the late 1950s and early 60s – where challenges to the racial order would still be met with intimidation, arrests, beatings, lynchings – members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) engaged in years of patient community organising in the towns and country of the region, breaking the back of American apartheid in its historic heartland.

SNCC's Mississippi efforts there are today most remembered, perhaps unsurprisingly, for the thousands of White northern students who were bussed down for a number of months in 1964 to help run community schools and voter registration campaigns, in what has subsequently become known as 'Freedom Summer'. The results have sometimes been written off as a disaster of attempted inter-racial solidarity, remembered only for how the 'educated whites patronized, romanticized, intimidated and otherwise disrespected the Black people they were trying to assist' (Elbaum, 2018: 169). One former volunteer later stated that between the White students and the Black Mississippians lay 'an emotional

chasm no amount of good feeling could overcome' (Perlstein, 1990: 323).

The results were less straightforward than this implies. As Charles M. Payne writes in his profound social history of the SNCC's organising efforts, 'the role played by the white students was a heroic one that contributed measurably to the success of the project' (Payne, 2007: 424). 'Intramovement racial friction,' he writes, 'is less surprising than the fact that the volunteers were so warmly received by so many of the local residents across the state' (*ibid.*: 306). Tactically, it helped shine a light on the state at a crucial inflexion point for SNCC's organising. The national scandal around the KKK's killing of three Freedom Summer volunteers – two of them, crucially, White – helped tighten the room for repressive manoeuvre by local White supremacists. Illustrating the epistemic benefits of chosen marginality, the White students were themselves perhaps more politically transformed than the students. 'A recurrent theme in the observations of the White volunteers,' notes one review, 'was what they had learned, how they had changed' (Rachal, 1998: 189). Many went on to do important work in a range of other political movements in the 60s and 70s (McAdam, 1990).

Judged by the yardstick of self-emancipation, though, the effort was a failure. The presence of the students, writes Payne, 'worked against the development of local leadership' and resulted in many local African Americans – painstakingly brought into the movement by years of patient organising – 'pulling away from the movement that summer' (*ibid.*: 335—6). One White volunteer later reflected that, 'we were hurting the building of that very self-esteem and self-empowerment that we needed to organize' (Rachal, 1998: 192). Parachuting in dissident members of the oppressor group – members raised thousands of kilometres away in a vastly different social milieu, with only a week or two of preparatory training – is an abject lesson in how not to undertake boundary-crossing in an organising context.

As Payne shows, however, the problem of relative outsiders did not start or end with the White students of 1964. As his study makes clear, the most successful organising efforts were those that developed local leadership, allowing ordinary Black people to take control of their lives and break the chains of Jim Crow themselves: that is, self-emancipation. Such efforts were not, however, emerging organically in the late 1950s, at least not to a degree coordinated and powerful enough to succeed. Payne paraphrases the words of one experienced organiser in the region: in most towns, 'a strong outside stimulus' was 'necessary to break what frequently was a local paralysis' (Payne, 2007: 249). The aim of the SNCC was to help the local people free themselves; but some form of 'outside stimulus'

was needed to get things moving in the first place. This work was usually done by fellow Black working-class southerners, but even they may have been raised in cities rather than isolated rural farms. Some staff members were Black northerners; others, Whites from out of state. At times, Black organisers from the North 'acted as if Mississippi people were still in slavery, too backwards to do anything for themselves' (*ibid*.: 241). The problem of managing this difference between full-time organisers and local people remained omnipresent, if in a less visceral manner than during the Summer of 1964.

SNCC's method of handling this problem tracks the proposals outlined in this paper. The organisation placed utmost emphasis on patient, long-term building of relationships, becoming as close with the community as possible. They decided, one organiser said, 'to enter into every phase of the lives of the people of Mississippi' (Street, 2004: 273). Outside organisers 'immersed themselves in their communities', 'learning those communities from the inside and developing relationships in which people learned to care about one another as individuals in ways that cut through issues of ideology and social status' (*ibid*.: 404). They were taught to see the best in everyone, to assume all had a contribution to make, to treat their comrades and the oppressed – no matter how initially hostile – with a steadfast love and understanding. Undertaken over months and years, such work yielded results:

> By late 1963, women like Lula Belle Johnson and Susie Morgan and Lou Emma Allen often stopped by the SNCC office just to sit around and visit with one another and the staff and maybe do a little sewing. Old men stopped by to listen to the ballgames or just to argue with one another. For a segment of Greenwood's Black population, the movement had become as integrated into their lives as the barbershop or beauty parlor (Payne, 2007: 263).

Notably, the language of organising developed by SNCC's leaders on the ground shares certain resonances with Maoism's metaphors, despite a presumed lack of connection between the two. SNCC's Ella Baker called long-term community organising 'spade work' (*ibid*.: 264); a gardening metaphor is frequently used by Mao. Bob Moses called those who made their lives one with the people 'deep-sea divers' (quoted in *ibid*.: 404); Mao, referring to the people and party guerrillas, wrote that, 'the former may be likened to water the latter to the fish who inhabit it' (Mao, 2000). Payne (2007: 420) describes SNCC's internal reflection processes as 'institutionalized self-consciousness', a close cousin of Maoism's criticism-self-criticism.

SNCC's epilogue, and that of its descendants, holds further relevance for the proletarianisation thesis. As the movement became more successful and

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legitimated in Mississippi, and local White repression weakened, all manner of previously hostile or indifferent segments of the Black population – especially from the middle-class – began to enter the movement and utilise it for their own self-gain, diluting the movement's base in the working class, sharecroppers and small-holding farmers. Such a risk is theorised in Maoism as the 'two-line struggle'. As the party grows in strength and power it inevitably risks co-option by the very power structures and class enemies it was built to combat: it 'succumbs to bourgeois culture and politics, being no longer able to maintain an effective boundary between itself and its threatening surround' (Gouldner, 1974: 30). Within the two-line struggle, one line concerns the fight between the party and the wider social structure; the other concerns the internal struggle to maintain the party's revolutionary character (Dittmer, 1973: 710). Proletarianisation is an institutionalised manner of dealing with this inevitable contradiction, as incoming party cadres are required to become as close with the oppressed as possible, changing the conditions of their lives – and perhaps their very identities – in order to reduce (if never fully erase) bourgeois tendencies that will negatively impact the party's social mission and class basis. The individual proletarianises her character through a collective vehicle to, in turn, maintain that vehicle's proletarian character. 'Such practices,' as Isaac Deutscher once wrote, 'cannot overcome the contradictions between the rulers and the ruled and between brain workers and manual labourers; but they may help to keep these contradictions within certain limits' (Deutscher, 1964: 32). Without a sufficiently well-developed theory and practice of proletarianisation within the SNCC and its offshoots, the old guard of organisers who had done so much to build it in the first place were swept aside by a rising caste of Black politicians and new community leaders disconnected from the struggle against racial capitalism.

Conclusion: proletarianisation today

Higher degrees and licenses are no longer guarantees of PMC [professional-managerial class] status.

— Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich (2013: 10)

There is no question that a strategic, mass-based communist movement seeking to implement some form of proletarianisation will have to attend to the particulars of different social groups and individuals. A movement or party cannot abolish the division of labour within the struggle. Political operators, journal editors and the like will have to be allowed to operate with a degree of freedom from the pressures of proletarian life – even if a strong case can still be made that they should maintain some organic contact with the people they are supposed to be

serving, and should experience the lives they analyse, write about, and attempt to transform. Proletarianisation may, however, be generally applicable among a concrete social group within contemporary Global North societies.

Studying the most recent 70 years electoral data, an inter-disciplinary team of researchers headed by Thomas Piketty argues that where once a class cleavage was clearly visible through the mists of electoral volatility – the rich and well-educated tended to vote right, the poorer and less-educated tacked left – a certain rearticulation of factors has taken place (Piketty et al., 2021). Today, the most well-educated vote disproportionately leftward, and while progressive parties are still home to the poorer segments of society, conservative parties are making inroads within the working class, particularly the least-educated and whiter parts.

There is, then, a new social bloc that makes up a substantial part of the social democratic voting base and tends to constitute the bulk of key radical left organisations outside of the parliamentary sphere. The bloc has been described as the 'Brahmin Left' (Piketty et al, 2021), 'new petty bourgeoisie' (Evans, 2023), and 'Generation Left' (Milburn, 2019), but what defines it, in broad outline, is that its members overwhelmingly rent their homes in an extortionate and competitive private market, tend to possess an undergraduate degree or higher, and are often found in alienating 'bullshit' white collar jobs or menial, zero-hours service work (Graeber, 2018).

From the movements of the squares at the start of the 2010s to the left populist electoral turn in the middle of the decade, to the recently renewed street contestation of Black Lives Matter and Palestine solidarity, this bloc has been at the forefront of post-financial-crash leftism. What has become apparent, though, is this bloc's inability to force drastic changes in the streets or to seize control of the state through electoral means. Whether we call it a fraction of the working class or something else, two things are clear: it is a sociologically distinguishable section of the population with left-political potential, and it is largely culturally, physically and politically distant from other, more classical fractions of the working class.

The question facing this bloc, at a moment of strategic impasse, is how to augment its power and expand beyond its group boundaries. A large part of the working class, less urban and less formally educated, is increasingly captured by the right. An alliance between these two blocs is vital, and what better way for it to be achieved than through a coordinated program of proletarianisation, reducing the gap that currently separates them? As the economic instability and foiled expectations of this bloc lays the basis for its political radicalisation to the

left – never assured[8] – might it be time to embrace this trend rather than resist it? Might we convert a tendency of involuntary into voluntary proletarianisation? Rather than cling to the shrinking coffers of post-WW2 social democracy as the surrounding storm tries to tear us away, why not allow ourselves to be carried by the winds of history into the ranks of the oppressed, making our struggles one with theirs?

This is, indeed, precisely the strategy advocated by the 'Bread and Roses' faction within the US Democratic Socialists of America (Bread and Roses, undated). Trotskyist movements, from Australia to the United Kingdom, have proposed something similar, although their floundering efforts usually lack the humility, love and self-remoulding advocated by Maoism and Freire. Promising are tendencies towards 'workers' inquiries' (Haider and Mohandesi, 2013), based in large part on the Italian autonomist tradition (Wright, 2017), where the educated and politically conscious intellectual engages with workers, perhaps as a worker herself (Notes from Below, 2020), to produce studies of the class relations of domination and resistance within the workplace (see an exceptional example in Woodcock, 2016). What is vital is to experiment through existing and new forms of political organisation, rather than as lone radicals undergoing a futile effort in matrydom. Organisers could move to housing estates to help build tenants unions through, in the UK, organisations like London Renters Union, ACORN, and Living Rent. Graduates could enter distribution warehouses, schools and hospitals as packers, teachers and cleaners, working within smaller radical unions like the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB) and leftist networks within larger unions like Unite and Unison to push mass labour organising. Ideally, these efforts would eventually become linked and coordinated through a larger umbrella organisation. We cannot prejudge the shape of such a vehicle here.

At the end of his recent book, Dan Evans comes close to advocating a similar solution to the strategic impasse of this bloc. What would be 'most transformative' for this group, he writes, 'would be to abandon social mobility, to dispense with its obsessive focus on climbing the career ladder, to embrace and accept downward social mobility […] This would lead to the gradual erosion of class boundaries between the subordinate classes and help guarantee the formation of broad political alliances' (Evans, 2023). Despite its difficulty and

8 Illustrating again how material interests, class position and political consciousness can easily come apart, there is also a substantial – and in some countries, dominant – hard-right trend among the youth of this social bloc. The much-vaunted leftist consciousness of this bloc, even in a country like the UK, may be overstated (Eagleton, 2020). What matters above all is the *collective political mediation* that pushes this group's consciousness one way or another.

dangers, voluntary proletarianisation may be our best shot. Because, as Freire writes (2017: 106), 'What could be more important than to live and work with the oppressed, with the "rejects of life", with the "wretched of the earth"?' (Freire, 2017: 106).

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