MARX AND THE LUMPENPROLETARIAT

Jean-Claude BOURDIN

This work, which aims to understand the uses of the notion of the lumpenproletariat in Marx (and Engels), is driven both by the absence of a theory of the lumpenproletariat and the violence of the derogatory terms used in referring to it. Although some believe that the lumpenproletariat has an important place in the Marxist view of classes, the term is actually little used. Generally, it only features indirectly, when addressing the political issue of proletarian alliances. Engels’s 1850 The Peasant War in Germany distinguishes different classes, and after the implicit theory identifying the interests of each class and its political behavior, evaluates the potential strength of the alliance sought. Analyzing the “plebeian opposition … of a mixed nature” to the urban patricians at the end of the Middle Ages, he distinguishes déclassé bourgeoisie and day-laboring journeymen without civic rights from the “lumpenproletariat, this scum of the decaying elements of all classes, which establishes headquarters in all the big cities” and the embryonic elements of bourgeois society, of which the “proletarian elements have not yet developed.” Engels specifies that the lumpenproletariat comes out of “the decay of feudalism” following the decline of traditional professional protections, enlarging the mass of urban vagabonds, beggars, and day laborers working in misery in the gaps left by the corporations. This is why, in the 1874 preface, he warns the German socialists:

The lumpenproletariat, this scum of the decaying elements of all classes, which establishes headquarters in all the big cities, is the worst of all possible allies. It is an absolutely venal, an absolutely brazen crew. Every leader of the workers who utilizes these gutter proletarians as guards or supports, proves himself by this action alone a traitor to the movement.

1. For an excellent analysis of the uses of the notion, see Raymond Huard, “Marx et Engels devant la marginalité: la découverte du lumpenproletariat,” Romantismes 59 (1988): 5-17.
4. Engels, The Peasant War in Germany, 16.
Engels’s explanations are undeniably somewhat ambiguous. The “decay” of feudal corporative structures is a sign of the appearance of the lumpenproletariat. However, it also affects peasants and the “ex-officers,” as well as artisan craftsmen. According to the sphere affected, the gap between strata in terms of their proletarian destiny can be measured: peasants and domestics are not yet proletarians, whilst journeymen are not entirely proletarian.5 The explanation in terms of decay thus affects the composition of the proletariat in various ways: some are part of its history and others, the lumpenproletariat, can never become part of it, because they are akin to dregs outside the history of the proletariat. This is why, when they do participate in its battles, they do so as outsiders, hostile and always harmful: in the peasants’ war, they were either the auxiliaries of the princes, or, having joined the peasants, they had a “demoralizing influence.”6 Why is a section of the urban plebeians considered a lumpenproletariat, with no hopes of ever joining the proletariat, when other elements have this possibility? One might hypothesize that it is not so much their place right at the bottom of the social ladder, their pauperism, which explains this, but the fact that they lack the means to become organized and fight with an awareness of the ends and means. Vagabonds and beggars acquire an ethos preventing any transformation and condemning them to a parasitic or even criminal life. We wish to argue that the difference lies in a moral or spiritual element linked to this state, allowing Marx to indirectly sketch the lineaments of a theory of revolutionary communist subjectivity.

A STIGMATIZING STRATEGY

The pejorative descriptions and the stigmatization of the lumpenproletariat are part of a precise strategy: to separate the working class and the value of its struggles from the lumpenproletariat, with which it has become confused in the discourse of journalists and bourgeois politicians. However, Foucault believed that it was the bourgeois itself which made the distinction between the proletariat and the “nonproletarian plebeians,” creating a permanent conflict among plebeians in order to “build the wall intended to separate the delinquents from all the lower classes that they came from and with which they remained linked.”7 By presenting the nonproletarian plebeians to the proletariat as dangerous, the penalty measure forced proletarians to accept campaigns to “moralize” the poor. Moreover, the criminalization of “heavily legislated infractions like pamphlets, strikes, coalitions, and associations,
for which workers were asking for the recognition of a political status”\textsuperscript{8} aimed to bring inflammatory workers over from delinquency to the side of the law. Thus, the lumpenproletariat appears as a construction\textsuperscript{9} to which the proletarians contributed, in order to escape the trap laid for them. However, their fight against the bourgeoisie’s attempt to force them into submission was ambiguous. One episode offers a particularly interesting demonstration of this. It is no surprise that Engels approved of the workers’ groups which, in February and June 1848, wrote “Death to the thieves!” on house doors. He commented that “they did it, not out of enthusiasm for property, but because they rightly considered it necessary to hold that band at arm’s length.”\textsuperscript{10} Not that this was any use: antisocialists explained that if today’s thieves were scum, tomorrow, the proletarians would not hesitate to shoot the exploiters, who were likened to thieves.\textsuperscript{11} The lumpenproletariat was not merely an obstacle hindering the organized workers. It was harmful to the revolution, and this danger needed bringing to light, not only in order to escape the bourgeois trap.

Knowing how Marx came to speak of the lumpenproletariat allows us to verify this hypothesis. His historical texts give an indication of this path. The revolutionary period from 1848 to 1852 raised two questions for the theorist and revolutionary activist. What caused the failure of bourgeois revolution which, despite the June 1848 workers’ insurrection being suppressed, did not manage to establish its political power in the form of a republican constitution, and even gave up doing so, to go about its business and allow a mediocre schemer to seize power? And how are we to understand the fact that the working class’s first independent political uprising since 1789 (after they acted as a support for the liberal bourgeoisie in 1830 and suffered defeats in 1831, 1834, and 1839) was quashed and failed to impose the idea of social and democratic republic? The bourgeoisie was left with unfinished business: to establish a state power which, according to the terms of the \textit{Manifesto}, “is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie,”\textsuperscript{12} and to extend the real subsumption of society under the capitalist mode of production, requiring the unification of capital under the progressive domination of industrial capital. This took place within a conflict with the political and ideological representatives of landowners, financial capitalists, and the commercial and artisan petite bourgeoisie. However, this

\begin{itemize}
  \item For which workers were asking for the recognition of a political status? \textsuperscript{8}
  \item Aimed to bring inflammatory workers over from delinquency to the side of the law. Thus, the lumpenproletariat appears as a construction to which the proletarians contributed, in order to escape the trap laid for them. However, their fight against the bourgeoisie’s attempt to force them into submission was ambiguous. One episode offers a particularly interesting demonstration of this. It is no surprise that Engels approved of the workers’ groups which, in February and June 1848, wrote “Death to the thieves!” on house doors. He commented that “they did it, not out of enthusiasm for property, but because they rightly considered it necessary to hold that band at arm’s length.” Not that this was any use: antisocialists explained that if today’s thieves were scum, tomorrow, the proletarians would not hesitate to shoot the exploiters, who were likened to thieves. The lumpenproletariat was not merely an obstacle hindering the organized workers. It was harmful to the revolution, and this danger needed bringing to light, not only in order to escape the bourgeois trap.
  \item Knowing how Marx came to speak of the lumpenproletariat allows us to verify this hypothesis. His historical texts give an indication of this path. The revolutionary period from 1848 to 1852 raised two questions for the theorist and revolutionary activist. What caused the failure of bourgeois revolution which, despite the June 1848 workers’ insurrection being suppressed, did not manage to establish its political power in the form of a republican constitution, and even gave up doing so, to go about its business and allow a mediocre schemer to seize power? And how are we to understand the fact that the working class’s first independent political uprising since 1789 (after they acted as a support for the liberal bourgeoisie in 1830 and suffered defeats in 1831, 1834, and 1839) was quashed and failed to impose the idea of social and democratic republic? The bourgeoisie was left with unfinished business: to establish a state power which, according to the terms of the \textit{Manifesto}, “is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie,” and to extend the real subsumption of society under the capitalist mode of production, requiring the unification of capital under the progressive domination of industrial capital. This took place within a conflict with the political and ideological representatives of landowners, financial capitalists, and the commercial and artisan petite bourgeoisie. However, this
\end{itemize}

8. Foucault, \textit{Surveiller et Punir}.
9. Construction in the sense that Foucault explains how the “population” is that needed by biopolitical governmentalities. Similarly, the lumpenproletariat is what the bourgeoisie needs to govern proletarian poverty and revolt.
conflict was joined and influenced by worker struggles, which increasingly had their own premises and were “self-originating.” Three facts therefore require explanation: the bourgeoisie’s lack of fidelity to its role, the reasons for the failure of the proletariat, and the state’s partial non-compliance with the theory of the Manifesto.

The notion of the lumpenproletariat is helpful when attempting to explain the second and third phenomena. Regarding the defeat of the working class, Marx, beyond analyzing the hostile political forces and the weaknesses and illusions of the Montagnards, focuses on the military aspect of the defeat and the two forces of repression: the National Guard and the Mobile National Guard. The former, whose members came from the bourgeoisie, petite bourgeoisie, provincial nobles, and well-off rurals, is simple: it made sense for the bourgeoisie to fight against the proletariat with forces from its own ranks. The latter is harder to understand, because its recruits were mainly workers; we would normally expect class solidarity, rather than the violence and cruelty that they showed against their fellows. Because they were proletarians, they also had to be something else, since Marx seemed unable to accept that the working class could be divided to the point of civil war. They had to be lacking something for their consciousness and their will to overcome their class being:

\[
\text{It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is, and what, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do.}\]

Strangely, Marx did not talk about the competition, before the repression, between young and older workers, which he considered one of the obstacles to class unity. The violence and cruelty of the young mobile guards could also be explained by the use of the brutal colonial tactics of the generals in Algeria, as described by Engels. Marx preferred to emphasize the malleability of the guards because of their youth, the effects of community spirit, the prestige of uniform, and finally payment. He must have been aware that the power of these elements also need explaining and relating to a class mentality, but since they were proletarians, a “subcategory” had to be invented: the lumpenproletariat. It is not clear whether young proletarians of the mobile guards already belonged to the lumpenproletariat or whether they obtained lumpenproletarian

15. Engels emphasized this transfer of “Algerian barbarity to Paris” in Neue Rheinische Zeitung, July 1 and 2, 1848, 197.
traits by going over to the side of the repressive forces. It was the spirit of venality and betrayal that revealed the “lumpenproletariat” in them. “Lumpenproletariat” must be taken more as a predicate designating a set of moral characteristics seen in various social categories (the mobile guards in this case) than as a subject. This ambiguity can be reduced by saying that the lumpenproletariat, as a moral disposition, encapsulates a whole range of individuals or groups outside of capitalist working and production relationships. In social terms, the lumpenproletariat refers to both behaviors and moral attitudes seen throughout society, right up to the highest strata. Rancière thus spoke of the “lumpen” within each class: for the proletariat, these people were the workers renouncing their revolutionary vocation and resorting to self-preservation, while for the industrial bourgeoisie, they were the financial aristocracy with their ways of snatching productive wealth: “Every class is virtually its own lumpen, in that its members defend their ‘social interests.’”

A NONDEFINITE DESCRIPTION

Upon examining Marx’s use of the word “lumpenproletariat” closely, it becomes apparent that it is not even a definite description. Marx often uses it to refer to a list of individuals. On the subject of the mobile guard, *The Class Struggles in France* states that:

“They belonged for the most part to the lumpen proletariat, which in all big towns forms a mass sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat, a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds living on the crumbs of society, people without a definite trade, vagabonds, men without hearth or home.”

Engels calls the mobile guard an “organized lumpenproletariat” made up of “former beggars, vagabonds, rogues, gutter-snipes and small-time thieves.” In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, the lumpenproletariat includes new elements. Marx describes the nature of the Society of December 10th, destined to support Bonaparte and strike out: “The lumpenproletariat of Paris had been organized.”

Alongside decayed roués with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous

---

offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaux* [pimps], brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ grinders, raggickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars – in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French call *la bohème*.19

Here, it is the *bohème* which cuts short a potentially longer list, a strange list meant to outline the elements of the lumpenproletariat, which we will return to later. From 1830 to 1851, the year in which Murger’s *Scènes de la vie de bohème* was published, the meaning of the word *bohème* (bohemian) went from pejorative to socially acceptable. Why did Marx retain the most unfavorable interpretation, and why did he present it as an equivalent of the lumpenproletariat?

Looking at Adolphe Chenu’s *Les Conspirateurs*,20 which offers useful insight into the colorful world of the professional revolutionaries and police informers, Marx identifies two types of “bohemians” among the professional conspirators: the democratic bohemians of proletarian origin and bohemians of bourgeois origin, made up of flaneurs who prop up bars and do business with wine merchants. The first group includes workers who have given up work and turned to debauchery, fugitives from justice, and people who have come from the lumpenproletariat and who still display its dissolute ways. It produces most of the conspirators. Marx describes their scorn for the theoretical education of workers, making them hostile to the more or less cultured intellectuals representing the workers’ movement. The theme of venality is also present, because they easily go over to serving the police. They are above all serious and dangerous opponents of the secret proletarian associations, who want revolution (not the insurrection constantly presented as imminent). Their class origins remain ill defined, combining lumpenproletariat and proletarian elements. What sets them apart is their political ethic, and this is what separates lumpenproletariat and communists. Engels seemingly emphasizes an inertia in the lumpenproletariat, which might potentially become action hostile to the proletariat. Here, Marx describes the active lumpenproletariat, but in conspirator form, meaning that this form reflects the place of the lumpenproletariat in society. The ambiguous nature of the term (whether it refers to a social stratum or moral characteristics) means

it can be applied to the higher social strata and to groups very distant from
the proletariat. From the financial bourgeoisie under the July Monarchy,
to Bonaparte, “a bohemian, a princely lumpen proletarian,” triumphing
over “a rascally bourgeois,” the lumpenproletariat breeds and expands:
“The same mania to get rich was repeated in every sphere, from the court
to the Café Borgne, to get rich not by production, but by pocketing the
already available wealth of others.” In “its mode of acquisition as well as
in its pleasures,” the financial aristocracy “is nothing but the rebirth of
the lumpenproletariat on the heights of bourgeois society.” Parasitism,
unproductive activities, trafficking, stock-market manipulation, and con-
stant law breaking: the lumpenproletariat erases all social distinctions in
one move.

Marx’s construction of the lumpenproletariat is starting to become
clear, as is the reason for his violent denunciation of it as “scum,” a “venal
crew,” the “dregs,” and so forth. This violence recalls that of the bour-
geois journalists, sociologists, and researchers on the working classes,
contrasting with Hugo’s compassion:

Those words, intended to be insults, such as beggars,
rabble, ochlocracy, the populace, prove alas! rather the fault
of those who reign than the fault of those who suffer; …
the rabble followed Jesus Christ.23

With the many characters illustrating the lumpenproletariat, Marx
attempts to condemn those who might feed myth or bourgeois anti-
worker racism.24 This is a difficult and uncomfortable position.

We need to take the lists of characters in the lumpenproletariat seri-
ously and try to get a clearer understanding. We will therefore tackle two
words in Marx’s lists characterizing the lumpenproletariat: vagabonds and
lazzaroni.

“MAKING THE METAPHOR SWEAT”

What is striking here is Marx’s need to unpick the notion of the
lumpenproletariat, to “make the metaphor sweat,” in the words of the
newspaper Les Boulets Rouges in reporting on Victor Hugo’s speech to the
assembly on June 20, 1848, about “the inactive, the destitute, poverty, the
idle, the lazy, the lazzaroni, the praetorians of rioting, the condottieri; in
a word, he made the metaphor sweat to attack the national workshops.”

s miserables05hugouoft_djvu.txt.
24. This observation is made in Robert Castel, Les Métamorphoses de la question sociale (Paris: Fayard, 1995), 223.
This development produces a rhapsody of different elements, surprisingly juxtaposing “knife grinders,” “tinkers,” “ragpickers,” and “organ grinders” with “pimps” and “brothel keepers.” Marx’s remarkable literary criticism against Eugène Sue in chapter 8 of *The Holy Family* could equally be applied to Marx himself. Commenting on the declarations of the schoolmaster who, horribly tortured by Chouette, wants to make her suffer now that she is in his power, Marx emphasizes his moral sermonizing: he is like most of Sue’s characters, who

must express as the result of their own thoughts, the conscious motive of their acts, the reason why the writer makes them behave in a certain way and no other…. As they do not really come to a life of any content, what they say must give vigorous tones to insignificant features.25

It is because the lumpenproletariat lacks conceptual vitality that Marx as an author must add a multitude of particular figures who cannot by definition make up a concrete whole.

In this strange mixture, three groups can be identified: after the ruined “roués [rogues]” who make a living in dubious ways and the “offshoots” of the bourgeoisie, comes a catchall group combining street jobs, illegal activities or activities verging on illegal, and outcasts such as vagabonds, who have constantly been seen as a social threat since the Middle Ages.

Vagrancy brings back old legal categories found in the 1810 penal code: “People without abode,” “People without hearth or home.” Although these categories are seen again in the police and legal texts of the time, it is surprising to see Marx using them to describe the lumpenproletariat (“Without hearth or home,”) seemingly without distancing himself from the administrative and police vocabulary.

What makes it so surprising is that in an article in *Vorwärts!* on August 7 and 10, 1844, “Critical Notes on the Article: ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian,’” he makes controversial comments against Ruge, who he reproaches for thinking that it is because of Germany’s political backwardness that the king of Prussia views the cause of pauperism as “a failure of the administration or of charitable institutions.”26 Marx observes that England, reputed to take political action against pauperism, created many institutions and administrative

measures, workhouses, and laws, and when these failed, blamed poverty on the poor. Marx concludes with a Foucauldian comment:

“The general lesson learnt by political England from its experience of pauperism is none other than that, in the course of history and despite all administrative measures, pauperism has developed into a national institution which has inevitably become the object of a highly ramified and extensive administrative system, a system however which no longer sets out to eliminate it, but which strives instead to discipline and perpetuate it.”

27 If this is true, then people “without abode,” “without hearth or home,” the vagabonds who make up the lumpenproletariat, must be seen as part of a category constructed by the government to justify the control of part the population and its failure to produce the expected results. A possible explanation for this concession to bourgeois discourse is that Marx believed that there was a section of irreducible poverty, that the “lowest sediment of the relative surplus population finally dwells in the sphere of pauperism” 28 and that this group was dependent on subjective contingency and arbitrariness, and that consequently, it was the concern of the Polizei, having nothing to do with the class struggle. In the analytical framework of the supposed initial “accumulation of capital,” the violent expropriation of the peasants led to the loss of all legal protection and to their workforce being available to capital, after their land was incorporated into capital. Since they could not be absorbed by industries in the towns and they could not adapt to the discipline of manufacturing, these peasants became beggars, thieves, and vagabonds. They were the “fathers of the present working class.” 29 Seen as such, they are good candidates for the lumpenproletariat, “that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society” of the Manifesto. However, their association with other bohemian characters linked to crime is still surprising. The presence of members of this population in events involving politics may well create heterogeneity, but for Marx, this heterogeneity is not politics as such, as noted by Peter Stallybrass in his very interesting work. 30

In fact, if we look closely, the lumpenproletariat is neither the “antithesis of political unification” nor “the condition making it possible,” because

29. Marx, Capital, 515.
the condition for the proletariat’s political unity lies in its struggles, and the lumpenproletariat is above all outside of the capitalist conditions of production and exchange, concentrated in service activities. Whether in terms of the persistence on old phenomena revived by unemployment (vagabonds), the irreducibly illegal (prostitutes, brothel keepers), or the unproductive “odd jobs,” the lumpenproletariat is a social residue where poverty drives individuals to live by whatever activity they can. If the vagabond of accumulation is the “father” of the modern workers, the vagabond of the 1830s to the 1850s is the monstrous abandoned child of capital. Escaped convicts and freed prisoners are the “precipitates” of the penal system. Vagabonds and beggars live on private and public charity, and the donations they receive are one form of “the financial science of the lumpen proletariat, whether of high degree or low,” and whether the donations are given or borrowed. As for prostitutes and street workers, they can be analyzed as “unproductive” people who “exchange services for money from others, which they consume.” This is still a system of simple, rather than capitalist, circulation:

From the whore to the Pope, there is a mass of such scum. But the honest and “working” lumpenproletariat also falls within this category: for example, there is a whole band of henchmen (Schürg) and other executors of low works who offer their services in ports, etc.

Reduced to the exchange sector, they find themselves in a situation where hunger reigns, exposing the denatured nature of need.

THE INHUMAN NEED

The relationship of the individuals in our lists to the need to eat is that of the alienated workers that Marx analyzes in his Manuscripts of 1857 to 1858. Hunger is a human need, yet also an inhuman human need that workers experience when they are forced to restrict themselves to a minimum level of life’s pleasures…. Not mentioning the pure animalization that results – an animalization that makes aspiration impossible, even to wealth in its universal form, as money, accumulated money – (and the part that the worker takes in higher pleasures, including the

33. Marx, Manuscrits de 1857-1858, 214. [Translator’s note: Quotation back-translated from the French-language version of this article.]
spiritual: doing propaganda in his own interests, keeping
diaries, going to lectures, educating his children, develop-
ing his tastes, etc.)

An analysis of the 1844 manuscripts, still relevant at the time of the
Grundrisse, shows the transformations experienced by men within “pri-
vate property,” which forms a system with “greed, the separation of labor,
capital and landed property; the connection of exchange and competi-
tion, of value and the devaluation of man, of monopoly and competition,
etc. – the connection between this whole estrangement and the money
system.” On the one hand, alienation shows in a “sophistication” of
needs and the means to satisfy them, and on the other by “a bestial bar-
barization, a complete, crude, abstract simplicity of need … or rather
… it merely reproduces itself in its opposite.” The worker even loses
the most natural necessities: fresh air, light (men return to their pesti-
lient “caves”), “the simplest animal cleanliness,” the need to eat, which
becomes reduced to what is only purely necessary (worse, “the Irishman
… knows … only the need to eat potatoes – and scabby potatoes at
that”), the need to move, and the need for company. These needs no
longer even exist in animal form, and have thus become (with the senses)
human.

This description can be applied to the proletariat as well as the lumpenproletariat. However, communist workers differ from pro-
letarian workers or those of the alienated lumpenproletariat. Although
they come under Marx’s 1844 critique of the communist doctrine, which
“negation of the negation, as the appropriation of the human essence
through the intermediary of the negation of private property,” is not the
“true, self-originating position.” But when they “associate with one
another, theory, propaganda, etc., is their first end. But at the same time,
as a result of this association, they acquire a new need – the need for
society – and what appears as a means becomes an end.” Thus, “smoking,
drinking, eating, etc., are no longer means of contact or means that bring
them together:” it is already a world whose position is “self-originating:”

“Company, association, and conversation, which again has society as its
end, are enough for them; the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase

34. Marx, Manuscrites de 1857-1858, 228. [Translator’s note: Quotation back-translated from the French-language version of this article.]
38. Engels, The Condition of the Working Class. See Rancière’s commentary on these lines in Le Philosophe et ses pauvres, 124-125.
with them, but a fact of life, and the nobility of man shines upon us from their work-hardened bodies.\footnote{Rancière, \textit{Le Philosophe et ses pauvres}.}

Marx’s harshness about the lumpenproletariat arises from the certainty that its members’ mindset is that of poverty itself. Marx would not agree that they are “victims” of society, just as many of them would not agree with this themselves, unless playing ironically on Slavoj Žižek’s paradoxical neo-Nazi skinhead,\footnote{See Žižek Slavoj, \textit{Le spectre rôde toujours} (Paris: Nautilus, 2002), 17.} asked why he was violent towards an immigrant, he answered like a sociologist or a social worker, claiming a poor education, an alcoholic father, unemployment, a lack of authority, and so forth. It is clear that Marx did not strive to show the humanity of the prostitutes, the ragpickers, the vagabonds, the thieves, and the freed convicts (Jean Valjean). He considered that the model of humanity shown by workers in hard labor, the study of the fraternity created here and now by meetings and conversations, was undoubtedly part of the enlightened ideal of the \textit{Bildung} of mankind. The importance attributed to the state of mind (\textit{Gesinnung}) is perhaps a result of a Hegelian legacy allowing us to understand the moral definition of the notion of the lumpenproletariat.

In \textit{Elements of the Philosophy of Right},\footnote{Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, \textit{Elements of the Philosophy of Right}, trans. S. W. Dyde (Kitchener, Canada: Batoche Books, 2001).} poverty is addressed in the description of the \textit{Polizei}, “the force, by which the universal guarantees security” (§ 231) in civil society, but which remains abstract, lost in the division between particular and universal rights (§ 184). Since the particularity bears the whole speculative weight of the analysis of bourgeois civil society, its needs and its means of satisfying them depend on arbitrary factors, on “external chance, caprice” (§ 185): talent, health (§ 237), loss of the “bond of the family stock” (§ 241), and so forth. Moreover, it is constantly confronted with the “power of the universal” which restricts the satisfaction of basic and contingent needs by making it “contingent.” For Hegel, this explains the “spectacle of excess, misery, and physical and social corruption” (§ 185). Without going into detail about the \textit{Polizei} administration’s activities, it should be remembered that its “control” and its “supervision” (§ 235) are limited to the “realm of mere accident” and remain, for individuals, an “external arrangement” (§ 231) which cannot go beyond what Marx, in 1844, called the “administration” of pauperism. In other words, nothing can be done to stem vagrancy and begging, except using social control and repression until times improve, and warning the organized proletariat about the political danger that it represents. However, the \textit{Elements of the Philosophy of Right} above all
underline the insufficiency of the ethical moment in poverty, compared to that of the individual who is integrated within social institutions. Hegel and Marx evoke the Neapolitan *lazzaroni*, using them to illustrate the significance of the moral element.

**THE LAZZARONI**

According to Fontanier, the use of this Italian word is an example of rhetoric and antonomasia. It is a “synecdoche of the individual” which encapsulates four cases, including our own. It substitutes a common noun for the name of the type to which it belongs, expressing its meaning “with greater sense and force.”

43 The word *lazzaroni* refers to individuals living on the port of Naples with a reputation for living with almost nothing, cultivating idleness and a distaste for work, and surviving through occasional tasks linked to fishing, theft, or murder. But the *lazzaroni* have a well-known past: the famous *lazzarone* of Masaniello, who led a revolt and founded a republic by opposing the Spaniards in 1647. Unfortunately for them, their contemporary history linked them to the conservative forces and to two failed attempts at political revolution: the uprising against the Parthenopean Republic in 1798, and the intervention against the liberal revolution in May 1848. Engels, describing May 1848, emphasized the greed of the *lazzaroni* and their violence, associated with that of the Swiss.

44 Marx’s rhetorical operation first consists in using the antonomasia mentioned above in different situations: “In Paris the Garde mobile, in Vienna ‘Croats’ – in both cases lazzaroni, lumpenproletariat hired and armed – were used against the working and thinking proletarians.”

45 Secondly, in the passage of *The Class Struggles in France* cited above, the Parisian lumpenproletariat is said to depend on “the degree of civilization of the nation to which they belong, but never renouncing their lazzeroni character.”

46 This character is in contrast with that of the “working and thinking proletarians.” The character of the *lazzaroni* is therefore linked to their distaste for thought and their relationship to work. In paragraph 244 of *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel explains that it is poverty, “when a large number of people sink below the standard of living regarded as essential for the members of society” that “[produces] a pauper class (*bringt die Erzeugung des Pöbels hervor*)” (§ 244). However, in the addition to this paragraph published by Gans, the explanation

---

changes, because poverty “does not itself make a pauper. The pauper state implies a frame of mind, associated often with poverty consisting in inner rebellion against the wealthy, against society, and against constituted authority.” Hegel obviously does not suppose that this inner rebellion can have emancipatory doctrinal content. The whole construction of the constitution relies on the people being incapable of having a universal view of material life, a fortiori the plebeians, and this is why states exist (§ 301). Yet given the addition to § 244, stating that “want assumes the form of a wrong done to one or other class (Klasse),” one might think that the feeling of injustice could justify the right to distress (Notrecht), and that Gesinnung might drive a revolt based on this right. For this, we would need to look at § 244 and its addition, alongside § 127 and its addition, to establish a relationship between the normative dimension of poverty in itself and the recognition that property violation can be based on a right: the right of distress.

Returning to Marx after this Hegelian digression, we can say that what the lazzaroni of the lumpenproletariat lack is the feeling of an injustice expressing the infinite violation of the right to life, especially when human life has become inhuman. On the contrary, men “at the mercy of the changes and chances of life … must be heedless and indifferent to work, as are the Lazzaroni in Naples.” We have seen that Marx also uses the lazzaroni to represent a character, but with the difference that he emphasizes the political effects of the venality of those rejecting work. However, between a distaste for work and venality, a third ethical term comes into play. The “lazzaroni character” is a mindset characterizing those who live outside the social institution. Hegel speaks of “corporations” or “corporative associations,” with reference to the professional institutions that introduce “the developed and actualized rationality” into the “temper of individuals” (§ 265). They work to create confidence in the protection of individuals by the state, they develop the righteousness linked to exercising a profession, and they give objectivity and social recognition to individual abilities, cultivating “patriotism” and immediate adherence to the universal. Plebeians are seen as having an antisocial mindset: idleness and viciousness in contrast to the ethical virtues linked to other social conditions: rectitude, honor, and mutual recognition (§ 207). Poverty deprives individuals of the “sense of right, rectitude, and honor which is derived from self-support” (§ 244). Leaving aside the role that Hegel attributes to corporations, Marx clearly follows the

47. Hegel, Elements of the Philosophy of Right, 188.
48. Hegel, Elements of the Philosophy of Right, 189.
50. Hegel, Elements of the Philosophy of Right, 188.
logic of this analysis, which is neither moralizing nor moralistic, because it emphasizes the ethical element as decisive in the fall of the lumpenproletariat or the existence of the lazzaroni.

Marx’s and Engels’s condemnation of the lumpenproletariat is political. This is because of its role as a support for the bourgeoisie and its harmful impacts on struggles (undoubtedly corrupted by conspiracies), but above all because its ethos formally and concretely goes against the ethical condition required for revolution (not revolution as an act of insurrection or even a process of transformation-suppression of the former mode of activity, of domination of all classes, and of classes themselves). In fact, some of Marx’s statements break with the normal poetic paradigm of the revolution, which could be described as such: a subject (the dominant social relationships and type of activity), a goal (their suppression), a final form (free association), and an agent (the proletariat). Communism is not a goal and the revolution is not the means of reaching it, as stated by the frequently quoted phrase: “Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.” However, “the real movement which abolishes the present state of things” already faces the aporias of all circularity, as encountered by Rousseau in the self-institution of the people, a problem which he resolved with the miraculous intervention of the legislator. In fact, for the real movement of abolition to be communist, the masses involved must already be communist, and the revolution must be communist in itself. In other words, the masses must be what the revolution is meant to have made them. The aporia of this circularity can be resolved by considering that “in revolutionary activity, self-change and changing [the] conditions coincide.” Yet the lumpenproletariat cannot change or become involved in changing the current situation. If the proletariat can only “sweep away the decay of the old system sticking to it and become able to rebuild society on new foundations” through revolution, it is clear that the lumpenproletariat, who lack the necessary energy for revolution, will not sweep away the decay of the old system, because they are this decay. From this, Marx comes to the conclusion (a painful one for the noble) that the lumpenproletariat must be left to its fate, that it is pointless trying to reform it, and that the most important thing is to avoid becoming contaminated.

52. Marx, The German Ideology, 64.
The difficulties that we have encountered (and perhaps exaggerated) in Marx’s thought are interesting: the lumpenproletariat provides an opportunity for reflection in contrast to the revolutionary subjectivity of the proletariat. Let us simplify greatly, and say that before 1848, the proletariat was subject to four approaches: a speculative approach in the last pages of *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, an economic approach linked to the study of labor, salary, and profit; an approach looking at worker struggles and how they are organized; and an approach belonging to the materialist historical schema of the *Manifesto*. Between the 1844 speculative ontology of the proletariat, the philosophical-economic works, the economic ones, and the analyses of political situations, what was missing was a political analysis of the proletariat. Reflection on revolutionary subjectivity is necessary to fulfil the formal categories of 1844, when Marx carried out a speculative reasoning regarding the proletariat, to solve a philosophical and political problem. If in 1843-1844 Marx wanted to discharge speculation, it is striking that in his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* he does so by way of a marked German speculative reverence. Marx’s reflection aims to identify the conditions for a meeting between post-Hegelian, postspeculative critical theory and reality. He frames the problem as follows: critical theory emerging from speculation entails that it must become effective, and that it can only complete its secularization by refusing to be an activity apart from the world. However, it is only possible to become part of the world if the reality of the world shows that it needs thought, and that it contains the revolutionary energy embodied in a class which truly rises to the rational and emancipatory principles of the theory. Marx therefore looks, within civil society, for the conditions to bring together critical philosophy with the courage and energy that intelligence requires. This meeting allows the exchange of material and intellectual weapons. We are familiar with the brilliant identification of these conditions: a class which is not a class, which is the dissolution of all the classes, which is the negation of civil society because it denies it.\(^{55}\) This class is the proletariat. However, something that remains to be addressed is how this identification can apply to the lumpenproletariat as well as the proletariat, making the lumpenproletariat the proletariat of the proletariat. If “by demanding the negation of private property, the proletariat merely raises to the rank of a principle of society what society has raised to the rank of *its* principle,”\(^{56}\) the lumpenproletariat, by its criminality and its venality, in principle increases the immorality of the

bourgeois society in the economic and financial domain, an immorality that this society hides, but on which it lives. This is why Bonaparte is the man of the lumpenproletariat on all levels of society. The notion of the lumpenproletariat, beyond its strange confusions and its heavy rhetorical circumlocutions, is a fairly good way of negatively demonstrating what a communist revolutionary subjectivity is, and of positively showing the backstage workings of the political theater in the revolutionary period: several decades later, Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* and his *Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* would attempt to show this.

Jean-Claude BOURDIN is an emeritus professor at the University of Poitiers. His research focuses on Hegel, Enlightenment materialism, Diderot, and Dom Deschamps. He has published many articles on Marx, Foucault, and politics. He has also studied the notion of “materialism of the encounter” in Althusser, and he was editor of the book *Althusser, une lecture de Marx* (Paris: PUF, 2008).

**ABSTRACT**

Marx’s use of the word *lumpenproletariat* first strikes us by its violence: the term acts as a derogatory stigmatization of heterogeneous groups whose social position is essentially determined by the sphere of exchange and pure circulation in a service economy. Study of Marx’s use of the term demonstrates that it is not a concept: it alludes to the problem posed by the proletarian participation in the repression of June 1848, or by the *lazzaroni* in the failure of the liberal revolutions. The term does not designate a “class.” It is instead used to identify a type of behavior seen at all levels of society: predation, gain by misappropriation, and unproductive speculations by the “déclassés” of a society’s “bohemians.” This article puts forward the hypothesis that Marx’s articulation between the lumpenproletariat and the importance of the ethical evaluation of its tenuous relationship to work is partly derived from the Hegelian perception of poverty (the “social question”). An analysis of the “inhuman” needs and the speculative deduction of the proletariat in 1844 demonstrates that the negative determinations of the proletariat establish the lumpenproletariat as the proletariat of the proletariat. The difference then lies in the revolutionary subjectivity of the proletarians, to which the members of the lumpenproletariat do not accede.