

The Refuse of all Classes

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STRUGGLESSESSIONS



“Who are our friends? Who are our enemies? This is the first question of revolution.”

-Mao Tse Tung

“It is clear to us that the so-called lumpen class cannot carry our liberation struggle forward

on its own.”

-Black Liberation Army

One of the hotly debated subjects of today is around the Lumpen line, where the lumpenproletariat, that declassed milieu that Marx and Engels in the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte called “the refuse of all classes” or “the decaying elements of all classes,” is elevated as the revolutionary subject of our time. The origin of the Lumpen line was with Bakunin in his criticisms of Marx and Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon, though a revolutionary nationalist and anti-imperialist who defended the right to violence from the conciliatory French social-chauvinists of the revisionist Communist Party of France, had embraced eclecticism like many revolutionaries of the time. Fanon mistakenly defined the

“lumpen” to include the unemployed and marginally employed that were becoming increasingly prominent in colonies and semi-colonies as traditional agriculture was displaced by imperialism and pushed a mass of landless peasants into rings of slums. These such elements who would find work sometimes but were marked by and large by a precarious existence are best embodied by Algerian revolutionary Ali La Pointe (depicted in the film *Battle of Algiers*).

Similarly, the failure of the Communist Party – USA because of their liquidation of the national question, social chauvinism, reformism, and class collaborationist politics allowed the New Left and Black Liberation Movement to embrace the Lumpen line in a way that blurs out class analysis. To oppose the workerist identity politics of the CPUSA, the lumpenproletariat then was suddenly praised by many revolutionaries. In 1969 when the Black Panther Party was explaining the forcible ouster of disruptive white leftists from their Oakland “United Front Against Racism” Conference, it was said to be done as “lumpenproletarian discipline.” Eldridge Cleaver, acting as one of the chief theoreticians of the BPP, called the “Black urban lumpenproletariat” the “vanguard of the proletariat.”

The Lumpen line of elevating the lumpenproletariat as the most revolutionary strata of U.S. society, in spite of proving to be catastrophic to the BPP and used as a political line of counterinsurgency by the state, continues to be upheld by Anarchist “prison abolitionists” and syndicalists. Even among some “Maoists” a strange form of neo-lumpen vanguardism is promoted that negates the necessity of focusing on proletarian leadership and, through liberal identity politics and eclecticism, intentionally obscures the severe limitations and counter-revolutionary tendencies among the lumpenproletariat.

Now that we have defined the Lumpen line, what then, is the lumpenproletariat?

What is the lumpenproletariat?

“The lumpenproletariat of Paris [in the form of the December 10 group] had been organized into secret sections, each section led by Bonapartist agents, with a Bonapartist general at the head of the whole. 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, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars — in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass*, thrown hither and thither, which the French call la bohème... This Bonaparte, who constitutes himself chief of the lumpenproletariat, who here alone rediscovers in mass form the interests which he personally pursues, who recognizes in this scum, offal, refuse of all classes the only class upon which he can base himself unconditionally, is the real Bonaparte, the Bonaparte sans phrase.” [Our emphasis]

-Marx, Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte

“The ‘Dangerous class,’ the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it *far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.*” [Our emphasis]

-Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto

We should define what the lumpenproletariat is in its relation to production, in its mode of politics, and in its history.

The lumpenproletariat are, by definition, not a class category but a nebulous, disintegrated group a) without stable structural determination that produces a certain determined subjectivity and b) that choose to instead be parasitic, giving them an often reactionary character. The basis for the lumpenproletariat’s reactive relation to history lies in its relation (or lack thereof) to productive activity. This is why Marxists see social forces and relations as primary, seeing that what is social determines the forms and identities through the relation of class. When one looks at

the bourgeoisie, one sees in the ideology that emanates from their class the demand to “constantly revolutionize production” to continuously maximize surplus value through production for production’s sake, and in the proletariat, the revolutionary class that has the singular rather than vacillatory mission to end exploitation and to abolish all classes by controlling the infrastructure by which the bourgeoisie parasitically reproduces itself. Those that are frequently unemployed but that are contracted into work through temp agencies or who engage in gigs and hustles, that are unemployed and collecting unemployment, that are old and physically infirmed, disfigured by capitalism and it’s productive process, and the homeless, are all—in spite of coming from or being part of the bottom layers of the proletariat, semi-proletariat, and the lower petty bourgeoisie—dangerously conflated as being in the same category of heroin dealers and thieves.

Those that are lumpen on top of no longer having distributive or productive relations to the capitalist economy live *parasitically* off of those around them, most typically the proletariat, and this is what differentiates them from the unemployed and marginally employed. They owe no loyalty to anyone but themselves, and far from having some solidarity to the lower classes because they both are victims of police violence (a point of similar circumstance brought up by those espousing the lumpen line that obscures lumpen ideology and the political role it plays), they instead predate upon their own. This is the social activity which unites this nebulous mass of declassed people. Also worth noting is that to be declassed is not automatically mean to originate from the proletariat, though it does often tend to mean that.

Today we can recognize the lumpen around us, with chronically homeless people who have totally opted out of the capitalist workforce, panhandlers, longtime psychiatric patients, drug dealers, pimps, prostitutes, street gangs, certain train hoppers who often come from middle class backgrounds that don’t work on their own volition, among many others. There is significant fluidity in and out of this strata, as being in a class is not necessarily belonging to an immutable category, but generally, there is a commonly held relationship of every member of this strata reveling in surviving outside of the class structure by living off the wealth of others. While some postmodernists and anarchists will interpret this as oppressive “anti-

poor” analysis the precise point of analyzing the lumpenproletariat is to understand why it’s so hard to constitute them into a political organization, just as it was and is for the peasantry and petty bourgeois as well.

What’s more is that legality or illegality is not the same as relationship to production — large and integral parts of the capitalist-imperialist economy are in fact illegalized (for examples nacrotrafficking, arms dealing, and transportation of ‘illegal’ workers). Indeed many who are lumpen operate almost entirely under legal or semi-legal sanction. This could include pawnshop brokers who essentially act as loan sharks, gamblers, dispensary operators, tow truck operators who almost exclusively are contracted to remove people’s cars from coveted parking lots, bounty hunters and hired security guards.

Some promote the idea that there is a “lumpen”-bourgeoisie, this is false. Famously depicted in *Godfather 2* and *3* we are presented with mob boss Michael Corleone, a Euro American gangster of Italian descent who wishes to bring the Corleone family of La Cosa Nostra into the legitimacy of the old WASP ruling class, switching investments in illegal extortion, labor, gambling, and prostitution rackets entirely over into ‘legal’, above ground business. Director Francis Ford Coppola inadvertently (and with reference nonetheless to how the actual Italian American Mafia was indeed a capitalist enterprise) provides a fantastic look into the lumpenproletariat aspiration embodied in the lumpen ideology, the successful individualistic pursuit and obtaining of parasitic self-gratification and enrichment in the context of imperialism, but more importantly, Coppola does well in showing how beyond criminal tradition and ethnicity, there is very little distinction between the “illegal” bourgeoisie and the legal, in that they must launder their money into being clean through various legal enterprises. The bourgeoisie is a parasitic class which lives off the wealth produced by others, but it does so by owning the means of production, not by being removed from it. Michael Corleone, “El Chapo” Guzman, Carlos Gambino, John Gotti, and “Whitey” Bulger, then, are not lumpen (though they once were and derive incomes from sources that are), but are part of the bourgeoisie, albeit one which enlists lumpenproletariat as part of the parastate forces they develop to enforce their business decisions while *simultaneously* also enlisting sectors of the repressive state apparatus as well. We can see these types in

some instances rise to powerful positions within the bourgeois state, Cartels in Mexico penetrating the government or more aptly Bonaparte as the antagonist in *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

To see drug trafficking and its current boom as separate rather than part and product of the dynamics of the capitalist-imperialist economy, as well as part of the policies and measures applied by the governments that represent this system, would be a mistake of idealism. The ultra-high profit rate of the drug trade has made it both an entrance ticket to wealth for new sectors of the illegal bourgeoisie and a “competitive advantage” and solution for the problems of profitability being experienced by major sections of legal capitalists. Drug addiction, the prostitution of young women and girls, people kidnapped and forced to work as slaves on drug plantations, or people kidnapped and killed for their organs to be sold, this is the reality of bourgeois rule.

Lumpen ideology

What then is the political expression of the lumpen? The lumpenproletarian spontaneity as it has been labeled by Marx, Engels and Mao means that is not always a counterrevolutionary force, hence its vacillating nature. Engels in *The Peasant Wars* remarked that each day of the land revolutions in Germany saw the lumpen frequently change what side they were on, being most prone to reaction as they were more often than not willing to hire their services at high price. Marx in *Eighteenth Brumaire* pointed out that the lumpen “swamp flower” was “capable of greatest acts of heroism and the most exalted self-sacrifice” but then would turn to banditry as well. Its “precarious” means of subsisting, dependence on “chance” in its day to day life, can situate it with the revolutionary forces.

“The greater the insecurity, the more the conspirator hastens to seize the pleasures of the moment. . . . The desperate recklessness which is exhibited in every insurrection in Paris is introduced precisely by these veteran professional conspirators, the hommes de coups de main [men of daring raids]. They are the ones who throw up and command the 1st barricades, who organize resistance, lead the looting of arms-shops. . . . In a word, they are the officers of the insurrection.”

Marx, however, noted that their extra-social character that spans their spontaneity makes building a revolution among them unreliable. Mao likewise noted the “unstable” and “lack[ing] of constructive qualities” the lumpen had, but explained it’s possible to “remold them and guard against their destructiveness.” These teachers who examined and participated in the great revolutions of the time noted essentially that if they are put under the leadership of the proletariat this strata could effectively be proletarianized and integrated into the movement.

Bakunin, the “lumpen priest” as Engels called him, like most anarchists still to today, caricatured Marx’s definition of the lumpen to be a broader catchment, and situated the lumpen as more revolutionary than “bourgeois” workers of their time who were increasingly subsumed by the discipline of the capitalist labor process. The revolutionary subject was not scientifically named or analyzed by its relation to the production process but was rather looked at like a comic book archetype. Far from being seen as a tendency towards social identity on parasitic lines outside of capitalist productive relations, Bakunin saw the lumpen as a sort of actually existing anarchism, unemployed youth, thieves, and travelers that somehow precariously “escaped” the crushing burden of exploitation and oppression by opting out of selling their labor. It was in their eternal protest to class society by being antiheroes or unfortunate dependents that they supposedly were dangerous to the state.

“Cossacks, our innumerable saintly and not so saintly tramps (brodiagi), pilgrims, members of ‘beguny’ sects, thieves, and brigands – this whole wide and numerous underground world which from time immemorial has protested against the state and statism.”

Of course, Bakunin’s disciples still exist today and produce similar filth, urging people to quit working and live off the waste of civilization, a privilege most proletarians don’t have. The Lumpen line that many anarchists have then stressed less the economic role they play, than the identities the lumpen have as oppositional to the state in moments when their parasitic activities come into violent antagonism towards the state. Not much in effort is placed on dialectical materialist analysis in the anarchist milieu here, and abstracted Humanist concepts of freedom and equality come to hold more weight in examining this supposed revolutionary

subject than their actual potential as it relates to socio-historical forces. There are exceptions for example, in that the anarchists in Excarhia in Athens are in a battle with drug dealers now for example, but by and large, there is an identification with many of these predators as revolutionary antiheroes by those in the North American anarchist milieu.

The Lumpenproletariat and Fascism

In *Eighteenth Brumaire*, we received the first theorization of the social base of fascism without Marx. As the Second Republic began to fail and the French bourgeoisie seemed incapable of ruling, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte began summoning the support of the lumpenproletariat, consisting of declassed peasants and workers, soldiers, adventurers, and in large part, sections of the immiserated petty bourgeoisie. The Society of December 10th, a pro-Bonaparte faction, grew from this basis. The parliamentarian bourgeoisie, which represented what we would call today the legal left, came into contradiction with Napoleon in the presidency, the latter which would use the lumpen to carry out a coup d'état that would dispose the former and allow him to declare himself Napoleon the Third, Emperor of the French.

Even Fanon, who thought that the idled swindler in the colonies would come to recognize the error of its ways through anticolonial violence alone, had to admit to moments where the lumpenproletariat played a blatantly counterrevolutionary role. In Madagascar, the French colonial authorities enlisted imprisoned lumpen to use “its distinctly provocative actions” as the “legal excuse to maintain order.” In Angola, Algeria, and Congo, the colonialists had pressed in elements of the lumpen as soldiers, agents, strikebreakers, and as reactionary demonstration-breakers and assassins. Fanon admitted that the danger of the lumpenproletariat lays in its spontaneity and unreliability, but because of his eclecticism and also perhaps because he did not live to see the future leaps in theory that Maoism provided, there was no Communist Party of the proletariat which could provide the leadership that the lumpen desperately needed.

In pre-revolutionary China, the mutual aid societies and martial art schools of the Triads became the lumpen merchants which the British imperialist bourgeoisie used as wholesalers of opium – as well as the base by which Chiang Kai Shek’s fascist terror would be enlisted. The infamous 1927 massacre, where large numbers of Communists were publicly murdered by gang members in gruesome ways, was the work of the Shanghai-based Green Gang. When the Maoist forces started to close in they shut down the opium dens, publicly try and kill the large-scale drug dealers, and provide treatment to addicts, the Triads fled to the Portuguese and British-held Macau and Hong Kong, knowing their day was over. When Deng restored capitalism he (for the first time in Chinese Communist Party history) admitted to meeting with these opium capitalists, saying they were “great patriots.”

Likewise in the history of the imperialist countries, we’ve seen how the lumpen has served as the base of an emergent fascism. Mussolini’s base was that of the declassed middle class and soldiery, and Hitler the same. A sample of 584 professions in the fascist British National Party also revealed similar demographics of the increasingly declassed petty bourgeois and lumpenproletariat who, since the 2007-2010 Recession, have grown in greater number. Like the cunning “drunken adventurer” of Louis Bonaparte Trump has similarly come to represent the figure of order who beckons so many declassed petty bourgeois and bourgeois people to his banner.

Oppressed Nation Lumpen Organizations in the USA

Many figures of the fascist movement in the USA and Europe are drawn from this declassed strata but there are also many oppressed people who fall into it as well, and that enter into an organized basis through street gangs. While we should see it clear what Marx and Engels meant when they say the lumpen “may, here and there, be swept into the movement [but] it’s conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue” we should see how, for

example, Black and Latino gangs are composed primarily of working-class youth, many of whose families are in what Marx referred to as the “reserve army” of the unemployed. These youth, because of that colonial and class oppression, are logically pulled towards rebellion – and many indeed would leave gang life to join the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army and work, for example, to push out heroin dealers from their communities. But in spite of oppressed status, gang structures and leadership, as seen with the Blackstone Rangers and Disciples in Chicago as a case study, more often than not “police” oppressed working class communities and prevent the people from rebelling.

In Chicago, the gangs, unlike the Black Panthers and other Black Liberation organizations, often worked with the police in hopes that cooperation with them would earn special favors, specifically personal protection from arrests. The Stones leadership, for example, worked with the Chicago Police Department 1966-1968 to keep the Woodlawn Community there “quiet.” In a grant application to the now dissolved Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), the Woodlawn Community Organization gave an example of this precise activity:

“At the time the riots were underway, the Rangers were under considerable pressure to join the rioters because of their alliances with Westside groups. The Ranger leadership met and decided to not participate in the riots but, more importantly, decided to make an organized effort to prevent similar violence in Woodlawn. The following plan was developed and carried out by the Rangers with the Chicago Police Department. First, the Ranger leadership manned a twenty-four-hour phone service at the Church during the time the riots were taking place in the Westside. The Ranger leadership, in response to calls, went to the site of possible disturbances and dispersed the youth involved.” –(Untitled grant proposal from T.W.O. to Community Action Program O.E.O. 1967, p. 10)

The OEO and other NGOs in Chicago correctly recognized what class the gangs stood with and how they’d work to prevent revolutionaries from gaining a foothold in neighborhoods. Chicago’s OEO leadership through Jerome S. Bernstein bragged in 1968, citing the benefits of federal funding being allotted to Rangers and Disciples, that in 1967 they prevented a Black Panther meeting from taking place

and that they would continue to disrupt Black Panther meetings. As one Disciple gang fascist told the press that was inquiring about their role, “we can control and police our people better than the police and the Army.” In terms of their relationship to the local white business community, the presence of their investments was a source of income to gang leadership, so they vehemently protected it. When it was discovered, for example, that the Red Rooster Super Markets was rigging sales on poultry by soaking it in water and then freezing it so each package that Black shoppers would purchase was more expensive because they were paying for the ice as well as the meat, protestors started picketing the store. Protests soon ended, however, when the Stones negotiated for several of its members to be hired.

The white ruling class and Black lumpenproletariat in gang leadership got together so well because, in many ways, they both viewed the Black proletarians in the same way: as a class of people to plunder and poison. In understanding the lumpenproletariat there must never be a reproduction of the white supremacist fantasy that criminalization of oppressed nation people implies collective lumpenization, this theoretical mishap leads to some on the ‘left’ equating the lumpenproletariat – with its anarchist, militarist, misogynistic, profiteering ideology which permits such class collaboration as detailed above – as being the same the Black and Latino proletariat.

Revolutionary Law Against Lumpen Crimes

When Revolutionary Communist Party [which was “Maoist” if we were to use Maoism loosely, as some of the first U.S. forces which identified with Mao’s line and self-identified as Maoists, but which we know revealed itself as solidly revisionist with time] member Damian Garcia was stabbed to death by a gang member in Los Angeles’ Pico-Aliso housing project, they reminded Damian as they murdered him that their flag was red-white-and-blue, not red. Beyond often being enlisted by exploitative interests as detailed above, the lumpen shares with the government an opposition to grassroots revolutionary organizations. The reason is simple: if

revolutionaries are allowed to freely have such a presence to organize, they can crowd out lumpen organizations by denying them the ability to profit off of the people, even recruit people away from the organization the lumpen run in. As so, in any base building that revolutionaries do, they must contest not just the police and NGOs, but the gangs that so often work with them to pacify the people, just as the *kapos* were enlisted by the Nazis in the Jewish ghettos.

In the case of the People's War in Peru, the Communist Party of Peru (PCP) organized people in their base areas into Popular Assemblies which targeted hated oppressors – which included cattle rustlers. The livelihood of Andean people in these areas where revolutionary power was strongest had historically been tied to the availability of cattle and sheep, so rustlers' (who were often connected to more powerful merchants and hacienda owners) thievery did not just cause a significant amount of economic trauma for peasant families but also were cause of malnutrition and hunger in many villages. Vigilante violence against cattle rustlers had been punished by regional government authorities in spite of popular demands for the death penalty to be used on the rustlers. The arrival of the Communists' Guerrilla Army [Peoples Guerrilla Army, EGP] led to the institution of the death penalty on cattle rustlers along with the regular patrolling of roads, trails, pastures, and fields. In this case, the reactionary alliance between the lumpenproletariat and the old State created a fissure where the PCP could entrench itself, and endear itself to the people.

In the event of a revolutionary situation even in imperialist countries like the USA, those people whose "relationship to production" is ripping other people off would have to be proletarianized through revolutionary violence and economic construction in those base areas where revolutionary forces are in control. This would be done by making them party workers, by enlisting them in the people's army and militias, by getting them to engage in productive labor through connecting them to those in skilled trades, and by promoting revolutionary culture. Only by the proletarian party, its army, its mass organizations, and its united front, can lumpen ideology be defeated – lest they, like all other obsolete classes, antagonistically try to prevent its extinction through targeting revolutionaries and the people. In all revolutions, it is only the recidivist, anti-people criminals and class

enemies who are annihilated and liquidation of the lumpenproletariat takes place in many different forms.

Article by S. Mazur

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