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## COOPERATIVES UNDER THE AEGIS OF CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM

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**Abstract:** Through theoretical research, this article presents some analyses of the flexibilization and fragmentation of production and its links to the accumulation of capital, in order to understand that current relations of production use cooperatives and other forms of work to organize, under the command of capital, a renewed form of labor cooperation. These cooperative processes, rather than breaking with the process of valorization, operate a continuity, insofar as they place the production carried out by these various forms of work under capitalist domination. Worker cooperatives are thus linked to the process of value production and revive combined labor and labor cooperation. **Keywords:** Capitalism; Labor; Cooperative; Fragmentation.

## INTRODUCTION

The last few decades of social history have been marked by restructuring in capitalism that has introduced new dynamics into the social relationship between capital and labor. These changes, known in the literature as flexibilization and productive restructuring, have imposed new relations of organization and use of the workforce that go beyond traditional forms of wage-earning. However, the current forms of payment for the workforce do not imply overcoming the relationship of subordination of labor to capital, nor does it result in the absolute supremacy of capital in its relationship of dependence on labor. Capitalist restructuring has led to increasingly precarious relations of production in peripheral capitalist countries, such as Brazil, and a strong tendency towards the deconcentration of production combined with a process of concentration of capital and socially produced wealth.

As a direct result of these changes, the creation of various work cooperatives is stimulated, which will directly or indirectly

subsidize capital's webs of productivity. Cooperatives have a peculiar ideological appeal that gives them a certain insertion in the discourse of so-called "alternatives to combat unemployment" and more recently, with the debate on the "solidarity economy", as an "alternative to capitalism". But the pertinent question is not what cooperatives might become in another societal form, but how they have been objectively functioning and serving the interests of production and reproduction of capital in the current structure of society.

## VALORIZATION PROCESS: THE EVER-INCREASING PATH OF CAPITAL

"Big industry" - the mature phase of the capitalist production process - expresses the conditions in which capital has eliminated all the barriers that prevented it from dominating labor, operating a desubjectivation of the labor process. Machines are no longer the means by which the workforce is instrumentalized in the production process, they are promoted to the primary force in the production chain, which now uses this same workforce as a means to set its "monstrous gift" in motion. The cooperation of labour becomes increasingly diffuse as the collective worker, who existed in the early stages of capitalism, is renewed and dispersed among the gears of the machine and the webs of abstract labour that are organized to feed them. In this respect, Teixeira says that with the phase of big industry "abstract labor takes on a technically tangible reality. How so? The general leveling of operations makes it possible to move the workers, who are effectively occupied, from one machine to another in a very short time and without the need for special training" (1996, p. 67).

In addition to this general leveling of work, big industry has allowed capital to create a market structure that exceeds the basic

demands of personal consumption. With the increase of machines in production, an industrial branch developed specializing in the production of machines and equipment to feed dead labour into the production process and increasingly reduce the average social time of goods. Capital was thus able to invest in this part of production as a new market to also operate the mechanism of valorization, and also to regulate the wages paid to the workforce in a new way. This was only possible because the change in the exploitation of living labor by dead labor reduced, in relative terms, the demand for labor and increased the demand for more machinery and equipment (cf. Teixeira, *idem*). In these terms, the development of the capitalist mode of production does not mean eliminating the fundamental contradiction of dependence and negation in the relationship between capital and labor. This relationship takes on new contours every time new forms and strategies of surplus value production are developed.

With this premise, we want to lay the foundations for understanding how the dynamics of capitalist accumulation have transformed the production process, aiming for renewed forms of surplus value extraction. From this perspective, it stands out that this would be a crossroads at which capital has found itself. For Teixeira, either capital developed new forms of value production, or the mode of production would collapse, canceling out capital's dominance over the dynamics of social life.

Big industry could not eliminate this contradiction. On the contrary, it sharpened it even more, which led the system to face one of two possibilities: either to restart a new succession of forms of commodity production, or to end up in a final crisis, thus decreeing the death of the system itself (Teixeira, 1996a, 68).

All it takes is a little observation to realize that we are not living through a final crisis of capitalism, which solidifies elements for us to understand that the transformations that have been developed in the production and reproduction of social life, under the aegis of capital, are responses found by the valorization process to maintain its dominance over contemporary forms of commodity production<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the development of productive forces, which according to Marx (1975), in a communal society, would be the free development of individuals, in capitalism - the evolution of science and technology - is a prerequisite for the free development of capital, without, however, eliminating living labor as the force it feeds on to form value.

### **COOPERATION: THE SUBSTANTIVE FORM OF CAPITAL**

Investigating the relationship between capital and labor, in terms of productive deconcentration in the restructuring process, leads us to understand both the contemporary moment of capital - which operates under the sign of flexibilization - as well as the forms of precarious work and their umbilical relationship with outsourcing. But we want to make it clear that, at a time when the focus is on the deconcentration of production and the updated forms of outsourcing, we are not

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1. The debate on the crisis of capital raises a question. For some authors, the current moment in the development of capitalism's history is marked by a change in the way surplus value is produced, in other words, the transition from big industry to a post-big industry moment. This debate is of great importance if we are to understand the current forms of exploitation of more labor by capital. However, within the limits of this article, we can point out that contemporary capitalism uses new ways of exploiting the workforce that date back to the beginnings of capitalism. However, analyzing the depth of the ruptures and continuities in the existing form of production does not give us the means to affirm big industry as a historical moment in capitalism that has been overcome.

ignoring or minimizing the classic forms of precarious work embedded in production, or even restricting the precariousness of work to the current forms of exploitation. The aim is to show how the development of the capitalist mode of production is now able to intensify the exploitation of the workforce to such an extent that it apparently negates the classic form of the industrial worker and the cooperation of work processes as important sources that feed the production of value.

It is therefore necessary to highlight the way in which capital uses the organization of work in capitalist production, which articulates the working hours of different workers, converging them to produce value. It is a “new collective worker” that is created in the current phase of commodity production. Tavares corroborates our interpretation and points out that:

the transformation of production processes and the downgrading of the workforce have not eliminated the combined working day, which is to say that cooperation remains the basic form of the capitalist mode of production, which also confirms collective work, although the conditions that make it a reality in contemporary society have changed (2002, p. 64).

These are the conditions that define cooperation and collective work today, which leads us to analyze work cooperatives and their participation in the fragmented processes of organizing work and producing value. In our understanding, which converges with Tavares’ analysis (2002), in order for the capitalist to have workers and the social power of their work under his command, he must have the means to mediate the purchase and sale of the workforce. But employing them jointly and in combination no longer means having them under the same roof and clustered in the same place. This dispersion does not mean, however, that there is no cooperation of part-time jobs based on the combined working day, or even less that there is no buying and selling of

labor power.

In this sense, we affirm that cooperation - a constitutive form of the capitalist mode of production - is being updated by the flexibilization of production processes that determine today’s productive restructuring complex. The deconcentration of production maintains a partial productive dynamic in the central production unit and feeds the machines with living work carried out outside the factory, which can be in the form of absolute or relative surplus value. The flexibility of the combined work process makes it possible to produce goods that are the product of several combined working hours, carried out through various types of work, including cooperatives. Many companies have sought to outsource part of their production, subsidizing the creation of work cooperatives so that they can carry out activities in parts of their production chain, in an articulated and exclusive way. The exploitation of the workforce, carried out by this disguised form of autonomous work, shifts the central debate from the forms of exploitation of surplus value to a truncated debate about “economic warming, flexibilization and the reduction of unemployment”, as put forward by today’s liberal economists (cf. Pastore, 1995).

### **WORK COOPERATIVES: FLEXIBILIZATION AND DECONCENTRATION OF PRODUCTION**

The complex of productive restructuring, based on the flexibilization and deconcentration of production, makes increasing use of outsourcing and subcontracting to transfer the production of goods or semi-manufactured products to small businesses - and in our study in particular to cooperatives. Thus, under the impetus of autonomous work, which makes the worker his own boss, the organization of work is pushed to ever more elas-

tic limits, because workers are subjected to a regime of self-exploitation under the ideal of autonomous work. If you combine this with the debate on cooperatives and the “solidarity economy”, it takes on even more mystifying contours<sup>2</sup> and mystifying.

Going against all this debate, we conducted our analysis of the flexibilization of work and capital on the understanding that it gives rise to renewed forms of commodity production under the command of capital. Cooperative workers, who think they are self-employed, exploit themselves and other workers, who objectively work together under the command of capital, producing more value for most of them. In this way, we have tried to show that the logic of flexibility and its strategies for exploiting overwork imply a new form of labor cooperation, and allied to this, the imposing reaffirmation of collective work for the accumulation of capital today. Flexibility makes it possible for supposedly informal and autonomous work to establish fundamental connections with the process of valorization of value.

When we analyze the cooperatives outsourced by companies - such as the experiences developed in Brazil’s automotive industrial complex - we see the links between the work done in the cooperative and the work done in the company. It is this invisible link that reinforces the cooperation of work, through the combined working day, as the foundation of the capitalist mode of production. However, the mystification of these jobs as autonomous subjects apparently

obscures these central links with capital, to the extent that these workers are seen as sellers of goods who face each other in the sphere of circulation, and not as sellers of labor power who carry out activities in production and negotiate in the sphere of circulation. Many argue that cooperatives are autonomous forms of organizing work and production, but with some systematized analyses we can question this claim. Who determines the conditions and form of production, the workers or capital? Would it be possible to say that work is controlled by the workers themselves or by relations of production external to the cooperative? How is production organized in such a way as to articulate today’s flexible chains of fragmented work? How is cooperation affirmed as a fundamental form of the capitalist mode of production in the cooperative? Various data show that production in cooperatives is a complementary part of the central factory’s production process. The working day carried out in the cooperative is linked to other different working days of individual workers. Thus, we affirm that this type of work reorganizes a “new combined collective worker” and reaffirms the cooperation of partial jobs, through the social power of collective work, as an organism that feeds capitalist accumulation with more value.

2. One of the ideological facets reproduced by cooperative theories is the pursuit of cooperative and joint work between equals, aimed at the well-being of its worker-owners and the equal distribution of benefits to the collective of members. The cycles of production and reproduction of capital, which manifest themselves in the forms of capitalist production and accumulation, reissue anachronistic means of appropriating socially produced wealth. The process of capital domination intensifies in such a way as to elaborate different forms of exploitation and accumulation, since cooperatives are part of this corrosive context. In these terms, the vision of cooperativism and the solidarity economy is rejected, as it exalts working relationships in which pedagogical proposals would manifest themselves as permeated by democratic processes and participation. On the other hand, one of the most exacerbated processes of exploitation is aimed at the worker-owner: self-exploitation. The ideology of the worker being their own boss leads them to take on the work process in the most extreme modes of production, re-editing primary forms of accumulation and production under capitalism, such as family and domestic work. Since working time is one of the foundations for the capitalist’s accumulation of surplus value, the worker-boss intensifies his work by imposing different working hours, based on market requirements, in an attempt to be a competitive company.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In these terms, it can be said that the freedom to exploit labor, which capital has historically sought, is materializing more and more in the present day. It is this predominantly apparent form of capitalist society that makes workers feel like independent, liberated producers, and on the other hand, enables new relationships of buying and selling labor power under the aegis of capital. In our view, this is what makes cooperatives, and other forms of work, the most appropriate ways for the capitalist mode of production to exploit labor today. But it's important to reiterate that the form has changed adjectivally, but the content of exploitation remains substantively unchanged. Therefore, the struggle between the fundamental classes continues to be the stage for the battles that will have to be fought in the arena of history for the development of humanity.

So, as we come to the end of this text, we would also like to point out that the fragmentation resulting from productive restructuring is not unreasonable and undefined. The result of this fragmentation of labor and production relations is a constant threat to workers' li-

ving conditions. These uncertainties, such as precarious work, unemployment and poverty, imply a deterioration in the power of the working class to organize, which results in a fragility, not only in thinking up alternatives for struggle, but also in understanding the real conditioning factors of changes in work and capital. This undoubtedly increases the power of large companies over workers as a whole, which consequently increases the power of capital over labor. The system of protection created in the contradictory movement of conquests and concessions in the class struggle, which served part of the working class, is being dismantled, putting workers in increasingly demeaning conditions. Capital, as a constitutive feature of its history, seeks to place itself as an absolute and independent subject in its relationship with labor. However, this attempt comes up against the other constitutive pole of this relationship, work, which we understand to be made up of subjects who seek to make history, even if it is not under the conditions they determine. With this understanding, our intention is to point out that the possibilities for changing the conditions of exploitation and domination to which work is subjected are posed, solely and exclusively, in

the historical arena of the class struggle.

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