



### Counter-power: A Marxist view — An ontological enquiry

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## Counter-power: A Marxist view — An ontological enquiry

The term ‘counter-power’ is widely used in political debates and social struggles. Scientifically, however, there is no clear distinction between powers and counter-powers. In the academic debate, largely based on methodological individualism, power is mostly conceived as an interpersonal relations, and counter-powers have no specific role, if not as opposing powers. In this paper, I develop an ontology of capitalist power, based on Marx’s critique of capital, and I clarify the role of counter-powers in this ontology. With these lenses, I reconsider critically the debate on power in economics and I discuss the limits of the individualist approach, from neoclassical ultra-liberalism to radical political economics. Finally, I discuss the implications of my ontological enquiry into counter-powers as far as theoretical research and political struggle are concerned.

*Key words:* Power, Counter-power, Marxism, Ontology, Intersectionality

*JEL classifications:* A1, B14, B41

The term ‘counter-power’ is widely used in the general discourse and is one of the keywords of political activism, in particular within some radical left circles. Counter-power, however, is all but an unambiguous concept. The Collins English dictionary defines it simply as ‘an opposing power’. The problem with this abstract definition, however, is that it characterises the *relationship* between powers and counter-powers, without defining any of them, so that the distinction between these

1  
2 opposing terms is only conventional: if one is the power, the other is the counter-power. But which  
3  
4 is which? Without an understanding of the general context in which this opposition occurs there is  
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6 no way to characterize the different nature of its constitutive elements.  
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9 The problem is not merely semantic but ontological. Indeed, as I argue in this paper, to develop a  
10  
11 scientific notion of counter-power, we must first identify the necessary forms of power within a  
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13 system of social relations. To develop such an exercise, I will define the notion of ‘system of  
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15 power’, which refers to 1) the set of necessary forms of power, 2) their reproducing mechanisms  
16  
17 and 3) the tendencies they produce within a decision-making system. Only after having discussed  
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19 these essential elements of a system of power, does a theoretical distinction between powers and  
20  
21 counter-powers become scientifically possible.  
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25 Unfortunately, in mainstream economics and sociology — largely based on methodological  
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27 individualism — power is reduced to an interpersonal relationship between two particular agents,  
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29 taken in isolation. Rather than focusing on the whole structure of the decision-making system which  
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31 gives rise to particular power relationships, this approach try to ascertain if an interpersonal  
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33 relationship has or has not a power content by making abstraction from the rest of the system. This  
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35 apparently innocent methodological choices has severe consequences in the analysis of the forms of  
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37 power of capitalism: firstly, it suggests that power-free relationships can in fact exist in capitalism  
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39 and that power emerges only as a consequence of the asymmetries existing at an individual level;  
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41 secondly, it suggests a mystified conception in which power and counter-powers become in fact  
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43 undistinguishable, as simple opposing powers.  
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48 What Karl Marx (1894, ch. 13) reproached to vulgar economists in their discussion of  
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50 competition applies to mainstream economists in their analysis of power: ‘The vulgar economist  
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52 does practically no more than translate the singular concepts of the capitalists, who are in the thrall  
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54 of competition, into a seemingly more theoretical and generalised language, and attempt to  
55  
56 substantiate the justice of those conceptions.’ Rather than shedding light on the causes of  
57  
58 competition and power, and show the essence of coercion hidden behind the appearances of  
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1  
2 freedom and equal rights, the old and new vulgar economics only try to rationalize the appearances.  
3

4 The forms of power that are necessary for the working and reproduction of a system of power are  
5 properly speaking ‘powers’: as direct manifestations of the structures and mechanisms that govern  
6 the reproduction of the social system, these forms of power are themselves constitutive elements of  
7 the system of power. Beside these necessary forms of power, however, there might exist other  
8 forms of power, which hinder, impede or counter the reproduction and development of a system of  
9 power and which act thus as counter-powers. This distinction — flowing from the relationship  
10 between the forms of power and the structures and mechanisms that govern their working — is the  
11 fulcrum of my ontological characterisation of powers and counter-powers. In a nutshell: powers are  
12 direct expressions of the way a social system works and reproduces itself; counter-powers are  
13 reactions against the forms of coercion embedded in the social system.  
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27 In this article, I develop this ontological enquiry by following a Marxist approach. Although  
28 Marx does not focus directly on the notion of power, his critique of capital shows that capitalistic  
29 reproduction cannot occur without specific forms of power and coercion. In Marx’s conception,  
30 power relations are not merely relationships between isolated individuals but social relations that  
31 are necessary for the working of a given mode of production. This conception suggests to start from  
32 the critique of capitalism, as a system operating with specific historical rules, in order to  
33 characterise its essential forms of social coercion and interpersonal power.  
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43 Different philosophers and economists have investigated Marx’s ontology and methodology  
44 (Lukács 1923, 1975, 1978, Rosdolsky 1977, Gould 1978, Smith 1984, Ollman 2003, Lawson 1997,  
45 2019, Thompson 2019, Bonifati 2020). **I have followed this path by developing an ontology of**  
46 **power in capitalism, based on Marx’s work (Palermo (2007a, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2019)). In**  
47 **these works, however, I do not develop the role of counter-powers.** The goal of this article is to  
48 fill this gap, by introducing explicitly counter-powers and the related notions of counter-  
49 mechanisms and counter-tendencies in this ontology of capitalist power.  
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59 The article is structured in five parts: in the first two, **I summarize and develop the ontology of**  
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2 **power in capitalism, by defining a system of power and characterizing capitalism as a system**  
3 **of power.** Then, I introduce the notions of counter-mechanism, counter-tendency and counter-  
4 power. With this enlarged ontology, I reconsider critically the debate on power in social sciences,  
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6 power. With this enlarged ontology, I reconsider critically the debate on power in social sciences,  
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8 which largely neglects or misinterpret the role of counter-powers. Finally, I discuss some  
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10 implications of my ontological enquiry into counter-powers as far as theoretical research and  
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12 political struggle are concerned.  
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## 20 1. The ontology of power

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25 In order to develop a general ontology of capitalist power relations, let us begin by building an  
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27 abstract ontology of a system of power in terms of decision theory. In this ontology, empirically  
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29 detectable power relations (those mostly studied in social sciences) are put in relation with non-  
30  
31 observable structures and mechanisms (generally ignored by mainstream economics and sociology).  
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34 Decision theory is the underlying framework of most of the approaches based on methodological  
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36 individualism, but constitutes in fact a broader framework in which social categories can be  
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38 discussed as well. I use it here precisely for these two reasons: first, it facilitates comparisons with  
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40 neoclassical economics;<sup>1</sup> second, it allows developing the relations between individual and social  
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42 categories.<sup>2</sup>  
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50 <sup>1</sup> Although commonly used in the academic field, the phrase 'neoclassical economics' is far from precise.  
51 Different authors have insisted on various theoretical aspects to define the neoclassical school, such as  
52 marginalism, the role of mathematics, the axiomatic method, the concept of equilibrium, the individualistic  
53 perspective, subjectivism, deductivism and a particular conception of human rationality, but none of these  
54 elements is unanimously recognised as a founding characteristic of this school of thought. Even the distinction  
55 between mainstream and heterodox economics is not generally developed in ontological or methodological terms  
56 but primarily on the basis of the substantive theories and normative prescriptions that follow from them, making  
57 it difficult to speak properly of alternative schools of thought. Historically, however, the term 'neoclassical' was  
58 introduced by Thorstein Veblen (1900) more to highlight the methodological and ontological tensions within the  
59 discipline of economics at the end of the 19th century than to indicate a precise school of economic thought.  
60 Veblen's critique in fact focuses on the ontological assumptions (Veblen uses the term 'metaphysics' but  
essentially with the same meaning with which I speak of 'ontology' in this article) of the development of the new

### 1.1. Power to act and power over somebody

The main forms of power studied in the literature are ‘power to act’ (PTA) and ‘power over somebody’ (POS). The former is defined by the ‘decision-making set’ of the agent, which exhaustively describes its potential courses of action. The latter occur when an agent is able to modify another agent’s decision-making set or her choice criteria within it.

### 1.2. Constraining structure

The relation between the PTAs of different agents can take different forms in terms of set theory. In some cases, the PTA of agent  $A$  might be a subset of the PTA of agent  $B$  ( $B$  can undertake actions that are precluded to  $A$ ). This asymmetry may take different forms and degrees and may regard few agents in the decision-making system or all of them. When such an asymmetry exists, at whatever degree, the structure of the decision-making system is essentially a ‘constraining structure’: even if  $A$  has no direct power over  $B$ ,  $A$  is structurally less constrained than  $B$ .

Unlike PTA and POS, which are attributed to particular agents, the constraining structure is social in nature. The existence of a constraining structure is a signal of the existence of objective forms of social coercion, which can be grasped only by an inspection of the whole decision-making

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tools of analysis and on the transformations of economic theory itself in this new conception. According to Tony Lawson (2013), the term neoclassical thus expresses a tension between method and ontology and is used by Veblen to emphasise the elements of continuity and departure from what Veblen considers classical thought. The neoclassical school, in this sense, is characterised by possessing a certain ontological awareness while still following a methodology that is inconsistent with the general features of this new ontology. Given the imprecision of the term and given the problems arising from modern attempts to characterise neoclassical economics without critically investigating its ontological underpinnings, Lawson suggests abandoning the term altogether. In this article, consistent with Veblen's approach and Lawson's considerations, I use the term neoclassical on primarily ontological grounds to identify the body of theory that has developed from the general economic equilibrium model, through theoretical extensions and modifications of the model's axioms and assumptions, within the same general conception of economics and economic theory implicit in the basic model. This characterisation comes close to Joseph Stiglitz's (1993) definition of post-Walrasian economics as a coherent extension of the Walras model and its underlying conception. Contrary to the conclusion of the Nobel laureate in economics, however, I believe that what unites this set of theories is precisely the weakness of the underlying ontology (Palermo 2016c).<sup>2</sup> Bartlett (1989) develops an organic conceptualization of power by means of decision theory. His goal is to formally include power in neoclassical modelling. As a consequence, he remains attached to an interpersonal conception of power and develops it within the flat neoclassical ontology, in which there is no room for social coercion.

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2 system and which remain invisible when the analysis is developed on single interpersonal relations  
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4 in isolation.  
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### 8 9 *1.3. Conditioning structure*

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13 The set of individual goals and their interdependencies define the subjective elements of the  
14 decision-making system. Like in the discussion of objective constraints, these subjective elements  
15 can take different forms. In some cases, *A*'s and *B*'s goals might be the product of different  
16 subjective preferences. In other cases, they might express similar or even coincident preferences.  
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18 This similarity may be more or less pronounced and may regard few agents in the decision-making  
19 system or all of them. When such a uniformity in preferences exist, the structure of the decision-  
20 making system is essentially a 'conditioning structure'.  
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29 Like the constraining structure, the conditioning structure is a social entity, in the sense that its  
30 goals conditioning is not necessarily attributable to any specific agent but is a general feature of the  
31 decision-making system. Like the constraining structure, it is also objective, for its existence is an  
32 objective quality of the decision-making system. Taken together these structures express the general  
33 (objective) asymmetries and (subjective) homogeneities in the decision-making system. As the  
34 constraining structure signals the existence of objective forms of social coercion, the existence of a  
35 conditioning structure is a signal of the existence of subjective forms of social coercion.  
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### 48 *1.4. Coercing mechanism*

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52 When the constraining structure or the conditioning structure remains relatively stable in time, the  
53 problem arises of discovering the mechanisms that regulate its reproduction and evolution. In order  
54 to reproduce a general asymmetry in the decision-making system, these mechanisms necessarily  
55 involve some general form of coercion. They are thus called 'coercive mechanisms'.  
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2 'Social coercion' is the combination of either a constraining or a conditioning structure and the  
3 mechanisms that reproduce it. Although both these structures are objective, the resulting forms of  
4 social coercion can be classified as objective in the first case — when coercion operates via  
5 objective constraints — and subjective in the second one, when it operates via subjective goals.  
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10 In both cases, social coercion is dynamic in nature. It does not reflect simply a general  
11 asymmetry and/or homogeneity in the decision-making system in a point of time, but an asymmetry  
12 and/or homogeneity that is constantly reproduced over time. It can be grasped only by looking at  
13 the decision-making system globally and dynamically.  
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### 20 21 22 *1.5. System of power*

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27 When a decision-making system is characterized by a constraining and/or a conditioning structure  
28 and some coercing mechanisms reproducing it, it is a 'system of power'.  
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31 In a system of power,  $A$ 's PTA and goals can be influenced by completely different factors: in  
32 one case, they can be (partly) controlled by  $B$  via a direct relation of POS; in another case, they can  
33 be influenced by the tendencies caused by the coercing mechanisms that govern the evolution of the  
34 whole system of PTAs and goals, without any relation of POS. However, if the result is the same set  
35 of concrete decisions, then the difference between the two cases is only formal, not substantial.  
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43 This suggests that the analysis of power cannot be reduced to the study of POS, for if two agents  
44 are part of a system of power, their asymmetric PTAs and homogeneous preferences can be  
45 systematically reproduced by impersonal structures and mechanisms without necessarily giving rise  
46 to relations of POS. This suggests also that, in a system of power, POS does not represent an  
47 essential form of power in the decision-making system but is only a manifestation of the general  
48 forms of social coercion that govern the overall reproduction of PTAs and POSs.  
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57 Let us now see how these abstract definitions apply to the capitalist mode of production.  
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## 2. The ontology of capitalist power

Although Marx did not develop any independent treatment of ontological issues, his choice to focus on categories such as production and reproduction of human life is the result of a materialist conception of social reality. Labour is the central element in this ontology: ‘It is an eternal nature-imposed necessity, without which there can be no material exchanges between man and Nature, and therefore no life’ (Marx, 1867, ch. 1).

Lukács (1978) distinguishes three ontological levels, which historically could not develop other than in sequence: material or inorganic being, organic life and social reality. Each ontological level is the precondition for the development of the subsequent one and imposes its laws on it. Firstly, organic life develops as a consequence of a particular development of the inorganic reality. In this process, biology develops its own laws of development but these laws cannot clearly violate the laws of physics. In the same way, the subsequent development of the social realm is the product of a certain development of organic life and is embedded in the laws of organic and inorganic development. Social reality, however, differs from the other levels of reality in one essential respect: due to their ability to perform labor, humans can define goals and try to govern the processes they manipulate. Like the other ontological spheres, the social realm is governed by autonomous forces; unlike them, its existence incorporates a form of intentionality in human action, which interacts with the physical, the biological and the social laws (Lawson 1997, 2019).

Labour, in Marx’s conception, is conceived of as purposeful human activity (Smith 1984). According to Marx (1845-46, ch. 1), ‘(Men) begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence’. In this way, they also start producing their actual material life: not only do they intentionally transform objects given by nature or modified by past labour, they also transform themselves. The relations among individuals becomes dependent on the division of labour in the production process, and human nature itself becomes dependent on the

1  
2 mode of production prevailing in society. Human consciousness is ‘a late product of this material  
3  
4 ontological development’ (Lukács 1975, p. 23).  
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6 In capitalism, the product of labour appear in the form of commodities and the latter acquire the  
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8 character of fetishes: ‘a definite social relation between men ... assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic  
9  
10 form of a relation between things.’ (Marx, 1867). The ability to work — labour power— becomes  
11  
12 itself a commodity and workers lose progressively any awareness of the social character of their  
13  
14 labour. Commodity fetishism and labour alienation are therefore part of the same process, which  
15  
16 starts with the divorce of the producer from the means of production and opens the way to the  
17  
18 commodification of labour power. Alienation has many faces in capitalism but they are all  
19  
20 expression of the general lack of control — by the single worker, as well as by the whole society —  
21  
22 over the purposes of labour (Gould 1975, Ollman 1977, Bonifati 2020).  
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26  
27 This raise the ontological issue of ‘freedom’, as the real possibility to consciously govern the  
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29 process of satisfaction of human needs on a social basis (Hartmann 1975, Gould 1975, Lukács  
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31 1978, Kolakowski 1978, Smith 1984, Thompson 2017, 2019, Ollman 2012, Bonifati 2020). In  
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33 capitalism, this possibility is precluded by its internal laws, which put capital needs before human  
34  
35 ones, and transform capital accumulation into the very end of human society. A process towards  
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37 real freedom, in this ontological framework, is impossible without the conscious re-appropriation by  
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39 the workers of the control of the labour process and without adequate procedures to define societal  
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41 goals.  
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45 With these ontological premises, let us examine the entities that characterize the capitalist system  
46  
47 of power.  
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### 51 52 53 54 55 *2.1. Purchasing power, authority and market power* 56 57 58 59 60

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2 Purchasing power exists in all societies based on private property and the market. In capitalism, the  
3  
4 central role of private property and the market makes purchasing power the essential form of  
5  
6 economic PTA. It is determined by the distribution of property rights and the array of prices, which  
7  
8 define the budget constraints of each agent. In general terms, an agent's decision-making set defines  
9  
10 what she can and cannot *do*; in market relations, purchasing power defines what she can and cannot  
11  
12 *buy*.  
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16 The quantitative differences between agents' purchasing power are a measure of the existing  
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18 asymmetries of PTA in the economic sphere.  
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21 POS takes different forms in production and in circulation: in production, it takes the form of  
22  
23 authority relations; in circulation, that of market power.  
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26 Although the worker and the capitalist meet in the market on the basis of equal right (but with  
27  
28 asymmetric purchasing power), the fact that one sells labour power and the other buys it produces a  
29  
30 direct relation of POS between them in the process of production. This power relation in production  
31  
32 is not caused by an unequal exchange in the sphere of circulation, but is rather the consequence of  
33  
34 the exchange of this peculiar commodity — labour power — which involves human beings directly  
35  
36 (Braverman 1974; Marglin 1974, 1975; Edwards 1979).  
37

38  
39 In circulation, an agent can influence the action of others only by having some control over the  
40  
41 price system. Market power is thus the economic form of POS in this economic sphere. It is defined  
42  
43 as the power of the seller [buyer] to fix the price above [below] the price fixed by competitors. This  
44  
45 form of economic power is not specific to capitalism; it is rather a potential feature of all systems  
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47 based on market exchange. The specificity of capitalism is rather in the tendencies towards capital  
48  
49 concentration and monopoly, which progressively increase the role of POS in the market.  
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51  
52 By considering authority and market power as detached from the general structures and  
53  
54 mechanisms of capitalism, they appear as mere theoretical possibilities, not as empirical  
55  
56 manifestations of the essential forms of coercion of this mode of production. This appearance is  
57  
58 reinforced by the fact that there is no rigid empirical law in their historical development since  
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1  
2 empirical forms of power are governed by the interaction of different coercing mechanisms. Only  
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4 when these forms of power are put in relation with these coercing mechanisms, can they be grasped  
5  
6 as necessary manifestations of these essential ontological entities. Apparently, authority and market  
7  
8 power are unnecessary both theoretically and empirically. Yet, they play an essential role as effects  
9  
10 of the social structures and mechanisms that govern production and exchange in capitalism.  
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13 Obviously, both authority and market power, as forms of economic POS, presuppose purchasing  
14  
15 power, as a form of economic PTA. In order to have authority in production or market power in  
16  
17 circulation, one must first have purchasing power, for the obvious reason that without the power to  
18  
19 buy, one clearly cannot buy labour power, or any other commodity, at whatever price. The problem  
20  
21 now is to explain how purchasing power on the one hand, and authority and market power on the  
22  
23 other, are continuously transformed into one another and how they reproduce the constraining  
24  
25 structures of this mode of production.  
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## 32 *2.2. The class structure of capitalism*

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36 In capitalism, the quantitative asymmetries in the distribution of purchasing power produce a central  
37  
38 qualitative asymmetry: on one side, there are people that, given their (lack of) purchasing power,  
39  
40 must *sell* their labour power; on the other side, other people, thanks to their purchasing power, can  
41  
42 *buy* this labour power and make a profit from it. This is the essential constraining structure of  
43  
44 capitalism.  
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48 Bourgeois economists can adopt methodological individualism for theoretical or ideological  
49  
50 convenience and explain everything starting from the isolated individual. But capitalism is  
51  
52 essentially a class based system: no classes, no stable sellers and buyers of labour power, no  
53  
54 capitalism.  
55  
56

57 A general feature of all class societies is exploitation. Exploitation might occur through different  
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59 mechanisms: in the feudal system, the direct power relation of the lord over the worker assures that  
60

1  
2 a part of the crop produced by the latter goes to the former. In capitalism, this relation is mediated  
3  
4 by the market and does not necessarily involve direct interpersonal power relations. Here,  
5  
6 exploitation occurs through social coercion. These form of coercion may be analysed in different  
7  
8 ways but a theory of capitalist power without social classes is a contradiction in terms. It equals to  
9  
10 assume that social classes – the cause of exploitation of one part of society over another – have  
11  
12 nothing to do with the mechanisms that force the members of one class to work for the members of  
13  
14 the other class.  
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17  
18 Social coercion takes the form of ‘domination’ when, beside the economic asymmetry, the  
19  
20 intentional action of agents is routinized and internalized, so that even the essential asymmetry is  
21  
22 accepted as valid by the agents on both side of the relation (Thompson 2017). In a system based on  
23  
24 formal freedom and equal rights, this subjective transformation of the individual is a necessary  
25  
26 element of the reproduction of class relations. Exploitation cannot occur without forms of  
27  
28 domination.  
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31  
32 In capitalism, exploitation takes the form of a social relation between capital and the working  
33  
34 class. This entails a form of social coercion, mostly indirect, operating through the asymmetric  
35  
36 distribution of purchasing power in society, which brings a class of persons to work (voluntarily)  
37  
38 for another class of persons. Individual freedom takes here a very peculiar form: the workers is free  
39  
40 in a ‘double sense, that as a free man he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity,  
41  
42 and that on the other hand he has no other commodity for sale, is short of everything necessary for  
43  
44 the realisation of his labour-power” (Marx 1867, ch. 6). If he does not like the capitalist that  
45  
46 exploits him, he can always look for another capitalist willing to exploit him better.  
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49  
50 Abstractly, private property and the market might exist without class divisions. Class monopoly  
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52 of the means of production, however, is not a historical accident. It is instead the condition for the  
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54 emergence of wage labour and the development of new institutions functional to this new mode of  
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56 exploitation, with its associated forms of domination.  
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1  
2 The asymmetric distribution of purchasing power in society is a necessary condition for the  
3  
4 working and reproduction of the capitalist system. Notwithstanding the never-ending dreams of the  
5  
6 bourgeois economist attached to egalitarianism, with a really symmetrical distribution of purchasing  
7  
8 power, capitalist production would not even begin.  
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### 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 *2.3. The capitalist superstructure* 17 18 19

20 According to Marx's historical materialism, individuals are free to act within the existing social  
21  
22 context, but are conditioned in their very consciousness by the mode of production of their material  
23  
24 life (Marx 1859, preface; Marx and Engels 1845-46, Part 1). This means that subjective values and  
25  
26 interpretative frameworks, like objective constraints, are influenced by the forms of social  
27  
28 interaction.  
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31  
32 As we have seen, the voluntaristic element is integral part of all social ontology and, in  
33  
34 capitalism, it is part of the reproduction of class relations. The evolution of these subjective element  
35  
36 however, can be fully grasped only by investigating the so called superstructure of capitalist society,  
37  
38 which includes the culture, ideology and norms that govern social interaction, social institutions, the  
39  
40 political system, the state and the overall society's governing apparatus.  
41  
42

43 The formation of individual values and beliefs and the development of cognitive interpretative  
44  
45 frameworks are complex processes, dialectically related to the evolution of class relations. In these  
46  
47 processes, the superstructure legitimizes the base and contributes to its material reproduction. It  
48  
49 creates the conditions in which the relations of production appear acceptable and 'natural' to all the  
50  
51 members of society, even though they are objectively in the interest of the ruling class only. Once  
52  
53 this social asymmetry is incorporated in the norms and habits of social interaction, subjects tend to  
54  
55 accept it as valid, just because the domination relation gets rooted in the cognitive and evaluative  
56  
57 capacities of their agency (Thompson 2017). This process of 'reification' is an important element of  
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1  
2 stability in the functioning and reproduction of the essential social asymmetry of capitalist  
3  
4 interaction: ‘Just as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically  
5  
6 on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more  
7  
8 fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man’ (Lukács 1923, ch. 4). When the  
9  
10 ruling class not only de facto imposes its rules and values, but also commands strategically the  
11  
12 moral, ideological and political terrain of society that allows these rules and values to be peacefully  
13  
14 accepted by the other classes, Antonio Gramsci (1929-35) speaks of ‘hegemony’.  
15  
16

17  
18 In this process, human intentionality is shaped by the institutional context in such a way to  
19  
20 incorporate the norms and practices of social domination. Subjective values and interpretative  
21  
22 frameworks — the basic elements that lead to define individual goals — are not at all the result of  
23  
24 autonomous processes originating in the mind of the isolated individual. They develop instead in  
25  
26 social interaction and are moulded by the laws that govern social relations.  
27  
28

29  
30 On the other hand, superstructural developments can also enter in contrast with the mechanisms  
31  
32 of reproduction of the economic base. Gramsci (1929-35) has carefully studied the role of  
33  
34 superstructural powers and how to develop them for revolutionary goals. He discusses both the  
35  
36 class nature of culture, education and ideology and their role in the reproduction and evolution of  
37  
38 class relations. He shows that this dialectical relation is not mechanic or predetermined but is  
39  
40 instead part of an open process, in which self-reinforcing coercive tendencies can be contrasted  
41  
42 concretely by organized conscious action and practices of social struggle.  
43  
44

45  
46 Gramsci (1949, ch. 1) explains that ‘All men are intellectuals’ — since ‘There is no human  
47  
48 activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded’ — but... ‘but not all  
49  
50 men have in society the function of intellectuals’. He identifies two types of intellectuals: traditional  
51  
52 ones — professional thinkers, such as men of letters, philosophers, artists — who simply take the  
53  
54 views of the ruling class for granted and therefore, in their concrete work, can only help rationalise  
55  
56 and develop it; and organic ones — not really characterized by their profession — who consciously  
57  
58 direct the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong. The development of  
59  
60

1  
2 hegemonic organic intellectuals, working on behalf of the capitalist class to intentionally shape the  
3  
4 political, moral, social and cultural agenda, is facilitated by the economic asymmetry in class  
5  
6 relations. The problem, for Gramsci, is thus to create a new stratum of organic intellectuals within  
7  
8 the proletariat. Its role is to contrast the hegemony of the ruling class by developing critical  
9  
10 awareness between the masses, by putting into question — rather than passively accepting — the  
11  
12 value-systems incorporated in capitalist institutions, and by developing an alternative systematic  
13  
14 and coherent worldview. The mode of being of such an organic intellectual consists in active  
15  
16 participation in practical life within the masses and in social struggles, as material base from which  
17  
18 developing the feelings and the instances of the working class and the social movements. Only such  
19  
20 an intellectual can play a revolutionary role against the intrinsic conservatory function of traditional  
21  
22 intellectuals.  
23  
24  
25

26  
27 But, of course, this process does not develop out of class relations, but within them, with open  
28  
29 clashes between different class cultures and practices. Gramsci's revolutionary strategy insists on  
30  
31 the role of the superstructure to force transformations in the base as well: the struggles in the  
32  
33 cultural, political and ideological spheres are an integral part of class struggle and a tool to  
34  
35 transform also the material asymmetries in the economic base and subvert capitalism. But it is clear  
36  
37 that if these struggles remain at a superstructural level, without radical transformations in the  
38  
39 material base, their revolutionary content will remain only formal and their concrete effects will be  
40  
41 limited.  
42  
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49

#### 50 2.4. *Competition*

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52  
53

54 The main mechanism that regulates the reproduction of class relations in capitalism is  
55  
56 'competition'. Competition is born with the market, but becomes the specific reproducing  
57  
58 mechanism of capitalism only with the birth of the *labour* market: the existence of competition is a  
59  
60

1  
2 consequence of private property and the market, but it is only with the full development of capital  
3  
4 that it becomes the general coordinating and coercing mechanism of this mode of production.  
5

6 The development of capital and the development of competition describe the same historical  
7  
8 process. This process has not created exploitation but has rather transformed pre-existing class  
9  
10 societies and their modes of exploitation, by placing them in a capitalist framework regulated by  
11  
12 capital and competition.  
13  
14

15 Competition operates as the invisible hand of capital. It regulates the relations between  
16  
17 individual capitals and individual workers by enforcing the general laws of capital (Rosdolsky  
18  
19 1977; Pilling 1980; Heinrich 1989; Smith 1990; Moseley ed. 1993; Arthur 2002; Moseley and Smith  
20  
21 eds. 2015, Palermo 2017). Logically, these laws — which include exploitation — exist before  
22  
23 competition. Competition simply enforces them in the concrete process of capital accumulation, by  
24  
25 guiding individual action along the process of capitalist exploitation. The scientific problem is that  
26  
27 these laws are invisible in the reign of competition and can be discovered only by an analysis of the  
28  
29 whole capitalist system of power.  
30  
31  
32

33  
34 In general terms, ‘competition is the completest expression of the battle of all against all’ (Engels  
35  
36 1845, ch. 3). In a class society, this battle ‘is fought not between the different classes of society  
37  
38 only, but also between the individual members of these classes’. This battle, between and within  
39  
40 classes, regulate wage dynamics, unemployment and the profit rate.  
41  
42

43 For the working class, the result is a tendency of the wage towards the subsistence level and a  
44  
45 structural surplus population with respect to the needs of capital valorisation, the ‘industrial reserve  
46  
47 army of labour’ (Marx 1867, ch. 22). Although social mobility is not precluded at individual level,  
48  
49 competition ensures that, globally, all individual processes reproduce a class of propertyless  
50  
51 persons, in need to sell their labour power. This is the essential mechanism of social coercion that  
52  
53 keeps the exploitative process in motion.  
54  
55

56  
57 For the capitalist class, the struggle between individual capitals leads capital to concentrate  
58  
59 (towards both progressive accumulation and centralisation processes). Monopoly and market  
60

1  
2 concentration are not simple possibilities in capitalism but necessary consequences of the working  
3  
4 of the competitive mechanism. At the same time, this process governs the dynamics of the profit  
5  
6 rate. Under the pressure of competition, individual capitals can increase their profit rates by  
7  
8 increasing their composition of capital. To the extent that this process increases the organic  
9  
10 composition of capital in the economy, however, the overall result is a fall in the general rate of  
11  
12 profit. This is the essential contradiction in the development of this mode production.  
13  
14

15  
16 In the process of commodification of society, competition tends to impose itself at a subjective  
17  
18 level as well, in the values and the interpretative frameworks of the individual. As the spectrum of  
19  
20 social relations governed by competition develops and gets cemented in the institutional system,  
21  
22 competition tends to appear as a natural force, a form of interaction that has always existed, a  
23  
24 consequence of human nature. In his polemics with Pierre-Joseph Proudhon who conceives human  
25  
26 nature as natural and everlasting, Marx (1847B, ch. 2, part 3) writes: ‘M. Proudhon does not know  
27  
28 that all history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature’. The problem is not to  
29  
30 explain how God or an immutable human nature produced capitalism, but to understand how,  
31  
32 historically, capital has imposed its logic on society and has led to develop a ‘competitive human  
33  
34 nature’, as the specific human nature of the capitalist mode of production, in the same way as other  
35  
36 modes of production shaped completely different human natures in the past.  
37  
38  
39

40  
41 Historically, the development of competition and the theoretical conceptions that present it as a  
42  
43 rationality benchmark for society took a leap forward with the rise of neo-liberalism. In the name of  
44  
45 competition, international institutions, national governments and capitalists’ associations have  
46  
47 imposed capital mobility, work flexibility and processes of privatisation, liberalisation and  
48  
49 deregulation. At a subjective level, the objective mechanisms of class selections have been hidden  
50  
51 behind the veil of meritocracy and all social asymmetries have been presented as the fair result of a  
52  
53 competition between well-performing and bad-performing individuals. One of the strongest  
54  
55 declaration of war in class relations has so appeared as a natural process, as the highest form of  
56  
57  
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60

1  
2 rationality in human relations. All problems originate in the individual. In society, you get what you  
3  
4 deserve!

5  
6 Today, to go against competition is simply irrational, inefficient and incompatible with  
7  
8 individual freedoms and the common good. In the words of Margaret Thatcher, the iron lady who  
9  
10 knew how to deal with workers and political opponents: 'Tina – there is no alternative'. These are  
11  
12 the terms of the political debate in the era of the neoliberal hegemony.  
13  
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### 20 21 *2.5. The capitalist system of power*

22  
23  
24  
25 The class structure of capitalism and the coercive mechanism of competition make capitalism a  
26  
27 system of power. Within this system, the distributions of PTA and POS are constantly reproduced,  
28  
29 under the rules of capital, enforced by competition. These rules are the means by which capital  
30  
31 imposes the form of social coercion necessary to carry out the process of exploitation.  
32  
33

34  
35 The specificity of exploitation in capitalism is that it does not occur through direct relations of  
36  
37 POS, like in the feudal or the slave systems, but through the social shaping of PTAs into  
38  
39 constraining and conditioning structures regulated and reproduced by competition. This form of  
40  
41 social coercion is an essential aspect of the capitalist ontology of power. It is objective and its  
42  
43 existence does not depend on its concrete detection by some agents of the opposing classes. On the  
44  
45 contrary, it is empirically invisible and detectable only by means of scientific investigation. The  
46  
47 reason of its invisibility is competition. The latter tends in fact to separate individuals and make  
48  
49 them appear as independent from each other. It tends thus to mask their social role, and gives a  
50  
51 coercive social relation the appearance of a free interpersonal relation.  
52  
53  
54

55  
56 A process towards freedom does not arise spontaneously in such a highly developed system of  
57  
58 power. Instead, it needs social consciousness and organization. Freedom can only develop by  
59  
60

1  
2 consciously contrasting the reproducing mechanisms of this system of power and starting to  
3  
4 concretely organise alternative modes of human relations in production and society.  
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### 10 11 3. Counter-mechanisms, counter-tendencies and counter-powers 12 13 14

15 Let me now develop this ontological enquiry by introducing the role of counter-mechanisms,  
16 counter-tendencies and counter-powers. I proceed again by discussing these notions first in an  
17 abstract system of power and then in the context of capitalism.  
18  
19  
20  
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24

#### 25 *3.1. Counter-mechanism* 26 27 28

29 Besides coercing mechanisms, other mechanisms might intervene in the reproduction of the  
30 constraining structure, contrasting the action of coercing mechanisms. The existence of these  
31 mechanisms might be either independent from the general conditions of reproduction of the  
32 decision-making system or an endogenous product of this process, a consequence of existing  
33 coercing mechanisms. Only in this second case, are these mechanisms an integral part of the  
34 ontology of power. Otherwise, they play the role of simple exogenous forces in the decision-making  
35 system.  
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45 When these mechanisms develop as endogenous reactions against coercing mechanisms, they act  
46 as 'counter-mechanisms'. Unlike coercing mechanisms, they are not a logical necessity in this  
47 ontology of power. Their concrete development is only a theoretical possibility created by the  
48 existence of coercive mechanisms. As reactions against other mechanisms, however, counter-  
49 mechanisms presuppose conscious action as well. They do not develop automatically.  
50  
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#### 59 *3.2. Counter-tendency* 60

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4 The general effect of counter-mechanisms is to contrast the tendencies governed by coercing  
5 mechanisms, thereby generating ‘counter-tendencies’. The concrete development of empirical  
6 forms of power is the product of the interaction of these tendencies and counter-tendencies.  
7  
8  
9

10  
11 Marx (1894, part 3) provides a clear example of this interaction in his discussion of the ‘the law  
12 of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall’. First, he analyses ‘the law as such’ (ch. 13): the main  
13 force that constantly pushes the profit rate down. Then, he discusses the ‘counteracting influences’  
14 (ch. 14): the set of contingent forces that might contrast or reinforce the law as such. Finally, he  
15 makes a synthesis of the two and move to the ‘exposition of the internal contradictions of the law’  
16 (ch. 15). It is this dialectical relationship between the main forces that interact in the economy that  
17 explains the concrete dynamics of the profit rate. It would be nonsensical to try to confirm or  
18 discard Marx’s theory by means of econometric analysis of the actual dynamics of the profit rate:  
19 the law as such never operates in isolation. Marx’s method, on the contrary, explains why the profit  
20 rate reacts in a particular way in some circumstances and in different ways in other circumstances  
21 but in no case can escape its general law.  
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36 Consider an object falling from the sky. Its trajectory is first of all conditioned by gravitation.  
37 Many other factors can hoverer intervene as well: the wind, air density, material obstacles or an  
38 engine, if the object is for instance an airplane. The resulting trajectory is a combination of all these  
39 elements: it can have infinite paths but all of them lead to the ground.  
40  
41  
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### 48 *3.3. Counter-power*

49  
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52 Whereas coercing mechanisms tend always to reproduce the symmetries in the constraining  
53 structure, counter-mechanisms generate forms of power, which might either weaken or strengthen  
54 these asymmetries. Only the former are properly ‘counter-powers’, the latter can instead be called  
55 ‘reinforcing-powers’.  
56  
57  
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1  
2 Notice that some forms of power might reinforce the structural asymmetry along one dimension  
3  
4 of the decision-making system and act against asymmetry along another dimension, thereby  
5  
6 incorporating de facto both the characteristics of counter and reinforcing-powers.  
7

8  
9 Counter-powers do not simply attenuate the forms of social coercion in the decision-making  
10  
11 system, but constitute also an internal dynamic element, a potential cause of instability, which  
12  
13 might eventually lead to the internal crisis of the system of power.  
14

15  
16 This aspect of counter-powers can be discussed by referring to the notion of positional powers  
17  
18 developed by the Cambridge Social Ontology Group. Tony Lawson (1997, 2012, 2019) has  
19  
20 developed a theory of social positioning, in which rights and obligations are associated with “social  
21  
22 positions” and, as such, are ‘positional powers’. In this conception, social phenomena are  
23  
24 reproduced and transformed through collective practices enabled by positional powers. At the same  
25  
26 time, these practices reproduce and transform the existing positional powers (Martins, 2022).  
27  
28

29  
30 In a system of power, positional powers are defined by the constraining structure. As such, they  
31  
32 are essential elements of the system of power. Counter-powers, by contrast, do not exist as products  
33  
34 of the system of power, they must be created. Only once they have been created and  
35  
36 institutionalized through collective practices, they can be recognized as positional powers.  
37

38  
39 As positional powers, counter powers can be used to improve one’s power position within the  
40  
41 system of power. But counter-powers are a very specific form of positional powers: they can also  
42  
43 aim at transforming the set of rights and obligations, i.e, the system of power itself and its  
44  
45 associated power positions.  
46  
47  
48  
49

#### 50 3.4. Association 51

52  
53  
54  
55 In capitalism, the counter-mechanism *par excellence* is ‘association’: ‘workers of all countries,  
56  
57 unite!’ is the battlecry of Marx and Engels (1848).  
58  
59  
60

1  
2 Like competition, association is better understood as a causal mechanism: a mechanism of  
3  
4 causation of empirical processes, which however is not itself an empirical entity. Different from  
5  
6 competition, this mechanism operates by producing visible forms of collective PTAs. The paradox  
7  
8 is that these counter-powers — which are not even essential entities in this ontology — appear as  
9  
10 the very sources of power, once the coercive role of competition has become invisible. Rather than  
11  
12 counter-powers developing as reaction against capitalist structural coercion, in bourgeois  
13  
14 economics, these PTAs appear as the cause of power in a system of otherwise power-free relations.  
15  
16 In this mystified conception, trade unions are not tools to defend workers in their struggle to reduce  
17  
18 capital coercion and exploitation. They are imperfections in the competitive model, whose  
19  
20 consequences are unemployment and power relations.  
21  
22  
23  
24

25 Association is as old as social life. It plays different roles in different modes of production and  
26  
27 exists since the first forms of primitive communism. With the development of capitalism and the  
28  
29 rise of competition as its general coercing mechanism, its economic role evolves. Association gets  
30  
31 transformed by competition and develops as a reaction against it, as a counter-mechanism. In the  
32  
33 empirical realm, it takes the form of a visible hand, governed by a piece of society, against the  
34  
35 invisible hand of capital, which divides society into isolated individuals: a conscious collective  
36  
37 action against the impersonal mechanism of competition.  
38  
39  
40

41 Like competition, association operates both between and within classes.  
42  
43  
44

### 45 *3.5. Interclass and intra-class association* 46 47 48 49

50 In the relations between classes, association contrasts competition and tends to produce associative  
51  
52 forms in which class conflicts and the asymmetric strength of each class are integrated within the  
53  
54 association. Corporations and other institutional forms finalised to recompose the conflicting  
55  
56 interests between classes are concrete examples of interclass association. Of course, this mode of  
57  
58 managing the conflicting interests between classes is not the end of conflicting interests, but only a  
59  
60

1 way to let them develop without open battles. Interclass association suffocates class struggle and the  
2 explosion of overt class conflicts, by internalising the structural asymmetry between classes within  
3 the associative form. This is why, notwithstanding the appearance of a symmetrical role of all  
4 participants, interclass associations are structurally asymmetrical in terms of their internal power  
5 relations.  
6  
7  
8  
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12

13 Association contrasts competition also within classes. It leads the members of the same class to  
14 cooperate to counter the effects of competition among themselves. Like interclass association, its  
15 social effect is to unite what competition separates.  
16  
17  
18  
19

20 The structural asymmetry in the distribution of PTA and in the way competition operates  
21 between classes influences the way association develops within each class. The possibility to  
22 develop concrete associative forms depends in fact on the strength of competition, which these  
23 associative forms should contrast. Competition for workers is a matter of existence, for capitalist is  
24 a matter of profit. That is why association is easier on the capitalists' side and more problematic on  
25 the workers' one. As Engels (1845, ch. 5) said, 'competition of the workers among themselves is ...  
26 the sharpest weapon against the proletariat in the hands of the bourgeoisie.' This is also the reason  
27 why capitalist associations generally oppose full employment policies and consumption subsidies,  
28 even if profits would be higher with such policies: simply because they would decrease the pressure  
29 of competition on workers: "The fundamentals of capitalist ethics require that 'you shall earn your  
30 bread in sweat'—unless you happen to have private means" (Kalecki 1943, p. 3).  
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45 The forms of power emanating from capitalists' association strengthen the strong side of the  
46 capital-labour relation and tend to increase the overall coercion of the working class. Association  
47 between workers tends instead to counter the coercing role of competition on the working class.  
48 Through trade unions, political associations and class struggle, workers can overtly fight against the  
49 constraining structure of this mode of production and improve their general relation with capital. In  
50 this sense, these forms of collective power are properly counter-powers, whereas capitalists'  
51 associations are better understood as reinforcing-powers.  
52  
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60

1  
2 Unlike competition, association is not really necessary for the development of capitalism. It may  
3  
4 materialise on one side of the capital-labour relationship, on both sides or on neither of them, but  
5  
6 capitalism goes on anyway. As *Wal-Mart* has demonstrated, capitalism without trade unions is not  
7  
8 only possible, but also very profitable.  
9

10  
11 Association is not only a counter-mechanism within this mode of production but also the tool to  
12  
13 subvert the overall capitalist system of power. As a positional power, it can be used to improve the  
14  
15 conditions of the members of the association, within the existing constraints. As a counter-power,  
16  
17 however, it can also operate to weaken or remove these constraints and transform or even abolish  
18  
19 this system of power based on exploitation by means of competition. Association is both the means  
20  
21 to contrast competition in capitalism and the embryo of the coordinating mechanism of a new  
22  
23 society, without exploitation and its associated forms of social coercion.  
24  
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#### 32 4. Counter-power in the debate on power 33 34 35

36  
37 The notion of counter-power has played no role in the economic debate. Within methodological  
38  
39 individualism, power is identified with its sole POS form. The distribution of PTA in society is not  
40  
41 investigated but taken as given, exactly as the goals of each agent. As Samuel Bowles and Herbert  
42  
43 Gintis (1994) put it, even purchasing power — the most evident form of PTA in the economy — is  
44  
45 not in fact a form of power because power is, by definition, an interpersonal relation. Counter-  
46  
47 powers cannot thus have any room in this ontology, which, by assumption, denies any role to PTA  
48  
49 and to the constraining and the conditioning structures, and which does not even pose the problem  
50  
51 of the mechanisms of reproduction of these structures. At best, in this conception, counter-power  
52  
53 can be conceived as a form of POS in which the power relationship is bidirectional.  
54  
55

56  
57 From the ultra-liberal view of Armen Alchian and Harold Demsetz to the radical approach of  
58  
59 Bowles and Gintis, all debaters has developed the same notion of POS as a consequence of the lack  
60

1  
2 of perfect competition on one side of the market. The exercise is purely theoretical and  
3  
4 imperfections might thus be introduced in each side of the market. The notion of counter-power is  
5  
6 thus meaningless even within this narrow conception based on POS: no matter how, why and where  
7  
8 a power relation develops, its cause cannot be a reaction against another power relation but the lack  
9  
10 of competition.  
11

12  
13 The debate in the field of political science and sociology follows a similar path. Power is defined  
14  
15 on a purely interpersonal basis (Dahl 1957). Even when introducing the so-called second face of  
16  
17 power (Bachrach and Baratz 1962) — the control of the political agenda in decision-making by  
18  
19 particular actors — the analysis remains at a pure interpersonal level. There is no room in this  
20  
21 theoretical framework for collective action and what Stephen Lukes (1974) calls ‘systemic effects’  
22  
23 (outcomes caused by the form of organisation of a decision-making system that are not attributable  
24  
25 to any individual agent).  
26  
27

28  
29 On the other hand, historically, the academic debate on power — developed in the 1960s and the  
30  
31 1970s — took a great stimulus precisely from the counter-powers that were mounting in societies.  
32  
33 Let me discuss this problem first theoretically and then historically.  
34  
35

#### 36 37 38 39 *4.1. The mystified conception of the individualist approach* 40

41  
42  
43 The champions of the liberal view, Alchian and Demsetz (1972), deny the existence of any real  
44  
45 asymmetry between the worker and the capitalist on the ground that their interpersonal relation is  
46  
47 like any other market relation regulated by perfect competition. New institutionalists, like Ronald  
48  
49 Coase (1937) and Oliver Williamson (1975, 1985, 1995, 1996) or Sanford Grossman, Oliver Hart  
50  
51 and John Moore (Grossman and Hart 1986; Hart 1987; Hart and Moore 1988, 1990; Moore 1992),  
52  
53 have criticised this conception, by arguing that intra-firm relations are different from market  
54  
55 relations, since the former replaces competition with authority so that in one case interpersonal  
56  
57 relations involve power and in the other they are power-free. Bowles and Gintis (1988, 1990,  
58  
59  
60

1  
2 1993a, 1993b, Bowles 1985) have instead followed Alchian and Demsetz's idea the capitalist-  
3  
4 worker relation is in fact a simple market relation but have shown that, with some imperfections in  
5  
6 the decision-making context, market relations too might involve power. In a Marxist ontology of  
7  
8 capitalist power, these conceptions are all wrong and misleading. They all seek the cause of power  
9  
10 in imperfections within the firm or within the market but do not understand the nature of neither the  
11  
12 firm nor the market (Palermo 2000, 2007b, 2014, 2016c).

15  
16 Wage labour is not a market relation like the others. As we have seen, the exchange of labour  
17  
18 power, different from the exchange of other commodities, involves interpersonal relations directly.  
19  
20 The PTA that the capitalist obtains in exchange for his money is itself a POS. Clearly, the authority  
21  
22 relationship is never absolute, since, like for any commodity, the utilisation of labour power is  
23  
24 regulated by laws and institutional rules. However, within these norms, the economic POS acquired  
25  
26 by the buy of labour power is absolute, exactly as absolute is the economic PTA conferred by the  
27  
28 ownership of any other commodity.  
29  
30

31  
32 In theoretical models, we can assume imperfections wherever we want and consequently power  
33  
34 relations might go in any direction. As Samuelson (1957, p. 894) put it, 'In a perfectly competitive  
35  
36 model, it really doesn't matter who hires whom; so let labor hire capital.' In real capitalism,  
37  
38 however, it is the capitalist who hires the worker, not the other way round. This implies a power  
39  
40 relation of the former over the latter. This is the 'natural' way power relations flow in capitalism.  
41  
42 When workers gets some power, it is not because imperfections have suddenly moved to the other  
43  
44 side of the market, but because workers organize themselves to fight the power relation they suffer.  
45  
46

47  
48 The cause of the capitalist/worker power relation is not in the interpersonal relation itself, as  
49  
50 methodological individualists presuppose but in the constraining structure of capitalism, which  
51  
52 forces all workers to find a capitalist willing to exploit them. The social asymmetry between  
53  
54 capitalists and workers is the true necessary condition that regulates their interpersonal relationship.  
55  
56 But the latter does not necessarily manifest itself in the form of POS. Although authority is the  
57  
58 typical form in this mode of production based on the commodification of labour power, it is not  
59  
60

1  
2 necessary at all. Disciplining mechanisms are historically variable and the disappearance of  
3  
4 authority in the production process is not *per se* a sign of workers' emancipation through counter-  
5  
6 powers.  
7

8  
9 Consider cooperative enterprises. Here, authority in the workplace is reduced or might even  
10  
11 disappear. But this does not relax the general dependence of workers on capital and their  
12  
13 subjugation to capital laws. The power relation imposed on the worker by the class monopoly of the  
14  
15 means of production become impersonal but do not cease to exist. Labour is no longer disciplined  
16  
17 by a capitalist supervisor, like in the traditional capitalist firm, but by the dynamics of market  
18  
19 prices, which impose cooperatives' workers to self-organise, under capital laws, to pay capital its  
20  
21 tribute. Profit disappears formally, but — as a right to surplus-value conferred by capital ownership  
22  
23 — remains the essential motive of cooperative firms as well. 'This is why even workers'  
24  
25 cooperatives producing commodities for the market will tend inevitably to "become their own  
26  
27 capitalist" — they will be driven by market competition ... to meet the survival conditions  
28  
29 established on the market' (McNally 1993, p. 181).  
30  
31  
32  
33

34  
35 Disciplining labour may be managed by personal or impersonal devices, but workers'  
36  
37 exploitation remains the necessary condition for capitalist production also in this form of enterprise  
38  
39 without authority. Authority in the workplace is simply a manifestation of a social asymmetry, but  
40  
41 the latter, not the former, is necessary to capitalist production. Interpersonal power-free relations  
42  
43 during the labour process cannot cancel the essential coercive condition that makes all workers  
44  
45 equal before capital: their freedom from the means of production.  
46  
47

48  
49 The cooperative firm is not by its nature a counter-power. It can be the case when it develops by  
50  
51 self-organised workers struggling for emancipation but it would be the opposite if it is created by a  
52  
53 capitalist for fiscal or profit related purposes. Cooperatives can act as counter-powers and play an  
54  
55 emancipatory role only in so far as they reduce workers' dependance on capital. The problem is that  
56  
57 the creation of cooperatives, when incentivized by capitalists, often increases, rather than decrease,  
58  
59 the exploitation rate and the general dependance of workers on market conditions, with the result  
60

1  
2 that, without the direct capitalist supervision, workers themselves have to self-impose harder work  
3  
4 and wage-cuts.  
5

6 Some radicals and market socialists following methodological individualism have developed  
7  
8 models of self-managed firms, which in their view might end power relations, alienation and  
9  
10 exploitation (Vanek 1970, Roemer 1982, Bonin and Putterman 1985, Bowles and Gintis 1993c, ,  
11  
12 Jossa and Cuomo 1997, Screpanti 2001, Dow 2003). This is illusion. Workers can do without the  
13  
14 capitalist, but they need capital to start cooperative production. They may acquire it by means of a  
15  
16 loan or by any other means. But, in any case, it will be workers' surplus-value to remunerate  
17  
18 anticipated capital.  
19  
20  
21

22 There exists significant examples of cooperative based systems developed as attempts to  
23  
24 emancipate from capital, like the Mondragon corporation in the Basque country  
25  
26 (Thomas and Logan 1982). In many other cases, however, cooperatives have just developed  
27  
28 because capitalists have preferred externalizing some functions in the production process. Without  
29  
30 an ontological distinction between power and counter-power, this opposing tendencies appear as the  
31  
32 same thing.  
33  
34  
35

36 The political encouragement of cooperatives on purely abstract grounds is very dangerous  
37  
38 politically. In the neoliberal era, the development of cooperatives is not generally a sign of strength  
39  
40 for workers, rather the opposite. The ontological problem with this approach is that, like in all  
41  
42 bourgeois economics, the appearances of interpersonal relations are confused with the essence of  
43  
44 social relations: direct power relations in the workplace are only the appearance, the underlying  
45  
46 form of social coercion is the essence.  
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#### 52 *4.2. Counter-powers and academic radicals*

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58 The 1968 movement has been one of the most advanced radical, revolutionary movement with a  
59  
60 worldwide impact. Feminism, black power, anti-fascism, anti-imperialism, anti-war, anti-

1  
2 nuclearism, anti-prohibitionism, ecologism, homosexuality, peoples self-determination, all aspects  
3  
4 of social life were object of collective critique and political struggle. Counter-powers developed  
5  
6 everywhere: in workplaces, in schools and universities, in the streets and in prisons.  
7

8  
9 Institutionalised power was questioned and overtly fought, in the attempt to change the material  
10  
11 conditions of this class society, discard the hegemony of bourgeois culture and rethink the rules of  
12  
13 social interaction. All the dimensions of the constraining and the conditioning structures were  
14  
15 questioned and transformed.  
16

17  
18 The student movement disrupted academic equilibria and forced a reaction against mainstream  
19  
20 social sciences. In the United states, these processes led, in 1968, to the foundation of the *Union for*  
21  
22 *Radical Political Economics*, which rapidly affirmed itself as a leftist heterodox school accepted by  
23  
24 academic orthodoxy for its rigorous adherence to the neoclassical method.  
25

26  
27 The academic debate on power is to a large extent a product of this context. Forced by the  
28  
29 contradictions of society and by overt political struggles, social scientists have been called to take  
30  
31 position: but of course they did it as academician, by respecting the academic system of power and  
32  
33 its internal hierarchies, according to which only one method is scientifically rigorous: the  
34  
35 neoclassical one. Thus was born this curious theoretical exercise, seeking to rehabilitate Marx  
36  
37 within mainstream economics.  
38  
39  
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41  
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43  
44 Like old revisionisms, neoclassical radicals start by formally declaring sympathy for Marx, but  
45  
46 soon after distance themselves from his method and critique. Rather than developing a theoretical  
47  
48 conception of power that might give coherence to the collective struggles growing in society, they  
49  
50 have developed a framework in which power is good for the individual and collective action is a  
51  
52 deplorable form of monopoly. Students and society demanded critical thinking and attacked  
53  
54 frontally institutionalised powers, including academic hierarchies. 'Radical' teachers and  
55  
56 researchers answered by developing a theoretical framework in which 1) the greatest worldwide  
57  
58 wave of collective struggles appears simply as an irrational, scientifically unfounded, reaction  
59  
60

1  
2 against an only imaginary world of social coercion, 2) the sole rigorous science of power has to do  
3  
4 with isolated individuals fighting for themselves and 3) power is a simple interpersonal relation,  
5  
6 which develops naturally, for personal convenience.  
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## 16 5. Counter-powers, theoretical research and class struggle

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### 21 *5.1. Reorienting theoretical research and political struggle*

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26 The conceptions of capitalism as a system of power or as a set of interpersonal relations suggest  
27  
28 different approaches to economic research and political struggle.  
29

30 In the first conception, research and struggle should be oriented at transforming the system, its  
31  
32 constraining and conditioning structures and its coercing mechanisms. Association and collective  
33  
34 action are the material basis of counter-powers and the ways to contrast competition. Social and  
35  
36 political struggle is the very danger for capitalist power. Worker solidarity is the necessary  
37  
38 condition for workers to consciously take control of production, it is the strength of the individual  
39  
40 worker and the entire working class. Workers' union is the concrete way to transform power  
41  
42 relations in the workplace and in society and, more generally, the union of the oppressed is the way  
43  
44 to contrast and abolish oppression.  
45  
46  
47

48 In the second conception, power is an individual problem. The submission to a power relation is  
49  
50 an individual choice aiming at receiving privileges from the transacting party. It is an individual  
51  
52 strategy that divides, does not unite. Workers' association is only a form of monopoly and counter-  
53  
54 power is an empty concept. The whole theoretical framework is little more than a formalisation of  
55  
56 the *carrot and stick* approach as an everlasting truth, without even seeing it as a class strategy. The  
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59  
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1  
2 old Julius Caesar's maxim *divide ut regnes* is no longer seen as a tyrannic strategy to gain and  
3  
4  
5 maintain power, but as a state of nature to take for granted.  
6  
7

8 The structures and mechanisms that govern actual power relations are rejected on the ground that  
9  
10  
11 they are not empirically detectable. In the ontology implicitly adopted by methodological  
12  
13  
14 individualists, all forms of power have the same nature and the same cause: market imperfections.  
15  
16 The worker's right to a job is on the same ground of the capitalist's right to fire her; the lessee's  
17  
18 right to a home is like the lessor's right to take back his apartment; people's right to defend their  
19  
20 land is equal to the right of a foreign state to militarily occupy it. In this conception, asymmetric  
21  
22 rules or direct actions in defence of the weak party are simply irrational. All rights are the same and  
23  
24  
25 the stronger wins.  
26  
27

28 The distinction between powers and counter-powers, however, is decisive both in economic  
29  
30 research and in political struggle. In the ontology I have developed, power emanates directly from  
31  
32 the structures and mechanisms of capitalism (and can be reinforced by the conscious action of  
33  
34 actors on the dominating side of the system of power); counter-powers arise instead only as  
35  
36 conscious responses by the dominated side. This conceptual difference presupposes a critical view  
37  
38 on capitalism, in which the structures and mechanisms that govern the system are not neutral and  
39  
40 power-free but play instead an asymmetric coercive role.  
41  
42  
43

44 The theoretical and practical separation of powers and counter-powers is the necessary condition  
45  
46 to develop a general and coherent strategy to counter or overturn a system of power. Capitalist  
47  
48 power is shaped by capitalist exploitation and its real danger comes from the struggles that  
49  
50 transform this class relation. Historically, production stoppages, strikes, sabotages, occupations  
51  
52 have been forms of struggle that have weakened capital in its valorisation process. But capitalist  
53  
54 power is not limited to the production and circulation processes. It affects all aspects of social life.  
55  
56 This opens many possibilities for counter-powers. Capital can be attacked and weakened in the  
57  
58 workplace and in society at any stage of the process of commodification and subsumption of social  
59  
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1  
2 relations under capital. But all this needs conscious action and organisation.  
3

4 This is the very challenge in the development of counter-powers. Unlike powers, they do not  
5 develop spontaneously and are generally not welcome by the dominating side when they manage to  
6 be effective. The more they hit the heart of the capitalist system, the more they appear as sources of  
7 inefficiencies and violations of the ‘universal’ values of the bourgeoisie, and, as a consequence, the  
8 harder is their social condemnation and political repression. This is why a struggle within a system  
9 of power is a much more complex issue than a fight between isolated individuals.  
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## 20 5.2. *The end of class struggle* 21 22 23 24 25

26 One of the most dangerous political implications of the individualist approach to power regards its  
27 implications on class struggle: class struggle, in this approach, is simply nonsensical. First, because  
28 class relations do not play any essential role in the neoclassical ontology. Second, because the  
29 notion of struggle is extraneous to this approach to power.  
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35 Let me start from class relations. If Marx and Engels (1848, ch. 1) believed that ‘The history of  
36 all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’, neoclassical economics suggests  
37 instead that it is a history of harmonious societies, evolving according to Pareto improvements,  
38 giving rise occasionally to some interpersonal power relation (Williamson 1975).  
39  
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45 Even collective action becomes a matter of personal convenience in this approach. To quote  
46 again the leaders of radical political economics, employment rents ‘are not only enforcement  
47 instruments, they are also prizes to be won or enhanced through collective action. Collusion by one  
48 group of workers to exclude others on the basis of racial, gender, or ethnic differences, for example,  
49 can increase the employment rents of this group’ (Bowles and Gintis 1990, p. 197). For these  
50 radical thinkers, workers’ union is not in the first instance a tool to resist capital, but a strategy to  
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1  
2 beat other workers in the struggle for the capitalist's carrot. Collective action is not an emancipatory  
3  
4 practice, but a cause of discriminations.  
5

6 Faced with the many overlapping sources of power and coercion flowing from class, racial,  
7  
8 gender and ethnic relations, radicals do not even try to disentangle this complex set of social  
9  
10 relations and, eventually, suggest how to struggle against this multiform oppression. Instead, they  
11  
12 provide a rationalisation of the battle of the have-nots, in which socially discriminated groups find  
13  
14 their enemy in other oppressed groups, not in the general cause of their oppression, namely capital.  
15  
16  
17

18 It would be clearly exaggerated to blame an academic approach for the real transformations of  
19  
20 society. But this is precisely how the direct attacks on wages, centralised bargaining and workers'  
21  
22 rights – including the right to struggle – have been imposed in the last decades in most of the globe:  
23  
24 not as forms of class struggle against the proletariat, but as technical solutions flowing from  
25  
26 individual optimization.  
27  
28

29 The second reason of the disappearance of class struggle from the mainstream approach to power  
30  
31 is the methodological exclusion of struggles in general. Indeed, in this approach, the system is taken  
32  
33 as given and assumed to change automatically towards increasing levels of economic efficiency,  
34  
35 therefore, the possibility to transform it by means of struggles is both illogical and undesirable.  
36  
37  
38

39 In this approach, the problem is to define an optimal strategy *within* the existing norms and  
40  
41 constraints. But the problem of transforming these norms and constraints cannot be posed. Social  
42  
43 asymmetries are not denied, but taken as given, and individual rationality is defined within these  
44  
45 social asymmetries, with the obvious result that revolutionary practises – or, simply, attempts to  
46  
47 modify the existing asymmetries – appear as irrational. *Given* the existing norms and constraints,  
48  
49 this approach therefore suggests that the individual worker should think for herself, go to work  
50  
51 when her colleagues go on strike and, more generally, divide from her comrades and become a  
52  
53 special collaborator of the capitalist. This is workers' rationality for (radical left) neoclassical  
54  
55 economists.  
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1  
2 In social struggles, however, the problem is not merely to take advantage of the contingent  
3  
4 power relations, but also to transform these relations and lay the foundations for more advanced  
5  
6 struggles in the future. In a perspective of social change, rationality does not imply at all the  
7  
8 cowardice of the neoclassical worker, but is defined dynamically, according to a collective strategy.  
9  
10 Even the choice to violate the rules might be perfectly rational if the historical circumstances  
11  
12 require it.  
13  
14

15 A class struggle within the rules is the dream of any conservative. It equals to struggle by ceding  
16  
17 on one front in order to advance on another. This kind of 'struggle' only reinforces the existing  
18  
19 power balance; it hardly disrupts it. Historically, however, improvements in the economic and  
20  
21 social conditions of the working class have often been obtained by breaking the existing rules.  
22  
23  
24

25 Only when the struggling process impedes concretely the working of a system of power, the  
26  
27 latter is forced to deeply transform itself, to change its rules, to redefine the set of duties and rights  
28  
29 in society. Only when the mechanisms of reproduction of a system of power jam, another world  
30  
31 becomes possible. Neoclassical economics may teach us that these struggles are incompatible with  
32  
33 Pareto efficiency. But nobody has ever thought that class societies might be abolished by means of  
34  
35 Pareto improvements.  
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### 41 *5.3. Disentangling counter-powers*

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45 In the concrete development of the capitalist mode of production, the essential forms of social  
46  
47 coercion tend to coexist with other forms of power and coercion, which are not essential for the  
48  
49 capitalist system of power. In real capitalism, the constraining and the conditioning structures are  
50  
51 much more complex than the stylized ones flowing from class relations. Race relations, gender  
52  
53 relations, politics, religion and other objective or subjective social divisions may add new forms of  
54  
55 power and coercion to the essential structures and mechanisms of the capitalist system of power. In  
56  
57 this process, however, they do not act independent on class relations, but are reshaped by them (and  
58  
59  
60

1  
2 contribute to shape them). Therefore, a theory of power that abstracts from the essential coercion of  
3  
4 the capitalist mode of production might be deeply misleading.  
5

6 The last decades have witnessed a strong development of ‘intersectionality’ (Crenshaw 1989,  
7  
8 1991; Levine-Rasky 2011; Bose 2012; Collins 2015; Carastathis, Leong and Smith eds. 2016;  
9  
10 Runyan 2018; Duran 2020). The idea to study how different kind of privileges and discriminations  
11  
12 — based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, physical appearance — interact is the big merit  
13  
14 of this stream of studies. The problem, however, is that this approach tends to deny the different  
15  
16 ontological role of these social dimensions, which opens the way to all sorts of opportunism. As I  
17  
18 have argued, some forms of coercion are necessary for the working of this mode of production,  
19  
20 whilst some others are only historically contingent. Put simply: without class relations there would  
21  
22 be no capitalism, whereas capitalism can work without race or gender discriminations.<sup>3</sup> This does  
23  
24 not make the latter less important. On the contrary, in concrete situations, they can have strong  
25  
26 effects on daily life. The problem is that without a clear ontological hierarchy between essential and  
27  
28 contingent forms of social coercion, a strategy of emancipation along one social dimension can  
29  
30 have contradictory effects on the overall constraining structure.  
31  
32  
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35

36 Let me give a rough example. In the narrative on gender or racial relations, abstracting from  
37  
38 class relations, the premiership of Thatcher in the United kingdom and the presidency of Barack  
39  
40 Obama in the United states — the first woman and the first black to have reached these positions —  
41  
42 are presented as advancements towards egalitarianism and real democracy. If however class  
43  
44 relations are taken into account, it is clear they both come from the upper class and that they have  
45  
46 increased, not reduced, the exploitation and the twofold oppression of British female and North-  
47  
48 American black workers: as workers, and as women or blacks.  
49  
50  
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56  
57 <sup>3</sup> A lucid example of how to develop racial relations in a class framework, inspired to Marx and Gramsci, is developed  
58 by Wilson’s (2011). He criticises progressive scholars who have analysed racial oppression by detaching it from  
59 economic exploitation and discusses the historical development of racism in the US as part of the transformations in  
60 class relations. Within the tradition of intersectionality, Angela Davis (1983) is probably the author that has best  
focused on the relationships between gender, race and class relations not only academically but also as a militant.

1  
2 Historically, the main actors of the conquest of British women's and North American black  
3  
4 people's rights were the feminist movement and the *Black Panther Party*, with the participation of  
5  
6  
7 the proletariat, not Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Obama.  
8  
9

## 10 11 12 13 14 Conclusions

15  
16  
17  
18  
19 The neoliberal cultural hegemony is today one of the main obstacles to the development of counter-  
20  
21 powers with a real anti-systemic vision. Yet, when a growing part of society has nothing to lose but  
22  
23 its chains, counter-powers become a necessity. This is the contradiction of our time: objective  
24  
25 coercion increases with the progressive subsumption of society under capital, but 'radical thinking'  
26  
27 runs after the myth of perfect competition and supposedly power-free relations. **In capitalism,**  
28  
29 **however, competition is not at all the reign of freedom but the coercive mechanism of capital.**  
30  
31 **There can be no process of individual or social liberation without the re-appropriation of the**  
32  
33 **control of the labour process by the workers and without the conscious management of social**  
34  
35 **processes in general.** The history of capitalism shows that when capital is left free to operate, it  
36  
37 tends to subjugate the whole society. But it shows also that anywhere capital imposes its coercive  
38  
39 law, society does not follow academic teachings. It self-organises and defends itself from capital.  
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43

44 With this paper, I have tried to contribute to give theoretical coherence and practical  
45  
46 effectiveness to the many anti-capitalist struggles developing in society, by proposing a general  
47  
48 framework for the analysis and transformation of capitalist power relations.  
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