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# The Immediate Proletariat Against Cognitive Proletarianization

*A Critical Reappraisal of the Concept of Class in Bernard Stiegler's Technological  
Theory*

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## Abstract

This article critically reexamines Bernard Stiegler's theory of proletarianization, which shifts the definition of the proletariat from a material relation to capital to a cognitively incapacitated subject shaped by digital automation. In contrast to this technocentric idealism, the article reaffirms Marx's conception of the proletariat as a structurally dispossessed class, defined by its separation from the means of production and its role in the extraction of surplus value. Drawing on key texts from the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts to Capital, the article argues that proletarianization is not a psychological or epistemological collapse, but a material condition of domination and exclusion embedded in capitalist social relations.

As a counterpoint to Stiegler's reduction of class analysis to epistemic disintegration, this article introduces the concept of the *immediate proletariat*: a class severed not only from ownership and collective organization, but also from the material conditions of resistance and political subjectivity. This concept highlights how digital capitalism intensifies structural exploitation by neutralizing the conditions for collective action. By reconstructing the proletariat as a historically specific material subject, the article reclaims the critical and emancipatory thrust of Marxian theory in the context of digital domination.

### **Keywords:**

immediate proletariat; proletarianization; Bernard Stiegler; historical materialism; digital capitalism; exploitation; structural domination; technological idealism; emancipatory critique

## Résumé

Cet article propose une réévaluation critique de la théorie de la prolétarianisation formulée par Bernard Stiegler, qui substitue à la définition marxienne du prolétariat — en tant que rapport matériel au capital — une

subjectivité rendue impuissante par l'automatisation numérique. Contre cet idéalisme technocentrique, l'article réaffirme la conception du prolétariat chez Marx : une classe structurellement dépossédée, définie par sa séparation d'avec les moyens de production et par son rôle dans l'extraction de la plus-value. En s'appuyant sur une lecture approfondie des textes fondamentaux — des *Manuscrits de 1844* au *Capital* — l'auteur soutient que la prolétarisation ne relève ni d'un effondrement psychologique ni d'un déficit cognitif, mais constitue une condition matérielle de domination et d'exclusion inscrite dans les rapports sociaux capitalistes. Face à la réduction de l'analyse de classe à une désintégration épistémique, l'article introduit le concept de *prolétariat immédiat* : une classe non seulement privée de propriété et de structures collectives, mais aussi coupée des conditions matérielles de la résistance et de la subjectivation politique. Ce concept met en lumière la manière dont le capitalisme numérique intensifie l'exploitation structurelle en neutralisant les médiations nécessaires à l'action collective. En reconstituant le prolétariat comme sujet matériel historiquement déterminé, cet article revendique la puissance critique et émancipatrice de la théorie marxienne face aux formes contemporaines de la domination numérique.

**Mots-clés :**

prolétariat immédiat ; prolétarisation ; Bernard Stiegler ; matérialisme historique ; capitalisme numérique ; exploitation ; domination structurelle ; idéalisme technologique ; critique émancipatrice

## Introduction: Toward a Materialist Critique of Digital Proletarianization

In recent decades, the expansion of digital technologies, pervasive automation, and data-driven cognitive engineering has led several contemporary thinkers to revisit and redefine classical concepts of critical theory. Among these, the notion of the *proletariat*<sup>1</sup>—as the nodal point of class

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<sup>1</sup> The term *proletariat* derives from the Latin *proletarius*, which in the Roman Republic referred to citizens who possessed no property and whose sole function was to produce the next generation. In the nineteenth century, the term entered modern social vocabulary and, in the thought of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, became a structural category within the analysis of capitalism. The proletariat is the class that, through the process of *expropriation*, is separated from the means of production and can sell only its *labour power*. Its condition is not merely an individual experience but an objective position within the relations of production.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifeste du parti communiste* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1848), 14–18.

In *The Class Struggles in France*, Marx emphasized the dialectical relationship between this class and the structural crises of capitalism. The proletariat, by negating *propriété privée* (private property), becomes the force capable of overturning the bourgeois order.

Karl Marx, *Les luttes de classes en France: 1848–1850* (Paris: Gallimard, 1852), 125–133.

In later Marxist tradition, this position was rethought. Antonio Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks*, argues that the proletariat can fulfill its historical role only by becoming the *classe hégémonique* (hegemonic class); that is, by transcending the economic level through the *intellectuel organique* (organic intellectual), it must assume cultural and political leadership.

Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, vol. 2 (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), Q11, §12.

Herbert Marcuse, in *One-Dimensional Man*, sees the conditions of consumer capitalism as leading to the integration of the proletariat into the dominant system. In such a context, resistance may arise from groups outside the traditional class structure.

Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 180–188.

In post-Marxist theories, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, replace the class subject with a chain of *demandes disjointes* (disjointed demands) as the basis of political subject formation. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), 130–146.

contradiction in Marxist theory—has undergone a semantic shift. One of the most prominent figures in this reinterpretation is the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler. In *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, Stiegler moves beyond the classical definition of *proletarianization*<sup>2</sup> as dispossession from the means of production and reframes it as a cognitive and technological experience. Proletarianization, he argues, entails “the loss of biological, technical, and theoretical knowledge as a result of automation and digitalization.”<sup>3</sup>

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Jacques Rancière, in *La mésentente*, conceptualizes the proletariat not as an economic position but as a symbolic one, from which the *sujet politique* (political subject) emerges within the discursive order.

Jacques Rancière, *La mésentente: politique et philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1995), 42–51.

In contemporary readings, Bernard Stiegler, though not using the term *proletariat* explicitly, employs notions such as *prolétarisation* (proletarianization) and *désindividuation* (disindividuation) to describe a new mode of expropriation that encompasses not only the means of production but also memory, knowledge, and the subject’s theoretical capacity.

Bernard Stiegler, *La société automatique*, vol. 1 (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 57–64.

<sup>2</sup> The term *prolétarisation*, referring to the historical process by which individuals are turned into proletarians, was first rigorously theorized in the work of Karl Marx. In *Capital*, he explains this process as one of *expropriation*: the separation of producers from the means of production and their transformation into sellers of labour power. This expropriation is a foundational moment in the emergence of capitalist relations and wage labour.

Karl Marx, *Le Capital*, Livre I (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1867), 717–728.

In the 1920s, the term entered the realm of cultural policy. In the Soviet Union, projects such as the “proletarianisation of science” sought to align knowledge with the values of the working class, although this usage was largely ideological.

M. Brauner, “The ‘Proletarianisation of Science’ in Russia,” *Nature* 108, no. 2704 (1921): 367–368.

At the same time, in French sociology, *prolétarisation* became an analytical tool in labour and epistemological studies. In Western Marxist tradition, the concept evolved beyond economics to encompass psychological and cognitive dimensions. Georg Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness*, treats *prolétarisation* as a precondition for class consciousness—a position from which the entire reification of capitalist order becomes intelligible.

Aaron Jaffe, “Lukács’ Antinomic ‘Standpoint of the Proletariat’,” *Thesis Eleven* 157, no. 1 (2020): 60–79.

In the mid-twentieth century, attention shifted to the impact of mechanized division of labour on skills. Georges Friedmann, in *Le travail en miettes*, interprets *prolétarisation* as the result of declining artisanal expertise and worker autonomy.

Georges Friedmann, *Le travail en miettes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956).

Harry Braverman, in *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, elaborates the notion of *deskilling*, showing how workers are deprived of evaluation, knowledge, and control over their labour process.

Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 112–128.

André Gorz, in *Métamorphoses du travail*, expands this analysis to the mental and affective domains. He argues that late capitalism subsumes not only the body, but also memory, language, and imagination—turning *prolétarisation* into a process of eroding the subject’s creative faculties.

André Gorz, *Métamorphoses du travail* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 35–42.

In non-Marxist philosophy, Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, though not using the term directly, emphasizes a process whereby *labour* (*travail*) overtakes *action*, thereby exhausting political action within material reproduction.

Hannah Arendt, *Condition de l’homme moderne* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1958), 144–151.

In contemporary readings, Bernard Stiegler extends the concept of *prolétarisation* into the psychological and cognitive realms. In *La société automatique*, he argues that the late-capitalist separation from the means of production includes separation from the tools of thought, memory, and desire. In this view, *prolétarisation* is not only economic but epistemic. However, despite its philosophical sophistication, Stiegler’s analysis often avoids direct confrontation with the material and class structures of capitalism, making its relation to classical Marxist formulations contested.

Bernard Stiegler, *La société automatique*, vol. 1 (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 57–64.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *Pour une nouvelle critique de l’économie politique* (Paris: Galilée, 2009), 45.

In this framework, the proletariat is no longer defined by its socio-economic position but rather by its inability to comprehend technical systems; even financial elites may be considered proletarianized if they “no longer understand anything.” Stiegler writes in *The Automatic Society*: “This condition [proletarianization] now extends even to the elites—for instance, Alan Greenspan, who in 2008 admitted that he no longer understood the mechanisms he was supposed to regulate.”<sup>4</sup> This article argues that such redefinition—despite its appearance of novelty—is fundamentally at odds with the core of historical materialism and class analysis. In the Marxian framework, the proletariat is not defined by cognitive deficiency but by its material relation to capital: dispossession, the compulsion to sell labor-power, and a structural role in the production of *surplus value*<sup>5</sup>—that

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<sup>4</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *La société automatique. Tome 1: L'avenir du travail* (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 112.

<sup>5</sup> *Surplus value* is a central concept in Karl Marx's critique of political economy, set in fundamental opposition to both classical and neoclassical interpretations of economic surplus. In the eighteenth-century physiocratic tradition, François Quesnay viewed surplus production as a natural phenomenon derived from land, articulated through the concept of *produit net* specific to the agricultural class, while other classes were considered unproductive.

François Quesnay, *Tableau économique*, ed. Christine Théré and Loïc Charles (Paris: INED, 2005).

In classical economics, Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* understood surplus as the outcome of division of labor and increased productivity. Unlike Quesnay, he recognized industry and commerce as productive, though surplus in this tradition lacked any critical social dimension.

Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan, vol. I (London: Methuen, 1904).

David Ricardo, in *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, analyzed surplus in relation to land rent and diminishing marginal returns, without conceiving profit as the appropriation of unpaid labor.

David Ricardo, *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, ed. P. Sraffa, *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo*, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951).

In contrast to these perspectives, Marx formulated a foundational theory of *surplus value* in Volume I of *Capital*. He showed that the worker under capitalism spends only part of their labor time reproducing the value of their labor power, while the remaining unpaid time accrues to the capitalist. This unpaid surplus, which becomes objectified as dead labor, constitutes surplus value—the foundation of profit, interest, rent, and capital accumulation. For Marx, *surplus value* is the economic form of expropriation and the material mechanism of exploitation. He measures this according to socially necessary labor time, meaning the average time required under specific social conditions to produce a commodity. Marx's detailed analysis of this process appears in Chapters 5 to 9 of Volume I.

Karl Marx, *Le Capital*, Livre I, trans. J. Roy, rev. M. Rubel (Paris: Gallimard, coll. “La Pléiade,” 1983), 247–366.

Later Marxist thinkers expanded this concept. Harry Braverman, in *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, through his analysis of scientific labor management, demonstrated that mechanization in capitalism serves not to reduce labor, but to intensify the extraction of surplus value from living labor. The process of deskilling, for Braverman, represents a rationalized form of domination over labor aimed at increasing the rate of exploitation.

Harry Braverman, *Le travail et le capital monopoliste*, trans. J.-M. Vincent (Paris: Éditions Maspéro, 1976), 64–118.

In neoclassical theory, surplus analysis shifted to class-neutral frameworks such as consumer surplus, and capitalist profit was reframed as the return on investment or innovation. Consequently, surplus value as a mechanism of social domination was eliminated from mainstream economic analysis.

For Marx, however, *surplus value* was not merely an economic phenomenon, but the central node of class conflict, the economic form of domination, and the foundation of capitalist reproduction.

Although Bernard Stiegler does not use the term *surplus value*, his analysis of cognitive exploitation, memory loss, and collective psychic disindividuation can be interpreted as a reconfiguration of the logic of value at a techno-psychological level.

Bernard Stiegler, *La société automatique*, vol. 1 (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 57–64.

is, the difference between the value of labor-power and the value produced by the worker and appropriated by capital. As Marx writes in *Capital*, “Labour-power can appear on the market as a commodity only if, and only insofar as, it is offered for sale by its owner—the person for whom the sale of labour-power is the only means of subsistence.”<sup>6</sup> It is this condition, not any psychological or epistemological crisis, that renders the proletariat the subject of historical contradiction.

From this perspective, Stiegler’s theory, by discarding the class relation and the concept of *exploitation*,<sup>7</sup> reduces the analysis to a matter of understanding, meaning, or subjectivity—an analysis that ultimately illuminates neither the mechanisms of domination nor the horizon of emancipation. As will be argued, proletarianization in Marx’s sense is not a mental deficiency, but a material mechanism in the reproduction of domination within capitalism.

What this article seeks is not merely a critique of a specific narrative of the proletariat but a conceptual rethinking of proletarianization under digital capitalism. Through an analytical link between theoretical framework and empirical insights into platform labor structures, it argues that the elimination of collective organization, the dissolution of mediating institutions, and the technical capture of decision-making have redefined the proletariat: not as a cognitively deficient class, but as one severed from the possibility of material agency. This condition is theorized here

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, *Le Capital, Livre I*, trans. J. Roy, rev. M. Rubel (Paris: Gallimard, coll. "La Pléiade," 1983), 217.

<sup>7</sup> Exploitation is a foundational concept in Marxist critique of political economy, referring to the structural appropriation of unpaid labor by capital. Etymologically rooted in the Latin *exploitatio*, meaning “utilization,” the term acquired a critical theoretical significance in the nineteenth century through the work of Karl Marx. In *Capital*, Marx conceives of exploitation as a material relation inherent to the capitalist mode of production. The worker sells labor power, but the wage received merely covers its reproduction. The surplus value created beyond this cost is appropriated by the capitalist. This process is governed by *travail abstrait* (abstract labor) and *temps de travail socialement nécessaire* (socially necessary labor time).

Karl Marx, *Le Capital, Livre I*, trans. J. Roy, rev. M. Rubel (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 243–266.

In twentieth-century Marxist theory, Harry Braverman, in *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, examines exploitation through the lens of managerial control and technical deskilling. He emphasizes how *déqualification* (deskilling) and scientific management transform labor into a measurable, machine-subordinated activity.

Harry Braverman, *Le travail et le capital monopoliste*, trans. J.-M. Vincent (Paris: Éditions Maspéro, 1976), 89–103.

Herbert Marcuse, in *One-Dimensional Man*, expands exploitation into the domains of desire and ideology. He introduces the notion of *besoins faux* (false needs), which are culturally engineered within consumer capitalism to internalize domination.

Herbert Marcuse, *L’homme unidimensionnel*, trans. M. Wittig (Paris: Minuit, 1968), 45–63.

In feminist materialism, Silvia Federici and Maria Mies reinterpret exploitation through the prism of unpaid domestic labor and social reproduction. The household, long excluded from economic theory, is revealed as a site of systemic and invisible exploitation.

Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004), 91–109.

Bernard Stiegler, in *La société automatique*, develops a psychocognitive understanding of exploitation, emphasizing mechanisms like *expropriation de l’attention* (expropriation of attention) and *automatisation de la vie psychique* (automation of psychic life). Here, exploitation occurs not only in labor time but also in the structuring of desire, memory, and subjectivity.

Bernard Stiegler, *La société automatique* (Paris: Fayard, 2015), vol. 1, 137–150.

through the concept of the “immediate proletariat”—a notion that aims to reconstruct the link between class, domination, and technology within contemporary materialist critique.

By introducing the concept of the “immediate proletariat,” this article responds to the growing trend in recent literature that interprets digital labor through psychological, cognitive, or technological categories. In contrast, this article emphasizes the structural rupture between expropriation and the erasure of collective action, showing how the productive class under digital capitalism is deprived not simply through the erosion of skills or understanding, but through immediate and structural mechanisms that eliminate resistance, organization, and political representation. Thus, the “immediate proletariat” functions not merely as a critical rejoinder to cognitive reductionism, but as a theoretical intervention in the reconstruction of the concept of class under digital domination.

Consequently, what this article pursues is not only a critique of a particular redefinition of the proletariat, but a broader rethinking of the conceptual foundations of domination within digital capitalism: an attempt to reformulate the notion of class based on structural exclusion from agency, and to show how exploitation and surplus value extraction under digital capitalism have become more immediate, more technologically mediated, and at the same time less susceptible to organization than ever before. The concept that captures this condition is the “immediate proletariat”: not a subject lacking cognition, but a class severed from the tools of resistance.

This rethinking, while centered on class analysis, is also in critical dialogue with global debates on digital capitalism. Scholars such as Nick Srnicek,<sup>8</sup> Trebor Scholz,<sup>9</sup> and Shoshana Zuboff<sup>10</sup> have each illuminated distinct aspects of platform-based domination—from infrastructural concentration and algorithmic surveillance to new forms of depoliticized participation. Yet, what remains largely absent in these frameworks is the position of class, the logic of value, and the material subjection embedded in production relations. The concept of the “immediate proletariat” is introduced here to re-center this analytical horizon.

Within critical literature on the digital economy, various attempts have been made to reread the concept of the proletariat through the lens of technological configurations. For Ursula Huws, digitalization entails not only the expropriation of productive tools but also of memory, attention, and human communication. Through the concept of the *cybertariat*, she identifies a class of workers

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<sup>8</sup> Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Trebor Scholz, *Platform Cooperativism: Challenging the Corporate Sharing Economy* (New York: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019)

exploited on platforms under precarious conditions, without formal contracts or organizational representation—a condition in which the boundary between labor and life is blurred.<sup>11</sup>

In a similar vein, Christian Fuchs, drawing on Marx's theory of value, shows how social media users, through their participation in content creation and platform interactions, generate unpaid surplus value for digital capitalists. This, according to Fuchs, constitutes a form of *data exploitation*, in which the worker—despite the absence of a formal wage relation—is transformed into a source of surplus value.<sup>12</sup>

## The Proletariat in Marx: From Dispossession to Exploitation

In Marx's theory, the proletariat is neither a cultural or sociological identity, nor a psychological state, nor a metaphor. Rather, it is a determinate position within the material relations of capitalist production. What renders a worker proletarian is not poverty *in itself*, but a structural dependence on the sale of labor-power, a separation from the means of production, and subjection to an exploitative relation governed by the logic of capital accumulation. As previously noted, Marx states in the first volume of *Capital* that labor-power can only appear as a commodity on the market “if, and only if, the worker is compelled to offer it for sale, having no other commodity to sell.”<sup>13</sup> This compulsion is not simply economic—it is a historically specific social relation that defines the proletarian condition.

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx describes the link between the production of value and the negation of human being: “The more wealth labor produces, the more poverty it creates for the worker.”<sup>14</sup> This poverty is not merely material; it signals a process of *alienation*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ursula Huws, *Labor in the Global Digital Economy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014), 2–9.

<sup>12</sup> Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (London: SAGE, 2014), 112–119.

<sup>13</sup> Marx, *Le Capital*, 217.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, *Manuscripts de 1844*, trans. J. Molitor (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1982), 83.

<sup>15</sup> Alienation is a key concept in the modern critical tradition, whose meanings have evolved through Christian theology, German classical philosophy, Marxism, existentialism, and philosophy of technology. In Christian theology, alienation refers to the separation of humanity from the divine essence and the decay of the soul's relation with God due to sin. In a humanistic shift, Ludwig Feuerbach introduces the concept of *projection*: humans transfer their own qualities to the heavens, name it God, and thereby become estranged from themselves. In *The Essence of Christianity*, he writes: “Theology is anthropology projected.” Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1841]), 79–106.

G. W. F. Hegel, in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, discusses *Entäußerung* (externalization) and *Entfremdung* (alienation) as necessary moments in the realization of spirit. For Hegel, consciousness can only return to itself through alienation and recognition in the other.

G. W. F. Hegel, *La Phénoménologie de l'esprit*, trans. Jean Hyppolite (Paris: Aubier, 1941), 104–127.

Karl Marx breaks from the idealist framework and, in his 1844 Manuscripts, discusses economic alienation. He argues that under *travail contraint* (forced labor) and *travail abstrait* (abstract labor), the worker becomes alienated from the product, the labor process, *Gattungswesen* (species-being), and others.

Karl Marx, *Manuscripts de 1844*, trans. Jean-Pierre Lefebvre (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1982), 112–123.

through which the worker becomes estranged from the product of labor, the activity of labor itself, nature, and ultimately from their own species-being. Unlike interpretations that reduce alienation to a crisis of meaning or subjectivity, Marx treats it as a *structural and material* phenomenon—an outcome of the subsumption of *living labor*<sup>16</sup> under capital, not a psychological failure.

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In *Capital*, Marx elaborates on the structural alienation of capitalism: capital, as *travail mort* (dead labor), dominates *travail vivant* (living labor). Social relations appear as commodities, detached from individuals, and consciousness is subjected to market logic.

Karl Marx, *Le Capital, Livre I*, trans. J. Roy, rev. M. Rubel (Paris: Gallimard, coll. «La Pléiade», 1983), 111.

Georg Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness*, extends alienation to the level of consciousness: in *Verdinglichung* (reification), human relations appear as objects, and the subject loses the ability to recognize social relations.

Georg Lukács, *Histoire et conscience de classe*, trans. K. Fol (Paris: Minuit, 1960), 83–110.

Max Weber, in *Economy and Society*, focuses on *rationalisation*: in modern societies, instrumental rationality confines individuals within bureaucratic structures and separates them from lived experience.

Max Weber, *Économie et société*, trans. J. Freund (Paris: Plon, 1971), 956–971.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, interprets alienation ontologically: the subject, faced with the gaze of the other, becomes *objet pour-autrui* (object for the other), and its freedom is denied in this encounter.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 523–547.

Louis Althusser, in *Positions*, rejects the notion of a pre-ideological subject and instead speaks of ideological *interpellation*: the subject is constituted within ideological structures, rendering alienation meaningless in this framework.

Louis Althusser, *Positions* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1970), 96–113.

Herbert Marcuse, in *One-Dimensional Man*, discusses the extension of capitalist domination to language, desire, and the body: *besoins faux* (false needs) replace genuine desires, and the subject dissolves in a one-dimensional world.

Herbert Marcuse, *L'homme unidimensionnel*, trans. M. Wittig (Paris: Minuit, 1968), 19–64.

Gilbert Simondon, in *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, introduces *individuation*, showing that subject and technology co-evolve in a constant process.

Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (Paris: Aubier, 1958).

Bernard Stiegler, in *Technics and Time*, speaks of *perte de l'individuation* (loss of individuation) and *prolétarianisation*. In psychocognitive proletarianization, *mémoires techniques* (technical memories) replace individual memory, depriving the subject of the capacity to organize time, desire, and thought.

Bernard Stiegler, *La Technique et le Temps*, vol. 1 (Paris: Galilée, 1994), 173–204.

Further Reading:

Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Étienne Balibar, *La philosophie de Marx* (Paris: La Découverte, 1993).

Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> The concepts of living and dead labor are foundational to Marxist analysis of capitalist social relations. Karl Marx uses this distinction to explain the antagonistic relationship between human agency and the structure of capital accumulation. *Living labor* refers to the human energy actively engaged in production—the sole source of new value. *Dead labor*, in contrast, is the historical accumulation of this labor, embodied in objects, capital, machinery, and the infrastructures of social reproduction.

Marx argues that capital, as dead labor, must absorb living labor to sustain itself. He famously writes: “Capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor.”

Karl Marx, *Le Capital, Livre I*, trans. J. Roy, rev. M. Rubel (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 254.

Bernard Stiegler reinterprets this distinction in the context of data-driven economies and automation. For him, in contemporary capitalism, living labor is no longer just physical effort but includes memory, desire, and the process of *individuation*. Digital capital, through *mémoire technique* (technical memory), externalizes and controls these elements.

Bernard Stiegler, *La Technique et le Temps*, vol. 1 (Paris: Galilée, 1994), 198–204.

Moishe Postone argues that dead labor in modern capitalism is not only the result of past work but also a structuring force of *temps social* (social time). Capitalism, under the domination of abstract value, produces a

As previously emphasized, for Marx, capitalism is only fully realized when the worker has been separated from the totality of conditions of production—tools, time, skill, and social organization.<sup>17</sup> Within this structure, the worker is dispossessed not only of ownership but also of command over the process of production and social reproduction. Yet this dispossession, contrary to what theorists like Bernard Stiegler suggest, does not equate to cognitive incapacity. It is a historically specific position constituted by relations of production and the telos of capital valorization.

In *Capital*, Marx famously states: “Capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.”<sup>18</sup> This is not a metaphor for aesthetic effect—it articulates the material mechanism through which capital dominates the proletariat. Surplus value is not derived from the worker’s knowledge or ignorance but from the difference between the value of labor-power and the value it produces for capital.

It is precisely this structural relation that grants the proletariat its historical role. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels write: “The proletariat can only exist on a world scale.”<sup>19</sup> This global scope is not due to a universal proletarian consciousness but to the structural simultaneity of dispossession in the global capitalist order. The proletariat is the class that has nothing to lose but its chains—a condition that renders it the potential bearer of emancipatory politics.

In sum, proletarianization in Marx’s analysis is a material, historical, and class-bound process. It begins with dispossession, is consolidated through the structural domination of the labor process, and culminates in alienation from both the product and the activity of labor. If a loss of knowledge or orientation occurs, it is not the cause but the *effect* of this process. Any interpretation that defines the proletariat based on cognitive, media-related, or psychological attributes—rather than on its

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specific historical structure of time that subordinates living labor to its own reproduction.

Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

In the Frankfurt School tradition, Herbert Marcuse contends in *One-Dimensional Man* that with technological advancement, living labor is stripped of its critical potential and reduced to a task devoid of subjectivity within automated and bureaucratic structures.

Herbert Marcuse, *L’homme unidimensionnel*, trans. M. Wittig (Paris: Minuit, 1968), 56–63.

Gilbert Simondon, in his account of *individuation*, argues that humans and technical objects co-evolve through shared processes of formation. Yet the dominance of dead labor obstructs this formative process from within.

Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d’existence des objets techniques* (Paris: Aubier, 1958).

In sum, the distinction between living and dead labor is not merely economic but ontological. In capitalist logic, living labor—source of all value—is always subjected to the objective structures of dead labor. This contradiction underlies the crises of social and historical reproduction.

See also:

Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Bernard Stiegler, *La société automatique* (Paris: Fayard, 2015).

Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx’s Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012).

Andrew Feenberg, *Between Reason and Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1973), 704.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *Le Capital*, 343.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *L’Idéologie allemande*, trad. G. Badia (Paris : Éditions Sociales, 1985), 76.

position in the relations of production—breaks from class analysis and lapses into theoretical idealism.

### Stiegler's Theory: From Dispossession to the Inability to Understand?

Drawing from the tradition of philosophy of technology and psycho-social analysis, Bernard Stiegler reconfigures classical Marxist categories within a framework where technical systems and cognitive dependency—rather than relations of production—form the core of analysis. In this system, the proletariat no longer embodies class antagonism, but instead represents a cognitive condition wherein the subject loses the ability to live, act, and think. For Stiegler, in a world dominated by algorithms that govern memory and decision-making, proletarianization emerges as the collapse of perception and orientation.

In *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, proletarianization is defined as “the loss of experiential, practical, and theoretical knowledge as a result of automation and digitalization.”<sup>20</sup> These three dimensions<sup>21</sup> are not considered as social products, but as internalized capacities of the individual. Consequently, they are severed from the framework of production relations and reduced to the level of cognitive subjectivity. In *The Automatic Society*, this thesis is extended through the notion of the “proletarianization of cognitive activities,” wherein digital systems exceed human understanding and the agent becomes a disoriented consumer rather than a worker.<sup>22</sup>

This theoretical rupture reaches its climax in *Symbolic Misery* and *States of Shock*, where Stiegler speaks of the “proletarianization of the consumer,” who “has only her consciousness to sell,”<sup>23</sup> and of the proletarianization of elites, such as Greenspan, who “no longer understands the mechanisms he was supposed to regulate.” In this view, the concept of the proletariat no longer arises from property relations and exploitation but is instead derived from the most superficial stratum of subjective cognition. Its historical position is displaced into a condition of epistemic incapacity.

However, from the standpoint of class analysis, this redefinition entails several critical ruptures. First, in Stiegler's framework, knowledge is not treated as a product of social production relations, but rather as a psychological capacity of the individual. As a result, the loss of knowledge becomes a subject-centered, decontextualized experience, rather than a consequence of structural dispossession. Second, the concept of alienation—which for Marx refers to the material relationship between labor, capital, and product—is reduced to a cognitive or affective disorder.

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<sup>20</sup> Stiegler, *Pour une nouvelle critique*, 45.

<sup>21</sup> Stiegler identifies three forms of knowledge whose loss defines proletarianization: *savoir-vivre* (experiential), *savoir-faire* (practical), and *savoir-théoriser* (theoretical).

<sup>22</sup> Stiegler, *La société automatique*, 112.

<sup>23</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *De la misère symbolique, Tome 1: L'époque hyperindustrielle* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), 89.

Whereas Marx speaks of “the worker’s separation from the conditions of labor,”<sup>24</sup> Stiegler speaks of *cognitive disorientation*<sup>25</sup> as the result of technical dependency—without examining how these systems are embedded in and reproduced by capitalist social relations.

As István Mészáros has emphasized, proletarianization is not the loss of understanding, but the internalized form of subjugation under capital: “Capitalists are merely the personifications of capital... Replacing one kind of personification with another will lead to the same catastrophe.”<sup>26</sup> From this perspective, ignorance and impotence are not alternatives to dispossession but its effects. Erasing this material foundation reduces critique to an epistemological impasse and renders emancipatory politics conceptually inoperative.

Ultimately, in the absence of concepts such as class, surplus value, ownership, and exploitation, the proletariat in Stiegler’s theory dissolves into a vague, incapacitated subject: one who understands nothing, and is therefore unable to resist or to organize. In such a framework, theory ceases to be a tool for liberation and becomes an aestheticized elegy of decline.

## Subject of Contradiction: Rereading the Proletariat through the Lens of History and Production

In Marxist theory, the proletariat is not merely a subordinate class or a descriptive concept; it is the bearer of a material contradiction at the core of capitalist production. What grants this class its revolutionary potential is neither a priori consciousness nor a mental disposition, but a historically structured position arising from dispossession, subjugation within the labor process, and an exploitative relation governed by the logic of capital accumulation. The proletariat is not the victim

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<sup>24</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 418.

<sup>25</sup> The concept of *désorientation cognitive* (cognitive disorientation) emerges in Bernard Stiegler’s analysis of temporality in his multi-volume work *Technics and Time*. In Volume 2, drawing on the ontology of Martin Heidegger, Stiegler examines memory-based technical systems—such as writing, analog recording tools, and automated numerical devices—as *pharmaka* (remedy/poison): technologies that both enable *mise en mémoire* (memory inscription) and, under market domination and acceleration, contribute to a breakdown in temporal perception.

Bernard Stiegler, *La technique et le temps, Tome 2: La désorientation* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), 23–45.

In such a condition, the connection between past, present, and future collapses. This disruption is linked to the concept of *mémoire artificielle* (artificial memory): the externalization and control of memory through infrastructures that, rather than enhancing *protention* (the projection of the future), reduce experience to immediacy and the repetition of the moment.

Cognitive disorientation entails a disruption of normative and cultural orientation systems: a lack of defined value horizons, incapacity to organize desire and decision-making, and a crisis in the imagination of the future. This condition is not merely psychological but a historical–technical phenomenon, structured by the logic of automated temporality.

For Stiegler, the path out of this condition lies in the restoration of *temps symbolique* (symbolic time), the reconstruction of collective memory, and the strengthening of cultural capacity for *protention*.

<sup>26</sup> István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Toward a Theory of Transition* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995), 72.

of cognitive incapacity but the living consequence of the binary between capital and labor—the very binary through which social reproduction is organized under unequal relations.

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx articulates the relation between poverty and production as follows: “The more wealth the worker produces, the poorer he becomes.”<sup>27</sup> This poverty is not merely material; it reflects the worker’s estrangement from the product, from the labor process, from nature, and ultimately from their own human essence. This alienation, in contrast to later psychological or cognitive interpretations, is a structural relation embedded within the logic of capital. In other words, one becomes estranged not because of an inability to comprehend, but because of one’s objective position within the process of value production.

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx delineates this position with even greater theoretical clarity: “The foundation of capitalist production is the separation of free labor from the objective conditions of labor...”<sup>28</sup> These “conditions” include tools, skills, land, time, and even the social organization of production. The worker, as proletarian, contributes only their body to production, while everything else remains under the capitalist’s control. This separation constitutes the basis for the domination of dead labor (capital) over living labor (human beings)—a relation that is foundational to exploitation.

It is this logic—where the worker’s survival depends on offering their labor-power as a commodity on the market—that defines the proletarian condition. This compulsion is the starting point of proletarian subjectivity: not consciousness, but the necessity to survive in a world where the means of production are owned by others. It is this structural necessity that makes emancipation possible as a material—not a moral or psychological—project.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels formulate this potential within the critique of ideology: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.”<sup>29</sup> The proletariat, in its confrontation with this entrenched ideology, becomes the historical subject of transformation because it is the only class with nothing to lose—and thus carries the capacity to negate the entire existing order.

At this point, theorists such as Ellen Meiksins Wood highlight the proletariat’s role in distinguishing capitalism from other historical forms of domination. Wood writes: “In capitalism, appropriation does not occur through direct coercion, but through the economic mechanisms of the market... exploitation is embedded within the process of production itself, not imposed from outside by political or legal instruments.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, the proletariat is not only the product of this internalized

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<sup>27</sup> Marx, *Manuscripts de 1844*, 83.

<sup>28</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 463.

<sup>29</sup> Marx & Engels, *L’Idéologie allemande*, 57.

<sup>30</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood, “The Separation of the Economic and the Political in Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, no. 127 (1981), 66.

exploitation but also the only force capable of disrupting its material relations—because it has placed its body, time, and very being within this structure and has nothing outside it to lose.

In conclusion, the proletariat in the tradition of historical materialism is not a mental condition, a cognitive subject, or a moral metaphor. It occupies a material position within an economic–social mechanism grounded in ownership, wage labor, and accumulation. To erase this position and replace it with cultural or technological narratives is not only to undermine analytical precision, but also to deprive the material subject of any horizon of emancipation.

### Technological Idealism<sup>31</sup> and the Neutralization of Emancipatory Politics

This article intervenes theoretically by redefining the concept of the proletariat within digital capitalism—not as a subject incapable of understanding technology, but as a class that, within the architecture of contemporary technical systems, has been deprived of tools for collective action, class-based organization, and political representation. In contrast to interpretations that conflate proletarianization with memory loss, deskilling, or cognitive inability, this article argues that what is transformed in the digital age is not consciousness but the material capacity to act against property and structural domination. The proletariat, in this reading, is not a forgetful subject but a

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<sup>31</sup> Technological idealism refers to a tendency in the theory of technology in which *technologie* (technology) is treated as an autonomous and determining force—an external agent possessing causal or even ontological power. In this view, technology is abstracted from *rationalité historique* (historical rationality) and the structures of production and class struggle, while politics is reduced to the realms of *expérience* (experience), *psychologie* (psychology), or *culture* (culture).

The critical use of this term first appears in the 1970s in the work of Gérard Leclerc. In *Anthropologie et marxisme*, Leclerc critiques approaches that regard technology as an independent force, arguing that they erase history and social structures from the theory of technology.

Gérard Leclerc, *Anthropologie et marxisme* (Paris: Maspero, 1972), 118–125.

Andrew Feenberg revisits this concept in his critique of *essentialisme technologique* (technological essentialism), arguing that such perspectives separate technology from its socio-political contexts and lead to *naturalisation du pouvoir technique* (naturalization of technical power).

Andrew Feenberg, *Transforming Technology: A Critical Theory Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 18–23.

Drawing on Herbert Marcuse's analysis in *One-Dimensional Man*, Feenberg emphasizes that *rationalité technologique* (technological rationality) can serve to neutralize critical imagination and reinforce domination.

Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 154–162.

Within this critical tradition, Bernard Stiegler's work presents a point of reflection. Richard Beardsworth, responding to Stiegler's analyses of *prolétarianisation* (proletarianization), *désindividuation* (disindividuation), and *misère symbolique* (symbolic misery), argues that Stiegler's frameworks displace analysis from the social structure to technical, psychic, and symbolic levels—thereby producing a subtle form of *idéalisme technologique*.

Richard Beardsworth, "Technology and Politics: A Response to Bernard Stiegler," *Cultural Politics* 6, no. 2 (2010): 184–186.

Although Stiegler does not use the term himself, in works such as *États de choc*, he emphasizes the dual nature of technology via the concept of *pharmakon* (remedy/poison). However, critics argue that his structural distance from class conflict redefines politics within the framework of symbolic decay and cognitive disorientation.

Bernard Stiegler, *États de choc: Bêtise et savoir au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2012), 29–47.

class removed from the chain of material resistance—one that can remain the historical subject of critique only by reclaiming its position within the relations of production.

Bernard Stiegler's theory of proletarianization, while seemingly animated by a critical concern for the domination of smart technologies and automated algorithms, ultimately turns into a paradigmatic form of late idealism. The analysis in his theory departs from social relations and material contradictions and descends instead into the psychological–cognitive domain, where *stupidity*<sup>32</sup>, the *decay of theoretical capacity*<sup>33</sup>, and cognitive confusion displace concepts such as exploitation, dispossession, and surplus value.

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<sup>32</sup> In the work of Gilles Deleuze, *bêtise* (stupidity) is a philosophical concept that goes beyond mere ignorance or lack of reason. In *Difference and Repetition*, it denotes a disruption in the process of thought itself—a condition in which thinking loses its creative engagement with ideas and retreats into the reproduction of empty, clichéd concepts. For Deleuze, stupidity is uniquely human, since only humans can believe they are thinking while engaging in *mis-thinking*. This condition is linked to an *incapacité à créer de la différence réelle* (inability to create real difference), confining thought to superficial and reproductive distinctions.

Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: PUF, 1968), 206–213.

Jacques Derrida, in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, draws on the linguistic play between *bête* (beast) and *bêtise* (stupidity) to reread the concept as a rupture in the human/animal distinction. He speaks of *bêtise transcendante* (transcendental stupidity), a slippage in thinking that destabilizes the boundaries of reason, language, and ethics.

Jacques Derrida, *La bête et le souverain*, vol. 1, ed. M. Lisse and M.-L. Mallet (Paris: Galilée, 2008), 270–284.

Bernard Stiegler integrates these traditions and formulates stupidity as a technical phenomenon in *États de choc*. He views it as the consequence of *automatisation de la cognition* (automation of cognition) and *économie de l'attention* (attention economy): a state in which the human subject loses the capacity to *penser autrement* (think otherwise), becoming a reactive, predictable being devoid of creative openness.

Bernard Stiegler, *États de choc: Bêtise et savoir au XXIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2012), 29–47.

Stiegler bases his analysis on Gilbert Simondon's theory of *individuation*. Simondon distinguishes between the *individu* (individual as result) and *individuation* (individuation as process). According to Simondon, the individual is not a static entity but is constituted through ongoing processes of psychic and collective individuation, shaped by technical and social relations.

Gilbert Simondon, *L'individuation psychique et collective* (Paris: Aubier, 1989), 17–35.

<sup>33</sup> This concept is rooted in a tradition that regards theorizing not merely as the construction of concepts, but as a cultural, technical, and historical faculty for organizing analytical thought. Gilbert Simondon, in *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, emphasizes that the human relation to technology is integral to the process of *individuation*—a continuous becoming through engagement with technical environments. When this engagement is obstructed—for instance, when technology subjugates rather than mediates—thinking as a theoretical activity is also impaired, as it emerges from critical confrontation with complexity.

Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (Paris: Aubier, 1958), 172–198.

André Leroi-Gourhan, in *Le geste et la parole*, considers technology an extension of human memory. Tools, writing, and symbols function as externalized memory, enabling conceptual organization, theory formation, and transmission. When these tools lose their semantic vitality or become purely mechanical, the cultural capacity to theorize deteriorates.

André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole, Tome I: Technique et langage* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1964), 165–185.

Bernard Stiegler, in *La société automatique*, interprets this condition as a consequence of *automatisation cognitive* (cognitive automation), *datafication*, and the *attention economy*. In such conditions, decision-making is delegated to algorithmic systems, and theory as a tool for thinking loses its place. Reflexive, compositional, and contemplative modes of thought are replaced by instantaneous conditioned responses.

Bernard Stiegler, *La société automatique, Tome 1: L'avenir du travail* (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 91–115.

For Stiegler, the decay of the capacity to theorize is part of the process of *désindividuation* (disindividuation): the disruption of the subject's ability to make distinctions, perceive historicity, and produce conceptual

In this formulation, the driving force of proletarianization is no longer a social relation of production but rather technology itself, acting as an autonomous ontology: automated systems replace lived and skilled knowledge, algorithms sideline human comprehension, and digital networks undermine the capacity for direction and action.<sup>34</sup> But the fundamental question remains: who produces these technologies? Who owns them? And on what logic are they developed? Without answers to these questions, Stiegler's theory retreats from the analysis of production relations and replaces structure with a system of technical causality. As a result, proletarianization is reduced to a cognitive condition allegedly encompassing everyone—from workers to managers, consumers to software designers. This conceptual equivalence, in practice, erases the foundational difference between the exploited and the dominant subject, rendering all equally incapacitated in their understanding.

From the standpoint of historical materialism, this analytical rupture is not only theoretically flawed but also politically perilous because it:

- reduces class antagonism to a cultural condition;
- detaches the subject of emancipation from their material position;
- and replaces the possibility of resistance with a discourse of decay and subjectual erosion.

As Daniel Bensaïd aptly states, “A crisis only opens up the possibility of emancipation when it is immanent to the relations of production—not when it is displaced onto some external or cultural force.”<sup>35</sup> From this perspective, the subject of resistance emerges from contradiction, not from mourning the decay of comprehension. Once this contradiction is erased, what remains is merely the description of a powerless, confused subject—one that can no longer even recognize itself as a class.

Consequently, what appears to be a *critique of technology*,<sup>36</sup> in the absence of class analysis, becomes a form of technological idealism: a cultural representation of crisis that not only fails to critique

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understanding. The path toward overcoming this lies in restoring institutions of thought, collective memory, and the possibility of *penser autrement* (thinking otherwise).

<sup>34</sup> For critical analyses of the decay of knowledge, automation of cognition, perceptual disorientation, and the crisis of theorization in the context of digital technologies, see:

Bernard Stiegler, *La société automatique*, vol. 1 (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 111–115; idem, *La technique et le temps*, vol. 2 (Paris: Galilée, 1996), 78; idem, *Dans la disruption: Comment ne pas devenir fou?* (Paris: Les Liens qui Libèrent, 2016).

For further reading, consult:

Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013);

Yves Citton, *Pour une écologie de l'attention* (Paris: Seuil, 2014);

Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (London: Verso, 2017).

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Bensaïd, *Thèses sur la résistance*, *Viento Sur*, December 2004. Available at:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/bensaïd/2004/12/resist.htm>

<sup>36</sup> Critique of technology has been a central issue in modern philosophy, beginning with Martin Heidegger's foundational analysis of its ontological status. Heidegger defines technology not merely as a set of tools but as a

structure but also mystifies it. In this narrative, technical systems appear not as instruments of class domination but as impersonal, mysterious, and autonomous forces. As a result, social responsibility, contradiction, resistance, and organization give way to resignation, vertigo, and psychological metaphors.

In this sense, Stiegler's theory, despite its rhetorical elegance, contributes not to the reconstruction of critical theory but to the neutralization of its political potential. The proletariat, instead of being a subject of history, becomes a lost, directionless phenomenon; and emancipation, rather than being a material project rooted in contradiction, becomes a wish suspended in a cognitive fog.

Compared to other prominent approaches to digital capitalism—such as platform capitalism in Nick Srnicek's work<sup>37</sup> or surveillance capitalism in the writings of Shoshana Zuboff<sup>38</sup>—Stiegler's theory operates on a different layer. He shifts from issues of ownership and control of data toward perceptual and cognitive crises, but in this shift, he sidelines the material relations of production and the positionality of class. This article, by distancing itself from both cognitive reductionism and narrowly structural analyses, seeks to reconstruct a new nexus between technology, domination, and class subjectivity through the concept of the "immediate proletariat."

At first glance, Stiegler's analysis of psychological proletarianization may appear aligned with concepts such as the *cybertariat* in Ursula Huws or "unpaid surplus value" in Christian Fuchs. All

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mode of revealing in which being presents itself as something measurable and controllable. This condition is captured in his concept of *Gestell* (enframing), which obstructs *aletheia* (unconcealment) and thus impedes the unfolding of truth.

See: Rae, "Being and Technology: Heidegger on the Overcoming of Metaphysics," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 43, no. 3 (2012): 305–325.

Gilbert Simondon distances himself from this metaphysical framing by understanding technology as a process of individuation. For Simondon, technics transcend the instrumental realm and play a constitutive role in the formation of the human subject. In *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, he highlights the dynamic interaction between humans and technical objects, arguing that the meaning of technology must emerge immanently from its historical and material processes.

See: Crogan, "Bernard Stiegler: Philosophy, Technics, and Activism," *Cultural Politics* 6, no. 2 (2010): 133–156.

Bernard Stiegler offers a structural and historical account of the contemporary technological condition in his *Technics and Time* series. He describes technology as an *epiphylogenetic prosthesis*, a system that externalizes memory through media, writing, data, and algorithms. Technology, in this view, is a necessary condition for individuation and consciousness, provided a critical and creative relation to it is maintained.

See: Colony, "A Matter of Time: Stiegler on Heidegger and Being Technological," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 41, no. 2 (2010): 117–131.

In his later work, Stiegler addresses the role of technology within platform capitalism and the attention economy. Technology, rather than enabling individuation, becomes a tool for psychic control and the destruction of collective memory. This situation leads to *cognitive disorientation*, the *erosion of theoretical capacities*, and a structural condition of *stupidity*. For Stiegler, critique of technology does not imply a return to an original past, but instead calls for a reinvention of the future through a renegotiated relation among thinking, education, and technics.

See: Beardsworth, "Technology and Politics: A Response to Bernard Stiegler," *Cultural Politics* 6, no. 2 (2010): 181–199.

<sup>37</sup> Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016)

<sup>38</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

three emphasize the role of technology in memory erosion, skill degradation, or the invisibilization of labor. However, what this article highlights is the fundamental difference in analytical logic and theoretical positioning.

In the work of Huws and Fuchs, despite acknowledging the new forms of exploitation within the digital realm, the analytic framework remains grounded in material relations of production and the potential for class recognition. The *cybertariat*, despite diverging from classical structures of wage labor, is still understood as a productive class; even in fragmented, unstable, and unpaid conditions, it theoretically retains the potential for resistance and organization. Similarly, Fuchs' analysis of unpaid surplus value in cognitive labor continues the Marxian theory of value by offering a contemporary critique of exploitation in digital platforms.

In contrast, Stiegler's analysis, by breaking with production relations, does not engage with class relations but instead focuses on the decay of the cognitive subject—where proletarianization is reduced to memory loss, loss of theoretical capacity, and perceptual rupture.

The concept of the “immediate proletariat,” proposed in this article, establishes a dialectical contrast with both approaches. Unlike Stiegler, it emphasizes the material structures of domination and the logic of capital accumulation; and in distinction from Huws and Fuchs, it refers to conditions in which not only ownership of the means of production but also the possibility of political representation, collective organization, and class recognition are structurally eliminated.

From this vantage point, if the *cybertariat* still presumes the potential for resistance based on the attention economy, and if data-exploitative labor retains the productive subject's capacity to reflect on its class position, the “immediate proletariat” denotes a condition where the command of capital is enforced without mediation and through technical architecture; domination is thus defined not merely through exploitation, but through the complete blockage of material action and the elimination of the conditions of political subjectivity.

This article contends that under digital capitalism, the proletariat is severed from its historical role not due to memory erosion or cognitive deficiency, but because of its structural exclusion from tools of collective action and material positions of resistance. This is not merely a theoretical claim; empirical evidence substantiates it. A comprehensive study by Brancati, Pesole, and Fernández-Macías<sup>39</sup> on the European platform labor market reveals that most workers, lacking ownership of digital infrastructures or personal data, are excluded from political representation, collective

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<sup>39</sup> Brancati, Urzi, Maria Pesole, and Enrique Fernández-Macías. *Digital Labour Platforms in the EU: Mapping and Business Models*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2020.  
<https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/459278>

bargaining, and organizational power. Likewise, Posada's research<sup>40</sup> demonstrates that even highly skilled workers remain entrenched in exploitative conditions due to their lack of control over workflows, payment systems, and decision-making processes. Fagioli,<sup>41</sup> Vercellone, and De Stasio<sup>42</sup> similarly argue that the dynamics of digital labor today do not stem from cognitive deficiencies, but rather from the enduring material structures of domination—specifically, the dual mechanisms of exploitation and dispossession. These findings underscore the continued analytical relevance of a materialist class perspective in understanding the structural logics of digital capitalism.

This conceptual reconstruction of the proletariat seeks to respond to the contemporary conditions of domination and the elimination of collective action in digital infrastructures. In a context where mediations of resistance have vanished and the command of capital is enacted through algorithms, platforms, and technical systems, the proletariat is redefined not only by the dispossession of productive tools but also by a rupture from the capacity to act, organize, and represent itself politically.

The “immediate proletariat” is thus a concept aimed at recognizing this condition: a position directly exposed to command, deprived of mediations of action, and disconnected from the capacity for class recognition. In this condition, what is lost is not merely technical skill or cognitive comprehension but the material ability to resist, intervene, and politically reproduce itself.

From this perspective, domination in digital capitalism not only continues the logic of exploitation but reproduces it without recourse to classical ideology—through the erasure of mediating institutions and the imposition of technical subjugation. Surplus value continues to be extracted within the production relation, but the productive class is structurally deprived of collective action. In such conditions, the immediate proletariat is not a forgetful or degraded subject, but a class that experiences contradiction in the absence of tools for resistance—and this experience of exclusion is not merely passive but may become the point of departure for rethinking the very possibility of emancipatory theory. Resistance, from this horizon, is only possible through the reconstruction of material grounds for action and the invention of a new conceptual language capable of rendering novel forms of domination intelligible, recognizable, and organizable.

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<sup>40</sup> Julian Posada, “Embedded Reproduction in Platform Data Work,” *Information, Communication & Society* 25, no. 14 (2022): 1963–1981, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2022.2049849>.

<sup>41</sup> Andrea Fagioli, “To Exploit and Disposess: The Twofold Logic of Platform Capitalism,” *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation* 15, no. 1 (2021): 126–137, <https://doi.org/10.13169/workorgalaboglob.15.1.0126>.

<sup>42</sup> Vercellone, Carlo, and Antonio De Stasio. “Free Digital Labor as a New Form of Exploitation: A Critical Analysis.” *Science & Society* 87, no. 3 (2023): 334–357. <https://doi.org/10.1521/isis.2023.87.3.334>.

## Class Recognition within the Technical Architecture of Domination

The opposition between Marx's theory and Bernard Stiegler's account of the proletariat is not merely a semantic dispute—it reveals a fundamental divergence in how history, subjectivity, and emancipation are conceived. This article has traced the confrontation between two theoretical foundations: one rooted in the analysis of production relations, property, accumulation, and exploitation; the other constructed through a technological apparatus that substitutes class antagonism with incomprehension, cognitive fragmentation, and symbolic collapse.

In the Marxian framework, the proletariat becomes a potential historical subject by virtue of its structural position within the capitalist mode of production. This position arises from the separation from the means of production, the compulsion to sell labor power, and the generation of surplus value under conditions of private ownership. In contrast, Stiegler's analysis, by sidelining the structure of value, reduces the relation of exploitation to a question of cognition and technique—as if what demands reconstruction is not material social relations but memory and comprehension.

Yet emancipation is not achieved through the restoration of perception, but through the transformation of the relations of production. As István Mészáros insists, “What obstructs social transformation is not technology, but the structure of domination internalized within the relations of reproduction themselves.”<sup>43</sup> From this perspective, the proletariat is not the outcome of perceptual disorder but the result of material dispossession of control over production and social reproduction.

If critical theory is to sustain the horizon of emancipation, it must not substitute the subject with one who is exhausted, disoriented, or cognitively incapacitated. Rather, it must reaffirm the proletariat as the bearer of contradiction and historical possibility. In a world where the analysis of domination is reduced to cognitive or cultural metaphors, only theoretical fidelity to the proletariat—as a structural, class-based, and material relation—can rescue emancipatory politics from subjectless abstraction.

This article's conceptual reconstruction of the proletariat seeks to respond to the contemporary conditions of domination and the structural elimination of collective action within digital infrastructures. In a context where the mediations of resistance have been dismantled and capital's command is enacted through algorithmic and technical architectures, the proletariat is no longer defined solely by dispossession of the means of production, but also by its severance from the very capacity to act. The “immediate proletariat” is proposed here as a concept that registers this

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<sup>43</sup> Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 72.

condition: a position directly exposed to command, deprived of organizational agency, and lacking the mediatory means of action. This concept does not signal a return to cultural or psychological narratives, but offers a framework for rethinking the relation between power, class, and technology in a world where mechanisms of domination have assumed novel forms—and where resistance requires a new conceptual lexicon to become intelligible, recognizable, and organizable.

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