In memory of my friend

Robert Castel,

to whom I owe so much

At the Threshold of Social Respectability: On the political construction of new underclasses[1]

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Preface

For some time now, there has been a heated debate in Western capitalisms about how to conceptualize multiple inequalities in sociological terms. This debate also concerns the lower end of the social hierarchy. Are we dealing with the emergence of a new, primarily urban underclass, as Michael Mann claims (Mann 2013)? Is the underclass an interest-driven invention, an analytically unsound term that should be replaced in a more serious scientific manner by the term 'precariat', as Loic Wacquant suggests in his recent book (Wacqaunt 2022)? Is the precariat a class at all, as Guy Standing (Standing 2011) claims? Or is it, as Erik Olin Wright (2015) argues, a large social group that has no vested interests in relation to the working class and hence does not form a class of its own?

In the following, I would like to explore these questions by drawing in three ways on the work of my friend Robert Castel, who unfortunately passed away much too early. *First*, I take up a collaborative work that helped to initiate a now diverse body of research on precarisation and precarity in Germany (Castel/Dörre 2009). *Second*, I will refer to one of Robert Castel's working hypotheses, which an analytic look at the emergence of a precarious full-employment society in Germany confirms. And *third*, inspired by intense, thoroughly controversial but always productive debates which we had the privilege of having with Robert Castel in Jena, I will argue for an analytic usage of the term 'underclass'. The concept of social property is central to this usage.

[1] I am grateful to Adrian Wilding for the translation of this text.

What makes it useful to speak of underclasses in an analytic sense? From my point of view, the most important reason is a presumption of causality. Class, as a concept, always implies a connecting principle that makes it possible to link "the good fortune of the rich to the misfortune of the poor" (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007: 354). The contemporary production of new underclasses also follows such a causality, albeit an extremely complex one. To reduce the complexity in a deliberately stylized way, the social mechanism of underclass formation can be described as follows: ruling classes (fractions) which demand a "lean state," low taxes, and the lowest possible labour and reproduction costs, are responsible (not solely responsible but via an essentially complex set of causes) for the formation and recomposition of underclasses. In general, the concentration of wealth and income promotes the propensity for speculative transactions and thus increases the economy's vulnerability to crises. Economic power can be transformed into political power, for instance through the financing of lobbying, and used to promote commodifying labour market and social policies. The result is a curtailment of social property and a selective stripping of wage-earners and their families of welfare-state safeguards. Underclasses are characterized by structurally deficient social property, measured by common standards of normality. This means that they suspected by the social majority of no longer being able to achieve individual reproduction through their own efforts and by means of their own achievements. They find themselves marked with the status of welfare and falling below the threshold of social respectability.

In the following, this thesis will be tested in several steps. I begin with a look at the bewildering variety of multiple inequalities and the German debate that has developed on these (I.). It turns out that the persistent blind spots in sociological inequality research cannot be corrected overnight. A step in the right direction could be to look at the key concepts of "exclusion" and "precarity" in such a way that both differences and overlaps with the concept of class are elaborated. This will be attempted in what follows. First, I clarify the basic concepts of exclusion and precarity (II). Building on this, I look at the political construction of the new underclasses and the emergence of a precarious full employment society in Germany (III., IV.). Summing up, I argue why it makes sense to use the concept of the underclass for the analysis of demobilized class societies (V.).

I. Introduction: Multiple inequalities as a challenge for sociological analysis

For three decades, vertical, class-specific inequalities have been on the rise once again in most countries worldwide. While inequalities *between* countries are decreasing—mainly as a result

of rapid growth and catch-up processes in large emerging economies—income and wealth inequality *within* nation states is becoming more pronounced (Therborn 2012; Milanovic 2011, 2016). While earnings from capital income increased between 1980 and 2013, the wage ratio in the advanced industrial countries continuously declined (IMF 2017). The wage increases of the subsequent years were insufficient to correct this imbalance in any significant way.

Rapid growth in both small and large emerging countries, which contributes to the emergence of middle classes locally, occurs to the detriment of disadvantaged groups in the OECD countries. The primary beneficiaries of globalisation are the elites residing mainly in the affluent societies of the global North. Some 44 percent of the total increase in income between 1988 and 2008 went to the wealthiest five percent, and almost one-fifth to the richest one percent of the world's adult population. The rising middle classes in the emerging economies of the South received only two to four percent of total income increases (Milanovic 2011, 2013, 2016). Large groups of wage earners—production workers and the growing service proletariat in particular—find themselves on the losing side of globalisation. They no longer benefit from what Branko Milanovic describes as the 'citizenship rent' of wealth distribution (2011: 120). The privilege of being born in a rich country has ceased to serve as a protection against downward social mobility.

At the same time, new divisions and inequalities are becoming more pronounced and making their presence felt even *within* directly or indirectly wage-dependent classes. Even in societies with a flourishing economy, precarious work and employment relations have become the '"normal" organisational form' of social life (Castel 2011: 136). At the same time, another form of exclusion is taking place. At the very top of the social hierarchy, we find one group expanding, namely the—albeit still tiny—group of super-rich owners of wealth that largely live outside the rules that apply to the rest of the population.[2] At the bottom of the social hierarchy, by contrast, large social groups are forming which drop out of the established social order in an entirely different way. These groups are excluded not only from regular gainful employment, but also stripped of basic social and democratic rights; from the perspective of mainstream society, they simply appear 'superfluous'. These underclasses comprise between 10 and 15 percent of the total population in almost all early industrialised countries (Mann 2013: 91f.).

[2] Krysmanski (2012: 45-46) estimates the social core of this faction of the propertied classes to include around 10,000 to 20,000 super-rich individuals worldwide, among them some 3,000 billionaires whose liquid assets amounts to more than 500 million US dollars. These super-rich are joined by another 100,000 people with assets of 30 to 500 million US dollars, as well as ten million people with a liquidity between one and five million US dollars.

But how can this structural heterogeneity of social dislocations and disparities be conceptualised in a scientifically accurate and reliable way? The answers to this question differ substantially. However, it is obvious from countless debates that sociology and the social sciences currently lack adequate theoretical concepts and analytical tools to capture the confusing melange of social divisions, social polarisation, widespread precarity and exclusion. There are two particular reasons for this. The first is the “neglect of class” (Kadritzke 2017) especially in the German social sciences, which is today being critically revised. The second reason is the insufficient interlinking of theories of class and approaches which focus on other manifestations of the social question such as exclusion or precarity (Kronauer 2002; Castel/Dörre 2009; Bude/Willisch 2006).

II. The basic concepts of exclusion and precarity

From the mid-1980s, German sociology was dominated by a discourse that construed inequalities primarily in terms of individualisation. In a pointed summary of the sociological debates from that decade, Ulrich Beck proclaimed an irreversible process of dissolution of industrial class society (Beck 1983, 1992): according to Beck, the logic of class-specific wealth distribution was increasingly being replaced by the logic of ecological risks to civilisation which were not specific to class. Added to this, Beck contended, a renewed surge of individualisation tendencies had divested the social forms of industrial modernity, above all class, status and gender, of their cohesive force in the lifeworld: “The individual himself or herself becomes the reproductive unit for the social in the lifeworld” (Beck 1992: 130).

In retrospect, there can hardly be any doubt that Ulrich Beck and the authors building on his analysis address an important dimension of socio-structural change when they refer to the liberation of the individual from traditional social milieus, predetermined gender roles and religious ties. Yet the pointed emphasis of the individualisation thesis on the image of a “capitalism without classes” has proven problematic (Beck 1992: 88). According to Beck, society is currently “searching for a different social structure” and cannot “be forced back into the class category time after time and against the grain without running the risk of a dangerous loss of reality and relevance” (Beck 1986: 140, translation amended). Applied to the present, this thesis could be reversed: due to the dramatic increase in vertical inequalities, it appears to make little sense to force ‘general’ class differences, against the grain, so to speak, into categories such as indi-

vidualisation, pluralisation or the temporalisation of social inequalities. The sociological rediscovery of the social question, however, was initially not based on class categories, but precisely on terms like exclusion or precarity.

The reasons for this also pertain to theoretical strategy. Regardless of their general heterogeneity, class theories assign individuals and collectives a more or less fixed position in the social structure of modern societies. Even members of subaltern classes are still seen as members of society. The basic underlying premise of concepts that place social exclusion at the heart of their analysis is a different one. These concepts make reference to social groups 'decoupled' (or 'disaffiliated') from mainstream society (Castel 2002), to their 'expendability' (Kronauer 2002) or their exclusion from social subsystems (Luhmann 1995a, and, more controversially: Schroer 2008; Nassehi 2008).

II.1 Blind spots of the classical (and other) theories of class

As a result of this focus, the theorems of social exclusion—which, for their part, are also highly diverse—highlight a blind spot of countless class analyses. Organised actors can pursue the class struggle in a way that facilitates the social integration of both conflict parties. The unregulated (or poorly regulated) industrial conflict can then turn into a 'democratic class struggle' (Korpi 1983; Dahrendorf 1967, 2017). The frequently displayed ferocity of such conflicts aside, they are conducted on the grounds of guaranteed economic and social rights of wage earners. The erstwhile 'wild' class struggle becomes a dispute between collective bargaining parties; it is institutionalised, pacified and de-dramatised. And yet, the less friction the systemic integration of the democratic class struggle causes, the more apparent the social divisions that erupt outside the regulated sector. These divisions have a disintegrating effect on society, yet without having any system-transcending impact. Large social groups that are excluded even from exploitation by wage labour and thus assume a socially marginalised position are insufficiently theorised in both classical and more recent class theories.

In Marx's class theory, such groups feature as the industrial reserve army or are discussed in terms of an exclusively negatively connoted *Lumpenproletariat*. To Marx, the industrial reserve army in its various manifestations constitutes an unemployed segment of the proletariat, and overcoming the divisions between active and passive workers is therefore a matter of "planned co-operation between the employed and the unemployed" (Marx 1976: 793) and thus of political and trade unionist class unity. Even orphans and pauper children are regarded as "candidates for the industrial reserve army" (ibid.: 797) who are "enrolled in the army of active workers both speedily and in large numbers" in times of economic prosperity (ibid.). In contrast, Marx

considers vagabonds and criminals, the incapacitated, the mutilated and the sickly as a 'pauperized section' [In the original: '*Lazarus layer*'] (ibid.: 798) that is equally unable to be integrated into the working class, and which will tend, time and again, to rally with the political reaction. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels refer to the *Lumpenproletariat* as that "passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society" (Marx/Engels 1976: 494) and who, as a result of their entire way of life, are predestined for the role of "bribed tool of reactionary intrigue" (ibid.).

This view reveals resentment, on the basis of which the social outsiders are ascribed all those negative traits from which the potentially revolutionary proletariat is supposedly exempt (Bescherer 2013). Needless to say, such classifications are untenable historically. Irish immigration, for example, which Engels commented on with a mix of dismissal and contempt—given that it 'degraded' (Engels 1975: 393) the English working class through the competition and uncivilised behaviour it imported—became one of the first focal points of organised labour movements as a result of its numerous seemingly irrational struggles (Thompson 1991). Max Weber's conceptual framework, when it comes to considering the lowest levels of the social pyramid, has little to offer in the way of alternatives to Marx's class theory. That said, in Weber we do find, alongside some vague hints at deprivileged classes and strata, the social figure of the 'Pariah' and the category of the 'Pariah people' (Weber 1978 [1921]: 492 ff.), which, as Weber explains in terms of the example of Jewish people (ibid.), correspond to specific forms of intentionally precipitated social exclusion.

In more recent class analyses that build on Marx and Weber, the analysis of underclasses forming 'below' the segment of the working population also remains peculiarly weak. Everything that is located below the middle classes, so to speak, is classified as being 'at the bottom'. Such ascriptions can even be found in Pierre Bourdieu's magnum opus, *Distinction* (1984). From today's perspective, Bourdieu's description of a pragmatic 'taste of necessity' (ibid.: 6) that constitutes the lower classes, appears to correspond more to the blue- and white-collar workers of 1960s France. Such a definition is inadequate to describe socially excluded or even 'Lumpenproletarian' groups. As we will see, however, Bourdieu's comprehensive work does, on closer inspection, contain approaches that analyses of exclusion, precarity and the underclasses could take as starting points.

II.2 Social exclusion

The debate surrounding social exclusion addresses what neither Marx nor Weber anticipated in their conception of class: the formation of social groups that are considered worthless in terms

of economic valorisation and useless for mainstream society, and which are, therefore, expendable. These 'superfluous' (Kronauer 2002: 116; Bude/Willisch 2008: 31-49) groups are not even part of the industrial reserve army, as they are simply not needed (any longer). They are not to be confused with what Dahrendorf (1967: 83) refers to as the 'socially despised', however, a group that has always existed in regulated welfare state capitalisms, as exclusion is not an exclusive problem of 'marginalised strata' (*Randschichten*) (Geißler 2006: 201). Nevertheless, the fact that 'superfluous' groups in society exist in the first place becomes a challenge for those social theories that at least implicitly assume a progressive inclusion of social sub-systems. When surveying the Brazilian favelas, Niklas Luhmann encountered people who were literally "without function" for highly differentiated social sub-systems and thus constituted a theoretical problem (Luhmann 1995 a, b). The concept of exclusion, as it were, allows a particular variant of the social question to intrude into the theory of the functional differentiation of society. Correspondingly, the zone of exclusion has become the object of fierce theoretical controversies. One group, among them Armin Nassehi, emphatically rejects the theoretical use of the term 'exclusion'. In Nassehi's view, its use is inappropriate because of an overlapping with socio-political connotations: "If inclusion is nothing but the way in which social systems accommodate people, include them in their space of resonance, both develop and restrict their action scope, make them visible, then exclusion denotes the mechanism through which individuals are deprived of any designation or recognition. To be exact: ideally, the excluded should not even be visible at all," the argument runs (Nassehi 2008: 122f).

"Those in darkness *can* in fact be seen" ("*Die im Dunklen sieht man doch*"), is Markus Schroer's (Schroer 2008: 178–194) implicit response. Schroer believes he can demonstrate that Luhmann, in his later work, contemplated whether 'the inclusion/exclusion distinction might be slowly replacing the logic of functional differentiation' (ibid: 181). Schroer links this discovery to a plea for a more precise examination of the zone of exclusion, as he considers it possible that the said distinction could become the key social difference in the 21st century. In this context, the author calls for a discussion that no longer addresses the inclusion/exclusion problem as a binary schema: "I would claim that we are dealing, in the zone of inclusion, with an inverted repetition of the differentiations in the zone of exclusion. Alongside the necessary differentiation of the concept of exclusion, we need a differentiation of the concept of inclusion, too, so that the varying degrees of inclusion and exclusion can be ascertained, much like the precarious melange of inclusion and exclusion" (ibid.: 192).

Martin Kronauer in fact does make such a distinction. His sociological concept of exclusion may well represent the most elaborate definition in the German-speaking world thus far. However, Kronauer is less concerned with systems theory nit-picking as with real phenomena first observed in the advanced capitalisms of the 1980s. His empirical point of departure is the "social layer of long-term unemployed" (Kronauer et al. 1993), which grew steadily in Germany up until 2005. In engaging with this phenomenon, Kronauer develops a concept which, from a theoretical perspective, draws on social exclusion as well as the 'underclass' debate that can be found mainly in the English-speaking world (Kronauer 2002: 38–74). He reveals the problems and aporias of a dichotomous concept of exclusion, commonly used in systems theory. As an alternative, he proposes an approach that takes account of the fact that exclusion can imply a simultaneity of inside and outside. Social exclusion takes place in distinct modes and dimensions of social participation (ibid: 153). That is why exclusion can denote very different things: exclusion from the social division of labour, falling through social safety nets and the resulting isolation, exclusion from material and cultural participation in the sense of being unable to keep up, as well as political-institutional barriers to participation which, taken together, amount to an experience of permanent powerlessness and lack of opportunity. Individuals and social groups can be included in these dimensions for one reason, while being excluded from them for another.

Exclusion, in Kronauer's understanding, thus addresses the 'inside of the outside', or, more precisely: "In the continuing custody of welfare state assistance, the excluded find themselves in the paradoxical situation of an institutionalised simultaneity of inside and outside. Given the tightly calculated provisions and the daunting bureaucracy, social benefits hardly represent a survival strategy of choice, as poor people are often accused of. When the welfare status continues to last, then this is usually due to a lack of alternatives, repeated botched attempts at escaping this status and, ultimately, resignation" (ibid.: 204). Wherever the large-scale formation of a 'superfluous' stratum takes hold, exclusion can become a "danger for social integration" (Kronauer 2002: 228), eroding democracy in the long term.

II.3 Precarity

Martin Kronauer's dynamic, multi-dimensional concept of exclusion places him, both theoretically and analytically, close to a discourse on precarity that was originally largely influenced by French sociology, and especially by Pierre Bourdieu (1998) and Robert Castel (2002, 2005, 2011). Robert Castel explicitly distances his concept of precarity from overly narrow notions of exclusion. His main criticism is that there is too strong a tendency to view 'exclusion' from

the perspective of its outcome. Castel contends that given there are only two possible conditions, inside or outside, the semantics of exclusion create a blindness to the wide range of social dislocations creating social vulnerability, the effects of which extend well into the somewhat secure core of the labour force (Castel 2008). Castel's criticism is obviously directed at Kronauer's gradualist concept of exclusion; and yet, the proposed alternative approach to precarity allows perspectives on social dislocations than even flexible theorems of exclusion miss.

The origins of the term can be found in the Latin *precarium*, referring to a loan (of an object, of land or rights), the right to use of which could be revoked by the donor at any time. Precarity thus describes an insecure, unstable relationship that is subject to cancellation at short notice, a relationship in which the recipient of a good becomes dependent on the donor. The opposite would be a stable, secure relationship, characterised by equal rights. In the sociological debate, the term precarity refers to insecure, uncertain and unstable conditions of work, employment and life in general. As a social phenomenon, precarity is anything but new. The history of precarious working and living conditions can be traced back at least to the 14th century AD (Castel 2002; Schultheis/Herold 2010). In the feudal order, beggars and vagabonds were subjected to the disciplining violence of the guilds and the police. The liberation from the hierarchical order that occurred during the transition to the industrial capitalist mode of production inevitably entailed forced pauperisation. In the crumbling feudal order, state power was used against potential wage workers; what emerged was the phenomenon of 'undignified' wage labour (Castel 2011: 63). According to diagnoses by Bourdieu, Castel, and many others, today's displacement from welfare-state guaranteed social security systems has led to the return of this phenomenon—albeit at an entirely different level of social wealth and security. Precarious wage earners are thus the new 'vagabonds' of the 21st century, who enter the stage in the wake of the deregulation of work and employment (Castel 2011: 68) and who, as a result of their partial disenfranchisement, become 'denizens', a kind of semi-citizen excluded from social and democratic rights (Standing 2011, 2014).

What is constitutive of precarity in affluent societies is neither the association with an *underclass* that commands little social respect, nor mass unemployment, but rather the proliferation of low-paid, often temporary work and employment relations that enjoy little recognition, a phenomenon that is also widespread among skilled workers and academics (Bologna 1977; Roth 2010: 155; Schultheis/Herold 2010: 244.) André Gorz uses the term with reference to the expansion of domestic services (1989: 197, here translated as 'precariousness'). In the works

of Pierre Bourdieu, the category addresses, for example, the 'de-collectivisation' of the industrial working class. Precarity as a concept simultaneously implies a criticism of the return of social insecurity and as such transcends a mere description thereof.[3]

That said, precarity is not an ideological battle cry. Regarding its analytical scientific use, two forms must be distinguished. Precarity, as a *social analytical* and as a *diagnostic concept* addresses changes at the intersection of gainful economic activity, the welfare state and democracy. The term addresses 'a general convulsion of society' (Ehrenberg 2011: 366; Barbier 2013). It seeks to render the connections between individual phenomena observable. In this diagnostic usage, the term can be refined in a way that highlights its strengths. This is possible if precarity is understood not as a primarily social condition, but as a regime of power, control and disciplining which influences and changes the 'work-centred society' (*Arbeitsgesellschaft*) as a whole (Dörre 2009). From these various uses for a diagnosis of the times and for social analysis, some more narrowly conceived, *empirically oriented categorisations* stand out which conceive of precarity as a special form of atypical employment (Keller/Seifert 2007), as a social position between poverty and normality (Kraemer 2009), as externalisation on the labour market (Bartelheimer 2011; Krause/Köhler 2012), as increasing fragility of social reproduction and informal migrant domestic service work in 'global care chains' (Aulenbacher 2009; Hochschild 2001), or as a form of social vulnerability which originates at the heart of work-centred society and must be distinguished from phenomena such as poverty, unemployment or exclusion (Vogel 2009).

Both forms of usage of the term 'precarity' have been influenced by the works of Robert Castel. According to Castel, the post-Fordist work-centred societies of the affluent North are divided into distinct zones of differing levels of (social) security (Castel 2002: 304f.). Although a majority of wage earners in the advanced capitalisms are still situated within a zone of integration, which entails protected full-time employment and more or less intact social safety nets, below that level a *zone of precarity* is expanding, which is marked by both uncertain employment and eroding social safety nets. At the bottom of this hierarchy, a *zone of decoupling or detachment* is taking shape, comprising groups who have no real chance at integration in the still protected segments of the labour market and concomitant social safety nets. Castel's zone model has

[3] In his famous speech, "Job Insecurity is Everywhere", Pierre Bourdieu sums up the essence of this criticism as follows: "In all these areas it [precarity, K.D.] produces more or less identical effects, which become particularly visible in the extreme case of the unemployed: the de-structuring of existence, which is deprived among other things of its temporal structures, and the ensuing deterioration of the whole relationship to the world, time and space" (Bourdieu 1998: 82).

served as a heuristic template used by numerous authors to conduct their own empirical research. Today, the applicability of this analytical model to Germany and other European societies has been sufficiently demonstrated (see, i.a.: Allmendinger et al. 2018; Brinkmann et al. 2006; Castel/Dörre 2009; Schultheis/Schulz 2005; Pelizzari 2009; Sander 2012).

What is important in this context is that Castel by no means disputes the relevance of social exclusion for contemporary societies in general. Rather, he wants to reserve the term, both theoretically and analytically, for social groups that are assigned a special status as a result of resentment and intentional policy, which permanently sets them apart from 'mainstream society'. According to Castel, exclusion is defined by a) complete (physical) exclusion from society, as in the case of the Spanish Jews or the Moors, which in the worst case can lead to genocide; b) the construction of closed-off facilities in which, for example, criminals, lepers or the mentally ill are separated from the rest of society, in which they nevertheless remain, and c) the moment from which the assignment of a status occurs, which allows certain classes to coexist within the community, but which robs them of "certain rights and opportunities to participate in certain social activities" (Castel 2008: 81).

Castel does not (case a), or only to a limited extent (cases b and c), see anything of this kind taking place in the welfare state capitalisms of continental Europe. In his view, most scenarios that are defined as exclusion in sociological discourse in fact follow different logics: "In most cases, it is social vulnerability caused by a degradation of employment relations and the associated social security or, in short: the crisis of 'work-centred society' [*Arbeitsgesellschaft*]. One may speak of precarisation, vulnerability or marginalisation in this context, but not of exclusion [...] The need for such a distinction implies neither that these situations of exclusion as such are not a serious matter, nor that the risk of exclusion does not exist today. They are by all means to be taken seriously, for they contribute to a general destabilisation of society. Correspondingly, those segments of the population are growing that suffer from deficient integration concerning employment, housing, education, culture etc., and for whom, we could say, the threat of exclusion is very real. These processes of marginalisation, then, can ultimately lead to exclusion in the actual sense of the term, i.e. an explicitly discriminating treatment of these social groups" (ibid.: 83).

III. On the political construction of new underclasses

When comparing Castel's concept of precarity to a differential concept of exclusion, as Kronauer proposes, the common aspects are immediately clear. Kronauer's multi-dimensional concept refers primarily to groups located in the proximity to the social welfare status. To Castel and those whose analyses build on him (Dörre 2005; Brinkmann 2006; Dörre et al. 2013), individuals who are 'decoupled' or 'disaffiliated' (*désaffilé*) constitute, so to speak, the lowest reference point of precarity. They represent the counterpart to the underclass in the United States, albeit less socio-structurally entrenched and politically by no means entirely excluded. The formation of underclasses is also the point at which the link with the classical class theories mentioned earlier surfaces. In contrast to Guy Standing's assertion, the precariat is not a class, let alone 'a class-in-the-making' (Standing 2011: 7, 2014), that could replace the organised industrial proletariat as a collective actor in social conflicts. Instead of conceiving of the precariat as a class, it seems more productive to differentiate between class- and gender-based forms of precarity (Pelizzari 2009). If we replace precariat with underclass, the chances of an accurate analysis improve. Vulnerability as a result of social proximity to the welfare status nevertheless represents a social positioning that unites members of the underclass despite otherwise highly diverse backgrounds.

III.1 At the threshold of social respectability

Pierre Bourdieu and the research group surrounding him described this social positioning quite accurately when studying the social rupture in the French *banlieues*. In *The Weight of the World*, the category of the 'outcasts on the inside' (Bourdieu et al. 1999: 421–506) is introduced. This group includes, among others, second-generation immigrants. Their experience is that educational institutions not only have significant selective effects, but that they fail to guarantee upward social advancement even in the case of successful educational careers. To Bourdieu, however, these internal outcasts represent only one specific manifestation of the tendency towards precarisation, one closely linked to the dismantling and restructuring of the welfare state. In his analysis, Bourdieu draws on categories which he originally developed in the context of his study of (post-)colonial Algerian society. In his work *Algeria 1960* (1979), Bourdieu describes the appropriation of an economic habitus that engenders forms of calculating behaviour, which in turn are indispensable for rational behaviour in capitalist markets.

Studying the Kabyle society and its transformation process as a living laboratory, then, Bourdieu finds that the opportunities to adopt dispositions of economic rationality compatible with market society are distributed unevenly. The precondition of rational economic behaviour in capitalist market societies is that "the whole of existence be organized in relation to an absent,

imaginary vanishing point" (Bourdieu 1979, p. 7). The radical orientation towards the future that characterises capitalism as a social formation must be internalised and become an organic component of one's existence. As an internalised economic mindset, capitalism acts as a 'fateful force' (Weber 1992) that subordinates the lives of individuals to sober and rational objectives based on precise, quantifiable calculations (Sombart 1928: 329). In this context, Bourdieu points to two thresholds that mark the boundaries between distinct levels of social security: "Permanent employment and regular income, together with the whole set of assurances about the future which they guarantee, bring people on to what we may call the *security plateau*" (Bourdieu 1979: 54). Below this first threshold, we find unstable forms of work and life. Above it, the prime goal of people's economic activity "remains the satisfaction of needs" and improvement of social security. An actual entrepreneurial and market-compatible mindset that allows one to gear one's existence to the future, however, only becomes possible when a "*threshold of calculability* (or enterprise)" is reached, which is "marked by possession of incomes sufficient to overcome the concern with simple subsistence" (ibid.).

Strikingly, Bourdieu makes implicit reference to a third threshold. This threshold marks the outer limit of social respectability and appreciation by others. It is indicated by an institutionalised welfare status. Below this threshold of respectability, autonomous social reproduction becomes impossible without the assistance of the community or society. So to say, the social welfare status epitomises society's zone of exclusion. Anyone situated in the social proximity to the welfare status almost inevitably becomes the target of negative (e.g., sexist or racist) classifications that are always linked to the welfare status and may well lead to social exclusion. Wherever social conditions solidify that are located around or below this threshold of respectability, we may speak of the emergence of socially devalued underclasses.

Thresholds of respectability, security and calculability exist in all modern capitalist societies. They may change in relation to the level of wealth in these societies, they may be contested and can shift depending on socio-economic developments, welfare state institutions, symbolic as well as political struggles, but they do nevertheless exist. They even exist in the regulated welfare state capitalisms of continental Europe. The rationalisation of people's private life conduct has progressed tremendously in the advanced capitalisms, the economic habitus has proliferated across class and gender boundaries, and there is hardly an area of life that is spared the calculating rationality of capitalist commodity exchange.

III.2. The formation of underclasses through devaluation

Yet the formation of new underclasses in the capitalist metropoles does not follow a natural law. Their emergence and consolidation are based on the formation of political blocs, through which social elites, in alliance with segments of the 'performing' middle and working classes, revoke their solidarity with and the protection of the allegedly 'unproductive', 'superfluous' members of the new underclasses. The same process is additionally and substantially advanced by government policies of demarcation, which—be it intentionally or be it implicitly—amount to the collective depreciation of the most vulnerable groups in society.

In order to better understand this notion, a brief digression into Bourdieu's theory of the state is appropriate. Distinguishing his approach from Marxist political theories—albeit based on a highly selective representation thereof—Bourdieu argues that the state is not an actor but rather a 'well-founded illusion', a 'place that exists essentially because people believe that it exists' (Bourdieu 2014: 10). That is why 'all sentences that have the state as subject are theological sentences' (ibid.). In order to avoid theology, Bourdieu suggests substituting "for the state the acts that can be called acts of 'state'—putting 'state' in quotes" (ibid.). This idea can be harnessed for an analysis of the political production of new underclasses. Bourdieu defines the state as the "monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence" (Bourdieu 2014: 66), whose most universal of all functions includes "the production and canonization of social classifications" (ibid.: 10). State institutions and actors have a classifying effect, for example, by establishing standards of normality and thus shifting and cementing a society's threshold of social respectability. Underclasses emerge in regulated welfare state capitalisms when entire population segments are permanently forced below the threshold of social respectability as a result of carefully designed scarcity and symbolic devaluation. Depending on the varying policies and welfare state regimes, class formation through demarcation and symbolic devaluation can, however, manifest in very different ways.

In France, the social rift can be situated spatially; the demarcation vis-à-vis the underclasses takes place in the form of *socio-spatial isolation and separation*. Whoever lives in the suburbs, the *banlieues*, moves below the threshold of respectability and stands almost no chance of making the leap into the society of respected citizens even with a good education. Those affected include, above all, but not only, immigrants who originally came from the French colonies, as well as their children and grandchildren. The demarcation initially occurs within civil society and via struggles over classification at the interface of the border regime. These struggles around classification were and are being fuelled by ethno-pluralist ideologemes that replace notions of racist purity with those of cultural identity (Taguieff 1991: 221–268). Corresponding

interpretative frames combine class-specific and cultural traits and thus contribute to the ethnicisation of the social, entailing the collective devaluation of an allegedly 'useless' underclass dominated by immigrants.

While those living in the French suburbs represent groups of 'internal outcasts' who do not entirely drop out of the social security systems, in the United States we encounter an underclass that experiences the state primarily in the form of a repressive authority. Here, we find the mechanism of *demarcation through criminalisation*. Over the course of 40 years, the number of prison inmates has grown fivefold, most of them poor people of colour. One in nine young African-American men are incarcerated; about 60 percent of those who never graduate from high school have been to prison by their mid-30s (Goffman 2014: xiii). In such a scenario, contact between the state and members of the underclasses can easily turn into armed confrontation. Time and again, police use the slightest excuse (if any) to employ deadly force against unarmed people of colour, as they identify the latter—precisely because of their complexion—as members of the dangerous, threatening classes. These conflicts have been escalating for a long time. They have sparked uprisings and riots by the black community and, in some isolated cases, the 'outcasts' have now started to shoot back at the police.

The formation of underclasses may also take place in a far more subtle way, however. For example, it may emerge as a result of a gradual *proliferation of* badly paid, barely acknowledged and thus *'undignified' labour*. A glance behind the façade of the so-called German 'job miracle' illustrates what this means. Over the course of a decade, a precarious full-employment society has emerged in Germany. A decreasing volume of paid working hours is asymmetrically distributed to a record number of economically active people. For large groups in society today, integration into the labour market occurs via non-standardised, precarious, badly paid, barely acknowledged work with few to no participatory rights (Allmendinger et al. 2018; Dörre et al. 2018).

The mobilisation for 'undignified' labour occurs in accordance with the logic of the activating labour market regime, in which the receipt of social benefits indicates the threshold of social respectability. In this regime, the entitlement to receive assistance is endlessly tested, ultimately determining whether or not one's leap into the society of respected citizens can succeed. The receipt of benefits is staged as a contest in which those who are successful set the standards: these standards then serve as an orientation or a norm for those who have thus far failed to make the leap into a better position. The vast majority of recipients proactively expend great efforts to exit their welfare status. Yet despite these best efforts, most respondents fail to secure regular

employment. What we see instead is a kind of *circular mobility*. Ingresses into benefit receipt and the number of people coming off benefits show a high fluctuation. However, this should not be confused with a functioning avenue for upward social mobility. In fact, it involves oscillating between precarious employment, publicly subsidised work and unemployment. Although in Germany the number of long-term unemployed persons declined by about 40 percent between 2006 and 2011, and has remained at that level ever since, there is a solid core of about one million people who have not left the welfare status in a decade. In 2014, a total of 4.4 million people were dependent on social benefits; 3.1 million of them were long-term benefit recipients. Only half of benefit recipients were unemployed; only 770,000 of the 4.4 million were both long-term unemployed and long-term benefit recipients.

Behind these figures lies the consolidation of social circumstances at the threshold of social respectability. The longer people remain on benefits, the greater the pressure to adopt a habitus that is not anticipated in Bourdieu's class analysis. Those affected develop a habitus of survival which sets them apart from the rest of society. For the most part, this is not to be understood in the physical sense. As the status of benefit recipient continues, individuals are forced to come to terms with a situation of material scarcity, a lack of social recognition and strict bureaucratic surveillance of their everyday life. In the very act of coming to terms with this situation they further separate themselves from the rest of society. Once separated, their way of life becomes an even better target for collective devaluation by mainstream society. It is precisely because benefit recipients adapt to adverse conditions that they become the target of negative classifications by so-called 'mainstream society'.

III.3 Employment orientations of obstinate 'clients'

We have empirically researched what underclass formation in Germany means subjectively under this strict regime in a seven-year follow-up study.[4] One element of the justificatory order of the system of competition of activating labour market policy is its promise of raising benefit recipients' willingness to accept work as well as improving their chances of finding employment. Yet, in the context of selection procedures, the counsellors and case handlers come face to face with people who already have relatively stable views and preferences. What occurs when

[4] The study has an empirical basis in case studies across four different geographical regions of the German labour market, 95 expert interviews with labour administration staff and other regional experts as well as 188 interviews with recipients of Arbeitslosengeld II (ALG II – unemployment benefits) that were conducted in in three stages between 2006 and 2012. The study looks at benefit recipients' subjective employment orientations, individual compromises between normative orientations and actual activity, and the impact of strict rules concerning conditionality on these compromises. Cf. Dörre/Scherschel/Booth et al. 2013.

case teams with their specific objectives and obstinate clients with a previously acquired employment orientation come into contact is best understood by use of a typology of benefit recipients' subjective employment orientations which we extracted from our longitudinal study.

Depending on social background, academic career, and occupational socialisation, subjective employment orientations are the outcome of a biographical path of development. They include the respective manifestation of an 'economic habitus' (Bourdieu 1979, p. 4), a calculating way of thinking (Sombart 1928), that is to say, the internalisation of a capitalist 'spirit' as a precondition for rational behaviour on markets, especially on the labour market. A subjective employment orientation, however, amounts to more than just this latent, seemingly primarily spontaneous and unconscious mindset. To the extent that they are part of a subjective employment orientation, these 'habitualised' patterns of acting and thinking are embedded in socio-moral evaluations and explicit demands for paid work that can be identified in interviews. The internalisation of the socially hegemonic obligation to earn a living (moving from 'you have to work!' to 'I want to work!') produces a norm that mediates between the latent and the explicit mindset. Accordingly, our typology of subjective employment orientation encompasses three dimensions of work consciousness: the occupational concept, the normative employment orientation, and the individual compromise arrangements, which, depending on the anticipated chances, mediate between the norm and the concept of occupation; thus combined they become the dominant processing mode, 'cross-cutting' through the different types (cf. Table 1).

Our findings indicate anything but a decline of a work ethic and middle-class virtues. The benefit recipients for the most part are quite self-motivated to quickly find work by their own efforts. To them, regular employment that allows for an independent life represents the norm which they do not wish to call into question. However, this is not an achievement of the new labour market regime and its new test formats. Rather, despite the experience of unemployment lasting for several years, respondents nevertheless retain subjective employment orientations that they have developed completely *independently* of the system of competition of *Fordern und Fördern*. Their main goal is to exit from the test format associated with 'Hartz IV' altogether and to reach a position above the threshold of respectability. While being obliged to undergo the tests of the new labour market regime, they mostly find them neither reasonable nor just.

Table 1: Employment Orientations of Basic Social Security Recipients – Types and Subtypes

CORE CRITERIA	WORKERS AT-ANY-COST	AS-IF WORKERS	NON-WORKERS
Form of employment	Centrality of employment norm Paid work (remains) as centre of activity Handed down or lived normality of paid work First experiences of precarity Future expectations characterised by hope and confidence No "coming to terms" with unemployment	Relativisation of employment norm Experience of regular paid work Manifest experience of precarity Sense of the future ranges between hope and pessimism Ambivalent relationship to paid work (means of integration and source of insecurity)	Rejection of employment norm Distanced from labour market Vague idea of regular paid work No experience of paid work and loss of employment- related skills Lack of expectations for the future
Activity concept	Activism, sense of feasibility	Reintegration strategies: secondary labour market and alternative roles	Reintegration strategies: social networks and alternative roles
Method of dealing with situation	Untiring pursuit of paid work	Reinterpretation	Ignoring the employment norm
Socio-demographic characteristics	Medium and higher educational qualifications Labour market integration Age: 30 to 40	Medium and higher (but outdated) educational and vocational qualifications Unemployment and training measures Age: 40 to 60	No or low educational and vocational qualifications Long-term unemployment Age: 40 to 60
Sub-type I	The promising	The socially committed	The aimless
Experience of paid work	Good jobs and first experience of precarity	Succession of training measures and voluntary work	No experience of paid work
Anticipated chances	Precarity as an opportunity for and prospect of succeeding in own project	Little hope of integration into labour market	Vague sense of the future
Sub-type II	The no-alternatives	The pseudo-employed	The resigned
Experience of paid work	Varied experiences of precarious labour market integration	Succession of training measures and precarity	Experience of paid work long ago
Anticipated chances	Precarity as last option	Hope of integrating into secondary labour market	Resigned sense of the future

In order to pass the tests to a satisfactory degree, the respondents cannot help but discipline themselves in some way or another. One form of *self-disciplining* is a show of excessive activity. Benefit recipients that we designated as the type of *workers at-any-cost* (type 1) will, regardless of the strictness of the rules concerning conditionality, accept almost any gainful activity that improves their position, and which may spare them a life below the threshold of respectability. They often perceive the Job Centre's measures as unnecessary or even as harassment, since the only thing they are really looking for – regular employment ensuring their own living standard above a minimum cultural standard – is not on offer there. The second form of self-disciplining amounts to resigning oneself to adverse conditions. Benefit recipients belonging to the type of *as-if-workers* (type 2) would very much like to enter regular employment, yet they have no chance of doing so on the job market and thus have to accept alternatives to regular employment

instead. They do not view publicly subsidised occupations such as *Ein-Euro-Jobs* as punishment. Rather, these opportunities to work allow them to maintain a front of normality. Proactive initiatives, be they volunteer work or a paid part-time job, are subjectively reinterpreted so as to resemble forms of regular employment. Indeed, this way the tensions between the norm of gainful employment and the occupational concept can be eased to some degree, but they can never be fully removed. The attitude towards the official selection tests is correspondingly ambivalent. The test formats may be accepted for the most part because 'regular gainful employment', as a normative orientation, is at most qualified, but not fully invalidated subjectively. But the longer the period of unemployment, the experience of precarious jobs, and the alternative to real employment lasts, the stronger is the awareness of lack of opportunities for oneself, which puts both the occupational concept as well as the normative employment orientation under pressure to change. Only those respondents whom we designated as *non-workers* (type 3) have actually broken with the hegemonic norm of gainful employment, or have, temporarily, suspended it subjectively. There are different reasons for this. Women whom we interviewed who have received social welfare benefits (*Sozialhilfe*) for many years and have never been economically active were in many cases not even capable of forming an orientation towards employment.

The development of an orientation towards employment is equally (temporarily) blocked in adolescents who enter into subcultures and who turn the necessity of an anticipated lack of opportunities into a virtue by presenting themselves as consciously refusing work. Another different set of cases includes those in which illnesses or strain, due to precarious employment circumstances, have over time wrecked the subjective employment orientation**.** There is also a small number of 'politically unemployed' who base their entire social identity on the unemployed status. Finally, there are those benefit recipients, particularly in rural regions, who combine benefit payments with moonlighting, managing quite well. Yet these respondents must always fear sanctions should their activities be discovered. This is just one more indicator that it is barely possible for anyone to really get comfortable in the 'Hartz IV hammock'.

In contrast to what is implied in the debate on the underclass, a large majority of our interviewees does not give any reason to assume that they are renouncing the norm of gainful employment. Rather, the opposite is the case. Even if one already anticipates, or is already fully aware, that the chances of making the leap into reasonably attractive gainful employment no longer exist, that norm is still largely held on to. Such fundamental attitudes have no truck with an education-oriented aspiration towards social advancement as can be commonly observed

among members of the middle class. But then again, this hardly comes as a surprise. As would be the case with most people, the respondents favour sustainable biographical action strategies which "aim at sustaining *a familiar social position* and *lifestyle* in the broadest sense, both morally and materially" (Vester 2011, p. 57). For a majority of our respondents who have previously held a job, however, 'Hartz IV' represents a social decline that they are having a hard time coming to terms with. This is why they are so anxious to maintain not only the reproductive standards they demand with regard to employment but also their particular subjective standards concerning content and quality of work. The interviewees do not act at all like people who give absolute priority to material values in periods of scarcity. Even in a situation in life marked by serious material deprivation, many respondents aspire to social recognition and indeed self-development and leading an independent life. It is only after these aspirations cannot be redeemed (any longer) within the occupational sphere that they are projected onto alternative activities and alternative roles.

The desire to actively influence their own life circumstances shapes the respondents' occupational concept. In stark contrast to the stereotype of the 'lazy unemployed', most benefit recipients are markedly active. Respondents must work very hard to change their situation, or even to organise their life in a somewhat viable way. The hierarchization of their activities, however, is dictated by outside forces to a large extent. A *mini-job* and obligatory internship can easily add up to a 48-hour week at times. On top of this, there are the demands of family life and child-rearing. As our follow-up research indicates, most respondents are not making any headway whatsoever, despite all their efforts. Only a tiny minority of respondents in our sample has actually managed to enter into fairly stable employment. The larger part by far remains, both professionally and socially, at the exact same stage where they had been during our first inquiry. For a small group of benefit recipients, particularly among the (single) self-employed, even a downward development can be observed – despite a favourable economic situation. What is also clear is that after having been in a situation of unemployment and precarity for years, those affected virtually burn out. With no realistic chance of a fundamental improvement in their lives, the subjective drive for social advancement gradually falls by the wayside.

As a consequence, the benefit recipients interviewed consider themselves to be members of a *stigmatised minority* who are forced to do whatever they can to establish or maintain a connection to social normality, for which the state sets the norm. 'Hartz IV' constitutes a status that

entails a similar effect for benefit recipients as skin colour does in the case of racist discrimination or gender in the case of sexist discrimination. The unemployed and precariously employed are discreditable; once attributed the stigma of 'Hartz IV', it becomes very difficult to get rid of it. The logic of 'Hartz IV' ('Any job is better than no job!') requires abandoning certain aspirations concerning the quality of work and life—aspirations which could in fact motivate increased proactivity. When circular mobility produces attrition, standards and aspirations are lowered—and this is precisely what ultimately causes resignation and passivity. In this sense, the social reform referred to as 'Hartz IV' has the exact opposite effect of what it intended to achieve. Initiated and imposed from above, as a class project by those at the top and centre of the social pyramid, the activation regime leads—through social and cultural devaluation—to the formation of underclasses at the bottom.

IV. Social exclusion—class-theoretical perspectives

All the idiosyncrasies of the outlined mechanisms of the activating labour market regime aside, what this illustrates is the formation of underclasses in affluent societies.

IV.1 Competing classes

In advanced capitalisms, classes, including underclasses, are competing classes (1). They arise from rivalry and competition, as the product of political measures and symbolic demarcations. That is why these classes are not socially homogeneous. In Germany, the underclass is by no means identical with 'the long-term unemployed'. Only about 53 percent of working-age benefit recipients are unemployed, while 25 percent supplement their income with 'Hartz IV' benefits (the so-called '*Aufstocker*'). At least 50.8 percent of benefit recipients have completed vocational training or even obtained a master craftsman's certificate, 7.2 per cent have a polytechnical degree (Beste et al. 2014). And yet, this does nothing to change the position of those concerned at (or below) the threshold of social respectability. The activating labour market regime, so to speak, 'forcibly homogenises' all benefit recipients—who otherwise differ strongly with regard to social background, occupational biography, educational level, age, family situation and social networks—through the social welfare status.

This politically constructed levelling leads (2) to *tensions and strategies of distinction*. The mechanism of competition takes hold among the underclasses, too. For that reason alone, the number of people belonging to the underclass cannot be accurately determined. In the struggles surrounding distinction, which often target the 'lazy unemployed', the 'social freeloader' or the

'labour immigrant', the aim is to at least symbolically shift the threshold of respectability. In the immediate social vicinity, say, within sight, of the '*Aufstocker*' and unemployed benefit recipients, the struggles for distinction are fought out particularly fiercely. In constant flux as they are, the upper and lower boundaries delineating the underclasses keep blurring. At the top end, there are overlaps with precarious workers and a service proletariat whose occupations provide—despite uncertainty and low income—opportunities for positive identification, particularly in the social and care sectors. Below the level of 'Hartz IV' benefits are the illegal immigrants, the informally employed, the homeless and beggars to whom benefit receipt is a desirable welfare state promise. Even though there is no evidence of any widespread 'benefit fraud' or 'welfare fraud' among these groups (IAB 2014), Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants, among them many Roma, incarnate the often-invoked 'Lowest of the Low' of the underclass society.

Such strategies of devaluation illustrate that underclasses (3) only ever exist *as part of a process and in (inter-)relation to other classes*. Precisely because of their—real or assumed—willingness to actively adapt to the most adverse conditions, underclasses increasingly become a security problem for the still relatively secure groups of wage earners. Whoever is situated in the proximity of social welfare or even acquiesces to benefit dependence, is surrendering themselves, in the eyes of unionised blue- and white-collar workers, to a situation of extreme alienation. In fact, there are trade union activists who react to such forms of adjustment with downright disgust. Here, the mere inkling that a comprehensive subordination to utter heteronomy and the permanent dependence on others is actually feasible and liveable, that there can actually be a subjective surrender of the entire set of activities that mitigate alienation and exploitation, causes the collective devaluation and stigmatisation of those affected by this classification (Dubet 2008). Individuals and groups who resign themselves to a situation of total alienation and heteronomy, seemingly without resistance, represent a latent or even manifest threat to any kind of wage earners' solidarity, particularly from the perspective of unionised workers. Such groups are met with exclusive solidarity that seeks dissociation not only from the top, i.e. 'capital', 'the employer' or 'the board', but also from the 'other' or 'the bottom' (Dörre et al. 2018). The symbolic demarcations illustrate that the world of the precarious and 'outcasts' can no longer be kept separate from the world of the still somewhat secure wage labour. If not at one's own workplace, this menacing reality looms at the plant down the road or even in one's neighbourhood.

One fundamental problem those subjected to negative classification face is that class positions which arise largely from negative classifications (4) are unsuitable as the foundation of a positive collective identity. What is noticeable is that a considerable proportion of the respondents in our study have difficulties when asked to position themselves in society. The unemployed and precariously employed complain about discrimination, but most of them would not describe themselves as poor, nor would they agree to being grouped with the lower levels of society. When asked, some ostentatiously place themselves 'in the middle'. Others essentially have no real connection with society anymore; their world consists of a limited sphere of select social contacts and relationships; whatever occurs beyond this microcosm is simply irrelevant to them. The fact that members of the underclass refuse to use terms such as poverty or lower strata, etc., to describe their position can likely be explained by the negative connotations of these labels. Our respondents' fear seemed to be that they might place even more strain on their already difficult situation by referring to it with 'contaminated' language.

Official politics is no longer part of their lives, as it does not concern their own everyday environment. When respondents do indicate political values or judgements, they commonly follow a situational, affective, emotionally charged logic. Conspiracy theories and a tendency to personalise are ubiquitous. The negative class ethos conceals logical inconsistencies and contradictions concerning political positions (in the broadest sense). One exception, if there is an exception, are those respondents who volunteer in unemployed groups or other political organisations. And, here again, to them, their own activities become heavily morally charged, causing a constant oscillation between the vehement demand for attention for their own issues, and deep frustration in the case of real or assumed dismissal of such requests. What we can establish is that neither underclass nor precarity currently provide an associative framework of interpretation from which a positive identity of the 'declassed' may arise.

IV.2 Precarious full-employment society

Facilitated by the mechanisms outlined above, a precarious full-employment society has emerged in Germany (Dörre et al. 2013; Dörre 2014: 28, 33). That is to say, mass unemployment is made to 'disappear' through an increase in wage labour and simultaneous expansion of uncertain, badly paid and poorly recognised employment (Castel 2011). The statistics section of the yearbook '*Gute Arbeit*' ('Good Work') provides evidence that this trend, which has been ongoing since 2005, continues to this day (Reusch et al. 2019). The official unemployment rate, which had reached its peak at 11.7 percent in 2005, receded to below five percent on average by 2018. Simultaneously, the number of economically active people reached a new record high

of about 45 million in 2018. Between 1991 and 2017, the number of wage earners rose from 35.227 million to about 40 million. And yet, the volume of paid working hours, which reached a low point in 2010 (47.845 million hours), in 2017 (50.930 million hours) still remained below 1991 levels (52.098 million hours).

The German 'job miracle' thus largely rests on a strongly asymmetrical distribution of an—at best—stagnating volume of paid working hours relative to a markedly increased number of economically active people. While the number of full-time positions declined from about 29 million in 1991 to roughly 24 million by 2017 (low point: 2010, 22.825 million), the share of part-time positions sharply increased (1991: 17.1 per cent; 2017: 39.1 per cent). Despite favourable economic and demographic developments, atypical, insecure and badly paid forms of employment have receded only slightly since 2010, while the share of temporary employment has gone up (Reusch et al. 2019: 294). The number of so-called 'mini jobs' was still at 7.5 million in 2017. Some 4.7 million of these jobs constituted the sole source of income (ibid.: 289). While the low-wage sector consistently accounts for about 22 to 24 percent, and in the East even as high as 37 percent of wage earners, the neglected labour reserve remained at about six million in 2014 (2.1 million unemployed, 2.9 million underemployed, one million silent reserve). If we were to add the working hours sought by underemployed wage earners (Fischer et al. 2015), unemployment would be about twice that of today's official figures. Alongside statistical 'adjustments', the German 'job miracle' to a large extent rests on the artificial 'disappearance' of official unemployment through the expansion of insecure, badly paid and poorly recognised work.

Like other plagues in the past, the coronavirus pandemic has in many ways acted as an amplifier of inequality and driver of precarisation. As if under a spotlight, the disease reveals all those social uncertainties and inequalities that modern capitalist societies have been (re)producing for a long time. And it adds new dividing lines to the old ones. The previously existing inequalities included the socially unequal distribution of health risks now linked to COVID-19 infections. The fact that health risks can be correlated with one's personal social circumstances is undisputed. And the coronavirus pandemic is no exception. Although the SARS-CoV-2 virus generally poses a threat to everybody, not everyone is affected in the same way. By now, it is obvious what virology and related scientific disciplines were initially unable to ascertain due to insufficient data: as the German Robert Koch Institute has noted, the risk of infection is particularly high wherever material hardship and crowded living conditions make social distancing almost impossible. If we 'trace the infection chains', we come upon precarious working conditions,

overcrowded living quarters and neighbourhoods with high proportions of people living off social welfare benefits. The 'zone of precarity', which, despite the alleged 'job miracle', in Germany comprises at least one-fifth of the economically active population (the reference figure being the 20 to 24 per cent of all wage earners working in the low-wage sector), provides the social space for Corona hotspots.

IV.3 Excursus: Underclass formation in the demobilized class society

How is the underclass to be located in the social structure of German society? At present, we encounter a class society in which a positive consciousness of class membership – such as worker and producer pride – is barely present in the wage-earning classes. The reasons can be illustrated with the help of a heuristic (Fig. 1), which differentiates classes on the basis of their control over the means of production, the derived power of control over persons, which also includes ideological power and appropriated social property.[5] Using the aforementioned criteria, six classes can be distinguished on the basis of a 2018 data set (n= 19,964) and a supplementary data set based on a population survey from the spring of 2022, four of which (old and new middle class, new and conventional wage labour class) each produce their own zones of exclusion, characterized by a below-average endowment of social capital. The new underclass, which we have added on the basis of the criterion "unemployed poor", is entirely below a threshold of social respectability, i.e., it is largely excluded from access to social capital tied to gainful employment. The non-employed do not form a class of their own, but rather a cross-section that cannot be clearly located socially. The proportion of the non-employed is more realistically represented in the H2Well[6]data set than with BIBB/BAuA[7]; on the other hand, the underclass is missing in the second data set because the number of unemployed persons was so small that it was not possible to quantify this class.

The distributions depicted in the class heuristics illustrate what studies on global inequalities describe at the international level. The relative losers of globalization are the industrial labour force and, because their activities are often locally bound, the service proletariat of the old capitalist centres. Thus, the zone of exclusion of the conventional working class, measured by atypical employment and a precarious wage (less than two-thirds of the average gross wage),

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[5] According to Robert Castel, social property is a form of ownership which, in the form of social rights, collective bargaining standards and opportunities for co-determination, gives wage earners something that was previously exclusively linked to private property - the chance to plan their lives for the longer term.
[6] H2Well is the abbreviation for an ongoing research project dealing with the environmental awareness of the population and the acceptance of a hydrogen economy. A population survey and several qualitative surveys have taken place as part of the project.
[7] BiBB is the abbreviation for the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, which conducted a large survey together with the Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (BAuA), which we used for a secondary analysis.

is almost as large as that part which sets the class-specific standards of normality. The transitions to the new underclass are accordingly fluid. This shows that even in comparatively rich societies such as Germany, exploitation and overexploitation exist in numerous variations simultaneously and side by side. These are class societies, each of which forms its own peripheries and zones of exclusion. The interactions between these areas often mean that the permanent employees are disciplined by the precarious parts of their own or other classes. Temporary workers are thus motivated by the dream of making the leap into the protected permanent workforce; the nightmare of permanent employees, on the other hand, is of falling back into a temporary work position. But there is nothing the members of both groups fear more than falling into the socially devalued underclass. In this way, a regime of mutual discipline and control is created, in which permanent employment becomes a privilege that regular employees try to defend tooth and nail.

Fig. 1: Graphical representation of division by class

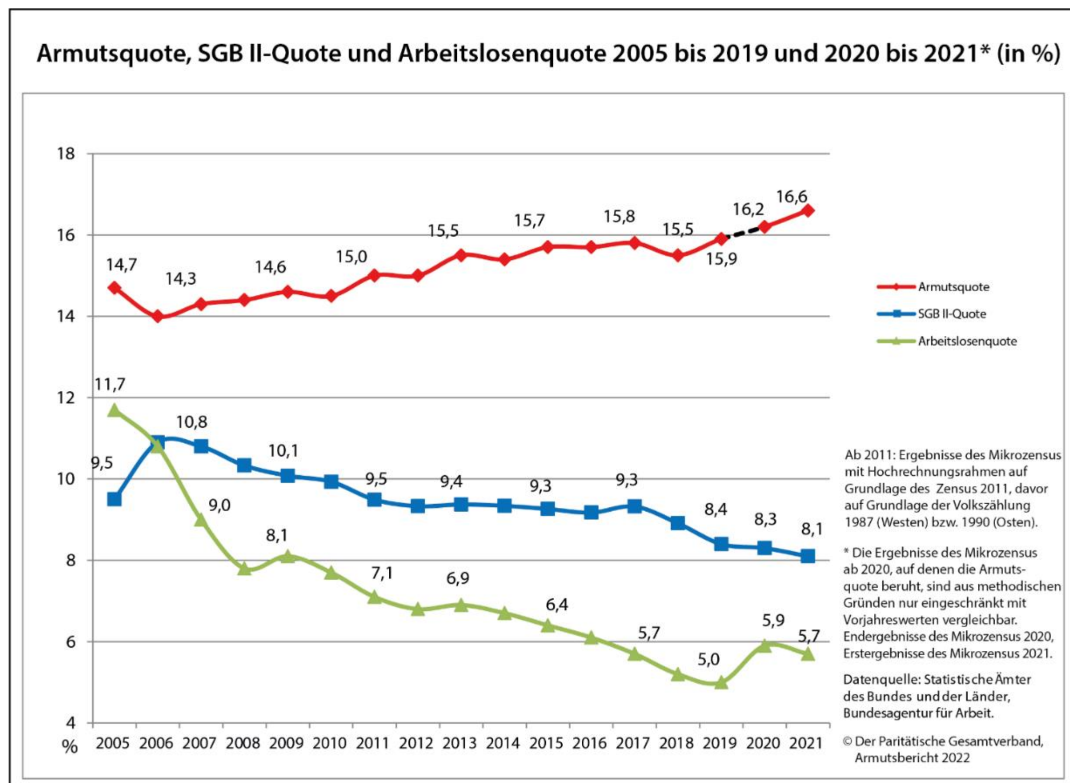
	BIBB/BAuA		H2Well	
	Proportion	Number	Proportion	Number
Ruling class	1.3%	337	-	-
Old middle class	5.5%	1,460	5.8%	64
Zone of exclusion old middle class	1.9%	490	0.9%	11
New middle class	15.7%	4,182	11.2%	124
Zone of exclusion new middle class	4.7%	1,243	1.9%	21
New working class	9.6%	2,531	7.3%	81
Zone of exclusion new working class	2.6%	682	1.5%	17
Conventional working class	18.2%	4,823	21.7%	241
Zone of exclusion conventional working class	15.9%	4,216	6.6%	73
New underclass	3.3%	*	-	-
non-employed	21.4%	*	43.0%	477
Total	100%	19,964	100%	1,109

* These two classes were not surveyed but added, therefore no numbers of cases can be given for them

From this point of view, the mere existence of a numerically comparatively small underclass produces enormous effects in socio-structural and socio-psychological terms. Together with the zones of exclusion found in every social class, it contributes to the de-collectivization of labour relations. Today, only about one third of wage earners in the EU are represented by any form of collective interest organisation (Eurofounds 2020). In many industrialized countries, the ability of trade unions to sustain themselves is acutely endangered. The sectors with organized labour relations are shrinking, while those with little or no union power are expanding. Added to this are the challenges of a digital platform economy, whose corporations are able resourcefully to evade organized representation of workers' interests. To be sure, conflicts at the shop-floor and company level are on the rise in some cases, and inflation has led to a series of strikes and mass protests in countries such as France, England, Portugal and Germany. But political consolidation of such disputes is only possible in exceptional cases. In the demobilized class societies of the capitalist centres, the political left has obviously lost its exclusive power to define the social question, and for the trade unions the question arises whether they are still able to maintain their organizational power by their own efforts and without state help at a scale that makes them capable of conflict and enforcement. The politically manufactured new underclass contributes – unintentionally – to the de-collectivization and disorganization of wage labour, because it makes it constantly palpable that the descent below the zone of respectability is a real danger for many.

To the remarks on demobilised class societies it should be added that in Germany, as in many other EU countries, we have been experiencing a serious change in the labour market for some time. The labour market has changed from a buyer's market to a supplier's market. In many sectors there is a shortage of skilled workers and labour. At the same time, inflation and the consequences of the war in Ukraine have caused the poverty rate to rise to record levels, despite a decline in unemployment and in the number of people receiving "Hartz IV" benefits – now called "Bürgergeld" following a reform (see Fig. 2). This means that the poverty zone is shifting into the area of full-time employees. This development will probably continue despite comparatively high wage settlements, and the inequality gap will widen further. According to calculations by the Institute of the German Economy (IW), which is close to employers, the Corona pandemic and the Ukraine war could lead to an average welfare loss of about 7,000 euros per capita in 2023 alone (Otte 2023). Between 2020 and 2022, the loss of purchasing power already amounted to 400 billion euros; planned investments in the order of 125 billion euros were not made (Grömling 2022).

Figure 2: Percentage of population living in poverty (red), on Hartz IV/Bürgergeld (blue) and unemployed (green) 2005 to 2019 and 2020 to 2021



What this will mean for underclass formation in the future is unclear. However, our initial research on food banks (*der Tafel*) – an institution that provides food to the needy but is not an official social policy instrument – shows that new groups have entered the zone of the excluded. Never before have the food banks received so little and such poor quality food as now, and never before has the demand been so great. Those seeking charitable food handouts include three groups in particular: the long-term unemployed, poor pensioners and migrants, including refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and African countries as well as war refugees from Ukraine. Our working hypothesis is that there will be a further recomposition of the underclasses; the threshold of respectability will again be readjusted – how exactly is an open question that can only be answered by means of empirical research.

V. Requirements for a critical theory of underclass formation

In order to assess the possibility and likelihood of points of transition to collective (class) action in the 'zone of precarity', we require a critical theory of social underclasses. An understanding of class formation through exclusion and precarisation would have to be at the heart of such a

theory, breaking with an objectified, ideologically distorted view that 'naturally' burdens members of the underclass with negative classifications. Instead—fully in the spirit of the Marxian class theory, and yet going beyond it—such a theory would have to critically consider the socioeconomic and political causes of exclusion. The aim of such a theory would be to strengthen the confidence of the underclasses, enabling them not only to cope with but to change their own lives—based on solidarity. In my view, any theoretical approach that could offer as much would have to address three specific aspects:

Firstly, the fact that members of the new underclasses have not been identical with the classic '*Lumpenproletariat*' for a long time. Most of the time, we are talking about people who are fully capable of working, but who are being deprived of the basic means of reproduction. Robert Castel saw this very clearly (Castel 2008). Considering that the zone of exclusion has been moved closer to the zones of inclusion as a result of the *Landnahme* of the social and the curtailing of public goods, this must have certain implications for the self-understanding of critical social work as well. Social work cannot function as a repair shop, fixing and compensating for what deficient social security systems fail to provide. Exploited in these activities time and again, social workers are themselves part of the exploited subaltern. By exercising bureaucratic power or participating in such functions, however, they can also become exploited exploiters and dominant subaltern. In short: they are located in a middle-class position that is characterised by its structural contradictoriness. This is why they are not necessarily perceived as allies by members of the underclasses, but rather as representatives of (state) authority.

Secondly, this can only change if the alleged uselessness of the seemingly 'superfluous' is challenged both symbolically and politically. This necessarily entails conceiving of work not only as gainful employment, and of exploitation not only as taking advantage of wage earners, but rather construing both more broadly. Social groups located in the proximity to the welfare status are usually anything but 'lazy' or 'passive'. In fact, they often have to work especially hard to manage their situation. What their specific activities are, however, is determined to a considerable extent by state authorities. Part-time employment and obligatory work placements can easily add up to a 48-hour week at times. On top of this, there are the demands of family life and child-rearing. There is a powerful motive behind all these activities. To the respondents in our study, it appeared as if they could realistically reach the next level up in the social hierarchy, promising a modicum of social normality, on their own steam. Despite the already slim chances of upward social mobility, the government-staged competitive benefit system additionally suf-

focates the proactive initiative of those threatened by exclusion. In publicly subsidised employment, they provide their labour power, either voluntarily or forcibly—at any rate, very cheaply—for all kinds of public tasks. The private sector, for its part, exploits low-wage workers who then have to supplement their insufficient income with social benefits. Unpaid volunteer work and civic engagement, say, in a sports club, a charity store or in a hospice, may contribute to general social cohesion, but it does little to meaningfully improve the status of those doing the work. The same applies to care activities, which may well reward those performing them with a sense of fulfilment, but, again, barely bring them any closer to a position of social 'normality'. The self-directed activity of people who can be classified as the new underclasses marks a crucial difference vis-à-vis the unemployed of the Weimar era as depicted in the famous Marienthal study. Countless activities outside of protected wage labour, however, are based on unequal exchange, which could well be construed as taking advantage of bureaucratically decreed exploitation (Haubner 2017). This kind of unequal exchange can be challenged once the performed work hidden in the transaction is publicly exposed and the devalued workers or integrated outcasts are appreciated both symbolically and in real terms. A positive self-confidence of members of the underclasses could arise precisely from such a 'proof of performance', based not primarily on paid (wage) labour, but on a much wider range of work activities, i.e. on the recognition of socially valuable work in the broadest sense.

Such a self-confidence would, *thirdly*, find the support of a critical social theory that makes the formation of (under-)class formation in the zone of exclusion its central object of study. Theories of capitalist *Landnahme*, which essentially rest on the assumption that the capitalist dynamic relies on the constant internalisation of an external (non-capitalist) 'Other' (Luxemburg 2015: 256–257; Harvey 2018; Dörre 2015), may prove fruitful in this endeavour. Such a theoretical framework helps map out the zone of exclusion more comprehensively. One promising approach, as proposed by Silvia Federici (2004), may be to analyse two distinct *modes of production*, one of which is being increasingly subordinated to the other. The dominant capitalist mode of production, in which human labour power is used for the profit-oriented production of goods and services, is inextricably linked to a mode of production that serves the creation and regeneration of labour power. Even in Germany, the capability of the export sector relies on a particularly pronounced form of collective devaluation of both paid and unpaid care work (Dörre et al. 2014; Aulenbacher et al. 2014). The provision of care services as a public good additionally comes under pressure because of a lack of publicly funded solvent demand. The political response to the rising challenges in the sphere of reproductive activities has been the orchestration of quasi-markets in which private and public providers effectively compete via

wage-costs. The outcome includes workload increases, the precarisation of employment relations, recurring shortages of skilled workers and reallocating the responsibility for providing care work to private households. This is one of the causal mechanisms contributing to the structural formation of (under-)classes in proximity to the welfare status.

From the perspective of a theory of continuous *Landnahmen*, the new underclasses constitute a proactively politically created, non-commodified (or at least not fully commodified) 'Other', which at the same time turns out to be instrumental in securing domination in capitalist societies. In the context of such theories, the new underclasses are no longer to be construed as a 'Lazarus layer', but as a social force that is doubtlessly capable of self-organising and forging coalitions with working and middle classes. As Göran Therborn (2012) at least hints in his remarkable call for a 'return of class', such a perspective may become significant beyond the capitalist centres: in the rich countries of the global North, he argues, a comprehensive process of deindustrialisation has led to a decline in the labour force, its power resources and organisations. For this reason, the industrial labour force in the advanced capitalist countries increasingly see themselves as a major social group in social decline. The growing working classes in the emerging countries, by contrast, are faced with the very real vision of climbing up the social ladder and becoming part of the expanding middle classes. One consequence of this, according to Therborn, is that the focal point of the conflict dynamic shifts either towards the educated groups, who are nevertheless partially without professional opportunities or prospects, or towards those plebeian masses who dominate the social structure below the working class and its weakened organisations in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

The energy for powerful protest may also be generated by the supposedly apathetic, disorganised underclasses. Spontaneous riots, uprisings or revolts, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, can radiate far into other classes and inspire worldwide protest movements. These non-standardised conflicts, which are waged outside the framework of institutionalised procedures, have become the common form of collective protest and rebellion in many countries of the global South. They can in fact become an important catalyst for socialist agency, precisely because they proceed, as in the case of Black Lives Matter, from a social context profoundly shaped by "race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and religion" (Davis 2018: xii).

Given their heightened sense of the intertwinement of various forms of domination, activists of the early 21st-century movements have a major advantage over the founding fathers of Marxist socialism. Engels, in his otherwise remarkable analysis of *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, commented on Irish immigration in a more than disrespectful manner. He saw

“these people [who have] grown up almost without civilisation” (Engels 1975: 389) mainly as a competition for English workers, who had to stand by and look on as Irish migrants accepted the lowest wages and worst dwellings and thus engaged in one of the earliest forms of social dumping. The problematic aspect of this is that Engels occasionally conflates his realistic description and his prejudiced disparagement. This becomes more obvious when the “inventor of Marxism” (Krätke 2020) pontificates about the Irish national character, invoking negative classifications which he had previously criticised in Thomas Carlyle: “The southern facile character of the Irishman, his crudity, which places him but little above the savage, his contempt for all humane enjoyments, in which his very crudeness makes him incapable of sharing, his filth and poverty, all favour drunkenness […] With such a competitor the English working-man has to struggle, with a competitor upon the lowest plane possible in a civilised country” (Engels 1975: 392).

Based on a superficial reading, Engels would quite possibly be accused of classism today, i.e. the targeted devaluation of deprivileged groups.[8] Instead, I would tend to interpret his words as expressing immanent contradictions in an otherwise ground-breaking class analysis, for Engels does defend, in another instance, the working class as a whole against prejudices like habitual drunkenness projected onto the excluded classes by the bourgeoisie. Moreover, Engels certainly acknowledges the circumstance that the cultural particularities of Irish immigrants, their inclination to wage ‘insane’ (because doomed to fail) struggles, could indeed be beneficial to the formation and organisation of a conscious class.[9] Nevertheless, Marxist socialism, along with Social Democracy and the trade unions, all still harbour a productivist tradition, which seeks to distance itself from ‘the lowest of the low’ allegedly unwilling to pull their weight, in order to let the true working class—i.e. the performance-oriented wage earners—appear in an even more positive light.[10] Any movement for sustainable socialism must shed such one-sidedness even in its early stages. The social-theoretical conditions for such a correction are far more favourable these days than they were at the time of Friedrich Engels. Studying the relationships between precarious conditions and class formation in zones of social exclusion in more detail represents a task that social science has yet to tackle.

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[8] “Classism comprises ideological structures that are also brought to bear in other forms of oppression. It is based on naturalisation, culturalisation, dichotomous top-bottom constructions, institutionalisation and linguistic ascription.” (Kemper et al. 2020: 25 f., translation amended) One problem with this definition is that it convicts all workers who articulate a dichotomous world view of classism.

[9] E. P. Thompson has shown that the emergence of the organised English working class indeed benefited greatly from a ‘radical popular culture’ of which Engels provides at most a rudimentary description. See Thompson 1991: pp. 797 ff.

[10] A splendid treatment of this (which, unfortunately, has received far too little attention thus far) can be found in Bescherer 2013.

Le Havre

Are precarisation, social exclusion and the emergence of new underclasses drivers of post-democratic tendencies since they make it impossible for individuals to “perceive themselves as a clearly defined social group” (Crouch 2008: 71)? There is much to be said for this thesis. But perhaps it is too one-sided, too much of a snapshot, to be generalized. Perhaps we just need to put on different glasses in order to see something different, something better. Ari Kaurismäki has shown us how this can be done. In his film *Le Havre*, the members of the underclass, first and foremost a shoe shiner, are heroes who make it possible for a migrant boy smuggled in illegally in a container to reunite with his mother. They are members of the underclass who practice a solidarity that in the past would have been attributed to organized labour. The protagonists of the film speak their minds, they have good manners and their practical help has such moral integrity that in the end even the commissioner responsible for deportations cannot refuse to support them. Kaurismäki’s underclass is, of course, a distortion of reality. But doesn’t this very positive distortion bring to light hidden things that would otherwise escape our analytical gaze? In fact, the members of the underclasses always act obstinately, they actively intervene in social ordeals. They have their own moral economy, which legitimizes many things that appear to ‘the majority society’ as a violation of the rules. This obstinacy repeatedly gives rise to practices that provide food for negative classifications. But it is also a source of unruliness and resistance. As we know, underclasses, which make up ten to fifteen percent of the population, can be kept under control through exclusion, ghettoization, police violence and “prisonfare” (Wacquant 2009). But there is no guarantee that this will succeed in the long term. Even in Germany, initiatives that organize less than three percent of the unemployed have been instrumental in moving against the Hartz reforms. They did not prevent the laws, but they did change the political party landscape significantly. Since then, the social question has been back on the agenda of political issues. Within and beyond Europe, especially since the crisis of 2008-09, there are numerous examples of organizing the supposedly unorganizable. Perhaps such seeds of solidarity are growing in secret, and we need the glasses of an Ari Kaurismäki to be able to discover them at all in the complex web of demarcations, battles over interpretation, devaluation strategies and stigmatization.

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