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**Migrant Waste Collectors in Thailand's Informal Economy: Mapping Class Relations**  
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*Abstract* | Recent scholarship on primitive accumulation and deagrarianisation in the global South has addressed a decline in formal employment prospects, leaving most ex-peasants (and their heirs) struggling to earn a livelihood in the informal economy. Taking this phenomenon as a point of departure, and drawing on the case of migrant waste collectors in Mae Sot, Thailand, this article examines the multiple ways that waste collectors are embedded in informal relations of production and exchange. This variable relational embeddedness has implications, I argue, for the forms of struggle available to those engaged in informal labour.

*Key words* | informality, subsumption, surplus value, Thailand

Within recent scholarship on the transformation of labour and production in the global South, there have been two significant lines of debate whose cross pollination could bear analytical (and perhaps political) fruit. The first concerns the proliferation of forms of informal labour and production, with disputes over how such forms, or ‘classes of labour’, are best categorized.<sup>1</sup> A pertinent example is the question of whether certain forms of informal petty production are best understood as self-employment or disguised wage labour.<sup>2</sup> The second line of debate concerns the claim, put forth in the works of Kalyan Sanyal and Partha Chatterjee, that the pre-eminent form of struggle available to subaltern actors in the informal economies of the global South is an appeal to the state for targeted welfare delivery, which is then often provided outside the terms of official state policy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Bernstein, ‘Capital and labour from centre to margins’, Paper prepared for the ‘Living on the Margins’ conference, March 26–28, Stellenbosch, South Africa, (2007); Available at <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.464.2120&rep=rep1&type=pdf> (accessed 18 October 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Saumyajit Bhattacharya, ‘Is Labour Still a Relevant Category for Praxis? Critical Reflections on Some Contemporary Discourses on Work and Labour in Capitalism’, *Development and Change* Vol. 45, No. 5 (2014), pp. 941-962; Barbara Harriss-White, ‘Labour and Petty Production’, *Development and Change* Vol. 45, No. 5 (2014), pp. 981- 1000.

<sup>3</sup> Kalyan Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality,*

These two lines of debate can be productively brought into conversation because, for Sanyal and Chatterjee, subaltern appeals for case-contingent provisions of goods and services are conditioned by the supplicant's labour/production being outside the circuits of capital accumulation. Informal workers/producers are not, in the Sanyal-Chatterjee framing, embedded in class relations of exploitation against which they might otherwise struggle. Sanyal, in particular, draws (selectively and critically) on J.K. Gibson-Graham's critique of 'capitalocentric' representations of the economy in order to argue that informal petty production in the postcolonial world is 'outside' class-exploitative relations. A debate here arises from analysts who have critiqued this framing of capital's 'outside' on the grounds that it narrowly construes capitalist relations as formal wage labour, and that it lacks sufficient empirical grounding.<sup>4</sup>

In the present article, I bring these two lines of debate into conversation in order to consider how variable class relations can open up or close down possible forms of class struggle in the informal economy. I examine the case of undocumented migrant waste collectors—originally from Myanmar, but now residing in the border town of Mae Sot, Thailand—in order to map the variable class relations in which these workers/producers are embedded. This variable relational embeddedness, understood in terms of different and shifting class relations, has implications, I

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*and Postcolonial Capitalism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2007); Partha Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011); Partha Chatterjee, 'Gramsci in the 21st Century', in *The Postcolonial Gramsci*, eds. Neelam Srivastava and Baidik Bhattacharya (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Shapan Adnan, 'Primitive accumulation and the 'transition to capitalism' in neoliberal India: mechanisms, resistance, and the persistence of self-employed labour', in *Indian Capitalism in Development*, eds. Barbara Harriss-White and Judith Heyer (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 23–45; Jan Breman, *At Work in the Informal Economy of India: A Perspective from the Bottom Up* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), see pp. 20–22; Vinay Gidwani and Joel Wainwright, 'On Capital, Not-Capital, and Development: After Kalyan Sanyal', *Economic & Political Weekly* Vol. XIIX, No. 34 (2014), pp. 40–47; M.A. Jan, M.A. "Ideal-types' and the Diversity of Capital: A Review of Sanyal', CSASP-SIAS Working Paper No.12 (Oxford: South Asian Studies, 2012).

argue, for the forms of struggle available to those engaged in informal labour and production—whether as petty commodity producers exploited through unequal relations of exchange, or as workers exploited in direct or disguised wage labour.

Most individuals engaged in informal labour/production in the global South are, I suggest (*pace* Sanyal and Chatterjee), still within the circuits of capital accumulation—a point I address at length in this article. Moreover, among those individuals eking out a precarious living in the South’s informal economies, many (like undocumented migrants) are in a very weak position to leverage claims for targeted welfare delivery. So what, specifically, are the heterogeneous relations of surplus extraction in which different forms of informal labour and production are embedded? And what types of struggle remain possible from within these class relations? These two questions motivate the present inquiry.

The case of informal waste collection is especially germane to the questions posed here, as this occupation has been variously cited as an instance of disguised wage labour, production outside the circuits of capital accumulation, and petty commodity production exploited through unequal terms of exchange.<sup>5</sup> I therefore trace in this article the ways waste collectors encounter different modes of surplus extraction as the relations in which they are embedded shift. This shifting relational embeddedness has implications for the structural possibility—if not conjunctural feasibility—of particular forms of class struggle, which variously open up or close down for the individuals in question. As an inquiry into class relations and possibilities for struggle among informal workers in the global South, my analysis brings the agrarian question of labour into conversation with the labour question in contemporary capitalism.

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<sup>5</sup> Bhattacharya, ‘Is Labour Still a Relevant Category for Praxis?’; Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development*, p. 227; Harriss-White, ‘Labour and Petty Production’.

For the analysis presented herein, I draw on interviews with migrant waste collectors, as well as visits to Mae Sot's dump, urban recycling depots, and waste collectors' homes—research I carried out mostly in May-June 2012 and June-July 2016 as part of a larger project on migrant labour in Mae Sot that lasted twenty-plus months from 2011 to 2016.<sup>6</sup> During these two periods (in 2012 and 2016), I conducted interviews in Burmese with 20 individuals involved in various aspects of Mae Sot's waste collection/recycling industry. Aside from formal interviews, I held informal discussions with another dozen or so dump residents and town-based waste collectors.

### **The Agrarian Question of Labour**

Attempts to theorise the proliferation of forms of labour in the global South have emerged in response to the evident failure of the 'classic' agrarian transition to reproduce itself in the postcolonial world. In Marx's retelling of the English case, the capitalist transformation of agriculture began with the enclosure of the commons and the separation of peasants from the land.<sup>7</sup> As a process of primitive accumulation, rural dispossession relegated ex-peasants to pauperism and/or waged employment, most notably in the country's expanding industrial sectors. The enclosure movement provided in this way for the emergence of landed capital and for the expansion of an industrial proletariat; the peasants were 'freed' of means of production and 'free' to sell their labour power to the employer of their choice.

Whereas primitive accumulation belongs, in Marx, to capital's 'pre-history', scholars have

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<sup>6</sup> See Stephen Campbell, 'Everyday Recomposition: Precarity and socialization in Thailand's migrant workforce', *American Ethnologist* Vol. 43, No. 2 (2016), pp. 258–269; and Stephen Campbell, *Border Capitalism, Disrupted: Precarity and Struggle in a Southeast Asian Industrial Zone* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (London: Penguin Classics, 1976 [1866]).

more recently sought to rework the concept to theorise present-day processes of (often rural) dispossession. Such is the case with David Harvey's reframing of primitive accumulation as 'accumulation by dispossession'.<sup>8</sup> Sanyal likewise employed the notion of primitive accumulation to grasp in a non-historicist manner ongoing processes of agrarian dispossession in the postcolonial world.<sup>9</sup> The contemporary deployment of primitive accumulation as an analytic also marks much recent literature on the 'global land grab'.<sup>10</sup> But rural proletarianisation has occurred in other ways as well. Rural dwellers have, for example, often turned their backs on farming in order to pursue urban employment, thus fuelling a process of deagrarianisation.<sup>11</sup> Agrarian competition has also frequently led to class differentiation among the peasantry, as the 'simple reproduction squeeze' compels smallholders to sell off their land to their neighbours.<sup>12</sup> At present, however, many ex-peasants find themselves unable to access industrial employment, or at least formal industrial employment, due to insufficient manufacturing jobs and a thorough saturation of the industrial labour market. It is for this reason that Henry Bernstein reframes the agrarian question of today as the agrarian question of labour: 'the truncated transition that expels people from agriculture without absorbing their labour elsewhere in the economy'.<sup>13</sup>

The production, in this way, of absolute surplus populations whose labour remains

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<sup>8</sup> David Harvey, *The New Imperialisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development*, pp. 113–199.

<sup>10</sup> Derek Hall, 'Primitive Accumulation, Accumulation by Dispossession and the Global Land Grab', *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 34, No. 9 (2013), pp. 1582–1604.

<sup>11</sup> Derek Hall, Philip Hirsch and Tania Li, *Powers of Exclusion: Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University Of Hawai'i Press, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Henry Bernstein, 'Notes on Capital and Peasantry', *Review of African Political Economy* Vol. 10 (1977), pp. 60–73, see p. 64; see also Tania Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Henry Bernstein, 'Agrarian Transformation and Surplus Populations in the Global South: Revisiting Agrarian Questions of Labour', The Hague: International Institute of Social Studies (2011); quote from p. 1.

extraneous to capitalist production is an important facet of contemporary agrarian change.<sup>14</sup> But like Sanyal's informal petty producers, surplus populations are but part of the story. For while some ex-peasants find that their labour is unneeded, others have found their way into various forms of employment, if largely within the informal economy. The heterogeneous forms of labour in the contemporary global South thus include varieties of formal and informal wage labour, alongside the employment of individuals not 'free' of means of production (who persist as petty producers, dependent contractors, or putting-out workers) and individuals not 'free' to leave their employer (who remain bonded in relations of debt, familial obligation, or outright slavery). There are, consequently, evident limits to a theoretical (or political) privileging of Marx's 'doubly-free' proletariat.<sup>15</sup> Efforts to analytically square this multiplicity of labouring forms have produced an umbrella category of 'subaltern workers', as well as references to multiple 'modes of surplus extraction', 'forms of exploitation', and 'classes of labour'.<sup>16</sup>

But what does this mean for class struggle in the global South? Or rather, how does the varied relational embeddedness of different 'classes of labour' within the informal economy open up or close down possible forms of struggle, as conditioned by class relations? This last question brings the agrarian question of labour into conversation with the labour question in contemporary capitalism. For as Amrita Chhachhi frames it, the labour question addresses 'the role of labour in

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<sup>14</sup> Tania Li, 'Centering labor in the land grab debate', *Journal of Peasant Studies* Vol. 38, No. 2 (2011), pp. 281-298.

<sup>15</sup> Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> See van der Linden, *Workers of the World*; Amit Basole and Deepankar Basu, 'Relations of Production and Modes of Surplus Extraction in India: Part II - 'Informal' Industry', *Economic & Political Weekly* Vol. 46, No. 15 (2011), pp. 63-79; Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Bernstein, 'Capital and labour from centre to margins'; Jens Lerche, 'From 'Rural Labour' to 'Classes of Labour': Class Fragmentation, Caste and Class Struggle at the Bottom of the Indian Labour Hierarchy', in *The Comparative Political Economy of Asia and Africa* (London: Routledge, 2010).

production, regimes of accumulation and social reproduction’ and how this role shapes, in turn, ‘labour’s emancipatory potential as a counter-capitalist force’.<sup>17</sup> To the extent that this question reflects contemporary capitalist realities, needed is an analysis that considers labour’s productive role and emancipatory potential in terms of the proliferating informal, casual, and precarious employment arrangements of the present.

### **At Once ‘Inside’ and ‘Outside’ Capital**

It was Gibson-Graham who considered most thoroughly the question of capitalism’s ‘outside’.<sup>18</sup> Critiquing what they saw as ‘totalising’, ‘capitalocentric’ representations of the economy, Gibson-Graham argued that such accounts discursively subsume heterogeneous economic relations and practices to an imagined capitalist system, blinding us thereby to the world’s many ‘autonomous’, ‘non-capitalist’ sites of production. Self-employment is thus, for Gibson-Graham, a ‘non-capitalist practice’, and workers’ cooperatives are post-capitalist projects—alternatives to capitalism in the here and now, without need of revolution.<sup>19</sup> Crucially, in their critique of capitalocentrism, Gibson-Graham rely on a particular understanding of capitalism defined as ‘formal markets, wage labour, and capitalist enterprise’.<sup>20</sup> This definition, however, is contentious, as neither informality nor wageless labour necessarily render a given economic activity outside capitalism, or even outside the circuits of capital accumulation.

Jairus Banaji provides useful clarification here in his discussion of Marx’s two uses of

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<sup>17</sup> Amrita Chhachhi, ‘Introduction: The ‘Labour Question’ in Contemporary Capitalism’, *Development and Change* Vol. 45, No. 5 (2014), pp. 895 - 919.

<sup>18</sup> J.K. Gibson-Graham, *The end of capitalism (as we knew it): A Feminist critique of political economy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006 [1996]).

<sup>19</sup> Gibson-Graham, *The end of capitalism (as we knew it)*; quote from p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Gibson-Graham, *The end of capitalism (as we knew it)*; quote from p. xiii.

‘mode of production’.<sup>21</sup> As Banaji notes, Marx employed the term mode of production to index both particular ways of organising the labour process (such as industrial wage labour) and ‘epochs in the social development of society’ (as in capitalism writ large). Capitalism as an ‘epoch’ is best understood, Banaji argues, as generalised market compulsions to accumulate surplus value.<sup>22</sup> Under such compulsions, capitalist enterprises may extract surplus value through forms of labour outside the industrial wage relation—through slavery, for instance, or peasant production.

This brings us to Sanyal and Chatterjee. In *Rethinking Capitalist Development*, Sanyal argues that primitive accumulation in the postcolonial world continues to strip peasants of their land. But, like Bernstein’s agrarian question of labour, ex-peasants find limited employment opportunities in the formal economy. They are therefore compelled to pursue livelihoods as informal petty commodity producers who, while not (*pace* Gibson-Graham) ‘outside capitalism’, are nonetheless ‘outside capital’.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, they are outside class-exploitative relations and the circuits of capital accumulation. This ‘classless’ space of informal self-employment, posits Sanyal, has come to increasingly typify postcolonial development.<sup>24</sup>

The Sanyal characterisation of the informal economy has significant implications for conceptualizing forms of struggle in the postcolonial world. Chatterjee thus draws on Sanyal in order to argue that, since such informal production remains outside the circuits of capital accumulation, peasants and other informal petty producers confront not ‘traditional direct exploiters, but rather governmental agencies from whom they expect benefits’.<sup>25</sup> For this reason,

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<sup>21</sup> Banaji, *Theory as History*, pp. 349 – 350.

<sup>22</sup> Banaji, *Theory as History*, p. 98.

<sup>23</sup> Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development*, pp. 7 – 8.

<sup>24</sup> Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development*, p. 259.

<sup>25</sup> Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society*, p. 205. Although Chatterjee draws for this argument on Sanyal’s *Rethinking Capitalist Development*, Sanyal in fact based much of his own analysis on Chatterjee’s earlier book, *Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular*

argues Chatterjee, the preeminent form of struggle available in postcolonial spaces of informality is not class-based resistance to exploitation, but case-contingent claims for targeted welfare delivery.

There are two points in the Sanyal-Chatterjee narrative on which my own reading of informality diverges. First, informal self-employment is but one possible outcome of primitive accumulation (or other forms of rural exclusion and deagrarianisation). Even where such production has come to characterise the largest class formation, multiple other classes of labour have nonetheless proliferated. These other classes of labour, including a sizable industrial proletariat, are not anachronisms, and they need to be analytically (and politically) taken into account. In India, moreover, on whose experience Sanyal bases his analysis, while informal petty production grew significantly following the liberalization legislation of 1991, the growth of informal wage labour has since the early 2000s been proportionately larger.<sup>26</sup> Class relations in the informal economy are also often fluid, with individuals sliding between petty production, and various forms of direct and disguised wage labour.

Second, while it is in principle possible for informal petty producers to remain ‘outside’ the circuits of capital accumulation (that is, they neither exploit labour, accumulate capital, or are themselves exploited), my inability to locate a single such case among Mae Sot’s waste collectors is, I believe, indicative of a more general scarcity. Instead, most presently proliferating classes of labour are, I submit, still embedded in various relations of exploitation. Even petty producers not exploited as wage labour are still commonly exploited through markets for rent, interest, inputs

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*Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Barnes, *Informal Labour in Urban India: Three Cities, Three Journeys* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 32–33.

and products, as a consequence of unequal terms of exchange.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, as market compulsions continue to shape (and as capitalists seek to regulate) the practices of even seemingly ‘independent’ petty producers, such producers cannot be deemed to be wholly ‘outside’ or ‘autonomous’ of capital.<sup>28</sup>

But so too, insofar as managers can never fully control labour, even under the ‘really subsumed’ conditions of factory production, it cannot be said that workers are ever wholly ‘inside’ a totalising capitalist logic. Non-capitalist logics persistently ‘interrupt’ the logic of capital,<sup>29</sup> and workers continually subvert capitalist control. My position, then, is that the inside/outside-capital dichotomy is misleading due to its positing of a totalising logic of capital, on the one hand, versus a possible autonomy from capital, on the other.<sup>30</sup> The relevant question is not whether petty producers are wholly inside or outside capital’s logic, but rather how different and shifting relations of surplus extraction open up or close down possible forms of class struggle. It is this latter question that I pursue ethnographically in the following section.

### **Migrant Waste Collectors in Mae Sot**

Born into a Muslim fisher family in the seaside town of Mottama, Daw Yasamin was a child at the time of Burma’s 1962 military coup.<sup>31</sup> With exports prohibited under the military’s autarchic

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<sup>27</sup> Barbara Harriss-White, ‘Globalization, The Financial Crisis and Petty Production in India’s Socially Regulated Informal Economy’, *Global Labour Journal* Vol. 1, No. 1 (2009), pp. 52-77.

<sup>28</sup> Bernstein, ‘Notes on Capital and Peasantry’, pp. 63 – 64.

<sup>29</sup> Vinay Gidwani, *Capital Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> My position here is informed by the *Aufheben* article, ‘Value struggle or class struggle? A review of The beginning of history by Massimo De Angelis’, Vol. 17 (2009); available at <https://libcom.org/library/review-article-beginning-history-value-struggles-global-capital-massimo-de-angelis> (accessed 18 October 2017).

<sup>31</sup> All personal names included herein are pseudonyms.

rendering of socialism, Mottama's fishing industry grew but slowly, and remained largely in the hands of self-employed fisher families, like Yasamin's. Things began to change when the military removed export restrictions after the 1988 popular uprising. Residents of nearby Mawlamyine with access to capital moved to Mottama to set up large export houses—capitalizing on foreign (largely Chinese) demand for local fish supplies. At the bottom end of the supply chain, more and more locals began fishing, and selling their catches to the growing number of export houses. Under increasing competition, some fishers were able to acquire credit from export houses and procure larger boats and nets, while others turned to fishing with 'poison' (likely cyanide). Fish stocks off the coast of Mottama declined, and with them the incomes of fisher households, many of whom slipped into debt bondage with export houses that had advanced them consumption loans to make up for declining fishing incomes. Under these conditions, Yasamin decided to leave for Thailand in 2006, at the age of 50. Upon arrival in Mae Sot, a relative introduced her to the business of waste collection; it has been her livelihood ever since.

Daw Yasamin's story illustrates one of the varied life histories that led migrants from Myanmar to pursue livelihoods collecting waste in Mae Sot. In most cases, the collectors I met came from proletarian backgrounds in urban or rural Myanmar. Ko Win, for instance, had worked odd jobs digging latrines, picking coconuts, and cutting trees in his home village in Bago Region, before heading to Thailand in the mid-1990s. U Zaw and U Khin were outliers in this respect. The former had farmed rice on a 5-acre field he owned in Bago Region, while the latter had owned a small palm orchard in rural Mandalay, which he tapped to make a traditional rustic alcohol. Neither men earned much with their lands, and market pressures and high inflation after 1988 compelled both of them to sell their lands and move to Thailand. While not their initial plan, both men ended up collecting waste in Mae Sot. Notably, though not reflected in my own interviews, several civil

society reports have traced (some) migration to Thailand back to an increase in rural land grabs within Myanmar following an upsurge in foreign investment and export growth since 2010.<sup>32</sup>

Waste collection in Mae Sot is part of a multi-layered supply chain connecting migrant pickers and petty traders with local scrap purchasing depots, Bangkok-based recycling plants, East Asian industrial manufacturers, and global finished-goods markets. Sanyal, by contrast, points to waste collection as illustrative of a self-enclosed production and commercial unit. Citing a US State Department report on the developmental benefits of micro-credit, Sanyal proffers the case of a Ms. Lola Tasuna of Manila. ‘Her business’, quotes Sanyal, ‘is making [and selling] kerosene lamps, a necessity in a neighbourhood where blackouts are frequent... [previously] she had to scratch through the garbage dump every morning to find jars. She washed them in a bucket of cold water, scrapping off the labels and the filth with her fingernails’.<sup>33</sup> Supporting Sanyal’s broader argument, Ms. Tasuna’s customers buy her lamps for their use value, not their exchange value. It also seems that Ms. Tasuna neither accumulates capital, exploits the labour of others, nor is herself exploited by either an employer or merchant trader.

Saumyajit Bhattacharya sees this business of waste collection rather differently.<sup>34</sup> Locating waste collection in India within a global supply chain for recycled materials, Bhattacharya emphasises the extraction of value from waste collectors, and their alienation from the products of their labour. For these reasons, Bhattacharya argues, waste collection is best understood as a form

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<sup>32</sup> Transnational Institute, ‘Land Grabbing in Dawei (Myanmar/Burma): A (Inter)National Human Rights Concern’, (2012); available at: [www.tni.org/files/download/dawei\\_land\\_grab.pdf](http://www.tni.org/files/download/dawei_land_grab.pdf) (accessed 18 October 2017); and *Human Rights Watch*, ‘The Origins of Myanmar Migrant Worker Misery’, (2016); available at: [www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/14/origins-myanmar-migrant-worker-misery](http://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/14/origins-myanmar-migrant-worker-misery) (accessed 18 October 2017).

<sup>33</sup> Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development*, p. 227.

<sup>34</sup> Bhattacharya, ‘Is Labour Still a Relevant Category for Praxis?’.

of disguised wage labour. Barbara Harriss-White disagrees.<sup>35</sup> Insofar as waste collectors are not in a dependent relationship with a single purchaser, they cannot, she argues, be said to be in a relationship of disguised wage labour.<sup>36</sup> While disguised wage labour may be present, the numerically most extensive form of labour/production in the informal economy (at least of India) is, Harriss-White argues, self-employed petty commodity production. Nevertheless, waste collectors can still be exploited as self-employed producers, as a consequence of unequal terms of exchange within debt, rent, input and product markets.<sup>37</sup>

Rather than a single form of exploitation, Mae Sot's waste collection industry exhibits a range of extractive relations. At the bottom of the supply chain are the 'pickers' (*kautthema*) who make their rounds through town, sifting through roadside rubbish bins, or who reside at one of three settlements in and around the town dump, where they dig through daily deliveries deposited by privately-operated refuse trucks. Waste collectors with whom I spoke estimated that as of 2016 there were over 1,000 individuals—men and women in roughly equal proportions—engaged in regular waste collection within Mae Sot town proper. This includes elderly pickers up to about 70 years of age; children as young as 7 or 8, who begin collecting waste while accompanying their parents on their daily rounds; and itinerant waste 'buyers' (*wethema*). Approximately 80% of waste collectors in town are Muslim—again, according to collectors' own estimates. This figure is significant, as all full-time waste collectors in Mae Sot are migrants from Myanmar, but estimates based on Myanmar's 2014 census put Muslims at only 4.3% of Myanmar's population.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Harriss-White, 'Labour and Petty Production'.

<sup>36</sup> Harriss-White, 'Labour and Petty Production', p. 988.

<sup>37</sup> Harriss-White, 'Globalization, The Financial Crisis and Petty Production'.

<sup>38</sup> *Myanmar Times*, 'After long delay, religious census data proves less 'sensitive' than anticipated' (22 July 2016), available at: [www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/21542-after-long-delay-religious-census-data-proves-less-sensitive-than-anticipated.html](http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/21542-after-long-delay-religious-census-data-proves-less-sensitive-than-anticipated.html) (accessed 18 October 2017).

Some particularly destitute individuals start out collecting waste by traipsing through town filling fibrous plastic rice sacks that they carry by hand, and children often collect with two such bags affixed to the rear rack a bicycle. More established pickers will rent a push cart for 20 baht (about US \$0.57)<sup>39</sup> per day, or, if they manage to save sufficient funds, may purchase a used cart for 500-600 baht (about five to six days' income). Ma Nyo, whom I first interviewed in 2012, ten days after she had started this occupation, obtained (after deducting what was then 15 baht/day for her cart rental) around 55 baht per day. As a single mother with two children, Ma Nyo's income amounted to little more than \$0.50/day for each family member. More experienced pickers are often able to earn 100-150 baht/day. But with both parents (and at times children) collecting together, this amount is typically the household's entire income. Thus, for a two-parent, three-child household, an income of 150 baht for a 'good day' would still only provide a per capita daily income of about \$0.85.

Typically, waste picking is carried out in two shifts, first from morning to around noon, and then again from mid-afternoon to sunset, with individual pickers working longer hours on days that pickings are scarce. With more migrants taking up waste collection in Mae Sot, competition has increased, forcing pickers to work more hours and travel longer distances to obtain enough recyclables to earn an income sufficient to meet their immediate household needs. At the end of the day, pickers will lug their sacks or push their carts to one of nine waste purchasing depots in town. As purchasing rates will vary slightly from depot to depot, pickers will inquire with each other throughout the day about these different rates, and then take their wares for sale to the depot offering the highest prices on that particular day. The flexibility pickers exercise here in choosing

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<sup>39</sup> The exchange rate at the time of these interviews (July 2016) was approximately 35 baht to the US dollar.

to whom they sell their goods differs from the situation Kaveri Gill observed in Delhi, where pickers are bound in dependent relations, often lasting years, according to which they are obliged to sell their wares to one specific scrap dealer (a relation of disguised wage labour, as Harriss-White defines it).<sup>40</sup>

When I interviewed collectors in 2016, they were unanimous in decriing the decline in purchasing prices for recyclables they had seen over the years. U Khin had observed this decline over the course of his 15 years as an itinerant waste buyer. Within the preceding five years alone, the price for plastic water bottles had dropped from 16 baht/kilogram to 7 baht, iron from 11 baht/kilo to 3.5 baht, beer cans from 50 baht/kilo to 25 baht, and copper wire from 11 baht/kilo to 7 baht. In years gone by, it had been possible to earn more in waste picking than in waged construction work—but no longer. Some pickers saw this decline in prices as the outcome of increased competition among collectors, while others believed it had been orchestrated by Bangkok-based recycling firms, which acted, they said, as ‘merchants’ (*konthe*) by hoarding recyclable materials. Compounding pickers’ financial difficulties, inflation and miserly landlords had during these same years significantly increased the costs of basic goods and home rental prices. Consequently, waste pickers in Mae Sot have by and large taken on increased debt. To illustrate, Daw Yasamin pointed to herself and to the 15 or so other households in the compound where she lived, all of whom depended on waste collection as their primary means of income. When Daw Yasamin moved to Mae Sot ten years prior, only one or two people in this compound had been in debt. By 2016, every household, she claimed, was in debt, and Yasamin’s own debt had increased to over 10,000 baht. Given rent, food and other expenses for her and the two young children she

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<sup>40</sup> Kaveri Gill, *Of Poverty and Plastic: Scavenging and Scrap Trading Entrepreneurs in India's Urban Informal Economy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 100.

cared for, as well as her monthly interest payments, Daw Yasamin was incredulous about the possibility of ever fully repaying her debt.

One of the consequences of inflation, declining incomes and growing debt has been that migrant waste pickers are typically unable to afford the costs of registering for legal residence and employment permits in Thailand. They are thus, like most migrants here, at constant risk of arrest and extortion by the local police. Yet, as Daw Yasamin explained, the police have generally left migrant waste pickers alone. The reason, as she sees it, is that it is too much of a hassle for the police to arrest and extort money from impoverished waste pickers who most likely lack the means to meet extortion demands in the first place. Daw Yasamin considered for me the unlikely possibility of such a situation:

If [the migrant] is just picking up waste, [the police] won't arrest her... They never arrest simple waste pickers. If they arrested [a waste picker], what would they gain? If they arrested [a waste picker], they wouldn't get any money. If they put her in the back of the [police] truck, who would come [to pay the police] to get her released? It would be a hassle [*shaukde*]. And how would they put the [waste picker's] cart up on the [police] truck? [She laughs.] And some [pickers] have their children with them, and their cart, and other things. The children would be crying and hungry on the way to the police station. And so [the police] don't want to deal with the hassle. So they don't arrest [waste pickers].

Such tenuous disregard from extortionate police may be poor recompense for pauperism, but pickers also identified several less ambiguous advantages to this work over regular waged

employment. Specifically, pickers saw their work as a form of ‘self-employment’ (*kobaing alok*), which allowed them to choose their hours, take time off if they are sick or need to care for sick children, and avoid managerial harassment. Similar, then, to the informal waste collectors Kathleen Millar studied at Rio de Janeiro’s main garbage dump, waste collectors in Mae Sot are motivated, at least in part, by an aversion to ‘normative forms of capitalist labour’.<sup>41</sup> But this work also provides pickers with cash in hand each day, without having to wait a month for wage disbursements, as is the case at local garment factories. This immediacy of income has been crucial in motivating individuals who have fallen into sudden financial crises to turn to waste picking. Such benefits aside, most migrants on the border see this business of waste picking as located on the bottom rungs of the border’s social hierarchy—as an occupation that is dirty, dangerous and degrading, and with decreasing financial returns. For these reasons, when I spoke with Ma Nyo in 2012, shortly after she first started this work, she had not reconciled herself to long-term waste picking, and she wanted out as soon as possible:

It’s hot coming and going under the sun. And in some rubbish bins, when you turn the rubbish over, there are fleas and things. And when I get home, I can’t even bring myself to eat. That’s just the way it is. And even though I’m thirsty, I have no desire to drink. I don’t like that... And obviously there’s danger. Some people throw out broken bottles. Some people throw out sharp metal things and you have to search through that. When you [stick your hand into a bin to] search, your hand gets pierced and torn... Look here, this morning I cut my hand on a broken bottle. That’s

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<sup>41</sup> Kathleen Millar, *Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio’s Garbage Dump* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 92.

just the way it is. So I don't want to do this work for very long.

While Ma Nyo saw this occupation as a degrading form of livelihood, she had also come to see in it certain redeeming qualities:

Obviously, it's only once someone has fallen into trouble that they start picking up rubbish. Ordinarily, no one would accept to lose their dignity [*theikakya makanbu*]. No one wants to lose their dignity. But if you were to ask, 'What is this waste picking work?', well there's one good thing: It's not stealing things from others. You don't need to lie and defraud others. It's an honest living [*thammaaziwa kyade*]. You pick up what people have thrown away. You don't go into people's homes and steal... And obviously that's good. It's an honest living.

Despite wanting out, Ma Nyo went on to work as a waste picker for another four years. In 2016, when I interviewed her again, she had only recently changed occupations, having obtained a cleaning job at a local Muslim school.

Waste collection in Mae Sot includes, as well, the labour of itinerant waste buyers, whose incomes put them a step up financially from pickers. U Khin, for example, considered as 'sufficient' the money he earned trading in plastic and metal goods that he purchased from motorcycle and bicycle retailers and repair shops in town. Key to U Khin's success was his three-wheeled auto rickshaw, which allowed him, within just a couple hours each morning, to make his rounds, transport heavier metal waste, and earn a daily income of at least 250 baht. This was enough to support himself, his wife (who was not employed), and three school-aged children.

When U Khin arrived in Thailand 20 years prior with money from the sale of his palm orchard, he first worked five years as a tenant farmer and then bought a cycle rickshaw and moved into waste trading, later upgrading to an auto rickshaw. But this raises the question: if buying and selling waste is so much more profitable than picking, why have most pickers not become traders? As U Khin explained, ‘Some [pickers] don’t have any money. They don’t have capital [*ayin*]. So they just do picking. If they had capital, they’d become buyers’. Given that U Khin derived his capital from prior land ownership, class status in Myanmar can evidently translate into a parallel hierarchy among migrants in Thailand.

Of course, not all recyclable items get immediately reclaimed. Privately-operated municipal waste disposal trucks collect refuse, including many recyclables, from roadside bins daily and transport this to the Mae Sot dump located a fifteen-minute drive outside of town. On the edges of this dump are three squatter settlements inhabited solely by migrants from Myanmar. With some 150-170 households of 4-8 members each, the dump had, by mid-2016, an estimated population of somewhere between 700 and 1,000 people, divided among these three settlements. My visits were primarily to X settlement, named after a large tree located on site. The population of X settlement is, residents estimated, 70% Buddhist—the rest being Christian, aside from one elderly Muslim man. Most residents are ethnic Karen and Burman, with smaller numbers of Pa’o, Mon and Rakhine. Residents construct their homes from waste materials found on the dump, and from bamboo and wood collected from the surrounding forest. No one pays rent.

On any given day (Sundays excluded), four rubbish trucks are in operation, making two rounds each, collecting waste in Mae Sot town and its peripheral villages. There are thus eight waste deliveries by truck to the dump six days a week, arriving between 10:30 am and 1:00 am. Nighttime deliveries are the most lucrative for dump residents, as such deliveries include bottles

and cans from restaurants, and other waste that has not already been filtered by town-based pickers. Mae Sot's waste disposal trucks are government-owned, but privately operated—a prerogative awarded by tender. While drivers are Thai, the 22 salaried refuse loaders working on these trucks are all young men from Myanmar resident at the dump. When Ko Thant began working as a refuse loader in 2008, there were 29 migrants so employed. Shortly thereafter, however, local authorities introduced hydraulic refuse trucks, which required fewer loaders. Migrant refuse loaders working on these trucks earn monthly salaries of 7,800 baht for an arduous 11-13 hour workday, six days per week. Supplementing their salaries, refuse loaders will reclaim easily accessible recyclables from roadside trash bins prior to emptying these bins into the truck's hopper. At the end of the day, they sell these collected recyclables to purchasing depots and split the profits evenly among the driver and loaders, earning in this way an additional 3,000 baht/month or more each—an 'outside' income, as one loader called it, using the English term. While waged employment on refuse trucks is considerably more profitable than waste picking, it is also exhausting. Young men thus typically cycle through this work, lasting several years before returning to casual waste picking on the dump.

When a refuse truck arrives at the dump, pickers will be waiting on site with their bags, hoes and (at night) battery-powered headlamps. As the truck reverses into place, pickers will arrange themselves in a semi-circle behind the hopper. For afternoon dumps, some 40-50 pickers, including children as young as 10 years old, will gather around the truck. Ko Win, a long-time dump resident, described the process as follows:

When the truck arrives, everyone runs to get in front. The truck dumps the rubbish and we try to snatch [recyclable items]. Each person digs in front of himself and picks up [rubbish bags] in front of himself. Another person isn't allowed to pick up

bags that someone has thrown behind himself. If someone else opened up a rubbish bag that someone had thrown behind himself, then there'd be a fight. When we tear open [the bags] and pick through them, sometimes there are babies' diapers and all sorts of things. We have to pick through that and select [recyclable items].

Pickers will amass recyclables for four to five days and then sell their wares to outside buyers who visit the dump, or to the largest of three dump stores, whose owner engages in waste trading. Outside buyers and the store owner will then take these goods for sale to a waste purchasing depot in town. In this way, dump households earned, as of mid-2016, anywhere from 100 to 200 baht per day, depending on their experience, age and the number of hours put into scavenging each day. While this is sufficient to keep resident households fed, it remains near impossible for dump residents to save money. Aside from food, residents must purchase waste collection equipment (rubber boots, headlamp, and hoe), all of which are sold at the main dump store.

Ideally, residents would prefer to sell to outside buyers, who offer better rates than the dump store. Lacking savings, however, most residents rely on store credit for food purchases. A condition of credit is that debtors must repay their debts by selling their recyclables to the store owner at 20% below the rate offered by outside buyers. A similarly monopsonistic arrangement occurred under a private waste disposal contractor, when I visited the dump in 2012. At the time, the private contractor who had recently won tender to manage the municipal waste disposal service suddenly forbade outside waste purchasers from driving into the dump, and forbade resident pickers from selling to outside buyers (the store owner was not yet trading in recyclables). Instead, the contractor instructed residents to sell only to him at a rate half that of outside buyers, via the

waste processing facility he managed at the dump. At the time, dump residents said they would not be able to survive selling their recyclables at such low rates. Initially, pickers just hoarded their wares. Before long, however, hunger compelled some residents to sell in small amounts to the contractor, while other residents surreptitiously took their wares out by night to sell to outside buyers. Fortunately for dump residents, the contractor in question was replaced a few months later (for reasons I never learned), and the new contractor again permitted outside buyers into the dump. Both cases—that of pickers bonded by debt to the dump store owner and that of pickers compelled to sell to the contractor—illustrate relations of disguised wage labour, as individuals formerly ‘free’ to sell their wares on the market fell into dependent relations with a single purchaser.

When waste pickers and petty traders sell their wares to purchasing depots, the depot’s employees (all migrants) will disassemble electrical appliances into their component parts, and sort, breakdown, and bundle materials for shipment to Bangkok. Ko Myo worked as a scrap handler at one such depot for five years, eventually earning a daily wage of 170 baht. This was more than most migrant factory workers earned, but still below the legal minimum wage of 300 baht/day, and on most days Ko Myo had to work unpaid overtime for an hour or more. While Ko Myo’s employment was *de jure* formal under Thai labour law, the reality of his less-than-legal wages, forced overtime, and lack of written contract indicate *de facto* informal conditions of employment. Ko Myo described his own workplace as among the smaller depots in Mae Sot, as it never employed more than ten workers. Mae Sot’s larger depots, by contrast, employ upwards of 40 migrants. Once sorted and bundled, depot owners (all Thai) will dispatch their recyclables by truck to recycling factories in Bangkok, with whose owners they have prearranged agreements of sale, and (typically) longstanding business relationships. Ko Myo explained that at his own depot, shipments to Bangkok had to be at least nine tons to make a profit, given the 5,000-6,000 baht it

cost to hire the truck and driver per delivery.

Among Thailand's largest recycling firms is Wongpanit. Established in 1974, Wongpanit now has an estimated value of over several hundred million baht and a capacity to process 200-250 tons of waste daily into usable materials, which are sold off to manufacturers in Thailand and abroad.<sup>42</sup> For several decades, the Thai government has employed incentivising policy to promote private waste reclamation through companies like Wongpanit, as means of subsidising the country's growing waste disposal needs.<sup>43</sup> In Mae Sot, then, with incomes barely that of subsistence wages, migrant pickers labour to subsidise the 'public good' of waste disposal in Thailand, the growth of recycling companies like Wongpanit, and the profits of global manufacturing firms looking to reduce the costs of capital inputs.

## Capitalist Relations

Informal migrant waste pickers and petty traders in Mae Sot, like their counterparts around the world, are situated at the bottom of intricate, but massive global supply chains, which tie them into a global recycling industry valued at approximately US\$ 200 billion.<sup>44</sup> These individuals perform

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<sup>42</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 'Enterprising collectors find trash means cash' (15 April 2012), available at [www.bangkokpost.com/print/288912/](http://www.bangkokpost.com/print/288912/) (accessed 18 October 2017).

<sup>43</sup> 'Thai Style Recycling', *Waste Management World*, 12 October 2011. <https://waste-management-world.com/a/thai-style-recycling>

<sup>44</sup> Recent studies that situate informal waste collectors within Global Value Chains/Global Production Networks include Bhattacharya, 'Is Labour Still a Relevant Category for Praxis?'; Harriss-White, 'Labour and Petty Production'; Gill, *Of Poverty and Plastic*; and Demet Ş. Dinler, 'New forms of wage labour and struggle in the informal sector: the case of waste pickers in Turkey', *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 37, No. 10 (2016), pp. 1834-1854; Aiden M. Wong, 'Articulation of Informal Labour: Interrogating the E-waste Value Chain in Singapore and Malaysia', in *Putting Labour in its Place: Labour process analysis and global value chains*, eds. Phil Taylor, Kirsty Newsome, Jennifer Bair and Al Rainnie (London: Palgrave, 2015), pp. 100 – 118; Kathleen Millar, *Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio's Garbage Dump* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018). The figure of US\$ 200 billion comes from Millar, *Reclaiming the Discarded*, p. 8.

the labour necessary for the ‘salvage accumulation’ of Thai recycling companies and global industrial manufacturing firms.<sup>45</sup> Yet in their immediate relations of production, waste pickers, petty traders and waged refuse/recycling workers are embedded in these supply chains quite differently, and their labour is not uniformly subsumed to capital.

The subsumption analytic comes to us from Marx, who employed it to theorize the extension of the capitalist mode of production—specifically, in the shift from independent peasant production, to dependent petty production, to industrial wage labour.<sup>46</sup> For Marx, the moment of ‘formal’ subsumption occurs when petty producers ‘dependent on individual customers’ become, or are replaced by, petty producers dependent on ‘a constant paymaster in the shape of the capitalist’.<sup>47</sup> This subsumption of labour to capital is ‘merely formal’ because the capitalist has not intervened to alter the labour process through mechanisation or regimentation. By subsuming labour in this way, capitalists are able to extract surplus value through forms of labour lying outside direct wage relations. It is for this reason that Banaji sees formal subsumption as disguised wage labour.<sup>48</sup> By contrast, the ‘real’ subsumption of labour to capital obtains under direct wage labour. For under such conditions, capitalist managers are able to increase surplus value by mechanising and regimenting the labour process.

In Mae Sot’s waste collection industry, the real subsumption of labour finds expression among migrants employed as loaders on refuse trucks and as handlers at scrap depots. In both cases, the individuals in question are exploited as waged labourers. They own no means of production and their employers have been able to regiment and mechanise the labour process, such

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<sup>45</sup> Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 63.

<sup>46</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, pp. 1021–1038.

<sup>47</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol.1*, p. 1020.

<sup>48</sup> Banaji, *Theory as History*, p, 145–146.

as by introducing hydraulic trucks for municipal waste collection. Yet waged workers in these cases have transgressed the boundaries of real subsumption. Loaders employed on refuse trucks have, for instance, earned ‘outside’ income on the job through casual scrap reclamation, and in the end they return, exhausted, to casual waste picking. The fact that loaders have re-entered casual waste collection after deciding to leave waged employment indicates that entry into informal petty production is not always dictated by a ‘saturation’ of the formal labour market.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, migrants have often chosen to take up informal waste picking instead of factory employment, due to the immediacy of income that picking provides and the autonomy from managerial control that this work allows.

For waste pickers resident on the Mae Sot dump, relations of formal subsumption have been realised under the monopsonistic order of the private contractor in 2012, and more recently in relations of debt bondage to the dump store. It is under such conditions that we can speak of disguised wage labour; the workers involved are dependent on a single purchaser, despite retaining ownership of limited means of production (bags, hoes, etc.) and labouring outside direct managerial control. But in such cases too, dump residents have transgressed the boundaries of (now formal) subsumption, as when they evaded the dump contractor to clandestinely sell their recyclables to outside buyers.

But what of relations of surplus extraction outside even formal subsumption? As Harriss-White observes, petty producers are commonly exploited through debt, rent, input and product markets.<sup>50</sup> For Banaji, such extractive relations express a ‘pre-formal’ subsumption of labour to capital.<sup>51</sup> Significantly, both Chatterjee and John Harriss have critiqued Banaji’s terminology for

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<sup>49</sup> See Millar, *Reclaiming the Discarded*, Ch. 2, for a similar argument.

<sup>50</sup> Hariss-White, ‘Globalization, the Financial Crisis and Petty Production’.

<sup>51</sup> Banaji, *Theory as History*, p. 282.

its teleological connotations.<sup>52</sup> While I endorse their refusal of historicism, it seems to me still useful to consider such forms of surplus extraction—through interest or rental payments, for example—alongside formal and real subsumption. This is because ‘pre-formal’ subsumption entails extractive relations that *may* slide into formal subsumption—as when debt becomes debt bondage. Likewise, individuals *may* be able to quit such ‘pre-formal’ subsumption—by absconding from debts owed, for example. All of this is to say that the boundaries between real, formal, and ‘pre-formal’ subsumption are not fixed, nor is the movement between them linear. Rather, manifold struggles by waste collectors, waged refuse loaders, itinerant buyers, moneylenders, refuse truck drivers, depot owners, and large-scale recycling firms have led to back-and-forth shifts between these various forms of subsumption.

There is, then, the final category of petty producers independent of all capitalist class-exploitative relations. Such a producer would accumulate no capital, exploit no one else’s labour, be exploited by neither an employer nor merchant trader, pay no rent that a landlord reinvests, and pay no interest that a lender rolls over into new credit. Such an independent producer would most closely align with Sanyal’s account of the informal economy. My own research among informal waste collectors suggests, however, that, in Mae Sot at least, such complete exemption from capitalist extractive relations is not particularly common.

### **Class Struggle as a Structural Possibility**

In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx posits that with the proletarianisation of petty producers, the centralisation of means of production, and the concentration of waged workers under factory

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<sup>52</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 305, n. 8; John Harriss, *Capitalism and Peasant Farming: Agrarian Structure and Ideology in Northern Tamil Nadu* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 293.

production, possibilities emerge for labour socialisation, which facilitates workers' organisation and collective struggle.<sup>53</sup> The contemporary proliferation of casual employment and informal petty production—notably, but not exclusively, in the global South—presents evident obstacles to workers' and worker-producers' struggles against capitalist exploitation and control. Such obstacles include the organisational fragmentation of labour processes, the decentralisation of production, and the *de jure* and *de facto* exclusion of informal workers and petty producers from legislated employment protections.

To be sure, mass worker strikes remain widespread at mines and factories across the global South.<sup>54</sup> Likewise in Mae Sot, migrant factory workers have demonstrated a consistent capacity for strikes, alongside everyday forms of workplace struggle.<sup>55</sup> But the proliferation across the global South of informal labour and production—often small scale, casual, and outside direct wage relations—demands a clearer grasp of the possibilities for direct struggle against capitalist exploitation and control by individuals labouring outside formal employment. What, moreover, are the political implications of locating the catalyst of class struggle within the contradictions of capitalist production, when there is a proliferation of forms of labour and production operating outside direct wage relations, with surplus seemingly negotiated in the sphere of circulation?

Crucially, recycling supply chains exemplify a 'vertical integration' of petty producers under capitalist enterprise, whereby circulation becomes 'a value-creating process by subsuming production'.<sup>56</sup> Integrated in this way, circulation-as-production establishes conditions for struggle

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<sup>53</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, p. 926.

<sup>54</sup> Immanuel Ness, *Southern Insurgency: The rise of the global working class* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

<sup>55</sup> Campbell, *Border Capitalism, Disrupted*.

<sup>56</sup> Jairus Banaji, 'Merchant Capitalism, Peasant Households and Industrial Accumulation: Integration of a Model', *Journal of Agrarian Change* Vol. 16, No. 3 (2016), pp. 410–431; quote from p. 413.

‘at the point of production’ outside direct wage relations. For under such conditions, capitalists may seek ‘to regulate the conditions of [petty production] without undertaking its direct organization’, while petty producers and disguised wage labourers may resist such control.<sup>57</sup> This struggle over the conditions and relations of production, and of circulation-as-production, can shift existing modes of surplus extraction, thereby opening up or closing down the relations of exploitation that make certain forms of class struggle structurally possible, if not immediately feasible.

It is, in addition, within such spaces of informality that Chatterjee locates an unruly political society making claims on the state outside official channels, for benefits granted outside the terms of formal state policy. Yet undocumented migrants seemingly fall outside the parameters of political society, as Chatterjee defines it. For ‘the underside of political society’, writes Chatterjee, ‘is the utter marginalization of those groups who do not even have the strategic leverage of electoral mobilization... In this sense, these marginalized groups represent an outside beyond the boundaries of political society’.<sup>58</sup> But if such were the case, how have undocumented migrant waste pickers lacking the leverage of electoral mobilisation been able to claim a tacit toleration of their informality by the police? Daw Yasamin’s insights into the logic of this toleration—a desire by the police to avoid a ‘hassle’—points to the basis of waste pickers’ leverage in direct action, rather than electoral mobilisation.

Ultimately, the proletariat is defined by dispossession, not employment.<sup>59</sup> Possession of a used rice sack, a hoe and some boots does not negate this proletarian condition. It is for this reason that waste collectors’ manifold struggles retain a proletarian character, even when waged labour is

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<sup>57</sup> Bernstein, ‘Notes on Capital and Peasantry’, p. 70.

<sup>58</sup> Chatterjee, ‘Gramsci in the 21st Century’, p. 134.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Denning, ‘Wageless Life’, *New Left Review* 66 (2010), p. 81.

absent.

## **Conclusion**

Motivating this paper has been the question of whether and how class struggle remains possible for those labouring outside formal waged employment. I have concerned myself here with class struggle in the restricted sense of structurally possible (if not immediately feasible) resistance to capitalist exploitation and subordination. Spaces of informality in the global South are crisscrossed by heterogeneous relations of surplus extraction—relations usefully understood in terms of labour’s differential subsumption to capital. This subordination to capital is continually contested, leading to shifting modes of surplus extraction that open up or close down possible forms of struggle (from debt, rent and workplace strikes to surreptitious ‘outside’ sales and debt flight).

As an unruly political society, informal workers and worker-producers have also asserted claims on the state that transgress official law and policy, as when undocumented migrant pickers have pursued livelihoods and established squatter settlements with the tacit toleration of the Thai police. Given the embeddedness of Mae Sot’s informal waste collectors within class-exploitative relations, such claims on the state are evidently not dependent on any externality to the circuits of capital accumulation.

In such ways, direct forms of class struggle remain structurally possible from within the heterogeneous informal relations of capitalist exploitation that crisscross the global South.