

## **Refuting the “Useless Class” theory in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: From the Perspective of Human Subjectivity**

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**Abstract:** With the rapid development of artificial intelligence, the phenomenon of “machines replacing humans” has become widespread, bringing the “useless class theory” into public discourse. This theory’s claim that the proletariat has become useless rests on specific class and philosophical positions, conflating uselessness to capital with uselessness to society and thereby misreading the Marxist conception of human subjectivity. In the context of the AI age, whether the proletariat retains its subjectivity is a key question concerning the historical role of working people. By grounding analysis in Marxism and historical materialism, we can critically transcend the pessimistic assumptions embedded in the useless class theory and identify emergent forms of proletarian subjectivity under contemporary conditions. Ultimately, this will elucidate the historical logic of artificial intelligence and its liberating potential.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence; Subjectivity; the Useless Class Theory; Historical Materialism

### **1. Introduction: The Development of Artificial Intelligence and the Emergence of the “Useless Class” Theory**

As we enter the 21st century, algorithmic systems, intelligent devices, and automated processes have become increasingly integrated into production and daily life. Consequently, machines not only can replace human manual labor, but also start to take over some “human-like” cognitive tasks.

The advancements in technology have not only brought about changes in job structures but also raised questions about the social role and status of human beings: Has Protagoras’ proposition that “man is the measure of all things”[1] become outdated? Against this backdrop, the “useless class theory” has gradually come into the public view.

In *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, the historian Yuval Noah Harari argues that artificial intelligence will replace both human physical and mental labor, forcing the vast majority of people (the proletariat) out of the labor market and thereby causing them to lose their “economic, political, or artistic value” [2], falling into a class that’s useless to social development. This argument further leads to a pessimistic judgment about human subjectivity: “for most contemporary jobs, 99 percent of human qualities and abilities are redundant, [3]” and the useless masses may be able to obtain a sense of satisfaction only through drugs and computer games. In this vision, the future of humanity will be one in which humans are “downgraded from designers to chips, then to data, and finally dissolved and dispersed in the flood of data.[4]”

Under conditions in which artificial intelligence is deeply embedded in social operations, do human beings still participate in and influence social development as subjects? How should the position of the proletariat in social history be understood? Centered on these questions, this study takes the social reality of the age of artificial intelligence as its background and draws on Marx’s theory of human subjectivity to analyze the useless class theory, thereby examining the concrete forms of proletarian subjectivity under conditions of artificial intelligence and its paths of return.

### **2. The Ideological Roots and Philosophical Standpoint of the Useless Class Theory**

From its theoretical origin, the “useless class” is a reconfiguration of the concept of the proletariat. Both are grounded in capitalist private ownership of the means of production. But they reach opposite conclusions about workers’ social status and historical role. The useless class theory defines workers excluded from production by private ownership as a no-contribution group. Whereas Marx regarded the oppressed working masses as the decisive force of social

transformation. This shift reflects a degradation of workers' historical subject status.

The theory presupposes the capitalist mode of production as "a natural and eternal existence form" and treats artificial intelligence merely as "a new variable introduced within this unchanging framework" [5]. As a result, structural contradictions such as intensified inequality, unemployment, and the expansion of the industrial reserve are interpreted as natural outcomes of technological evolution, thereby legitimizing capitalist domination. Within capital logic, the proletariat is deemed "useless" because it no longer satisfies capital's demands for efficiency and profit.

Its philosophical foundation lies in technological determinism and AI universalism. As Habermas warned of the "colonization of the lifeworld by the system" [6], once technology is seen as the dominant force of social change, human practice and agency are weakened. Consequently, social usefulness is reduced to efficiency and technical adaptability, misreading Marx's concept of subjectivity and ignoring the capacity to transform reality through objectified practice [7]. Therefore, the "uselessness" of the useless class refers to the uselessness of capital, rather than the uselessness in society. The useless class theory solely negates the social usefulness of the proletariat from the perspective of capital, which is a instrumentalist understanding of human subjectivity. In the era of artificial intelligence, the true subjectivity of the proletariat has not disappeared. It has merely been suppressed by the capital logic.

### **3. The Connotation and Clarification of Proletarian Subjectivity in the Age of Artificial Intelligence**

The Marxist concept of human subjectivity includes three dimensions: practicality, creativity, and sociality. In the era of artificial intelligence, these dimensions acquire new meanings. Practicality remains the foundation of subjectivity and is expressed in the proletariat's capacity to create value in new fields under conditions of technological transformation. Even when excluded from formal production positions, workers may expand creativity and achieve more free and comprehensive development through labor liberation. At the same time, proletarian subjectivity retains its social character, as individuals continue to participate in social operations through technological mediation.

Practicality provides the material basis of subjectivity, creativity indicates its developmental orientation, and sociality constitutes its structural condition. Together, these dimensions form the overall configuration of proletarian subjectivity in the age of artificial intelligence.

#### **3.1. Practicality: Expanding New Value Spaces**

Practicality is the fundamental attribute of subjectivity. In the era of artificial intelligence, practicality is mainly manifested as the ability of workers to create value by utilizing technology in new production domains when they are excluded from the traditional production system. No matter how technology develops, subjectivity always roots in specific labor practices. Marx pointed out that the product of labor "is fixed in a certain object, a materialized labor", and "the realization of labor is the objectification of labor"[8]. Only through real labor can the purpose and ability of the subject be transformed into objective existence, and then become a actual social subject. Although artificial intelligence has compressed the labor space, it has not eliminated the labor practice itself. It promotes the transfer of practical activities from "on-site operation" to "system support, data generation and value transformation".

The useless class theory, however, equates practicality with whether one is in a traditional production site or a formal position. Once workers are excluded from the existing production structure by technology, they are considered to have withdrawn from the value creation process. This judgment ignores the adjustment of the employment structure under artificial intelligence conditions and also obscures the possibility of the proletariat continuously participating in social production through diverse practices. First, some scholars have mentioned that unmanned factories present a "no-man's-land" production scene, but this is actually because human labor has shifted to the background: the design and construction of production systems, the manufacturing, installation, debugging and maintenance of robots and equipment, the development of operating codes for different product production lines, the processing of production data and process optimization, etc[9].

Second, platform-based development has absorbed a large amount of labor. Video bloggers

and livestream hosts generate traffic by producing content, while platforms rely on algorithmic distribution to realize advertising and e-commerce revenue; users' clicks and interactions are likewise transformed into data value. This form of "play labor" creates real economic returns, though the protection of rights and interests remains insufficient[8]. In addition, the expansion of personalized products and service industries that rely on human initiative has accommodated part of the transferred labor force. Even in sectors where artificial intelligence does displace labor, such displacement is not unilateral but accompanied by a "structural compensatory effect." For example, ride-hailing platforms use algorithms to improve the efficiency of matching supply and demand. Although they exert a crowding-out effect on traditional taxis, they also expand the overall travel market and increase demand for drivers[10]. Hence, it is not the practice itself that is excluded, but the specific form of labor preferred by capital. And practicality continues to persist in new forms in the process of development.

### **3.2 Creativity: Liberation of Labor and Free Development**

If the practical aspect answers the question of whether the proletariat still participates in production, then creativity responds to whether workers still have the ability to contribute to society after leaving their established positions. In the era of artificial intelligence, creativity mainly manifests as the ability of workers to achieve free development on the basis of labor liberation. As Marx said, "Man should possess his own comprehensive essence in a comprehensive way, that is, as a complete person[11]" ,having obtained new material conditions. AI and machines take over repetitive and monotonous labor, providing workers with more free time to arrange their activities autonomously, allowing them to "do this today and that tomorrow.[12]" Meanwhile, the abundant resources linked by artificial intelligence have enhanced the creative ability of workers. Through intelligent systems, workers can access diverse learning and development channels, "improving environmental adaptability and self-development capabilities"[13].

The misinterpretation of the useless class theory in this dimension lies in its reduction of creativity to job skills, thereby denying the possibility of

individual development under conditions of labor liberation. It argues that once artificial intelligence replaces some jobs, the proletariat is rendered incapable of creating value in economic and political spheres, ignoring the individual development opportunities brought about by AI. Even if workers are excluded from core positions, they can still utilize the saved time and expanded resources for creative practice. For example, they can engage in emerging production activities such as writing, short video creation and self-media operation, and creative design with AI assistance, thus playing an active role in the new social production form. In reality, this misinterpretation is strengthened through the monopoly of high-end positions, the continuous increase of skill requirements, and the imbalance in resource allocation, thereby compressing the creative opportunities of workers. However, labor liberation itself has opened up a new starting point for the exertion of creativity.

### **3.3 Sociability: Reorganization and Strengthening of Social Relationships**

In the era of AI, the sociality of subjects is manifested as the ability of workers to continuously integrate, enrich, and reshape social relationships through technologies. Marx pointed out that "the essence of man is the sum of all social relations[14]" and emphasized that "the existence of all human history is undoubtedly the existence of living individuals"[15]. This means that the sociality of human beings is not fixed in a specific system or position, but always starts from the actual individual and continuously generates in specific interactions. At the same time, the constantly generated social relationships keep individuals within the social structure, releasing and promoting the forces that drive social and historical development. The wide application of artificial intelligence has led to new characteristics in interactions: traditional face-to-face collaboration has been weakened, and interactions based on networks and intelligent systems are constantly expanding. Digital technology has compressed time and space distances, making it easier for individuals to maintain existing relationships and establish new collaboration networks. At the same time, the transparency of personal privacy brings about the "ending of routines," promoting goodness in human nature and reducing the cost of forming trust[16]. Thus, social relationships have shifted from a closed and local structure to a

more open and integrated form.

The misinterpretation in the dimension of sociability lies in equating the qualification for participating in social relationships with being within the formal production system. When some workers are excluded from it, they are regarded as peripheral groups. This judgment ignores the changes in the mechanism of social relationship generation under artificial intelligence conditions. In fact, people can make up for the lack of offline interactions through online interactions. At the production level, people participate in division of labor and value creation through forms such as gig work and prosumer labor [17] to build relationship networks. At the learning level, they form communities through online courses and knowledge communities. In the life level, they maintain daily interactions through community platforms and mass media. It can be seen that equating whether a worker is “useful” with whether they occupy a production position obscures the fact that social relationships are being reorganized and strengthened under new technologies. Therefore, equating whether a worker is useful with whether they occupy a production position obscures the fact that social relationships are being reorganized and strengthened under new technologies.

#### **4. Conclusion: The Path of the Return of the Proletarian Subjectivity**

The above critique reveals that the useless class theory is a static class view based on technological determinism to defend the logic of capital. Through the analysis of practicality, creativity, and sociality, it can be seen that the subjectivity of the proletariat has not disappeared. Instead, it has acquired a new existence form in the migration of the practical field, the transformation of creative space, and the reorganization of social relations.

However, the development of artificial intelligence also poses new challenges to subjectivity. In reality, capital is accelerating the process of replacing humans with machines and incorporating emerging labor activities into the value-creating track through methods such as algorithm management and data monopoly. In response, it is necessary to address the challenges from the three levels of people, technology, and institutions. For example, the vast number of workers should “emancipating the mind and challenge the limits, constructing with artificial intelligence in both directions”[18].

Technological development should control the speed and leave time for society to adapt. Public policy should be constructed to ensure a “smooth transition” of the employment structure[19]. Here, the socialism with Chinese characteristics shows its remarkable advantages. The socialist market economy adheres to the value orientation of putting people first, which can regulate capital operation and promote technological development to serve social interests[20]. This also indicates that the social trend of artificial intelligence is not determined solely by the capital logic.

From a historical perspective, the transformation brought about by artificial intelligence is strikingly similar to the process in the Industrial Revolution where machines replaced manual labor. Both witnessed revolutionary changes in the means of production, “transforming human life” and “preparing for the liberation of humanity”[21]. The difference lies in that the changes in the era of artificial intelligence have to a greater extent weakened the central position of direct labor in wealth creation. It further expanded the possibility that “humans no longer engage in the kind of labor that can be performed by things on behalf of humans”[22]. The measure of wealth is increasingly shifting from working hours to practical skills.

Ultimately, whether the technical potential can be transformed into a comprehensive liberation of subjectivity depends on the social system in which it is embedded. The fundamental flaw of the useless class theory is its avoidance of the issue of ownership of the means of production. It understands technological development in a non-historical manner, obscuring the transformative power of the proletariat under conditions of highly developed productive forces. When the proletariat’s “usefulness” to capital continues to decline and reaches its limit, the existing relations of production will become unsustainable. The relations of production will be adjusted accordingly. A “Verein freier Menschen” will be formed and human subjectivity will be fully realized in the new social formation.

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