

EDUCATION FOR SOCIALISTS

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THE WORKERS' VITAL ROLE

DUNCAN HALLAS

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“A DEVELOPMENT of the productive forces is the absolute practical premise of communism because without it want is generalised, and that means that all the old crap must revive again.” By “all the old crap” Marx meant classes, inequality, class struggles and war.

On a world scale this problem has been solved. The material basis for socialism exists, but as a result of the course of capitalist development it is very unevenly distributed. For example, in the USA output per man-hour, averaged for all sectors of the economy, rose from 37 units in 1870 to 100 units in 1913 (taken as baseline), to 208 units in 1938 and to nearly 400 units in 1963.

On the other hand, in most of the “underdeveloped” countries overall productivity remains very low. It has been kept low by the competitive power of the developed capitalist countries and by the transfer of resources from the “underdeveloped” to the “developed” by imperialism.

A Chinese economist published a book in 1950 giving these figures: “In the USA there was an average of about 600 times more industrial capital per head (of the population) than in China, or more than 900 times if manufacturing capital alone were considered.” Even making every allowance for industrial development since 1950 it is clear that the basis for a classless

society in an isolated China does not exist.¹ The same argument applies to the rest of the “Third World”, that is, to two-thirds of mankind. What does exist is the possibility of an international socialism and this requires the growth of an international revolutionary movement.

Such a movement must be based on the industrial working classes. This is not a question of dogma. It is fundamental to the Marxist analysis of society and follows from the actual life situation of the modern workers as compared to that of all previous exploited classes.

While it is the case that the low level of the productivity of labour was the basic reason for inequality and exploitation in pre-capitalist societies, there was also another reason. In pre-industrialised societies the working people, whether slaves, serfs or “free” peasants, normally worked in fairly small groups isolated from similar groups widely scattered over the countryside. This made it very difficult for them to think in collective terms and still more difficult for them to act as a class.

As Marx, writing of the French peasantry, noted, “Insofar as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that divide their mode of life...from that of other classes, and put them in hostile contrast to the latter, they form a class. Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small peasants, and the identity of their interests, begets no unity, no national union, and no political organisation, they do not form a class. They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interests... They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.”

Slaves, serfs, peasants could and often did revolt, burn the big houses and kill lords, priests and lawyers. What they could not do, except for short periods in exceptional circumstances, was impose their rule, as a class, on society. Either the old rulers regained control or others took their place. For the cultivators had sooner or later to disperse to their plots or starve. Professional rulers arose to “represent” them.

It is the concentration of the modern working class into large units in cities and the enormous development of means of communication that makes

1: The expansion of the Chinese industrial production since this article partially invalidates this argument, though it remains the case that the mass of China’s population languishes in poverty. Hallas’s point certainly does still hold true across most of the Global South—editor’s note.

possible trade union and political organisation. They make it possible for the working class, the great majority, to impose its collective will on society. There is no possible substitute. Socialism means a society based on voluntary cooperation between working people. It can neither be established in the absence of a modern working class nor imposed on one from above.

Marx took as his model of working class rule the Paris Commune of 1871. His description of its working is still, in essentials, the outline of a “workers’ state”, though the rise of large-scale industry has made workers’ councils based on productive units more important than area organisation.

The Commune was formed of municipal councillors chosen by universal suffrage...responsible and recallable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men... The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time...the police was at once stripped of its political attributes and turned into the responsible and at all times recallable agent of the Commune.

So were the officials of all other branches of the administration. From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at workmen’s wages. The vested interests and allowances of the high dignitaries disappeared along with the high dignitaries themselves... Like the rest of public servants, magistrates and judges were to be elective, responsible and recallable... The first decree of the Commune was the abolition of the standing army and the substitution for it of the armed people.

Such a revolutionary and democratic regime, solidly based on the working class, is the essential instrument for the transition to socialism. To establish it, of course, the capitalist state machine must be eliminated because workers’ power is incompatible with any kind of bureaucratic and repressive hierarchy.

THE TWO SOULS OF SOCIALISM

HAL DRAPER

An extract from the classic pamphlet (1966)

THE NEAREST thing to a common content of the various “socialisms” is a negative: anti-capitalism. On the positive side, the range of conflicting and incompatible ideas that call themselves socialist is wider than the spread of ideas within the bourgeois world.

Even anti-capitalism holds less and less as a common factor. In one part of the spectrum, a number of social democratic parties have virtually eliminated any specifically socialist demands from their programmes, promising to maintain private enterprise wherever possible.

In another part of the world picture, there are the Communist states, whose claim to being “socialist” is based on a negative: the abolition of the capitalist private-profit system. However, the socio-economic system which has replaced capitalism there would not be recognisable to Karl Marx.² The state owns the means of production—but who “owns” the state? Certainly not the mass of workers, who are exploited, unfree, and alienated from all levers of social and political control.

These two self-styled socialisms are very different, but they have more in common than they think. The social democracy has typically dreamed of “socialising” capitalism from above. Its principle has always been that increased state intervention in society and economy is per se socialistic. It

2: Hal Draper saw the Stalinist states as a new form of class society, whereas the SWP saw them as examples of state capitalism. This, in fact, adds weight to Draper’s critique. See Tony Cliff’s *Trotskyism After Trotsky* (available from www.marxists.org) for more details—editor’s note.

bears a fatal family resemblance to the Stalinist conception of imposing something called socialism from the top down, and of equating statification with socialism. Both have their roots in the ambiguous history of the socialist idea.

There have always been different “kinds of socialism”, and they have customarily been divided into reformist or revolutionary, peaceful or violent, democratic or authoritarian, etc. These divisions exist, but the underlying division is something else. Throughout the history of socialist movements and ideas, the fundamental divide is between Socialism-from-Above and Socialism-from-Below.

What unites the many different forms of Socialism-from-Above is the conception that socialism (or a reasonable facsimile thereof) must be handed down to the grateful masses in one form or another, by a ruling elite which is not subject to their control in fact. The heart of Socialism-from-Below is its view that socialism can be realised only through the self-emancipation of activated masses in motion, reaching out for freedom with their own hands, mobilised “from below” in a struggle to take charge of their own destiny, as actors (not merely subjects) on the stage of history. “The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves”: this is the first sentence in the Rules written for the First International by Marx, and this is the First Principle of his lifework.

What Marx did

In the socialist movement as it developed before Marx, nowhere did the line of the Socialist Idea intersect the line of Democracy-from-Below. This intersection, this synthesis, was the great contribution of Marx: in comparison, the whole content of his *Capital* is secondary. This is the heart of Marxism: “This is the Law; all the rest is commentary.” The Communist Manifesto of 1848 marked the self-consciousness of the first movement (in Engels’s words) “whose notion was from the very beginning that the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself”.

The young Marx himself went through the more primitive stage just as the human embryo goes through the gill stage; or to put it differently, one of his first immunisations was achieved by catching the most pervasive disease of all, the illusion of the Saviour-Despot. When he was 22, the old kaiser died, and to the hosannas of the liberals Friedrich Wilhelm IV acceded to

the throne amidst expectations of democratic reforms from above. Nothing of the sort happened. Marx never went back to this notion.

Marx entered politics as the crusading editor of a newspaper which was the organ of the extreme left of the liberal democracy of the industrialised Rhineland, and soon became the foremost editorial voice of complete political democracy in Germany. The first article he published was a polemic in favour of the unqualified freedom of the press from all censorship by the state. By the time the imperial government forced his dismissal, he was turning to find out more about the new socialist ideas coming from France. When this leading spokesman of liberal democracy became a socialist, he still regarded the task as the championing of democracy—except that democracy now had a deeper meaning. Marx was the first socialist thinker and leader who came to socialism *through* the struggle for liberal democracy.

In working out the viewpoint which first wedded the new communist idea to the new democratic aspirations, they came into conflict with the existing communist sects such as that of Weitling, who dreamed of a messianic dictatorship. Before they joined the group which became the Communist League (for which they were to write the *Communist Manifesto*), they stipulated that the organisation be changed from an elite conspiracy of the old type into an open propaganda group, that “everything conducive to superstitious authoritarianism be struck out of the rules”, that the leading committee be elected by the whole membership as against the tradition of “decisions from above”.

When the Communist League split, it was in conflict once again with the “crude communism” of putschism, which thought to substitute determined bands of revolutionaries for the real mass movement of an enlightened working class. Marx told them:

The minority...makes mere will the motive force of the revolution, instead of actual relations. Whereas we say to the workers, “You will have to go through 15 or 20 or 50 years of civil wars and international wars, not only in order to change extant conditions, but also in order to change yourselves and to render yourselves fit for political dominion,” you, on the other hand, say to the workers, “We must attain to power at once, or else we may just as well go to sleep.”

In order to change yourselves and to render yourselves fit for political dominion: this is Marx's programme for the working class movement, as against both those who say the workers can take power any Sunday, and those who say never. Marxism came into being, in self-conscious struggle against the advocates of the Educational Dictatorship, the Saviour-Dictators, the revolutionary elitists, the communist authoritarians, as well as the philanthropic do-gooders and bourgeois liberals.

The heart of the theory is this proposition: that there is a social majority which has the interest and motivation to change the system, and that the aim of socialism can be the education and mobilisation of this mass-majority. This is the exploited class, the working class, from which comes the eventual motive-force of revolution. Hence a Socialism-from-Below is possible, on the basis of a theory which sees the revolutionary potentialities in the broad masses, even if they seem backward at a given time and place. *Capital*, after all, is nothing but the demonstration of the economic basis of this proposition.

It is only some such theory of working class socialism which makes possible the fusion of revolutionary socialism and revolutionary democracy. We are not arguing at this point our conviction that this faith is justified, but only insisting on the alternative: all socialists or would-be reformers who repudiate it *must* go over to some Socialism-from-Above, whether of the reformist, utopian, bureaucratic, Stalinist, Maoist or Castroite variety. And they do.

Five years before the *Communist Manifesto* a freshly converted 23-year-old socialist had still written in the old elitist tradition, "We can recruit our ranks from those classes only which have enjoyed a pretty good education; that is, from the universities and from the commercial class." The young Engels learned better; but this obsolete wisdom is still with us as ever.

MARXISM AND THE WORKING CLASS

BY JOSEPH CHOONARA

Adapted from “Class and the Classical Marxist Tradition”
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SOME POINT around 2013, according to data from the International Labour Organization, a historic landmark was reached. For the first time, wage labourers constituted a majority of the global labour force, amounting to some 1.6 billion people. This symbolic milestone might be seen to confirm Karl Marx’s prognosis in *The Communist Manifesto* that “the bourgeoisie... produces, above all, its own grave-diggers”. However, the sentence that follows in the *Manifesto*, “Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable,” has increasingly been contested, not simply within mainstream political discourse but also on the radical left (Marx 1977, 231).

As early as the mid-1980s, Ellen Meiksins Wood felt moved to write *The Retreat from Class*, decrying the rise of post-Marxism as a return to the kind of perspectives Marx criticised among the German left intelligentsia of the 1840s. According to the introduction to the second edition, published a decade later, in the subsequent wave of “post-left theories...there is even less room for class politics than there was in post-Marxism”.¹

A couple of years later, *Empire*, the first in a trilogy of works by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, appeared, popularising ideas that had gestated among sections of the Italian radical left since the 1970s.

1: Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class* (Verso, 1998).

They argue:

In a previous era the category of the proletariat centred on and was at times effectively subsumed under the industrial working class, whose paradigmatic figure was the male mass factory worker... Today that working class has all but disappeared from view... it has been displaced from its privileged position in the capitalist economy... [U]nder the category of the proletariat we understand all those exploited by and subject to capitalist domination... Some labour is waged, some is not; some labour is restricted to within the factory walls, some is dispersed across the unbounded social terrain; some labour is limited to eight hours a day and 40 hours a week, some expands to fill the entire time of life.²

Their emphasis on the breakdown of the relationship between capital and labour in traditional workplaces leads Hardt and Negri to focus on a new political subject, the multitude, consisting of practically anyone engaged in any form of creative activity.

This position does not seek to invalidate traditional Marxist claims about class so much as to relegate them to a historical proposition. So too with a second strand of left thinking, which emphasises the emergence of a “precariat” of insecure workers. This conception gained currency in the English-speaking world with the publication in 2011 of Guy Standing’s *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. For Standing, the vanishing epoch of the working class was characterised by:

A society consisting mostly of workers in long-term, stable, fixed-hour jobs with established routes of advancement, subject to unionisation and collective agreements, with job titles their fathers and mothers would have understood, facing local employers whose names and features they were familiar with.³

To these strands of criticism we could add works by Eric Hobsbawm, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, André Gorz, Manuel Castells, Slavoj

2: Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Harvard, 2001).

3: Guy Standing, *The Precariat* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

Žižek and Paul Mason to name just a few. The argument here is that there are important elements of the classical Marxist notion of class that are ignored or misconstrued by recent radical left writers. We have to return to Marx to assess the validity or otherwise of the retreat from class.

Relations of Production

Marx never set out his view on class in a single work. One of his plans for *Capital* did include a book on wage-labour, but this never materialised; the third volume of the published text famously finishes with a “title: Classes. Forty lines, then silence”.⁴ Nonetheless, it is possible to reconstruct a consistent account of class from the totality of Marx’s writing.

Class, for Marx, arises out of the relations of production, a category that begins to emerge in *The German Ideology*, co-authored with Frederick Engels around 1846. Initially Marx and Engels speak of production in a given nation involving a combination of “productive forces” and “internal and external intercourse”. A given “mode of production” gives rise to and is characterised by “the real process of production” consisting of both material factors and social relations. While, at this stage, the term *intercourse* is used, rather than relations of production, we get, in embryonic form, a vision of historical development that will be refined in later works, involving a succession of forms of intercourse promoting and then acting as “fetters” on the forces of production.⁵

This process of refinement is clear in Marx’s polemic against the German revolutionary Karl Heinzen, penned a year or so after *The German Ideology*:

Since private property...consists in the totality of the bourgeois relations of production...since all these bourgeois relations of production are class relations...a change in, or even the abolition of, these relations can only follow from a change in these classes and their relationships with each other, and a change in the relationship of classes is a historical change, a product of social activity as a whole...⁶

4: Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (Pantheon, 1971).

5: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1974).

6: Karl Marx, “Moralising criticism and critical morality”, *Collected Works*, volume 6 (International Publishers, 1976).

Relations of production are here explicitly linked both to the control of property and to class relations. The developing account of forces and relations of production culminates in the famous preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production... At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters.⁷

Marx's account only makes sense if the broad range of concrete relationships through which workers are organised in workplaces are considered, along with technology, as an element in the forces of production. This category, for Marx, denotes the capacity of a society to produce in order to satisfy historically determined needs. The relations of production are a much narrower set of relationships, consisting of two species. The first are the antagonistic relations of exploitation:

The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relationship of domination and servitude, as this grows directly out of production itself and reacts back on it in turn as a determinant. On this is based the entire configuration of the economic community arising from the actual relations of production, and hence also its political form.⁸

The other species of relations of production are those governing the effective control (and usually ownership) of the means of production. Under

7: Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1981).

8: Karl Marx, *Capital*, volume 3 (Penguin, 1991).

capitalism, in contrast with, say, feudalism, control of the means of production rests almost exclusively with the capitalist class. Labourers can only access these by entering into a wage relation with capital. It should be added that ownership of the means of production is not collective among capitalists. Competition, which is “the inner nature of capital, appearing in and realised as the reciprocal interaction of many capitals with one another” is inherently a part of the relations of production.⁹

A looser notion of the relations of production leads to the idea that changes to the production process can reconfigure the class structure willy-nilly. Negri and Standing both tend to fetishise particular phases in the history of the working class, associated with a particular stage of the development of the forces of production. In Negri’s case, the benchmark is the Italian factory struggle of the 1970s; in Standing’s case, the world of the long boom following the Second World War, which created employment conditions that existed only for a brief period in the history of capitalism and have never existed across most of the globe.

Some of the post-Marxists explicitly collapse relations of production into the forces of production. So Castells argues:

Technology is embodied in technical relationships, which are socially conditioned... In principle...it could be assigned primarily to the process of production, in which we could then distinguish social relationships of production, and technical relationships of production, as proposed in the Marxian model, and as I had proposed in my own work. I now think this is questionable... In the last analysis, the networking of production leads to the blurring of class relationships... production-based, social classes, as constituted, and enacted in the Industrial Age, cease to exist in the network society.¹⁰

Hardt and Negri write: “Production becomes indistinguishable from reproduction; productive forces merge with relations of production”.¹¹

9: Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Penguin, 1993).

10: Manuel Castells, “Materials for an exploratory theory of the network society”, *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol.51, no.1 (2000).

11: Hardt and Negri, as above.

In both cases the result is a kind of technological determinism in which changes to production methods translate into a sidelining of a supposedly ‘traditional’ proletariat.

The importance of Marx’s account of relations of production is that, while the forces of production can change dramatically over the life-course of a mode of production, it is nonetheless possible to speak of a set of “relations of production corresponding to [a] specific and historically determined mode of production”.¹² If, as I shall argue, the most important shared capacities and interests of classes arise out of the relations of production, and the way they interact with the forces of production, we should expect these to be preserved despite the real changes to capitalism in recent decades.

The Special Class

Following Hal Draper, we can consider the features making the working class a “special class”. First, the “proletariat is the only class that has the social weight and power to carry through the abolition of the old order and to build a new society”. This is true in the sense that the working class in advanced capitalist societies constitutes the numerical majority. More fundamentally, capitalism’s relations of production compel it not simply to create a working class but to imbue it with power due to “the strategic role of the indispensable services performed by the proletariat in keeping society going”.¹³

It is this interdependence of capital and labour that distinguishes exploitation from oppression. To be oppressed on the grounds of gender or race does not imbue the oppressed with any particular power; exploitation does. Stoppages, strikes and workplace occupations are all evidence of the working class mobilising this power. The dependence of capital on labour holds regardless of whether workers are involved in producing goods or services. Either can involve the appropriation of unpaid surplus-labour to generate surplus-value (the source of profits), a point acknowledged by Marx with regard to private education:

Capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is, by its very essence the production of surplus-value... If we may

12: Marx, 1991, as above.

13: Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution*, volume 2 (Monthly Review Press, 1978).

take an example from outside the sphere of material production, a schoolmaster is a productive worker when, in addition to belabouring the heads of his pupils, he works himself into the ground to enrich the owner of the school. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of a sausage factory, makes no difference to the relation.¹⁴

It is noteworthy, given recent debates, that Marx chooses a field in which “knowledge” is involved. There is no reason in principle why Marx’s political economy, and hence his class analysis, cannot be extended into these areas.

The dependence of capital on labour is most obvious when workers directly generate surplus-value or in, for instance, the financial sector where they are essential to the appropriation of surplus-value generated elsewhere in the system. However, the role that the state has come to play in capitalist production (and reproduction) also imbues large numbers of public sector workers with considerable power. The disruption involved in shutting down publically-run transport networks, waste disposal services or schools are examples. The public sector strikes of 2011 cost British industry an estimated £500 million, primarily by forcing parents to make alternative arrangements for their children.

A second consequence of capitalist development is the formation of a collective class. Collectivisation takes two forms. First, capitalism is a largely urban system that experiences a pressure to agglomerate within cities. Fear of the “mob” in cities such as Paris or London long pre-dates industrialisation. However, under capitalism, for the first time in world history, more than 50 percent of people live in urban areas, another historic landmark, this one reached in 2007 according to the United Nations.

This form of concentration dovetails with a more fundamental form, namely the concentration of workers within workplaces. While this process begins in the early stages of manufacturing, it is the utilisation of machinery on a large scale that really revolutionises production. Mechanisation of the labour process has contradictory impacts on the collectivisation of labour. At first, as greater quantities of capital are mobilised and the scale

14: Karl Marx, *Capital*, volume 1 (Penguin, 1990).

of production expands, and as firms swallow up their rivals, the number of workers mobilised in workplaces generally grows. However, mechanisation can also lead to the replacement of workers with machinery. This does not automatically entail a reduction of workplace size. If the overall expansion of capital is more rapid than the increase in its organic composition (the ratio of investment in machinery and raw material to investment in labour power), or if capital is being centralised in fewer hands, workplaces can still expand. If this is not the case, though, we might expect the workplaces in a particular industry to decline in size.

This has indeed occurred in many fields of manufacturing. However, this has not necessarily diminished the strength of groups of workers still employed. Indeed, the use of “just in time” methods across production networks spanning continents can imbue relatively small groups of workers with extraordinary strategic power. The “surplus population” produced by accumulation in particular fields of employment also “becomes, conversely, the lever of capitalist accumulation”, offering the potential for new fields of production to open up and draw labourers into them.¹⁵ Marx cites the railways as an example, but the century and a half since has seen many more instances, notably the growth of the service sector generally across advanced capitalist countries since the Second World War.

What is surprising over the past few decades is not that some workplaces have diminished in size while others have grown, but rather how stable the distribution of workplace size seems to have been. In the US, between 1980 and 2007, the percentage of employees in workplaces with over 100 employees fell by just 1 percent from 46 percent to 45 percent.¹⁶ Given the decline in the size of many manufacturing workplaces this suggests the emergence of a range of big service sector workplaces. Half the US labour force is today in workplaces comparable in size to the cotton mills of Lancashire during the great Chartist agitation of the 1840s, which generally employed around 100 or 200 labourers.

A third consequence of the rise of capitalism is that workers are placed in a homogenous position relative to capital. This is, it should be stressed, not

15: Marx, 1990, as above.

16: Bill Dunn, “The new economy and labour’s decline”, in *Trade Unions and the Global Crisis* (ILO, 2011).

absolute homogeneity. Workers can occupy quite different positions in the labour process and work within entirely different labour processes. Fortunately absolute homogeneity is not necessary. It is sufficient that the working class have the potential to recognise the simple fact that they face a common situation of exploitation by a common enemy.

The combination of collectivisation and relative homogeneity tends to close off individual solutions. Crudely, the peasantry could rise up, seize the lord's land, divide it up, and each farm a plot individually. There is no analogous solution if workers take over a supermarket, car plant or hospital.

The fourth point is that capitalism creates a propensity to struggle. As Draper points out, this does not rest on a particular view of society. "The working class moves towards class struggle insofar as capitalism fails to satisfy its economic and social needs and aspirations, not insofar as it is told about struggle by Marxists".¹⁷

Ultimately these struggles can break the bounds of capitalist society and herald the emergence of a new form of society. As Draper puts it: "The thrust of the proletariat's organised struggle persistently tends to go outside the framework of bourgeois institutions and ideas".¹⁸ This is true even though the organisations of workers may be led by reformist leaders who seek to constrain the struggles within the limits afforded by capitalism and even if many workers enter struggle on the basis of attempting to win reforms. That the aspirations held by workers cannot ultimately be satisfied within the confines of capitalist society again reflects the relations of production of capitalism. The potential for those living under the system to realise their historically determined needs is consistently undercut by the class relations of capitalism—the production relations of capital have, in a real sense, become "fetters" on the development of society.

Militancy and Consciousness

For those of us living in societies experiencing a long lull in class struggle it is important to remind ourselves that the working class demonstrates a persistence of militancy surpassing that of any other exploited class historically. While peasant revolts and slave rebellions were known in previous

17: Draper, as above.

18: Draper, as above.

epochs, they tended to be occasional eruptions threatening the social order. Under capitalism, strikes, occupations and demonstrations feature regularly in almost any country. Revolutions or revolutionary situations, though less common, have occurred somewhere within the system in every decade of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Accompanying this is a persistence of organising of some form or other. As Draper points out, “Workers are taught organisation not by their superior intelligence or by outside agitators, but by the capitalists... Capitalism has no choice about teaching its workers the wonders of organisation and labour solidarity, because without these the system cannot operate”. In carrying through their struggles, workers are compelled to form organisations on class lines. “The basic function of class organisation is struggle, present or potential, reality or threat. The very notion of an organisation, like a trade union, which is inherently hospitable to members of one class only, and which is inherently weakened until it achieves the organisation of the entire class as such, is a notion that fits no bourgeois ideology”.¹⁹

In this account it is not a case of achieving a level of organisation and then embarking on the class struggle. On the contrary, organisation tends to flow from the needs of, and actuality of, struggle.

The same applies to the development of class consciousness. Consider the succinct theorisation of contradictory consciousness offered by Antonio Gramsci:

The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but no theoretical consciousness of his practical activity, which nonetheless involves understanding the world in so far as it transforms it. His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed.²⁰

19: Draper, as above.

20: Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1998). The rather dated used of “man” and “his” reflects the typical language of the period.

The uncritical absorption of ideas can be best understood as a consequence of the alienation experienced by the worker. Capitalism confronts workers as a set of apparently naturalised, immutable relations. It is under those conditions that the “ideas of the ruling class” can become “the ruling ideas”, even where they run counter to the interests of the majority. Yet, Gramsci suggests, such ideas are never the totality of consciousness; they always exist in tension with ideas that reflect the objective interests of workers.

The combination of these two contradictory conceptions of the world can lead to a paralysis that “does not permit any action”, resulting in “passivity”, but this is not a static state of affairs. First, as Gramsci notes, there is a distinction between “normal times” and “exceptional” ones. Prolonged periods of crisis—political or economic—disrupt the coherence of ruling class ideology and along with it the complex, contradictory sedimentation of ideas forming the “common sense” of the working class.

Second, the experience of struggle leads to the transformation of consciousness: “Every ‘spontaneous’ movement contains rudimentary elements of conscious leadership”.²¹ In other words, the development of militancy and organisation is what Draper helpfully describes as a process of *maturation*. The converse of this is that periods of setback and demoralisation may lead to regression. Following the defeats suffered by the working class movements in most advanced capitalist countries from the late 1970s onwards, there has been a long period of capitalist restructuring in which new potential class forces have developed with little or no direct experience of open class struggle—especially sustained, successful class struggle.

However, there is no objective reason why new groups of workers created by contemporary capitalism cannot acquire the militancy of older groups. Indeed, we have seen this process develop in embryo over recent years. Consider the now venerable arguments, dating back at least to the 1950s, regarding the emergence of large groups of “white-collar”, middle-class professionals. C Wright Mills includes in his “white-collar mass” three groups: “schoolteachers, salespeople...and assorted office workers”.²²

21: Gramsci, as above.

22: C Wright Mills, *White Collar* (Oxford University Press, 1956).

Taking teachers as an example, we can see how militancy among this group has proliferated in recent decades, achieving a geographical spread “far greater than was the case historically for the textile or automobile industries”.²³ Whatever special factors obfuscated teachers’ shared interest with the wider working class or encouraged identification with other classes have substantially broken down. An early observer of this process in the UK, Stephen Ball, traces it back to the education reforms that began at the end of the 1960s leading to greater emphasis on regulation and control of the labour process:

In this historical process the immediate work experience of the teacher is undergoing a significant shift from that approximating a classical, if limited, professionalism towards that of technical labourer... Increasingly teachers see it to be in their interests to oppose the measures introduced by management in specific instances and to be “in opposition” to management in general terms.²⁴

Ball sees these factors as underlying the build-up to the industrial action by teachers in 1985-6. A more recent two-year study of teachers by Bob Carter and Howard Stevenson shows that the experience of educational reform under subsequent Labour governments saw further work intensification, a strengthening of managerial control and a decline of autonomy.²⁵ The analogy between teaching factories and sausage factories, made by Marx, is not lost on many contemporary teachers.

None of this is to ignore the presence of divisions in the working class. The argument is simply that, in the long-run, capitalism tends to exert unifying pressures on the proletariat that can push groups who did not do so to identify themselves with the wider working class movement. It is this pressure that will ultimately lead to new explosions of working

23: Beverly Silver, *Forces of Labor* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

24: Stephen Ball, “Staff relations during the teachers’ industrial action”, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1988).

25: Bob Carter and Howard Stevenson, “Teachers, workforce remodelling and the challenge to labour process analysis”, *Work, Employment & Society*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2012).

class struggle, likely centred on new working class forces forged by contemporary capitalism.

Employment Relations

Employment relations are formed in the context of class relations. Within Marxist theory, labour-power is identified as a commodity, but, as Marx notes, a “peculiar commodity”. Labour-power, unlike most commodities, is reproduced outside the capital-labour relation and is sold, not outright, but only for a period of time in exchange for a wage. In addition, unfortunately for the capitalist, the worker also accompanies their labour-power into the workplace, and must be subjected to managerial discipline if the capitalist is going to receive the full benefit of their market transaction.

Managerial relations in large firms typically involve delegation by the capitalist, to managers and supervisors “who command during the labour process in the name of capital”.²⁶ As Guglielmo Carchedi points out, managers perform two functions. One is actually a function of collective labour, namely the work of “coordination and unity of the labour process”, something that would hypothetically be necessary even in a world free from antagonistic social relations. Managers also perform a second function, “the global function of capital”, which involves “control and surveillance”:

Labour must be performed regularly, properly and continuously. The worker must not ill-use or damage the machines; must not waste raw materials; must not only reproduce his own labour power but must also produce surplus value, by working for a time longer than that contained in his wage, etc. Of particular importance is that since the quantity produced is a function of both the length of the working day and of the intensity of labour, it is necessary that the labourer works with the average degree of intensity.²⁷

Managers and supervisors form bureaucratic hierarchies combining to different degrees these two functions. Near the base of this hierarchy, we could expect low-level supervisors to sometimes side with workers against

26: Marx, 1990, as above.

27: Guglielmo Carchedi, *On the Economic Identification of Social Classes* (Routledge, 1977).

capital; near the top we would expect a greater propensity to side with capital. In this analysis, the participants in the hierarchy are best seen as a series of layers pulled between the two main classes of capitalist society, rather than a coherent class with distinctive interests. These groupings, the economic basis of the “new middle class” are “only identifiable in terms of contradiction”.²⁸

Turning to the market side of the employment relationship, there is a dearth of literature from a classical Marxist perspective. Ben Fine, in one of the few serious theoretical treatments of the issue, offers a number of insights. The reproduction of labour-power outside of the capital-labour relationship involves the creation of systems of provision and consumption that “vary not only with income but also with a range of other socio-economic variables such as age, region, household composition, etc”. The “shifting differentiation in consumption can lead to differentiation of wages as these are consolidated within the labour market”.²⁹

Alongside this “supply side” structuring of the labour market, there is a distinctive Marxist approach to the “demand side”. Across an economy there will be both a distribution of labour between sectors, reflecting the social division of labour, and particular divisions of labour within workplaces. These two divisions of labour interact in complex ways that are not “reducible by a technological imperative alone to the nature of the tasks themselves”. In addition, the processes structuring labour markets cannot be reduced simply to “the narrow economic arena defined by production, distribution and exchange”. The process of “social reproduction encompasses a wide range of factors...such as sexism, racism, trade unionism, etc,” each interacting with economic reproduction in particular ways to generate labour market reproduction. From all this, Fine draws a crucial conclusion:

Labour markets are different from one another, not only in outcomes in the sense of rewards in the form of wages, conditions and careers, but also in the way in which they are structured and reproduced. There is no single labour market, although labour markets are intimately

28: Carchedi, as above.

29: Ben Fine, *Labour Market Theory* (Routledge, 1998).

connected to one another, and no single generally applicable labour market theory.³⁰

If Fine is correct, then we need a concrete examination of particular labour markets, rather than sweeping claims of an endless rise in precarity or straightforward generalisation from the most marginal workers. This leads to a second, related, sense in which many radical left conceptions of the labour market might be misleading. As Kevin Doogan puts it, “the labour market is not only an imperfect conduit through which new employment relations might be transmitted, it also acts as an insulator against the pressures for institutional changes imputed to technological development and capital mobility”.³¹

The labour performed by labour-power is always of a dual nature, creating new use-values as “concrete labour” as well as creating value as “abstract labour”.³² The concrete, determinant qualities of labour are specific to particular labour processes and have to be reproduced accordingly. As Doogan writes: “While one set of market pressures is generated by the immediate requirements of production...there is another set of reproductive imperatives that impact upon the labour market.” Changes to labour markets will reflect both pressures. Furthermore, “in contrast to the irrationality engendered by neoliberal compliance with market forces, the reproductive requirements of capitalism confer a greater sense of rationality and order, demand long-term planning for current and future needs”.³³ Capitalists and state managers are not indifferent to the problems of establishing a reliable, suitably skilled supply of labour and the retention of the correct forms of labour-power.

For all the claims of Standing and others, the proportion of the labour force in the UK with temporary contracts has been stable at about 6 percent for three decades—even if other forms of contract that do not offer permanency of employment, such as zero-hours contracts, are added to this, the total amounts to about 10 percent of the labour force. There is little evidence of the employment relation in general becoming more transitory in

30: Fine, as above.

31: Kevin Doogan, *New Capitalism?* (Polity, 2009).

32: Marx, 1990, as above.

33: Doogan, as above.

countries such as the UK. Data from the General Household Survey shows that, on average, employees in Great Britain could, by 2015, expect their job to last 16 years, roughly the same as in 1975.³⁴ Doogan has shown that the phenomenon of increasing employment stability under neoliberalism holds for many advanced capitalist countries.³⁵

There are instances where capital can benefit from rendering labour more precarious, as has sometimes happened in low-skilled areas of retail or food serving where staff turnover is relatively high, as well as in some areas of social care and in tertiary education in the UK, where non-permanent employment runs at levels three times higher than in the labour force as a whole. However, there are powerful countertendencies that mean that, in many cases, labour remains relatively secure in its employment, but faces other attacks—on conditions of employment, pay, autonomy in the workplace or control of the labour process, for instance. Often workers risk not so much being shunted out of good jobs as being stuck in increasingly lousy ones.

Conclusion

Marxism offers a distinctive approach to class, envisaging it as bound up with the relations of production, which give rise to particular capacities and interests. It is these, rather than the existence of particular types of workers—the textile workers of the 1840s, the engineers of the Great Unrest or the car workers of 1968—that create the potential for a collective challenge to capitalism.

The particular level of combativity at any given moment does not indicate either the scale of the working class or its potential power. Class forces must mature, and, in particular, they do so through struggle. Fortunately, in the long run, they tend to be impelled towards struggle by the workings of capitalism itself. It is in this sense that Marx argues in *The Holy Family*: “The question is not what this or that proletarian, or even the whole of the proletariat at the moment considers as its aim. The question is what the proletariat is, and what, consequent on that being, it will be compelled to do”.³⁶

34: Joseph Choonara, *Insecurity, Precarious Work and Labour Markets* (Palgrave, 2019).

35: Doogan, as above.

36: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Holy Family* (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956).

The classical Marxist tradition does not stop at identifying the particular capacities and interests of workers. It also provides a basis on which labour markets can be theorised. This theorisation, critically, sees the relationship between capital and labour as one of two-way dependence, in which workers have potential power over their employers, challenging visions of ever-growing marginalisation that have become pervasive on the left.

This rich and subtle tradition deserves to be applied to the complexities of contemporary capitalism. Sadly, the rejection of what generally amounts to a crude caricature of Marx's own theory risks erasing the hard-won insights of classical Marxism from radical left class analysis.

Sample questions for discussion

- › How would you answer someone who claimed that class, in the Marxist sense, was no longer relevant?
- › How do the politics of the Labour Party today fit into Hal Draper’s categories of “socialism-from-below” and “socialism-from-above”?
- › How does the Marxist concept of class help explain the revolutions in the Arab world in recent years?
- › How might the changes to the working class in Britain affect the kind of organisations that would be created in a revolution here compared to in the past?

Further reading

A full version of Hal Draper’s *The Two Souls of Socialism* is available from the Marxist Internet Archive (www.marxists.org) along with the classic works by Marx and Engels dealing with this subject, such as the *Communist Manifesto*. Draper also wrote a volume entitled *The Politics of Social Classes* as part of his multi-volume work *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution* (Monthly Review), which can sometimes be obtained second hand.

A more recent work by August Nimtz, *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough* (State University of New York), deals well with the founders of Marxism and their relationship to class struggle. Debates on precarity are taken up by Kevin Doogan in *New Capitalism: The Transformation of Work* (Polity) and Joseph Choonara in *Insecurity, Precarious Work and Labour Markets: A Critique of the Orthodoxy* (Palgrave Macmillan). Kim Moody’s book *On New Terrain* (Haymarket) looks at debates on the working class in the US.

A detailed work by Raju Das, *Marxist Class Theory for a Sceptical World* (Haymarket) is an important recent study of the Marxist account.

