

Finally, this essay is deliberately open and exploratory in nature. It is futile to imagine that locked within the past contributions of scholars or activists is a key that can unlock a better future. Equally futile is the time-honoured method of argument-by-quotation, with the implicit assumption that every proposition must be justified by appeals to authority, related to the study of time-honoured questions, and deploying approved terminology. That method may safeguard a tradition, but at the cost of reducing still further its appeal to a society that has plainly rejected the failed socialisms of the past.

CLASS ANALYSIS IN THE MARXIST TRADITION

For Marx there were two great classes in capitalist societies, the capitalist class or bourgeoisie and the working class or proletariat, bound together in the social relation of capital. In this view, capitalists own the means of production, and purchase labour-power from workers with the purpose of increasing their wealth by extracting surplus-value and accumulating it as capital; workers have been dispossessed of direct access to the means of subsistence through self-activity, and therefore must sell their labour-power in order to subsist. The two classes in relation to each other constitute the relations of production in capitalism, which is a historically distinct mode of production that emerges from a pre-existing feudal order undermined by economic, social and technological change. Its own development, in turn, entails a growing economic polarization between the two great classes; this generates a political consciousness uniting the working class in collective action to overturn the capitalist order and usher in a classless society.

This core ‘Marxist theory of class’ has been challenged and qualified on a great variety of grounds, precisely because it stands at the heart of the political theory and practice of his followers. Theoretically, the two classes and the relationship between them are co-constituted with the concepts of mode of production, relations of production, value, capital, surplus-value, labour process, accumulation -- and necessarily also the forms of law and state that ensure the political rule of the capitalist class. Practically, socialism as a political movement rests on the belief that there exists a common interest across the working class, on which a unity of action can be built, first for resistance and then for revolution; this directs attention to the empirical configurations of class, the determinants of belief and behaviour, and the strategies and tactics of political mobilization.

Before turning to the main critical challenges to the two-class model, it is worth setting out the positive case for it, and especially for the idea of the working class as agent of social change. There is no question that Marx and his successors argued repeatedly that the dynamics of capital accumulation would tend to generate increasing social polarization between capitalists and workers. Even in the first volume of *Capital*, these tendencies find empirical specification in the account of how, after its initial phase of ‘primitive accumulation’ in which the means of production are appropriated by the rising capitalist class, both the production of commodities and their circulation are transformed by the drive to accumulate. In production, the key argument is that the ‘formal’ subsumption of labour to capital, in which capitalists assume control of substantively unchanged material production processes based on handicraft methods, tends to be transformed towards a ‘real’ subsumption of labour, entailing the development of first a detailed division of labour in factory production, and then the application of science and technology to the development of machine-based production. As Braverman, Gorz and others reminded us in the 1970s, this transformation of the capitalist labour process tends to reduce an increasing proportion of the direct labour force within the capitalist workplace to an undifferentiated mass of unskilled (or

more euphemistically ‘semi-skilled’) workers, subjected to the relentless discipline of mechanical or chemical processes designed and policed by capitalist managers.

At the same time, competition in the marketplace reinforces this process. In the labour market, technological change in production, appearing for capital in the form of increased labour productivity, continually leads to reductions in the demand for labour, and thereby a reserve army of labour that depresses wages and undermines attempts to organize opposition on the shop floor. In product markets, competition leads inevitably to the concentration and centralization of capital: the scale of production tends to grow faster than sales, leading to concentration in ever-larger units, while the development of credit and financial markets encourages the centralization of capital through the creation and merger of joint-stock companies.

But do these developments lay the foundations for the self-organization and growth of the working class as a collective actor? The conventional understanding within Marxism has always been that the collective experience of class struggle brings home to workers their shared class interest, encouraging self-organization and political contestation. Marx and Engels themselves left no systematic account of how this might transpire, but their writings abound in concrete analyses of the political activities of the working class, analyses which necessarily can only be undertaken by successive generations in response to the contingencies of time and place. Such contingencies evidently include a vast array of natural, social and cultural factors which stand alongside the reproduction and accumulation of capital, shaping the thinking and the actions of different groups within the working class. It is this unavoidable gap between abstract theory and concrete self-activity that later Marxists summed up in the formula that the ‘class in itself’ had to become a ‘class for itself’ equipped with a collective understanding of their circumstances.⁹ This gap can only be navigated by developing and contesting political strategies for overthrowing capitalist rule and ushering in a classless society. It is in this context that the validity of the two-class model has been questioned.

THE MIDDLE CLASSES

A first important challenge to the two-class model has been the existence of social groups that appear to stand between capital and labour. The empirical existence of ‘middle classes’ was clear to Marx and Engels themselves, and has been the subject of periodic debates ever since.¹⁰

Capitalism had emerged over a long historical period from societies of a very different kind, building upon components in a social division of labour which was dominated politically by a land-owning ruling class and characterized by its own distinctive relations of production. The transition to capitalism entails the continuing coexistence of earlier institutions, cultures and practices with the emerging capitalist order, and this hybridity is remarkably persistent; but in addition, the spread of capitalism generates rapid economic growth, new patterns of international trade and continuous technological change. These transform the division of labour both in society at large and within workplaces: new occupations arise and old occupations are brought within the scope of capitalist production, not only affecting the make-up of the two new great classes, but also continually generating an ill-defined border zone between them. Furthermore, these complexities are never observable in isolation from the processes of social contestation that accompany the development of capitalism.

Thus in the late nineteenth century, socialists recognized the political importance of both a ‘labour aristocracy’ and a ‘petty bourgeoisie’. The former was made up of workers

organized both to defend the skill-based material privileges that they retained from their artisanal origins, and to establish shop-floor control within the new industries of the second industrial revolution. Their generally higher levels of education and income ensured that they played a disproportionate role in the development of trade unions and social democratic parties, but it was open to such workers to pursue their own interests at the expense of the working class as a whole. This could be achieved both individually through promotion within the workplace,¹¹ and collectively through maintaining separate ‘craft’ unions and pursuing demarcation disputes against management attempts to deskill their work. As a result, they could be drawn into political alliances with liberal reform. The petty bourgeoisie, the small proprietors in industry and commerce, were capitalists by definition, but in the face of market competition and the development of large-scale industry and finance in this period, their position became increasingly precarious, especially at times of economic crisis. As a result, they gravitated politically towards populist alliances with the working class, but on the other hand, political ideologies of nationalism, racism or imperialism could suffice to keep them loyal to the *haute bourgeoisie* and the capitalist state.

Of greater interest in more recent debates have been other intermediate groups, such as managers and technical specialists in capitalist production; independent professionals such as lawyers, accountants, doctors, artists, journalists, clergy, etc.; and managers within the public sector and the state apparatus. There is no question that the occupational groups in question expanded greatly in the twentieth century in the advanced capitalist countries, and indeed in the Soviet bloc and other state-socialist countries also. At the turn of the century, Thorstein Veblen had already identified the potential antagonism between businessmen and engineers in large-scale industry, and the work of Berle and Means and James Burnham in the 1930s launched the idea of the ‘managerial revolution’.¹² By the 1960s, even mainstream economists and sociologists were heralding a ‘post-capitalist’ order based on technical rationality and economic efficiency, and it is hard to find much difference in this respect between the ‘new industrial state’ of J. K. Galbraith and the ostensibly Marxist analysis of ‘monopoly capital’ in the work of Baran and Sweezy.¹³

In relation to these middle class elements, Marxists have followed two main analytical strategies. One strategy is to attribute to these groups, or even by extension the middle classes as a whole, a set of activities and beliefs that seem to define a distinct location within the class structure of capitalism, which then becomes a three-class model. The second is to argue that the various components of the middle classes have no distinct function or purpose, but instead occupy a collectively ambiguous position; rather like the traditional labour aristocracy and petty bourgeoisie, they align with either the capitalist class or the working class, most visibly in periods of crisis. Both strategies were extensively deployed in European and North American debates in the 1960s and 1970s.

A well-known example of the first strategy was the thesis of the professional-managerial class, or PMC, posited in 1977 by Barbara and John Ehrenreich.¹⁴ They distinguished the PMC from the traditional petty bourgeoisie of small proprietors, and included in it a wide range of salaried white-collar workers, including scientists, engineers, managers, public officials, teachers, journalists, accountants, lawyers and the medical professions. Citing E. P. Thompson’s view that class could only be understood as a historical relationship, they argued that the specific class role of the PMC was primarily one of reproducing capitalist social relations. The occupational, educational, social and economic diversity of the PMC was no obstacle to its identification, and in any case no greater than the diversity of the capitalist class or the working class. Its rapid expansion during the post-1945 boom years was closely linked to the consolidation of monopoly capitalism and the expansion of the state, but also to the renewal of middle-class radicalism in the form of the New Left. This allowed the possibility of the PMC becoming a ‘class for itself’, developing a

distinct political voice and purpose, and even potentially taking over the role of revolutionary agency traditionally attributed to the working class. In all respects, this placed the putative PMC of the 1970s firmly in the American progressive tradition. It also stood alongside a growing literature in mainstream US sociology that advanced ‘new class’ theses,¹⁵ as well as echoing parallel thinking among dissident Marxists in Eastern Europe on the role of the intelligentsia.¹⁶

In contrast to the depiction of the PMC as a distinct if related class, other writers used various arguments to claim either that the occupational groups contained within it were liable to absorption into either the capitalist or the working class, or that they remained unable to cohere into a class-for-itself and were therefore irrelevant to the prospects for revolutionary change.¹⁷ Braverman’s deskilling thesis, though much misrepresented, provided ammunition to the prediction that intermediate groups were liable to undergo the same process of polarization that the original two-class model entailed. After all, the principles that Marx applied to the appropriation of workers’ skills in the development of the capitalist labour process could be applied just as well to mental as to manual workers, and therefore to the various occupations included in the PMC. Since the 1970s, many low- and mid-level technical, professional and managerial occupations have indeed become more routinized, and their workers subjected to the steady erosion of the advantages that they once enjoyed in the labour market. Elements of the process of deskilling long identified in blue-collar work now apply not only to low-level clerical or retail jobs, but also to supposedly higher level jobs. The close monitoring of work processes in graduate professions such as university teaching undermines the traditional ideology of professionalism, creates antagonism between staff and senior management, and encourages traditional responses such as trade union activism.

At the same time, in the higher reaches of the PMC, the once-fêted managerial revolution has very largely been reversed. In the private sector, the revival of shareholder power, the use of stock options and widespread privatization of state enterprises have drawn the highest levels of management firmly into the capitalist class. In the public sector also, the wholesale adoption of management techniques from the private sector has steadily undermined the traditional ideology of public service, installing instead apparatuses of strategic management based on top-down executive hierarchies and financial incentives. This has been accompanied by the outsourcing of everything from policy design through to routine service provision, overseen by growing two-way managerial traffic between the public sector and its private contractors. Today, it would be hard to argue that there exists a class, in the Marxist relational sense, that is distinct from the working class and the capitalist class. The trends that have brought about the demise of the PMC are part of the wider turn to neoliberalism in recent decades, although it could still be argued that there *really was* a nascent PMC in the period from the 1920s to the 1970s.¹⁸

THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE WORKING CLASS AND THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY

If the working class in Marx’s sense can now be understood once more to be overwhelmingly predominant in terms of numbers, it remains the case that the concept of the middle classes is very widely accepted in public debate; and the course of the global crisis since 2008 shows all too clearly how far we are from an effective class-based socialist politics. This brings us to the second critical issue for Marxist class theory, namely the question of agency: can either side of the two-class model really be seen as a historical subject? As far as the capitalist class is concerned, this centres on the historical development of capitalism, and the economic and political processes by which the capitalist class becomes

hegemonic in relation to landed interests as well as subordinate classes. There is a long tradition of debate on divisions within the capitalist class, most notably between industry and finance, as well as on the institutions and practices through which individual capitals or ‘fractions’ of capital overcome the antagonisms generated by their competitive struggles and arrive at some form of hegemonic strategy to sustain their class rule. Any historical inquiry into these issues unavoidably has to take fully into account the development of the capitalist state, which like class was vigorously debated in the 1970s and 1980s, but more recently has been relatively neglected; the main exception being the focus on the states system in arguments over globalization.¹⁹

Problematic though the relation between capital and the state remains, however, the question of working-class agency is far more challenging. As noted earlier, the standard formula for this has traditionally been to distinguish between the ‘class in itself’ and the ‘class for itself’: while accumulation expanded the ranks of the working class as a structural category and concentrated them in ever-larger production sites, it would then take the active organization of workers to transform them from victims of exploitation into agents of social transformation. This analytical distinction played a crucial part in shaping socialist politics, especially in ensuring the ascendancy of political parties, whether ostensibly reformist or revolutionary, over alternative working-class agencies such as trade unions that focused either on labour market conditions or on workplace struggles. Most damaging to the grassroots political engagement of workers at large was the concept of ‘false consciousness’, used to justify the elimination of rank-and-file democracy in workers’ organizations of all kinds.²⁰ But although the in-itself/for-itself distinction appears to have been largely rhetorical, it does direct us to the fragmentation of the working class across society at large, as well as the advances that have historically been achieved through party politics.

That the proletariat is differentiated in a great variety of ways is indeed clear, not least in the empirical evidence on which Marx himself drew in analyzing capitalist production in *Capital*. The social division of labour between branches of production, coupled with the technical division of labour within the workplace, means that wage labourers are highly differentiated by location, income, skill and authority, in complex combination with dimensions of difference such as gender, ethnicity and religion whose origins appear to lie outside the capitalist production process as such. In his analysis of the evolution of capitalist production from simple co-operation to manufacture to modern industry, Marx places considerable emphasis on how in the latter two stages the drive to extract relative surplus-value entails the transfer of immediate control over production from workers to capital and its agents.²¹ This leads not to the reduction of all to interchangeable general labourers, but to the decomposition of earlier forms of hierarchy and division of tasks and their recomposition as elements, no less hierarchical and diverse, within the collective labourer of developed capitalist production. At the same time, he sees the shedding of employment by large-scale modern industry as providing the basis for a continuous renewal of small-scale and less technically advanced fields of production; for example, the widespread existence of adjunct production formally outside the factory, such as homework in the textiles industry, allows factory owners to transfer to petty producers the financial consequences of periodic crises. Labour shedding constantly feeds into the broader reserve army of the unemployed, but they too are differentiated into what Marx dubs the floating, the latent and the stagnant.

Despite this obvious diversity within the mid-nineteenth century workforce, there is little doubt that traditionally the primary reference point for assessing the unity and cohesion of the working class was the large factory. In his general discussion of the development of machinery in *Capital*, Marx argues that once machine-based production takes hold of an industry, the relation between the workers and their instruments of labour becomes inverted: the worker becomes the adjunct of the machine.²² With further evolution towards a unified

machinery system, workers are bound together by its preordained rhythm: the collective character of labour confronts the workers as a technical necessity. This vision of increasingly automated flow production reflects the early development of assembly-line technology, which reaches its apotheosis in the early twentieth century in Ford's Highland Park plant and in continuous flow production in the chemical and related industries; it becomes a primary subject for the analysis of modern capitalist production, whether from cheerleaders or critics, as well as a cultural reference point when contrasted with the supposed idyll of artisanal production, as in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* or Chaplin's *Modern Times*.

In Marxist scholarship, this model of mass production is seen as dramatically accentuating the contradictions of capitalism. The need to valorize vast amounts of fixed capital accelerates the trend towards monopoly, the rise of trusts and cartels aimed at controlling markets; and at the same time, flow production systems make the collective nature of exploitation immediately apparent to the workers involved, encouraging thereby collective resistance on the shop floor and the rise of shop stewards and other forms of bottom-up self-organization. For example, Alfred Sohn-Rethel argued that the contradiction between the normal ebb and flow of price-competitive markets and the requirement of continuity of flow production amount to a 'dual economics of transition', which he identified historically in the support given by German heavy industry to the forms of state coordination and sector planning adopted by the Nazis.²³

However, as is readily apparent to anyone examining more broadly the nature of capitalist labour processes, very few wage labourers in capitalism actually find themselves subordinated to a machine-based collective process in this way. Even within the engineering industries, heartland of the machine-paced assembly line, at the peak of manufacturing employment in the UK it was estimated that such systems covered only 30 per cent of workers.²⁴ The reality is that the disposition of labour in the modern workplace is for the most part not shaped by technology into an inflexible form that contradicts the fluidity that money capital seeks. As the pioneers of labour process studies showed in the 1970s, it is shaped by the choices of capitalist management and the resistance, whether individual or collective, of workers.²⁵ As we have seen only too clearly in recent decades, even the most apparently stable oligopolies, whether in manufacturing or services, are open to fundamental disruption through not only technological change, but also organizational innovations such as the relocation or outsourcing of production; the use of complex incentive schemes; the ever-closer monitoring of production activity through information systems; and above all, the constant and recently all too successful efforts of employers to remove hard-won legal rights from trade unions.

Already in 1986, Peter Meiksins suggested that the debates on class, and specifically the relation between the 'polar' model and the evident vertical and horizontal fracturing of the workforce in capitalism, required that 'the relationship between production relations and specific, historical patterns of class conflict needs to be reconsidered'.²⁶ Yet with the general decline in interest in class, these adjustments have not taken place, or at least not with the positive outcome that Meiksins hoped for. Indeed, the lack of progress is reflected in the similar call made nearly twenty years later by David Camfield, who draws attention not only to the continuing need to situate classes historically, but also to 'consciously incorporate social relations other than class, such as gender and race'.²⁷ In the remaining sections I will try to explain this and to suggest ways to begin to effect such changes in theory and in practice, and particularly to overcome the divisions that currently beset us in challenging the present social order.