

KARL MARX'S THEORY OF SOCIAL CLASSES

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Karl Marx's theory of social classes was of great importance in his work and it has had a profound influence on modern social thought. Yet the writings of Marx, voluminous as they are, do not contain a coherent exposition of that theory. They contain, instead, many scattered fragments on this topic. We have tried to assemble these fragments; and by writing a commentary on this series of quotations we attempt to give a view of the theory as a whole. We should add that such a procedure neglects Marx's own intellectual development, for it treats as parts of one theory ideas which he expressed at various times in his career. However, in the case of Marx's theory of social classes this difficulty is not a serious one in our judgment.

According to Marx history may be divided roughly into several periods, for example, ancient civilization, feudalism, and capitalism. Each of these periods is characterized by a predominant mode of production and, based upon it, a class structure consisting of a ruling and an oppressed class. The struggle between these classes determines the social relations between men. In particular, the ruling class, which owes its position to the ownership and control of the means of production, controls also, though often in subtle ways, the whole moral and intellectual life of the people. According to Marx, law and government, art and literature, science and philosophy: all serve more or less directly the interests of the ruling class.

In the period of its revolutionary ascendance each class is "progressive" in two senses of that word. Its economic interests are identical with technical progress and hence with increased human welfare. And its efforts to pursue these interests align this class on the side of liberating ideas and institutions

and against all who retard technical progress and human welfare. But in time an ascending class may become a ruling class, such as the feudal lords or the capitalists, and then it comes to play a different role. Its economic interests, which originally favored technical progress, call for opposition to it when further change would endanger the economic dominance which it has won. Before its emergence as a ruling class, it turns from a champion of progress into a champion of reaction. It resists increasingly the attempts to change the social and economic organization of society, which would allow a full measure of the progress that has become technically possible. Such changes would endanger the entrenched position of the ruling class. Hence, tensions and conflicts are engendered that eventually lead to a revolutionary reorganization of society.

"...the means of production and of exchange, which served as the foundation for the growth of the bourgeoisie, were generated in feudal society. At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged, the feudal organization of agriculture and manufacturing industry, in a word, the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder.

Into their place stepped free competition, accompanied by a social and political constitution adapted to it, and by the economic and political sway of the bourgeois class.

A similar movement is going on before our own eyes. Modern bourgeois society with its relations of production, of exchange, and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells. For many a decade past the history of industry and commerce is but the history of the revolt of modern productive forces against modern conditions of production, against the property relations that are the conditions for the existence of the bourgeoisie and its rule. It is enough to mention the commercial crises that by their periodical return put the existence of the entire bourgeois society on trial, each time more threateningly. In these crises a great part not only of the existing products, but also of the previously created productive forces, are periodically destroyed. In these crises there breaks out an epidemic that, in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity--the epidemic of over-production. Society suddenly finds itself put back into a state of momentary barbarism; it appears as if a famine, a universal war of devastation had cut off

the supply of every means of subsistence; industry and commerce seem to be destroyed. And why? Because there is too much civilization, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce. The productive forces at the disposal of society no longer tend to further the development of the conditions of bourgeois property; on the contrary they have become too powerful for these conditions, by which they are fettered, and no sooner do they overcome these fetters than they bring disorder into the whole of bourgeois society, endanger the existence of bourgeois property. The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them. And how does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old one. That is to say, by paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented.

The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself.

But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons--the modern working class--the proletarians."¹

This conception of class conflict and historical change lent itself to a dogmatic interpretation. In particular, the materialist conception of history was often used in a manner which implied that only technical and economic factors were really important and that the whole social, political and intellectual realm (what Marx called the "superstructure") was of secondary significance. In two letters, written in 1890, Friedrich Engels, the life-long collaborator of Marx, opposed this "vulgar" interpretation:

"Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger writers sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due it. We had to emphasize this main principle in opposition to our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to allow the other elements involved in the interaction to come into their own rights...."

"...the materialist conception of history also has a lot of friends nowadays, to whom it serves as an excuse for not studying history...

¹Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party (New York: International Publishers, 1932), 14-15.

In general the word materialistic serves many of the younger writers in Germany as a mere phrase with which anything and everything is labelled without further study; they stick on this label and they think the question disposed of. But our conception of history is above all a guide to study, not a lever for construction after the manner of the Hegelians. All history must be studied afresh, the conditions of existence of the different formations of society must be individually examined before the attempt is made to deduce from them the political, civil-legal, aesthetic, philosophic, religious, etc., notions corresponding to them..."¹

It is well to keep these reservations in mind. They suggest that Marx and Engels often felt compelled by the exigencies of the social and political struggle, to cast their ideas in extremely pointed formulations. Had they been scholars of the traditional type, they might have avoided at least some of the dogmatic interpretations of their work, though they would have had far less success in spreading their ideas and getting them accepted. Much of the difficulty in obtaining a concise view of Marxian theory stems from the fact that it was meant to be a tool for political action. In reviewing briefly Marx's theory of history and his theory of social class, we shall at first disregard this political implication. We shall consider this implication more directly in the concluding paragraphs of this essay.

A social class in Marx's terms is any aggregate of persons who perform the same function in the organization of production. "Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed" (Communist Manifesto) are the names of social classes in different historical periods. These classes are distinguished from each other by the difference of their respective positions in the economy. Since a social class is constituted by the function, which its members perform in the process of production, the question arises why the

organization of production is the basic determinant of social class. Marx's answer is contained in his early writings on philosophy, especially in his theory of the division of labor.

Fundamental to this theory is Marx's belief that work is man's basic form of self-realization. Man cannot live without work; hence the way in which man works in society is a clue to human nature. Man provides for his subsistence by the use of tools; these facilitate his labor and make it more productive. He has, therefore, an interest in, and he has also a capacity for, elaborating and refining these tools, and in so doing he expresses himself, controls nature and makes history. If human labor makes history, then an understanding of the conditions of production is essential for an understanding of history. There are four aspects of production, according to Marx, which explain why man's efforts to provide for his subsistence underlie all change in history.

a) "...life involves before everything else eating, and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself."¹

b) "The second fundamental point is that as soon as a need is satisfied, (which implies the action of satisfying, and the acquisition of an instrument), new needs are made."²

c) "The third circumstance which, from the very first, enters into historical development, is that men, who daily remake their own life, begin to make other men, to propagate their kind: the relation between man and wife, parents and children, the FAMILY. The family which to begin with is the only

¹Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Germany Ideology (New York: International Publishers, 1939), 16.

²Ibid., 16-17.

social relationship, becomes later, when increased needs create new social relations and the increased population (creates) new needs, a subordinate one..."¹

d) "The production of life, both of one's own in labor and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship. By social we understand the cooperation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end. It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of cooperation, or social stage, and this mode of cooperation is itself a "productive force." Further, that the multitude of productive forces accessible to men determines the nature of society, hence that the "history of humanity" must always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange."²

There is a logical connection between these four aspects. The satisfaction of man's basic needs makes work a fundamental fact of human life, but it also creates new needs. The more needs are created the more important is it that the "instruments" of production be improved. The more needs are created and the more the technique of production is improved, the more important is it that men cooperate, first within the family, then also outside it. Cooperation implies the division of labor and the organization of production (or in Marx's phrase "the mode of cooperation" as a "productive force") over and above the techniques of production which are employed. It is, therefore, the position which the individual occupies in the social organization of production, that indicates to which social class he belongs. The fundamental

¹Marx and Engels, loc. cit.

²Ibid., 18.

determinant of class is the way in which the individual cooperates with others in the satisfaction of his basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. Other indexes such as income, consumption patterns, educational attainment, or occupation are so many clues to the distribution of material goods and of prestige-symbols. This distribution is a more or less revealing consequence of the organization of production, it is not identical with it. Hence, the income or occupation of an individual is not, according to Marx, an indication of his class-position, i.e., of his position in the production process. For example, if two men are carpenters, they belong to the same occupation, but one may run a small shop of his own, while another works in a plant manufacturing pre-fabricated housing; the two men belong to the same occupation, but to different social classes.

Marx believed that a man's position in the production process provided the crucial life experience, which would determine, either now or eventually, the beliefs and the actions of that individual. The experience gained in the effort of making a living, but especially the experience of economic conflict, would prompt the members of a social class to develop common beliefs and common actions. In analyzing the emergence of these beliefs and actions Marx specified a number of variables which would facilitate this process:

1. Conflicts over the distribution of economic rewards between the classes;
2. Easy communication between the individuals in the same class-position so that ideas and action-programs are readily disseminated;
3. Growth of class-consciousness in the sense that the members of the class have a feeling of solidarity and understanding of their historic role;

4. Profound dissatisfaction of the lower class over its inability to control the economic structure of which it feels itself to be the exploited victim.

5. Establishment of a political organization resulting from the economic structure, the historical situation and maturation of class-consciousness.

Thus, the organization of production provides the necessary but not a sufficient basis for the existence of social classes. Repeated conflicts over economic rewards, ready communication of ideas between members of a class, the growth of class-consciousness, and the growing dissatisfaction with exploitation which causes suffering in psychological as much as in material terms: these are the conditions which will help to overcome the differences and conflicts between individuals and groups within the class and which will encourage the formation of a class-conscious political organization.

Marx's discussions of the development of the bourgeoisie and of the proletariat give good illustrations of the manner in which he envisages the emergence of a social class.

"In the Middle Ages the citizens in each town were compelled to unite against the landed nobility to save their skins. The extension of trade, the establishment of communications, led the separate towns to get to know other towns, which had asserted the same interests in the struggle with the same antagonist. Out of the many local corporations of burghers there arose only gradually the burgher class. The conditions of life of the individual burghers became, on account of their antagonism to the existing relationships and of the mode of labour determined by these conditions which were common to them all and independent of each individual. The burghers had created the conditions in so far as they had torn themselves free from feudal ties, and were created by them in so far as they were determined by their antagonism to the feudal system which they found in existence. When the individual towns began to enter into associations, these common conditions developed into class conditions. The same conditions, the same antagonism, the same interests

necessarily called forth on the whole similar customs everywhere. The bourgeoisie itself, with its conditions, develops only gradually, splits according to the division of labour into various fractions and finally absorbs all earlier possessing classes (while it develops the majority of the earlier non-possessing, and a part of the earlier possessing, class into a new class, the proletariat) in the measure to which all earlier property is transformed into industrial or commercial capital.

The separate individuals form a class only in so far as they have to carry on a common battle against another class; otherwise they are on hostile terms with each other as competitors. On the other hand, the class in its turn achieves an independent existence over against the individuals, so that the latter find their conditions of existence predestined, and hence have their position in life and their personal development assigned to them by their class, become subsumed under it. This is the same phenomenon as the subjection of the separate individuals to the division of labour and can only be removed by the abolition of private property and of labour itself..."¹

This passage makes it apparent that Marx thought of social class as a condition of group-life which was constantly generated (rather than simply given) by the organization of production. Essential to this formation of a class was the existence of a common "class enemy," because without it competition between individuals would prevail. Also, this is a gradual process, which depends for its success upon the development of 'common conditions' and upon the subsequent realization of common interests. But the existence of common conditions and the realization of common interests are in turn only the necessary, not the sufficient bases for the development of a social class. Only when the members of a 'potential' class enter into an association for the organized pursuit of their common aims, does a class in Marx's sense exist.

In discussing the development of the proletariat under capitalism Marx described a process which was essentially similar to that which he had described for the development of the modern bourgeoisie.

¹German Ideology, 48-49.

"The first attempts of the workers to associate among themselves always take place in the form of combinations (unions).

Large-scale industry concentrates in one place a crowd of people unknown to one another. Competition divides their interests. But the maintenance of wages, this common interest which they have against their boss, unites them in a common thought of resistance--combination. Thus combination always has a double aim, that of stopping the competition among themselves, in order to bring about a general competition with the capitalist. If the first aim of the general resistance was merely the maintenance of wages, combinations, at first isolated, constitute themselves into groups as the capitalists in their turn unite in the idea of repression, and in the face of always united capital, the maintenance of the association becomes more necessary to them than that of wages. This is so true that the English economists are amazed to see the workers sacrifice a good part of their wages in favor of associations, which in the eyes of the economists, are established solely in favor of wages. In this struggle--a veritable civil war--are united and developed all the elements necessary for the coming battle. Once it has reached this point association takes on a political character.

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The domination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In this struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle."¹

Thus in the case of the proletariat, as in the case of the bourgeoisie, Marx cited several conditions which were essential for the development of a social class: conflict over economic rewards, physical concentration of masses of people and easy communication among them, the development of solidarity and political organization (in place of competition between individuals and organization for purely economic ends.)

The antagonism of the workers to the capitalist class and to the prevailing economic system was to Marx not simply a consequence of the struggle for economic advantage. In addition to the conditions mentioned

¹Karl Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy (New York: International Publishers, n.d.), 145-46.

he laid great stress on the human consequences of machine production under capitalism. The social relations which capitalist industry imposed, deprived the workers of all opportunities to obtain psychological satisfaction from their work. This complete want of satisfaction Marx called the alienation of human labor. He attributed it to the division of labor in modern industry, which turned human beings into appendages of the machine.

"The knowledge, the judgment and the will, which though in ever so small a degree, are practiced by the independent peasant or handicraftsman, in the same way as the savage makes the whole art of war consist in the exercise of his personal cunning-- these faculties (?) are now required only for the workshop as a whole. Intelligence in production expands in one direction, because it vanishes in many others. What is lost by the detail labourer, is concentrated in the capital that employs them. It is a result of the division of labor in manufactures, that the laborer is brought face to face with the intellectual potencies of the material process of production, as the property of another, and as a ruling power. This separation begins in simple cooperation, where the capitalist represents to the single workman, the oneness and the will of the associated labor. It is developed in manufacture which cuts down the laborer into a detail laborer. It is completed in modern industry, which makes science a productive force distinct from labor and presses it into the service of capital.

"In manufacture, in order to make the collective laborer, and through him capital, rich in social productive power, each laborer must be made poor in individual productive powers. 'Ignorance is the mother of industry as well as of superstition. Reflection and fancy are subject to err; but a habit of moving the hand or the foot is independent of either. Manufactures, accordingly, prosper most where the mind is least consulted, and where the workshop may...be considered as an engine, the parts of which are men'. (A.L. Ferguson, p. 280)"¹

"...within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productiveness of labor are brought about at the cost of the individual laborer; all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of the producers; they mutilate the laborer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil; they estrange from him the intellectual

¹Karl Marx, Capital (New York: Modern Library, 1936), 396-97.

potentialities of the labor-process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they distort the conditions under which she works, subject him during the labor-process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life time into working-time and drag his wife and child under the wheels of the Juggernaut of capital. But all methods for the accumulation of surplus value are at the same time methods of accumulation; and every extension of accumulation becomes again a means for the development of those methods. It follows therefore that in proportion as capital accumulates, the lot of the laborer, be his payments high or low, must grow worse.¹

Marx believed that the alienation of labor was inherent in capitalism and that it was a major psychological deprivation, which would lead eventually to the proletarian revolution. This theory of why men under capitalism would revolt, was based on an assumption of what prompts men to be satisfied or dissatisfied with their work. Marx contrasted the modern industrial worker with the medieval craftsman, and--along with many other writers of the period--observed that under modern conditions of production the worker had lost all opportunity to exercise his "knowledge, judgment and will" in the manufacture of his product. To Marx this psychological deprivation seemed more significant even than the economic pauperism to which capitalism subjected the masses of workers. At any rate, two somewhat conflicting statements can be found in his work. In one he declared that the physical misery of the working classes would increase with the development of capitalism.

"Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole..."²

But in the other he maintained, that capitalism could result in an absolute increase of the standard of living for the workers, but that it would result

¹ Marx, op. cit., 708-709.

² Ibid., 709.

nevertheless in the experience of mounting personal deprivation.

"When capital is increasing fast, wages may rise, but the profit of capital will rise much faster. The material position of the laborer has improved, but it is at the expense of his social position. The social gulf which separates him from the capitalist has widened."¹

And, as we have seen, Marx summarized his analysis of the oppressive effects of capitalism with a long list of striking phrases, only to conclude this eloquent recital with the sentence: "It follows therefore that in proportion as capital accumulates, the lot of the labourer, be his payment high or low, must grow worse."

It will be apparent from the preceding discussion that Marx did not simply identify a social class with the fact that a large group of people occupied the same objective position in the economic structure of a society. Instead, he laid great stress on the importance of subjective awareness as a precondition of organizing the class successfully for the economic and the political struggle. Marx felt certain that the pressures engendered by capitalism would determine its development in the future. And he believed it to be inevitable that the masses of industrial workers would come to a conscious realization of their class-interests. Subjective awareness of class interests was in his view an indispensable element in the development of a social class, but he believed that this awareness would inevitably arise along with the growing contradictions inherent in capitalism. In the preceding discussion we have cited two of the conditions which made Marx feel sure of this prediction: the concentration of workers in towns and the resulting ease of communication between them, and the psychological suffering engendered by

¹Karl Marx, "Wage, Labor and Capital," in Selected Works (Moscow: Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R., 1936), I, 273.

the alienation of labor. By way of summarizing Marx's theory of class we cite his views on the French peasants who occupy a similar position in the economic structure but do not thereby provide the basis for the formation of a social class.

"The small peasants form a vast mass, the members of which live in similar conditions, but without entering into manifold relations with one another. Their mode of production isolates them from one another, instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse...In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that divide their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of other classes, and put them into hostile contrast to the latter, they form a class. In so far 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 organization, they do not form a class."¹

That is to say, the peasants occupy the same position in the economic structure of their society. But in their case this fact itself will not create similar attitudes and common actions. The peasants do not form a social class in Marx's sense, because they make their living on individual farms in isolation from one another. There is no objective basis for ready communication between them.

In the case of the industrial workers, however, such an objective basis for ready communication existed. They were concentrated in the large industrial towns, and the conditions of factory production brought them into close physical contact with one another. Yet, even then Marx did not believe that the political organization of the working class and the development of class-consciousness in thought and action would be the automatic result of these objective conditions. In his view these objective conditions provided a favorable setting for the development of political agitation. And this

¹Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (New York: International Publishers, n.d.), 109.

agitation was in good part the function of men, who were not themselves workers, but who had acquired a correct understanding of historical change, and who were willing to identify themselves with the movement of those who were destined to bring it about.

"...in times when the class struggle nears the decisive hour, the process of dissolution going on within the ruling class, in fact within the whole range of old society, assumes such a violent, glaring character, that a small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift and joins the revolutionary class, the class that holds the future in its hands. Just as, therefore, at an earlier period, a section of the nobility went over to the bourgeoisie, so now a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole."¹

There is little question that Marx conceived of his own work as an example of this process. The scientific analysis of the capitalist economy, as he conceived of it, was itself an important instrument by means of which the class consciousness and the political organization of the workers could be furthered. And because Marx conceived of his own work in these terms, he declared that the detachment of other scholars was spurious, was merely a screen thrown up to disguise the class-interests which their work served. Hence he denied the possibility of a social science in the modern sense of that word. The "proof" of his theory was contained in the actions of the proletariat.

It is apparent that Marx's theory of social classes, along with other parts of his doctrine, involved a basic ambiguity which has bedevilled his interpreters ever since. For, on the one hand, he felt quite certain that the contradictions engendered by capitalism would inevitably lead to a class-

¹Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party (New York: International Publishers, 1932), 19.

conscious proletariat and hence to a proletarian revolution. But on the other hand, he assigned to class-consciousness, to political action, and to his scientific theory of history a major role in bringing about this result. In his own eyes this difficulty was resolved because such subjective elements as class-consciousness or a scientific theory were themselves a by-product of the contradictions inherent in capitalism. The preceding discussion has sought to elucidate the meaning of this assertion by specifying the general philosophical assumptions and the specific environmental and psychological conditions on the basis of which Marx felt able to predict the inevitable development of class-consciousness. To the critics this claim to predict an inevitable future on the basis of assumptions and conditions, which may or may not be valid, has always seemed the major flaw in Marxian theory.