

## Class consciousness (from a Marxist perspective) today

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**FOR MARXISTS**, the division of modern socioeconomic classes is not the *cause* of the problem of capitalism but rather its *effect*.

Modern classes are different from ancient separations between castes, such as between the clergy or priestly caste, and the noble aristocracy or warrior caste, and the vast majority of people, "commoners," or those who were ignorant of divinity and without honor, who, for most of history, were peasants living through subsistence agriculture, a mute background of the pageantry of the ancient world.

Modern, "bourgeois" society, or the society of the modern city, is the product of the revolt of the Third Estate, or commoners, who had no property other than that of their labor: "self-made" men. During the French Revolution, the Third Estate separated itself from the other Estates of the clergy and aristocracy, and declared itself the National Assembly, with the famous Tennis Court Oath. This fulfilled the call of the Abbé Sieyès, who had declared in his revolutionary pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?*, that while under the *ancien régime* the Third Estate had been "nothing," now it would be "everything."

As the 20th century Marxist Critical Theorist Theodor Adorno put it, "society is a concept of the Third Estate." What he meant by this was that unlike the previous, ancient civilization in which people were divinely ordered in a Great Chain of Being, the Third Estate put forward the idea that people would *relate* to one another. They would do so on the basis of their "work," or their activity in society, which would find purchase not in a strict hierarchy of traditional values, but rather through a "free market" of goods. People would be free to find their own values in society.

Modern society is thus the society of the Third Estate, after the overthrow of the traditional authority of the Church and the feudal aristocrats. Modern, bourgeois society is based on the values of the Third Estate, which center on the values of work. The highest values of modern society are not religion or the honor of a warrior code, but rather material productivity and efficiency, being a "productive member of society." From this perspective, the perspective of modern bourgeois society, all of history appears to be the history of different, progressively developing "modes of production," of which capitalism is the latest and highest. The past becomes a time of people toiling in ignorance and superstition, held back by conservative customs and arrogant elites from realizing their potential productivity and ingenuity. The paradigmatic image of this state of affairs is

Galileo being forced to recant his scientific insight under threat by the Church.

With the successful revolt of the Third Estate it appeared that humanity attained its "natural" condition of Enlightenment, in relation both to the natural world and in humans' relations with each other. Seemingly unlimited possibilities opened up, and the Dark Ages were finally brought to an end.

With the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th to early 19th centuries, however, a new "contradiction" developed in bourgeois society, that of the value of *capital* versus the value of the wages of *labor*. With this contradiction came a new social and political conflict, the "class struggle" of the workers for the value of their wages against the capitalists' imperative to preserve and expand the value of capital. This came to a certain head in the 1840s, known at the time as the "hungry '40s," the first world-wide economic crisis after the Industrial Revolution, which seemed to go beyond a mere adjustment of the market, but pointed to new and deeper problems.

This new conflict between the workers and capitalists that raged in the mid-19th century was expressed in the desire for "socialism," or of society becoming true to itself, and the value of the contributions of all society's members being recognized and their being allowed to participate fully in the development and political direction of humanity. This was expressed in the Revolutions of 1848, the "Spring of the Nations" in Europe that resulted from the crisis of the 1840s, which called for the "social republic" or "social democracy," that is, democracy adequate to the needs of society as a whole.

For the socialists of the time, the crisis of the 1840s and revolutions of 1848 demonstrated the need and possibility for getting beyond capitalism.

In late 1847, two young bohemian intellectuals, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, were commissioned by the Communist League to write a manifesto ahead of the potential revolutions that appeared on the horizon. Issued mere days ahead of the revolutions of 1848, the *Communist Manifesto* was a survey of the contradictory and paradoxical situation of modern society, its simultaneous radical possibilities and self-destructive tendencies in capitalism.

For Marx and Engels, as good followers of Hegel's dialectic of history, the phenomenon of contradiction was the appearance of the possibility and necessity for change.

Marx and Engels could be confident of the apparent, manifest crisis of modern society and the need for radical change emerging in their time.

They were not the originators of socialism or communism but rather tried to sum up the historical experience of the struggle for socialism in their time. They did not seek to tell the workers their interest in overcoming capitalism, but rather tried to help clarify the workers' own consciousness of their historical situation, the crisis of bourgeois society in capital.

What Marx and Engels recognized that perhaps distinguished them from other socialists, however, was the utterly unique character of the modern, post-Industrial Revolution working class. What made the modern working class, or "industrial proletariat" different was its subjection to mass unemployment. Marx and Engels understood this unemployment to be not a temporary, contingent phenomenon due to market fluctuations or technical innovations putting people out of work, but rather a permanent feature of modern society after the Industrial Revolution, in which preserving the value of capital was in conflict with the value of workers' wages. Unlike Adam Smith in the pre-industrial era, who observed that higher wages and lower profits increased productivity in society as a whole, after the Industrial Revolution, increased productivity was not due to workers' greater efficiency but rather that of machines. This meant, as the director of the Marxist Frankfurt Institute for Social Research Max Horkheimer put it, that "machines made not work but the workers superfluous."

On a global scale, greater productivity increased not employment and wealth but rather *unemployment* and *impoverishment*, as capitalism destroyed traditional ways of life (for instance of the peasants) but failed to be able to provide meaningful productive employment and thus participation in society for all, as originally envisioned in the revolt of the Third Estate and promised in the bourgeois revolution against the hierarchy of the *ancien régime*. The promise of the modern city is mocked by the mushrooming of slum cities around the world. The old world has been destroyed but the new one is hardly better. The promise of freedom is cruelly exploited, but its hope dashed.

Marxists were the first, and have remained the most consistent in recognizing the nature and character of this contradiction of modern society.

The difference between Marx's time and ours is not in the essential problem of society, its self-contradictory form of value between wages and capital, but rather in the social and political conflicts, which no longer take the form primarily, as in Marx's time, of the "class struggle" between workers and capitalists. "Class" has become a passive, objective category, rather than an active, subjective one, as it had been in Marx's day and in

the time of historical Marxism. What Marxists once meant by "class consciousness" is no more.

This lends a certain melancholy to the experience of "class" today. Privilege and disadvantage alike seem arbitrary and accidental, not an expression of the supposed worth of people's roles in society but only of their luck, good or bad fortune. It becomes impossible to derive a politics from class position, and so other politics take its place. Conflicts of culture, ethnicity and religion replace the struggle over capitalism. Impoverished workers attack not orders whose privileges are dubious in the extreme, but rather each other in communal hatred. Consciousness of common class situation seems completely obscured and erased.

Not as Marx foresaw, workers with nothing to lose but their chains, but the unemployed masses wield their chains as weapons against each other. Meanwhile, in the background, underlying and overarching everything, capitalism continues. But it is no longer recognized. This is not surprising, however, since proper recognition of the problem could only come from practically engaging it as such. The issue is why it seems so undesirable to do so, today. Why have people stopped struggling for socialism?

We hear that we are in the midst of a deepening economic and social crisis, the greatest since the Great Depression of the early 20th century. But we do not see a political crisis of the same order of magnitude. It is not, as in the 1930s, when communism and fascism challenged capitalism from the Left and the Right, forcing massive social reform and political change.

This is because the idea of socialism — the idea of society being true to itself — has been disenchanting. With it has gone the class struggle of the workers against the capitalists that sought to realize the promise of freedom in modern society. It has been replaced with competing notions of social justice that borrow from ancient values. But since the sources of such ancient values, for instance religions, are in conflict, this struggle for justice points not to the transformation of society as a whole, but rather its devolution into competing values of different "cultures." Today in the U.S., it seems to matter more whether one lives in a "red or blue state," or what one's "race, gender, and sexuality" are, than if one is a worker or a capitalist — whatever that might mean. Cultural affinities seem to matter more than socioeconomic interests, as the latter burn. People cling to their chains, as the only things that they know. | P

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