

NOTES ON 'CLASS'

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1. It is much easier to say what, according to Marxism, class *is not* than to say what it is. A class is not a group of individuals, specified by what they have in common (their income-level or life-style, their 'source of revenue',¹ their relation to the means of production, etc.). The proletariat, for example, is not to be defined as a group 'as against capital' (Marx 1969 p. 173). Nor is class a structurally or relationally specified "place" (or "position") in the social landscape (a place which individuals may "occupy" or in which, as individuals, they may be 'interpolated',² etc.). The difference between "empiricist" and "structuralist" Marxisms, which respectively treat classes as groups of individuals and as "places", is in this regard a trivial one. For want of a more convenient term, I shall refer to the view which treats classes *either* as groups *or* as places as the 'sociological' conception of class.
2. Marxism regards class as, like capital itself (Marx 1965 p. 766), a social relation. That which is a relation cannot be a group, even a relationally specified group; nor can it be a position or place (a relationally specified place) in which a group may be constituted, or may stand. Setting aside such views, we can say that a class is *the relation itself* (for example, the capital-labour relation) and, more specifically, a *relation of struggle*. The terms 'class' and 'class relation' are interchangeable, and 'a' class is a class-relation of some historically particular kind.
3. Class relations are production relations, but care is needful if this seemingly straightforward statement is to be understood. According to Marx – and in contradistinction to the "Marx" of the deterministic 1859 Preface – relations of production are not one species or subset of the social relations (e.g. the "economic" subset) but rather the social relations as such and as a whole. 'The relations of production in their totality constitute what are called the social relations, society, and, specifically, a society at a definite stage of historical

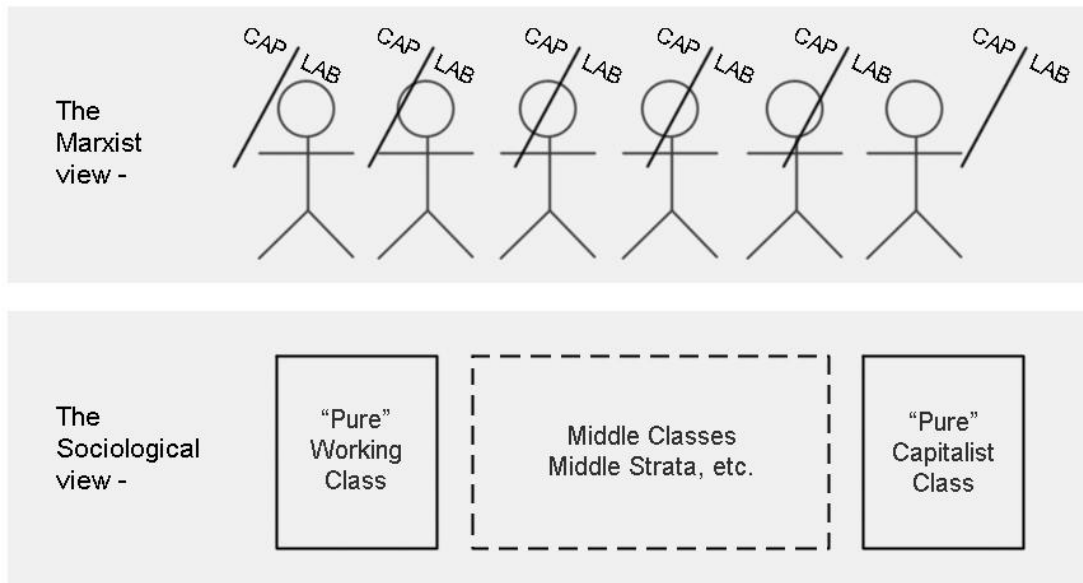
1 This much at least is clear from the final, fragmentary chapter of *Capital* Vol. III (Marx 1971 pp. 885-6).

2 E.g. Althusser (1971) pp. 160-5.

development' (Marx 1952 p. 28). This being so, it may seem tempting to construe class relations as one species of the production relations. I propose that, on the contrary, class relations just are the social relations (i.e. the totality of the social relations) *grasped as production relations*: the stake in class struggle is the power – understanding “power”, here, in something like the sense given it to Foucault (cf. Foucault 1979) – inscribed within the social process, and every aspect of every individual's social existence is of relevance to this struggle. That is, it is bound up within it and is affected by its outcome. As will become clearer later, the concept of class throws the notion of society *as a totality* into relief.

4. So also does it throw the notion of society as a mediated articulation of *agency and struggle* into relief (cf. Gunn 1987). It is not that classes, as socially (or structurally) pre-given entities, enter into struggle. Rather – holding fast to the conception of class relations as relations of struggle – we should think of *class struggle* as the fundamental premise of *class*. Better still: class struggle is class itself. (This is how Marx himself introduces 'class' in the opening sentences of the *Communist Manifesto*: we learn, first, of history as the history of class struggles and only subsequently of the specific class relations of 'freeman and slave, patrician and plebian', etc. The order of presentation is all-important.) That 'class struggle' is intrinsic to 'class' is Marx's point when he stresses that existence 'for itself' – i.e. oppositional, struggling existence – is intrinsic to the existence of class (Marx 1969 p. 173). The primacy of class struggle in the definition of class corresponds to the primacy which Marx consistently accords to active over passive (institutional or structural) categories: for example, private property is the 'consequence' of alienated labour rather than vice versa (Marx 1959 p. 76). This primacy of class struggle is Marx's rendition of the Hegelian thesis that a social world 'is not a dead essence, but is *actual and alive*' (Hegel 1977 p. 264).
5. I shall refer to the conception of class as a relation (a relation of struggle) as the 'Marxist' conception of class: here, more than convenience dictates the terminological choice. Notoriously, what I have called the sociological conception of class faces the embarrassment that not all individuals in bourgeois society can be fitted, tidily, into the *groups* which it labels 'capitalists' and 'proletarians'. This embarrassment is *produced by* the conception of classes as groups or places, and to escape the embarrassment sociological Marxism has recourse to categories like 'the middle classes', the 'middle strata', etc. Such categories are *residual* or catch-all terms and, in short, are theoretical figments generated by an impoverished conceptual scheme. The Marxist conception of class, on the contrary, faces no such difficulties: it regards the class relation (say, the capital-labour relation) as structuring the lives of different individuals in different ways. It allows the line of class division to fall *through*, and not merely *between*, the individuals concerned. The contrast in this regard between

the Marxist and the sociological conceptions of class can be illustrated, very roughly, as follows:



Not least, this illustration is rough because the difference in the ways the capital-labour structures the lives of individuals in bourgeois society is as much qualitative as quantitative: a spatial diagram can only be “undialectical”, abstracting not only from qualitative distinctions but also from the 'sheer unrest of life' (Hegel 1977 p. 27) – in Marxist terms, the unrest of struggle – which characterises the class relation in any given case. (The model for such spatial diagrams is the *Figurae* of Joachim of Fiore, which become redundant once the spiritual intelligence which they summon has come into its own: cf. Reeves 1976 p. 13.)

6. What qualitative forms can the structuring of our lives by the capital-labour relation (once again, a relation always of struggle) take? The form to which Marx especially attends is that of expropriation/appropriation. Other forms include inclusion/exclusion (Foucault), identity/non-identity and universality/particularity (Adorno), conservation/expenditure and homogeneity/heterogeneity (Bataille) and incorporation/refusal (Tronti, Marcuse):³ the list is phenomenologically rich, and open-ended. At once praxis and process, class is both the structuring of our lives through struggle and the structuring of this same struggle by the patterns hitherto imposed – imposed through struggle – upon our lives. In this way, although class struggle is always “spontaneous” (in virtue of the primacy of action over structure), a sheerly *immediate* spontaneity is a contradiction in terms. What class struggle does is place at issue, in struggle, the mediations which give to that struggle its characteristic form or forms.

³ See Foucault (1979) Part Four. ch. 2; Adorno (1973); Bataille (1985); Marcuse (1968); Tronti (1979).

7. One difference between the Marxist and the sociological views, as illustrated in para. 5, above, is that on the Marxist view the 'pure' worker, situated on the extreme left hand to the diagram, whose social being falls entirely under the heading of 'labour' and who is (unlike all the intermediate figures) in no way divided in and against himself or herself, is in no way methodologically privileged. Neither is the 'pure' capitalist. Both, rather, are merely limiting cases and, as such, they are seen only as figures commingled with others in a diversely-structured crowd. The sociological view, on the other hand, treats the 'pure' worker and the 'pure' capitalist as methodological pillars between which the web of intermediate classes is slung.
8. This difference is important because, according to Marx, the 'pure' worker *does not exist*. This is not at all because of a relative decline in the numbers of the “traditional working class” (however this theoretically suspect group may be defined). On the contrary, it is because the wage-relation itself is a bourgeois and mystifying form (Marx 1965 Part IV): whoever lives under its sign – even, and especially, the fully-employed producer of surplus-value – lives a life divided in and against itself. So to say, his or her feet remains mired in exploitation even while his or her head (which is thereby tempted to construe exploitation in terms not of surplus-value but of “low wages”, i.e., in terms which are mystified) breathes in bourgeois ideological clouds.⁴ Accordingly, the line of class struggle runs not alongside, but through, the individual by whom surplus-value is produced (as with, say, the figure standing second-to-the-left in the diagram). Here, again, there is no embarrassment for the Marxist conception of class which is interested in the specific ways in which the capital-labour relation structures, antagonistically and self-antagonistically, particular lives. But the non-existence of a proletariat in all its purity deprives sociological Marxism with a needful methodological pillar and so can only bring the sociological conception of class to the ground.
9. A further evident difference between the two schemes is that the Marxist view speaks of a *single* class-relation (the capital-labour relation) as obtaining in existing society whereas the sociological scheme acknowledges as many such relations as there are possible combinations of social places or groups. For this reason the 'sociologists' accuse the 'Marxists' of reductionism. In fact, it is against the sociologists themselves that the charge of reductionism may properly be brought. The sociologists want to situate each individual, unequivocally and without remainder, in one or other of the specified groups or places: a “cross-categorical” individual cannot be allowed to appear in the

4 The view that the “ideological” mystification inherent in the wage-form leaves the class-purity of the worker uncontaminated depends on treating production and ideology as discrete social 'levels' or 'instances', as does the reading of the class in-itself/for-itself distinction criticised at paras 15-16, below. On 'levels', see paras. 14-15. In passing, it is worth noting that the conception of ideology as a discrete level (however specified) remains wholly mysterious, if only because social existence without exception – for example gender distinctions, architecture, work-discipline and scientific knowledge – carries with it an ideological charge.

picture which the sociologists draw. The point of the sociological proliferation of middle classes, middle strata, new petty bourgeoisies, etc., is to find some pigeon hole to which each individual may be unequivocally assigned. Hence precisely the ways in which, in class terms, individuals are divided in and against themselves – the numerous and complex ways in which the geological fracture-line of class struggle runs not merely between, but through, individuals – enters theoretical eclipse. In this fashion, the 'pigeon-holing process' of the non-dialectical understanding (Hegel 1977 p. 32) falsifies the experience and the praxis of struggle itself. The Marxist conception of class, by contrast, avoids any such reductionism and brings the experiential richness of individuals' (self-)contradictory life-texture into full theoretical and phenomenological view. The banal charge that Marxism reduces the lived experience of individual subjectivity to a play of impersonal and sheerly objective "class forces"⁵ is least of all applicable when 'class' is understood in an authentically Marxist sense.

10. A related point is that the Marxist conception, unlike that of the sociologists, does not construe class in terms of the bearing (the "supporting") of this or that social role. From his early essay 'On the Jewish Question' onwards, Marx castigates, as alienating and unfree, any society wherein role-definitions (or a "social division of labour") obtain. Far from taking on board role-definitions as a methodological principle, the Marxian view depicts the individual as the site of class struggle – of his or her own struggle – which brings not merely the "universal" (role-bearing and socially homogenous) but also the "particular" (unique and socially heterogenous) dimensions of individuality into political and theoretical play. Neither in theory nor in practice do role-definitions such as "proletarian" or "bourgeois" (or indeed "man" or "woman" or "citizen") represent Marx's solution; on the contrary, they figure as one among the problems which 'class' in its Marxist designation is intended to resolve.

11. What form might such a resolution take? Here, only the briefest of indications can be given. Social roles are mediations of class struggle, i.e. they are *modes of existence* of class struggle itself (cf. Gunn 1987): as mediated in terms of roles, class struggle exists *in the mode of being denied*. This is so because, quite regardless of their character or content, role-definitions abstract from the class relation and from the struggle in which that relation consists. Even the role-definitions of "bourgeois" or "proletarian" or "capitalist" or "worker" make this abstraction inasmuch as they substitute 'sociological' for 'Marxist' views. In this sense, something quite like class in its sociological meaning *does indeed exist* in capitalist society, but only as an "appearance" or in other words as an aspect of the fetishism to which Marxism stands opposed. Like vulgar political economy, sociological Marxism takes appearances at their face value and casts itself upon the mercy of the existing order of things.

5 For a refutation of this charge see Sartre (1963).

12. Hence it is no surprise that, as between the Marxist and the sociological conceptions of class, another area of difference is political. The sociological view advocates a politics of alliances between classes and class-fractions or, rather, between their representatives. (These representatives are to be seen as place-holders in more or less hierarchical organisations since, without hierarchy and authoritative leadership, the notion of “alliances” makes little sense.) Moreover, the sociological view ascribes to the 'pure' working class a privileged – a leading or hegemonic – political role. No question of such alliances arises on the Marxist view. Nor, on the Marxist view, does the 'pure' working class (e.g. the employed as opposed to the unemployed, the “direct” as opposed to the “indirect” producers of surplus value, the proletariat as opposed to the lumpenproletariat, those whose labour produces value as opposed to those whose labour does not) have a politically any more than a methodologically privileged place. For no such “places” exist. Nor is there any question of ascribing to “rising” as opposed to “declining” classes a monopoly of revolutionary interest or force: such ascriptions only make sense when classes are seen as places or groups. Finally, the whole notion of a vanguard party (together with its diluted variants) is overturned since the distinction between “advanced” and “backward” class-elements disappears along with the sociological conception of class itself. In sum: what has traditionally passed as 'Marxist' politics is in fact sociological, and authentically Marxist politics amounts to politics in an anarchistic mode.

13. Inherently, the forms of such a politics cannot be determined in advance. If classes are not groups or places but relations of struggle, then insofar as revolutionary conflict takes the form of a conflict between groups (but it does this always imperfectly and impurely) this has to be understood *as the result* of class struggle itself. It is not to be understood sociologically as, for example, an emergence of pre-given classes – at last! – into their no-less pre-given theoretical and practical “truth”. The question before the individual is not on *whose* side, but rather on *which* side (which side of the class relation), he or she stands; and even this latter question is not to be understood in terms of a choice between socially pre-given places or roles. Not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively, class struggle remains inherently unpredictable and “surprising”. The Marxian conception of class focuses sharply on the issue of choice with which class struggle presents us, and in doing so disallows appeal to any role or place or group in which (according to sociology) we stand already *prior to* the commitment that we choose to make. It disallows this not least because it depicts us *as torn* by the force of the class struggle in which we are always-already (whether consciously or unconsciously) engaged.

14. A final area of difference as between the Marxist and the sociological conceptions of class can be indicated. The sociological conception, whenever it

seeks to establish Marxist credentials, inescapably becomes economic-determinist. This is so because the only “indicator” of class-membership (class, here, being viewed sociologically) which Marx's writings even remotely supply is that of a common relation to the means of production. Besides being related to the means of production, however, individuals who are class members (or who are class-interpolated) find themselves related to the state and to “ideology” to say nothing of their local church or football team or pub. Hence, at once, the sociological conception of class generates a schema of discrete social 'levels' or 'practices' or 'instances' (Althusser) and must address the question of how these levels are related. The answer is well-known: *in the last instance* 'the economic movement...asserts itself as necessary'.⁶ In the last instance, in other words, sociological Marxism amounts to an economic determinism with, to be sure, long and complex rather than short and simple deterministic (i.e. causal) strings. To claim, as Althusser does, that such a theory is (because of its complexity) no longer deterministic is like claiming that a machine is no longer a machine because of the number of cogwheels its motor drives.

15. With the Marxist conception of class, everything is different. Marx's distinction between class 'in itself' and class 'for itself' is to be taken as drawing a distinction, not between societal 'levels' (cf. footnote 4, above) but between sociological and Marxist conceptions of class themselves: if a class only becomes such when it is 'for itself', then *political struggle* with all its unpredictable ramifications and developments and expenditures is already built into what sociological Marxism treats as the economic “base”. Whereas sociological Marxism attempts to unite levels which it assumes to be discrete, and on the basis of this starting-point can only fall back upon causalist and *external* relations of however “structural” (cf. Althusser) a kind, Marxist Marxism moves in the opposite direction and draws distinctions within a contradictory totality, i.e., within an *internally* and antagonistically related whole: 'The concrete is the concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence the unity of the diverse' (Marx 1973 p. 101). As the diagram in para. 5 makes clear, the *totality* of the class-relation which is specific to, for example, bourgeois society (the capital-labour relation) is present – *wholly* present, though in qualitatively different ways – in *each* of the individuals who form that society's moments or members or parts. Conversely, inasmuch as class relations *qua* relations of production encompass *all* the social relations and not merely, for example, economic relations (supposing these latter to be capable of independent abstraction), *all* aspects of individual existence – and not, for example, merely the economic aspect – are class-relevant and class-concerned. The essential thing was said long ago by the early Lukacs: 'It is not the primacy of economic motives in historical

⁶ Engels to J. Bloch, 21-22 September 1890 (Marx and Engels n.d.) p. 498. Althusser's distinction between 'determining' and 'dominant' instances amounts to a permutation of the same theme.

explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality' (Lukacs 1971 p. 27).

16. Along with the 'point of view of totality', and in accordance with the Marxist acknowledgement of all aspects of individual existence as class-relevant, a wholly novel conception of *class politics* is brought into play. Once "politics" is seen (as it is by the sociologists) as a discrete social level, the litmus test of the existence of class 'for itself' becomes the formation of a political party of a more or less conventional – which is to say: bourgeois – kind. Seen thus, even a vanguard party amounts to a variation on a bourgeois theme. However it is not Marx, but rather bourgeois society, which distinguishes (again as a mediation of class struggle) between the levels of political state and civil society – as criticised in 'On the Jewish Question' – and which prescribes the former as the arena wherein social groupings in their maturity (which is to say: in their conformity) may compete. The Marxist conception of class, or in other words 'the point of view of totality', rejects precisely the *narrowness* of the conception of politics which the sociological conception entails. On the Marxist view, the category of "politics" becomes co-extensive with individuals' experiential existence and as wide as the forms which class struggle unpredictably takes. Not merely is no issue excluded from the political agenda; the notion of political agendas is itself excluded since any such agenda (the stock-in-trade of alliance-forming hierarchical parties) excludes and marginalises whatever does not fall within some theoretically pre-established political domain.
17. All this said, it is to be conceded and indeed emphasised that whomsoever so wishes can derive 'sociological' wisdom from Marx's texts. Certainly, and especially in his so-called political writings, Marx was not always a Marxist. Nonetheless, unless the Marxist conception of class were in fact Marx's, the circumstance that Marx wrote *Capital* would be unintelligible. It was Marx himself who, long before his critics and revisionists, pointed out that as capitalism developed the numbers of the 'middle classes' could be expected to grow (Marx 1968 pp. 562, 573); and yet he wrote a book, entitled *Capital*, in which a *single* class relation (the capital-labour relation) is given pride of place. The conundrum can be resolved only by taking his remark about the middle classes to be sociological, and by reading the main argument of *Capital* as Marxist in the above-specified sense.
18. The above notes claim neither to be complete and systematic nor to defend at all points the conception of class which they have attempted, schematically, to restate. Their sole aim has been to make clear some of the issues which a Marxist understanding of class entails. As regards evaluation of this understanding: the suggestion may be hazarded that the line of critical questioning which seems most fertile is that which asks whether the class

relation (in existing society, the capital-labour relation) is the sole or chief relation which structures our lives. And here there can be no question of supplementing Marx: other such relations – sexual and “race”-based relations, for example – are mediated through the capital relation just as the capital relation is mediated through the relations concerned. (For brief comment, see Gunn 1987.) Inquiry as to which relation is “dominant” remains scholastic if one tries to pursue it on a methodological and *a priori* conceptual terrain: or rather, it can be pursued only in concretely political (which is also to say phenomenological) terms. Both politically and methodologically, the great superiority of the Marxist over the sociological view of class is that it frees Marxism from every taint of the determinism which Marx castigated as amongst the most murderous features of capitalism – the tyranny of 'dead' over 'living' labour, or in other words of the past (as in all determinist schemes) over the present and future – and to which from start to finish his best thinking stands implacably opposed. This is so because the single theme of Marxian “class analysis” is the finely-textured and continually and unpredictably developing struggle which, for Marx, is the existence of class *per se*.

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[Note added in 2011: Shortly after 'Notes on “Class”' appeared in *Common Sense*, a reader – neither Holloway nor Diamanti – remarked that my view resembled Eric Olin Wright's notion of 'contradictory class locations': see Wright's 'Class Boundaries in Advanced Capitalist Societies' *New Left Review* No. 98 (1976). I take this extremely belated opportunity to comment that – see my opening paragraph – nothing could have been further from my mind.]

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