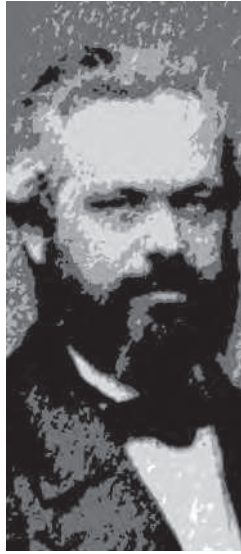


## The Working Class

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In *The Poverty of Philosophy* Marx writes ‘Just as the economists are the scientific representatives of the bourgeois class so the Socialists and Communists are the theoreticians of the proletarian class’<sup>1</sup>

In *The Communist Manifesto* he wrote

Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class...

The essential condition for the existence and for the sway of the bourgeois class is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage-labour. Wage-labour rests exclusively on competition between the labourers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers.

These statements raise two basic questions: 1) who are the working class or proletariat? 2) Why does Marx put such emphasis on the working class as the principal revolutionary class?

In answer to the first question Frederick Engels in a footnote to 1888 edition of the *Manifesto* writes simply: ‘By proletariat [is meant], the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live’.

This very succinct definition immediately tells us

a number of important things. It distinguishes the working class or proletariat – we can treat the terms as interchangeable here – from slaves and peasants, the two other main exploited classes in history, by the fact that they do not own any means of production as peasants do and that, unlike slaves who are owned, they sell their labour power. It also makes clear that the working class is not, for Marx, defined by certain occupations e.g. mining, textile work, bus driving etc. nor by the nature of its work e.g. manual labour versus white collar but by the social relation of wage labour.

By this definition, teachers, nurses, shop workers, clerical workers, call centre staff, librarians and so on are just as much part of the working class as factory workers or dockers because they all live by the sale of their labour power. This is extremely important for analysing the class structure of modern Western societies where many of the old industries have declined and the proportion of white collar workers has much increased. Many sociologists and media commentators use this to suggest that the working class has declined and most people are middle class now. Marxists don’t accept this.

This simple ‘those who live by the sale of their labour power’ definition is useful but it is also important to understand that it is underpinned by a much deeper analysis of history and society. Marx argued that the fundamental feature of all societies was how they organised the production of the necessities of life. Class divisions were the product not just of unequal distribution and consumption but of exploitative relations of production, in which one group in society extracted wealth from the labour of another group. As the Marxist historian Geoffrey de Ste Croix put it ‘Class (essentially a relationship) is the collective social expression of the fact of exploitation, the way in which exploitation is embodied in a social structure.’<sup>2</sup> And it is above all through the buying of labour power that

exploitation, the extraction of what Marx calls surplus value, is accomplished in capitalist society. This in turn sets the sellers of labour power, the working class, into a permanently antagonistic relationship with its buyers, the capitalist class.

Profit rises to the extent that wages fall; it falls to the extent that wages rise ...The interests of capital and the interests of wage labour are diametrically opposed.<sup>3</sup>

At this point however the definition of the working class on the basis simply of selling its labour power has to be qualified. This is because there is a layer of people in capitalist societies who appear to live by selling their labour i.e. to receive a wage or salary, but who are not employed or paid in order to produce and are not exploited. On the contrary they are paid by the capitalists to control the labour and enforce the exploitation of others. This is a layer of managers who stand in between the Capitalists and the workers and constitute what might be called the middle class. Such middle class managers, who are not themselves capitalists (owners of capital) nonetheless act on their behalf and they exist in almost every workplace, company and institution. They range from Head Teachers and Principals who do little or no teaching themselves, but control the work of other teachers, to managers in hospitals, to managers in private companies. Together they make up about 20% or so of the population in an advanced capitalist economy like Ireland or Britain<sup>4</sup> with the working class constituting about 70 percent.

Which brings us to the question of what, for Marx, makes the working class the main revolutionary class? We can start by saying that it is not simply that the working class is impoverished or deprived. Marx was sharply critical of those 'utopian' socialists for whom the proletariat exists 'only from the point of view of being the most suffering class'. [*The Communist Manifesto*] Besides it is clear that generally speaking the peasantry, and certainly slaves, are more impoverished than the modern working class.

Nor is it that Marx imagines that all or even most workers have revolutionary or socialist ideas. He is perfectly well aware that:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling

intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.<sup>5</sup>

And argues that:

The question is not what goal is *envisaged* for the time being by this or that member of the proletariat, or even by the proletariat as a whole. The question is *what is the proletariat* and what course of action will it be forced historically to take in conformity with its own nature. [Holy Family]

There are a number of features of the 'nature', or rather social being, of the working class that combine to make it 'the really revolutionary class'. First, as we have just discussed, its permanent conflict of interest with capital which continually threatens to break out into open struggle. This conflict is rooted in exploitation in the workplace but extends throughout society to health, housing, taxation, welfare, warfare, education, the environment, policing, gender equality, racism and so on. On virtually every issue of public policy the interests of the working class and the capitalist class diverge and clash. This is why, as Marx puts it, 'every class struggle is a political struggle'. [CM]

Second, the fact that whereas other oppressed classes and groups (peasants, small shop keepers etc) tend to be eliminated by capitalist development, the working class is 'its special and essential product.'

In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed... with the development of industry, the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more. [CM]

This enables the proletarian movement to become 'the movement of the immense majority in the interests of the immense majority'. [CM] and it means that although the bourgeoisie can, and does, defeat the working class in many individual battles it cannot defeat it historically i.e. it cannot dispense with its services without destroying the basis of its own existence and society as a whole.

The fact that the labour of the working class is the source of the bosses' profits and that all society's infrastructure and services – its trains, buses, planes, phones,

supermarkets, hospitals, factories, construction – depend on it makes the working class the most potentially powerful oppressed class that has ever existed in the five thousand or more years of class-divided society. By withdrawing its labour, that is through mass strike action, the working class has the ability to paralyse the economy and the whole system. It means that even when it remains a numerical minority in a country, as in Russia in 1917, its pivotal role in the economy and its concentration in large workplaces and cities, the working class nevertheless is able to play the leading role in a revolution.<sup>6</sup>

Third, there is the socialist dynamic built into working class struggle. The working class is an inherently collectivist class. It is only through combining and taking collective action in its workplaces and communities that the working class can defend its most basic interests or improve its standard of living. The worker cannot make a stand against their employer as an isolated individual, hence the crucial role of trade unions in the history of the working class in all countries. Consequently the principles of unity and solidarity, of not strike breaking or passing a picket, while obviously not always observed, invariably come to the fore in any serious working class struggle. This is why ‘scab’ is the deadliest insult in the workers’ movement and why employers attempt where they can to ban its use.

For the working class the principle of solidarity is not nationally limited. ‘The working man has no country’ writes Marx. The working class is, ultimately, an international class with the same fundamental interest globally. Capitalism may be temporarily overthrown in a single country but its permanent defeat is only possible internationally. That is why the closing words of *The Communist Manifesto*, ‘Workers of the World Unite!’ are the fundamental slogan of the movement.

The principle of collective action applies not only to the working class struggle against capitalism but also to how it can take control of society in and after a revolution. Peasants can take over the land and divide it up. Workers cannot take over factories or corporations and divide them up into individually owned parts – to take control of the means of production they have no choice but to take them into collective social ownership. Socialism is the logic of working class struggle – it is the form of society the working class has to introduce to establish and consolidate its political power.

Similarly the working class is able, through workers’ councils and workplace committees, in a way not true of any other class in history, to produce and rule society at the same time. In this way the rule of the working class, what Marx called the dictatorship of the proletariat, would be both highly democratic and pave the way for the abolition of all class rule in a fully communist society.

All the preceding classes that got the upper hand sought to fortify their already acquired status by subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation. The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby also every other previous mode of appropriation. They have nothing of their own to secure and to fortify; their mission is to destroy all previous securities for, and insurances of, individual property. {CM}

All of these characteristics of the working class combined to make it both the revolutionary and the socialist class and underpinned the first sentence of the Rules of the International Working Men’s Association written by Marx in 1864: ‘The emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working class itself’. Marx also believed that in liberating itself the working class would open the way to the abolition of all exploitation and oppression and the liberation of humanity as a whole.

It is important to emphasize that the revolutionary role of the working class is not just one detachable proposition or theory within Marxism but rather its core doctrine. ‘Logically’ it might seem that the role of the working class would a conclusion Marx came to on the basis of his dialectical philosophy, his materialist conception of history, his theory of the class struggle, and his theory of surplus value but actually this was not so. In fact it was Marx’s ‘recognition’ of the revolutionary working class, as a result of his actual encounters with communist workers in Paris in late 1843- early 1844, that marked the beginning of Marxism as a distinct theory and constituted the point of departure for the development of his materialist dialectic, his theory of history and his economics in the years that followed.. It was his adoption of what Georg Lukacs called ‘the standpoint of the proletariat’ that formed the ground on which the rest of Marx’s ideas were built. It is the proletariat who are the active subject of *The Communist Manifesto*, as

of the First International and his master work, *Capital*, is 'a Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production' from the standpoint of the proletariat.

Nor is it possible to surgically remove the working class from Marxism, replacing it with an alternative agent of change (the peasantry, Third World nations, students and radical intellectuals, marginalised groups, the 'precariat', 'the multitude' etc.) while retaining the rest of the theory and practice intact. In so far as this was done in practice – for example by Maoism or Castroism or varieties of third world nationalism – the consequence was not socialism but state capitalism. In so far as it was done in theory – for example by Eric Hobsbawm, André Gorz, David Harvey, Antonio Negri and others – the tendency has been for the rest of the theory to start to unravel.

The final point to be made is that the dominant academic view is that though Marx's theory of the role of the working class may have had some validity in the past – say the 19<sup>th</sup> or early twentieth century – it no longer applies today. In reality the opposite is the case. When Marx 'discovered' the proletariat in 1844 or called on the workers of the world to unite in 1848, the working class barely existed outside of Britain and some parts of North Western Europe. When Marx spoke of the international proletariat as 'the immense majority' he did so, projecting the future into the present because he had grasped, with great insight, the central dynamic of the system to grow and expand.

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere... It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt

the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.

And he saw that in the process it would create its own gravediggers on a global scale. And this was precisely what happened, via imperialism and globalisation to the point where those who live by the sale of their labour now make up for the first time a majority of the world's population. While relatively small countries such as South Korea and Egypt each have working classes larger than the entire international working class in 1848, China has a new proletariat of maybe 500-600 million, and India of 300 million or more. Concentrated in vast cities and with the entire global capitalist economy depending on its labour the modern working class has more potential power to challenge and overthrow the system than ever before.

#### Notes

1 David McLellan ed, *Karl Marx*, *Selected Writings*, p.212.

2 G E M de Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, Duckworth, p.43

3 Karl Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/wage-labour/ch07.htm>

4 There is another section of 'the middle class' made up of small business people or 'petty bourgeois'.

5 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels *The German Ideology*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm#b3>

6 This was a central element in Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution which predicted that the bourgeois democratic revolution in Russia would be led by the working class and would grow over into a socialist revolution.

7 *The Communist Manifesto*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#007>