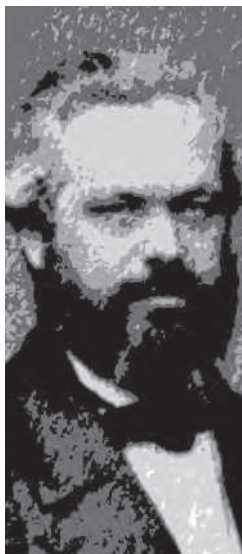


Class struggle

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‘..and now as to myself, no credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before me bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this class struggle and bourgeois economists, the economic economy of the classes. What I did that was new was to prove: (1) that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with *particular historical phases in the development of production*, (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat,(3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*’.¹

Karl Marx was not the first to write about class and class struggle, but he was the first to fully grasp the nature of class society, its history and its development.

Throughout his writings runs a clear thread of knowledge of the peculiarities of class in different societies and most importantly its relation to the economic organisation of society as a whole.

Marx is often criticised and labelled as an economic reductionist, that is that he reduced everything in society to economics and wasn’t able to grasp the complexities of society.

This is not true. Marx looked at how human beings were organised in production as a base upon which a variety of forms, or superstructures, then materialise. Marx wrote:

‘Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of different and distinctly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views

of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations’.²

These superstructures can carry different forms in different countries due to the peculiarities of development of those societies. In order to understand the class struggle, and devise a strategy for the struggle, one must take all those peculiarities into account. The Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin wrote in an article that:

‘Only an objective consideration of the sum total of the relations between absolutely all the classes in a given society, and consequently a consideration of the objective stage of development reached by that society and of the relations between it and other societies, can serve as a basis for the correct tactics of an advanced class. At the same time, all classes and all countries are regarded, not statistically, but dynamically —i.e., not in a state of immobility—but in motion (whose laws are determined by the economic conditions of existence of each class). Motion, in its turn, is regarded from the standpoint, not only of the past, but also of the future, and that not in the vulgar sense it is understood in by the “evolutionists”, who see only slow changes, but dialectically: “...in developments of such magnitude 20 years are no more than a day,” Marx wrote to Engels, “thought later on there may come days in which 20 years are embodied” (*Briefwechsel*, Vol. 3, p. 127)’.³

Lenin basically argues against those who, by the early 1900’s, had reduced Marxism to a theory of evolution where the working class would eventually rise to power in a slow process akin to that of the rise of the bourgeoisie under feudalism. However, as Lenin argues, this is a misunderstanding of the class struggle under capitalism and the nature and potential of, as well as the difficulties facing, the working class as distinct from other classes.

When Marx argues in the *Communist Manifesto* that *the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles* he is saying that throughout the development of production in human history the development of classes leads to struggle between those classes. That struggle takes different forms under the slavery of Ancient Rome, the rising bourgeoisie under feudalism and the working class against the capitalist class under capitalism.

Marx continues 'Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other – Bourgeoisie and Proletariat'.⁴

At the time when Marx was writing the development of the working class, or the proletariat, was at its infancy. Today, however, the working class is developed across the globe in a way that was unimaginable in Marx's time.

The antagonism between these two main classes goes to the very heart of the capitalist system. Capitalism creates on the one hand a class of people who have in their ownership the means of production, that is the factories, the machinery and the raw materials. On the other hand, it creates a class of workers who have nothing to sell but their labour power. The capitalist class, in order to survive as capitalists, must squeeze as much value of the working class as possible while the workers, in order to survive, must resist. The struggle is part of the 'base' – ie, it is inherent in the very foundation of the capitalist system. How that struggle takes its shape depends on the peculiarities of that society. For example, the fight for higher wages will look different in a country, or a sector, where collective bargaining is in place and the trade unions are controlled by members of the Labour Party in comparison to a country/sector where there is significant grassroots activity and a revolutionary leadership.

Another development of the class struggle under capitalism, Marx argues, is that for the first time in history the oppressed class fights in the interest of the majority rather than a minority. This means that the working class holds the key to unlocking liberation not only for itself but for the whole of humanity.

So how then is the working class to unlock this

liberation? The bourgeoisie in its struggle with the aristocracy was capable of growing in economic power under feudalism, creating within the old system the new forms. Despite this, it took the revolutionary moments such as the French Revolution to overthrow the power of the monarchs and the aristocrats.

On the other hand, the working class under capitalism has no capability of slowly creating a new society within the old.

The system relies on wage labour to continue, and even when a member of the working class becomes a small business owner they simply stop being a member of the working class. But if all workers did that the system would collapse.

Even where some have tried to organise workers in co-operatives, outside of capitalism, they have eventually been forced to operate through the capitalist market and either cut their own wages to compete, or to shut down. The capitalist market is all pervasive. It is an unconscious force, created by human activities but outside of our control, which compels the drive for profits and ever increasing productivity.

It is only through struggle that the working class can gain economic and political power. When the people of Paris rose up in 1871 in the Paris Commune Marx wrote:

'It was essentially a working class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor.'⁵

He means that throughout the course of the struggle the working class found ways to achieve their own liberation by taking control of the means of production as well as organising society politically in a new way. For example, elected officials were recallable, paid an average wage and the oppressive forces of the state were disbanded.

This statement by Marx, if read in isolation, may lead you to think that the class struggle by itself will lead the working class automatically to find this solution, without the need for intervention by organised forces. Actually, Marx and Engels understood clearly the necessity of organisation. The *Communist Manifesto* was written in 1848, not as a piece of theory, but for the purpose of a platform for the Communist League- an organisation of the working class. They write:

‘The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole. The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement’.⁶

Here Marx and Engels describe the organisation of the working class and its necessary principles. The first is the principle of internationalism, which was also one of the first to be abandoned by the so called Marxists of the First International at the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Even in Marx’s time, organisations and individuals claiming to be acting in the interest of the working class revealed themselves as opportunists. He writes during the time of the Paris Commune that ‘as in private life one differentiates between what a man thinks and says of himself and what he really is and does, so in historical struggles one must still more distinguish the language and the imaginary aspirations of parties from their real organism and their real interests, their conception of themselves from their reality’.⁷

In addition to internationalism, Marx and Engels highlight the necessity of having knowledge of the theory of class struggle and its history, in order to understand the strategy and tactics, or what they call the *line of march*. Today, this would mean a well organised party of the working class which has as one of its primary aims to educate its members in the class struggle, its

history and its strategy and tactics. It also necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the peculiarities of capitalism and the class struggle in the country where you are organising.

History has shown us that without an organisation with these principles at its heart, the working class can’t win in the struggle against the system. The tragic events of the 20th century and the revolutions lost-from Germany in 1923 to Portugal in 1975- teach us the necessity of a well organised, well educated and sizeable revolutionary party.

If the history of all hitherto society is the history of class struggle, it is only class struggle that can end this, Marx argues. He says:

‘If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by the force of circumstances, to organise itself as a class, if, by means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class. In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’.⁸

Class struggle will continue but unless we organise to win, that struggle could be lost.

Notes

1 Marx to J. Weydemeyer in New York, 1852, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/letters/52_03_05-ab.htm

2 *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, p38.

3 Lenin Karl Marx: *Tactics of the Class Struggle of the Proletariat* (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/granat/ch05.htm>)

4 *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

5 *The Civil War in France*.

6 *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

7 *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, p39.

8 *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*.