

The Concept of “Class” on Marxist Doctrine

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Abstract: There are very few ideas which are closely linked with Marxism as the concepts of class and class conflict. Therefore, it is impossible to imagine what a Marxist philosophy of history or a Marxist revolutionary theory would be in their absence. Hence, as with much else in Marxism, these two concepts remain abstruse and contradictory at all times. Some scholars may argue that, Marx didn't provide any coherent or unique understanding or conception of class and class struggle. In this paper, I would try to explain the origin of the concept of “class” on Marxist theories and how it is developed. The paper argues that in Marxist doctrine, the concept of class is grounded in the process of production and the working class.

Keywords: Marxism, Class Struggle, Production, Classical Political Theory.

I. INTRODUCTION

There are very few ideas which are closely linked with Marxism as the concepts of class and class conflict. Therefore, it is impossible to imagine what a Marxist philosophy of history or a Marxist revolutionary theory would be in their absence. Hence, as with much else in Marxism, these two concepts remain abstruse and contradictory at all times.¹ Some scholars may argue that, Marx did provide any coherent or unique understanding or conception of class and class struggle. In this paper, I would try to explain the origin of the concept of “class” on Marxist theories and how it is developed. The paper argues that in Marxist doctrine, the concept of class is grounded in the process of production. Marx and Engels wrote in the first lines in their famous work of ‘*The Communist Manifesto*’ as:

*The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another...*²

Some people may argue that both Marx and Engels never resolve the contradictions and ambiguities in their theories in this topic. In the last chapter of their prominent work ‘Capital’ third volume published in 1894, is titled, “Classes.”³ Karl Marx wrote: “The first question to be answered is this: What constitutes a class?” “At first glance” it would seem to be “the identity of revenue and sources of revenue.” In that case, Marx finds this was inadequate, since “from this standpoint, physicians and officials, e.g., would also constitute two classes...” Distinct classes would also be yielded by the infinite fragmentation of interest. In the literature of Marxism, it has been noted that Marx composed this chapter between the years 1863 to 1867, almost twenty years before his death⁴. Engels justifies to the missing points and noted “Marx used to leave such concluding summaries until the final editing, just before going to press, when the latest historical developments furnished him with unflinching regularity with proofs of the most laudable timeliness for his theoretical propositions.”⁵

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Therefore, with this background, this explanation would be more convincing if in the intervening years before his death Marx provide a clear definition of classes in his theory elsewhere. But the Marxist concept of classes is defected and of conflicts raised among them, it remains the case that Marxism is so closely identified with these ideas that an important fact is often not come in light: not only was the notion of class conflict a commonplace for decades before Marx began to write, but a quite different theory of class conflict had been worked out which itself played a role in the genealogy of Marx's ideas.

II. THE REVIEW OF SOME MARXIST LITERATURE

In what some people call 'the first history of economic thought', Adolphe Blanqui published in 1837, in his paper Blanqui wrote:

*"In all the revolutions, there have always been but two parties opposing each other; that of the people who wish to live by their own labor, and that of those who would live by the labor of others.... Patricians and plebeians, slaves and freemen, guelphs and ghibellines, red roses and white roses, cavaliers and roundheads, liberals and serviles, are only varieties of the same species..."*⁶

Blanqui tries to shape foundation of understanding what would have been at issue of social struggle at the time. So, according to him, the tax of the government "is the fruit of laborer's toil" that each government want to collect from each citizen. But, on the other side, it is an abuse put in more indirect forms which the state shares to privileged industries. Blanqui was not the originator of the idea of liberal analysis of the class conflict, he was rather developed an interesting and widespread discussion among the liberal circles in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Karl Marx and his long-term friend Engels were also aware of the existence of this notion. Marx wrote a letter to his follow Joseph Weydemeyer in 1852, Marx said:

*"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 anatomy of the classes..."*⁷

Some people argue that, there are few ideas associated with Marxism as the concepts of class and class conflict, and these concepts are ambiguous. There were two historians that Karl Marx mentioned in his letter and called them as "bourgeois historians", those are, Francois Guizot and Augustin Thierry.⁸ After two years Marx referred to Augustin Thierry as "the father of the 'class struggle' in French historiography. According to the literature on Marxism, the "bourgeois" were the lineage of Marxist theory and it was immediately accepted by Marxist followers. At his late years, Engels suggested "few people count in history, as compared to the great underlying social forces". In the absence of Marx himself, Engels wrote "'the materialist conception of history" would have been discovered by others; his evidence is that "Thierry, Mignet, Guizot, and all the English historians up to 1850" were striving towards it."⁹ In addition, Franz Mehring, Plekhanov, and other Scholars of Marxism school were emphasized on the roots of Marxist class conflict in French historiography.¹⁰ Lenin himself also endorsed "the bourgeoisie," not Marx, were the originators of the theory of the class struggle.¹¹

III. MARXIST THEORY OF CLASS AND CLASS STRUGGLE

The Marxist theory of class and class struggle is a major problem both in theory and political practice, especially when it comes to the 'strategy of the working class'. But, this rather makes possible scientific analysis of the topic, especially the historical stage of social development. i.e. if the preliminary investigation of political struggle for the victory of socialism is to have effective leadership. In the famous letter to J.Weydemeyer, Karl Marx wrote:

*"As far as I am concerned, to me belong neither the merit of discovering the existence of classes in modern society, not the merit of the discovery of their mutual struggle ..."*¹²

In Marxism, **Marxian class theory** asserts that an individual's position within a class hierarchy is determined by his or her role in the production process, and argues that political and ideological consciousness is determined by class position.¹³ Marx distinguishes one class from another on the basis of two criteria: ownership of the means of production and control of the labor power of others. From this, he defines modern society as having three distinct classes:

1. Capitalists, or bourgeoisie, own the means of production and purchase the labor power of others.
2. Workers, or proletariat, do not own any means of production or the ability to purchase the labor power of others. Rather, they sell their own labor power.
3. A small, transitional class known as the petite bourgeoisie own sufficient means of production but do not purchase labor power. Marx's Communist Manifesto fails to properly define the petite bourgeoisie beyond “smaller capitalists”¹⁴

IV. MARX’S CONCEPTION OF CLASS

Production:

In the writings of Karl Marx and the Marxist theory of historical materialism, he explained ‘mode of production’ as a specific combination of the followings:

1. Productive forces: like human labour power and means of production such as tools, equipment, buildings etc.
2. social and technical relations of production: like the property, power, and control relations governing society's productive assets.

Marx regarded productive ability and participation in social relations as two essential characteristics of human beings and that the particular modality of these relations in capitalist production are inherently in conflict with the increasing development of human productive capacities.¹⁵

According to Marx, the *combination* of forces and relations of production means that the way people relate to the physical world and the way people relate to each other socially are bound up together in specific and necessary ways. People must consume to survive, but to consume they must produce, and in producing they necessarily enter into relations which exist independently of their will. For Marx, the whole 'secret' of why/how a social order exists and the causes of social change must be discovered in the specific mode of production that a society has. He further argued that the mode of production substantively shaped the nature of the mode of distribution, the mode of circulation and the mode of consumption, all of which *together* constitute the economic sphere. To understand the way wealth was distributed and consumed, it was necessary to understand the conditions under which it was produced.¹⁶

State:

Karl Marx and his longtime friend Engels never put forward a unified presentation of the theory of the state, their main conception of the state is a fundamental aspect of their outlook, this idea later come to be called Marxism. In fact, theories of the state constitute critical facets of all totalitarian credos, not just the Marxist doctrine. However, a given ideology may be overwhelmingly totalitarian in underlying logic, but if it lacks a focus on using the state as the means of transforming society—that is, of imposing its ideas—its totalitarianism will remain implicit. For them, While Marxism contains many propositions that imply totalitarianism, it is Marx and Engels' view of the state that renders their theory totalitarian in practice. This is mostly evident in their argument that the state, in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, is the chief weapon in the struggle to establish communism. After twenty years, in 1830, the northern radical, William Legget also condemned for what he called “exploiting classes”. Legget claims that, principles of Political economy are the same with those American Republic. He said “Laissez-faire, do not govern too much”. As a follower of Adam Smith and J. -B. Say, he argues that the equal rights system has been overthrown by a new aristocracy, for him the state was connected to bankers.

John C. Calhoun, in his *Disquisition on Government*,¹⁷ he mostly focused on taxation powers of **the state**, he argues that, their main agenda was to divide the community into two classes taxpayers who support the government; and recipients through disbursement and who are according to him supported by the government; or in other words, into tax payers and tax-consumers. In liberal class conflict theory has been applied throughout nineteenth century; in England critics had been put on “plutocrats” or capitalists who use the state rather than the market to enrich themselves. Today many there is revival appear underway of the concept as the creator of classes and the class struggle. Some scholars including Theda Skocpol had started an anthology with the title “*Bringing the State Back In*”¹⁸ The first chapter Skocpol discussed "an intellectual sea change" taking place, by what he ascribed “"society-centered ways of explaining politics and governmental activities". These concepts were popular in the 1950s and 60s, but the government is being reserved as “independent actor”.

Civil Society:

Marx came to understand the contradiction between the liberal state and civil society as what he called a 'sophistry' because it undermined the possibility of the democratic agency of workers. This was a sophistry, not because he opposed political democracy, but because the development of capitalism undermined the possibility of democratic agency. Citizenship could be nothing but a "lion's skin" of politics concealing the nature of civil society beneath it. This contradiction would drive Marx's thought forward as he moved from liberalism to democratic socialism with his developing understanding of the structure and dynamics of capitalism from 1843 until the end of his life. In his paper William argues that, there are two closely related claims about Marx's thought regarding liberalism and democracy.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STATE AND EXPLOITERS?

The class of contemporary exploiters that the Industrialist writers investigated more than any other was the government bureaucrats. As Comte put it:

*"What must never be lost sight of is that a public functionary, in his capacity as functionary, produces absolutely nothing; that, on the contrary, he exists only on the products of the industrious class; and that he can consume nothing that has not been taken from the producer."*²⁰

The contribution of Industrialism to the prehistory of the theory of Public Choice has received little attention.²¹ True to the Industrialist concentration on the "economic factor," Dunoyer surveyed "the influence exercised on the government by the salaries attached to the exercise of public functions."²² In the United States — always the model Industrialist country — official salaries, even for the president, are low. Typically, American officials receive an "indemnity" for their work, but nothing that could be called a "salary. In France, on the other hand, public opinion is shocked not by the exercise of power being made into "a lucrative profession," but by its being monopolized by a single social class. Public expenditures, however, bear almost an inverse relationship to the proper functioning of government: in the United States, for instance, where government costs some 40 million francs a year, property is more secure than in England, where it costs more than 3 billion. The characteristics of public employment are the reverse of those in private business. For example: ambition, so fertile in happy results in ordinary labor, is here a principle of ruin; and the more a public functionary wishes to progress in the profession he has taken up, the more he tends, as is natural, to raise and increase his profits, the more he becomes a burden to the society that pays him.

As increasing numbers of individuals aspire to government jobs, two tendencies emerge: government power expands, and the burden of government expenditures and taxation grows. In order to satisfy the new hordes of office-seekers, the government extends its scope in all directions; it begins to concern itself with the people's education, health, intellectual life, and morals, sees to the adequacy of the food supply, and regulates industry, until "soon there will be no means of escape from its action for any activity, any thought, any portion" of the people's existence. Functionaries have become "a class that is the enemy of the well-being of all the others."²³

Since the enjoyment of government jobs has ceased to be the private preserve of the aristocracy, it has become the object of everyone in society. In France, there are perhaps "ten times as many aspirants to power than the most gigantic administration could possibly accommodate.... Here one would easily find the personnel to govern twenty kingdoms.

The emphasis by the *Censeur Européen* liberals on the ravenous exploitation of the productive classes by the growing class of state functionaries opens another point of contact with Marxism. As has been sometimes noted,²⁴ Marxism contains two rather different views of the state: most conspicuously, it views the state as the instrument of domination by exploiting classes that are defined by their position within the process of social production, e.g., the capitalists. Sometimes, however, Marx characterized the state itself as the independently exploiting agent. Thus, Marx, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, writes, quite in the Industrialist viewpoint: This executive power, with its enormous bureaucratic and military organization, with its ingenious state machinery, embracing wide strata, with a host of officials numbering half a million, besides an army of another half million, with appalling parasitic body, which enmeshes the body of French society like a net and chokes all its pores, sprang up in the days of the absolute monarchy. All regimes assisted in the growth of this parasite, according to Marx, He further noted:

*"Every common interest was straightway severed from society, counterposed [sic] to it as a higher, general interest, snatched from the activity of society's members themselves and made an object of government activity, from a bridge, a schoolhouse, and the communal property of a village community, to the railways, the national wealth, and the national university of France.... all revolutions perfected this machine instead of smashing it."*²⁵

Thus, the conception of the "parasite-state" is clearly enunciated by Marx. By now it should be clear, however, how incorrect it is to assert, as does Richard N. Hunt, that Marx originated this conception. Several decades before Marx wrote, the *Censeur Européen* group had already singled out the parasitic state as the major example in modern society of the plundering and "devouring" spirit. "The Industrialist attack on militarism and standing armies was savage and relentless."

Interestingly, another similarity between Industrialism and Marxism is in the notion of ideology. According to the Industrialist view, there are ideas and values that serve the interests of the productive and of the exploiting classes, respectively. Comte mentions, for instance, the typically feudal judgment, that those who sweat for their wealth are ignoble while those who "gain it by shedding the blood of their fellows" are glorious; such an essentially barbaric idea, he asserts, had to be hidden and veiled by placing it in the context of classical antiquity. Comte even indicates the existence of what could be called "false consciousness," that is, the harboring by members of one class of ideas contrary to their own interests and useful to the interests of an opposing class. He states:

*The war waged by the slaves against their masters has something base to our eyes. These are men who fight so that the product of their industry should not be the spoils of those who enslaved them; it is an ignoble war. The war waged by Pompey against Caesar charms us; its object is to discover who will be the party who will tyrannize the world; it takes place between men equally incapable of subsisting by their own efforts; it is a noble war. If we trace our opinions to their source, we will find that the majority have been produced by our enemies.*²⁶

First, he argues that Marx engaged in a democratic critique of liberalism; second, and as a response to his democratic critique of liberalism, Marx developed a more sociological understanding of democracy, and hence believed that political democracy was a necessary condition of freedom, though not a sufficient condition.¹⁹

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End Notes:

- [1] Always the concept of class has a central importance in Marxist theory, some people may argue that neither Marx nor Engels ever expounded it in a systematic form. See for example Tom Bottomore, "Class," A Dictionary of Marxist Thought (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 74; Another contemporary Marxist theoretician, Charles Bettelheim, "Reflections on Concepts of Class and Class Struggle in Marx's Work," trans. Carole Biewener, in Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, eds., Rethinking Marxism: Struggles in Marxist Theory. Essays for Harry Magdoff and Paul Sweezy (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 1985), p. 22: Karl Marx "never provide a unique or coherent understanding or conception of classes and of class struggles."
- [2] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Selected Works in Three Volumes (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983), I, pp. 108–9.
- [3] Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, III, The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole, Friedrich Engels, ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1967), pp. 885–86.
- [4] Ibid. Friedrich Engels, "Preface," p. 3.
- [5] Ibid. p. 7.
- [6] Jérôme-Adolphe Blanqui, Histoire de l'Economie Politique en Europe depuis les anciens jusqu'à nos jours (Paris: Guillaumin, 1837)
- [7] Marx to J. Weydemeyer, March 5, 1852, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Selected Correspondence (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), pp. 67–70.
- [8] See for details, Marx and Engels, Selected Correspondence, p. 69. Marx refers to the economists, Richardo, Maithus, Mill, Say, et al., who have revealed how the "economic bases of the different classes are bound to give rise to a necessary and ever-growing antagonism among them." It is worth noting that in the same letter, Marx ridicules the view of "the fatuous [Karl] Heinzen," that "the existence of classes [is connected with] the existence of political privileges and monopolies ... "

- [9] Engels to H. Starkenburg, January 25, 1894, Selected Correspondence, p. 468.
- [10] See Karl Marx: His Life and Thought (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 95:
- [11] V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (1917) (New York: International Publishers, 1943), p. 30:
- [12] On January 1, 1852, Weydemeyer had published an article in *The New York Turn-Zeitung* entitled “Dictatorship of the Proletariat.” Parkin, F. *Marx’s Theory of History: A Bourgeois Critique*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979.
- [13] See Marx and Engels, 1848, pp 25
- [14] See Marx, *Grundrisse*. (English Translation)
- [15] Karl Marx (1867), *Capital: A critique to Political Economy*.
- [16] This concept was deeply explained by John C. Calhoun, *A Disquisition on Government and Selections from the Discourse*, C. Gordon Post, ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), pp. 17–1
- [17] Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- [18] William L (2011), Karl Marx's sociological theory of democracy: Civil society and political rights, *Social Science Journal* Volume 48, Issue 1,
- [19] See, an article by Patricia J. Euzent and Thomas L. Martin
- [20] *Ibid.* p 77.
- [21] *Ibid.*,p 78
- [22] *Ibid.* p. 88.
- [23] See Richard N. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels: I Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy, 1818–1850* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), pp. 124–3 1;
- [24] See *A Farewell to Marx: An Outline and Appraisal of his Theories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), pp. 162 — 64;
- [25] For this account See, On Thierry, see A. Augustin-Thierry, *Augustin Thierry (1795–1856), d'après sa correspondance et ses papiers de famille* (Paris: Plon-No 1922