From the Professariat to the Precariat: Adjunctivitis, Collegiality, and Academic Freedom

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ABSTRACT

Social class lies at the core of much that Marx said about the “laws of history.” Class conflict was to be the means whereby capitalism would be overthrown, superseded by a revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and, subsequently, by a communist society in which alienation and exploitation would be replaced by emancipation and the full flowering of human potential as both individuals and a species. The capitalist system, however, has proven remarkably resilient and resourceful. The welfare state ameliorated extreme economic distress, popular culture sapped revolutionary energy, and “identity politics” fragmented political radicalism. Meanwhile, the definition of social class itself became problematic. A reorganized labor market produced divisions between the traditional working class and precarious workers and, in colleges and universities, the old “professariat” was joined by a new “precariat” that now does over two-thirds of the teaching. This trend is part of the “corporatizing” of higher education and the “neoliberal” restructuring of work in late capitalism. Intellectuals, once the theoretical “vanguard of the proletariat,” are now practical leaders too. Educational worker militancy has implications for the academy and class tensions throughout society. It raises the question: Was Marx wrong, or has he just not yet been proven right?

KEYWORDS

Administration, College, Corporatism, Curriculum, Education, Faculty Unions, Liberalism, Marxism, Neoliberalism, Online Education, Social Class, Technology, University

INTRODUCTION

Intellectual Marxism comes in various forms and flavors. Those inspired by the so-called “early Marx” of the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (Fromm, 1961; Marx, 1844) may unleash devastating philosophical critiques of alienation under capitalism that inspire quests for emancipation comparable to those championed by mid-twentieth-century existentialists and anarchists of any era. In the alternative, those preoccupied with the “mature” Marx of Das Kapital may focus on the macroeconomics of then-emerging industrial society and seek to apply the principles of “scientific” socialism, “dialectical materialism” and “economic determinism” to historical patterns and processes. Common to both, as well as to those who insist on the philosophical continuity between the “humanistic” and the “scientific” Marx, is the critical thread of “class conflict.”

Apart from the embarrassments caused by the appropriation of “Marxism” as the official ideology of such authoritarian states as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics under Stalin, the People’s Republic of China under Mao, and a number of failed “third-world” experiments, the primary problem of Marxism in the twentieth century and into the twenty-first has been its inability to account for the failure for the industrial working classes in advanced nations (notably the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany) to fulfill their appointed mission to overthrow their
capitalist oppressors. Instead, they seem to have been softened by the success of the “welfare state,” seduced by “consumerism,” occasionally lured into right-wing “populism” and in extremis into “fascism,” often distracted by nationalism, commonly diverted into the racial, religious and gendered resentments of “identity politics,” and everywhere reduced to alienated individualism with neither the wit nor the will to engage in revolutionary working class politics (Jay, 2018). Some people on the putative left—most obviously the pessimistic critical theorists of the original Frankfurt School (e.g., Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer) and any number of subsequent “postmodernists” (e.g., Jean Beaudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jean-François Lyotard) who have rebelled against all grand narratives—have kept up the criticism of capitalism, but have either compromised or utterly abandoned most of the core elements of traditional Marxism including the primacy of class analysis. They have seemingly replaced the class struggle over control of the means of production with the discursive struggle over control of the rules of discourse and ownership of the text (Jameson, 1991, 1997).

At the same time, criticism of Marx’s alleged “economism” is not entirely without merit. Imagining the working class as an “a priori” subject defined by its structural position within the capitalist mode of production allowed orthodox Marxism to neglect or, worse, to merely assume that the proletariat would perform its necessary and predetermined role in the revolutionary process. Bypassing any actual theory of politics, such orthodoxy conjured up a notion of revolution without paying sufficient attention to the motivations and mobilization of the members of the revolutionary class. A homogenous working class, activated exclusively by logical necessity rather than the by a conscious political response to multidimensional social reality, was, as Engels (1890) himself recognized, a “meaningless, abstract, senseless” proposition. Economics may have been the “ultimately determining element in history,” but it is by no means the only one.

Aronowitz and Giroux (1993, p. 133) seized on the narrow-minded reductionism of certain Marxist orthodoxies and joined in the demand for substantial revisionism. They urged Marxist theory to “free itself from forms of class and historical reductionism” and to give “primary importance” to matters of “culture and ideology as a constitutive force in the shaping of consciousness and historical agency.” The fresh attention to subjective elements in the creation of political consciousness can be welcome, but not at the cost of throwing the structural baby out with the economistic, deterministic, scientistic reductionist bathwater. Class matters. And it matters how the empirical substance of work as constituted by the labor process is accurately allocated to the categories of class. The capitalist/proletarian relationship was once dominant and still endures; however, employer/employee relationships in postindustrial society force observers to recognize new social formations. These can be revealed better by the inductive method of reasoning that begins with the concrete world as it is, than by the deductive method of starting with axiomatic propositions and squeezing the always complex and often contradictory lifeworlds of actual people into a formulaic historical mechanisms that remain oblivious to the lived experience of the people it seeks to define and liberate from oppression—regardless of their relentlessly subjective selves.

So it is that the call for a reassessment of class theory is legitimate insofar as it demands an unbiased, meticulous and ruthlessly unorthodox examination of the factual evidence concerning class formations in the postindustrial world. If undertaken properly, this project will not justify the abandonment of social class, but will require the realistic analysis and explanation of evolving social relations of production and distribution as well as the cultural determinants of their sustaining ideologies. It will embrace the need to consider and account for altered parameters, dimensions and evolving characteristics of the working class(es).

Reconciling class structure with class consciousness or, indeed, with consciousness of any kind, has been a constant problem in Marxism. It is no less so today, as the social relations of production change in large measure because of the influence of the massive innovations in the means of production and because of the extensive reorganization of work itself. In the end, it may be that a revised Marxian interpretation of class, change and revolution will compel only modest amendments or it may be that a
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