

# What are we going to do now?<sup>1</sup>

Towards a workable theory of class consciousness and organization

By Davy Jones, January 2020

The coincidence of changing circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*. (Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach III*)

The lunacy continues and has every chance of becoming a way of life unless we stop it soon.  
(Spike Milligan)

## Summary

This paper is an attempt (mainly) to outline Marx's theory of class and (provisionally) lay out some strategic implications.

This isn't a defence of that theory, a critique of other views of class, or responses to alternative Marxist interpretations. This is a much more limited endeavour: to outline Marx's theory, and to demonstrate that it's both consistent over time in his writings, and internally consistent from a theoretical perspective.

Marx's theory of class has the following characteristics:

### Class as a political category

Class is determined by the social relations of production, but is not identical to them. Classes are a political category, which is to say organisational, not an economic one. Someone is a worker because, in order to survive, they must sell their labour power in exchange for a wage. Someone is a member of the working *class* because of how they combine with others in the same situation in order to do something about this.

The proletariat is separated from the means of production and compelled to sell their labour power – and those people who are not directly involved in this relationship but are also dependent on the wage relationship, such as the unemployed, children, private domestic workers and retired workers.<sup>2</sup> The working class is constituted from this, emerging in the course of its struggles within capitalism. It's a little counterintuitive, given how people are used to using the term class – either by income level, or immediate relation to the production process – but it is in line with Marx's approach. And that's what's under discussion below.

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<sup>1</sup> With a nod to those giants of proletarian theory, Spike Milligan (a one-time Young Communist League member) and the Clash

<sup>2</sup> As all these are dependent on the wage in one form or another.

As Marx puts it:

The separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class; in other respects, they are on hostile terms with each other as competitors. (*The German Ideology* MECW 5 p77).

Class formation is united with, but distinct from, the reproduction of the relations of production; dependent on, but not reducible to, those relations.

## Constructive and destructive tendencies in working class formation

Marx identifies two contradictory tendencies in the formation of the working class:

- 1) Combination resulting from the ever-greater *centralisation of capital*;
- 2) Fragmentation resulting from the extension of the social *division of labour*, and the competition between workers as sellers of labour power.

Paradoxically, the more centralisation develops, the more the division of labour does. The division of labour increases productivity, allowing the greater centralisation of capital. The centralisation of capital, and thus of workers, allows their tasks to be further differentiated.

The development of the division of labour allows the extension of the market, and the drawing in of more workers into social production on a world scale. The greater exchange of commodities between branches of production, resulting from the development of the division of labour, making interdependent what were previously independent areas. This presents the possibility of overcoming its destructive effects on the working class through the greater interdependence of ever-larger numbers of workers.

This is a development that takes place not just – or even primarily – on the national level, but on the international one. Markets have been international since the days of the East India Company, and are far more so now. Production is integrated internationally. The problem is that the working class is integrated internationally to a far more limited degree. This is not the least of the advantages that the capitalist class has over us. While it's not a core theme of this paper, it's still worth noting that attempts to achieve socialism by withdrawing from this global production network are doomed (said in my best Private Fraser voice). Marx saw capitalism as creating the basis of the worldwide free association of producers, but unable to fully realise its benefits for humanity, which was the task of the working class, which has no intrinsic ties to national interest.

## Ideology and class consciousness

While the hold of capitalist ideas over the working class is exercised through the media etc, the reason these ideas have such a pervasive grip is rooted within the social relations of capitalist society itself. The domination of ruling class ideas over the working class is grounded in the activity of the working class:

The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas (*The German Ideology* MECW Vol 5 p59).

This domination cannot be reduced to any stranglehold of the labour aristocracy and bureaucracy. Rather, these are only able to play such a pernicious role because the results of the workers' own labour under capitalism conceals the nature of that society: we build our own prison.

The alien labour – the selling to another of one’s own essential creative, human capacity, the results of which face their producer as an alien and hostile power – peculiar to capitalist society appears as a natural and eternal condition of life.<sup>3</sup> The role of alienated labour extends beyond the mystification of the labour process to the legitimisation of the entire social structure of capitalist society. So today, as Fredrick Jameson said, it’s now easier to conceive of the end of the world than it is to conceive of the end of capitalism. Conveniently, they might come together, to save us having to make the distinction.

### Class in and for itself

That perspective seems very pessimistic. But, for Marx, it’s only part of the story. While the working class forges its own chains, these are radical chains that bring it into conflict with capitalist society in a fundamental way. Marx outlines a necessary – though not inevitable – developmental path for workers within capitalism, from isolated individuals to a revolutionary class, as a result of this conflict.

The working class organised to sell its labour power within capitalist society constitutes a class *in* itself. Organised to struggle against its role as labour power, it is a class *in and for* itself. Both are organisational determinations, and therefore forms of association at differing levels of consciousness.

These two modes of working-class existence – in and for itself – can also be expressed as contingent and necessary class consciousness at the level of modes of thought. Contingent class consciousness tends to limit its horizon to confrontations that are confined to issues within the confines of capitalist society, however large they may be. Necessary class consciousness addresses the strategic question of social control – who rules? – even when its objectives appear to be restricted to its immediate conditions. Resistance to factory closure by its occupation under workers’ control can be an example of how such issues can be posed.

### Necessary, not inevitable

Marx did not see class consciousness as an inevitable progression. He grappled with the relation between the force of social necessity, and the working class’s consciousness of this, without which its movement can be diverted, fragmented and defeated.

The development of class consciousness has as its cutting edge the fight around demands that structurally challenge the subjugation of society to the needs of capital. The way such questions are posed, and answered, can highlight the division between the revolutionary and the reformist approaches within the workers’ movement, and are issues around which strategies may be developed.

### So what?

A working-class strategy isn’t being in thrall to former industrial workers and what they may or may not think. It’s about being able to locate where working class is at its most developed, or is developing at its fastest pace: where the fracture lines are, and how they can be prised apart.

Labour’s tragedy in the Corbyn years was that its strategy was limited to elections – vote us into government, and we’ll fix things for you. People were left as bystanders in their own lives and, no being

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<sup>3</sup> While Marx’s 1844 manuscripts do not adequately describe *how* this takes place (a work in progress even in *Capital*), I think they pose the problem both powerfully and poetically.

involved, in many cases felt little trust. Everything can only be fixed by getting in a Labour government. But, bereft of a wider working-class ecosystem, it turned out nothing could.

That needs to change. In a period of sharpening antagonisms and looming climate crisis, people will either fight or be pushed in the abyss. Campaigns on the climate can take on a more working-class character, as apolitical approaches meet the violence of the state, and the stark reality that all parties aren't the same: that some will burn the planet while others are committed to preventing this. Meanwhile, workers in the gig economy are developing their own forms of struggle, from McStrikers to Deliveroo riders.

And, with the far right on the rise, defence of minorities becomes imperative. Contrary to the accusation that this is a departure from working class concerns, an obsession with identity politics, it's a very old-fashioned, core working class value – an injury to one is an injury to all.

This is by no means a prescriptive list, and history-changing struggles can and do flare up where no one saw them coming. At such junctures, people have the opportunity to learn fast and organise accordingly. The job of socialists today is to recognise such events and help them realise their full potential, in a way that the widest number of workers draw lessons from them, theoretically and organisationally.

# Introduction

We are living in a world of donut politics: not the type with a sticky, jammy centre but the ones with a hole in the middle. The centre has not held – however much liberals and the Labour right really, really thinks it has and should. But it's a lopsided confection – the right having grown much more than the left.

While we saw the significant move forward of a left Labour leadership, it's future is at the time of writing uncertain. Now, in the aftermath of the 2019 General Election things do not look good. The media, from the Mail through the BBC to the Guardian, demonised Corbyn and McDonnell as communists red in tooth and claw. The red baiting had traction and the Labour vote collapsed. Seat after seat turned from red to blue – some of which had never been so. Meanwhile, the far right, nationally and internationally, has grown faster and stronger: Trump, Bolsonaro, Orbán, Modi ... the far right has been 'normalised' in a way that socialism hasn't. Boris Johnson, in harnessing racism, sexism, Islamophobia and homophobia, has enthusiastically jumped on this rightward-hurling bandwagon.

"The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters," as Antonio Gramsci said.

What's more – to extend this creaky donut metaphor beyond its natural life span – if you break into it, it's mainly air. While Labour is the largest party in Europe, its growth has been detached from broader organisations based on and embodying the working class. Trade union actions are at historic lows.<sup>4</sup>

## Darker

The crumbling of the post-war Keynesian consensus saw a rolling back of working-class organisation on a world scale – in the UK, from the Callaghan Labour government's imposition of IMF-dictated austerity four decades before this became a left buzzword, through the miners' strike... and down.

Then came the 2019 UK General Election, and the collapse of the supposed 'red wall' in Labour's supposed heartlands. It was shocking – but was it really surprising? Here, I'm going to lay the case for an integral connection between organisation and outlook. So it should be no surprise that areas that were defined by unionised heavy industry, by labour clubs and societies, *decades ago*, should no longer feel an identification with the values they once embodied.

Whether this current period heralds the rebirth of a combative workers' movement, or a dead-cat bounce before something altogether darker, hinges on the adequacy of how socialists respond – something of a tautology, but no less true for that.

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<sup>4</sup> See [https://theclarionmag.org/2019/04/03/corbynism-and-the-drought-of-workers-struggles/?fbclid=IwAR23f2q3B1vzY98wgAJRh-BoiQ2elZ4Yoy\\_6HJo6PpARfUNbvclGqAUPyQ](https://theclarionmag.org/2019/04/03/corbynism-and-the-drought-of-workers-struggles/?fbclid=IwAR23f2q3B1vzY98wgAJRh-BoiQ2elZ4Yoy_6HJo6PpARfUNbvclGqAUPyQ)

This paper aims to explore questions of class, class consciousness and forms of organisation, and in doing so point the way to the elaboration of a strategy for today's conditions. The starting point of this is an examination of the manner in which Marx approaches the concept of class.

## Political economy of class

Marx's early consideration of the working class defined him as a communist. The Introduction to his 1843 *Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Law* put the proletariat at the core of any further historical development. The *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 extended and deepened this perspective. The dynamic of class, and of the working class in particular, were further investigated in *The Holy Family* (1844), *The German Ideology* (1845), and *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), not to mention the summary of Marx's analysis in the *Manifesto of the communist party*, all of which this paper draws on. However, the location of the category of class in Marx's mature work is indicated in *Capital*, and I therefore wish to turn to this first.

The final chapter of the third volume is titled 'Classes'. Like a character in a murder mystery, Marx does little more than drop a few hints... and then dies before revealing all, leaving only two pages of the chapter before the manuscript breaks off. We know only that his consideration of classes was to lead into an analysis of the capitalist state later on. However, this fragment, combined with the method of the preceding three volumes, and Marx's earlier studies of class, enable us to construct the basis of his theory of class.

Marx counters the rhetorical question "What constitutes a class?" with another; "What makes wage labourers, capitalists and landlords constitute the three great social classes?" He discounts the "first glance" solution of the "identity of revenues and sources of revenue". This gives us "three great social groups whose members, the individuals forming them, live on wages, profit and ground rent respectively, on the realisation of their labour power, their capital, and their landed property". Such a perspective relates these three great social groups to their share of the social product. But it cannot explain what is fundamental about them:

[F]rom this standpoint, physicians and officials, eg, would also constitute two classes, for they belong to two distinct social groups, the members of each of these groups receiving their revenue from one and the same source. The same would also be true of the infinite fragmentation of interest and rank into which the division of social labour splits labourers as well as capitalists and landlords (*Capital* Vol III p886 Moscow 1984).

Source of revenue only shows what divides individuals in society, not what unites these individuals of the "three great social groups" into the "three great social classes". And here's the rub: *how can a form of social production that atomises individuals by its very nature also combine them into classes?*

It might be argued that all Marx is emphasising is that classes must be understood in regard to "their functions in the production process" (Roman Rosdolsky, *The Making of Marx's Capital* p31). But this merely poses the same problem at a different level: here again the "infinite fragmentation of interest and rank" resulting from the division of social labour atomises, not unites, individuals. Anyway, Marx has already extensively explained workers' and capitalists' position in the production process in Volume I. It is hard to believe that he intends a repetition of this in Volume III, only perhaps with the inclusion of landowners.

The 'Classes' chapter in *Capital*, coming into the study *at the end of* an analysis of capitalist production as a whole, only makes sense if class formation is considered as logically *determined by* the social relations of production already outlined, not identical with them. Marx's approach to the same question in the 1840s and

1850s indicates that he sees class formation not as a blind economic process, like capital formation, but a conscious reaction to the social stresses that this engenders:

The separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class; in other respects they are on hostile terms with each other as competitors. (Marx & Engels *The German Ideology* MECW 5 p77. See also Engels' *Conditions of The Working Class in England* MECW 3 p376).

Being formed through association around particular needs, classes are a political category, not an economic one. To clarify the concepts resulting from Marx's analysis I will make a distinction between the *proletariat* and the *working class*. The formation of the *working class* is not the same as the formation of the proletariat. The proletariat is distinguished as a group separated from the means of production and compelled to sell its labour power. The working class is constituted from this, emerging in the course of its struggles against capital.<sup>5</sup> The proletariat, to even reproduce itself as such, must combine to defend its immediate interests. Such combination composes it as a class.

Marx views the working class as a product of these struggles. At the birth of the capitalist system "the proletariat is not yet sufficiently developed to constitute itself as a class, and consequently ... the very struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie has not yet assumed a political character" (Marx *The Poverty of Philosophy* MECW Vol 6 p177). It is because of this understanding that Marx can speak of the "organisation of the proletarians into a class" in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (MECW Vol 6 p493. Emphasis added), and later, the "long and arduous unification of the English workers into a class" (*ibid* p539. See also p498). The contradictory factors in class formation are outlined in the consideration of the French peasantry in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

Insofar as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their cultural formation from those of other classes, they form a class. Insofar as these small peasant properties are merely connected on a local basis, and the identity of their interests fails to produce a feeling of community, national links, or a political organisation, they do not form a class.<sup>6</sup> (*Surveys From Exile* p239).

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<sup>5</sup> This is the reverse of the convention generally adopted by those holding a similar view, such as Stephen Perkins's *Marxism and the Proletariat*, pp169-71. I have done this to avoid labelling something I do not believe to be a class 'the working class'.

<sup>6</sup> Hal Draper attempts to make an economic reductionist of Marx by adding "[subjectively]" to the end of the above quote from the *Brumaire* (Draper, *Karl Marx's theory of revolution, vol II: The Politics of Social Classes*, p349). If Marx had meant subjectively, I think he would have written subjectively.

Hegel makes a similar point in regard to "the class of slaves ... [which] is not a class, for it is only formally a universal. The slave is related as a single individual to his master." (*System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit*, Eds: HS Harris and TM Knox, p152).

What distinguishes the proletariat is that, while the peasantry is defined by a form of social life that militates against any wider combination,<sup>7</sup> the development of capitalism breaks down not only local boundaries, but also national ones through the development of the world market. Neither is the proletariat connected to any narrow property interests, being the owners of no (productive) property. Its very existence within capitalism therefore compels its formation as not only a national class, but an international one.

Capitalists, likewise, are compelled to form a capitalist *class* in an attempt to check the destructive effects of competition, and also to effectively fight, first absolutism, then their own workers. The main agency for this combination is the capitalist state.

How does a form of social production that atomises individuals also constitute them as a class? Capitalism does not do so immediately, but rather through creating the *necessity* for the formation of classes through combination. *Class formation is therefore united with, but distinct from, the reproduction of the relations of production; dependent on, but not reducible to, those relations.*

### Contradictions in class formation

In *The German Ideology* and *The Poverty of Philosophy* Marx identifies two contradictory tendencies in the formation and development of the working class:

- 1) Combination resulting from the ever-greater centralisation of capital;
- 2) Fragmentation resulting from the extension of the social division of labour, and the competition between workers as sellers of labour power.

#### **Centralisation**

While Marx argues that classes only arise through combination, this does not mean that he sees classes as incidental to capitalism. Centralisation is necessary in a society based on the expansion of profit, as “the concentration of labourers, and their large-scale co-operation, saves constant capital” (*Capital* Vol III p82 Moscow 1984). Co-operative forms of labour are the grounding for wider forms of co-operative organisation – organisation which stems from this relation to the production process and is therefore *class* organisation.

The process of capitalist production, and the antagonistic interests which it creates, compel the formation of classes even to reproduce the system itself. ‘The war of all against all’ would disintegrate social production, not least because the proletariat would not even be able to defend the conditions of its own reproduction. The reproduction of the proletariat is a precondition for the reproduction of capital. The conditions for this have at times needed to be addressed by the capitalists themselves; for example, legislation on working conditions in the early nineteenth century in Britain.

With the emergence of capitalism comes the formation of its constituent classes. As capital concentrates, it concentrates workers; as it expands outwards, it creates a growing mass of workers, interlinked by production. As these workers form as a class, they develop definite class interests, which are expressed in their forms of struggle:

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<sup>7</sup> I’m not concerned here with whether this is correct – as a general principle, I don’t think it is, and many peasant-based revolutions, not least China, have demonstrated this – but to unpick a point that Marx is making about the French peasantry in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century.

Large scale industry concentrates in one place a crowd of people unknown to one another. Competition divides their interests. But the maintenance of wages, this common interest which they have against their boss, unites them in a common thought of resistance – *combination*. Thus, combination always has a double aim, that of stopping competition among workers, so that they can carry on general competition with the capitalist. If the first aim of resistance was merely the maintenance of wages, combinations, at first isolated, constitute themselves into groups as the capitalists in their turn unite for the purpose of repression, and in face of always united capital, the maintenance of the association becomes more necessary to them than the maintenance of wages (Marx *The Poverty of Philosophy* MECW Vol 6 pp210-11).

Unfortunately for the capitalists, it is a short step for the workers to go from combining in the labour process as demanded by capital, to strengthening that combination to improve the conditions in which they work. The expansion of the market clarifies that the problem for the worker is not any one capitalist, but the social power of capital. The consciousness of the working class as a class against capital has as its underlying motive force this process whereby ever greater masses of workers confront increasingly concentrated capital on a terrain which becomes more international, resulting from the development of capitalist production.

### *The division of labour*

Were this the whole story, workers would long ago have got their act together and abolished capitalism. But this is only part of the story. Contradictory tendencies act to obscure the nature of this process, and thereby hide the real interests of individuals from themselves. Marx was no prophet of impending capitalist demise, but spilled much ink studying how the system reproduced itself. One key factor in this was the destructive effect of the division of labour on effective combination by workers. The social division of labour fragments workers into separate and competing groups – for example, on a trade and national level – concealing their common interests.

Individuals always proceeded, and always proceed, from themselves. Their relations are the relations of their real-life process. How does it happen that their relations assume an independent existence over against them? and that the forces of their own life become superior to them?

In short: *division of labour*, the level of which depends on the development of the productive power at any particular time. (*The German Ideology* MECW Vol 5 p93).

Socially divided labour is the precondition for commodity production, whereby the products of isolated and independent labours meet each other in the form of commodities via the market. The contradiction between the one-sided nature of labour, expressed in the social division of labour, and the many-sided needs of the individual mean that the product of labour – and for the worker, her labour power – serves only as exchange value. So, for the worker, productive activity is alienating activity, being confronted by the results of her labour over and against her: “the worker is related to the *product of his labour* as to an *alien object*.” (Marx *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* MECW Vol 3, p272).

It presents an insoluble threat for the individual; soluble only through collective action of the class. Paradoxically, the more centralisation develops, the more the division of labour does. The division of labour increases productivity, allowing the greater centralisation of capital. The centralisation of capital, and thus of workers, allows their tasks to be further differentiated. The social division of labour strengthens partial interests, continually tending to fragment labour, and therefore the grounding of class consciousness.

How do the general interests of the working class come to the fore, against – or, rather, mediated by – the partial interests, which appear to undermine them? From this flow questions of what forms of action make the general interests a decisive material force.

### From class to class consciousness

The formation of the working class is the same as it becoming conscious of itself as a class. In its fullest expression, class consciousness is “the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution” (MECW Vol 5 p52). But there’s a problem: while revolution needs the conscious and united action of the majority of workers, the material processes of society continuously destroy that consciousness.

Destruction and construction are not separate processes, however, but aspects of the same. Although the division of labour disrupts the unifying of the proletariat, it is also the medium for the socialisation of labour. Marx highlights this dual process as one of the “three cardinal facts of capitalist production” in *Capital*:

- 1) Concentration of means of production in few hands, whereby they cease to appear as the property of the immediate labourers and turn into social production capacities...
- 2) *Organisation of labour itself into social labour: through co-operation, division of labour, and the uniting of labour with the natural sciences.*  
*In these two senses, the capitalist mode of production abolishes private property and private labour, even though in contradictory forms.*
- 3) Creation of the world market. (*Capital* Vol III p266. Emphasis added).

The development of the division of labour allows the extension of the market, and the drawing in of more workers into social production on a world scale. The greater exchange of commodities between branches of production, resulting from the development of the division of labour, makes interdependent what were previously independent areas, and so more openly draws the interests of the workers in them together. The extension of the division of labour is bound up with the process of the centralisation of capital. This presents the possibility of overcoming its destructive effects on class and class consciousness through the greater interdependence of ever larger numbers of workers.

Marx went further in drawing revolutionary conclusions from the contradiction between centralisation and the division of labour. Communist consciousness arose precisely because the division of labour made no other form of existence practical for workers in the long term: “for proletarians – owing to the frequent opposition of interests among them arising out of the division of labour – no other ‘agreement’ is possible than a political directed one against the whole present system.” (*The German Ideology* MECW Vol 5, pp371-2).

The working class is not the passive object of these two forces, it is also their subject: its own productive activity reproduces them. Its intervention is therefore decisive in these developments. Its degree of organisation and awareness determine the effectiveness of this intervention, and therefore the development of its class consciousness and struggle.

### Ideology: not false consciousness

So far, I have tried to show that Marx’s understanding of class and class consciousness is much richer than has generally been interpreted. Class is often reduced to its grounding in the production process, and class consciousness – or rather its absence – to ‘false’ ideas which grip the proletariat from some external source

(conversely, 'true' class consciousness is also often seen as being imposed from the outside. See 'Organisation and consciousness', below). This dualistic approach is alien to that of Marx.

For many revolutionaries, the hold of bourgeois ideology over the working class is reduced to the influence of a labour aristocracy and bureaucracy – the dominant strata of the workers' movement – too lulled by crumbs from the capitalists' table to even conceive of taking over the banquet. Although these factors are important for the continuing domination of capital, they cannot in themselves explain the long-standing identification of the proletariat in general with the capitalist system, even at times when there are scant few crumbs to be swept their way. Georg Lukács doubts "whether such analyses satisfactorily explain the totality and hence the crux of the matter." (*Political Writings 1919-1929* p101). I agree. Yet this has limited many revolutionaries' understanding of the situation for a century, if not more. For instance, the first sentence of Trotsky's 1938 Transitional Programme states:

The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterised by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat. (Leon Trotsky *The Transitional Programme for Socialist Revolution* p111 Pathfinder).

This crisis of leadership is the political expression of the dominance of the labour bureaucracy and aristocracy.<sup>8</sup> Many revolutionaries remain trapped between the horizons of this one short sentence; blaming the defeats of the working class on the social democratic and communist parties. None of which explains why the working class continues to follow such parties, or often not even attain that level of consciousness. One could blame the collapse of the Second International on the betrayal of Karl Kautsky, Plekhanov, etc, but it does not explain why the mass of workers followed them in supporting their own ruling classes.

Marx's analysis of the nature of the labour aristocracy and bureaucracy was developed within the context of a more fundamental critique of the mystified relations of bourgeois society. Far from any single member of the working class being spontaneously class conscious merely because she is a proletarian, capitalist society is an ensemble of social relations that conceal this from its human subjects. The working class is the active producer of capitalist society, but is prevented from seeing this because of its alienation from its product and its own activity. It follows from this that the domination of ruling class ideas within the working class cannot be reduced to any stranglehold of the labour aristocracy and bureaucracy. Rather, these are only able to play such a pernicious role because the results of the workers' own labour under capitalism conceals the nature of that society: we build our own prison. Marx sees alienation of labour power as playing a role that extends beyond the mystification of the labour process to the legitimisation of the entire social structure of capitalist society.

The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas (*The German Ideology* MECW Vol 5 p59).

Through this process, manifestations of the domination of capital such as the state also appear as natural; in the case of the state it embodies the "illusory 'general' interest" (*ibid* p47). This is because the capital relation which it defends appears as an ahistorical and asocial relation, as 'normal' as rainfall. Its role can appear to

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<sup>8</sup> Whether or not the concept of labour aristocracy is a useful concept at all is not the question here. My point is that even if it is, it is subordinate to the social relations rooted in generalised commodity production that determine the consciousness of *everyone* in capitalist society.

represent the general interest of society because it appears to defend the eternal and natural conditions necessary for society to exist, and not just for that particular, capitalist, form of society.

Marx deepens the analysis of ideology as generated by the social relations of capitalist production with his analysis of commodity fetishism:

[T]he relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things. (*Capital* Vol I p73 1954).

Fetishism therefore expresses the appearance of the position of individuals within capitalism. Social phenomena are seen to obey immutable laws, impervious to human action.<sup>9</sup> Through naturalising the conditions of capitalist society from which it arises, ideology justifies and defends these conditions, even when articulated by individuals unaware or even hostile to this outcome. It is a 'conscious' expression of capitalism's appearance, an appearance that inverts its essence:

The final pattern of economic relations as seen on the surface, in their real existence and consequently in the conceptions by which the bearers and agents of these relations seek to understand them, is very much different from, and indeed quite the reverse of, their inner but concealed essential pattern and the conception corresponding to it. (*Capital* Vol III pp209).

The domination of ruling class ideas over the working class is grounded in the conditions of the productive activity of the working class. The corollary of this is that they are open to be challenged and changed by the activity of that class. The paradox is how, when the working class cannot see the necessity of such action?

Fetishism expresses the immediate position of the individual in capitalist society, in distinction to the position of the working class as its *collective producer*. Marx saw the latter as the *universal class*, the real bearer of general human interest, in contrast to its illusory embodiment within the capitalist state. Marx's concept of the working class is no disembodied ideal, far removed from the real individual workers with distinct individual interests. The immediate interests of individual workers compel them to forms of organisation that present ways to realise those interests; for example, interests such as employment at a living wage, etc. It is in this way that general class interests show their potential to come to the fore.

To understand not only what separates, but what links the particular fetishised interest of the worker with the working class is the start of the understanding of the necessary moments of a working-class strategy. Working class consciousness does not stem from any partial economic interest, but rather from its absence. The working class has no property forms of its own to protect, and therefore no basis to establish or justify new forms of exploitation. In freeing itself from bourgeois ideology, it therefore does not establish its own ideology to justify its own sectional interest. Possessing no property interest of its own, the working class must demystify the situation it faces, in order to change it.

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<sup>9</sup> One facet of this is the separation of physical and mental labour, where thought appears to be merely contemplative, relating externally to reality, not a transformative and integral part of that reality. This is because mental labour is divided from practically transformative, physical labour. Practice and consciousness seem naturally separate, not as what they really are: a historically specific result of class society.

Ideology fetters the fighting capacity of the working class through concealing the social foundations of its exploitation, but is paradoxically overcome through the action of that class against the reality of that exploitation, which persists irrespective of its awareness of it. This is not the result of the experience of any exploited class under any conditions, but is unique to the working class under capitalism. The mystified appearance of the commodity can only be understood when the commodity itself is not only man's object, but also its subject – through the experience of a class that is the bearer of the essential commodity of labour power. The working class must take control of the results of its own labour, and, in doing so, take control of its entire existence. In thereby preparing the ground to free humanity as a whole from the domination of capital.

### Class in and for itself

*The Poverty of Philosophy* draws a distinction between a class in itself and a class both in and for itself. The terms are used without full explanation, but originate from German Enlightenment philosophy. An understanding of their 'parentage' – which Marx's free usage clearly takes for granted – is invaluable to properly understand what point is being made.

The working class organised to sell its labour power within capitalist society constitutes a class in itself. Organised to struggle *against* its role as labour power, it is a class in and for itself. This distinction is encapsulated in Marx's statement in *Wages, Price and Profit* that the slogan of the working class should not be 'a fair day's pay for a fair day's work' but 'abolish the wage system'. That both are organisational determinations, and therefore forms of association at differing levels of consciousness, should be noted. Hal Draper argues that the "Hegelese" of in itself and for itself has been "widely distorted into the claim that for Marx a class exists only in the form of conscious organisation" (*Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, vol II: The Politics of Social Classes*, p41, fn). He later says "Fortunately, it was subsequently dropped" (*ibid*, p349). Though such terminology does not reappear in Marx's work, its content remains – if anything, it is more 'Hegelian' in outlook.<sup>10</sup> Marx's debt to Hegel is vast. Far from this formulation being an example of Marx's unfortunate coquetry with speculative jargon, it is vital to a Marxist theory of class; conscious organisation *must* be a key determinant of class at *all* levels.

So – a little background on the philosophical parentage of the in/for itself distinction. While Hegel often writes in a way that makes your eyeballs bleed, it's an important influence on Marx's perspective, so please bear with me.

Hegel states "Being-for-Self is the polemical or negative attitude against the limiting other ... something is for itself insofar as it cancels its otherness ... self-consciousness is Being-for-Self accomplished and posited" (*Science of Logic* p171 London 1966). He restates the distinction in a socio-historical context in his Introduction to the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*:

In order to comprehend what development is, what may be called two different states must be distinguished. The first is what is known as capacity, power, what I call being-in-itself; the second

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<sup>10</sup> Later works that argue that Marx has an increasing debt to Hegel, despite an abandonment of the 'Hegelian' terminology of early works (in contrast to the structural Marxist distinction between the young Hegelian Marx and the mature 'scientific' Marx) include Tony Smith's *The Logic of Marx's Capital* and Fred Moseley's *Money and Totality*. This is an approach I am in broad agreement with.

principle is that of being-for-itself, actuality... [In the transition between in-itself and for-itself] no new content has been produced, and yet this form of being for self makes all the difference. The whole variation of the development of world history is founded on this difference. This alone explains how since all mankind is naturally rational, and freedom is the hypothesis on which this reason rests, slavery yet has been, and in part still is, maintained by many peoples, and men have remained contented under it. (LHP I pp20-1)

Through Marx's appropriation of Hegel's categories, this "otherness" of being-in-itself emerges as the proletariat's self-estrangement through the alienation of its labour power. It is unfree because it is determined by something external to it – alien labour in the form of capital. The move from in- to for-itself overcomes the 'otherness' of this labour, so bringing it under conscious human control. Human activity is now self-determined and therefore truly free. The "negative attitude" is now not merely polemical, but practical: the overthrow of the limits of capital through workers' revolution; as Marx put it, the weapon of criticism must be replaced by the criticism of weapons.

The working class is only truly a class for itself at the point where it practically "cancels its otherness": in the course of its revolutionary struggle against capital. The working class for itself only fully exists when it asserts its autonomy as a class through its unity in struggle against its role as labour power: "*the working class is truly working class only when it struggles against its existence as a class*" (Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* p74). This is only fully expressed at the point of revolution. This is the only consistent interpretation of Marx's use of the term "for itself": that is, when it takes control of society.

We have explained 'in itself' and 'in and for itself', and shown their importance and how they arise in the course of Marx's analysis. But this would be of no use unless we can show how they are interconnected; how the class necessarily emerges as for itself as a result of its activity. Stated broadly, the link is in the forms of activity and organisation of the working class through the course of its struggles, and its resulting and developing consciousness of the nature and necessary direction of those struggles – to the point of revolution and beyond:

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a *revolution* (*The German Ideology* MECW Vol 5 pp52-3).

The distinction between 'in itself' and 'in and for itself' for the working class is a distinction between its actual and potential life: potential not in an arbitrary way, but because its own internal contradictions compel it to develop in such a way. The working out of this contradiction is the process of 'becoming' of the working class – the realisation of its potential; the prerequisite for revolution.

'In' and 'for itself' are not fixed states. Theory is grey, but the tree of life is ever green, as the man said: one doesn't go to bed one night as a member of the working class in itself, and wake up as one who is in and for itself. This whole process is a continual one of 'becoming' – of composition and decomposition, depending on the activity of people organising, dispersing, winning struggles and losing them. Heraclitus was right that you can't step into the same river twice, and this is further complicated by the fact that class is more of a tidal estuary – it flows both ways, with lots of tributaries and eddies to further confuse things. Life is messy.

## Contingent and necessary class consciousness

The class in itself and for itself are expressed in the contingent and necessary forms of consciousness: the distinction between “what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment regards as its aim” and the conscious expression of “what, in accordance with [its] being, it will be historically compelled to do” (*The Holy Family* MECW Vol 4 p36).

It is in this sense that the existence of the working class in and for itself is necessary. But necessary, in this sense, doesn't mean inevitable. A tadpole necessarily turns into a frog. Most tadpoles do not, though; they get eaten before they ever get that far.

Once again, this in/for itself distinction has a Hegelian pedigree, so it's useful to see how Hegel himself understood it. Hegel's *Science of Logic* defines the contingent as having “the ground of its being not in itself but in something else” (p205): not actively self-determined, but motivated by forces outside it. A working class that accepts the boundaries of capitalist society is therefore dominated by contingent class consciousness; in opposition to this, the expression of its being compels it to confront these boundaries.

It is not that such consciousness is false (a term first used in this context in a letter by Engels to Mehring in 1893), any more than fetishism is illusory, as it corresponds to the immediate experience of people. Such consciousness, however, represents the interests of particular groups of workers as sellers of labour power within capitalism. This is a consciousness that is rational, but a rationality of a sort, limited to the existing society.<sup>11</sup>

Necessary class consciousness is the awareness by the working class of capitalism's historical limits, and the need to go beyond them through its class struggle; an awareness that arises from the realities of capitalism that compel the formation of the working class.

What distinguishes contingent from necessary class consciousness is that, while the contingent responds to particular forms of capital's contradictions in a sectional manner, necessary consciousness sees such contradictions in their relation to the totality of world capitalism. This consciousness must have an organisational and political expression.

Contingent class consciousness tends to limit its horizon to confrontations confined to immediate issues, however large they may be. Necessary class consciousness addresses the strategic question of social control – who rules? – even when its objectives appear to be restricted to its immediate conditions. Resistance to factory closure by its occupation under workers' control, and attempting to spread such action, can be an example of how such issues can be posed.

What makes such a high level of consciousness possible – and not just possible, but the starting point for the real workers' movement – is that the conditions of capitalist society mean that for workers, “no other 'agreement' is possible other than a political one directed against the whole present system.” (MECW Vol 5 pp371-2).

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<sup>11</sup> There are important links between Marx's approach to this and Hegel's categorisation of the Understanding (see David MacGregor, *The communist ideal in Hegel and Marx*).

Contingent and necessary class consciousness have as much an objective basis as the working class itself. Both are grounded in the wage relation. Bound up with the formation of the working class, the formation of its consciousness is a contradictory process, stemming from the contradictions of social production and class struggle under capitalism. As explained above, the underlying motive force for this is the contradiction between the centralisation of capital and the extension of the division of labour. Workers are thrown into struggle in this context and, in the course of their struggles, modify both this development, and their own view of the world and their position in it. Lenin, speaking of the 1896 strike wave in Russia, illustrates this through his comments on the relationship between the spontaneous and conscious struggles of the working class:

[I]f we are to speak of the 'spontaneous element' then, of course, it is this strike movement which, first and foremost, must be regarded as spontaneous. But there is spontaneity and spontaneity. Strikes occurred in Russia in the 70s and 60s (and even in the first half of the nineteenth century), and they were accompanied by the 'spontaneous' destruction of machinery, etc. Compared with these 'revolts', the strikes of the 90s might even be described as 'conscious', to such an extent do they mark the progress which the working-class movement has made in that period. This shows that the 'spontaneous element', in essence, represents nothing more nor less than consciousness in an embryonic form. (*What is to be done?* CW Vol 5, p374).

The struggles of the working class in itself contain the immanent basis for its struggle as a class for itself: less developed forms contain the potential of the more developed, rather than exclude them. Struggles for a better deal within capitalism ultimately confront it with the limitations of that society. Contingent class consciousness accepts these limits, taking the boundaries of capitalism to be natural. Marx believed that such views would be undermined in the course of the conflict between the needs of capital and those of the working class: necessary class consciousness was necessary precisely because it corresponds to what workers "will be historically compelled to do."

Marx did not see class consciousness as any kind of passive inevitability. He grappled with the relation between the force of social necessity, and the working class's consciousness of it, without which its movement can be diverted, fragmented and defeated, as capital imposes its needs on the working class.

Class consciousness therefore not only has an objective basis, but must have an objective expression; the organisational forms developed through working class struggle.

### The relation between the political and economic

Writing in 1845, Marx believed that the working class had little room for manoeuvre before it confronted the necessity for the overthrow of capitalism:

even a minority of workers who combine and go on strike very soon find themselves compelled to act in a revolutionary way. (*The German Ideology* MECW Vol 5 p204).

Marx's judgement was coloured by the time: the strength of the Chartists in Britain, and the rising tide of revolution on the Continent. Carried along with the torrent, Marx conflates the possible with the

inevitable.<sup>12</sup> Sadly, there is ample evidence that Marx was a tad overoptimistic, from the defeats of 1848 to today.

Having said that, there is also much to show that capitalism's ability to contain the economic struggles of the working class at that level has increased in the intervening years. Has capitalism reinforced the division of the political from the economic since Marx's day?

Many Marxists have illustrated such a division and advanced strategies based around overcoming it: for instance, Lenin's *Imperialism and the Split in Socialism* and Zinoviev's *The Social Roots of Opportunism* focused on the question of the labour aristocracy and bureaucracy. Trotsky identified "the dependence of the reformist trade unions upon the state" and argued: "In the epoch of imperialist decay the trade unions can be really independent to the extent that they are conscious of being, in action, the organs of the proletarian revolution" (*Marxism and the Trade Unions* pp6 & 10 New Park 1983). Others, while acknowledging this, seek to identify the breakdown of the basis of opportunism since the 1970s. István Mészáros refers to a strengthening of "material ground for solidarity" within the international working class in the light of the "growing structural crisis of capitalism" (*The Power of Ideology* p345).

The validity of such claims can only be viewed within the context of a study of imperialism today. That is not the remit of this paper. Nevertheless, even accepting the trends outlined by Mészáros are real, they do not remove the *primary* barriers to conscious working-class solidarity. However much the imperialist bourgeoisie's hold over its working class is strengthened by its position, the grounding of this domination throughout the world, is in the division of labour and commodity fetishism. Strategies to extend working class solidarity must confront the problems that these raise, and confront them internationally, just as the division of labour is an international one. That reality is one of the fundamental weaknesses of national roads to socialism.

## Organisation and consciousness

There has to be a relationship between the manner of the reproduction of labour, nationally and globally, and the forms of organisation and strategies that flow from this. The key problem is that such a relationship is at best inadequately theorised.

If the working class is the medium for the transition from capitalism to socialism, then organisation is the form of that mediation. Each development of the working class must be expressed organisationally, each important defeat sees its reflection in the erosion of working class organisation. Organisation and class consciousness are therefore inseparable: the experience of the organisation of the class increases its consciousness, so spurring continuing development in a dynamic and reciprocally conditioning fashion. It is therefore incorrect to state that the "proletariat in struggle does not form an institution distinct from its

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<sup>12</sup> David MacGregor puts this more strongly, in regard to what Marx in the 1840s *failed* to take from Hegel: "Marx, with his expectations of imminent revolution, jettisoned every element of the Hegelian system which promised to restore unity to the disintegrating fabric of industrial capitalism. He ignored Hegel's suggestion that the consciousness of the proletariat is not all that different from the Understanding of the bourgeoisie, and as a result he underestimated the potential for reformism in the working class movement" (*The Communist Ideal in Hegel and Marx* p33).

immediate being” (Rossana Rossanda, ‘Class and party’ in *The Socialist Register* 1970, p221). The working class can be understood as *nothing other than* its determinant – mediated – forms of organisation.

Such forms must be appropriate to the conditions within which the working class fights if they are to be adequate to the task, be they unions, workers’ councils, parties, or whatever. For the struggles of the working class to have any lasting effect they must have a durable and responsive organisational expression. The spontaneous development of the working class – in the sense of an absence of organisational codification of its own struggles – is not possible.

This is never a smooth progression. London dockers in 1968 could demonstrate that ‘Enoch was right’, while having radical figureheads such as communist Jack Dash. Radicalism regarding economic demands had no inevitable connection to radical political demands – though, confusingly, *inevitable* is very different from *necessary*: if you want to secure economic demands long-term, you have to take the *necessary* step of challenging the political power of the capitalist state. That challenge becomes more problematic if you have an identification with that state under the belief of a common national interest. Hence why dockers could be very militant on the economic front, while capitulating to the worst elements of nationalism on the political front.

### Conditions of organisation today

How to bridge the gap between the existing contingent and the possibility of necessary class consciousness? Its possibility does not make it an historical inevitability. It remains a task that confronts the working class, only attainable through the action and organisations of that class.

Because of the fragmentation of labour by capital, at any time the majority of workers will only at best be partially aware of its situation, and not organised to the degree necessary to decisively respond to the attacks on it. However, within the wider class, those sections of the working class with a greater awareness of their situation will organise accordingly. But while they are a minority, their impact remains marginal.

Without organisational expression, workers are no more a class than the ‘potatoes in a sack’ peasantry that Marx talks about in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. Any such actualisation requires organisation. But what forms of organisation are appropriate to the conditions we face today – forms that will be able to both structure, and be structured by, the development of working class struggle? There is no formula for this – no historic template. And there’s no easy equivalence of ‘unions = economic/parties = political’. Apart from the fact that a multitude of organisational forms are possible, unions can and do behave in a revolutionary fashion, and parties can operate in the narrowest of ways, confined to the most modest demands.

In many ways, socialists are in a position not confronted by our authorities of the past. Marx played a key role in the organisation of the European workers’ movement for almost half a century. Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci wrestled with the strategic problems of a mass movement of which they were a part – indeed, central to: from the organisations of German social democracy, to the revolts of the Italian workers’ councils. Bolshevism grew with the workers’ movement in the volatile and unstable Russian empire.

Corbynism, on the other hand, while a huge step forward from the conditions that preceded it, proved fragile, and what succeeds it is still uncertain. Yes, the Labour Party has half a million members – but you try getting them mobilised on a day-to-day basis. We saw that play out tragically in the December 2019 general election. Labour is (as it always has been) an electoral vehicle, not an organisation that’s integral to people’s

lives and struggles. That understates the problem, as, with the retreat of traditional workers' organisations, Labour's wider ecosphere has withered, from unions, through co-operative societies to working men's clubs.

Despite the demonisation of Corbyn and McDonnell as Marxists, Marxists have become peripheral to the workers' movement, and – in terms of anything that is a living part of working people's day-to-day lives – the workers movement is a shadow of what it was. Indeed, the workers' movement is peripheral to the lives of most working people, by and large. As Kenan Malik writes in a recent Observer column:

For radical critics of liberalism, an individual realised himself or herself not through tradition but through struggles to transform society, from battles for decent working conditions to campaigns for equal rights. These struggles created organisations, such as trade unions and civil rights movements, which drew individuals into new modes of collective life and forged new forms of belonging.

These broad ways of thinking of “community” have long coexisted in tension. But in recent years, as trade unions have weakened and social movements crumbled, it has seemed for many that the only form of collective politics left is that rooted in conservative, Burkean notions of national or ethnic identity.<sup>13</sup>

This situation has been a long time in the making, although really started to bite from the 80s. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the 'Marxist' parties of the Second International built and maintained their mass character by adapting to the changing conditions of capitalism as the workers' movement lost its revolutionary character. Later, many Communist Parties, even in Western Europe, retained a mass base within the working class. Although these parties shed any real adherence to Marxism, their formal espousal of it helped maintain an anti-capitalist tradition within the working class. That imploded in the '90s, though of course it didn't come out of nowhere. Bourgeois ideology came to dominate in a way that it never had before.

A situation exists where the theoretical activity of much of the left either has no bearing on its practice – much less the practice of the wider working-class movement – or is tailored to suit it. That much of the left can proclaim the workers have no country, alongside falling in line behind the unambiguous nationalism of Brexit, illustrates this.

## Programme

Marx was adamant that any viable strategy must be based on the real experiences of the working class; action programmes for working class resistance are not born irrespective of the conditions of the class it is tailored to suit. Not the ones that work, anyway. Writing in reference to the First International in 1869, Marx highlights the dynamic of working-class convergence at that time:

Since the various sections of the working men in the same country, and the working classes in the different countries, are placed under different circumstances and have attained different degrees of development, it seems almost necessary that their theoretical notions, which reflect the real movement, should also diverge.

The community of action, however, called into life by the Intern[at]ional] W[orkers] Ass[ociation],

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<sup>13</sup> [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/22/idea-that-the-british-working-class-is-socially-conservative-is-a-nonsense?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/22/idea-that-the-british-working-class-is-socially-conservative-is-a-nonsense?CMP=share_btn_fb)

the exchange of ideas facilitated by the public organs of the different national sections, and the direct debates in the General Congresses, are sure by and by to engender a common theoretical programme. (MECW Vol 21 p45).

I want to now look at the basis of such a programme.

A programme is not a shopping list of demands. As a guide to action, it results from, and guides, the necessary struggles of the working class. Neither does it develop irrespective of the conditions of that class – its state of organisation, level of class consciousness, etc. The programme is a guide to the fusion of socialist politics with the working class in today's conditions. Otherwise it remains a utopia:

The development of necessary class consciousness does not imply its constitution as a homogeneous *psychological bond* ... but the elaboration of strategically viable *programmes of action* embracing a multiplicity of specific social groups in whatever variety of organisational forms may be required... And the historically necessary development of class consciousness consists precisely in this practical elaboration of a set of strategic aims corresponding to the objective structural position of the various social groups which formulate them. (I Mészáros, *Philosophy, Ideology and Social Science*, pp97-8).

A programme develops with the working class. Marx and Engels could remark that elements of the *Communist Manifesto* had become antiquated soon after it was written. This was not because the programme was wrong, but because capitalist society had developed, requiring the development of the programme with it.

Given that socialists cannot wish away their isolation, we need a strategy to orientate and develop our limited forces today – a programme. A programme is not a series of opinions or fundamental truths but, as the *Communist Manifesto* put it, our line of march. In this sense, while it is always a programme for the mass, it recognises the degree of fragmentation, national isolation and low level of consciousness, rather than a schema which addresses itself to a working class, which it presupposes exists like an army waiting for instructions.

To make some highly provisional observations: we need to turn our attentions to the necessary fracture lines within the system that present the opportunity for workers to combine, learn and develop, organisationally and politically. These fracture lines appear around such areas as: the proletariat's domination in the labour process and the potential for workers' control; unfolding climate catastrophe; women's oppression under capitalism, grounded in their *gratis* reproduction of labour; or racial oppression's role in dividing society to maintain the hegemony of the ruling class.

Such questions highlight the division between the revolutionary and the reformist approach within the workers' movement. They are not in themselves a strategy, but issues around which one may be developed. That the identification of such key questions is itself insufficient is indicated by the fact that where sections of the left have identified these issues, they have not been able to build sustainable and effective work around them.

Marx's aim was to realise criticism in political activity. This requires organised, practical work, and continuous analysis of factors blocking this realisation. So, yes – time is short. But that means even more than ever, we have to be right, not squander our scant resources on 'Jesus is coming – look busy'-style activism. And who

knows what 'right' is at this juncture? So, we need an environment that allows us to be flexible, correct faults (of which there will be many) and learn quickly.

## Instead of a conclusion

That's a whole lot of Marx going on. But so what? What use is it, and how do we apply it?

Good question. I'm glad you asked.

Difficult to say in any detail. The purpose of the paper was to outline Marx's theory of class, and to critique some ideas of what it's not.

Class is a conscious political, organisational process – the formation of a revolutionary subject. It's not what you earn, what you do or (god help us) what your parents did. I'm a London based activist. But I grew up in a deindustrialising area in the 80s. I experienced first hand the decline of class identification, to be replaced by resentment and a sense of powerlessness.

Within five years of the defeat of the miners' strike, I sat in the front room of the Communist Party former branch secretary of a National Union of Miners lodge in Maerdy, the Rhondda, as he described the defacing of the local Chinese takeaway with racist graffiti. This in the place that used to be infamous as Little Moscow. Read the pre-WWII traditions of this place in Lewis Jones' novels, *Cwmardy* and *We Live*. I've experienced the effects of the defeat and disintegration of class organisations. We cannot afford to romanticise the outcomes – though we do need strategies to fix them.

So, in the context of today, a working-class strategy isn't being in thrall to former industrial workers and what they may or may not think. It's about being able to locate where the development of organisation and consciousness is at its most developed, or is developing at its fastest pace: where the fracture lines are, and how they can be prised apart. After all, as Leonard Cohen said, there is a crack in everything – that's how the light gets in.

We need an approach that connects to how workers organise now, and develops and extends it, not that romanticises where they once did. That's the focus. If you have the resources, it's also about developing strategies to counter the destructive effects of capital, as workers are ground down further within the production process or spat out of it all together, or where class organisation is going into reverse. A mass organisation such as the Labour Party has the capacity to do this in many more areas than a smaller group of activists.

Labour's tragedy in the Corbyn years was that it had good intentions, but no analysis and no strategy. Or rather its strategy was electoralist – vote us into government, and we'll fix things for you. People were left as bystanders to their own lives and, not being involved, in many cases felt little trust. When you're promised a better world but that doesn't correspond with your experience of the way the world works, it may as well be Narnia. And the bailiffs took your wardrobe long ago. But that's the problem with Labourism: it's a thoroughly electoralist organisation. When your only tool is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Everything can only be fixed by getting in a Labour government. But, bereft of an organised working-class base, it turned out nothing could.

That needs to change. In a period of sharpening antagonisms and looming climate crisis, people will either fight or be driven into the abyss. If that sounds catastrophist... well, 'catastrophe' is what is happening to the

global climate. Campaigns on the climate can take on a more working-class character, as apolitical approaches meet the violence of the state, and the stark reality dawns that all parties are not the same: that some will burn the planet while others are committed to preventing this. Meanwhile, gig economy workers are developing their own forms of struggle, from McStrikers to Deliveroo riders.

Lastly, with the far right on the rise, defence of minorities becomes a greater imperative, otherwise we risk re-running the warning of Pastor Niemöller: first they came for the Roma, the Muslims...

Contrary to the accusation that this is a departure from working class concerns, an obsession with identity politics, it's a very old-fashioned, core working class value – an injury to one is an injury to all. Indeed, there's a strong relationship between hostility to immigrants and the lack of social cohesion within a society: "People are fearful in countries where the basic tissue of society is damaged, where people don't trust each other or the state's institutions, where social cohesion and solidarity are weak," as sociologists Vera Messing and Bence Ságvári's research demonstrates.<sup>14</sup> In a world where capital can increasingly only maintain dominance by fomenting such divisions, the task of repairing that damage falls to the working class, through class-based organisations that build general solidarity *against* capital.

To qualify: I'm not being prescriptive here: pivotal struggles can break out where they are least expected. For example, land and rent are an underappreciated form of wealth in the UK, so tenants' right could thrust themselves to the fore.<sup>15</sup> But I'll stop before this becomes a shopping list.

At such junctures, people have the opportunity to learn fastest and organise accordingly, if they are not to be smashed. Is this the future? We will only know when we get there, but it seems like a good bet.

The working class is not northern, or southern. It is not a sepia shot of cloth caps and heavy industry. It's where workers combine to defend and extend their material interests. Now, not then.

Ultimately, after all this ink has been spilled (and bless you if you've ploughed through to the end), the songwriter who immortalised the IWW union organiser murdered more than a century ago nailed it: 'Wherever workers organise, it's there you'll find Joe Hill'.

ENDS

*The paper above formed the basis of discussion at a Mutiny meeting on Tuesday 7 January 2020, held at Housmans Bookshop, Caledonian Road, Kings Cross, London. The following notes of the discussion were taken by Rowan Fortune. They are now appended to the document to further the discussion around the nature of class in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

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<sup>14</sup> Looking behind the culture of fear. Cross-national analysis of attitudes towards migration. <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/article/3014/messing-sagvari-fes-study-march-2018-executive-summary.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> See <https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2019/12/15/land-and-the-rentier-economy/>

## Notes

‘Towards a workable theory of class and class organisation’

### **Presentation (Davy Jones):**

- The presentation only concerned Marx’s theory of the working class (not whether Marx was correct, or other theories about class).
- Class is a political category (rooted in struggle), not economic (spontaneously arising out of production). This view is consistent across Marx’s writings.
- Class is a form of organisation, which always contains a level of consciousness.
- This view has the advantage of excising scholastic social science arguments about income, background, cultural capital, static notions of regional class groups (e.g. traditional working class of Northern England) etc. Class is grounded in wage relation (dependency, directly or indirectly), but is not reducible to it.
- This viewpoint focuses the argument on whether you organise politically in defence of workers, which is the key point for socialists.
- Two opposing forces effect class composition: increasing centralisation of capital, and fragmentation, resulting in the extension of the division of labour (i.e. alienation).
- Workers can only survive on the sale of their labour power. Out of this emerges worker’s organisation in-itself (particular struggles for

limited gains) and workers organisation in- and for-itself (that is, workers organised against capitalist society, ultimately seeking its own abolition as a class in the abolition of all classes).

- Marx's treatment of class is explicitly Hegelian.
- Whether examining class in-itself or in- and for-itself, class is always in a state of historical flux (composing and decomposing).
- There are no eternal solutions; viable forms of class organisation are not fixed. Implicit to Marx's view of class is a critique of immutable vanguard organisations, and the limits of social democratic 'nationalist' solutions (however inevitable those solutions will be to those organisational forms).
- Italian autonomists represent one alternative to vanguardism that is interesting in this context.
- More generally, Marx's concept of class opens up the discussion, and emphasises the need for socialists to be experimental.

### **Discussion Between Comrades (key points):**

- Towards what end?
  - The value of a discussion of class is to realise that class-consciousness, and class organisation, must be actively built to transform working class people into a force for change. Within the context of the workers who have backed a reactionary political project, too much of the left falsely believes that you must work within the terms of the reactionary nationalist project (e.g. Lexit).

- Mutiny: Revolutionary, internationalist, anti-racist, feminist, eco-socialist... It aims to be a new kind of left.
- A lot of ‘traditional’ Labour heartlands are not anymore; the cities (which are the most unionised, most diverse, and therefore most progressive places) have eclipsed the towns since the destruction of the old working class organisation that were located in rural, especially mining communities. However, this poses a problem: what do we do with this, when the majority of workers *do* live in towns where collective organs of the working class no longer exist? This is also an international problem, as manufacturing has moved to China, South America, Asia, whereas countries such as the UK have orientated to the service industry.
  - The working class exists within nation-states, languages, cultures (ideas, values), etc. These factors need to be taken into account. The ruling class does exist in- and for-itself, putting us at a disadvantage. What kind of class is the working-class in terms of its consciousness? It is the only class that can potentially organise the world as the only *democratic* class. Six million workers are in unions; this is the working class. Workers must organise themselves politically, with its goals. Social democracy is the *democracy of the working class*, even if it has been appropriated by the right.
  - It is interesting to take a sociological rather than just an economic or political perspective on class. We should accept that trade unions *are* a form of class-consciousness, combining across divisions of labour. It is admittedly only a trade union consciousness (rather than revolutionary), but it is the first step. Looking at those who voted Tory from the ‘heartlands’: many were retired, middle class, self-employed. Even within the ‘red wall’, we had support from workers. Accommodating Tories in those places betrays those working-class supporters in terms of their struggles within their own communities.

These towns were also abandoned, downtrodden, with complacent councils, whereas municipal socialism was a factor that worked in Labour's favour where it existed. The reformist movement abandoned workers (even prior to Blair, with Kinnock betraying the miners). The trade union leadership has been especially bad too (e.g. in failing to challenge nativism).

- New Labour was in power when austerity started, and many worker communities link this to the Labour Party irrespective of its current leadership. Too often discussion addresses the working class from an outsider perspective, without talking to workers.
- The majority of Labour Party members are advantaged in terms of class (using ABC style designations) and other sociological factors, and when attempts are made to resolve issues of oppression (disability, BAME) it further advantages middle class members. Unite are looking at the community involvement in the movement, and this should be emulated.
- Did the unions in the heartlands produce a strong working class? What is the place of the unions in 2020?
  - The rosy, myth of the red wall needs to be burst. Even at their height, the unions in these places were a closed shop (literally and in terms of the culture of the labour aristocracy). Moreover, even in the 80s, many of these constituencies (i.e. Redcar, Stockton South, Darlington) were much more marginal than is being acknowledged. The problem with the trade union movement today is that it is not organising where it is difficult to organise (hotels, the service industry more generally) and it has become more contractual in its relationship to workers.
  - There is a social structure, which creates class. Then there is agency, when the working class moves from just existing, to acting within the historical process. Trade union organisation

was fundamental in the '60s and '70s, and was also fighting against various forms of oppression (e.g. feminism) at the time. However, the working class can take other forms, beyond the scope of trade unions. The critical thing is the acquisition of agency, not the form of organisation.

○ Building on the point about structure and agency and consciousness. Young Doctors are organised, but the 'precariat' (those on zero-hours, 'self-employed', etc.) are disorganised and alienated.

○ Comrade experiencing precarious (food vendor) work: how do I organise?

- Alternative unions, new unions, court action, small action, etc.

- IWW, Baker's Union

○ If we are to talk about agency we need, first, to address power, and how it penetrates everyday life. Radical politics must find ways to question social power.

- On new unions: there are contemporary examples of fight back, insipient struggles. These need to be found and encouraged. Paraphrasing Trotsky: 'there are specialists in politics, and events crack the mould that contains the minds of the people, and the revolutionaries then rush to catch-up.' Revolutionaries need to plant seeds, spread the word, and help those engaged in struggle. Such examples have more impact on other members of the class and we need to face that fact with humility.

- Discussions are really important, but we need to be clear about what we are discussing. The ABC categories of class are not a good analytic tool (they were invented by advertisers to market consumer goods, and are now used by journalists as a cheap shorthand). Precarious work is not a new form of the working class, but is old.

Anti-union laws facilitate super exploitation. Those in stronger unions are still a relatively privileged section of the working class. International propaganda/culture war from the far right (see Steve Bannon) is persuading people that the ‘working class’ is white, conservative, traditionalist, backwards, nativist. We need to fight this propaganda war too, emphasising worker struggles of self-emancipation.

- We need to reject a mechanistic, building-block view of class ascendancy. There is no fixed form of worker organisation. E.g. the current ‘precariat’ struggles (which fall outside of union, social democratic or vanguard organisation) are often the most advanced, as they are young and transient (which is not necessarily a problem). The IWW goes back to early 20<sup>th</sup> century US and was effective *because* it worked with transient workers, developing roots everywhere. Our circumstances might be better than old forms of analysis suggest. Trade unions are not the horizons of possibility, even if they should not be discounted. Moreover, there is no casual links between university attendance and decline of the unions (*post hoc ergo propter hoc*); unions were smashed (an exercise of power, see previous point) and that was a separate process.
- There is an urgent need to do something. The Labour Party is highly elitist. Unite is unresponsive. These organisations are failing to communicate and resonate. Will the zeitgeist come from outside of such political structures, and possibly focus on rights?
- Technology has been disruptive to the left, and makes it often harder to create a collective consciousness. It hinders all communication (e.g. the Labour Party manifesto was not disseminated effectively). The working class is a living movement, and that is not apparent within these old organisations (unions, parties).

- Many workers today do not have the option of joining established unions, which are in decay.
- Recovering Marx's definition of class is also about understanding the nature of our goals. We do not need Marx's definition of class to understand why workers did not vote Labour. Without a goal (socialism), 'class' becomes a racket, and there is a danger in assuming that a Labour Party victory would have been sufficient.
- Tory vote share only went up by 1%; a lot of the people who 'switched' to the Tory Party also voted for Thatcher in the 80s. We need to focus on progressive voters rather than traditional voters. Peterborough pub culture, for example, does not represent our real base—it is a waste of time to focus our energy on these anti-socialist voters.
- First Past the Post encourages tactical voting, lesser evilism, etc. Proportional Representation might be a better system. Moreover, the House of Lords is a wholly unelected house. We need to recognise that we do not live in a democracy; vote as we may, the system is rigged.
- The meeting has more male speakers, but also is overwhelmingly white. In terms of Mutiny, it needs to become more diverse and representative to be a serious vehicle for socialist politics.
- IWW and left social democrats joined the communist party prior to the Bolshevik revolution (we must engage with that lesson).
- Agency is coupled with the nature of organisation. What type of organisation is built from the ground up and is controlled by its members?
- Don't confuse Labourism with socialism. Being in a trade union and voting for the Labour Party is currently the most basic form of class awareness, but not sufficiently radical for socialists. We cannot be

obsessed with the trade unions, which many struggles have successfully bypassed. Would a Corbyn victory have resolved the fundamental problems of our society? Old Marxist criticisms of the Labour Party and parliamentary socialism still hold true.

- If we consider it philosophically, the idea of the (democratic) party representing the best ideas of a class has value. Aims and means go hand-in-hand. Where are current the struggles for democracy? Lebanon, HK, etc. The imperative to secure democracy is powerful. The Tories understand this better than the British left, exploiting the genuine desire for democracy amongst workers. The Labour Party did not have a strong democratic programme (votes for 16 year olds, abolish fixed term act) and did not communicate it effectively.
- After their exploitation of democratic sentiment, the Tories will now attack democratic rights (e.g. photo-ID, boundary ‘reform’, etc.) through their constitutional agenda.
- Often people do not think in terms of class, but are driven by libidinal desires when they engage with parliamentary democracy. What are these desires that underpin such decisions? Perhaps it is not Marx but other thinkers we should look to (e.g. Stuart Hall). If a black comrade engages in canvassing they often face reactionary, racist sentiments. We need to better theorise the relationship between race and class.
- It is important to organise against climate change as workers—join climate protest, XR, etc.
- Organising workers and students against the far right, precarious work, climate change, etc. requires using the right language. The situation is not without hope—there are many struggles out of which we can build movements.
- Corbyn’s intention was to transform the Labour Party into a social movement, which is already happening.

- Labourism is a very British tradition that does not necessarily have strong parallels outside of the UK. Other traditions are worth learning from. The good thing about Mutiny is that, unlike a Trotskyist group, it is highly eclectic. In terms of power and what to do, Luxemburg's *Reform and Revolution* makes a relevant point. When Corbyn took over diverse people dived into the Labour Party, but stopped asking what we are trying to achieve. What would we have done if Labour had won, but without the mass movement that could implement social change from below? How could we have used our power to challenge their power? The sense that the tide was ever in our direction was possibly illusory even prior to our defeat. We need to address the question of what we are trying to achieve, and is the Labour Party, even now, the right place for us to be as socialists. After a Labour victory we would have still been fighting against the combined strength of the ruling class.
- In terms of the risk of tethering the working class to Labourism, there was a danger of this, but it was also (and possibly still is) the only embodiment of working class consciousness. We did not have a broader set of organisational roots. Paraphrasing Trotsky: 'the crisis of the working class is the crisis of leadership.' This is not true. Leadership arises from the movement in highly connected ways. Corbyn did not betray us; he was limited because the movement was limited. The working class is not what you earn, it is what you do—it is how you chose consciously to combine and fight with people in the same situation as you. It does not necessitate a party or any particular structure. We are outside of our comfort zone, and cannot be conservative about organisational structures.

Mutiny, Going Forward:

- Mutiny is not prepared to accept defeat. They are coming for workers, the oppressed, and are attacking the environment. Without revolution we will not save the planet. We are ambitious: we demand an international working class revolution to overthrow capitalism. That requires a lot of people. We need a left that is democratic, the kind of collective this meeting exemplifies. We must build understanding and a network to intervene in wider movements. We are all going to burn if we are not ambitious. The next meeting is 20<sup>th</sup> January. Let's get to the point where we don't even have enough space in Houseman's. And as the movement builds, we want to build a network of leaders—embedded in the movements opposing this far right regime.