

WHAT A CLASS!



Frans Masereel, *Manifestation*, 1933

As he himself pointed out, we do not owe to Marx the concept of social classes or the complementary concept of their struggle as the foundation of the history of most human societies. What he does possess, however, is an understanding of this struggle in its revolutionary outcome, leading to the necessary abolition of all classes, as the very goal of the communist revolution.

«Now, as far as I am concerned, it was not I who discovered the existence of classes in modern society, nor the struggle between them. Bourgeois historians had expounded the historical development of this class struggle long before me, and bourgeois economists had described its economic anatomy. My originality consisted of:

- 1. demonstrate that the existence of classes is only linked to certain historical phases in the development of production;*
- 2. that the class struggle necessarily leads to the **dictatorship of the proletariat**;*
- 3. that this dictatorship itself only represents a transition towards the abolition of all classes and towards a classless society.»* K. Marx, Letter to J. Weydemeyer, March 5, 1852. Marx-Engels, Correspondence, Volume III, Social Editions, Paris, 1972, p. 79.

Since then, this vigorous and indispensable clarification has been the basis of the Marxist conception of the class question, insofar as classes compete. A full understanding of the concept of class cannot be reduced to a simple economic and static vision of its place in the production process. Social classes are defined by a set of determinations, which certainly involve the economy, but which are inseparable from the social, -political, and historical dimensions- as articulated in the famous formula of the Manifesto:

«The history of all societies up to the present day is the history of class struggle¹. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, baron and serf, master and laborer, in a word: oppressors and oppressed, have found themselves in constant opposition; they have waged a merciless struggle, sometimes covert, sometimes open, which each time has ended either in the revolutionary transformation of the whole of society, or in the ruin of the various warring classes.» Marx-Engels, Communist Manifesto, pp. 161–162 Works, Economy I, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, NRF, Gallimard, Paris, 1965.

¹Engels would specify in 1888: "In other words, the history that has been transmitted to us in writing."

For Marx, the category of class, and a fortiori that of the working class, refers to a totality that carries a **political project** that signifies not only the affirmation of the proletariat as a class in the old capitalist society, but above all its **self-denial** and destruction in a new society without class and, therefore, without a State.

«Therefore, the emancipation of the oppressed class necessarily implies the creation of a new society. (...) The condition for the emancipation of the working class is the abolition of all classes. (...)» K. Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, p. 178, Éditions Sociales, Paris, 1972.

This double characterization is found in Marx's essential dynamic between the **class as such** - objectively determined by the place it occupies in the social relations of production - and **the class itself**, that is, the class conscious and active in the defense of its interests and in its struggle against exploitation. This primordial distinction was theorized in opposition to the spontaneity and immediacy of Proudhon and his "workerist" friends, who wanted to confine the proletarian struggle to the sphere of economic management and the "equitable" distribution of wealth within bourgeois society itself.

«The domination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. Thus, this mass is already a class in relation to capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have only mentioned some phases, this mass unites, constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But the struggle between classes is a political struggle.» Ibid., pp. 177-178.

And this political struggle, which is also -always- social, leads simultaneously and necessarily to the organization of the proletariat into a class and, therefore, **into a party**. This formula is of the utmost importance, because it essentially means that there is no class per se without its organization in a political structure: the **class party**.²

«The revolution requires an organization of active and positive forces, united by a doctrine and a goal. Important strata and countless individuals who materially belong to the class in whose interest the revolution will triumph are outside this organization. But the class lives, struggles, advances, and triumphs thanks to the work of the forces it has engendered in the pains of history. The class begins with an immediate homogeneity of economic conditions, which seems to us to be the primary driving force of the tendency to overcome and break with the current system of production. But to take on this grandiose task, it must have its own way of thinking, its own critical method, its own will directed precisely toward achieving the goals that research and criticism have defined, its own organization of struggle that channels and makes the most of efforts and sacrifices. All this is the party.» A. Bordiga, Party and Class, Rassegna Comunista, April 15, 1921, in "Party and Class," published by Programme Communiste, p. 49, Paris, 1975.

Some, like Maximilien Rubel, went so far as to conceive "a double conception of the proletarian party": on the one hand, a "sociologically" working-class party and, on the other, an "ethically" communist party³. For us, this is a serious programmatic distortion and an old vestige of the erroneous social-democratic conception based on a structural separation of the proletariat between its economic base (=trade unions) and its political expression (reduced for

²On this question, we refer to the reader in our text: "Parti pris" in our review of Matériaux Critiques N°3, also on our website: <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes>

³«However, it seems to us justified to distinguish, in the Marxist conception of the proletarian party, between the sociological concept of the workers' party, on the one hand, and the ethical concept of the communist party, on the other.» M. Rubel, The Proletarian Party, in Marx Critique of Marxism, p.191, Payot, Paris, 1974.

the most part to its parliamentary representation). This separation has been -and continues to be- one of the main causes of the "subjugation/dissolution/atomization" of the working class within the apparatus of the bourgeois state, a prelude to its partial but regular destruction in capitalist wars. The liquidation of the organic totality of the working class is the essential counterrevolutionary work of social democracy, pursued and amplified by Stalinism and its leftist epigones. The working-class project for society is emancipatory in a human sense because it does not seek to reproduce any of the specific divisions of class societies but rather aspires to the unified establishment of a global human community. This element is essential because it is the fact of being or not being the bearer of a new project for society, supported by a mode of production that makes it viable, that distinguishes the **revolutionary** classes of history from those that do not have this perspective.

In fact, not all exploited classes, and even more so the orders or castes⁴, correspond to this possibility and this vision of a radically different society. Such was the case of the slave revolts of Antiquity, which, incapable of conceiving any other form of social organization than that from which they had emerged, sought only to reproduce or reconstitute a slave society, simply by changing the masters. The same was true of serfs who, although openly exploited and oppressed, had, unlike slaves, the status of people, generally tied to lands that did not belong to them, but which they could cultivate in exchange for remuneration in kind or in labor.

«In serfdom, the slave's work for himself and his forced labor for his master are clearly separated from each other by time and space. In the slave system, the part of the day in which the slave merely replaces the value of his subsistence, when in fact he works for himself, appears to be nothing but work for his master. All his work takes on the appearance of unpaid labor.» K. Marx, Capital, Book I, Chapter XIX.⁵

Some social formations are not characterized by an alternative social project and, therefore, cannot be fully recognized as "historical" classes. They must then, like the peasantry or the "petty bourgeoisie," unite with and support the social project of one of the antagonistic revolutionary classes. For example, in the case of the "small-scale" peasantry typical of 19th-century France, Marx maintained that it did not constitute a class *"to the extent that there is only a local bond between the small-scale peasants, and the similarity of their interests does not create any community, any national bond, or any political organization between them."* K. Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Social Editions, p.127, Paris 1969.

It was in Book III of Capital (Chapter 52, Classes), published by Engels, that this important question needed to be clarified. But the manuscript stops abruptly. Nevertheless, Marx leaves us a very important definition of classes based on the type of income they generate: *"The owners of mere labor power, the owners of capital, and the owners of land, whose respective sources of income are wages, profit, and ground-rent; consequently, wage - earners, capitalists, and landowners constitute the three great classes of modern society founded on the capitalist system of production."* K. Marx, Capital, Volume III, p.796, Social Editions, Paris, 1976.

⁴Orders and castes are also social groups, but they are endogamous and are primarily based on a division between workers. While class tends to unify workers based on their common working conditions, caste, through its hierarchical structure and rigidity, tends to divide them.

⁵On the website: <https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/works/1867/Capital-I/kmcapI-19.htm>

This definition must be supplemented with this essential observation on the dynamics of **political** polarization between the two major classes of modern society:

«However, the distinctive character of our era, the era of the bourgeoisie, is the simplification of class antagonisms. Society is increasingly divided into two great hostile camps; two great classes directly opposed to each other: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.» K. Marx-F. Engels, Communist Manifesto, p.7, Marxist Science editions, Paris, 1999.

Therefore, classes only exist through their confrontation, as the German Ideology indicates: *“Individuals only form a class to the extent that they have to wage a common struggle against another class; for the rest, they are at odds in competition...”*» K. Marx-F. Engels⁶.

The class is constituted and organized against the "proletarian individual": it is its negation and its overcoming.⁷ That is why the working class⁸ is the cornerstone of living Marxism, which is nothing other than the teaching of the experiences and conditions of its liberation. This is also the reason why many revisionist and bourgeois "theorists" have set out to criticize and destroy the theory of the proletariat as a social and political force, bearer of the communist revolution. This is the case, for example, of André Gorz, who wrote his "Farewell to the Proletariat" in 1980, and of the self-styled "critics of value dissociation" who, together with Kurz and Lohoff, recently decided to attack "class interests, and class struggle."⁹

Others, such as the so-called "communizers" ("Théorie Communiste"...), have also endeavored to "modernize" the theory of the proletariat, diluting it into categories derived from fashionable bourgeois sociology- gender, race, and other differential criteria -that seek (unsuccessfully) to replace class in its function of unifying homogenization. Of course, what we are talking about here is the **division / denial** of the proletariat in favor of essentialized categories, which carry no valid solutions for the whole of humanity. For "TC," linguistic sophistication aside, "the proletariat is nothing more than its relation to capital." Therefore, it is nothing more than its image, its allegory, one of its personifications. But it is J. Camatte and the journal Invariance: from the second series of the journal Invariance onward, this erroneous and devastating theorization found its most reasoned development. For Camatte, it is the autonomization of capital, its flight beyond its own contradictions¹⁰. This is what he deploys in his great political renunciation, «Ce monde qu'il faut quitter», published in Invariance n°5,

⁶On the website: <https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/works/1845/00/kmfe18450000d.htm>

⁷On this subject, read our article: "Human Community VS Individual Identity" in our review of Matériaux Critiques No. 6, also available on our website: <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes>

⁸Some would like to make a conceptual distinction between the working class and the proletariat. However, in all the theoretical developments of both Marx and Engels, these two terms are synonymous, and both correspond to the "**working class**." In the Marxist tradition, the working class includes all those who have nothing to sell except their labor power, in exchange for a wage, the same as the proletariat. It is the social relationship of wage labor that continues to strictly determine, beyond the forms and intensity of exploitation, the production and reproduction of the proletarian class. Workers' coalitions and workers' associations are, therefore, the driving force behind the process of constituting the proletariat as a class.

⁹See his book *Le fétiche de la lutte de classe*, published by Crise & Critique, Paris, 2021. We have already had occasion to criticize this academic school specializing in the disguise of revolutionary Marxism in our text: "La Sainte famille des gratteurs ou la critique de la critique de la valeur," Matériaux Critiques No. 6, as well as on our website. <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes>

¹⁰Jacques Camatte dies at the end of April 2025 We highlighted the importance of his contributions on Facebook: "J. Camatte passed away last week at the age of 90. We salute him as a particularly important comrade for his work in historical reporting and for his contribution to the political education of younger generations. It was above all through his magazine INVARIANCE (first series from 1968 onwards) that he tirelessly carried out this work of dissemination and critical analysis. In this way, he contributed significantly to our own theoretical development and to our political existence." (21.04.2025)

series II, in 1974. After that, any grouping of proletarians would inevitably fall into the scam, and the only future left would be «individuality-gemeinwesen», nature and the cosmos. All these "theories" are nothing more than capitulation and the "a posteriori" recognition of the MPC's total victory. They are the ultimate consequence of the defeats and disillusionment of the post- May 1968 period, which was by no means the beginning of any kind of "regeneration," but simply a shock to the long and profound domination of the counter-revolution. In contrast to the caricatured apologia for Stalinist and spontaneous workerism, the nature of the proletariat, like that of any living species, is above all dynamic, contradictory, and therefore mortal.

This contradiction and the need to deny itself forge its revolutionary strength. Because it lies at the very heart of the system's production/reproduction, the proletariat is the only social force capable of destroying it by overcoming it, not in a definitive thermonuclear catastrophe, but in a global human community that completes the prehistory of humanity. This is not, therefore, a vision reduced to economism, to a simple and unique determination of the CPM and limited to it. We owe to the Italian communist left the insistence on the necessary process of overthrowing praxis, where the communist goal is not a vague and distant perspective, but rather it is from this historical goal that the principles, organization, and action of the party must be deduced. For Bordiga, it is the historical program that defines the class in its revolutionary function.

«The class must be defined by the mode of production it tends to establish. Therefore, it can only be a class for itself from the moment it acts in accordance with this objective, to the extent that it recognizes its program in which this mode of production is described. It exists when the party exists, because only with the party can the program be effective.» Invariance, N°3, p 27,1973.

«We still need an object, the party, to plan communist society.» Bordiga, Milan Meeting, 1960, idem, p.27.

The determination of the movement by its goal, by communism, corresponds to the opposite (negation) of the reformist conceptions typical of social democracy (Bernstein), for whom "the goal is nothing, only the movement would count." But the movement only has meaning - and effective existence- thanks to its communist goal. Deprived of this goal, the movement is inevitably reduced to an existentialism, idealistic and individualistic, typical of bourgeois society. The "free" individual¹¹ is the basis of the mystique of the democratic principle, which is nothing more than its quantification (50% + 1), correlative to the negation of the working class through its atomization.

«To start from the unity of the individual to draw from it social deductions and to elaborate plans for society, or even to deny society, is to start from an unrealistic presupposition which, even in its most modern formulations, is at bottom nothing more than a modified reproduction of the concepts of religious revelation, of creation and of spiritual life independent of the facts of natural and organic life.» A. Bordiga, The Democratic Principle, 1922, in Party and Class, p.73, Éditions Programme Communiste, Paris, 1975.

¹¹On the essential critique of democracy, read our article: "Contribution to the critique of democracy" in our journal Matériaux Critiques No. 3, also available on our website: <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes>

Therefore, only based on a totality of economic, social, political, and historical determinations can the revolutionary and anticipatory character of the proletariat be fully revealed and exposed. It is in this sense that Marx could affirm: "*The working class is revolutionary, or it is nothing!*"¹²

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Translated by IsaCR.

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¹²K. Marx, Lettre à JB von Schweitzer on February 13, 1865.