

The Eclipse of Class

Or, Keeping the Vision Alive

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Speaking personally, I see my main political task at the moment as keeping our ideas and ideals alive in a political climate that is not conducive to their positive reception by any significant section of the American people.

As far as I can tell, our group is extremely isolated politically, while the ideas we espouse are perceived as being irrelevant to the economic, social, political, cultural, and intellectual processes currently animating US society. Although there are many reasons for this, among them our limited numbers, our ages, and our relative lack of presence in activist milieus, the main reason is political. Specifically, three of the fundamental aspects of our program are completely outside the contemporary political discourse and are considered by the vast majority of the US population to be not only irrelevant but also absurd: (1) that our society is fundamentally diseased –cynical, brutal, unjust, and corrupt –and is incapable of being reformed sufficiently to provide all Americans with a decent and meaningful life; (2) that the solution to this problem lies in a popular revolution, an uprising of the vast majority of the people against the tiny elite that runs our society; (3) that this revolution should aim at establishing a truly democratic, egalitarian, and cooperative social system, what we have called “revolutionary libertarian socialism.” In sum, any notion of transcending the contemporary social arrangement and replacing it with another seems to have been lost.

Our political isolation and programmatic irrelevance are somewhat ironic, since the word/concept “socialism” seems to be as popular today as it has been for decades. According to various polls, large sectors of society, particularly young people, have a positive estimation of “socialism” and consider themselves to be “socialists” of one sort or another. To a great degree, this has been the work of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and the political campaign he waged in the Democratic primaries in 2016. Although Sanders never called for the establishment of socialism in the United States, he did identify himself as a “democratic socialist.” He also spoke highly of the Scandinavian countries and implied that they are contemporary exemplars of what he means by “socialism,” despite firm denials of this by the political leaders of these nations.

Unfortunately, what most people understand by the term “socialism” is a far cry from our view. Their conception is much closer to FDR’s “New Deal” and LBJ’s “Great Society” than anything we might consider to be socialist. From our standpoint, the popular conception of “socialism” has been largely liquidated of radical content, reduced not merely to the level of the reformist

and statist program of the old Social Democracy but even below that. Today, “socialism” to most people signifies little more than welfare-state capitalism, the contemporary capitalist system with somewhat more generous social programs. (Even where a more radical conception continues to exist, that is, among the Marxist-Leninists, their notion of “socialism” is what we consider to be “state capitalism,” that is, a highly stratified society, such as the Soviet Union/Russia, China, Cuba, North Korea, and, for some, Syria.)

This fact and our resultant political isolation have been facilitated by the collapse of the majority of US left into and behind the Democratic Party, the party that represents the liberal wing of the capitalist class. Among other things, this collapse parallels and reflects the fact that what seemed to be a militant popular movement, the so-called “resistance” that emerged in the wake of Donald Trump’s surprise victory in the 2016 elections, has been effectively defanged and has poured into and behind the Democratic Party. On the part of both the organized left and the “resistance,” this political alignment has been largely motivated by fear bordering on panic, specifically, the visceral conviction that Donald Trump is a fascist (or a “proto-” or “quasi-fascist”) whose goal is to overthrow “American democracy” and impose an authoritarian regime on the United States, and that the only way to stop this, if indeed it can be stopped, is to align ourselves with, to support, vote for, and organize for, the Democrats.

There is an additional irony here. This is that many, if not most, of the Marxist organizations and currents that make up the explicitly revolutionary left in the US have abandoned anything even vaguely resembling a class analysis of what is happening in the country and have rejected any kind of Marxist strategy for orienting themselves in the current situation. Rather than seeking to unite the broadest majority of the working class in opposition to the ruling class as a whole, which was the professed strategy of Marx and Engels (as well as of Lenin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, and Eugene Debs), they have, like the broader liberal-left, decided to do their best to tie one section of the working class to the capitalist liberals while abandoning the rest to the Trump-led Republican Party.

This is a reflection of the fact that the concept of social class (and especially the idea of the working class being in fundamental conflict with the capitalist class) has become virtually taboo in the country’s contemporary political discourse. To be sure, Bernie Sanders periodically denounces what he calls the “billionaire class,” but he focuses his fire at the Koch brothers and other conservative capitalists, while never mentioning the liberal billionaires, such as Warren Buffet, Bill and Melinda Gates, George Soros, Haim Saban, Eli Broad, (Dianne Feinstein’s husband) Richard Blum, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Tom Steyer, and the rest. In like manner, while Sanders excoriated Hillary Clinton as a spokesperson for Wall Street during the Democratic primary season, he never mentioned that ever since the 1990s, the majority of the bankers, hedge-fund managers, and investors on Wall Street have supported and bankrolled the Democratic Party. Moreover, Sanders completely capitulated to this tool of Wall Street several weeks before the Democratic convention, enthusiastically endorsed her candidacy, and ordered his political operatives, in collaboration with Clinton’s, to muzzle his disaffected supporters at the convention itself. Meanwhile, most of the left has followed suit. This, sadly, reflects the fact that for all practical purposes, the American working class has lost whatever class consciousness it ever had, while the left, including most of the Marxist organizations, have given up any effort to represent it or to foment it. Instead, what has emerged is a politically diffuse and uninformed “populist” resentment that has been easily manipulated by the leaders of both capitalist parties to pursue their partisan agendas.

The capitulation of the Marxist left to the Democratic Party is an indication of their theoretical bankruptcy. After all, to Marx and Engels, “class” and “class struggle” were fundamental, determinant, facets of human history. They insisted that all history is in fact the history of class struggle and contended (and attempted to prove) that it was the very logic of this struggle that would inevitably lead to an international proletarian revolution and the establishment of socialism around the world. It should be obvious at this point in time (that is, 170 years after the publication of the Communist Manifesto) that these contentions can no longer be defended. However, as far as I know, the Marxist organizations continue to uphold them in theory while completely rejecting them in practice. They have, in essence, followed in the footsteps of the old Communist parties, which in the mid-1930s jettisoned even the pretense of waging class war against the entire ruling class in favor of supporting one section of it, the so-called “progressive” capitalists represented by the Democratic Party, then led by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. This policy, known at the time as the “People’s (or Popular) Front,” has continued, except for a brief left jag in the late 1940s, up until the present, under the name of the “People’s Anti-Monopoly Coalition.”

In sum, while these Marxists continue to defend those aspects of Marxism that I believe to be untenable, they have discarded one Marxist tenet that I think remains valid. Thus, while I reject the theoretical contentions of Marxism, I continue to uphold one of Marxism’s strategic conceptions: that of uniting the entire working class against the entire capitalist class. In the US, this means, above all, explaining that both the Democratic and the Republican Party are capitalist parties and that the vast majority of the American people can never win their freedom and the opportunity to live comfortable lives by supporting either one of these outfits.

Among other aspects of Marxism that I reject are two centerpieces of the Marxist canon, while I would substantially revise a third.

I. I no longer believe that the working class, in contrast to other popular social layers, is ontologically privileged. By this, I mean that I reject the notion that the logic of capitalist development (and all history) automatically impels the working class to carry out a revolution. In my view, an honest look at the history of the last 150 years shows:

A. The working class is not intrinsically revolutionary. There are times when it can and has become revolutionary, but this is not the expression of some underlying (let alone inexorable) logic of capitalism or the nature of the class itself, but the result of contingent and ultimately unpredictable economic, social, political, and cultural/psychological processes.

B. Other popular classes, such as small farmers (peasants); semi-proletarian social strata, such as artisans and craftsmen; and other sectors of society, such as middle-class students, may also, under certain circumstances, become revolutionary. (Incidentally, this was one of the crucial differences between Marx and Engels and other Marxist theorists, on the one hand, and major anarchist thinkers, such as Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin, on the other.) It is also worth noting that in many of the revolutions of the past that have been described or identified as “proletarian” or “working-class,” the most revolutionary elements were to be found not among the longstanding proletarians but among those social layers, such as peasants and artisans, and workers recently derived from those groups, which were in the process of being “proletarianized,” that is, forced into the working class.

C. While the working class continues to have a structural advantage over other sections of the population in terms of economic muscle, this is not as significant as it used to be. Yes, workers on the whole continue to be located in urban areas, which is where economic and political power lies in contemporary society. Also, since most working-class people have jobs, they have a degree

of economic power because of their ability to stop work, that is, to strike, even if this is limited in time. Finally, many workers are still united in and organized by their workplaces. However, because of the tremendous amount of automation that has occurred over the last few decades along with other economic realities, such as the transfer of manufacturing plants to low-wage countries, the fact that small businesses today employ a significant proportion of the working class, and the fact that many people now work out of their own homes and/or are self-employed, this has become far less important than it was in the heyday of “industrial capitalism.”

II. I do not accept, as Marx put it, that “social being determines social consciousness.” In other words, I do not believe that human consciousness is an automatic reflection (or reflex) of socio-economic processes. This is one of the many things in Marxism that have a superficial plausibility but which cannot be reasonably sustained after careful consideration. In fact, nobody knows what consciousness is, what ideas are, or how our ideas arise, let alone what the precise relationship is between our consciousness and the rest of reality. Moreover, the notion that social being fully “determines” our consciousness, as opposed to merely influencing it in some way, represents a denial of ontological freedom, that is, it defines out of existence the idea that human beings, as individuals, groups, and as a species, have the ability to make choices and to determine our future. And if such freedom does not exist, the idea that human beings can create a truly free, self-determining society, is a complete and utter delusion, or in the words (actually, the title of one of his stories) of the Russian writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky, “the dream of a ridiculous man.” (The question of whether such ontological freedom exists or not has never been answered, and in my opinion, never will be answered, by science, philosophy, religion, or anything else. It is, at bottom, an issue that everyone must decide for oneself [if, of course, one is interested in such things]).

III. I think we need to revise our notion of the working class, specifically, to broaden it and make it more inclusive. We have in fact done this over the years, but I think we need to make this explicit and to extend our conception even further. I believe the classic Marxist definition of the working class is too narrow to reflect modern capitalist reality.

Marx and Engels defined the working class primarily as the industrial “proletariat,” that is, as workers in large industrial and manufacturing factories and in allied sectors of the economy, such as transportation (particularly, the railroads) and the wholesale sector. In their view, these workers represented the essence of humanity under capitalism, that is, people completely deprived of all their human attributes but their labor-power, their ability to work, while all the accumulated creative powers of historical humanity have been alienated from them and congealed in capital/the modern technical-industrial apparatus that stands over them, dominating them at work and, through this, their entire lives, their very being. Marx and Engels also believed that the logic of capitalist development, the necessary evolution of the system, would impel the vast majority of human beings, including small farmers, artisans, shopkeepers, peddlers, white collar workers, professionals, intellectuals, artists, small business people, and even most of the capitalists, into the ranks of the industrial proletariat. Eventually, if not in their day then ultimately (asymptotically), humanity and the proletariat would be co-terminus, so that the proletarian revolution would represent the democratic self-emancipation of humanity. It was this conception of the working class that was adopted by the classical Marxist thinkers and organizations. The Bolsheviks, for example, did not include white collar workers, such as employees of the banks and the government, to be members of the proletariat. (These workers reciprocated the sentiment. Better

educated and working and living in more comfortable circumstances than the industrial workers, they did not see themselves as “proletarian” either.)

From the vantage point of the present, we can see that, at least in this respect, capitalism has not evolved as Marx and Engels thought it would. Thus, while today most members of society are working people in the literal sense of the term (that is, people who must work if they are to survive and who do not possess substantial financial assets), they are obviously not all members of what Marx and Engels called the proletariat. Many are white-collar workers employed in banks, insurance companies, medical establishments, and other offices, including those of local, state, and the federal government. Many are technicians of various kinds. Others are teachers, nurses, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals, most of whom are not wealthy. In addition, more and more people today work as “independent contractors”; legally (as far as the IRS is concerned), they are owners of small businesses: those who drive for Uber and Lyft and those who work in other sectors of the “gig economy”, along with street vendors, owners of shops and restaurants, and other small businesses. In my opinion, most of these people ought to be included in a political (as opposed to a narrowly ideological or sociological) definition of the working class.

Today, as I understand the situation, roughly 20% of the US population are wealthy or at least comfortable. The rest of the people, roughly 80%, are struggling to get by; many, maybe the majority, are in deep distress. So, when I say I wish to unite the working class in a militant movement against the capitalist class as a whole, these (at the risk of being theoretically muddled and overly sentimental) are the people I mean.

To me, what our situation adds up to is that, today, we and other radicals face a choice. Either we abandon any claim to stand for a revolution, deciding that it is not feasible at the moment or not possible at all, and commit ourselves to support, vote for, and organize for the “lesser evil,” which, to most leftists, means the Democratic Party. Or, we can continue to raise and fight for the idea of building a revolutionary working class movement, one that is conscious of itself as being distinct from and counterposed to the entire ruling class. And this, in turn, requires opposing both the Democratic and the Republican parties. (As a tactical aside, I don’t think we should concentrate our efforts on convincing people not to vote if they are inclined to do so. Instead, I believe our focus should be on exposing the pro-capitalist nature of both parties, while arguing that we need to build a movement that is independent of both of them. For those active in political organizations, this means opposing resolutions to endorse Democratic candidates, to give them money, and to work on their campaigns, including so-called “socialists” and “progressives” running in the Democratic primaries.)

If we are to unite the majority of the American people into a militant anti-capitalist movement, we cannot write off all the people, particularly the working-class people, who voted for and continue to support Donald Trump. These people have real grievances; they have been victimized by the capitalist system that we oppose. Living in medium-sized and small cities, in towns, and in rural areas that have been rendered obsolete by the relentless march of the capitalist system, millions of them are truly suffering, from unemployment or partial employment, and from social isolation, depression, and opioid addiction. Moreover, they are not all committed racists and fascists. Nearly ten million people who voted for Trump in the last election voted for Barack Obama in 2008. Hardcore racists do not vote to make a Black man the president of the United States! While they have illusions in and delusions about Donald Trump, as well as various levels of racist and sexist attitudes, they have legitimate resentments against the capitalist liberals in general and the Democratic Party in particular. Remember, the Democratic president, Barack Obama, who

claimed to represent all the people, threw billions of dollars at the banks and insurance companies and bailed out the auto companies but did very little to help the real victims of the recession: the homeowners who lost their homes, the workers who lost their jobs, the small business people who lost their businesses, and the millions of others whose lives were devastated by the worst economic crisis since the 1930s. The workers and other people who voted for Trump have good reason to hate the Democrats and the rich, corrupt, and condescending liberals, such as Hillary Clinton, who lead the party. Following on Obama's betrayal, Clinton made it very clear, both in word and in deed, that she didn't need and didn't want the votes of the white working-class and middle-class people in the cities and towns of the Rust Belt and elsewhere in the heartland of the country, people who once constituted the base of the Democratic Party. I don't know how we can even begin to talk to these people if we tell them that we voted for Hillary Clinton and think that they should support the Democrats this time around too.

As I see it now, it is people like us who represent "class consciousness," at least in embryo. If we don't hold onto it and fight for it, nobody else will. At some point in the future, such consciousness may emerge among broader layers of the population. (As we know from our experiences in the 1960s, things can change, and radical consciousness can develop, very rapidly.) However, neither the "laws of motion" of capitalism nor the logic of history guarantee its emergence.

As far as this year's election and the election of 2020 are concerned, each of us ought to act as he/she thinks best. If people are so frightened of Donald Trump and the policies he is pursuing that they want to support the Democrats in the next two elections, or support "socialist" candidates running in the Democratic Primaries, they should do so. I, for one, do not want to try to convince people intellectually of what they do not feel emotionally. However, I will continue to wave the flag of revolution no matter how absurd this may seem at this time, to try to explain to whomever is willing to listen what's the matter with the capitalist system and why the majority of the American people should rise up, smash it, and replace it with a better one. And I will continue to look for and to unite with other people who think and feel, in their heads and in their guts, as I do.

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