What is the Proletariat?

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In 1848 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published the *Manifesto of the Communist Party.* It famously ends by declaring, "let the ruling classes tremble at a communist revolution. Proletarians have nothing to lose in it but their chains. They have a world to win. *Proletarians of all countries unite!*" (Marx and Engels 1996, 30). The word proletariat continues to be used by socialists and communists today. This does not mean that the word is widely understood. Some people use it as a meaningless adjective whereby their ideas, attitudes, and activities are proletarian. Those of people they dislike are bourgeois. Others equate the proletariat with particular kinds of work such that the ideal proletarian is a male factory worker on an assembly line. It is often wrongly claimed in mainstream discourse that only blue collar workers who do manual labour are working class proletarians. White collar office workers are apparently middle class. In this essay I shall explain the history of the word proletariat, how 19th century socialists and communists ended up using this word, and the various ways that they defined it. Doing so shall reveal that Marx and Engels' proletariat was not the only proletariat that existed in the minds of revolutionaries.

From Ancient Rome to the French Revolution

The word proletariat derives from the Latin 'proletarii' and 'proletarius', which literally means producers of offspring. The *Oxford Latin dictionary* defines proletarius as "belonging to the lowest class of citizens" in Roman society (Glare 2012, 1631). References to this class appear in several early histories of Rome, which were written in the first century BC. These allege that in the 6th century BC the king of Rome Servius Tullius carried out a series of reforms that laid the political and military foundations of the later Roman republic. These accounts are flawed in so far as they project certain features of the Roman republic onto an earlier time period and depict complex social changes, which must have occurred gradually over an extended period of time, as happening all at once due to the actions of a great man. One of the main reforms ascribed to Servius is the division of Roman citizens into six classes based on how much property they owned according to a census. The class a citizen belonged to determined their voting rights within an assembly called the comitia centuriata and what military duties they had. The wealthiest citizens had to equip themselves with the most expensive military equipment but also had the most votes and so political power (Cornell 1996, 173–197, 288–89; Lintott 1999, 55–61). Cicero defines the lowest sixth class as "those who brought to the census no more than eleven hundred asses or altogether nothing except their own persons". Servius named them "child-givers" [*proletarius*], as from them, so to speak, a child [*proles*], that is, an offspring of the city, seemed to be expected" (Cicero 2014, 76 [Cic. Rep. 2. 40). Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus both claim that the lowest class were exempt from military service (Livy 1919, 151 [Livy 1. 43]; Dionysius 1937, 327 [Dion. Hal. AR 4. 18]). Unlike Cicero, they do not refer to this group as the proletarius.

A similar account to Cicero is given in Aulus Gellius' *The Attic Nights*, which was written in the second century AD. During the dialogue Julius Paulus is asked what proletarius meant. Paulus, who is described as being very knowledgable, replies,

> Those of the Roman commons who were humblest and of smallest means, and who reported no more than fifteen hundred asses at the census, were called *proletarii,* but those who were rated as having no property at all, or next to none, were termed *capite censi,* or 'counted by head.' And the lowest rating of the *capite censi* was three hundred and seventy-five asses. But since property and money were regarded as

> a hostage and pledge of loyalty to the State, and since there was in them a kind of guarantee and assurance of patriotism, neither the *proletarii* nor the *capite censi* were enrolled as soldiers except in some time of extraordinary disorder, because they had little or no property and money. However, the class of *proletarii* was somewhat more honourable in fact and in name than that of the *capite censi;* for in times of danger to the State, when there was a scarcity of men of military age, they were enrolled for hasty service, and arms were furnished them at public expense. And they were called, not *capite censi,* but by a more auspicious name derived from their duty and function of producing offspring, for although they could not greatly aid the State with what small property they had, yet they added to the population of their country by their power of begetting children (Gellius 1927, 169, 171 [Gellius. 16. 10. 10–13).

Other sources use the terms proletarii and capite censi as synonyms. Gellius' belief that the two groups were distinct appears to be an error (Gargola 1989). Although this account is less reliable than earlier ones, it does repeat the point that the proletarii are citizens who were so poor that their primary contribution to the Roman state was having children. The fact that they are having a discussion about what the word meant is evidence that the word had fallen out of use some time after the end of the Roman republic.

In the centuries that followed the collapse of the Western Roman Empire the Latin words proletarii and proletarius continued to be known by students of ancient history. It appears to be the case that these words were not used to refer to class divisions within contemporary society until the 18th century. In 1762 the Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau published *The Social Contract*. In the book he discusses Servius's division of Roman society into six classes as part of an extended overview of how he believed decisions were made in the Roman republic. During this he refers to the proletarii with a French version of the word: "prolétaires" (Rousseau 1994, 145. For original French see Rousseau 1766, 221. Also see Montesquieu 1989, 527). Rousseau was widely read by participants in the French revolution, which included people who lacked a classical education. Some people chose to borrow the language of the ancient Roman Republic and apply the word prolétaire to poor people living under the new French republic. For example, in March 1793 the paper *Paris Revolutions* published an article which claimed that the nation was divided into two distinct classes, proprietors and prolétaires. This language was not mainstream at the time and other words were more commonly used when referring to the lower classes, such as the common people or the sans-culotte. The word 'sans-culotte' meant those who did not wear breeches. It referred to citizens who wore the trousers of the poor, rather than the breeches of the aristocracy (Rose 1981, 285–88).

One of the main ties between 18th century revolutionary republicanism and 19th century revolutionary socialism and communism was Gracchus Babeuf. In 1796 Babeuf and his associates unsuccessfully plotted to overthrow the Directory and replace it with a new revolutionary government that would, in theory, establish the collective ownership of property and create an egalitarian society they called common happiness (Birchall 2016). During his trial the prosecution referred to "this frightening mass of *prolétaires*, multiplied by debauchery, by idleness, by all the passions and by all the vices that pullulate among a corrupt nation, hurling itself suddenly upon the class of property-owners and sober, industrious and respectable citizens" (Quoted in Rose 1976, 367). Babeuf had himself occasionally distinguished between proprietors and prolé-

taires, but it was not his usual terminology. He generally used alternative words, such as workers, plebeians, or the poor (Rose 1976, 373–74, 377; Birchall 2016, 168–71, 195–96).

The Working Classes of the 19th Century

The word prolétaire largely fell out of favour in the immediate aftermath of the French revolution. During the early 19th century socialist and communist ideas began to emerge but the first wave of authors either did not use the word prolétaire or only used it on a few occasions (Rose 1981, 288–93). For example, Philippe Buonarroti's 1828 book *History of Babeuf's Conspiracy for Equality* was extremely influential but only refers to "the Proletarians" in Paris once. The fact that the English 1836 edition includes a footnote by the editor explaining what this word meant in Ancient Rome suggests that, at the time of writing, the term was not commonly used in Britain (Buonarroti 1836, 139). Early British socialists like Robert Owen and John Gray instead used phrases like "the working classes" (Owen 2016, 33; Gray 1825, 29). This wording is itself significant. People in the 17th and 18th centuries generally broke society down into various ranks, orders, degrees, and estates. Towards the end of the 18th century some authors started using the term 'class' to refer to categories of people within the economy. During the 19th century this language became the standard terminology in discussions of economic stratification and political ideologies began to be distinguished from one another by their views on what they called class (Briggs 1967).

In order to understand what authors in the 19th century meant by class it is necessarily to establish the economic context that they wrote in. Between 1500 and 1800 England transformed from being overwhelmingly rural and agricultural to having increasingly large towns and cities, alongside a significant rural manufacturing sector. In 1500 an estimated 74% of the population worked in agriculture, 18% in rural non-agriculture, and 7% in urban sectors of the economy. In 1800 only 35% worked in agriculture, 36% in rural non-agriculture, and 29% in urban. By the early 19th century Britain had the most successful economy in Europe (Allen 2004b, 15–18). This economic growth was enabled by multiple interlocking factors, including the rise of the British Empire. One of the most important factors was the adoption of new agricultural techniques in the 17th and 18th centuries that resulted in much bigger crop yields. More food could be grown without requiring a proportional increase in people doing agricultural labour. The result was massive population growth and the possibility for an increasingly large percentage of the population to do other kinds of work. This occurred in parallel to the enclosure of the common land and the spread of large farms run by tenant farmers. These tenant farmers were capitalists who rented the land from a small number of land owners, who owned the majority of farmland in the country, and hired propertyless wage labourers, who did not own any land, to do the farming (Allen 2004a, 96–116; Allen 2004b, 22–34).

Rural manufacturing was typically performed by workers at home and involved the entire family, including women and children. It is from this that we get the phrase 'cottage industries'. Self-employed workers would grow or buy their own raw materials, produce items using tools that they owned, and then sell the finished products to a merchant. Other workers were wage labourers who were employed in what is called 'the putting out system'. A merchant would hire workers to produce specific items, provide them with the raw materials that the merchant retained ownership of during production, and then sell the finished product to other merchants.

These wage labourers generally owned their own tools, but there are examples of some workers renting tools from the merchant that hired them. These two kinds of worker were not mutually exclusive. A person could be self-employed and a wage labourer at the same time, or shift back and forth between these different kinds of work (Clarkson 1985, 15–26).

In the 18th century one of the main rural industries was cotton textiles. This took the form of the spinning of cotton into yarn and the weaving of yarn into cloth using hand tools like the spinning wheel and the hand loom. The workers employed in this industry via the putting out system were wage labourers but they were wage labourers who worked at home using means of production that they personally owned. The textile industry was changed during the mid to late 18th century by a series of technological innovations that made it possible to mass produce thread and cloth using machines powered by waterwheels and later the steam engine. Capitalists centralised this new machinery inside factories known as cotton mills. The majority of the cotton used in these factories was imported from the Americas and had been picked by black slaves. Cotton mill workers were propertyless wage labourers in the sense that they did not own any property that was used in the production process. They owned personal possessions like clothes but did not own the factory. They produced commodities for a capitalist in a building they did not own with machinery they did not own. They worked 12–14 hours per day, including breaks for meals, in exchange for a wage. The start and end of the working day was signalled by the ringing of a bell. Whilst at work they were subject to supervision and control by overseers, who directed their movements and fined them for such misdemeanours as looking out a window. The only day off was Sunday and it was normal to work seventy hours a week. The majority of early factory workers were adult women and children, who could be as young as seven. As industrialisation continued factories which employed men became increasingly common, such as iron works (Freeman 2018, 1–42. For details about the Arkwright and Strutt mills specifically see Fitton and Wadsworth 1958, 224–53).

Over time an increasingly large number of goods came to be manufactured in factories and the towns and cities that grew up around them. In 1800 28% of the population lived in settlements with 5,000 or more inhabitants. By 1850 that number had increased to 45% and England became the most urbanised country in Western Europe (Wrigley 2004, 88–90). As early as 1835 there were 1,330 woollen mills, 1245 cotton mills, 345 flax mills and 238 silk mills in the UK. In 1851 the average number of workers in woollen mills was fifty-nine, in worsted mills 170 and in cotton mills 167. Only a minority of mills employed several hundred workers. Although the amount and kinds of factory increased during industrialisation, they did not become the default system in manufacturing. Many industries continued to rely on domestic labour and small workshops throughout the 19th century, such as tailoring, stationery, and guns. It is furthermore the case that the relations of production within a factory did not always take the form of a single capitalist directly hiring a group of wage labourers. This is because factories often relied on various forms of sub-contracting. For example, a factory owner could hire a head spinner and pay him per item produced. This head spinner, in turn, employed his own assistants and paid them per hour worked. It was also common for self employed craftsmen or small firms to rent out a room and power in a factory for their own purposes (Hudson 2004, 36–44).

The industrialisation of France did not follow the same pathway as England. In 1500 an estimated 73% of the population worked in agriculture, 18% in rural non-agriculture, and 9% in urban sectors of the economy. By 1800 these numbers had shifted but nowhere near as much as in England. Now 59% worked in agriculture, 28% in rural non agriculture, and 13% in urban (Allen

2004b, 16). In 1806 around 2.6 million people lived in settlements with more than 10,000 inhabitants. By 1851 that number had increased to 5 million and only accounted for 14% of the entire population. Of this 5 million roughly 1 million lived in Paris, which was much larger than every other French city. This picture remains the same even if smaller towns are included in the data. If an urban area is defined as any settlement with 5,000 or more inhabitants, then the percentage of the population living in urban areas is only 19%. The majority of the national population lived in the countryside and around half of France still earned their living from agriculture (Sewell 1980, 148–151; Wrigley 2004, 88).

During the early 19th century the majority of land was farmed in small units. This farming was done by peasants who owned their own land or were tenants who paid rent to a small number of large landowners with a portion of their crop or directly with money. As industrialisation expanded the number of small farmers who owned their own land increased, but large farms occupied a greater percentage of the land. In 1892 76% of farms were smaller than 10 hectares. These small farms, which were mostly owned by those who worked them, covered only 23% of the total agricultural land. Large agricultural holdings of over 40 hectares were 4% of the total number of farms but included almost half of the total land that was farmed. Medium to large scale farms employed wage labourers. These wage labourers included both those who were landless and those who owned a small amount of land but needed to supplement their income. A very significant number of peasant proprietors did not own enough land to survive off it and were compelled to engage in other kinds of labour, such as renting additional land, working in rural industry or as an agricultural wage labourer, and migrating to urban areas for work on a seasonal basis (Price 1987, 11–19, 143–160).

A huge sector of the urban economy was the manufacturing of goods. In the early to mid 19th century the vast majority of this was done by male artisans who engaged in small scale handicraft production. By 1848 there were only a few large factories and these were mostly in the textile industry. Artisans began their career when they were 13 or 14 and went to live with a master artisan who trained them in the craft. After four to six years of training as an apprentice they became a journeyman and could either continue working with their master or seek employment elsewhere. The master artisan owned the workshop, expensive instruments of production, and the necessary raw materials. The journeyman owned their own tools, which typically cost two to four weeks worth of wages. With these tools they would produce an item that was then sold by their master for a profit. The master then paid them a wage that was, depending upon the business and time period, per number of tasks completed, per number of hours worked, or a set amount per day. According to the 1848 Paris Chamber of Commerce survey half of all workshops were composed of a master artisan who worked alone or one master and a single worker who assisted them. Only one in ten workshops employed more than ten workers and in the majority of cases master artisans worked alongside their employees. Journeymen could become a master if they saved up enough money to create their own business. Their opportunities to do so were massively reduced by an economic crisis that hit the French economy during the late 1840s and resulted in a large number of small workshops going bankrupt (Traugott 1985, 5–12; Aminzade 1981, 2–5)

Artisans were therefore an extremely broad category. It included (a) independent craftsmen who used their own tools and workshop to produce products for the market by themselves, (b) small capitalists who employed other craftsmen in a workshop they owned whilst also doing some labour themselves, (c) craftsmen who used their tools to work for the small capitalists in

exchange for a wage. The majority of artisans were wage labourers. Typical professions included printers, carpenters, jewellers, and tailors (Moss 1980, 8–13, 17–18). These artisan wage labourers were often described as propertyless at the time (Sewell 1980, 215, 233–34, 264). This meant that they did not own property that was sufficient to become either an independent craftsmen or a master artisan, such as a workshop and more expensive means of production. These artisans owned the tools of their trade and, to that extent, were distinct from what I have called propertyless wage labourers. Despite this difference, both kinds of wage labourer could only survive by selling their labour to a capitalist in exchange for a wage.

The artisans of the 19th century were fundamentally different from the artisans that came before them. In old regime France artisans belonged to guilds for their specific profession. These were complex social networks led by master artisans who regulated their specific trade and thereby maintained their privileged position. These regulations typically determined things like the quality and price of goods, how many apprentices a master could have, how skilled an apprentice had to be before he became a journeyman, and the steps a journeyman had to go through in order to become a master. They not only had to have the necessary money to buy a workshop but also needed to pass an examination, pay a substantial fee to the guild, and swear an oath. Guilds were able to monopolise and regulate a particular trade due to legal privileges that were granted by the monarch. This legal recognition transformed a collection of real people into a single fictitious legal person that possessed certain rights, privileges, and duties. One of the main privileges that guilds were granted was the exclusive right to engage in a specific trade within a certain region (Sewell 1980, 19–39).

In parallel to this, journeymen formed their own clandestine guilds called brotherhoods. These brotherhoods, which often included journeymen from multiple professions, engaged in many of the same activities as the guilds led by their masters. This included maintaining standards of behaviour and quality of work and collecting dues and fines to pay for financial support when a member was ill, unemployed, or retired. They also engaged in activities that served their specific interests, such as compiling a blacklist of masters who did not pay journeymen enough, organising strikes, and ensuring that journeymen who refused to become members of the brotherhood could not find work. This is not to say that journeymen were attempting to unite as a class. They were divided into mutually exclusive and hostile organisations. These brotherhoods could not rely on the law to settle disputes and, when arguments and insults were not enough, violently fought one another in skirmishes and sometimes battles. Nor did brotherhoods aim to overthrow their masters. They viewed journeymen and masters as belonging to the same moral community. In trades where brotherhoods were influential, many of the masters were former members of a brotherhood and were still linked to this organisation by an oath that they had sworn (ibid 40–61).

The laws that enshrined the legal privileges of master guilds were erased during the French revolution of 1789 and replaced with a new constitution that granted every citizen the right to engage in whatever trade they wanted and to use their property how they wished. In 1791 guilds were formally abolished and citizens were banned from forming new ones. This included journeymen brotherhoods such that trade unions and strikes were made illegal (ibid, 84–91). After the abolition of the guilds, masters, journeymen, and apprentices confronted one another as legally free individuals connected by the market. In the old regime masters and journeymen were united by their shared profession and membership of a guild. This guild membership, in turn, separated them from unskilled workers, other kinds of artisan, and guilds that they were in competition

with. They were at the same time divided based on their amount of wealth and the degrees of privilege, rank, and status within the guild itself. Masters had authority over journeymen not just because they owned a workshop, but also because they were legally recognised as a master within a guild. Now masters and journeymen were only separated by the amount and kind of property that they owned. It was within this economic context that a large segment of journeymen wage labourers, regardless of what profession they engaged in, began to acquire a sense that they belonged to a distinct class which included both skilled and unskilled workers (ibid, 138–142).

France became increasingly industrialised during the course of the 19th century and more of the economy centred on factories, steam power, railways, and coal. This did not lead to artisan wage labourers disappearing overnight and becoming propertyless factory workers. The number of artisans actually increased because basically the only factories that directly competed with artisans were textile factories. These textile factories caused the decline of the rural domestic weaving industry but did not effect urban artisans employed in different trades. These new factories mass produced cheap raw materials like cotton and iron that lowed the cost of production for artisans and, at the same time, employed unskilled workers who used their wages to pay for artisan produced goods, such as furniture, clothing, and cutlery. As late as 1864 only 5% of workers in Paris were classified as factory workers. It is estimated that, in 1876, the number of urban workers employed in handicraft production within France as a whole was double the number employed in factories. This is not to say that artisans were unaffected by industrialisation. They suffered from deskilling, lower wages, and unemployment. This included large capitalists buying up small workshops or hiring them as subcontractors. It is furthermore the case that early factories routinely hired artisans as wage labourers in order to perform skilled labour that had yet to be mechanised. One of the main threats to artisans was the rise of an urban putting out and sweatshop system which employed unskilled and semi-skilled workers, especially women and children, to mass produce standardised goods like clothes and shoes in set styles and sizes. Master artisans responded by making their workshops more like factories in order to remain economically competitive. This included hiring more apprentices and journeymen, establishing a rigid division of labour, and making everyone work harder and longer (Moss 1980, 13–19; Aminzade 1981, 6–14; Sewell 1980, 154–61).

The Proletariat in Early Socialism

It is sometimes incorrectly assumed that Marx was the first social scientist to discover the existence of classes and class struggle in history. Marx himself rejected this view. He wrote in an 1852 letter, "I do not claim to have discovered either the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before me, bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this struggle between the classes, as had bourgeois economists their economic anatomy" (MECW 39, 62). One of the main influences on how socialists thought about class was British political economy and in particular Adam Smith's 1776 book *The Wealth of Nations.* Smith thought that there were three main orders in what he called commercial societies. These were (i) workers, who gain income from wages; (ii) merchants and master manufacturers, who gain income from profits of stock; and (iii), land owners, who gain their income from rent (Smith 1904, 248–50). Workers, which Smith typically called workmen, included labourers, journeymen and

servants. His category of worker therefore included both those who owned means of production, such as journeymen, and those who did not, such as servants (ibid, 70, 80). Smith also viewed self-employed artisans as workers. He wrote,

> It sometimes happens, indeed, that a single independent workman has stock sufficient both to purchase the materials of his work, and to maintain himself till it be completed. He is both master and workman, and enjoys the whole produce of his own labour, or the whole value which it adds to the materials upon which it is bestowed. It includes what are usually two distinct revenues, belonging to two distinct persons, the profits of stock, and the wages of labour (ibid, 67–68).

Master manufacturers, who owned workshops, and merchants, who used the putting out system, paid workers a wage to produce a particular item and then sold this item for profit on the market. Smith used the word stock to refer to anything that a person owned. Master manufacturers and merchants therefore earn profit from stock both by selling items that they own and by providing workers with the necessary raw materials, instruments of production, etc to produce the items in question. He called this kind of stock capital (ibid, 49–50, 261–65). Smith's merchants and master manufacturers were later called capitalists or the bourgeoisie.

In the 19th century the word proletariat first rose to prominence among working class social movements in France. Their conception of class was shaped by the legacy of the French revolution. In 1789 the clergyman Abbé Sieyès published a pamphlet called *What is the Third Estate?* In old regime France the first estate were the clergy, the second estate the nobility, and the third estate everyone else. In the pamphlet Sieyès argued that the third estate engages in, or at least could engage in, all the classes of labour (by which he meant categories) that are necessary for society to function and flourish, such as farming, manufacturing, shopkeeping, trading, and education. The consequence of this is that the third estate includes every person necessary for a complete country. The first and second estate should therefore be abolished because they are an unnecessary privileged class who are idle, do not engage in useful labour, and are a burden on the nation (Sieyès 1789).

This had a profound effect on how later French authors framed discussions of class. One of the main influences on French socialism was the aristocrat and canal enthusiast Henri Saint-Simon, who was not himself a socialist (Cole 1967, 37–50). Between 1814 and his death in 1825 Saint-Simon wrote a series of texts which divided society into two main groups: the industrials and the idlers. This distinction was not original to Saint-Simon and built on very similar ideas that had been proposed by the French political economist Jean Baptiste Say (James 1977, 456–75). The industrials were any person who engaged in what he regarded as productive labour. It included farmers, business owners, merchants, bankers, managers, and employees. The idlers were those who did not engage in productive activity and instead lived off the labour of others, such as aristocrats and the clergy. Saint-Simon sometimes referred to all industrials as workers, even capitalists and bankers (Saint-Simon 1975, 47–49, 158–160, 194–95, 214, 282). In 1823 he proposed that there was a third class between the industrials and the idlers. These were the bourgeoisie, who were non-aristocratic land owners, lawyers and soldiers (ibid 250–51). Two years later he published a fragment in which he referred to one section of the industrials as prolétaires. This group was "the most numerous class" and included both peasants and urban wage labourers. Saint-Simon thought that all members of the industrial class should unite together against the

idlers and take control of society (ibid, 262–66). For this reason his fragment on the prolétaires critiques the English proletariat for wanting to "commence the war of the poor against the rich", whilst praising "the French proletariat" for having "goodwill" towards "the wealthy industrials" (ibid, 265).

In 1827 the Swiss economist Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi published a second edition of his book *New Principles of Political Economy*. In the preface he claimed that he had revised his views based on an examination of England. During this research he discovered that,

> the people of England are destitute of comfort now, and of security for the future. There are no longer yeoman, they have been obliged to become day-labourers. In the towns there are scarcely any longer artisans or independent heads of a small business, but only manufacturers. The *operative*, to employ a word which the system has created, does not know what it is to have a station; he gains only wages, and as wages cannot suffice for all seasons, he is almost every year reduced to ask alms from the poor-rates … The English nation has found it most economical to give up those modes of cultivation which require much hand-labour, and she has dismissed half the cultivators who lived in her fields; she has found it more economical to supersede workmen by steam-engines; she has dismissed, then employed, then dismissed again, the operatives in towns, and weavers giving place to power-looms, are now sinking under famine; she has found it more economical to reduce all working people to the lowest possible wages on which they can subsist; and these working people being no longer anything but proletarians, have not feared plunging into still deeper misery by the addition of an increasing family (Sismondi 1847, 116–117. In the English translation it says 'rabble'. Have altered based on the original French quoted in Rose 1981, 290).

Shortly after the publication of this book Prosper Enfantin, who was an influential follower of Saint-Simon, gave a series of lectures between December 1828 and 1829. These were revised and published in book form as *The Doctrine of Saint-Simon: An Exposition* in 1830. In the fourth and fifth lectures, which were given in January and February 1829, Enfantin conceptualised history as a series of economic stages characterised by "the exploitation of man by man" and so the division of society "into two classes, the exploiters and the exploited" (Iggers 1972, 72–73). Each successive stage marked a decline in exploitation and so was a form of progress. Humans were initially "savages" who killed and often eat one another during wars. Then they started capturing people they defeated in combat and turning them into property who were instruments of work or pleasure. This system of slavery evolved over time and gave rise to new class distinctions, such as patricians and plebeians in ancient Rome. Eventually slavery was replaced by feudalism and the division of society into lords and serfs. Serfs were later separated from the land and turned into workers who could choose their master (ibid, 65–67).

During the sixth lecture, which was held in late February 1829, Enfantin outlined an analysis of class divisions within contemporary society. He said that,

> the exploitation of man by man, which we have shown in its most direct and uncouth form in the past, namely slavery, continues to a very large extent in the relations between owners and workers, masters and wage earners. Of course, the respective

> conditions of the classes today are far from those of masters and slaves, patricians and plebeians, or lords and serfs in the past. At first sight it seems as if no comparison could be made. However, it must be realized that the more recent situation is only a prolongation of the earlier. The relation of master and wage earner is the last transformation which slavery has undergone. If the exploitation of man by man no longer has the brutal character of antiquity and assumes more gentle forms today, it is, nevertheless, no less real. The worker is not like the slave, the direct property of his master. His condition, which is never permanent, is fixed by a transaction with a master. But is this transaction free on the part of the worker? It is not, since he is obliged to accept it under penalty of death, for he is reduced to expecting his nourishment each day only from his work of the previous day (ibid, 82).

He then explained that,

> the advantages and disadvantages proper to every social position are transmitted through inheritance. The economists have taken care to establish one aspect of this fact, namely *hereditary misery,* when they recognized within society the existence of a class of proletarians. Today the entire mass of workers is exploited by the men whose property they utilize. The managers of industry themselves undergo such exploitation in their relation with the owners, but to an incomparably smaller extent. And in turn they participate in the privileges of exploitation, which bears down with all its weight upon the laboring classes, which is to say, on the majority of the workers. In such a state of affairs, the worker appears as the direct descendent of the slave and the serf. His person is free; he is no longer bound to the soil; but that is all he has gained. And in this state of legal emancipation he can exit only under the conditions imposed upon him by a class small in numbers, namely the class of those men who have been invested through legislation, the daughter of conquest, with the monopoly of riches, which is to say, with the capacity to dispose at their will, even in idleness, of the instruments of work (ibid, 82–83).

Saint-Simon defined class in terms of a person's occupation and whether or not they engaged in productive labour or were idle. The consequence of this was that capitalists and wage earners could, with a broad enough notion of productivity, be viewed as different kinds of worker belonging to the same class: the industrials. Enfantin, in contrast, defined class in terms of a groups source of income, ownership of property, and role in the production process. The consequence of this was that he viewed capitalists and wage earners as distinct classes. He, in addition to this, distinguished between wage earners who were managers and those who were proletarians or labourers. He claimed that proletarians survive by selling their labour to capitalists in exchange for a wage. They are free to choose who they work for but lack the freedom to not do so. This is because capitalists have monopolised ownership of riches and with this the capacity to determine how the instruments of work are used. Under these circumstances, wage earners have no choice but to use property owned by capitalists in order to produce goods and services for them. Although Enfantin mentioned that some capitalists are idle he did not frame this as their distinguishing characteristic which separates them from other classes. They are instead defined in terms of their ownership of private property and their hiring of wage labourers.

Both Sismondi and Enfantin noted that proletarians do not own land and survive by selling their labour to capitalists in exchange for a wage. They disagreed on whether or not the proletariat consisted of (a) only propertyless wage labourers who do not own any means of production or (b) both propertyless wage labourers and artisan wage labourers, who own the tools of their trade. Sismondi framed the proletariat and artisans as distinct classes. In 1827 he claimed that in England "there are scarcely any longer artisans or independent heads of a small business, but only manufacturers (Sismondi 1847, 116). Sismondi expanded upon this in an 1834 article. He wrote that "there exist in society an already numerous class, and which has a tendency to become more so every day" that creates "wealth by the labour of their hands", have "no property", and live off "wages". This "class of working men to whom has been give in our time the name used by the Romans, *proletarii,* comprises the most numerous and energetic class of the population of large towns. It comprehends all those who work in manufactories, in the country as well as in towns; it continually encroaches on those kinds of business formerly known as master trades, whenever a manufactory can be established, when all together, in one place, under one head, but by many hundred hands, those common utensils and tools can be made" (ibid, 198–199).

Sismondi explicitly contrasted the manufactories, where proletarians were employed, with small workshops where artisans worked, including journeymen who were paid a wage. He wrote that in France "four-fifths then of the nation belong to the country and to agriculture, and the fifth to towns and other occupations. There would be danger to the state, the balance of production would be overthrown if this fifth became a quarter or a third, but it does not follow that this fifth should go to increase the ranks of the proletarri". This is because "one part of the products of industry is prepared by trades, another part by manufacturers. Now the life of men who exercise trades is in general happy, and affords all those securities which we have demanded for the poor who work. A trade always requires an apprenticeship" and includes "carpenters, masons, locksmiths, farriers, cartwrights, shoemakers, tailors, bakers, or butchers" (ibid, 203). He then described the career progression of an artisan. They start as an "apprentice" who "enters his master's family according to a contract which often binds him for many years", then live as "a journeyman" who "engages with a master for a salary", and finally becomes "a master" who "employs the little capital which he has been accumulating in purchasing tools and furnishing a workshop; engages a journeymen and an apprentice" (ibid, 204). It is "in the midst of these trades, exercised by the freemen of towns, which formerly did all the industrial work in all nations, that manufactories have arisen" (ibid, 205). Sismondi's distinction between artisans and proletarians is made even clearer several pages later. He claimed that in some towns in Germany and Switzerland master artisans are only allowed "to hire for wages more than one or two *compagnons* or journeymen, to keep more than one or two apprentices". In such towns "no proletaries are to be seen there" (ibid, 219). He therefore viewed wage labourers and proletarians as overlapping but distinct categories. All proletarians are wage labourers but not all wage labourers are proletarians, such as journeymen artisans.

Enfantin, in contrast, talked as if the proletariat included all wage labourers, including artisans. This is supported by two pieces of evidence. First, Enfantin claimed that "the entire mass of workers" and "the majority of the workers" were "proletarians" (Iggers 1972, 83). Elsewhere he referred to "the poor class, the most numerous class, the proletarians" (Quoted in Lovell 1988, 66). As has already been mentioned, at the time of writing the majority of the French population lived in the countryside and it was common for agricultural wage labourers to own a small amount of land. Most male urban workers employed in manufacturing were artisan wage labour-

ers. Propertyless wage labourers did exist and so form a subset of the group he is referring to, but they cannot form the majority. Second, Enfantin's description of the proletariat applies to artisan wage labourers. They are a "wage earner" who, unlike a slave, are not owned by anyone and, unlike a serf, "is no longer bound to the soil". They have the freedom to choose their "master" but lack the freedom to not sell their labour in exchange for a wage. This is because they are "reduced to expecting his nourishment each day only from his work of the previous day". They are "exploited by the men whose property they utilize" and who has "the capacity to dispose at their will, even in idleness, of the instruments of work" (ibid, 82–83). That is to say, the master artisan who owns the workshop they work in and the raw materials that they work on, determines what artisan wage labourers produce, and owns the product of their employees labour.

The word prolétaire rose to popularity in France during the aftermath of the 1830 July revolution. The revolution, which lasted only three days of insurrection, overthrew the Bourbon monarch Charles the 10th and replaced him with the Orleanist monarch Louis Philippe. Workers, especially artisans, formed the majority of people who fought at the barricades and were injured or killed during the revolution. The new monarchy passed a series of reforms, such as freedom of the press and lower property requirements for having the right to vote, but refused to implement reforms that workers proposed. The new state chastised workers for foolishly asking for restrictions on what they called the liberty of industry, such as a minimum wage and a maximum length of the working day. Then as now the liberty of capitalists was built on the oppression of workers. In response artisans created their own newspapers in which they adopted the language of the French revolution to frame capitalists as idle aristocrats and workers as the productive third estate or 'the people'. Capitalists were the new feudal lords and workers were the serfs of industry (Sewell 1980, 195–201). What Saint-Simonians had called "the most numerous and the poorest class" re-described itself as: "the most numerous and the most useful class … the class of workers. Without it capital has no value; without it no machines, no industry, no commerce" (Quoted in ibid, 198. See also ibid 214).

The first working class social movements in France were created by artisan wage labourers. These artisans called themselves proletarians (Moss 1980, 8; Traugott 1985, 198n7). The predominance of artisans in the labour movement was not unique to France. Among labour historians there is, to quote William Sewell,

> almost universal agreement on one point: that skilled artisans, not workers in the new factory industries, dominated labour movements during the first decades of industrialization. Whether in France, England, Germany, or the United States; whether in strikes, political movements, or incidents of collective violence, one finds over and over again the same familiar trades: carpenters, tailors, bakers, cabinetmakers, shoemakers, stonemasons, printers, locksmiths, joiners, and the like. The nineteenth-century labor movement was born in the craft workshop, not in the dark, satanic mill (Sewell 1980, 1).

Although trade unions were made illegal during the French revolution, journeymen had been clandestinely organising strikes and unions throughout the early 19th century. These typically took the form of a modern continuation of the journeymen brotherhoods of old, complete with bizarre rituals and initiation ceremonies. These secret groups were often hidden within public legal mutual aid societies that provided members with various benefits, such as sick pay and

a pension upon retirement. Initially these secret groups maintained the kinds of divisions and hostilities between rival sects and professions that had been common among the original brotherhoods (ibid, 162–190). Over time a segment of journeymen from different organisations started to co-operate with one another in their shared struggle against a common foe: capitalists and the current state. They began to advocate and organise the formation of workers' associations that united all the workers in a specific trade and then all workers from every trade (ibid, 201–18) In 1833 at least seventy-two strikes were organised by workers. This was over four times larger than the total number of strikes in 1831 and 1832 combined (ibid, 208). As part of this strike wave the stonecutters of Lyon sent an address to silk workers that asked for assistance in a dispute with their masters. They declared, "we are no longer in a time where our industries engage in mutual insults and violence; we have at last recognized that our interests are the same, that, far from hating one another, we must aid one another" (Quoted in ibid, 212). The silk workers replied by claiming that their newspaper had been founded "to bring into being the bonds of the confraternity of proletarians" and "the holy alliance of laborers" (ibid). The self-described French proletariat was therefore made by both workers themselves acquiring an awareness of their shared class interests and the economic and political context that they acted within and in reaction to.

Throughout the 1830s and 1840s the words prolétaire and (from 1834 onwards) prolétariat were often used by French authors to refer to workers in general. The exact kind of worker they had in mind varied greatly. In socialist discourse there was not one proletariat, but many (Rose 1981, 282–83, 293–99; Lovell 1988, 65–79). For some it included everyone who worked with their hands and produced the nation's wealth. This conception was broad enough to include almost the entire population of France, including propertyless wage labourers, artisan wage labourers, self-employed artisans, and peasants who owned or rented a small amount of land. In January 1832 the revolutionary Blanqui was on trial and asked what his profession was by the court. Blanqui replied "proletarian … one of the thirty million Frenchman who live by their labor" (Quoted in Spitzer 1957, 96). The total population of France at the time was around 32 million. It was, as it were, the 19th century equivalent of saying 'we are the 99%'. In 1834 Blanqui founded a secret society called the Society of Families (ibid, 6). Its programme defined "the people" or "the proletariat" as "the mass of citizens who work" (Quoted in ibid, 90).

Others adopted a more narrow definition. The printer Pierre Joseph Proudhon referred to himself as a "proletarian" multiple times in his 1840 book *What is Property?* (Proudhon 1994, 36, 72, 80. For Proudhon's life see Vincent 1984). In 1852 Proudhon distinguished between the proletariat and the middle classes. He wrote,

> *The middle class.* It consists of entrepreneurs, bosses, shopkeepers, manufactures, farmers, scholars, artists, etc. living, like the proletarians, and unlike the bourgeois, much more from their personal product than from their capital, privileges, and properties, but distinguished from the proletariat in that they work, in vulgar terms, for themselves, they are responsible for their estate's losses and the exclusive enjoyment of their profits, whereas the proletarian works for hire and is paid a wage (Quoted in Ansart 2023, 75-76n9).

Proudhon, in contrast to several authors from the 1830s, clearly viewed the proletariat as distinct from the self-employed, such as independent artisans and peasants who worked alone.

The wage earners that Proudhon called the proletariat included both propertyless wage labourers and artisan wage labourers who owned the tools of their trade.

Lastly, there was those who used the proletariat to refer exclusively to the new class of propertyless wage labourers that emerged during the industrial revolution. One of the earliest socialists to do so was Victor Considerant in his 1837 book *Social Destiny* (Rose 1981, 298–99). A decade later he published *Principles of Socialism: Manifesto of 19th century Democracy*, which repeated this point in a more condensed form. He distinguished between "the wealthy class that possesses capital and the instruments of production and the proletarian class that is stripped of everything" (Considerant 2006, 53). These proletarians, who work for capitalists in exchange for a wage, emerged due to the industrial revolution. He noted that, "in every branch of the economy, the big capitals and large enterprises make the law for the small. Steam engines, machinery, and large factories have always easily predominated wherever they have confronted small and middle-size workshops. At their approach, the old trades and artisans disappeared, leaving only factories and proletarians" (ibid, 54).

The Proletariat in Marx and Engels

The word proletariat was originally used in a variety of competing and contradictory ways. The various authors of the 1830s and 1840s that I have cited were extremely historically important but have largely been forgotten. When modern people in the 21st century think about the proletariat they generally think about the proletariat as it appears in the writings of Marx and Engels or, at least, the popular misrepresentations of Marx and Engels. Despite the central importance of class in their social analysis, it is surprisingly difficult to establish exactly what they thought about it. A key reason for this is that Marx died before writing his planned chapter on classes for volume three of *Capital*. The draft he begun contains only a few paragraphs (Marx 1991, 1025–26). Both Marx and Engels wrote about class a lot but often without defining key terms or providing the kind of systematic breakdown of classes that would make their ideas easy to understand. Matters are only made worse by the fact that they use the same word 'class' to refer to different things. The result is that even specialists disagree about how Marx and Engels understood class (Draper 1978; Heinrich 2004, 91–92; Ollman 1968; McLellan 1980, 177–82). Given this complexity, what follows is a brief attempt to establish how Marx and Engels defined the proletariat. It is not possible in such a brief account to cover every single source and nuance, but it should at least make their core positions clear.

Marx and Engels generally defined class in terms of a person's source of income and relationship to the means of production. When discussing class they focused on the social relations that labour was performed within. In February 1844 Marx published a *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right – Introduction* in a journal he edited. This journal was called the *Franco-German Yearbooks* and only one issue was ever published (McLellan 1973, 98–99). His essay, which was written between late 1843 and early 1844, is the first text where Marx refers to the proletariat as the agent of revolutionary change. Although he does not define the proletariat explicitly, he does pick out three key features of this class. Firstly, "the proletariat is only beginning to appear in Germany as a result of the emergent *industrial movement*. For the proletariat is not formed by *natural* poverty but by *artificially produced* poverty" (Marx 1992b, 256) Secondly, "when the proletariat demands the *negation of private property*, it is only elevating to a *principle*

for society what society has already made a principle *for the proletariat*, what is embodied in the proletariat, without its consent, as the negative result of society" (ibid). Thirdly, "the proletariat is already beginning to struggle against the bourgeoisie" (ibid, 255). In other words, the proletariat is a new class that does not own private property, emerges as part of the process of industrialisation, and is in an antagonistic relationship with capitalists, who are the class above it. Marx does not clarify how this new class is distinct from other kinds of worker that existed at the time. It is nonetheless clear that Marx is using the term in a narrower sense than many French socialists. This is for the obvious reason that artisans and peasants were not a new class that emerged during industrialisation.

Marx was not initially consistent with this terminology. On other occasions he followed common usage and referred to any worker as a proletarian, including artisans who owned their own means of production. In August 1844 he used the books of Wilhelm Weitling as evidence that "the German proletariat is the *theoretician* of the European proletariat" (Marx 1992b, 415). Weitling was a tailor and artisan (Wittke 1950, 6–9, 20–21). A few months later in his 1845 book *The Holy Family* Marx referred to the artisan and printer Proudhon as a proletarian. He wrote, "not only does Proudhon write in the interest of the proletarians, he is himself a proletarian, an *ouvrier* [worker]. His work is a scientific manifesto of the French proletariat" (MECW 4, 41). In his 1847 book the *Poverty of Philosophy* Marx mentioned "the proletariat of Feudal times" and so appeared to contradict his position that the proletariat is a new class that emerged with the industrial revolution. Marx later made a series of corrections to the book and one of them was replacing this phrase with "the class of workers of Feudal times" (MECW 6, 175, 672-3n71).

Around the same time Engels, who had met Marx but had yet to become his friend (MECW 50, 503), adopted the same narrow definition of the proletariat. Between October and November 1843 he wrote *An Outline of a Critique of Political Economy*. This essay was sent to Marx some time between late December and early January and was then published in the *Franco-German Yearbooks* (Carver 2020, 132). In this essay Engels referred to "the original separation of capital from labour and from the culmination of this separation — the division of mankind into capitalists and workers — a division which daily becomes ever more acute, and which, as we shall see, is *bound* to deepen" (MECW 3, 430). Engels mentioned the new factory system of industrial production several times but did not go into greater detail and instead promised to cover it at a later date (MECW 3, 420, 424, 442–43). Engels kept this promise and, in February 1844, wrote an essay that described the industrialisation of England during the 18th and early 19th centuries. The essay was published between August and September by the German paper *Forwards*, which was based in Paris and had Marx on its editorial staff. The publication of this essay coincided with Engels ten day visit to Paris, during which he cemented his friendship with Marx and they agreed to work together on future projects (Carver 2020, 145; Jones 2016, 161). In the essay Engels claimed that the industrial revolution led to "the division of society into owners of property and non-owners" (MECW 3, 478). He thought that,

> the most important effect of the eighteenth century for England was the creation of the proletariat by the industrial revolution. The new industry demanded a constantly available mass of workers for the countless new branches of production, and moreover workers such as had previously not existed. Up to 1780 England had few proletarians, a fact which emerges inevitably from the social condition of the nation as described above. Industry concentrated work in factories and towns; it became im-

> possible to combine manufacturing and agricultural activity, and the new working class was reduced to complete dependence on its labour. What had hitherto been the exception became the rule and spread gradually outside the towns too. Small-scale farming was ousted by the large tenant farmers and thus a new class of agricultural labourers was created. The population of the towns trebled and quadrupled and almost the whole of this increase consisted solely of workers. The expansion of mining likewise required a large number of new workers, and these too lived solely from their daily wage (MECW 3, 487).

Engels, like Marx, specified that the proletariat are a new class that does not own private property and emerged during the industrial revolution. He, in addition to this, clarified that the proletariat so understood survive entirely by selling their labour to a capitalist in exchange for a wage. He noted the existence of craftsmen who owned their own means of production but clearly viewed them as distinct from the proletariat (MECW 3, 477–78, 482–83). The central points of this essay were repeated by Engels in the opening chapter of his 1845 book *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Engels 1993, 15–30).

In 1847 Engels wrote a very clear and succinct account of what the proletariat is. He claimed that two main class positions were developing under capitalism. These were the "bourgeoisie" who "almost exclusively own all the means of subsistence and the raw materials and instruments (machinery, factories, etc.), needed for the production of these means of subsistence", and "the class of the completely propertyless, who are compelled therefore to sell their labour to the bourgeois in order to obtain the necessary means of subsistence in exchange. This class is called the class of the proletarians or the proletariat" (MECW 6, 342–43). He defined the proletariat as "that class of society which procures its means of livelihood entirely and solely from the sale of its labour and not from the profit derived from any capital" (ibid, 341). Elsewhere he noted that "the proletarian", in addition to this, "works with instruments of production which belong to someone else" (ibid, 100). This class is framed as being distinct from other kinds of worker that had previously existed, such as journeyman artisans and rural domestic workers, who produced cloth with a spinning wheel and hand loom that they owned themselves. Engels wrote, "the manufactory worker of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries almost everywhere still owned an instrument of production, his loom, the family spinning-wheels, and a little plot of land which he cultivated in his leisure hours. The proletarian has none of these things… The manufactory worker is torn up from his patriarchal relations by large-scale industry, loses the property he still has and thereby only then himself becomes a proletarian" (ibid, 344–45).

Marx and Engels repeated this definition of the proletariat in a more condensed form in the 1848 *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Marx and Engels 1996, 7). Why did Marx and Engels adopt their narrow definition of the proletariat? With Engels a key factor appears to be his life experiences. In November 1842 he moved to Manchester in order to work as a clerk in the offices of his father's business, which owned cotton mills where propertyless wage labourers were employed. Whilst living in England, Engels witnessed the effects of industrialisation on society, the plight of factory workers, and the Chartist movements struggle for universal male suffrage. At the same time he met socialists and began reading political economy and economic histories of Britain (Carver 2020, 123–32, 140–41). Historians have proposed various sources of inspiration for Marx, but there is not enough evidence to give any definitive answer. It is likely that Marx heard the word during the meetings of communist artisans that he attended in the summer of 1844 whilst

living in Paris (MECW 3, 355). One of the most common suggestions is that Marx read the 1842 book *Socialism and Communism in Contemporary France* by Lorenz von Stein. It is not known when Marx first read this book. He most likely knew of its existence soon after its publication because it was reviewed by someone else in a paper he wrote for called the *Rheinische Zeitung*. He first mentions the book by name in *The Holy Family*, which was written between September and November 1844 (Rubel and Manale 1975, 24; MECW 4, 134). Another likely source of inspiration for Marx is Sismondi. Marx explicitly refers to him in his 1844 Paris notebooks (Marx 1992b, 306, 339) and *The Holy Family* (MECW 4 , 33). Marx quotes Sismondi saying that, "my objections are not to machines, not to inventions, not to civilisation, but only to *the modern organisation of society*, which deprives the working man of any property other than his hands, and gives him no guarantee against competition, of which he will inevitably become a victim" (MECW 4, 272).

Over time Marx's definition of the proletariat became increasingly precise. This went alongside arguing that the proletariat first began to emerge in England during the 16th century and so prior to the industrial revolution of the 18th (Marx 1990, 877–88, 905–907). In *Capital Volume 1* he described the proletariat as the class which,

(i) sell their labour power as a commodity on the labour market. A person's labour power is the mental and physical capabilities they exercise when producing anything. In other words, their ability to labour.

(ii) are a legally free person who can sell their labour power to whoever they want. They are not a slave or a serf and so own or are the proprietor of their own labour power, rather than being the property of someone else. They must, in addition to this, not be bound by guild regulations that seriously restrict if they can work and who they can work for.

(iii) sell their labour power for a limited and definite period of time. If a person sells their labour power once and for all then they are selling themselves and thereby become a slave who is a commodity owned by someone else, rather than a person who is selling a commodity that they own.

(iv) own no means of production (raw materials, instruments of production, etc) such that they cannot survive by producing their own commodities and selling these on the market. They have nothing to sell but their labour power and this is what compels them to seek a buyer of labour power on the market.

(v) sell their labour power to a capitalist, who owns means of production, in exchange for a wage. A worker then uses this wage to buy the necessities of life, such as food, rent, clothes etc, and thereby reproduce themselves and their labour power (Marx 1990, 270–80, 874–76, 1025–31).[1]

[1] According to Draper, Marx thinks that only propertyless wage labourers who produce surplus value and thereby generate profits for a capitalist are proletarians (Draper 1978, 34). Propertyless wage labourers that do not produce surplus value are therefore not proletarians, such as teachers employed in state funded schools or road construction workers hired directly by the state. The best evidence I have found to support this view is a single sentence in the *Communist Manifesto* which claims "the proletariat" are "the class of modern workers who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital" (Marx and Engels 1996, 7). For Marx only productive labour, in the sense of labour that produces surplus value, increases capital (Marx 1990, 644). This sentence in the *Communist Manifesto* could be interpreted as a generalisation, rather than an attempt to establish the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for being a proletarian. The pamphlet is after all full of generalisations. Unfortunately Marx's other statements on the subject are vague and could be interpreted as either saying that the proletariat only includes productive workers or that all propertyless wage labourers who sell their labour power to an employer (rather than selling a labour service directly to a customer) are proletarians irrespective of whether or not they produce surplus value (MECW 34, 444–45). In *Capital Volume 3* Marx claims that "commercial wage-labourers

Marx and Engels' narrow definition of the proletariat is widely misunderstood. Three points of clarification must be made. First, they did not think that proletarians and capitalists were the only classes that existed under really existing capitalism. This misconception stems from a sentence in the *Communist Manifesto*. They wrote that, "society as a whole is tending to split into two great hostile encampments, into two great classes directly and mutually opposed – bourgeoisie and proletariat" (Marx and Engels 1996, 2). In this sentence Marx and Engels were careful to use the phrase "great classes", rather than 'only classes'. A society can have two 'great classes', whilst also having several other lesser classes that are not as significant. The fact that Marx thought this is made clear in *Capital Volume 3*. He explained,

> the owners of mere labour-power, the owners of capital and the landowners, whose respective sources of income are wages, profit and ground-rent – in other words wage-labourers, capitalists and landowners – form the three great classes of modern society based on the capitalist mode of production.
>
> It is undeniably in England that this modern society and its economic articulation is most widely and most classically developed. Even here, though, this class articulation does not emerge in pure form. Here, too, middle and transitional levels always conceal the boundaries (although incomparably less so in the countryside than in the towns). We have seen how it is the constant tendency and law of development of the capitalist mode of production to divorce the means of production ever more from labour and to concentrate the fragmented means of production more and more into large groups, i.e. to transform labour into wage-labour and the means of production into capital (Marx 1991, 1025).

Marx distinguished between capitalism in its "pure form", which has three great classes, and really existing capitalist societies like England, which contain far more classes. This was not a one off occurrence. In the early 1860s he wrote in his economic manuscripts that,

> here we need only consider the forms which capital passes through in the various stages of its development. The real conditions within which the actual process of production takes place are therefore not analysed … We do not examine the competition of capitals, nor the credit system, nor the actual composition of society, which by no means consists only of two classes, workers and industrial capitalists (MECW 32, 124).

Marx, in other words, distinguished between the model that is constructed to analyse reality and reality itself. This model is a simplification that zooms in on certain key features of reality, whilst at the same time ignoring other aspects. This is a necessary aspect of doing social science because reality is an overwhelmingly complex process that is constantly changing. It is not possible to write about everything at once and no single person can learn everything about the real world. A model is good or useful to the extent that it corresponds to the reality that it is describing and can be used to explain it. Marx called this method of research abstraction (Marx 1990,

employed by the merchant capitalist … do not directly produce surplus-value " but do ultimately enable their employer to generate a profit. In a footnote Engels refers to such workers as "the commercial proletariat" (Marx 1991, 406–407, 414–15). In the absence of definitive evidence I am agnostic on the matter, but I could have missed an important source or not seen an important detail when reading.

90, 102). He altered the categories that he used to understand reality depending upon the level of abstraction that his model was operating at. In *Capital Volume 3* he claimed that he is concerned with explaining "the internal organization of the capitalist mode of production, its ideal average, as it were" and so will not discuss the specifics of "the actual movement of competition" in "the world market" (Marx 1991, 969–70).

On numerous occasions Marx acknowledged that reality is far more complex than the simple two or three great class model he constructed to analyse capitalist society in its pure or average form. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels mentioned "the lower middle classes, small workshop proprietors, merchants and rentiers, tradesmen and yeoman farmers of the present" (Marx and Engels 1996, 8). They later referred to "the small manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant" in the present tense (ibid, 10). Marx and Engels predicted that, over time, an increasingly large percentage of these classes would be compelled by economic forces to become proletarians. This prediction is not the same thing as claiming that these classes do not exist within actual capitalist societies. They, in addition to this, claimed that,

> in countries where modern civilization has developed, a new petty-bourgeoisie has formed, fluctuating between proletariat and bourgeoisie, and always renewing itself as a complement to bourgeois society, but whose members are continually being dumped into the proletariat as a result of competition, who themselves – as modern industry develops – see the time approaching when they will disappear as an independent part of modern society and will be replaced (ibid, 22).

Even decades later Marx and Engels did not think that the complete proletarianisation of the labour force had occurred. In *Capital Volume One* Marx described capitalist society as it existed in England during the 1860s. As part of this he noted the on-going existence of domestic wage labourers who own their own means of production, such as a sewing machine, and are employed by a capitalist who provides them with the necessary raw materials (Marx 1990, 599–604). He also claimed that, according to the 1861 census, there were more servants in England and Wales than those employed in textile factories and mines put together. These servants, who were largely women, were technically paid a wage but this was paid directly to them by those who hired their services. They were therefore distinct from wage labourers who were hired by a capitalist as part of a profit generating business (ibid, 574–75). In 1870 Engels wrote that the urban proletariat "is still far from being the majority of the German people" and exists alongside "the petty bourgeois, the lumpenproletariat of the cities, the small peasants and the agricultural labourers" who belong to "the agricultural proletariat" (MECW 21, 98, 100).

Marx and Engels never provide a systematic definition of the petty-bourgeoisie. The petty-bourgeoisie are sometimes referred to as "the small trading class" (MECW 14, 145). It appears to consist of small merchants, shopkeepers, master artisans, and self-employed artisans. These self-employed artisans own their own means of production and use them to produce commodities or services that they sell on the market. They do not employ anyone else as a wage labourer (MECW 6, 79–80, 343; MECW 26, 500; MECW 34, 470–71). In *Capital Volume 3* Marx defined "small peasant and petty-bourgeois production" as "all forms in which the producer still appears as the owner of his means of production. In the developed capitalist mode of production, the worker is not the owner of his conditions of production, the farm that he cultivates, the raw material he works up, etc" (Marx 1991, 731). In his economic manuscripts from the 1860s Marx

described such independent peasant farmers and handicraftsmen as engaging in a pre-capitalist form of production that is mediated through capitalist social relations and thereby altered by them. The result is that self-employed producers are metaphorically cut or split into two: they live as a capitalist who employs themselves as a wage labourer (MECW 34, 141–42). This analysis is clearly borrowed from Adam Smith.

Marx thought that this kind of mediation between different relations of production occured when "a determinate mode of production predominates, although all relations of production have not yet been subjected to it" (ibid, 141. See also ibid, 428). He appears to have had the same view of chattel slavery occurring under really existing capitalist societies, such as the United States. In the *Grundrisse* Marx wrote that "slavery is possible at individual points within the bourgeois system of production … because it does not exist at other points; and appears as an anomaly opposite the bourgeois system itself" (Marx 1993, 464). This point is repeated later in the manuscripts. He noted that, "the fact that we now not only call the plantation owners in America capitalists, but that they *are* capitalists, is based on their existence as anomalies within a world market based on free labour" (ibid, 513. See also Marx 1990, 345).

The second clarification is that Marx and Engels did not think that only industrial propertyless wage labourers are proletarians. Engels is very clear that the proletariat also includes propertyless agricultural wage labourers. In February 1845 Engels claimed that in Germany,

> Our proletariat is numerous and must be so, as we must realise from the most superficial examination of our social situation. It is in the nature of things that there should be a numerous proletariat in the *industrial districts*. Industry cannot exist without a large number of workers who are wholly at its disposal, work exclusively for it and renounce every other way of making a living. Under conditions of competition, industrial employment makes any other employment impossible. For this reason we find in all industrial districts a proletariat too numerous and too obvious for its existence to be denied.— But in the *agricultural districts*, on the other hand, many people assert, no proletariat exists. But how is this possible? In areas where big landownership prevails such a proletariat is necessary; the big farms need farm-hands and servant girls and cannot exist without proletarians. In areas where the land has been parcelled out the rise of a propertyless class cannot be avoided either; the estates are divided up to a certain point, then the division comes to an end; and as then only one member of the family can take over the farm the others must, of course, become proletarians, propertyless workers. This dividing up usually proceeds until the farm becomes too small to feed a family and so a class of people comes into existence which, like the small middle class in the towns, is in transition from the possessing to the non-possessing class, and which is prevented by its property from taking up any other occupation, and yet cannot live on it. In this class, too, great poverty prevails (MECW 4, 256–57).

Engels made the same point in *The Condition of the Working Class in England,* which featured an entire chapter on what he called "the agricultural proletariat" (Engels 1993, 267–69). He explained that,

> The first proletarians were connected with manufacture, were engendered by it, and accordingly, those employed in manufacture, in the working up of raw materials, will

> first claim our attention. The production of raw materials and of fuel for manufacture attained importance only in consequence of the industrial change, and engendered a new proletariat, the coal and metal miners. Then, in the third place, manufacture influenced agriculture, and in the fourth, the condition of Ireland; and the fractions of the proletariat belonging to each, will find their place accordingly (Engels 1993, 32).

Marx agreed with Engels on this matter. Sometime between April 1874 and January 1875 he referred to the situation where a peasant proprietor becomes a proletarian. He wrote, "the capitalist tenant farmer has ousted the peasants, so that the actual farmer is as much a proletarian, a wage-labourer, as the urban worker" (MECW 24, 518). Marx and Engels were committed to the view that the industrial proletariat had the greatest revolutionary potential but this did not mean that they were the only members of the proletariat (MECW 5, 73–74; MECW 46, 153–54).

The third clarification is that Marx and Engels did not think that only workers who directly gather or produce a physical thing, like miners and assembly line workers, are proletarians. They were aware that other kinds of propertyless wage labourers exist. Marx emphasised the fact that the combination of large-scale production and the capitalist division of labour results in lots of propertyless wage labourers who play a key role in the production of a specific thing but are not direct producers of it. He wrote,

> With the development of the specifically capitalist mode of production, in which many workers cooperate in the production of the same commodity, the direct relations between their labour and the object under production must of course be very diverse. E.g. the assistants in the factory, mentioned earlier, have no direct involvement in the treatment of the raw material. The workers who constitute the overseers of those who are directly concerned with this treatment stand a step further away; the engineer in turn has a different relation and works mainly with his brain alone, etc. But the *whole group of these workers*, who possess labour capacities of different values, although the total number employed reaches roughly the same level, produce a result which is expressed, from the point of view of the result of the pure labour process, in *commodities* or in a *material product*, and all of them together, as a workshop, are the living production machine for these *products* (MECW 34, 144).

Marx, in addition to this, referred to proletarians who are not involved in the production of physical things. In *Capital Volume 2* he wrote that, "there are however particular branches of industry in which the product of the production process is not a new objective product, a commodity. The only one of these that is economically important is the communication industry, both the transport industry proper, for moving commodities and people, and the transmission of mere information – letters, telegrams, etc" (Marx 1992a, 134). He then acknowledged the existence of "workers occupied in the transport industry" (ibid, 135. Also see MECW 34, 145–46). Elsewhere he mentioned numerous kinds of worker who generate profits for capitalists by performing services or creating experiences for paying customers. This included waiters, singers, actors, teachers at private schools, and even clowns (MECW 31, 13, 15, 21–22; MECW 34, 139–40, 143–44, 448).

In these passages Marx emphasised the fact that two people can engage in the same kinds of labour but belong to separate classes due to the different social relations that they perform this

labour within. He wrote, "these definitions are therefore not derived from the material characteristics of labour (neither from the nature of its product nor from the particular character of the labour as concrete labour), but from the definite social form, the social relations of production, within which the labour is realised" (MECW 31, 13). A propertyless tailor who makes suits for a capitalist in a clothes factory is a proletarian. An independent tailor who is directly hired by a customer to make a suit is a self-employed worker. This is true even if the customer who pays for the suit happens to be a capitalist. A person can teach a group of children to read in any society with writing. This teacher only becomes a proletarian when they work "for wages in an institution along with others, using his own knowledge to increase the money of the entrepreneur who owns the knowledge-mongering institution" (Marx 1990, 1044). Such a teacher "works himself into the ground to enrich the owner of the school. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of a sausage factory, makes no difference to the relation" (ibid, 644).

The Spread of Marx and Engels' Narrow Definition

Marx and Engels' narrow definition of the proletariat did not immediately become popular. The standard broader conception continued to be widely used. For example, in 1852 Blanqui wrote in a letter that in France there were "thirty-two million proletarians without property, or with very little property, and living only by the product of their hands" (Quoted in Spitzer 1957, 101). One reason why the narrow conception of the proletariat did not become dominant is that Marx and Engels were not influential or widely read until decades later. Marx's 1847 polemical critique of Proudhon, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, had a print run of only 800 copies and received very little attention (McLellan 1973, 165–66). Even their 1848 *Manifesto of the Communist Party* had a small readership when it was first released and was largely forgotten until it was republished in 1872 with a new preface. The original 1848 edition was published anonymously and only people familiar with the inner workings of the Communist League knew who had written it (Carver 2015, 67–74; Steenson 1991a, 49, 112–13). Marx and Engels' narrow definition of the proletariat did not suddenly rise to prominence after the publication of Marx's magnum opus *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* in 1867. This is because *Capital* was hardly a best seller. The first German edition had a print run of 1,000 copies and did not sell out until 1871. The second 1872 edition had a print run of 3,000 copies and this lasted until 1883 (Steenson 1991a, 52). It is sometimes claimed that Marx became famous in 1871 with the publication of his analysis of the Paris Commune, *The Civil War in France*, which sold at least several thousand copies in a few months (Heinrich 2019, 333; McLellan 1973, 400; MECW 22, 666). Although it is true that the pamphlet had a much larger readership than Marx's previous output, it appeared as an official publication of the International Workingmen's Association and was signed by every member of the General Council, rather than only Marx. The consequence was that people read Marx without knowing that they were reading him (Steenson 1991a, 113; MECW 22, 309, 355).

Marx and Engels became increasingly influential due to key members of emerging socialist movements and parties disseminating their ideas through the press and printing new editions of their old work, including the *Communist Manifesto*. This first occurred in Germany and Austria during the 1860s. From the 1880s onwards they were well known throughout European socialist movements (Steenson 1991a, 49–52, 115–21, 161, 165–66, 169–70, 220, 224). A key reason for this growth in influence was Engels' various attempts to popularise his and Marx's ideas, such as the

1877–1878 *Anti-Dühring* and 1880 *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific.* This was followed by other influential summaries, such as Kaul Kautsky's 1887 *Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx* (Steenson 1991b, 33–35, 66). This influence culminated in a number of socialist parties adopting Marxist programs, or at least programs influenced by Marxism, during the late 19th century. In 1891 the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) adopted the Erfurt programme, which was primarily written by Kautsky, Eduard Bernstein, and August Bebel. All three were associates of Marx and Engels. Kautsky even received feedback on the draft from Engels himself (ibid, 98–99). The programme opened with Marx and Engels' narrow definition of the proletariat:

> The economic development of bourgeois society leads by natural necessity to the downfall of small industry, whose foundation is formed by the worker's private ownership of his means of production. It separates the worker from his means of production and converts him into a propertyless proletarian, while the means of production become the monopoly of a relatively small number of capitalists and large landowners (SPD 1891, 297).

Prior to the Russian revolution the SPD was the largest socialist political party in the world. In 1890 it had a membership of around 290,000 and had won 1.4 million votes and thirty five mandates in that year's elections (Steenson 1991a, 72). The growth of social democracy spread Marx and Engels' conception of the proletariat but it did not result in it being universally adopted by all socialists. On several occasions anarchist socialists continued to use the broad definition of the proletariat as a catch all term for any worker or wage labourer. This went alongside an awareness that the working classes are not a monolith and can be broken down into various subcategories, such as artisan wage labourers, propertyless wage labourers, peasants, skilled, unskilled and so forth. To give a few examples, in 1873 the Russian anarchist Michael Bakunin wrote that, "Italy has a huge proletariat, endowed with an extraordinary degree of native intelligence but largely illiterate and wholly destitute. It consists of 2 or 3 million urban factory workers and small artisans, and some 20 million landless peasants" (Bakunin 1990, 7). In 1926 the Group of Russian Anarchists Abroad claimed that capitalist society is split into "two very distinct camps … the proletariat (in the broadest sense of the word) and the bourgeoisie". The proletariat so understood included "the urban working class" and "the peasant masses" (Dielo Truda 1926, 195, 199). Other anarchists used the words 'proletariat' or 'working class' in a narrow sense. In 1938 Rudolf Rocker claimed that during the industrial revolution "a new social class was born, which had no forerunners in history: the modern industrial proletariat". This class, in contrast to journeymen and master artisans, did not own the "tools of his trade" and "had nothing to dispose of except the labour of their hands" (Rocker 2004, 24–25). Rocker's narrative is the same as Marx and Engels, which is unsurprising given that he explicitly references both *Capital* by Marx and *The Condition of the Working Class in England* by Engels (ibid, 21).

The Proletariat in the 21st Century

This essay has been concerned with explaining the categories that socialists historically developed to understand the economic classes that exist under capitalism. During the nineteenth century three competing conceptions of the proletariat arose. The word was used to refer to either (a) all workers, including the self-employed (b) all wage labourers, or (c) all wage labourers

who own no means of production. The last and most narrow conception was advocated by Marx and Engels and was not initially popular or widely used. Today it has become the dominant conception of the proletariat in socialist discourse. The proletariat so understood is only increasing in size. According to Immanuel Ness "while industrial production contracted in the Global North from 1980 to 2007, production in the South has expanded, and global production as a whole has grown from 1.9 billion to 3.1 billion workers – far more working people than at any time in the history of capitalism" (Ness 2016, 9, 14). It is furthermore the case that Marx and Engels never claimed that the proletariat only consisted of industrial workers. Propertyless wage labourers employed in starbucks or video game development are just as much proletarians as those who work in mines and factories. What makes a person a proletarian is not the kind of labour they engage in, such as digging a ditch or doing a powerpoint presentation, but the social relations that they work within (Raekstad 2022, 216).

An understanding of the proletariat as a really existing class should not be gained purely through an examination of what dead men with large beards wrote about it. It is necessary to not only read old theorists but also test their theories against reality. If a model does not correspond to reality or cannot be used to explain it, then we should create new and better models. Reality is always more complicated than the neat models we construct to understand it. The mistake is to ignore reality because it does not align with our model. Although classes can be clearly distinguished from one another at a societal level, the boundaries between classes become fuzzier the more we zoom in. In the 19th century a person could be self-employed and a wage labourer at the same time. A farmer could be a peasant proprietor for one season and an urban propertyless wage labourer another. A person could spend their youth working in the city for a wage and then retreat to the countryside when their father dies and they inherit a small plot of land. People could, in other words, belong to multiple classes at the same time and move between classes on a regular or permanent basis. Despite this generalisations can of course be made, but they should be made with care and caution.

A reader might suppose that there is a rigid clear distinction between chattel slaves who pick cotton and legally free wage labourers who work in a cotton mill. Doing so would ignore that it was common for slaves to engage in wage labour (Linden 2008, 23). The labour historian Marcel van der Linden provides one extremely interesting example of this. Simon Gray was a slave in the southern United States. He worked as the chief boatman of the Natchez lumber company from 1845 until 1862. His crew was composed of between ten to twenty men. It included both black slaves and white legally free wage labourers. Some of the slaves were owned by the company. Other slaves were hired as wage labourers via their owner. This included Gray himself. He, in addition to this, employed the white workers, lent them money, sometimes paid their wages, and engaged in a wide variety of managerial tasks. Linden describes this as "a *slave* who functioned as a *manager*, *free wage laborers* who were employed *by a slave*, and *other slaves* who had to obey an employer who was himself a slave!" (Linden 2008, 26).

It is furthermore the case that early factories in England relied on a form of labour that could be described as state enforced child servitude. The government involuntarily made poor and orphan children the apprentices of factory owners. The factory owner had full legal authority over the child and it was illegal for the child to run away. These children were not owned as property but they were not strictly speaking legally free wage labourers. Due to state violence they did not choose who they worked for or, indeed, if they worked at all. Whilst at work these children would, at least in some workplaces, be beaten by overseers in order to keep them awake

and on task during long shifts (Freeman 2018, 24–25). Marx was aware of this and wrote in *Capital Volume One* that the rise of "factory production" was built on "child-stealing and child-slavery" (Marx 1990, 922).

The distinction between wage labourers who own means of production and propertyless wage labourers was important in the 19th century. Drawing attention to it was necessary when explaining the decline of the hand loom and the rise of the factory in England. But reality was always more complicated than this distinction made it appear. Factory workers could own means of production as well. The German economist August Sartorius von Waltershausen visited the United States in the 1880s. He observed that,

> Unlike their European counterparts, American factory workers commonly own their own tools. The system used on the other side of the Atlantic is certainly preferable, for, as Studnitz has noted, it means that American workers choose their tools according to their own needs, while European workers are forced to adapt to the tools they are provided with. Tools often constitute a sizable proportion of a worker's wealth (Waltershausen 1998, 216. Cited by Linden 2008, 25).

In the modern world it is still common in certain professions for wage labourers to own their own tools, such as mechanics and chefs. Some companies use a bring your own device policy whereby people use their own personal computer and smartphone for work. When Marx was writing self-employed farmers and artisans were being turned into proletarians. Now corporations are attempting to avoid labour laws by transforming proletarians into self employed independent contractors who own their own means of production but have no job security and are not entitled to minimum wage. The sociologist Bartosz Mika has referred to the modern gig economy as the digital putting out system. During industrialisation merchant capitalists provided domestic craftspeople with raw materials. Now platform apps like uber, deliveroo, and taskrabbit provide service workers with access to consumers. Both forms of work are characterised by a decentralised labour force who are paid per task completed, do their work in isolation from other employees, and are dependent upon a central node for work (Mika 2020).

Capitalism has, in addition to this, created numerous other platforms that make it easier to be self-employed, such as social media, ebay, etsy, patreon, and onlyfans. But low wages and rising costs of living result in numerous proletarians turning to these sites not as their main source of income, but as a supplement to the inadequate wages paid to them by the ruling classes. It is furthermore the case that these self-employed workers are a source of revenue for the websites that they use to earn a living, whether this is directly through fees and advertising or indirectly through content production that ensures the website remains alive. On most websites users, whether they be content creators or viewers, are themselves a product whose personal data is sold to advertisers. In Asia some content creators are even being concentrated inside influencer factories, where they livestream in small cubicles for long hours in order to persuade their viewers to make donations and shop in real time. A large portion of the influencer's income is then split between the streaming platform they use and the company that owns the influencer factory and micromanages their brand and behavior.

When Marx was writing it was generally correct to say that the proletariat sold their labour to the capitalist class who privately owned the means of production. Today a significant segment of propertyless wage labourers work for the state. Some of these professions can be accurately

described as a person working for a state capitalist, such as a for profit energy or transportation company that the state owns the majority of shares in. In 1878 Engels correctly argued that,

> state-ownership, does not do away with the capitalistic nature of the productive forces … The modern state, no matter what its form, is essentially a capitalist machine, the state of the capitalists, the ideal personification of the total national capital. The more it proceeds to the taking over of productive forces, the more does it actually become the national capitalist, the more citizens does it exploit. The workers remain wage-workers—proletarians. The capitalist relation is not done away with (MECW 25, 266).

This analysis does not apply to sectors that do not produce a profit and are maintained by a government allocated budget, in particular state run education, welfare, and healthcare systems.

The division of labour has also become more complex under capitalism. In *Capital Volume 1* Marx pointed out that many capitalists hand "over the work of direct and constant supervision of the individual workers and groups of workers to a special kind of wage-labourer. An industrial army of workers under the command of a capitalist requires, like a real army, officers (managers) and N.C.O.s (foremen, overseers), who command during the labour process in the name of capital. The work of supervision becomes their established and exclusive function" (Marx 1990, 450). The number of managers, planners, and supervisors, who are wage labourers that have the power to direct and control the labour process, has significantly increased since the 1860s. This has led several modern socialists, such as Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, to view this kind of wage labourer as belonging to a distinct category called the co-coordinator class (Albert and Hahnel 1981, 84, 140–41). They are not capitalists but exercise authority over the proletariat. Tom Wetzel calls this the bureaucratic control class (Wetzel 2022, 11–12). On this model class is determined not only by whether or not a person owns the means of production. It is also determined by their role in the labour process and their powers of decision-making.

Conclusion

An analysis of class in the 21st century cannot simply repeat the analysis from the 19th as if the world is exactly the same. We have to develop our own ideas in response to the economic realities that confront us. Although much has changed since the 19th century, the fundamental structure of capitalist society has not. Capitalism is still a class society based on a division between capitalists and wage labourers, rulers and ruled, exploiters and the exploited. In the late 19th century anarchist socialist workers argued that the proletariat should abolish itself by overthrowing the ruling classes, expropriating their private property, and smashing the state. On the ruins of the old world the proletariat, alongside all other kinds of worker, would build a stateless, classless, and moneyless society in which the means of production and land are owned in common and society is self-managed via voluntary workplace and community associations. In such a society people would no longer be capitalists or proletarians. They would be human beings who engaged in acts of production and consumption. Workers called this society the free association of free producers (Baker 2023, 28, 79–91). The same language was used by Marx and Engels. They wrote in 1844 that "the proletariat … is victorious only by abolishing itself" (MECW 4, 36). Although they disagreed with anarchists on revolutionary strategy, they shared a vision of a future society

in which, to quote Engels in 1884, production is organised via the "free and equal association of the producers" (MECW 26, 272). Over a century later it remains the case that universal human emancipation requires the self-abolition of the proletariat.

In order to achieve this goal the proletariat needs to unite as a class, form their own organisations, and engage in direct action. One of the most effective kinds of direct action that workers can engage in is strikes. This is because capitalism requires the labour of workers. If nobody works, then business comes to a halt and capitalists cannot earn a profit. This imposes external pressure onto capitalists and gives them a powerful incentive to give into the demands of workers. The essential role of workers in production is both a source of oppression and their collective power to change the world. This is not to say that workplace strikes are the only form of direct action that workers should engage in or that workers should only organise at the point of production. Other forms of direct action and organising are necessary, such as rent strikes, civil disobedience, demonstrations, reading groups, university occupations, and so forth. Social change and the development of an effective mass movement requires both workplace and community organising. To give one example, the emancipation of women can be furthered by the formation of women only consciousness raising groups, cis-men doing their share of house work, reclaim the night marches, networks that help people get illegal abortions, and workplace organising against sexual harassment. The point is only that the ability to engage in class struggle via the collective withdrawal of labour is an important power that the proletariat has due to their location within the structure of capitalist society. This power was used by workers in the past to win better wages, safer working conditions, and shorter working hours. We can do the same and engage in collective direct action in order to improve our lives in the short term and build towards a truly free society in the long term.

Capitalism and the state are of course not the only oppressive structures. We live in a society which is patriarchal, racist, queerphobic and ableist. As a result of this, the working class is not an amorphous blob. It is divided along lines of gender, race, sexuality, and disability. These divisions are not merely the product of the ruling class dividing the working class. They are actively perpetuated by the working class themselves through the process of different working class people oppressing one another, such as working class men abusing working class women or white workers viewing black workers as inferior. Workers cannot unite within an organisation, let alone as a class, if one group of workers is being oppressed by another group of workers. Such behavior leads to workers being hurt and excluded within the very organisations that claim to fight for their emancipation. If we want to create a society in which everyone is free, then we must build organisations that struggle against all forms of oppression simultaneously. We must not tolerate any kind of oppressive behaviour and, at the same time, help other workers unlearn their socialisation into oppressive structures such that they become people who are capable of, and driven to, horizontally associate with others in all aspects of their life. The proletariat must unite as a class, but they must form a unity that is enriched by all the differences within it. We must engage in intersectional class struggle.

One serious barrier to the formation of a mass working class movement is that a large number of wage labourers do not regard themselves as belonging to the same class. Some wage labourers, for example, believe that capitalism is a meritocracy and worship CEOs as heroes and innovators. They have internalised the idea that if they have the right grind set and go monk mode then they too can become a successful entrepreneur. They are not a proletarian, but a capitalist in waiting who happens to be temporarily working for someone else. Workers must counteract

these patterns of thinking by deliberately choosing to spread class-consciousness through words and actions. The making of the first self-described modern proletariat in 1830s France was not driven purely by impersonal economic transformations to society. A crucial factor was workers themselves, who had previously been divided into mutually hostile professions and organisations, coming to think of themselves as belonging to a distinct class with shared class interests. The 19th century proletariat was made by both the structure of capitalist society and workers themselves. In 1847 Marx wrote that,

> Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The domination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have pointed out only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests (MECW 6, 211).

The proletariat of the 21st century must do the same. We have to transform from being just a class in itself and become a class for itself.

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