

Introduction: Class(es) Today

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It can appear as if the time of and for class-(based-)analysis is definitely over. At the beginning of the 21st century, the concept of the class appears to be little more than an outdated cog in a methodology that emerged in the 19th and lost its theoretical validity and practical potential at the end of the 20th century. The reason for this conceptual exhaustion or saturation does not only spring from the apparent Marxist bias of the concept. Nor, for that matter, only from its almost vulgar sociological application that reified the class concept into an objectivist substratum of societies. The reason for its contemporary disappearance rather seems to result from the fact that today either the overall regime of visibility of the class has changed and this transformation can appear as if the classes as such have disappeared.

Already at the end of the last century, Niklas Luhmann repeatedly and systematically insisted that from a certain historical moment onward, the organizational principles of society moved away from stratification to a rather flexible operation- and distinction-based model.

This means that societies are organized by complex assemblies of systems, each of which serves a particular organizing function that reduced the complexity of (re)producing and administering social order and allows for coordinated system-specific social operations in concerto. This is assumed to be a historical transformation that invalidated all that was stratificatory and static in society and thereby also, for Luhmann, invalidated concepts like that of the class (and its paradigmatic theoretical representation: Marxism). But even though being a partisan for non-class-based-social-theory, surprisingly classes and social stratification did not disappear entirely – as Luhmann himself clearly saw and admitted after visiting some favelas in Brazil.

But if the concept of class is not per se (trans)historically invalidated, maybe what we witness today is that it lost its explanatory potential due to another reason. One can certainly be tempted to assume that in present-day societies we seem to have reached a degree of social and economic mobility and permeability that invalidates everything that was still pertinent as ossified and ossifying structural feature of previous societies in the 19th and early to mid-20th century. One might here, rather vulgarly, think of those who invested into new electronic currencies and therefore became millionaires overnight; is our today not also that where movements in both directions are possible in a pace that was unthinkable before? Not only did the new currencies generate new millionaires (and in some countries there are more than ever), but as an effect of the most recent financial crisis some people lost millions (or more) overnight and what appeared to be their inexhaustible wealth evaporated into not even thin air. Does this point to the fact that classes are more porous and fluid than (we assumed) before? But if this were the case, as some claim, in this porosity and movement up or down, to use mountainous metaphors, then also and paradigmatically manifests a problematization of the – classical left-wing attempt to (objectively)

locate the – revolutionary class-agent (before the revolution). Even those who were once deemed to have a class-interest in revolutionizing or abolishing the present system that forces them into being one class, are no longer one class; or maybe as a class, as has been contended by Peter Sloterdijk for example, they do not have an interest to revolutionize the system if they at the same time profit from the system – even though, as is well-known, it is exactly this assumption that Marx branded as one of the most disoriented and conceptually flawed (he may thus have been simply wrong). What appears as empirical class-diversification seems to have affected the very potentiality of the concept of class and what can be anticipated or envisaged as its practical consequences. The situation is thus quite confusing and disorienting. Since certainly the class concept does demand a thorough (re-)conceptualization in times of its apparent disappearance – even if this disappearance is an illusion.

But is the very opposite not also true? Is not at least one class absolutely visible, maybe more visible than ever? Namely, the class – whatever the appropriate name might be – of the multi-billionaires, the super-rich, the new aristocracy. Their over-visibility even stands behind the assumption that today some speak of a transformation of capitalism into something like a neo-feudal order – and we take them to be so powerful that, strangely enough, many deem it convincing to involve them even in discussions about how societies will (have to) develop in the future. But what does this aristocratization, this feudalisation – if it is one – do to the overall conceptual powers of the concept of the class, as presented for example in the Marxist tradition? Are the super-rich conceptually crisis resistant? Do they represent the only class which certainly has a class-consciousness as it steers society in the direction of an even greater concentration of wealth in their few golden hands? If they seem to be “the visible hands of the market” could one not infer from this fact also the existence of the invisible hands and heads that have been and are exploited to (re)produce their absurd amounts of wealth?

One problem linked to the concept of the class in the Marxist tradition is famously linked to the distinction between the class-in-itself and the class-for-itself. This distinction generated theoretico-practical problems, to cut a long story very short, because the latter was – in the form of class-consciousness – ultimately that which provided constitutive of the class-as-one: it implied a subjectivization of objective conditions which thereby already was (potentially) transformed, since it was per-and conceived as such (namely as a shared objective condition). Thereby the concept of the class unavoidably entailed a process, or an act of subjectivization that demanded organization. No class without organization and subjectivization. This is still true for the nouveau super-super-rich.

Only when the objective conditions are perceived as shared objective conditions, the class can emerge as such, but this does not necessarily or automatically imply any emancipatory insight or potential.

But what to do against this background with emancipation? Does the concept of the class play a role in it at all? Does one need to diversify it, fluidify it? Give up the idea of the link between emancipation and class? Or it is exactly the other way round: Could one not also wager that when emancipatory struggles and struggles for liberation that have entirely different aims and highly particular motives realize that what they share is that they are all struggling with a system of oppression that thereby these singular struggles can take “struggling” as objective condition that constitutes them as a class(-for-themselves)? Such a class – the class of those who struggle for liberation – might then be the universal class (whereby those struggling for female emancipation are for example united with those who struggle for liberation from racist or sexist oppression)?

This overall picture is further complicated when we presume – and it needs to be examined if this is a convincing assumption or not – that there are classes but that there might be more than just two in which the organization principle of society is condensed. Since, what to do from this perspective with the idea of the middle class – which (in terms of a global petit bourgeoisie) has recently been identified by Alain Badiou as manifesting the very split that organizes capitalist societies, namely the split between those who own the means of production and circulation and those who do not. The middle class might have become a split middle class since it is torn between contradictory aspirations: either it becomes part of the upper class and therefore has an interest in stabilizing a system which seems impossible to stabilize or they side with those who have nothing such that a new world can emerge. And where does this leave other potentially relevant class-agents, for example the strange, dangerous or sub-classes, which – in some interpretations – have already irritated Marx (and Engels): the global Lumpenproletariat whose Italian version so much inspired and impressed Pasolini and which in its global form might stand in a still peculiar relationship to another class whose political leanings puzzled generations of Marxist (Stalin hated them, Mao sought to mobilize them): the peasants. How do these classes interact? What does all of this mean for the concept that was foundational for Marxism: class-struggle?

The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* seeks to deal with these questions from a variety of different angles. It examines the political relevance of class(es) for our times.

We hope it will begin to address topics related to the (non)existence of classes, class analysis, and class-struggle.

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