

On Some Paradoxes of Social Analysis

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Abstract: This paper detects two opposing politico-methodological ways of relating “class” and “class struggle” within Marx(ism). While the conservative analytic approach considers the existence of classes as primary and their struggle as secondary, the revolutionary synthetic method poses the primacy of struggle over classes. Although “class” and “class struggle” are absent from the lexis of contemporary politics, the synthetic procedure is still operative within a new ideological configuration of the West. This ideology employs a non-revolutionary synthetic method by denouncing the past revolutionary denunciations of inequality as part of the Western cultural heritage based on inequality.

Keywords: Class; Class Struggle; Marx(ism); Analytic approach; Synthetic approach; inequality; Confederation

The notions of class and class struggle stem from the 19th century. They are frequently associated with the name of Karl Marx. According to his own declaration, however, these notions are not his. In his letter to Weydemeyer, written in London on the 5th of March 1852, he mocks those who feign that these terms belong to the corpus of revolutionary theory. He invites them to acquaint themselves with bourgeois literature to convince themselves of the contrary. After naming the leading authors, who illustrate his thesis, he resumes his own position in the following way: “[...] 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. My own contribution was: 1. To show that the *existence of classes* is merely bound up with *certain historical phases in the development of production*; 2. that the class struggle necessarily leads towards the *dictatorship of the proletariat*; 3. that this dictatorship itself constitutes no more than a transition towards the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*.”¹

Without going into further detail, one gets the impression that for Marx, “class” and “class struggle” conceptually coincide. It seems futile (for Marx) to talk about society as it was in the mid-19th century, in *this* historical stage of the development of production, without mentioning classes; it seems futile to him to talk about classes without saying that they are in struggle; it seems futile to him to wish for their existence without being in struggle. The end of struggle and the end of classes are mutually conditioned (see point 3).

The pertinence of the text reaches well beyond the doctrinal clarifications that are made therein. Marx wants to be particularly

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¹ Marx 1983, p. 62-65.

clear; for this very same reason, he even reveals the presence of an obscurity. For his presentation omits the difference between two distinct approaches: either one proceeds by posing that classes exist at the beginning, and determines in a second step, that they are in struggle; or the approach begins by positing the existence of the social struggle and then defines the classes as actors of that struggle. I am qualifying the first approach in a conventional manner as analytic and the second as synthetic. My aim is to show that the principle of their difference is still relevant today, even though the notions of class and class struggle are less and less present, whether in scientific research or in the political debate.

The analytic approach can be found directly in the works of a “bourgeois historian” that Marx refers to in his letter: François Guizot, who was not only an author admired by all of scholarly Europe, but who became, between 1840 and 1848, as the most influential minister of King Louis Philippe, the political idol of the whole of conservative Europe. In this view, reasonable politics must be capable to govern the coexistence of different classes while preserving peace or at least the absence of a violent struggle between them. Guizot claimed to have achieved this until the Revolution of 1848 marked his failure; others have pursued the same project, and even today we are not lacking similar examples, except that the vocabulary of classes is no longer used, precisely because the revolutionary tradition has linked it to the synthetic approach.

Without necessarily being aware of the difference between the analytical and the synthetic, the proponents of the revolution have indeed chosen the second path; they situated the struggle within the fundamentals of societies and derived the notion of class from it. In the 20th century, this tendency was reinforced by historical situations; both in Russia and in China the revolutionary event was inscribed in the development of a war that was as much regional as it was global. Without coinciding with class struggle, the military confrontation made it directly visible. The texts of Mao Zedong in particular use the Sino-Japanese War as a pedagogical tool, which provides clarity on his interpretation of Marxism. However, this interpretation consists exactly in pushing the conceptual primacy of struggle over class to its extreme. In its insistence on class struggle, it will go so far as to autonomize the struggle in itself and separate it from the classes while reducing it to the struggle between the old and the new. The classes in general are determined by the position they occupy in this struggle; the classes of Chinese society are determined by the position they occupy in the Sino-Japanese War; the political notion of the “people” depends on the determination of the main enemy in the struggle (whether it is a military confrontation, a social struggle or the struggle between the old and the new): part of the people are all those who fight the principal enemy. Irrespective of the political practice of Mao Zedong and the disasters it

has caused the Chinese people, his doctrine illustrates clearly what I call the synthetic approach in class theory.

Marx himself undoubtedly has adopted a similar line of reasoning. This was already testified in 1847 by the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: the first sentence of section 1 poses the thesis: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." It then continues with a brief delineation: "Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight; a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes."² One can sense that the notion of class in these formulations has no proper character; it comprises profoundly heterogeneous realities. Its conceptual unity is fully dependent on the relation of oppressors/oppressed and its material unity depends on the notion of struggle. However, the relation of oppression is not investigated in detail as if its existence and its content were self-evident; in the same manner, the struggle is treated as if it did not require any definition; its empirical evidence is sufficient to take it as an immediate given.

Over the course of the *Manifesto* the transhistorical generalities of the introduction give way to the specificity of the moment; in the mid-19th century, the old classes in Europe gave way to the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In *Capital*, these two classes are identified in economical terms by the theory of surplus value; by the same token, the class struggle appears only under the economic form of irreducible inequality between sellers and buyers of labour power. Yet, beyond the explicit logic of *Capital*, subsists another implicit logic, in which the classes are derived from the struggle and not the other way around. While the presentation of the work is analytic, the synthetic approach prevails within the subtext.

My point here is not to pursue an in-depth commentary on Marx's doctrine. This doctrine is important since it allows us to situate the two approaches, which I have distinguished, in their relation to one another: the analytics, in which the classes precede the struggle, and the synthetics, in which the struggle determines the classes. In my mind, this is where the real discussion lies. However, as the example of François Guizot already made clear, nothing in the analytic approach obliges us to admit that the struggle might be a necessary element; the analysis often gains precision once it limits itself to establishing the differential characters of the various elements of society, without taking into

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2 Marx & Engels 1969, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/index.htm>. The original is written in German. The text derived from a collaboration between Marx and Engels; published in February 1848 without the names of the authors, it was republished in 1872. On this occasion, Marx and Engels jointly claimed co-authorship.

consideration at the outset whether the differences are themselves fixed in a struggle, which is either permanent or occasional. Of course, it thus becomes clear that the notion of class enjoys no privilege whatsoever. Other concepts may turn out to be much more suitable to grasp the multiplicity of groupings within

societies. If one accepts the classical Marxist position, one will only recognize those groupings whose principle is based on the economic structure as classes, but it turns out every day that one must take into account other forms of groupings whose principle is not immediately economic. Even the relation of oppression took other forms than the unequal buying/selling of labour power. All the dimensions of social life can be affected by that, whether they touch the economy or not. Under these conditions, the question of classes becomes a lexicological quarrel. Either one conserves the word in its old meaning, ignoring a vast ensemble of phenomena, or one changes the meaning of the word in order to include these phenomena, or, what seems to be the most honest solution, one renounces the word altogether.

Let us now be more precise. If one pursues the analytic approach the groupings do not derive from the struggle, neither conceptually nor materially; the right method consists therefore in beginning by bracketing the question of whether there exists a struggle or not. Let us now suppose, that in a second step, we come to state that there really is a struggle, then one cannot content oneself with observing it pure and simple. One has to reflect upon the subjective motives and the objective causes of this struggle; the simple existence of classes does not suffice. In other words, contrary to the *Manifesto*, the analysis cannot treat the struggle as an immediate given. Whether one calls it struggle or war or rivalry or oppression, the words do not matter much, one has to establish the motives and the causes. The simplest way is to stick to the relation of oppression. Therefore, apart from identifying the groupings, information on the inequalities in which they are inscribed must be added. Instead of “classes” and “class struggle” one thus uses the much more neutral vocabulary of “groupings” and “inequality”. Just as the groupings are distinguished by distinctive features, the inequalities are assigned to their respective register – economy, individual rights, ethnic background, cultural autonomy, etc. Ultimately, it is a question of whether they give rise to conflicts and what degree of violence they may reach.

Let us now turn back to the synthetic approach. It is a fact that it has maintained a privileged relationship with the revolutionary tradition since the 19th century. Has the decline of the latter within western societies provoked a parallel decline of any synthetic approach within those same societies? I do not think so. One can admit that the center of politico-social reflections, in western societies today, does not lie in Europe anymore, but in the United States. I even put forward the hypothesis that today the notion of the West has no other content but to

designate the set of states who accept, more or less openly, the military, economic, juridic, and intellectual domination of the United States. If one talks about the West, one talks in fact about a CONFEDERATION, which is assembled around the United States.

Otherwise, one has to accept a paradox: the US-American domination in the intellectual domain expresses itself in the discourses of dissent and protest and not in the discourses of order. The latter remain determined by their national particularities, i.e., the conception of order is not the same in a country of, say, catholic or protestant tradition; it is not the same in Europe and in the United States; it is not the same in central or western Europe, etc. Inversely, an echo of the protests and dissents which are expressed in the United States may be perceived in the positions of those who express their dissatisfaction with regard to the established order (dissent) and the ones who want to change the established order profoundly (protest). Within this domain, western Europe is not really autonomous anymore. It is true that the intellectual domination of the United States disposes of a network which extends over a very grand part of the globe: the universities, of which a majority inscribes itself in a perpetual back and forth, of which the central knot is located in the United States. In this way, a global UNIVERSITY is created, in which not the same solutions, but the same forms of reasoning circulate. It thus does not really matter whether the discourses of dissent and protest are held by nationals of the United States or on US-American soil. This hence forms one of the major frameworks of the western CONFEDERATION.

Not only does it produce the entirety of the educated middle classes within the CONFEDERATION, but it teaches them to refuse the economic, political, and ideological functioning of the western order in part or entirely. What are we stating then? As many forms as these refutations might take, they always aim at inequality. Inequality plays the role of an axiom, from which all ultimate criticism derives. Depending on the various situations, one will privilege this or that specific form of general inequality: colonial oppression, cultural appropriation, the primacy of white culture, the patriarchy, the conflicts of gender and so on. The list is not and could never be terminated. It will expand as the analysis of the past, present, and future of the West will be pursued. The *wokeness* movement has caught the attention of the media, but the crucial gesture goes well beyond that. It consists of a return to the synthetic approach, except that the class struggle is not mentioned. The starting point is a much more general determination, of which class struggle and even the relation oppressor/oppressed are just particular variants: inequality.

It presents itself as the origin and cause of all that which is dysfunctional in the West, on whatever level. Since western societies are considered fundamentally dysfunctional, the following consequence imposes itself: all the groupings and all the conflicts which count within

the social discourse are derived from one of the multiple aspects of the inequality-relation; all the groupings and all the conflicts which are derived from such an aspect count in the social discourse.

I have already pointed out the following paradox: there is an abundance of inequalities in the materiality of the western CONFEDERATION, both within its internal dispositives and its will for victory in the external competition. When it comes to the ideals that the CONFEDERATION proposes to itself in its own discourses, inequality is felt as an evil to be combatted or even as a fault that must be repaired. The contradiction is obvious. And yet the paradox goes even further. Inequality not only characterizes the present of the West; but it also defines its past. That which is often called the cultural heritage of the West is entangled with inequalities of all kinds. Not only does it describe them without always condemning them, but it is accused of producing them. One can even go so far as to consider that some of these inequalities have made this heritage possible in the first place. It then cannot escape the rejection proclaimed by the educated middle class. Through this gesture, they define an ideology. Despite its initial reluctance, a big part of the CONFEDERATION finally adopted this ideology because it could not go against the global University that has become a wheelwork of the US-American *soft power*. In so doing, the same part of the CONFEDERATION renounces the content of its own history and of its own culture. Although the rhythm of the process varies in the different states of the CONFEDERATION, it can be observed everywhere, with or without *cancel culture*.

This first paradox is accompanied by a second one: while an anti-western discourse is deployed within the West (and the West takes pride in this), another anti-western discourse is held outside of the West. Except that the first takes inequality for a fault, which one does not have the moral right to take advantage of; the second on the contrary sees in the inequality a virtue, on the condition that it is oriented in one's favor. Consequently, the proponents of the second anti-western discourse see the first as an indication of the enemy's decadence. They do not hide their contempt.

At the end of this itinerary, we have to point out one last paradox. If we admit that the synthetic approach has reappeared in the West, especially in the global University, and if we admit that this approach has elevated inequality to the status of an axiom, one could think that the logic of the *Manifesto* of Marx and Engels should have regained vigor. This is not the case. Precisely because the cultural heritage of the West cannot free itself from the inequalities that made its existence possible, past denouncers of inequality are themselves considered to benefit from one or another previously unrecognised inequality. I have only mentioned Marxism here, but all the revolutionary movements and the notions of the revolution themselves are subject to suspicion now,

simply because they belong to the long line of dead white males. The doctrine of classes and class struggle belong to the European cultural heritage, which is seen by the educated middle classes as the most narrow-minded version of the Western heritage. This double rejection of classes and class struggle provokes another one: the rejection of the revolutionary tradition altogether. Instead of being revived with the return of the synthetic method and the denunciation of inequality as the original cause of all evils, this return and these relentless denunciations imply on the contrary the obsolescence of the revolutionary tradition.

Translated by: Daniel Barry and Jan Weise

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Volume 10
Issue 1