

Class Struggle: Antagonism Beyond Fighting an Enemy

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Abstract: We live in an era of *unholy alliances*, a combination of ideological elements which violate the standard opposition of Left and Right. What does the Left do when it confronts a reactionary agent which IS what it claims to be, where there is no need for deep symptomal analysis? Here the Left gets perplexed: what of, at some deeper level, we are even worse than our reactionary opponent? Drawing from quantum physics, this short essay I make parallels with Bell's theorem in quantum physics in order to understand certain contemporary phenomena.

Keywords: class struggle, antagonism, Heidegger, quantum physics, Bell's theorem

What characterizes an authentic emancipatory thought is not a vision of conflict-free harmonious future but the properly dialectical notion of antagonism which is totally incompatible with the Rightist topic of the need of an enemy to assert our self-identity – here is Heidegger's concise articulation of the need for an enemy from his course of 1933-34:

“An enemy is each and every person who poses an essential threat to the *Dasein* of the people and its individual members. The enemy does not have to be external, and the external enemy is not even always the most dangerous one. And it can seem as if there were no enemy. Then it is a fundamental requirement to find the enemy, to expose the enemy to the light, *or even first to make the enemy*, so that this standing against the enemy may happen and so that *Dasein* may not lose its edge.... [The challenge is] to bring the enemy into the open, to harbor no illusions about the enemy, to keep oneself ready for attack, to cultivate and intensify a constant readiness and to prepare the attack *looking far ahead with the goal of total annihilation*.¹

The most ominous passage is here “to expose the enemy to the light, *or even first to make the enemy*, so that this standing against the enemy may happen.” In short, it doesn't even matter if the enemy is a real enemy - if there is no enemy it has to be invented so that a people “may not lose its edge” and can prepare the (invented) enemy's “total annihilation”... What we find here is the logic of anti-Semitism at its most elementary: what Heidegger ignores is the possibility that *an enemy is invented to create the false unity of the people and thus cover up its immanent antagonisms*.

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¹ Heidegger 2010, p.73

The true danger of this Heidegger's stance is that he presents the invention and elimination of the enemy as a proper *ethical* stance. The latest example of such a stance in movies is *The Menu* (Marx Mylord, 2022) in which Ralph Fiennes gives an exquisite performance by playing Julian, a top cook and owner of an elite restaurant on a small private island. He invites a group of rich guests with a plan to kill them all - the only survivor is Margot, one of the guests who mocks Julian's dishes and complains that she is still hungry. When Julian asks what she would like to eat, Margot requests a cheeseburger and fries, having previously seen a photo of a young, happy Julian working at a fast-food restaurant. Moved by her simple request, he prepares the meal to her specifications. Margot takes a bite and praises his food, then asks if she can get it "to go". Julian packs the food for her and the staff allow her to leave. Margot takes the Coast Guard boat docked nearby and escapes the island while Julian sets the restaurant ablaze, detonating the barrel and killing the guests, staff, and himself.² While Julian is definitely immoral (he kills a series of people who are corrupted and repulsive but not murderers), he nonetheless gives body to a pure ethical stance: his suicidal final act is not just a personal quirk, it targets an entire way of life exemplified by the *haute cuisine* in which not only customers but also cooks and waiters who serve them participate - one can bet that all his guests were involved in charities and had deep sympathy for the plight of the poor... The proof of his ethics is that he lets Margot go: if he were just immoral, he would have killed them all.

But fidelity to a principled decision is not enough for an act to qualify as truly ethical - sticking to a problematic "principle" doesn't help a lot in such cases since the principle itself is wrong. Here is the supreme case: in his speech to the SS leaders in Posen on October 4 1943, Himmler spoke quite openly about the mass killing of the Jews as "a glorious page in our history, and one that has never been written and never can be written"; he then goes on to characterize the ability to do this and to remain decent as the greatest virtue: "To have gone through this [the extermination of the Jews] and at the same time to have remained decent, that has made us hard." Himmler here explicitly opposes true principled virtue to ordinary human compassion for a singular human being: "But then they all come along, these 80 million good Germans, and every one of them has his decent Jew. Of course, it's quite clear that the other Jews are pigs - but this one is a first-class Jew..." In short, every German knows that Jews as such are pigs, but then they fail to apply this principle to singular Jews that they know. And he is well aware of what he is saying - he explicitly includes the killing of women and children:

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² The Menu (2022, film) Wikipedia

“We faced the question: what should we do with the women and children? I decided here too to find a completely clear solution. I did not regard myself as justified in exterminating the men – that is to say, to kill them or have them killed – and to allow the avengers in the shape of children to grow up for our sons and grandchildren. The difficult decision had to be taken to have this people disappear from the earth.”³

Because of this radical stance, Himmler was (till the Fall of 1944) opposed to the creation of a volunteer army of Russian prisoners to fight Soviet troops. When, after being taken prisoner, the Soviet general Yuri Vlasov proposed to exploit the anti-Stalinist sentiments among the Russian population and the POWs and to set up a Russian people’s army, Himmler spoke disparagingly of the “Vlasov shivaree” (*Der Wlassow-Rummel*) and rejected the idea that there is a mass of oppressed Russian people opposed to the Stalinist rule – for him, such distinctions within the inferior Slavic race were of no interest. But what makes all this so fascinating is the high ethical language used by Himmler to justify the extermination of Jews and the brutal treatment of the Slavic people under German occupation:

“One principle must be absolute for the SS man: we must be honest, decent, loyal and friendly to members of our blood and to no one else. /.../ Whether the other races live in comfort or perish of hunger interests me only in so far as we need them as slaves for our culture; apart from that it does not interest me. Whether or not 10,000 Russian women collapse from exhaustion while digging a tank ditch interests me only in so far as the tank ditch is completed for Germany. /.../ We have the moral right, we had the duty to our people to do it – to kill this people who wanted to kill us. But we do not have the right to enrich ourselves with even one fur, with one Mark, with one cigarette, with one watch, with anything. That we do not have. Because at the end of this, we don't want – because we exterminated the bacillus – to become sick and die from the same bacillus.”⁴

This properly *ethical* Evil makes Himmler much worse than any form of pragmatic opportunism. What really matters is how an ethical principle relates to social antagonisms: does it cover them up or render them visible. Or, to put it in another way: in contrast to the struggle against the enemy which aims at preserving one’s identity (allegedly threatened

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3 Quoted from Kershaw 2001, pp.604-5

4 Heinrich Himmler’s speech at Posen, available online at: <https://alphahistory.com/holocaust/himmlers-speech-at-posen-1943/>

by the Other), the main task of an emancipatory movement is to change OURSELVES, our own identity. The refusal to radically change oneself was clearly described back in 1937 by George Orwell who deployed the ambiguity of the predominant Leftist attitude towards the class difference:

“We all rail against class-distinctions, but very few people seriously want to abolish them. Here you come upon the important fact that every revolutionary opinion draws part of its strength from a secret conviction that nothing can be changed. /.../ So long as it is merely a question of ameliorating the worker’s lot, every decent person is agreed. /.../ But unfortunately you get no further by merely wishing class-distinctions away. More exactly, it *is* necessary to wish them away, but your wish has no efficacy unless you grasp what it involves. The fact that has got to be faced is that to abolish class-distinctions means abolishing a part of yourself. /.../ I have got to alter myself so completely that at the end I should hardly be recognizable as the same person.”⁵

In Germany and some other countries, recently a vague is emerging of what is called “classism”: a class version of the politics of identity. Workers are taught to safeguard and promote their socio-cultural practices and self-respect, they are made aware of the crucial role they play in social reproduction... Workers movement thus becomes another element in the chain of identities, like a particular race or sexual orientation. Such a “solution” of the “workers problem” is what characterizes Fascism and populism: they respect workers and admit that they are often exploited, and they (often sincerely) want to make their position better within the coordinates of the existing system. Trump was doing this, protecting the US workers from banks and the unfair Chinese competition. Is *Nomadland* (Chloe Zhao, 2020) not the ultimate example of such “classism”? It portrays the daily lives of our “nomadic proletarians,” workers without a permanent home who live in trailers and wander around from one temporary job to another. They are shown as decent people, full of spontaneous goodness and solidarity with each other, inhabiting their own world of small customs and rituals, enjoying their modest happiness – even the occasional work in an Amazon packaging center goes quite well... that’s how our hegemonic ideology likes to see workers – no wonder the movie was the big winner of the last Oscars. Although the lives depicted are rather miserable, the movie bribes us into enjoying it with the charming details of the specific way of life, so its subtitle could have been: enjoy being a nomadic proletarian! It is precisely the refusal to be such an element in the chain

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5 Orwell 2020

of identities which defines the authentic workers movement. In India, I met with the representatives of the lowest group of the lowest caste of the Untouchables, the dry toilet cleaners; I asked them what is the basic premise of their program, what they want, and they instantly gave me the answer: "We don't want to be ourselves, what we are." Workers are, to quote Jacques Ranciere, a "part of no-part" of the social body, lacking a proper place in it, an antagonism embodied.

This status of class struggle doesn't imply that it is simply "the most important" antagonism - the threat of a global ecological breakdown or of a new world war is, of course, more important, and we can even elaborate a kind of hierarchy of interconnected crises and struggles, with ecological breakdown at the top. The point is that class struggle is not just one among them, it is something that provides a specific color on all of them, making them visible through the prism of domination and exploitation, with all paradoxes and changes that are taking places today - Karl-Heinz Dellwo claimed that today it is "reasonable to speak no longer about masters and servants but only about servants who command servants." And, as Gandhi put it, the fate of the serf is worse than that of the slave, for the slave has lost only his liberty, but the serf has become unworthy of it. What this means is that we should leave behind the characterization of the global capitalist reproduction as an expression of the "will to power": the capital reproduces itself without a will, will is on the contrary something that would only characterize a "voluntarist" revolutionary attempt to interrupt this mad dance: "Today the one who doesn't want revolution doesn't want anything." This is also why we should resist the nostalgic search for a (new) revolutionary subject: there is no predestined agent of a revolution, the only solution is that we ourselves, each of us who experiences the need for global change, asserts itself as such: "I will not raise the question about the revolutionary subject. If we are not this, then others are also not this."⁶ In short, no one is allowed to take the easy path of expecting from another group (especially so-called "nomadic proletarians") to appear as a privileged agent which will show us the path - there is an absolute egalitarianism at work here, "objective social situation" is strictly secondary.⁷

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6 Dellwo 2021.

7 This absence of a predestined subject of change will also lead to new form of narratives. Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020, usually characterized as "hard science fiction") opens up a new path. It mixes narrative fiction (which follows an international organization named the Ministry for the Future in its mission to act as an advocate for the world's future generations of citizens as if their rights were as valid as the present generation's) with emphasis on scientific accuracy and non-fiction descriptions of history and social science. What is also so refreshing about this book is that, after the deluge of apocalyptic visions, it imagines what is basically an optimist vision: if we pull our strength together, we have a chance of achieving something.

Socio-political field is a space of multiple antagonisms: class antagonism, ethnic antagonisms, sexual antagonisms, religious antagonisms, struggles for ecology... All these antagonisms are real/impossible in the strict Lacanian sense: there is no neutral description of an antagonism, every description is already “contextualized,” partial. Antagonisms can be combined into what Ernesto Laclau⁸ called “chain of equivalences”: the Left claim that ecological struggle, feminist struggle, anti-racist struggle... can and should be combined with class struggle since racism, destruction of our environment, oppression of women and other races, are today all overdetermined by capitalist exploitation. But other combinations are also possible: feminism can be combined with liberalism, ecology with conservative anti-modernism, etc. Although, in every particular situation, there is always one struggle/antagonism which plays a hegemonic role (in Europe in 1940s it was anti-Fascist struggle, in Iran at the end of 2022 it was the struggle for women’s rights...), for Laclau one struggle is elevated into the hegemonic role through the struggle (for hegemony) whose outcome is not determined in advance but dependent on contingent strategic circumstances.

Let’s take the case of the struggle for hegemony that is taking place n (what remains of) the Left in the developed West, especially the US. The mainstream liberal Left de facto elevates to the hegemonic role the topics of the so-called Culture War (trans-rights, abortion...) and racism, usually just paying lip service to economic issues or simply ignoring them. In this way it is alienating millions of lower and middle class ordinary families in small towns and farmland who are not actively against LGBT+ but just want to live their traditional lives – they could be mobilized for many measures (against big corporations and banks, for more accessible healthcare, student loans...), so it is as if the liberal-Left is intentionally sabotaging big common causes (no wonder some Leftists mean they are doing it intentionally). The moment a more radical Left comes with such economic proposals, the Culture War liberals accuse it of neglecting trans-issues etc. – but the Culture War liberal Left does not do itself what it accuses of the more radical economic Left...

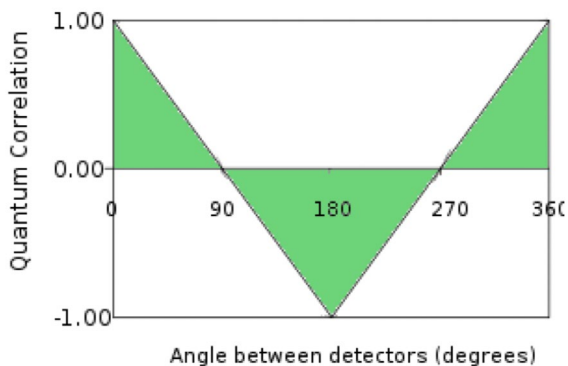
But is it enough to plea for such symmetry, for the equal weight of different antagonisms best formulated by Laclau’s theory according to which hegemony is the result of contingent struggles? Let me try to clarify this through the analogy with Bell’s inequality in quantum mechanics. Laclau’s multiplicity of antagonisms with no privileged struggles is a pure perfect form, and class struggle is what disturbs this perfect symmetry. The point is not that economic base is a “hidden variable,” the hidden substantial truth of all antagonisms which operates independently of all contexts, but a kind of structural imperfection, an “attractor” which disturbs the pure form. Let’s take a look at the

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8 Laclau and Mouffe 2001

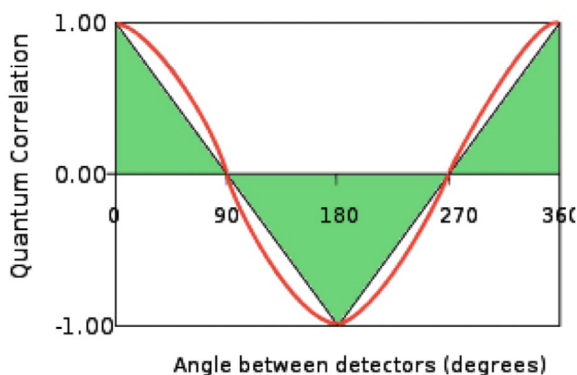
paradox of Bell's theorem: it provides a formula (of the result expected if there is no faster-than-light interconnection) *in order to refute it* - the two entangled electrons will give *more* correlation in their spin measurements than the limit imposed if we exclude a link that operates faster than the speed of light. This paradox enables us to explain why Bell's theorem is so revolutionary - it implies a move from perfection to imperfection. Imperfections usually serve to demonstrate that other (hidden) variables must be at work - in the case of Bell's theorem, they serve the opposite end: they prove that there is NOTHING behind. To put it in yet another way, Bell's theorem "is significant not because of what it is, but what its *negation* implies: a violation of Bell's theorem in experiment is proof that quantum mechanics *cannot* be described by hidden variables, and thus by classical mechanics."⁹ Here is a simple description of the experiment that I took from Paul Mainwood:

"I am going to allow my two electrons to communicate as much as I want in advance of their being emitted from the source. Now they are emitted by the source and fly apart, each to their own detector. I am going to set things up so that I ban them from all communication once they are in flight. I am also going to allow my detector operators a free choice as to the angles they choose to set their detectors and ban all communication between them too. *How much correlation can there be between the readings of spin ("positive" and "negative") that I get from the two detectors?* The answer to the question depends on the relative setting of the angles of the two detectors. Let's start with the case where the two detectors are set at the same angle as one another. For the case where the two detectors measure in the same direction, here's an easy plan that can give you full 100% correlation. But now, what if the detectors are not set at the same angle? For example, if we placed the detector angles at 90 degrees to one another and use the same rules, it is straightforward to see that we'd get zero correlation: half the time, the demons in each of the two electrons will shout the same word, and half the time they'll shout opposite words... But what happens if *the "demons" don't know what angles the detectors will be set at?* As long as there is no communication between the electrons once in flight, and so long as the angles of the detectors are set independently, then any scheme has a limit on the correlation value that is shown by the green areas here:

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9 What does Bell's inequality mean, in layman's terms? Available online at, <https://www.quora.com/What-does-Bells-inequality-mean-in-laymans-terms>



But what if you get to quantum mechanics, and you set up exactly this setup with two real electrons that are entangled with one another? Quantum mechanics predicts that these two electrons will give *more* correlation in their spin measurements than this limit - here's the quantum line in red:



In my brutal reading, this picture without the red curved line provides the correlation between social antagonisms without class struggle's "spooky" action at a distance, while the red curved line indicates how this "spooky" action at a distance disturbs the pure form of contingency. One has to add here that, already at a formal level, class struggle is not an antagonism like others: the goal of the anti-racist struggle is not to destroy an ethnic group but to enable the peaceful co-existence of ethnic groups without oppression; the goal of feminist struggle is not to annihilate men but to enable actual equality of all sexes and sexual orientations; etc. But the goal of the class struggle is, for the oppressed and exploited, the actual annihilation of the opposite ruling class as a class (not of the individuals who compose it, of course), not the reconciliation of classes (it is Fascism which aims at the reconciliation

of classes by way of eliminating the intruder – Jews – which introduce antagonism).

We live in an era of *unholy alliances*, a combination of ideological elements which violate the standard opposition of Left and Right. Let's just mention one of the saddest recent examples. At the end of February 2023, the Ugandan parliament debated a further toughening of the anti-gay law – the most radical proponents demanded death penalty or at least life imprisonment for those caught in the act. Anita Among, speaker of the parliament, said in the debate: "You are either with us, or you're with the Western world."¹⁰ Feminist, gay and trans struggles are thereby denounced as an instrument of Western ideological colonialism used to undermine African identity – and this immediately brings us to another unholy alliance: Russia, with its Orthodox fundamentalism, presents itself as an ally of Third World nations fighting colonialism, a fact that doesn't prevent parts of the Western Left to lean towards Russia in its aggression on Ukraine. When Sahra Wagenknecht, the most popular representative of *die Linke*, the German Leftist party, organized and spoke at a meeting for peace in Dresden in February 2023, calling for the end of helping Ukraine with arms, Björn Höcke (one of the leading members of the extreme Right Alternative for Germany present at the meeting) shouted at her: „Ich bitte Sie, kommen Sie zu uns“ ("Please come to us!"), calling her to change her party affiliation – and the public applauded him... How can this happen? The Left always prefers a symptomatic reading of an ideology: things are not what they claim to be, their truth is the opposite (freedom in the market is the form of exploitation and domination, universal human rights mask imperialist domination...) – so what does the Left do when it confronts a reactionary agent which IS what it claims to be, where there is no need for deep symptomatic analysis? Here the Left gets perplexed: what of, at some deeper level, we are even worse than our reactionary opponent?

These and other cases brought many social analysts to the conclusion that, today, the opposition between Left and Right became meaningless, or at least to Laclau's position that no antagonism enjoys a privileged status. Till now, Political Correctness mostly ignored class antagonism, focusing on racism, sexism, homophobia, religious fundamentalism, etc. Now advocates of PC more and more include into this series class differences, so that we get university courses (or obligatory training) on "racism, sexism, and classism." However, a close look on the content of "classism" makes it clear that these courses don't deal with the real of class antagonism but with description of bad effects of great differences in wealth: the privileges and insensitivity wealth

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¹⁰ Uganda MPs revive hardline anti-LGBTQ bill, calling homosexuality a 'cancer', available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/mar/01/uganda-mps-hardline-anti-lgbtq-bill>

brings, etc. (many rich people gladly accept this lesson and engage in charity...). We don't hear a lot about the basic structure of capitalism which generates class differences, and about ways to overcome or at least radically change capitalism.

A reference to quantum mechanics enables us to interpret the primacy of class struggle not in the substantialist way, as the essence expressed in other struggles, but in a purely formal way. What this implies is that we should distinguish between class difference as a difference (or struggle) between two well-defined positive social groups, and class antagonism as a pure difference which precedes the terms it opposes – in Hegelian terms, the “pure” class antagonism encounters itself among positive social difference in its “oppositional determination.” And the same holds for sexual difference: we should distinguish between “pure” sexual difference as the real of an “impossible” antagonism and sexual difference in its binary sense, as the opposition of two positive sexes. (As I demonstrated elsewhere, the “pure” sexual difference is embodied in trans-individuals who stand for the constitutive deadlock of sexuality.) In this sense “class struggle” and “sexual difference” are indeed something “spooky”: with regard to the field of positively-existing social relations and tensions between groups, they both are a virtual/real point of reference which, without existing as a positive entity, exists (or, rather, insists) only in its effects, as a force that bends the social space.

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