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A Question of Class

Contrary to what many believe, class is not a marxist concept. While we reject the marxist claims as to the historic role of the industrial working class above all the other exploited, it is obvious that society is still divided into opposing classes. The terms of this division are changing with the modification of capital. It is important to recognise this in order to address our attack towards the right objectives in the struggle.

Many anarchists believe that the idea of “class” is a marxist concept, therefore they have no interest in it and they try to work out other ways of accounting for social divisions.

These divisions clearly exist. Conflict and suffering dominate present day reality. The great masses who support the profiteers and their henchmen are barely managing to survive themselves.

It is therefore necessary to trace the outlines of the groupings or individuals who share the same economic, political and cultural social situation, no matter how difficult that may be.

It is true that the term “class” has been dominated by marxist mystification for the past forty years. This is not so much in Marx’s identification of classes, as his claim that the industrial working class were historically destined to bring about not only their own liberation, but also that of the whole of humanity, through the guidance of the party that claimed to represent it.

Any anarchist can see how absurd and mistaken this concept of class is. But we should remember that this is not so much to do with the concept of class, as the deterministic and messianic role that was thrust upon the industrial working class.

We think that the concept of class is not only valid, but necessary. It is an instrument to guide us through the flux of the various aspects of social reality. What we are not interested in are the mythical claims about the destiny of the industrial working class.

One thing we can say with certainty is that the productive structures that defined class divisions in the recent past are now undergoing profound changes. What is also certain is that although different in many respects, a conflict which is just as bitter is being reproduced. The problem is to see how this is happening. What are we dealing with today? What marks the boundary between the dominating part of humanity and the rest?

This is such an important question that it puts the need to study intermediate strata into second place for the time being. Equally unimportant — for the time being — is the need to consider a repartition into three or more classes. What interests us now is the progressive disappearance of traditional class divisions and the emergence of a new one. Clearly such an argument needs more space than we can dedicate to it here, but we shall do the best we can. The preceding

class division was based on a “lack”. There was something that was considered the “common good” which was divided into unequal parts. The class in power took possession of the greater part of this good (commonly known as wealth), and from this unjust profit drew the means to continue exploitation and domination. In the first place these were the cultural- and ideological means on which a whole scale of values was based and which condemned the expropriated mass to what seemed an irreversible situation.

In fact, the profound contradictions within the system itself had just as radical effect on it as the struggle against such forms of domination. Recurring social problems were solved by improving working conditions.

The situation was becoming intolerable for capital and it had to strengthen its structures by increasing collaboration between States: But it has been advanced technology that has made a decisive impact by making the restructuring of production possible.

We are now heading towards a radically different situation. The question of “lack” is becoming more hazy, while the question of “possession” is emerging. Class difference is no longer created by not possessing “as much” as the other, but by the fact — unique in the history of mankind — that one part possesses “something” that the other does not.

To understand this better we must remember that in the past the exploited class always “possessed” something, even if it was only their “working strength”, i.e. their capacity to produce. They were always forced to sell it, that is true, and often at a very low price, but the other side always needed it. The bargaining could even reach the point of these miserable vendors of their labour power being grabbed by the scruff of the neck, but no one could deny that the working class had a “possession” that was part of the same scale of values as that of the dominant class. In the past, exploiters and exploited faced each other (also within the considerable range of class stratifications) on the basis of a “possession” that was common to both, but owned unequally. Now one side possesses something that the other does not, and never will.

This “thing” is technology: the technological management of dominion, the construction of an exclusive “language” belonging to a class of “included”. They are surrounding themselves with a great wall that is far higher than the one in the past that consisted of material wealth and was defended by bodyguards and safes. This wall will be a radical separation, so clear cut as to be incomprehensible — in the short term — to those who do not find themselves within the process of inclusion. The remainder, the “excluded” will become a class of external “beneficiaries”, capable only of using secondary technology and perfectly instrumental to the project of dominion.

The “excluded” part of humanity will not be able, at least for a very long time to come, to realise what has been taken from them, because it will be a product that no longer belongs to the same scale of values. In building this new and, they hope, final separation, they are also building a new moral code that no longer belongs to the same scale of values, a kind of moral code that it no longer intends to share with others, with those who belong to the world of the excluded. In the past the Achille’s heel was precisely this moral code. It was useful in many ways towards ensuring better control, but it often resulted in the exploiters feeling the hot breath of their followers on the back of their necks.

So this new situation that is on the road to completion is building new class structures but is not abolishing the concept of class. This is not a question of terminology, but an operational necessity. At the moment the concept of class- and that related to “class conflict” seem quite adequate for indicating the processes of social structures and how they function. In the same way it is still possible to use the concept of “class consciousness” in the face of the increasing difficulty that the “excluded” are faced with concerning their own condition of exclusion.

Every revolutionary strategy we can imagine for resistance against the process of restructuring in course should bear in mind the modifications that are underway and, within certain limits, the stratification within the classes themselves. Perhaps in this early phase the margins of the included class (the enemy class) are not easy to define. We will therefore have to address our attack towards objectives that are more obvious. But this is only a question of documentation and analysis.

What is more important at this stage is to show that discussions on terminology are not going to solve the problem of finding the enemy and unmasking it. A persistence in doing this merely hides the incapacity to act.

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