

From Class Struggle to Struggle Without Classes?

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We are asked the question: “Whither Marxism?”. This means that not only the scope of Marxism, but its future, is in doubt. In 1913, Lenin wrote that “the dialectics of history has led to a triumph of Marxism which forces its enemies to disguise themselves as Marxists.” In other words he thought that Marxism was becoming a dominant *Weltanschauung*. Today perhaps only neo-conservative theorists, thinking that any social policy already represents a “Marxist” restriction of personal freedoms would write such a sentence. The dominant conviction suggests rather that we are experiencing the “withering away of Marxism.”

But is this the proper way of posing the problem? First of all — this is just elementary logic — Marxist theory itself cannot answer the question. To know whither it goes or leads, Marxism should know its own direction and meaning. It should master the dialectics of its own concepts, of its own historical implementation in the real world. But this is an absurd expectation. Secondly, dialectics teaches us — this is almost an absolute prerequisite — that anything that is *real*, including theory, will necessarily *perish*, and the more so the more it is effective. Therefore Marxism will perish. But there are several modes of perishing, and they are not all equivalent. Some are mere dissolutions, others are transformations or revolutions. The crux is that only retrospectively, when looking at its way of perishing, will we know exactly what Marxism *was* in fact. Until then, we must make guesses and take risks in order to help Marxism perish in the way that seems best. This leads me to a third observation: the historical effects of Marxism confront us with astonishing contradictions. On the one hand, although not everyone will agree when, at some point it became manifest that the original *predictions* of

Marxism would *never* pass into reality and its revolutionary program would not be achieved. And this was for one single reason: the originally assumed conditions no longer existed. Capitalism went beyond many of those conditions and, therefore, beyond Marxism as well. But, in an essential sense, this was itself an indirect effect of the existence of Marxism. Capitalist transformations in the twentieth century were prompted as responses and counter-attacks to the challenge of the Soviet Revolution and, with even greater effect, to its extensions in the labor movement and the struggles for national liberation. Hence Marxism itself is one of the causes of its own obsolescence. On the other hand, a certain variety of Marxism claimed to be “realized” in the socialist revolutions and in the “building of socialism.” So-called “real socialism” officially conceived of itself as a society without classes, or at least without class struggles as defined according to Marxist criteria. However, societies formed upon “real socialist” principles were not societies without *history* — they were not, that is to say, politically motionless — and this was due mainly to the fact that, periodically, classical or even revolutionary class struggles did take place in them, as also did democratic struggles against monopoly party-states (think of China or Poland). We face here a new paradox: Marxism, as a theory of social antagonism, seems to be ahead of its own realization. Yet class struggles never appear exactly where they are supposed to appear. Therefore we must look more closely at this central notion of class struggle.

I. The “Vanishing of Classes”

Clearly, the uniqueness of Marxism depends on the validity of its analysis of class and class struggle. Take this away, and you will be left with neither a specifically Marxist social theory, nor a specifically Marxist political strategy. On precisely this point Marxism has become increasingly challenged; the factual evidence has become confused and ambiguous. Some vague notions, such as “revolution” or “crisis,” are banalized. At least in “developed” capitalist countries, class struggle in its original simplicity has left the stage. In practice, classes themselves are less and less *visible*. Hence the idea starts to gain currency that they are *mythical* beings: the idea that it is Marxist theory, or rather transitory organizations within it, which have created an ideological “myth” of classes. For some time, this “myth” helped various social groups to claim their rights and to put forward their demands. But it is nonetheless imaginary, an artifact, and is now no longer of use.

Some of us might ask here: is this not a gigantic paradox? How is it possible to announce the vanishing of classes in a moment of world economic crisis when numerous phenomena can be observed which seem

directly to confirm the validity of the Marxist concepts of exploitation and class struggle: mass poverty, mass unemployment, overproduction and destruction of industrial capital, financial and monetary speculation. How indeed, when official state policies expressly aim at the well-being of enterprises (not of the collective people), at “economic war,” at increasing the efficiency of “human capital,” etc.? Is not all of this class struggle, open and recognizable? Well, certainly in a sense. But something essential is lacking: viz., a clear connection of the social, political and theoretical aspects. In a sense, there is no “myth.” But neo-conservative policies meet with undeniable success, at least negatively, by dissolving and depriving of their social legitimacy the institutional forms of the labor movement, i.e., “organized” class struggle. While the labor movement — I am thinking especially of Western Europe — has a century old tradition of organization and theoretical debate, most typical working class movements appear sectional and defensive, deprived of a collective meaning for the future. At the same time, however, *social conflict* emerges in a number of other forms, some of them more dynamic, more compelling and also more brutal. As some political philosophers suggest, this might be the really significant fact: to speak of the “vanishing of classes” does not amount to saying that socio-economic interests and conflicts are vanishing, but that they are being relativized, losing their political primacy. They are taking their place within a multi-lateral social conflict, without a “visible” splitting of society into “two camps,” without a determining historical trend. Only the probabilistic effects of technological constraints, state interests and ideological passions remain. We have in short, a “Hobbesian” rather than a “Marxian” world.

It seems to me that we can seriously compare these developments and claims with Marxian claims only if we clearly, if provisionally, distinguish between concepts or analyses of historical forms and programs or mottoes. Because of the confusion between these latter, the “universal” and “objective” meaning of Marxist statements has been permanently biased. We can hope that this type of comparison is not a way to escape into pure theory, but a way to prepare for political innovation rather than speculative empiricism. There has been much speculative empiricism in Marxism, but that is not all there has been.

II. Looking Back at Marx’s Concept of “Class Struggle”

It seems to me that a necessary working hypothesis is that the crisis in Marxist theory has some of its roots in contradictions in the Marxist critique itself that have only now become clearly understandable. I will first devote my attention to some aspects of these contradictions.

A first characteristic is notable: “class struggle” has very different features in Marx’s historical-political writings, which were elaborated under the pressure of circumstances, on the one hand, and in *Capital*, on the other hand. The former confront us with images of the class struggle in which a basic historical scheme becomes adapted to unforeseen empirical events, continuously oscillating between afterthoughts and anticipations. Fragile conceptual artifacts are produced, e.g. the famous notion of “labor aristocracy.” Serious logical difficulties emerge, e.g. the idea — which was suggested by Bonapartism — that the bourgeoisie as a class is not able to rule in its own interests. But there are also pieces of concrete dialectic, whereby the dramatic decay of class representation and the antagonistic polarization of society in revolutionary and counter-revolutionary crises is analyzed and explained with great subtlety. The basic scheme of history here is a strategic one: collective forces, each with its own proper identity and exclusive social functions and interests, are constituted and confront one another. The *Communist Manifesto* calls it a “civil war, latent or open.” “Classes” are regarded as sorts of persons — the material and ideological actors of history — and they are essentially *symmetrical*.

Precisely this symmetry cannot be found in *Capital*; it is in fact incompatible with the latter’s conceptual framework. There is rather a basic *asymmetry* of classes and class struggle in *Capital*. You could say that in a sense antagonistic classes never really encounter each other: when one is present, the other is absent. Whereas the proletariat immediately faces money-capital as a concrete historical reality — the “collective laborer,” the “labor force” — the bourgeoisie, or class of capitalists, never appear in the production process as a *social group*, but only as the abstract “bearers” of the various capitalist functions. In some strong sense, *Capital* is not then a two-class theory (or three, or four) but a *single-class* theory. It appears that far from contradicting the notion of “class struggle,” this asymmetry of the fundamental classes actually expresses its deep structure. More precisely it shows how class struggle is already implicated in the conditions of production and exploitation, and is not merely a “superstructural” *consciousness* of them. But since Marxism, as a comprehensive view of history, has to be the *combination* of these two different paradigms, either a series of *mediations* must occur, or the questions of *labor* and *power* will have to be connected through relations of “expression” and “representation,” and the logic of developing contradictions.

Let us look more closely at the way in which, in Marx’s *Capital*, contradictions are rooted in the very conditions of existence of the “proletariat.” Broadly speaking, there is a *universal form*: namely the *self-movement* of capital, an endless process of metamorphoses and accumulation.

And there is a chain of particular “moments”: transformations of “human material” into a commodity, which in turn will be used as a means of production of surplus-value, and which has itself to be continuously “reproduced” on the social level. Considering this process in its historical dimension, you can call it the *proletarianization* of society — the “logic” of capitalist domination. Now, just what is it that allows Marx to present this process as the realization of *one and the same* concept? It is the fact that three types of social phenomena are woven together here:

- 1) *Exploitation proper*, as a quantitative difference and an appropriation of value, the conditions of which are a stable judicial form (the wage-labor contract) *and* a collective unbalance of forces on the market.
- 2) The social form of labor itself, as it progressively transforms the actual labor process, depriving the workers of their *autonomy* through the division of labor, mechanization, intensification, and especially the splitting of “manual” and “intellectual” skills — or, in other words, the expropriation of the worker’s know-how and knowledge. Marx calls this process a “real subsumption” of labor under the capitalist form of valorization, which includes the capitalist forms of development of the “intellectual powers” of production. Since it requires a discipline, an internal framing of the physical, moral and intellectual dispositions of the human labor force, I call it *domination proper* (i.e., not just exploitation).
- 3) *Insecurity and competition* among workers, enforced by cyclical employment and unemployment — that specifically proletarian risk. This is a necessity of capitalist accumulation. It can be offset or restricted by trade-unions, or by the capitalists’ own interest in stabilizing and protecting fractions of the working class, but in the long run it will always be re-established, especially in business-crises. According to Marx, this aspect of proletarianization is directly connected with the “population laws” of capitalism: including “relative overpopulation,” colonization, immigration, and the competitive use of male, female, and child labor.

All three aspects include a dialectic of violence and law, economics and politics, mass and class, social difference and social identity. But, as counterparts to the unity of the self-movement of capital, they have to be unified into one single type, both logically and empirically. If such were not the case, the domination of the value form would seemingly remain still partial, since only a complete transformation of the labor force into a commodity allows the commodity form to seize upon the entirety of production and circulation. The labor force becomes a commodity proper

only when the different aspects of proletarianization are merged into one single process.

However, this ideal type is confronted with more than just secondary historical discrepancies. And it is only through questionable speculative-empirical postulates concerning the “historical tendencies” of capitalism that such discrepancies can be neglected. It is especially noteworthy that Marx assumes a linear tendency towards a *concrete realization* of “*abstract labor*,” in the generalized form of homogeneous, equivalent, unskilled labor. This will turn out to be a basic prerequisite for his conception of “class” and proletarian “class consciousness,” but it is far from being confirmed by the actual history of modern industry.

A remarkable feature of Marx’s account of proletarianization is its ambivalence with regard to the traditional categories of “economics” and “politics.” On the one hand, you can read it as an *economic theory of class* (and this has been the dominant conception in orthodox Marxism, including its revisionist or humanist currents), since all the successive moments of proletarianization typified by the stages of English social history from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries are functionally predetermined by the cycle of capital accumulation. From this viewpoint, the value form must be seen as the underlying *essence* of working class conditions and practices. It is indeed a “fetishized” essence, an illusory projection of social relations into the space of objectivity; whereas the ultimate essence — which becomes alienated in this economic form — is human *labor* itself. But far from breaking with the conceptual framework of classical economic anthropology, the model of an alienated essence actually confirms it, by simply inverting the use of its key-categories of human labor in general, property, value, and commodity. The *political* conflict aroused by exploitation and resistance to exploitation will here appear as an *expression* of economic contradictions, logically implied by the economic form of alienated labor.

But you can also reverse this pattern, and, within the same text, read a *political theory of class* by giving the theoretical primacy to the concrete variations of the contents. From this viewpoint, the term “labor” no longer refers to an anthropological essence, but rather to a system of material and social practices which have become isolated and institutionalized in a particular period of western history. Moreover, in the face of the complex interplay of these practices amidst their technological and conflictual aspects, there is no such thing as a “logic” of predetermined successive forms; rather there is a “game” of antagonistic *strategies*. Therefore class struggle is not an *expression*, it is rather a cause, in the structural sense, of the economic configuration. It has to be regulated in a different way at every historical juncture, due to the evolution of the conflicting forces. The “economic” character of labor and value emerges

on the background of comprehensive *political* processes — provided that you give the term “political” an enlarged definition.

I will refer again to this ambiguity in my conclusions. No doubt it plays a crucial role in the development of Marx’s conception of class. We can reformulate it in the following manner: workers are commodities, *and* they are not commodities (hence the equivocality of the notion “labor force”). Precisely on this point, the dialectic of the *revolutionary proletariat* takes place in order to combine economic objectivity and political subjectivity, to bring about the adequate unification of the working class as an “economic” agent and the proletariat as a “political” subject. Only through this adequation does a “class” acquire a social and historical identity. Accordingly, not every class completely achieves such an identity. Classes other than the working class achieve it only approximately, but the proletariat develops its “class consciousness” out of its *immediate* conditions of existence, which is why Marx labels it a “universal class.” Of course there are obstacles which can postpone the final identity of a class: such as “regressive consciousness,” professional and national “divisions” of the working class, “imperialist privileges,” etc. One may even think, like Rosa Luxemburg did, that proletarian identity never exists *before* the revolutionary act itself. The whole discussion of the issue will confirm, nevertheless, that class consciousness is contained *in potentia* in the conditions which first objectively unify the working class, then make its immediate interests and demands incompatible with these conditions, and finally produce a subjective unity under the form of a radical negation of the class structure. The categories operating in the process as a whole are class “situation” and “consciousness,” their correspondence, and their negativity.

We may conclude that there is a sort of circle underlying this conception. Class struggles are historically determinant *if* classes (above all the proletariat) acquire this objective and subjective identity. Historical transformations point in one determinate direction *if* classes enjoy a continuous existence on the social stage. But the converse is also true.

As I have argued elsewhere, this circle is that of Marx’s paradoxical a-historical historicism.¹ It is directly responsible for his (and, to a greater extent, his followers’) unshakable tendency to interpret the structural notion of an irreconcilable class *antagonism* as an equivalent for the *simplification* of class relations. In the end, the vital problem of humankind — that is, the radical choice between exploitation and liberation — is supposed to become openly “visible,” on a global scale, and the alternatives are supposed to be embodied in separate camps, as separate species. But this is a fiction, a millenarist legacy of socialist ideology. In reality — that is, in historical capitalism — empirical discrepancies between the various aspects of proletarianization are not transitory; they

are structural, assuming always new forms. Moreover, the “bourgeoisie” is not reducible to the performance of capitalist functions (or, if you like, “capitalist class” and “bourgeoisie” are not equivalent terms); it performs other social functions as well (whether progressive or not). Revolutionary and counter-revolutionary ideologies express material interests, but they are active reactions to specific circumstances, not universal forms of “self-consciousness.”

No wonder therefore that historical investigation has progressively resulted in a *de-constructing* of the original Marxist paradigm. Now, shall we conclude that its result is a mere annihilation? My suggestion is: not exactly. What lies ahead is a narrow but serious opportunity to *recast* the theory. We can reject the ideological view that a classless society is necessarily *anticipated* in the recognition of class struggle as a causal structure in history. The difference is that there will be no *given* “actors,” and no preestablished end of the game. To speak of “class struggle without classes” is neither to joke nor to be provocative, but rather to imply that class identities are continuously *transformed* in the process of class struggles, *before* they can achieve any ideal unity. Let me now briefly sketch some further suggestions along these lines.

III. Beyond Marx's Marxism

The “economistic” reading and the “politician” reading of class struggle are both reductive, for class struggle is *neither* economic *nor* political, but rather transcends the traditional distinction between the two. Nevertheless, this distinction is not fortuitous. And we can understand why not. If orthodox Marxism developed an evolutionary economic interpretation, this was due to the increasing integration of organizations of the working-class into the systems of state apparatuses. This made the state a blind spot for theory. But it did not prevent these organizations’ revolutionary critics, who advocated the “primacy of politics,” from falling into the same trap: starting with a voluntaristic strategy of seizing power, they ended up by reconstituting even less democratic state apparatuses, wherein a monopolistic “one-party rule” would be supported by ideologies of productivism and nationalism. I am not deducing these phenomena from a pre-existing logic. I am only suggesting that, with all the particular circumstances, they refer to a social complexity which is incompatible with any “whig” conception of history. In fact Marx had implicitly broken with the core of such a conception, by showing at length that the “immediate” relationships between employers and wage-laborers are *not* constitutive of a “private” sphere. Thus, in some respects Marx anticipated the transformation of the state into a “social” state, a transformation that has proved irreversible. At the same time, he main-

tained that it would be impossible *politically* to suppress social antagonism and to establish, within capitalism, a stable equilibrium of interests or a sharing of powers between those who benefit from exploitation and those who suffer it. This amounts to a radical destruction of the state's official claim to bring about a *community* of individuals or citizens. Now, the dominant form of this ideology in modern states (including socialist states) has been *nationalism*, which has proved perfectly compatible with both economic individualism and economic planning — or rather with all the various mixtures of the two. Proletarian class identity, call it a “myth” or not, has provided the main *opposition* to state nationalism and civic unanimity or discipline. If you ignore the ideological antinomy of “class” and “nation,” the role of the “social question” in the emergence of the “social state” becomes unintelligible. As Marx anticipated, there is no means for the state, whether authoritarian or contractual, to suppress the contradiction.

We must take the dilemma of class and nation very seriously, I think. Both are *mass ideological effects* in history — which is enough to prove that ideology has nothing to do with illusion. Let us try to describe class constitution as an effect within the realm of ideology. First of all, it is neither spontaneous nor automatic. What produces a class ideology is a dialectical play of mass practices and organizations, wherein conditions of living and working continuously intervene in the posing of such questions as universal suffrage, national unity, education, religion, and war. More precisely, in order to bring about an ideologically unified “working class,” there must exist a labor *movement*, and there must exist *institutions* within that movement (parties, unions, cooperatives, etc.). This is quite different from any sociological reductionism. I am not simply reversing the pattern; I am not saying that institutions, movements, and practices are one and the same thing, or expressions of one and the same essence. Between these three agencies, discrepancies and contradictions are unavoidable. Thus, class organizations never “include” or “represent” the totality of the labor movement; to the contrary, they often even come into conflict with it, because they rely upon idealized images of the industrial revolution and of certain central groups of workers. If these groups reach a political compromise with the state, the labor movement has to find new bases for operation *against* the existing forms of organization (not to mention their leaders) and to invent a new discourse. Schisms and ideological conflicts are crucial in this historical process. Much in the same way, the labor movement never expresses the totality of the social interests and solidarities that grow up around the factory, the family, the urban and ethnic communities. This has nothing to do with regressive consciousness: rather it reflects the dialectics of forms of life *and* constraints of exploitation, of traditions *and* utopias.

We can move one step further. Any of these terms is itself a complex of overdetermined historical effects. As a consequence, for example, the traditional debate among Marxists as to whether revolutionary class consciousness comes from inside or outside the labor movement turns out to be a mere abstraction, since:

- 1) elementary “class” solidarities resisting the capitalist competitive market are always a complex of professional, generational, gender, and ethnic solidarities;
- 2) a social movement with a decided proletarian character never has “pure” anti-capitalist goals, but always combines anti-capitalist goals with others, be they democratic, national, pacifist, or cultural (hence the decisive role of such notions as “justice” and “equality”);
- 3) a “class” organization which is a mass organization is never socially homogeneous — specifically, a political party of the working class must include workers and “organic” intellectuals (in the Gramscian sense), be they of working class origin or not. (Although this union of diverse elements never occurs without conflict, it often succeeds in producing ruptural political effects — hence the notion of “vanguard.”) In short, social relationships are not only established between classes, but they also cut across them. Thus, I suggest that the class struggle develops both inside and outside the classes themselves.

Now what we have noted here with regards to the class struggle has repercussions as well for our conception of the state. Classical Marxism went astray when it conceived of the state as a class apparatus *and*, at the same time, as having a *constitutive* role in class formation, rather than a “parasitic” or merely “instrumental” one. I would suggest that any proper bourgeoisie is a *state bourgeoisie*, since it is only by developing and controlling state institutions that it is able to achieve social and cultural domination. But it therefore has to transform itself and differentiate itself. We must push Gramsci’s idea to the extreme. There is no such thing as a *capitalist class*. There are capitalists and capitalist operatives of various kinds, but they form a dominant “class” only on the condition that they become linked with other social groups outside the “fundamental” social relationship: landowners, civil servants, the military, intellectuals. Or, better said, they can achieve class unity *among themselves* only if they achieve unity *with others*, that is, only through state mediation. To use a more dynamic formula: the *historical* “bourgeoisie” consists of those who are able to invent periodically *new* forms of the state, thus regulating the whole of society, which may involve violent contradictions among its constitutive groups. This is what the so-called

Keynesian or Welfare-State program has been all about: regulating the conflict between financial profit and industrial investment, while, *at the same time*, passing from nineteenth century paternalism to twentieth century social policies. It has allowed enormous inequalities of earnings, way of life, power, and prestige to persist, without their resulting in open conflict or fascism — that is to say, without depriving the political sphere of its regulative functions.

A similar argument applies to the exploited class. Only state mediation can articulate the various aspects of proletarianization which may be analyzed in Marxian terms. This was already true in the period of so-called “primitive accumulation”; but the necessity of an internal conflictual mediation did not recede thereafter. Much to the contrary, subsequent developments carried the state still further away from the liberal picture of the “Night-watchman” or its Marxist counterpart, the merely repressive state-apparatus. Without *state* regulation of the labor market, of unemployment, of social security, of public health and education — that is to say, without *non-market reproduction* of “human capital” — there would be no “labor force” available as a commodity *on the market*. The one decisive thing added by the “social state” is bureaucratic planning and integration of these interventions. This becomes necessary for a number of reasons: because wage-labor expands beyond the limits of productive functions; because so-called “unproductive” activities in services, scientific research, technological development, and communications are mechanized (that is to say, integrated in the processes of value and valorization); because individual wages are partially transformed into indirect collective wages; and because the educational system becomes not only a way of *reproducing* social inequalities, but a way of *producing* them as well. As a consequence, capitalist relations of production are merged into what we can call a *generalized economy*, in the sense that value-dominated processes are generalized. But a generalized economy represents also the generalization of state control. Hence the “social state” becomes an *immediate* field of contestation for class struggles.

In this description, however, an essential question has been left aside, thus distorting the whole configuration. I have implicitly assumed that the space of class struggle and class formation is a *national* space. That is wrong indeed. But to speak of international relations of production or communication is obviously not enough. In order to give the transnational processes their full weight, we need a more cogent concept. Let me borrow from Braudel and Wallerstein their notion of a “world economy,” without necessarily accepting their use of it in every detail. A first question that arises, then, is the following: is there such a thing as a “world-bourgeoisie”? Well, I think we should say “yes” in a sense and “no” in a sense. More precisely: from the very beginnings of modern cap-

italism, accumulation of value has been a global process, starting with an international or rather inter-civilizational circulation of commodities and money, and accompanied by the violent domination of non-market economies by market economies. Imperialism was a necessary companion of capitalism. It was as part of this process that industrial areas began to specialize and nation-states crystallized into stable entities, with the earliest centers becoming obstacles to the emergence of later ones. We can suggest that the capitalist groups which succeeded in the long run in gathering other “bourgeois” groups around them, thereby controlling the state and giving rise to nationalism, were those which operated on a global scale (unless the pattern was reversed and it was in fact the state that initiated this process in order to match the global challenge). Internal social and political functions and the external exigencies of competition were complementary factors. But it seems that there was also between these two aspects an initial contradiction, which might even be growing today. The big corporations are multinational, and industrial processes are fragmented and dispersed all over the world, while financial and monetary circulation is subjected to virtually instantaneous computerized calculation. These conditions, however, produce neither a world-state nor a world-currency — not even tendentially. And this is for at least one predominant reason: the *social* (or “hegemonic”) functions of the bourgeoisie are linked to national (or quasi-national) institutions. What one now observes are attempts at developing modern equivalents on the international level for the old paternalistic structures — e.g. human rights organizations with public and private support — but these only very partially fulfill the function of regulating social conflicts. It seems that there exists at least a tendency whereby the internationalization of capital *disintegrates* the unity of the dominant classes instead of integrating them at a higher level.

This disintegration occurs the more so because hegemony is closely connected with strategies of exploitation and domination. To use Sartrean terminology, a bourgeoisie is “made” by its strategies as much as it “makes” them. As capitalism develops it less than ever leads to uniform and homogeneous *methods of exploitation*. *Overexploitation* is everywhere needed to balance the very costs of maintaining “normal” conditions of exploitation, but it is also to a large extent culturally and politically incompatible with such conditions. Today’s capitalist world-economy, as a single field of accumulation, displays at once *all* possible historical forms of exploitation — archaic and modern, brutal and civilized — but these forms have to remain isolated from one another. Or at least they would have to remain as isolated as possible in order to avoid the formation of “dual societies” in which non-contemporaneous dominant and dominated social blocs confront one another in an explosive manner.

Actually, “dual societies” exist in many places today (including old national-social states, due to immigration and crisis). However, dual societies also have dual proletariats, and this is tantamount to having *no* proletariat in the classical sense. We may or may not agree with analysts like Claude Meillasoux, who have portrayed South African “apartheid” as a paradigmatic case concentrating the typical aspects of this general situation. At least *tendentially*, however, there are two antithetical modes of reproduction of the labor force, and therefore two modes of proletarianization: one is integrated into the reproduction of capital and the bourgeois “social” state through mass consumption, mass schooling and social security; the other still relies upon *pre-capitalist* modes of production and, inasmuch as immigration and apartheid are involved, has to do with “absolute overpopulation,” racial discrimination, and *destructive* forms of exploitation of the labor force. To a certain extent these two forms are present in the same national societies. The frontier between them is not fixed once and for all (on the one hand, you have “new poverty,” on the other hand, you have “civil rights” movements), but its very existence is incompatible with any hope of “remaking the working class” as a single homogenous entity. *Although it is the world-economy which represents the arena of class struggles, just as there is no “world-bourgeoisie” which appears in this arena, neither is there any “world-proletariat.”*

Let me now conclude. The picture is more complicated than the one proposed by Marx and for a long time accepted by Marxists in spite of historical evidence to the contrary. Inasmuch as the prospects of a simplification of antagonisms were essential to the Marxist view of history — that is to say, to the Marxist teleology — we may say that such a picture is non-Marxist, or even contravenes Marxism. However, it also carries to a higher level at least *some* structural aspects of the original Marxian problematic. Referring back to the hot debates of the sixties and the seventies, I should like to say that the significant alternative lies not between “structure” and “history,” but between teleology and structural history. This view gives a certain credence to Marx’s famous statement that, if the essence and the appearance of things were identical, no theory would be needed — but it does so on the condition, however paradoxical, that we abandon his conception of “essence.” It is the surface of society not the hidden destiny of man, which has to be conceptually organized and analyzed in its continuous transformations: a surface made up of practices, strategies, institutions, and ideologies.

In this picture some aspects of classical Marxism have been clearly negated: above all, the notion of symmetrical *isolated* classes — that is, the notion of the “two camps” into which capitalist society was supposed to split. I suspect that this image is closely related, even in Marx, to the

conception of state and society (or politics and economics) as two separated “spheres.” It is related therefore to the “whig” legacy in Marx’s theory, a legacy which is present in spite of his acute criticism of liberal individualism. We must admit that “classes” are not separated from one another as sociological entities or supra-individuals, whether conceived as “objects” or as “subjects.” In fact they are *overlapping*: intertwined and internally divided by materially conflicting interests and constraints. Relatively homogeneous class identities are conjunctural effects, not a predetermined fate. If we realize this, institutions and ideologies take on their full significance.

However, this view certainly does not amount to suppressing antagonism. No more than the idea that proletarianization is split into partially independent processes amounts to suppressing proletarianization. Not only are inequalities of conditions of working and living — as of power and control over political decisions and social communications — not decreasing, they are all directly linked to the extension of the value-form, or the self-sustaining process of capital accumulation. In short, the generalized logic of the production of commodities by means of commodities (including “non-material” commodities) — what I have called a “generalized economy” reaching beyond the limits of the industrial sphere — annuls the “proletariat” in its classical form and profoundly shakes the hegemonic unity of the classical “bourgeoisie,” but it does not annul *capital*, and it in fact enlarges the field of exploitation, domination and insecurity. This is an uneven development which can help account for the extension of irreconcilable conflicts *within* public institutions (notably the educational system) and for the acute crisis of the “social state”; it does not exclude mass confrontations or revolutions, whatever their political form.

Revolutions in the past were always closely connected with social inequalities, on the one hand, and the question of civil rights amidst the vicissitudes of the nation-state, on the other. That is to say, they were rooted in the contradictions between the modern state’s claim to build up a *community* and the actual phenomenon of *exclusion*. It is one of the deepest and most challenging aspects of the Marxian critique to propose that human societies are not built upon common interests among men, but upon the regulation of divisions between them. The Marxian sort of anthropology, obviously influenced by classical political economy and the devastating impact of the industrial revolution on popular cultures and ways of life, considered labor to be the basic practice which gets divided, and therefore the “essence” of man and society. Since labor and the division of labor are certainly not vanishing, but only losing their marks of isolation and becoming more differentiated, we may challenge such a reductive anthropology. Racial divisions and sexual divisions are not

reducible to this pattern; they are no less universal and no less antagonistic, although they have a completely different meaning. Therefore class struggle must be conceived as *one* determinant structure ranging over *all* social practices.

Universality is not the same as totality. However, there remains one point on which a Marxian or post-Marxian problematic is immediately crucial: this is the interaction of class formation and nationalism. Because, in both its liberal-democratic and its populist or authoritarian variants, nationalism has been the key to the relative stabilization and unification of forms of life and regional ideologies into one dominant ideology — and therefore the key also to the constitution of the “bourgeoisie” as a hegemonic bloc controlling the state’s social functions and neutralizing the disruptive effects of economic “laws” — nationalism should be expected to take the form of a synthesis: a “totalitarian” worldview, more or less resuming the functions of religion, in which *all* anthropological divisions are abbreviated and condensed. To borrow from systems-theoretical terminology, the national and nationalist state has been the main “complexity reducing operator” of modern history. Now, it is not likely that tentative supra-national nationalisms (like “Europe,” or “the Western World,” or “the Socialist community,” or “the Third World”) can achieve the same totalization. On the other hand, it should be no wonder that the ideology of “class division” and “class struggle,” which was opposed to nationalism and which it was an essential function of nationalism in turn to counteract, became *symmetrized* in this confrontation (and very often even absorbed into nationalism). In a mimetic process, it too became a “complexity reducing operator,” summarizing the social multiplicity according to a class criterion instead of a statist one. The ambiguity of the present situation, it seems to me, comes from the fact that the ideology of class needs now to regain its effective capacity to contest nationalism, while at the same time overcoming its mimetic unilateral character.

NOTE

1. Cf. Etienne Balibar, “The Concept of Class Politics in Marx,” *Rethinking Marxism*, 1 no. 2 (Summer 1988), pp. 18-51; and Etienne Balibar, “The Vacillation of Ideology,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 159-209.