

Classes, or The Lost Subject

'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.' Whether it is dealing with the relations of production or historical development, 'class struggle' is at the centre of Marx's thought. Yet 'Marxist' common sense seems oblivious of how easy it is to cite canonical texts containing the notion of class, yet how difficult it is to find a precise definition of class. At most we glean some pedagogical approximations: 'In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their cultural formation from those of the other classes and bring them into conflict with those classes, they form a class.' Or we get a terse characterization of the proletariat (not the proletarian) as 'he who lives without capital and ground rent from labour alone, and from one-sided, abstract labour at that'.¹ On the occasion of a new edition of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1888, Engels specified in a footnote: 'By proletariat [is meant] the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour

power in order to live'² – this is sketchy. These occasional formulas do not constitute a reference point for defining class.

Troubled by this lacuna, numerous authors (for example Schumpeter, Aron, or Dahrendorf) readily attribute it to Marx's alleged conflation of science and philosophy, economy and sociology. It is true that Marx proceeds not by definitions (enumeration of criteria) but by the 'determination' of concepts (productive/unproductive, surplus-value/profit, production/circulation), which tend towards the concrete as they are articulated within the totality. The (unfinished) last chapter of *Capital*, devoted to classes, contrives to keep us in suspense. Ralf Dahrendorf has attempted to reconstruct its probable content on the basis of scraps and fragments taken from the preceding 51 chapters of Volume Three, just as the skeleton of a great saurian is reconstructed on the basis of bone fragments. The exercise carries little conviction.³

The interrupted pages of *Capital* leave unanswered many questions, pregnant with consequences, about how to understand the evolution of classes in developed capitalist societies (their transformation and internal differentiation); and in non-capitalist (or bureaucratic) societies, often reduced to formal characterizations derived sometimes from the primacy of the economy (plan versus market), sometimes from the primacy of the political ('dictatorship of the proletariat'), and sometimes from a vague sociology of power ('workers' state').⁴

Marx's Unobtainable Sociology

'Curiously enough, Marx has never, as far as we know, worked out systematically what it is plain was one of the pivots of his thought.' Schumpeter entertains the notion that this task might have been deferred. Equally plausible is that 'some points about

it remained unsettled in his own mind, and that his way toward a full-fledged theory of classes was barred by certain difficulties he had created for himself by insisting on a purely economic and over-simplified conception of the phenomenon.⁵ What is even more 'curious' is that this judgement of Schumpeter's on the subject of classes could also be applied to the absence of a discourse on method, a theory of crises, an explicit theory of time, which unquestionably are likewise so many 'pivots of his thought'. We might even be led to believe that Marx, ensnared in his own traps, spent his time creating diversions by resolving secondary questions.

Anyway, what exactly did he spend his time doing? Treating his dreadful boils, sharing family problems, putting off his creditors, doing jobbing journalism to pay his debts, treating his Uncle Philip harshly, keeping up a voluminous correspondence, conspiring, and organizing the working-class movement. Above all, writing and rewriting *Capital*.

This is where we must seek the key to a theory of classes *in actu* – unsatisfactory, perhaps, but certainly not 'over-simplified'. The oversimplification is Schumpeter's. Marx, he claims, froze classes at the moment of their abstraction, as a structural potentiality of the mode of production, before the development of the social formation produced the complex differentiation of the division of labour, its organization and juridical relation to the state. This is to set little store by the logic of *Capital*, where the end is always-already contained in the origin. Thus, the results of circulation and reproduction are already present in value and surplus-value, which 'presuppose' the class struggle and the determination of *socially necessary* labour-time. Proceeding from the abstract to the concrete, in this optic the theory of classes cannot be reduced to a static operation of definition and classification. It refers to a system of relations

structured by struggle, whose complexity is displayed to the full in the political writings (*Class Struggles in France; The Eighteenth Brumaire; The Civil War in France*), where Marx offers his last word on the subject.

Schumpeter is well aware that the notion of class has several possible senses. Prisoner of an intellectual division of labour compartmentalized into so many watertight 'subject matters', he detects a deliberate confusion between different disciplines, like economics and sociology. This mixture of genres, which animates Marx's theory, fascinates him: 'There cannot be any doubt about the access of vitality which comes to analysis thereby. The ghostly concepts of economic theory begin to breathe. The bloodless theorem descends into *agmen, pulverem et clamorem*.⁶ Rejecting this seductive profusion, which seems to him to be a threat to science, Schumpeter prefers to ignore the movement from the abstract to the concrete. For him, the 'stratifying principle consists in the ownership, or the exclusion from ownership, of means of production.... We have thus, fundamentally, two and only two classes.'⁷ An oversimplified 'definition' if ever there was one....

The simple opposition between wage-labour and capital is not located at the level of the social formation in Marx, but at the first level of determinate abstraction – the sphere of production. In its deep structure, each society boils down to a fundamental, conflictual class opposition.

The determination of class relations in the sphere of production precisely represents merely the first word of Marx's analysis, and he does not leave it there. Disregarding Engels's clarification that the only human history reducible to class struggles is written history, subsequent to the dissolution of primitive communist society, Schumpeter condemns the abusive extension of the notion of class to all societies, including 'non-

historical epochs', with the exception of primitive communism and the classless society of the future. This effaces the specific articulations of these societies and systematically reduces classes to 'purely economic phenomena, and even phenomena that were economic in a very narrow sense'. Marx thereby denied himself the possibility of 'a deeper view of them'. This impasse is a political one. In fact, the reductive definition of classes allowed 'a bold stroke of analytic strategy', in the shape of an 'ingenious tautology': private property having been placed at the heart of the definition of classes, its abolition would automatically open to a classless society.⁸

According to Schumpeter, a class is 'something more than an aggregation of class members. It is something else ... A class is aware of its identity as a whole, sublimates itself as such.'⁹ This observation poses a logical problem whose elucidation would obviate a number of misconceived debates on borderline cases or individual statuses. The notion of class in Marx is reducible neither to an attribute of which the individual units comprising it are the bearers, nor to the sum of these units. It is something else: a relational totality, not a mere sum. This old problem has continued to rack logicians:

We must not forget that in social science the term 'class' has a different sense from its meaning in the mathematical sciences, which use it to denote a property. The bourgeoisie and the proletariat are social classes; and it would be a misconstrual to regard bourgeoisie or proletariat as properties of some particular individual. Here, in the social sciences, the mereological usage of 'class' is appropriate. The proletariat is a group of people, a composite object, in which the various proletarians are constitutive pieces of the solar system, in the same way that the various bees are the constitutive elements of a swarm of bees. The people who make up a given social class are obviously interdependent in ways other than the constitutive pieces of an

inanimate object or a herd of animals. In this instance, dependencies of a social, specifically human character come into play – for example, those attendant on the use of language to communicate, or conscious co-operation, etc. Nevertheless, this in no way alters the fact that the relation between a social class and the members of this class is a relation established between a composite object and its own constitutive elements. Class is here construed in 'mereological' fashion.¹⁰

But the dialectic finds it difficult to accommodate logical formalism.

Does not making class a higher reality than the individuals who comprise it succumb to the fetishistic illusions that transform society, history or class into so many mythical subjects? Marx specifically accuses Proudhon of treating society as if it were a 'person'. Denouncing this 'fiction' of the society-person, he scoffs at those who 'make a thing out of a word'. His approach precludes treating class as a person or as a unified, conscious subject, on the model of the rational subject of classical psychology. Class exists only in a conflictual relationship with other classes. In his marginal annotations to the manuscript of *The German Ideology*, Marx criticizes German philosophers for their formal understanding of the concept of class and for reducing individuals to mere specimens of an abstraction that dominates them. In particular, he criticizes Stirner for his frequent assertion that everyone is what they are by virtue of the state, in the same way that the bourgeois is a specimen of the bourgeoisie – as if the bourgeoisie existed prior to the individuals who comprise it. The crystallization of personal relations into class relations does not thereby dissolve them into a hypostatized mechanism of imaginary 'persons'. The dynamic reality of classes never falls into the inert domain of pure objectivity. Their cohesion is irreducible to the formal unity of a simple collection of individuals.¹¹ These early works should

obviously not be conflated with the concept of class developed in *Capital*. Nevertheless, they conclusively rule out both representing class as a super-subject and reducing it to a simple pattern of inter-individuality.

To demand of Marx a 'sociology' that conforms to the academic criteria of the discipline is a nonsense. No one is less sociological (in this conventional sense) than Marx. His 'critical sociology' is a negative sociology, or 'anti-sociology'.¹² Sociological inquiry can generate useful information; but information does not constitute thought and factual information does not constitute knowledge. In his repeated attacks on Bukharin's *Historical Materialism*, Gramsci stresses the irreducible antagonism between the two approaches. Seeking to adapt formal logic to the methods of the physical and natural sciences, Bukharin's manual yields a vulgar evolutionism. Despite its pedagogical intentions, the very idea of such a manual is incongruous, in the case of a theory 'that is still at the stage of discussion, polemic and elaboration': 'the vulgar contention is that science must absolutely mean "system", and consequently systems of all sort are built up.... The *Manual* contains no treatment of any kind of dialectic.' This defect could have two origins: 'on the one hand, a theory of history and politics conceived as sociology ... and on the other hand a philosophy proper, this being philosophical alias metaphysical or mechanical (vulgar) materialism'. The attempt to reduce 'the philosophy of praxis to a form of sociology' in fact reveals a desire – at once both illusory and disturbing – to hold 'the whole of history in the palm of its hand'. The real issue is to know what sociology amounts to as a separate discipline, and its role in the historical development of culture. Based on a 'vulgar evolutionism', in Gramsci's eyes it is an attempt to apprehend the social 'in a form dependent on ... evolutionist positivism'. In a critical perspective on the existing order, by contrast, what

would be required would be to find the most appropriate literary form to avoid a *sociological* exposition.¹³ Hence *Capital* as a *non-sociological* exposition.

The genesis of *Capital* constitutes a 'theoretical event' in its own right, comprising ruptures and continuities. This mutation could not fail to have consequences for the conceptualization of classes. In the grip of the economic crisis of 1857–58, Marx worked feverishly on the composition of the *Grundrisse*: 'so that I at least get the outlines clear before the *déluge*'.¹⁴ So it was an urgent piece of work. At the same time – 'by mere accident' – he rediscovered Hegel and his *Logic*. Chance sometimes has its necessity.

Knowledge is not a simple collection of facts. The difficulty resides in the transition from facts to knowledge, in the relation of logical categories to their content. 'Through its formal and abstract thinking, [which is] lacking all basic import, this enlightenment has emptied all content out of religion', leaving only 'the lifeless water of the understanding, with its generalities and its abstract rationalism'. Even so, it is not enough to oppose to these abstractions the immediate and chaotic concreteness of 'life' or romantic 'nature'. Partial determinations are one-sided, and need to be transcended by the authentic concrete that approximates to the whole. 'A philosophizing *without system* cannot be scientific at all': 'A content has its justification only as a moment of the whole, outside of which it is only an unfounded presupposition or a subjective certainty. Many philosophical writings restrict themselves like this – to the mere utterance of *dispositions* and opinions.'¹⁵

Thus Hegelian logic develops a radical critique of empiricism. Rather than searching for the true in thinking, the latter refers

to experience, postulating that what is true must exist in reality and exist for perception. It thus recognizes a principle of freedom (human beings must see for themselves), but universality, Hegel objects, is something other than large numbers. Kant's critical philosophy, he states, shares with empiricism the error of taking experience as the sole foundation of knowledge, not as truths, but as knowledge of phenomena, inevitably resulting in epistemological relativism.¹⁶

The genesis of *Capital* presupposes this critique of empiricism and Kantian philosophy. Most of Marx's detractors (the 'sociology of class' is the most blatant example) unimaginatively follow the opposite route, criticizing the unfinished determinations of the dialectical totality in the name of the metaphysical categories of empirical perception. In the 1857 Introduction, Marx explains the transition from the abstract to the concrete as a 'synthesis of many determinations' and 'unity of the diverse'.¹⁷ The concrete is not the empirical immediate datum of statistical investigation but a conceptual construction, or thought-concrete.

The possibility of scientific knowledge is inscribed in the distance between the empirically given and this constructed concrete. Starting from the domination of the whole over the parts, the plan of the *Grundrisse* no longer follows the descriptive categories of classical economics. Neither historical exploration nor analysis of the 'factors of production', it announces the dialectical synthesis of a system and its history. An interpretative abstraction from actual societies, 'capital' becomes the key to the totality in the capitalist mode of production. That is why, as 'the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society', capital 'must form the starting-point as well as the finishing-point, and must be dealt with before landed property'.¹⁸

The initial plan of *Capital* in six volumes envisaged a volume on the state and another on foreign trade (or the world market). Yet the subject matter of these unwritten volumes is not exhausted by the final four-volume plan. Marx explained this by suggesting that the other volumes would have led him beyond his specific task (the critique of political economy), since they would have introduced new conceptual determinations and new degrees of concreteness. The study of the state would have required elucidation of the relation between production and the institutionalization of law, the division of labour, and ideological apparatuses. An account of the world market would have demanded a study of the relations between classes, nations and states. Even so, the state and the world market have not disappeared. Moments and mediations of reproduction, they are constantly presupposed and, in some sense, 'already given'.¹⁹

Production and the Relation of Exploitation

Classes reveal themselves in and through the movement of *Capital*. If this disclosure is logically completed in Volume Three, with the 'process of production as a whole', the question is dealt with on several occasions in the process of production.

1. Class polarization features in Volume One, Chapter 10 on 'The Working Day': 'Hence, in the history of capitalist production, the establishment of a norm for the working day presents itself as a struggle over the limits of that day, a struggle between collective capital, i.e. the class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e. the working class.'²⁰ This transition from abstract social relations, corresponding to the *level of production* (capital/labour), to classes proper (at the *level of struggle*), already presupposes a permanent conflict over the division of time

between necessary labour and surplus labour (at the level of overall reproduction).

2. Marx proceeds to explain (Chapter 14 on 'The Division of Labour and Manufacture') that the tendency of manufacture to convert

a partial task into the life-long destiny of a man corresponds to the tendency shown by earlier societies towards making trades hereditary. The trades either became petrified into castes, or, in cases where definite historical conditions produced a variability in the individual which was incompatible with a caste system, they hardened into guilds. Castes and guilds arise from the action of the same natural law that regulates the differentiation of plants and animals into species and varieties, except that, when a certain degree of development has been reached, the heredity of castes and the exclusiveness of guilds are ordained as a law of society.²¹

3. The subject of classes reappears in Part 7 in the chapter on 'The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation':

within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker ... all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his labour by turning it into a torment; they alienate ... from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they deform the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working-time ...²²

In so far as it presupposes an account of the antagonistic relationship of exploitation, the presentation of the labour

theory of value and surplus-value sets about a theoretical approach to classes from Volume One onwards. But many mediations between this truncated and fragmented producer and the fully determined class remain.

4. Far from conferring on the proletariat the image of a mythical subject, from Volume One onwards Marx poses with the utmost clarity the contradiction of its condition and the enigma of its emancipation, on which (in his view) the future of humanity depends:

The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws. The organization of the capitalist process of production, once it is fully developed, breaks down all resistance. The constant generation of a relative surplus population keeps the law of the supply and demand of labour, and therefore wages, within narrow limits which correspond to capital's valorization requirements. The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases. *In the ordinary run of things*, the worker can be left to the 'natural laws of production', i.e. it is possible to rely on his dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them.²³

Things were different during the 'historical genesis' of capitalist production, when the bourgeoisie could not dispense with 'constant state intervention'. Alienation and fetishism are rooted in the production relation. The conditions of exploitation render the direct producer a physically and intellectually stunted being, to the extent that, 'in the ordinary run of things', submission reproduces submission, allowing the state seemingly to hold itself in reserve from the sphere of production.

How, being nothing, to become everything? Such is the unresolved mystery of emancipation starting out from a condition of subjection and alienation. The answer is found in political confrontation and class struggle: only struggle can break this vicious circle.

Volume One does not develop a systematic, complete conception of classes. The relation of exploitation between wage-labour and capital is only the first and most abstract of their determinations. At this level, the question of classes enters from two angles:

- to introduce the specificity of modern classes, grounded in the formal freedom of labour-power compared with caste and guild societies;
- to introduce the presupposition of the relation of exploitation: the class struggle, which determines the socially necessary labour-time for the reproduction of labour-power.

Circulation and Productive Labour

Volume Two deals with class relations in the unity of production and circulation. Before our very eyes, circulating capital accomplishes the endlessly renewed marvel of its metamorphoses. It steps out of one guise and slips into another. From money (M) it becomes means of production (P), then commodity (C), and then money again (M'), and so on. When the worker is separated from the means of production (the very precondition of the capitalist process of production), when the means of production confront the owner of labour-power as someone else's property, '[t]he class relation between capitalist and wage-labourer already exists':

- This is a *sale and purchase*, a money relation, but a sale and purchase in which it is presupposed that the buyer is a capitalist and the seller a wage-labourer; and this relation does in fact exist, because the conditions for the realization of labour-power, i.e. means of subsistence and means of production, are separated, as the property of another, from the possessor of labour-power.
- It goes without saying, therefore, that the formula for the circuit of money capital ... is the self-evident form of the circuit of capital only on the basis of already developed capitalist production, because it presupposes the availability of the class of wage-labourers in sufficient numbers throughout society.
- Industrial capital is the only mode of existence of capital in which not only the appropriation of surplus-value or surplus product, but also its creation, is a function of capital. It thus requires production to be capitalist in character; its existence includes that of the antagonism between capitalists and wage-labourers.
- The wage-labourer lives only from the sale of his labour-power [for money] ... His payment must ... be constantly repeated at short intervals, to enable him to repeat the purchases ... that are needed for ... self-maintenance. Hence the capitalist must constantly confront him as money capitalist, and his capital as money capital.²⁴

In Volume One, the class relation took the form of an antagonistic relation of exploitation between the worker as producer and the capitalist as industrial capitalist, as a division between necessary labour and surplus labour. Volume Two develops the metamorphoses of the circuit of capital. This process is a succession of acts of buying and selling. The relation

of exploitation emerges here as that between the worker as wage-labourer selling his labour-power and the capitalist as possessor of money-capital. What is at stake in this relation is grasped from the angle not of the division of labour-time, but of conflictual negotiations over labour-power as a commodity.

Often construed as a purely economic description of the process of circulation, Volume Two provides the material for a political theory of classes for Biagio De Giovanni, who writes that the

form of circulation of capital becomes decisive for the very morphology of classes. The antagonism corresponds to the space of circulation, not in as much as the acuteness of the contradiction in production is weakly reflected there, but in so far as the contradiction is extended over the whole form of the process and patiently reconstructed in its various forms.²⁵

The circulation process destroys the simplicity of the patterns of production in Volume One, and complicates their phenomenology. It constructs the 'social patterns' and the relations between them.

Indeed, it is as legitimate to seek the morphology of classes at the level of Volume Two as Volume One, to which most popularizers confine themselves. Specific to the sphere of circulation, the relation of buying and selling labour-power is no less constitutive of the class relation than the relation of exploitation disclosed in Volume One. For exploitation to become possible, the labourer and the means of production must be separated; and 'this separation is abolished only through the sale of labour-power to the owner of the means of production, a sale which signifies that the buyer is now in control of the continuous flow of labour-power to the owner of the means of production, a flow which by no means has to stop when the

amount of labour necessary to reproduce the price of labour-power has been performed.' Marx then specifies:

The capital relation arises only in the production process because it exists implicitly in the act of circulation, in the basically different economic conditions in which buyer and seller confront one another, in their class relation ... It goes without saying, therefore, that the formula for the circuit of money capital: $M-C \dots P \dots C'-M'$, is the self-evident form of the circuit of capital only on the basis of already developed capitalist production, because it presupposes the availability of the class of wage-labourers in sufficient numbers throughout society.²⁶

And, consequently, the class struggle.

Thus each volume of *Capital* contributes its specific determination.²⁷ In Volume One, the class relation receives an initial basic determination: that of the relation of exploitation. In Volume Two, it receives a new and essential – but not definitive – determination: that of productive or indirectly productive labour, which has generated so many controversies and misunderstandings. But why seek the last word for a theory of classes in the sphere of circulation? Marx broaches the subject systematically only in Volume Three, in the framework of his study of reproduction as a whole.

Reproduction as a Whole and the Enigma of the Unfinished Chapter

Here, once again, we change register. When it comes to production and reproduction as a whole, classes are no longer exclusively determined by the extraction of surplus-value, or by the categories of productive and unproductive labour. They are determined by the combination of the relation of exploitation in production, the wage relation and the productivity/non-

productivity of labour in circulation, and the distribution of revenue in reproduction as a whole.

Can we now include among the proletariat public-sector wage-labourers who participate in reproduction? With the result that what – from the viewpoint of circulation in Volume Two – was unproductive labour becomes indirectly productive in Volume Three, when it is considered from the standpoint of the capitalist dynamic as a whole? It can indeed be deduced from the logic of *Capital* that workers in the sphere of circulation (transport, trade, credit, advertising), who yield surplus-value to their employer and are subject to conditions of exploitation comparable to those endured by workers in production, fall under the same class determination. If Volume Three deals with the process of reproduction as a whole, it does not tackle the conditions of reproduction (education, health, housing), which would require the introduction as such of the state's mediation. In *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Marx simply evokes the 'immaterial' forms of labour that are 'transitional' to capitalist production (mentioning the 'educational factories' whose teachers are productive not *vis-à-vis* their pupils, but *vis-à-vis* the educational establishment), insisting on the notion of the collective worker.²⁸

There is no eluding the logical architecture of *Capital*.

In Volume Three, classes form the subject of a specific chapter once the theoretical conditions for a systematic approach have finally been met. The partial determinations of classes, at the level of the extraction of surplus-value in the production process and the sale of labour-power in the circulation process, are now integrated into the overall dynamic of competition, equalization of the profit rate, the functional specialization of capitals, and the distribution of revenue.

Only now can classes appear as something other than a sum of individuals performing a similar social function:

From what has been said so far [about the equalization of the profit rate through competition], we can see that each individual capitalist, just like the totality of all capitalists in each particular sphere of production, participates in the *exploitation of the entire working class by capital as a whole*, and in the level of this exploitation; not just in terms of general class sympathy, but in a direct economic sense, since, taking all other circumstances as given, including the value of the total constant capital advanced, the *average rate of profit depends on the level of exploitation of labour as a whole by capital as a whole ...* We thus have a mathematically exact demonstration of why the capitalists, no matter how little love is lost among them in their mutual competition, are nevertheless united by a real freemasonry *vis-à-vis* the working class as a whole.²⁹

Thus class relations cannot be reduced to a direct confrontation between boss and worker in the workplace. Exploitation, a social phenomenon, always presupposes the metabolism of competition, the formation of an average profit rate, and the determination of socially necessary labour-time.

The famous Chapter 52 of Volume Three, left unfinished, opens with a claim:

The owners of mere labour-power, the owners of capital and landowners, whose respective sources of income are wages, profit and ground-rent – in other words wage-labourers, capitalists and landowners – form the three great classes of modern society based on the capitalist mode of production.³⁰

The three 'great classes' (not the only ones) thus seem to be definitively determined by the source of their income.

As a classic capitalist country, England perfectly illustrates the tendency to increasing class polarization announced in the *Communist Manifesto*. The capitalist mode of production tends 'to divorce the means of production ever more from labour and to concentrate the fragmented means of production more and more

into large groups, i.e. to transform labour into wage-labour and the means of production into capital'. Yet 'even here', in this paradigmatic country, 'this class articulation does not emerge in pure form': 'Here, too, middle and transitional levels always conceal the boundaries (although incomparably less so in the countryside than in the towns).'³¹ In other words, the actual social formation is never reducible to the bare skeleton of the mode of production. Polarization operates, but without reducing the spectrum of positions, statuses and intermediate classes that complicate the class front. Far from dispelling this blurring by some kind of urban purity of capitalist relations, Marx observes, the town reinforces it relative to the countryside. We are miles away from a simplistic conception of classes. To clarify the problem, we must turn back from the immediate data of sociology to theory.

Marx writes: 'The question to be answered next is: "What makes a class"?, and this arises automatically from answering another question: "What makes wage-labourers, capitalists and landowners the formative elements of the three great social classes?"'³² In other words, revenue determines class, and – vice versa – the owners of capital, land and labour-power constitute the three great classes.... The trap closes in a patent tautology.

But what is a class? 'At first sight, the identity of revenues and revenue sources.'³³ Wages, profit or ground rent are the common denominator of a vast social group forming a class. But 'at first sight' only.

Marx does not make do with this first glance. The claim is immediately corrected by an objection: 'from this point of view, however' – the criterion of revenue – one would slip into the fragmentation of a descriptive sociology, since 'doctors and government officials would also form two classes, as they belong

to two distinct social groups, the revenue of each group's members flowing from its own source'.³⁴

There would never be an end to it. Classes would be dissolved into status groups and socioprofessional categories: 'The same would hold true for the *infinite fragmentation of interests and positions* into which the division of social labour splits not only workers but also capitalists and landowners – the latter, for instance, into vineyard-owners, field-owners, forest-owners, mine-owners, fishery-owners, etc.' 'At this point,' Engels notes laconically, 'the manuscript breaks off', leaving a major theoretical question begging.

From Karl Renner to Ralf Dahrendorf, attempts to pick up the thread of the interrupted manuscript and reconstruct the unfinished chapter are too numerous to count. For Dahrendorf, the theory of classes in Marx is not a theory of social stratification, but an instrument for explaining overall social change.³⁵ The issue is not to know what a society looks like at a given moment, but how to change the social structure. Dahrendorf's interpretation is, however, mortgaged to the idea that class theory represents the problematic link in Marx's work between sociological analysis and philosophical speculation. When he proposes to arrange a set of quotations from Marx in systematic order, and articulate them in a coherent text, Dahrendorf, far from following the logic of the unfinished chapter, leaves the terrain of *Capital* to venture into a theory of interests and ideology, struggle and class consciousness, which refers to a different level of analysis. He extracts fragments from *The German Ideology* or *The Poverty of Philosophy* (for example: '[t]his mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself ... the struggle of class against class is a political struggle').³⁶ Absorbed in this labour of montage, he forgets that

the approach to class in these texts is bound up with the anthropological conception of alienation in the young Marx; and that it is necessarily modified by the theory of surplus-value, profit and capital accumulation.

Faced with the blank page of the unfinished chapter, it would be more coherent to imagine Marx poised to change problematics once again. The route from the concrete to the concrete is never the shortest one; it often ends in a cul-de-sac. Determination of classes exclusively by revenue leads to their infinite erosion and disappearance as operational concepts. In accordance with the counsel of the 1857 Introduction, it is time to reconvene, in its unity, the set of determinations encountered on the long journey of *Capital*: the relation of exploitation that accounts for surplus-value; the wage relation that makes the worker by turns a buyer and seller of commodities; directly and indirectly productive labour; the social division of labour; and the nature and amount of income. This hypothesis seems to be more in line with Marx's conception of class, which does not draw up socioprofessional tables, string together statistics, or labour over borderline cases in the class structure.

Where positivist sociology claims to 'treat social facts as things', Marx always treats them as relations. He does not define his object once and for all by criteria or attributes; he pursues the logic of its multiple determinations. He does not 'define' a class; he apprehends relations of conflict between classes. He does not photograph a social fact labelled 'class'; he has his sights set on the class relation in its conflictual dynamic. An isolated class is not a theoretical object, but a nonsense.

The unfinished chapter can thus be read as an additional step in the determination of the concrete. Determined at the level of the production process as a whole, classes can still receive new determinations involving analysis of the family, education, the

state and, further still, the political struggle proper. The unfinished path of *Capital* should be intersected starting from the opposite direction, leading from class struggle as a political struggle to the mode of production. The abandoned volume on the state would then represent the vanishing point of an unobtainable theory of classes, to which death, definitively halting Marx's pen, was not the only obstacle.

Social Classes and Political Representation

The whole set of determinations – not only economic, but also political – converges behind the 'superficial appearance [that] veils the *class struggle*'. Confrontation between political parties discloses its reality even as it dissimulates it. It discloses it in mystified form. On the basis of different property forms and social conditions of existence, there arises, in fact, a 'whole superstructure of different and specifically formed feelings, illusions, modes of thought and views ... The whole class creates and forms these out of its material foundations and the corresponding social relations.' Accordingly: '[i]n historical struggles one must make a still sharper distinction between the phrase and fantasies of the parties and their real organization and real interests, between their conception of themselves and what they really are'.³⁷

Revolutionary theory has something in common with psychoanalysis. Political representation is not the simple manifestation of a social nature. Political class struggle is not the superficial mirroring of an essence. Articulated like a language, it operates by displacements and condensations of social contradictions. It has its dreams, its nightmares and its lapses. In the specific field of the political, class relations acquire a degree

of complexity irreducible to the bipolar antagonism that nevertheless determines them.

1. In the sphere of the political, the relations of production are articulated with the state: 'the *material interest* of the French bourgeoisie is most intimately imbricated precisely with the maintenance of that extensive and highly ramified state machine'. It is precisely through this 'imbrication' that class fractions are differentiated, political representations developed, and alliances forged. It is also the site where class relations and the bureaucratic corps of the state interact, perpetuating the hierarchical structure of pre-capitalist societies. Thus: '[b]ureaucracy is only the low and brutal form of a centralization still burdened with its opposite, feudalism'. And it is not disagreeable to the second Bonaparte to find himself 'forced to create, alongside the real classes of society, an artificial caste for which the maintenance of his regime is a question of self-preservation'.³⁸

2. Starting from the basic classes, determined by antagonistic relations of production, these intersecting articulations multiply the differentiations. From *Class Struggles in France* to *The Civil War in France*, Marx meticulously follows the dialectic between social relations and political representation:

because the democrat represents the petty bourgeoisie, a *transitional class* in which the interests of the two classes meet and become blurred, he imagines he is elevated above class antagonisms generally. The democrats admit that they are confronted with a privileged class, but assert that they, along with all the rest of the nation, form the *people*.³⁹

If the middle classes experience the polarization of the basic classes, they none the less play a role of their own. In the Paris Commune:

For the first time in history the petty and middling middle class has openly rallied round the workmen's revolution, and proclaimed it as the only means of their own salvation and that of France! ... The principal measures taken by the Commune are taken for the salvation of the middle class ...⁴⁰

The Society of 10 December is construed as the product of the lumpenproletariat, 'the refuse of all classes':

Under the pretext of founding a charitable organization, the Paris lumpenproletariat had been organized into secret sections ... Alongside decayed roués of doubtful origin and uncertain means of subsistence, alongside ruined and adventurous scions of the bourgeoisie, there were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged criminals, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, confidence tricksters, *lazaroni*, pickpockets, sleight-of-hand experts, gamblers, *maquereaux*, brothel-keepers, porters, pen-pushers, organ-grinders, rag-and-bone merchants, knife-grinders, tinkers, and beggars: in short, the whole indeterminate fragmented mass, tossed backwards and forwards, which the French call *la bohème*...⁴¹

3. If the proletariat is the potentially emancipatory class, this potential is not realized automatically. *Capital* underscores the obstacles to the development of class consciousness inherent in the reification of social relations. To these obstacles peculiar to the production relation are added the specific effects of practical victories and defeats: 'the workers ... renounced the honour of being a conquering power, gave themselves up to their fate and proved that the defeat of June 1848 had rendered them incapable of fighting for years'. The non-linearity of the class struggle ultimately expresses its structural specificity under the rule of capital:

Bourgeois revolutions, such as those of the eighteenth century, storm quickly from success to success. They outdo each other in dramatic effects; men and things seem set in sparkling diamonds and each day's

spirit is ecstatic. But they are short-lived; they soon reach their apogee, and society has to undergo a long period of regret until it has learned to assimilate soberly the achievements of its period of storm and stress. Proletarian revolutions, however, such as those of the nineteenth century, constantly engage in self-criticism, and in repeated interruptions of their own course. They return to what has apparently already been accomplished in order to begin the task again; with merciless thoroughness they mock the inadequate, weak and wretched aspects of their first attempts; they seem to throw their opponent to the ground only to see him draw new strength from the earth and rise again before them, more colossal than ever; they shrink back again and again before the indeterminate immensity of their own goals, until the situation is created in which any retreat is impossible ...⁴²

4. Finally, the relationship between social structure and political struggle is mediated by the relations of dependence and domination between nations at the international level. Thus: '[t]he English have all that is needed *materially* for social revolution. What they lack is *the sense of generalization and revolutionary passion*.' The reasons for this have nothing to do with temperature or climate:

England can not be considered simply as one country among many others. It must be treated as the metropolis of capital.... In dragging down the working class in England still further by the forced immigration of poor Irish people, the English bourgeoisie has not merely exploited Irish poverty. It has also divided the proletariat into two hostile camps.⁴³

It is in this sense that 'a people that oppresses another people forges its own chains': 'The English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that the ultimate aim of this most bourgeois of all nations would appear to be the possession, *alongside* the bourgeoisie, of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat.'⁴⁴

So the social structure of class does not mechanically determine political representation and conflict. If a state or a party has a class character, their relative political autonomy opens up a wide range of variations in the expression of this 'nature'. The irreducible specificity of the political makes the social characterization of the state, parties – and, *a fortiori*, theories – a highly perilous exercise.

On the basis of fragments from *The Poverty of Philosophy* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, this non-correspondence between social structure and political representation has often been treated in terms of the discrepancy between class-for-itself and class-in-itself:

In so far as millions of [peasant] families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their cultural formation from those of the other classes and bring them into conflict with those classes, they form a class. *In so far as* these small peasant proprietors are merely connected on a local basis, and the identity of their interests fails to produce a feeling of community, national links, or a political organization, *they do not form a class*. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name ...⁴⁵

On the one hand, the peasants constitute a class 'in so far as ...'; on the other, they do not 'in so far as ...'. They thus seem to constitute a class *objectively* (sociologically), but not *subjectively* (politically).

Object and subject, being and essence are bound up with one another in the development of classes. In the *dynamic* of class relations, the subjectivity of consciousness cannot arbitrarily emancipate itself from the structure, any more than the objectivity of being can be passively detached from consciousness. This problematic is opposed to any mechanical

conception of a necessary transition from the in-itself to the for-itself, from the unconscious to the conscious, from the pre-conscious social to the conscious political, with time acting as a neutral go-between. Class consciousness and unconsciousness are intertwined in a perverse embrace, and both are consistently mistaken.

The notions of class-in-itself and class-for-itself, by no means frequent in Marx, belong to the philosophical representation of the proletariat characteristic of the early works, illustrated by the famous letter to Ruge of September 1843 in which Marx evokes the 'consciousness of itself' that the proletariat 'will be obliged to acquire, whether or not it wants to'. Analogous formulations recur in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: they are inscribed in the problematic of the self-development of historical subjectivity, and betray the strong influence of Hegelian phenomenology as a science of consciousness and self-consciousness, and nostalgia for what Lukács embraced in his later work as an 'ontology of social being'.⁴⁶ In certain early works, the proletariat appears to be still ontologically 'compelled as proletariat to abolish itself'. Its fate is in some sense determined by its being: 'It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do.'⁴⁷

This destiny still figures prominently in the letter to Weydemeyer of 5 March 1852, in which Marx sums up his own contribution:

What I did that was new was to demonstrate: 1) that the *existence of classes* is merely linked to *particular historical phases in the development of production*, 2) that class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*, 3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*.⁴⁸

Hegelian interpretations of Marx have drunk their fill at these sources. The proletariat, writes Labriola in his text on the *Communist Manifesto*, 'is a necessary result of modern history, has for its mission to succeed the bourgeoisie, and to succeed it as the producing force of a new social order in which class antagonisms shall disappear'.⁴⁹ In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács develops this dialectic of the in-itself and the for-itself more subtly, mediated by the totality: 'The self-knowledge, both subjective and objective, of the proletariat at a given point in its evolution is at the same time knowledge of the stage of development achieved by the whole society.' The result is a kind of theoretical ultra-Bolshevism on the question of party organization. Elevated into the fulfilment of the 'for-itself', the latter becomes the 'form taken by the class consciousness of the proletariat', invested with 'the sublime role of *bearer of the class consciousness of the proletariat and the consciousness of its historical vocation*'. More 'Leninist' than Lenin, paradoxically, Lukács thus lapses back into the conflation of party and class that the author of *What is to be Done?* precisely set out to avoid. In the dominant discourse of the Second International, this confusion tended to identify the party with the multiform historical movement of the class. In Lukács, the tendency is to absorb the class into the party: 'it is the proletariat that embodies this process of consciousness. Since its consciousness appears as the immanent product of the historical dialectic, it likewise appears to be dialectical. That is to say, this consciousness is nothing but the expression of historical necessity.'⁵⁰

In contrast, the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* present themselves as a labour of mourning for ontology, a radical deontologization, after which no space remains for any 'world beyond' [*arrière-monde*] whatsoever, any dual content, any dualism of the authentic and the inauthentic, science and ontology. There is no

longer any founding contrast between Being and existence, nothing behind which there lies concealed some other thing that does not come to light. The appearance of the commodity, of social labour-time, of classes, is inextricably the appearance and the travesty of their being: Being is resolved into existence, class essence into class relations. Reduced to a pathetic philosophical incantation, the obscure disclosure of the in-itself in the for-itself evaporates in its own conceptual impotence.

The conclusion to Volume One of *Capital* takes up the idea of the proletariat's 'historical mission' and its practical conditions of possibility, which consist in the very expansion and concentration of capitalist production. Yet *Capital* also states the converse theory of the infernal cycle of reification.

1. According to Marx, 'economy in the use of means of production ... appears as a power inherent in capital and a method specific to and characteristic of the capitalist mode of production'. This is:

all the less surprising in that it corresponds to the semblance [*der Schein*] of the matter and that the capital relation actually does conceal the inner connection [*innern Zusammenhang*] in the state of complete indifference, externality and alienation [*Ausserlichkeit* and *Entfremdung*] in which it places the worker *vis-à-vis* the conditions of realization of his own labour.

Since the 'means of production' are for him 'a means for exploiting labour', the worker tends to regard them with indifference, even hostility. He behaves towards the social character of labour (the labour of others) as if it were 'a power that is alien to him'.⁵¹

2. 'Yet there is more to this than the alienation and indifference that the worker, as the bearer of living labour, has towards the economical, i.e. rational and frugal use of his conditions of labour.' The 'squandering of the life and health of the worker, and the depression of his conditions of existence'; physical and psychological mutilation – these become a means of raising the rate of profit.⁵² Consequently:

Capital shows itself more and more to be a social power, with the capitalist as its functionary – a power that no longer stands in any possible kind of relationship to what the work of one particular individual can create, but an alienated social power [*als entfremdete gesellschaftliche Macht*] which has gained an autonomous [*verselbständigte*] position and confronts society as a thing [*eine Sache*], and as the power that the capitalist has through this thing. The contradiction between the general social power into which capital has developed and the private power of the individual capitalists over these social conditions of production develops ever more blatantly ...⁵³

3. With the externalization [*Veräusserlichung*] of capital in the form of interest-bearing capital, 'the capital relationship attains its most superficial and fetishized form' [*erreicht seine äusserlichste und fetischertigste Form*], the 'alienated form of the capital relation'. In it, 'capital obtains its pure fetish form' [*seine reine Fetischform*]: 'capital's determinations are dissolved and its real elements are invisible'. Living capital now presents itself as a pure object; money becomes pregnant, and 'interest accrues to it no matter whether it is asleep or awake'!⁵⁴ Interest-bearing capital:

displays the conception of the capital fetish [*Kapitalfetisch*] in its consummate form, the idea that ascribes to the accumulated product of labour, in the fixed form of money at that, the power of producing surplus-value in geometric progression by way of an inherent secret

quality, as a pure automaton ... The product of past labour, and past labour itself, is seen as pregnant in and of itself with a portion of present or future living surplus labour.⁵⁵

4. Capital is 'the products and conditions of activity of labour-power, which are rendered autonomous *vis-à-vis* this living labour-power and are personified in capital through this antithesis'. The result is 'a definite social form, and at first sight a very mysterious form': the means of labour as an alienated form that has become autonomous *vis-à-vis* labour-power (which is decidedly not the same thing as the loss of an anthropological essence). 'Just as the products become an independent power *vis-à-vis* the producers in capital and in the capitalist ... so land is personified in the landowner.' The result is also a 'mystification' that transforms social relations 'into properties of these things themselves (commodity)' and 'the relation of production itself into a thing (money)'. Hence the appearance of a 'bewitched and distorted world'.⁵⁶

Value, an autonomous social relation, is imposed on individuals as a natural law. Its very elements become ossified in autonomous forms. 'The division of profit into profit of enterprise and interest ... completes the autonomization of the form of surplus-value, the ossification of its form as against its substance, its essence.' Indeed, a portion of profit becomes completely detached from production: 'If capital originally appeared on the surface of circulation as the capital fetish ... so it now presents itself once again in the figure of interest-bearing capital as its most estranged and peculiar form.'⁵⁷

The discovery of abstract labour-time leads ineluctably to that of commodity fetishism. Hence 'the bewitched, distorted and upside down world', 'this autonomization and ossification of the different social elements of wealth', 'this personification of

things and reification of the relations of production' [*Verdinglichung and Versachlichung*] – in short, a veritable 'religion of everyday life'.⁵⁸

In these conditions, by what miracle could the proletariat free itself from the spells of an enchanted world? Without underestimating his aporias, it is still Marx that we must start from if we are to have any hope of overcoming the contradiction. The mystifications of the commodity universe present social relations as things. Marx conceives them as conflictual relations. Rather than photographing them at rest, he penetrates their innermost dynamic. Rather than seeking a criterion for classifying individuals, he unearths the lines of polarization between vast groups, whose contours and borders are fluctuating. Rather than setting off in search of a principle of classification, he travels an infinite path of determinations, aiming for the totality without attaining it. Rather than separating subject and object, he starts from their amorous embraces and reversals. Classes do not exist as separable entities, but only in the dialectic of their struggle. They do not disappear when the more vital or conscious forms of struggle die down. Heterogeneous and uneven, consciousness is inherent in the conflict that commences with the sale of labour-power and resistance to exploitation – and is unceasing.