

# Countering the Mystique of the Proletariat

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The *Communist Manifesto*, written by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in 1848, asserts that “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,” that social transformations grow out of the contradiction between productive forces and the relations of production when the latter become too constricting for the development of the former. In every epoch a revolutionary class incarnates these productive forces. [For Marxists, the classic historic example of a class struggle which is followed by a radical social transformation is the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In this example the bourgeoisie incarnated the new productive forces: the feudal relations of production (the way society was organized), were too inflexible to accommodate the increasing commodity production.

In a mechanistic version of this theory as applied to contemporary capitalist society, the proletariat, the working class, is the revolutionary class: and once the relations of production become too restrictive on the productive forces, the collective efforts of the proletariat will bring about a classless, commodity free society.]

## THE RARE ODDBALL

This Marxist conception inspires, to a more or less acknowledged extent, the defenders of the myth of the proletariat who employ banalities such as “Capitalism is a class society,” “We live in a class society,” to silence anyone who dares question this myth. The myth-defenders use these statements to assert that classes are necessarily in conflict—one defending its privileges and the other trying to abolish the first through a revolutionary transformation.

Today, only the rare oddball argues that the abolition of a certain category of private property holders (those who legally own their business) could signal the disappearance of capitalist social relations. Just as ridiculous are the claims that are occasionally advanced for technology: such as the one that industrial mechanization, cybernetics, computerization or mass production serve to undermine oppressive social relations. So among the “productive forces” which might provide liberation from the yoke of Capital, this leaves only the Proletariat. The following remarks will attempt to counter this dogma.

One questions the radicality of people who, in order to refuse this world, need to think that “History” has already condemned it. As if the disaffection and the resistance to the uninterrupted mutilation of Life brought in the wake of this “History” (further aggravated by its most recent avatar, Capital) aren’t convincing enough, these people want guarantees!

After offering the banalities about class society, disciples of the Proletariat usually make us listen to the long litany of their god’s struggle: all the big and small strikes are enumerated, presumably to provide concrete evidence of the opposition between Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. They explain that such and such a movement was “manipulated,” “betrayed” by evil bureaucrats (whose political orientation may vary); but we can rest assured: next time, the Proletariat will dispense with leaders and we will finally reach the shores of the Social Revolution.

It seems strange that the Proletariat, this “incarnation of History,” this marvelous god, always lets itself be manipulated. If this class truly possesses all the capacities that its disciples attribute to it, how can it invariably furnish and support such leadership? To questions like this, disciples of the Proletariat untiringly respond: “Capitalism is a class society,” “We live in a class society,” and whoever does not share their Faith is nothing but a “petit-bourgeois modernist.” Their Faith makes them blind to what goes on every day in the workplace and elsewhere: snitching, the respect for hierarchy, forced smiles barely camouflaging fierce competitiveness.

None of this fazes the Proletariat’s disciples; their god cares only about work, money, supporting their company and their State; the abominable present and the catastrophic future furnished by Capital don’t concern it.

Faith in the Proletariat blinds these zealots to the fact that the Proletariat as such is nothing more than another category of Capital which, when it does get around to initiating a struggle, only wants a bigger share of the same rotten pie—of which the ruling classes are grabbing the “tidbits” for themselves.

Disciples of the Proletariat usually claim to be discoverers of the hidden direction of history. One might expect that the history of capitalist social relations, of their development and expansion, would help them see that contemporary social conditions are no longer the same as those in the nineteenth century. In the last century, capitalist social relations were still gradually undermining non-capitalist relationships. At that time, society as a whole did not yet completely support and mirror the process of reproducing Capital.

The production process had not yet been completely tailored to Capital, as it came to be once science was integrated as a central element in the production process. In the last century, the extraction of surplus value took the form of absolute surplus value (profits came from the inordinate lengthening of the working day). During this period, Capital did not directly manage the reproduction of the proletariat; workers were then supplied largely from pre-capitalist modes of production (the peasantry, artisans).

The violence of workers’ struggles in this earlier period and the impression that their standards and behavior were completely alien to society’s. can be understood by remembering that the human beings trapped in the condition of being proletarians still retained moral reference points distinct from those of the bourgeois and the shopkeeper. Traditions of another way of life allowed nineteenth century workers to perceive more directly than today the inhuman character of their condition.

Also, the society of that era did not recognize their right to be socially represented; they had neither the right to vote nor freedom to organize themselves. Even if factory despotism, as well as hunger, served to discipline workers, Capital was still unable to manipulate the totality of their existence, to make them an integral part of the production apparatus. Today, even in regions of the Third World where the reproduction of individuals still comes from non-capitalist modes of life, television and the tourist industry provide human beings with the message that in order to be happy, one must have things; and for this, one has to sell oneself no matter what is sold.

It was in the nineteenth century that the “workers’ movement” emerged. Impelled by the human rebellion against Capital, this movement undertook to transcend Capital by putting an end to factory management by private owners. For the “authoritarian” theorists of this movement, the State, led by the Party of the proletariat, was to take charge of the factories; for “anti-authoritarian” theorists, workers’ associations (unions, committees, councils...) were to take them over. Attempts to put these theories into practice make it clear that none of them had anything at all to do with the abolition of Capital.

In addition to these “revolutionary” endeavors to manage the capitalist mode of production for the benefit of the proletariat, the establishment of the “workers’ movement” played an important role in turning proletarians into full-fledged members of capitalist society by teaching them that they must not wreck machines, that they have to respect their work tools, that they should be proud of their function as producers of surplus value, that their good fortune to acquire “rights” as proletarians carries with it the obligation to internalize their “responsibilities” as workers and as citizens.

The notion of proletarian emancipation also has its roots in the nineteenth century. Contrary to what one might suppose, this notion does not imply liberation from the proletarian condition. Rather, this notion implies simultaneously a prior material existence in this condition (one is either born into this class or somehow becomes a member) and the existence of a barrier to escape this condition (the bourgeoisie). This conception of the proletarian condition reduces human beings to their function as living commodities competing with other commodities, to their being effectively trained in discipline and submission. The refusal of this condition means to constantly fight

against the mutilation of one's humanity, the mutilation being inherent in the proletarian condition, to try to save, against enormous odds, one's psychic and physical integrity which is ground down daily by society's mechanisms.

The radical disciples of the theory of the proletariat are generally obliged to admit that on the job, proletarian workers are just what they are called on to be: wage-workers, with a mentality which goes along with the condition they find themselves in. So, in order to preserve their theory, many of the worker-advocates redefine "proletariat" to be those who are excluded from society.

With this definition, their proletariat consists of the unemployed, temporary and part-time workers, etc. The radicals seem to forget that such categories of the proletariat are far from being excluded from capitalist society; the "excluded" are essential to the functioning of a system that lives off the production of exclusion and integration. They serve both as a mass which is willing to accept more rigorous working conditions and also as a reminder to workers with stable employment not to rock the boat too much or they might find themselves among the "excluded."

Moreover, this notion of exclusion is itself quite ambiguous because it suggests that the contaminated food, the stereo systems and the other rubbish which inundates workers "lucky" enough to have jobs are objectives perfectly worth striving for.

It is not as proletarians that proletarians will be able to abolish Capital, but by repudiating everything that characterizes their condition. The rebellion will be an endeavor of human beings; this means that it will be undertaken without any of the trappings of domestication. It will come from human beings refusing to live forever in the condition of prostitutes.

\* Text: Gerard; from: *Interrogations*, Autumn 1988, c/o I.S., B.P. 243, 75564 Paris, Cedex 12, France, FE translation.

## Postscript

The following paragraph is the conclusion to a letter the author wrote to a fan of the proletariat who criticized this essay because it "lacks any understanding of class."

I agree with you when you write that "our humanity is denied," but in my view this means that we have to claim what is denied us—our humanity—and not what ravages us—the proletarian condition. As for me, I am a proletarian worker but to declare, "I'm a proletarian!" is no consolation for everything I have to endure. That would just be reaffirming my servitude. Instead, I feel like shouting that I am a human being and not a thing; I'm more than a mere appendage to the Social Machine which transforms my humanity into a commodity competing with other commodities. Instead, I feel like shouting that no sum of money can compensate for my life being devoured in the gears of Wage Labor. I'm sick of being a proletarian but this doesn't mean I intend to become an administrator, an artist, or a small businessman...since no variant of the way Capital enslaves human beings interests me.

GSI

# fifth Estate

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