

· I ·

# Classical Views



# Introduction

## **Marx: Class Relations and Capitalism**

Marx's texts remain the fundamental resources with which anyone interested in the theory of classes and capitalist development must begin. Although the concepts of class and class conflict are integral to the whole of Marx's work, he never managed to complete a comprehensive formulation of them. Many of Marx's writings—including *Capital* itself—remained unfinished. Some of his most important and influential ideas are stated only in an incomplete way. As a consequence, any selection from Marx's writings tends to have a fragmentary character. Matters are further complicated by scholarly debates over how far Marx's 'early' works, especially *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, embody views which Marx later discarded.

These issues help to fuel the continuing and involved interpretative debates in which Marx's writings have long been entangled. Such debates often have a scholastic quality to them, but they also raise questions of great importance for class analysis today, many of which are discussed in the contributions which follow in this book. It is probably no longer possible to provide even a summary description of Marx's views of class and class conflict which would command the agreement of everyone. So the thumbnail sketch which we offer here should be read with this in mind.

According to Marx, class divisions are not found in all forms of society: classes are a creation of history and in the future will again disappear. The earliest, and smallest, types of society (which Marx usually refers to as 'tribal societies') are classless. This is because, in such types of society, there is no

surplus production and no private property. In tribal societies production is based upon communal resources—appropriated through hunting and gathering or through agriculture—and the fruits of productive activity are distributed through the community as a whole. Class divisions only arise when a surplus is generated, such that it becomes possible for a class of nonproducers to live off the productive activity of others. Those who are able to gain control of the means of production (in precapitalist societies this is above all *land*) form a dominant or ruling class both economically and politically. Class relations for Marx are thus necessarily exploitative and imply divisions of interest between ruling and subordinate classes. Class divisions are moreover inherently conflictual and frequently give rise to active class struggle, this being in Marx's view the chief 'motor' of historical development.

Marx distinguishes several types of class society in European history: ancient society (Greece and Rome), medieval feudalism, and capitalism. As class societies, they all share elements in common; but capitalism has certain very distinctive features as compared with the prior types. Marx spent a good deal of his career working out what these features are; and in analysing the trajectory of development of capitalist society that would lead to the creation of a socialist order in which classes would be transcended. In *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), from which the first two extracts are taken, Marx's ideas are as yet only developed in a fairly rudimentary way; nonetheless, they contain the outlines of a critical analysis of capitalism that carries formidable intellectual penetration and moral fervour. Taking over the concept of *alienation* from Hegel, Marx strips it of the epistemological connotations it had in the writings of that author and applies it to examining the consequences of the emergence of the capitalist class system.

Marx's account of the alienation of the worker in capitalist production may seem on initial acquaintance to be both vague and abstract. It becomes much less so when understood as a first attempt to specify some of the contrasts between capitalism and prior types of productive system. The political economists—the early founders of economics—Marx argues, have already demonstrated that the class system of capitalism is based upon one predominant class relationship: that between capital and wage labour. 'Capitalists' are those who own the factories and machines which increasingly replace land as the primary means of production. Wage labour, or 'wage workers', represent a class of propertyless workers, who have been expropriated from control of their means of production. As capitalism matures, the vast majority of the population become wage workers, who have to sell their labour power to the owners of capital in order to secure a livelihood. But the political economists have failed both to examine the origins of this class system, which has emerged out of the dissolution of feudalism, and have analysed capitalism purely from the point of view of the capitalist.

When we study the development of capitalism from the perspective of the worker, Marx says, we see a very different picture from the rosy view of prosperity typically painted in political economy. Marx was not an admirer of peasant production, the dominant form of production in feudalism. Peasant production yields little of the material abundance unleashed by the advent of capitalism. But, although not the legal owner of his plot of land, the enserved

peasant was still largely in control of the process of production itself. The peasant worker controlled the rhythms of the working day and the nature of the labour process. Such is not the case, however, with the wage worker in the workshop or factory. The wage worker sells his or her labour power to the capitalist employer and thereby forfeits control over the labour process, which is organised by the employer. In speaking of the 'alienation' of labour, Marx is attempting to describe the implications of this loss of control, whereby basic aspects of the production process become 'alien' impositions upon the worker. The worker becomes alienated from the labour task itself; from the products of his or her labour, which are sold on the market by the employer; from fellow labourers; and from human 'species being'. 'Species being' refers to the distinctive characteristics of the human being, as compared with the other animals. Because they are not merely driven by instincts, human beings do not adapt in a passive fashion to their environment, as the animals do. Human beings must actively and creatively master their environment to survive; creativity and control of one's circumstances are thus an intrinsic part of what it is to be 'human'. A worker in a factory, routinely doing dull and unrewarding tasks from hour to hour, is reduced to merely adapting passively to the environment—in Marx's evocative phrase, 'the animal becomes human and the human becomes animal'.

In the course of his later writings, Marx gave this analysis a more substantive historical backdrop and developed his own views with much greater precision. A major transition in Marx's thought occurs with his adoption of the notion of 'surplus value'. From the 1850s onwards, this concept occupies the central position in his analysis and critique of the capitalist class system. This analysis retains strong ties to Marx's early diagnosis of the nature of 'alienated labour', but in *Capital* the term 'alienation' is rarely used.

Why did Marx accord the concept of 'surplus value' such importance? The answer is bound up with his continuing preoccupation with criticising the writings of the political economists. According to political economy, the worker selling labour power to the capitalist gets full value in return in the form of wages. Such a conception effectively conceals the class character of capitalism because it seems as if the exchange between worker and employer is on an equal footing and there is no exploitation involved. In disclosing the origins of surplus value, Marx identifies the main axis of capitalist class relations by showing how capital is able to exploit wage labour. In common with other commodities, the value of labour power is determined by the amount of labour time necessary for its production. In the case of labour power—the 'brain and muscle' supplied by the worker—this amount of labour time represents how much the capitalist has to pay the worker for that worker's services. Surplus value is generated by the amount of labour time left over when the employer has recouped the cost of the wages of the worker. In a working day of ten hours, if the cost of paying the worker is recovered after six hours' work, the remaining four hours' production is appropriated by the capitalist as surplus value. Surplus value is the source of profit, the key element in a capitalist economy, since production for profit is the driving force of capitalist enterprise.

Marx's analysis of the dynamics of capitalist production is integrally connected with his interpretation of the changes that will produce a socialist order.

Two processes are involved in his analysis of the transformation of capitalism into socialism. On the level of the economy, a set of changes occur whereby the foundations of capitalist production are progressively undermined 'from within', that is, as a result of its own maturation over time. Capitalism is an internally contradictory system of production that cannot operate in a stable fashion. The most basic contradiction of the capitalist economy is that although founded upon 'private appropriation'—the search for profit on the part of capitalist entrepreneurs—it is in fact inherently the most 'socialised' form of order that human beings have ever created. For a capitalist economy involves the cooperation and mutual dependence of everyone in a way foreign to prior types of society. In prior types of production of an agrarian character, the peasant is largely self-sufficient as a producer working a specific plot of land. But with the development of capitalism, all of us become dependent upon a multiplicity of goods produced by others, exchanged on the market. 'Socialism', as a series of political ideas and as an emergent type of society, represents an acknowledgement of the inherently socialising character of capitalist production.

The economic changes that tend to undermine competitive capitalism in favour of an emerging socialist order, as described by Marx, are complex. But one main factor involved is the fluctuating nature of the capitalist economy, a concrete expression of its contradictory character. Capitalism is prone to cycles of boom and depression. In periods of depression or crisis, large firms tend to expand at the expense of smaller ones, which are thrust out of business. The growth of large firms is part of a process of an increasing 'concentration' of economic life. Concentration of economic activity tends to go along with what Marx calls the increasing 'centralisation' of the economy; this refers primarily to the expansion of the activities of banks and other financial organisations, partly operating through the state, in coordinating economic life as a whole. Taken together, concentration and centralisation progressively make manifest the necessarily social nature of capitalist production, undermining the mechanisms of individualistic entrepreneurial competition. This is an incipient form of socialism, coming into being with the very movement of capitalist production.

As part and parcel of these developments, however, according to Marx, we find the intensification of class struggle. The rise of labour movements, directed to the objective of achieving a socialist society, forms the main political medium whereby the changes described above are 'pushed further', are actualised in a socialist revolution. The nature of class struggle in capitalism is best explained in terms of the capitalist labour contract. The capitalist labour contract, as we saw above, involves the sale of labour power to employers in exchange for a monetary wage; in entering such a contract, the worker sacrifices control over the labour task and other aspects of the context of production. The rise of labour movements is first of all founded upon the attempts of workers to achieve a measure of 'defensive control' of the workplace. A primary means of resisting the power of employer and management is via the collective withdrawal of labour or its threat—the strike. The involvement of workers in such struggles leads to the formation of local unions and thence to the unification of labour movements upon a national level and to their extension into the political sphere. The existence of parliaments and recognition of the formal right to organise

political parties in the apparatus of bourgeois democracy permit the formation of labour parties that increasingly challenge the dominant order. Through such political mobilisation, the revolution is made—a process which Marx apparently believed could be a peaceful transition in certain countries with strong democratic traditions but was likely to involve violent confrontations elsewhere.

### **Lenin: Class, Revolution, and the State**

As the leader of the first successful revolution explicitly affiliated to Marxist ideas, Lenin of course has secured an enduring place in history. He was not a thinker of Marx's stature, but his ideas have of course taken on concrete expression in the development of the Soviet Union (although just how far the Soviet Union today is 'Leninist', or rather the outcome of the policies pursued by Stalin, is a matter of fierce controversy). Much of the distinctiveness of Lenin's contributions to Marxist thought derives precisely from the fact that he was involved in promoting revolutionary activity in a 'backward'—though rapidly developing—country, Russia. In contradistinction to many of his Marxist contemporaries, Lenin believed it possible to achieve a socialist revolution in Russia even while it remained a predominantly peasant society. Hence much of his written work consists in polemical interchanges with those who held different views about the possibilities of revolution. Although Lenin's views changed with different stages of political struggle, he often took the position that successful revolutionary activity, particularly in a country which lacked a strongly developed industrial sector, necessitated the 'professional' leadership of a disciplined cadre of revolutionaries.

In assuming this stance, he directed his critical attacks against those who held that working-class movements should engage in 'spontaneous' revolutionary activity, based upon workers' own appraisals of the potentialities of achieving political change. According to Lenin, left to their own devices, labour movements tend to produce only reformist ideas. To achieve a more radical outlook, they need the leadership that can only be supplied by intellectuals, trained to take a 'broader view' and educated in the theory of socialism; such leaders are generally 'defectors' from the bourgeois class, who choose to take the side of the working class. These ideas are worked out in their most succinct form in *What Is to Be Done?*, a manifesto for political action. Socialism, Lenin claims, is not a set of ideas that has emerged from labour movements themselves; it is a creation of intellectuals, introduced into class struggle from the outside. Here Lenin states his famous theory of the limitations of 'trade union consciousness'. This in effect questions the intrinsic connection that Marx drew between the formation of the working class, unions, and the extension of class conflict to the political sphere in the formation of socialist parties. Lenin argues that the relation between industrial and political conflict is more complicated than this. 'Left to themselves', workers will form unions and struggle against employers to secure greater returns from the labour contract and will also attempt to pressure the government to pass various sorts of welfare legislation. But revolution and socialism are not a natural outgrowth of these processes.

It is easy to see how these views fitted with the thesis—which Lenin turned into an active accomplishment—that socialist revolution was possible in ‘backward’ Russia. For Lenin stressed the need for active intervention in history to achieve socialist goals, placing much more emphasis upon revolutionary leadership than upon the level of development of industrial capitalism as such. This viewpoint remains now as controversial as it was in Lenin’s own day. Critics have argued that Lenin’s conception of the ‘vanguard party’ is an autocratic principle that has contributed to the formation of a bureaucratic state in the Soviet Union, a system far from the classless order Marx anticipated.

Lenin was himself however much concerned with analysing the nature of the state and its relations to classes and to socialism. *The State and Revolution* represents his most systematic statement on these issues. The book was written in the summer of 1917, when the ‘February Revolution’, which instituted a bourgeois parliamentary constitution, had taken place and just prior to the ‘October Revolution’ that was to sweep Lenin’s party to power. It considers the question of how far the state is a ‘neutral’ organisation, which can be taken over by a revolutionary party and turned to its own ends, or how far alternatively the state is intrinsically wedded to the interests of the capitalist class. If the second of these alternatives is the case, the state cannot simply be adopted by the socialist party assuming power, but has to be much more radically attacked or ‘smashed’ if a classless society is to be brought into being.

Basing his views upon an interpretation of comments by Marx and Engels on the state, Lenin asserts that the state is a product or expression of class antagonisms. The state (in all types of class society) is the apparatus whereby the dominant class is able to secure its rule. It follows that the state is essentially a repressive agency, concerned with the suppression of the interests of subordinate classes in society. Capitalist states differ from prior types of state because they characteristically involve parliamentary democracy. Parliamentary democracy supposedly permits the representation of the interests of the population as a whole. However, according to Lenin, it is as much a form of direct class rule as other, seemingly much more despotic state systems. This is so for two reasons. First, access to parliament is controlled by capitalist interests. The ‘real essence of bourgeois parliamentarianism’, in Lenin’s words, is ‘to decide every few years which member of the ruling class is to repress and crush the people through parliament’. Second, parliament is in any case more of a debating forum than anything else: the real policies of government are forged in the civil service bureaucracy, which is not accountable to the people. The reality of parliamentary government is bureaucratic power, the ‘state machine’, which serves the interests of the ruling class.

The implications of all this for socialism, in Lenin’s view, are clear. The state, and its bureaucratic underpinning, must be dramatically transformed as part and parcel of the achievement of a classless society. Although Lenin talks of ‘smashing’ or ‘destroying’ the state with the advent of a socialist order, he is careful to separate his ideas from those he sees as implied in anarchism. Anarchists, he claims, wish to destroy any form of centralised authority altogether. But this ambition is incompatible with a society in which there is to be the planned coordination of production in the service of the needs of the commu-



nity. The false democracy characteristic of capitalism must be replaced by genuinely representative democratic bodies, in which the mass of the population would be directly and continuously involved. In the early stages of socialism, this would be a state—a proletarian state, or what Marx referred to as the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. It would still maintain repressive elements, directed this time not against the majority of the working population but against the remnants of the bourgeois order. As these are dissolved, a phenomenon which involves an extended process, the repressive features of the state will begin to drop away. This follows directly from Lenin’s conception of the state as an expression of class relationships. In a society where privately owned capital has ceased to exist, there are no longer any classes, and therefore the repressive, bureaucratic state has no longer any foundation for its continuance. The state ‘withers away’.

### **Weber: Classes, Status Groups, and Bureaucratic Domination**

To Max Weber, ideas such as these seemed excessively naïve and dangerously misleading. Although Weber drew very substantially upon Marx’s writings, he did so in a critical vein. His interpretation of past history is in some respects very different from Marx; so are both his characterisation of contemporary capitalism and his prognosis about the likely destiny of socialist societies. The optimistic and progressive philosophy of history that informs the writings of Marx and of Lenin is replaced in Weber’s work by a much more sombre interpretation of the future of humanity.

Some of the most important differences between Weber’s views and those of Marx are the following. First, the concepts of class and class conflict do not occupy as important a role in Weber’s thought as in that of Marx. That class struggles have frequently occurred in different phases of history, Weber accepts; and he agrees with much of what Marx has to say about the specific significance of class conflict between capital and wage labour in industrial capitalism. But class conflict is not for Weber the main ‘motor’ of historical change. Conflicts between states, ethnic communities, and what Weber calls ‘status groups’ have been at least as important.

Second, Weber sees capitalism as a distinctively *Western* phenomenon in its origins, incorporating distinctive values and modes of activity that are divergent from those generated by other civilisations. The most important feature of this ‘Western-ness’ is what Weber refers to as the ‘rationalised’ character of capitalist production, something which stretches well beyond economic enterprise itself. Rationalisation is a phenomenon which permeates each of the major institutions of capitalist society. ‘Rationalisation’ is not an unambiguously formulated concept in Weber’s writings. But in its core meaning it refers to the extension of calculative attitudes of a technical character—epitomised in scientific reason and given substantive expression in the increasing role that science and technology play in modern life.

Third, Weber sees the increasing spread of bureaucracy as an inevitable accompaniment of the rationalised character of capitalist society. When Marx and Lenin wrote about ‘bureaucracy’, they had in mind the civil service, the

bureaucratic apparatus of the state. But Weber applies the concept of bureaucracy much more broadly, to characterise all forms of large-scale organisation: the state, to be sure, but also business firms, unions, political parties, universities, hospitals, and so on. Weber agrees with Marx and Lenin that bureaucracy is essentially undemocratic because bureaucrats are not accountable to the mass of the population affected by their decisions. But (1) the problem of bureaucratic domination is much more pervasive than they imagined, and (2) there is, according to Weber, no way of transcending bureaucratic domination save by limiting the spread of bureaucracy. In particular, there can be no question of 'transcending the state' in the manner anticipated by Marx and Lenin. The arrival of a socialist society, in Weber's view, will have quite the contrary consequence to that predicated by socialist thinkers: the further extension of bureaucratic domination.

Weber's formulation of the concepts of class and class conflict, like that of Marx, remained unfinished. There are two versions of his ideas to be found in his work, both of which are included here. 'Class, Status, and Party' is the earlier of the two and the fuller exposition. Weber distinguishes three main axes of the distribution of power in society, of which class relationships form one. His concept of class has some affinities with that of Marx but in other ways contrasts with Marx's usage. In assessing these similarities and differences, it is not enough merely to compare what he writes in 'Class, Status and Party', as many commentators have done, with Marx's analyses. Weber's conceptual discussion in the essay must be related to his broader writings in sociology and economic history, such as are contained in the other sources we have included from Weber's work in this book.

According to Weber, following Marx, class is first and foremost an 'objective' feature of economic relations, founded upon property relations. Weber accepts that the emergence of modern capitalism involved the formation of a mass of propertyless wage workers, who sell their labour to owners of capital in order to sustain a livelihood. He did not, however, accept the theory of surplus value, drawing instead mainly upon 'marginalist' economics, thus conceptualising class differently from Marx. According to Weber, classes consist of aggregates of individuals who share similar sets of "life chances" in labour and commodity markets. Classes are not groups, although group action may be taken on the basis of common class interests. Weber did not believe in the likelihood, or the desirability, of proletarian revolution and, consequently, tends to present a more diversified view of conflicts in capitalist societies than Marx. Coordinated action that is taken on a class basis is often cross-cut by power relations deriving from two other forms of group solidarity: those involved with 'status groups' and political parties. Status groups are founded upon relationships of consumption rather than production and take the form of 'styles of life' that separate one group from another. According to Weber's view, status groups, in the shape of feudal estates, or castes in India, have been prominent elements in all precapitalist societies. While tending to be overshadowed by class relations in modern capitalism, status group affiliations by no means lose their significance.

Weber's discussion of the independent importance of party formation has to be connected to his interpretation of the nature of the modern state. Marx's view of the state, which was never developed in detail, emphasised a conception of the state as the expression of class struggles (see, however, the articles collected in Section Three below). Weber, on the other hand, sees the state as based upon its capability of monopolising the legitimate control of the means of violence within a given territory. The modern state is a nation-state in embattled relations with other nation-states. Sentiments of ethnic community or of 'nationalism' for Weber become of major significance in the nation-state. Ethnically based, or nationalist, parties are forms of political mobilisation that do not necessarily follow class lines.

In concluding this preface to the 'classics', we have to expand upon the themes of rationalisation and bureaucracy in Weber's work. Weber's writings in respect of these issues can be read as a direct challenge to those who foresee the possibility of creating socialist societies that are not bureaucratic tyrannies. Although some writers, particularly those of a more orthodox Marxist persuasion, are prone to dismiss rather cursorily Weber's pessimistic appraisals of the modern world, it surely is the case that they pose problems of major importance. It is useless to pretend that these problems can be just pushed to one side.

The easiest way to get some insight into the standpoint Weber developed and how it contrasts with that of Marx—and Lenin—is to return to the idea of the expropriation of the worker with the emergence of capitalism. As we have noted, Weber agrees with Marx in accepting that the formation of a propertyless labour force is a distinguishing feature of capitalism. But he generalises the idea of the 'expropriation of the worker from control of the means of production' beyond the sphere of industry, relating it to the general expansion of bureaucracy in the modern world. The 'expropriation of the worker', Weber argues, is actually characteristic of all bureaucratic organisations and is a process that is irreversible. The alienation of the worker—loss of control over the instruments and process of labour—here becomes an ineluctable element of the centralisation of administration. Individuals at the lower levels in bureaucratic organisations inevitably lose control of the work they do, which is determined by those in the higher echelons. Bureaucracy, according to Weber, forms a 'steel-hard cage' in which the vast majority of the population are destined to live out a large part of their lives. This is the price, he argues, we pay for living in a technically highly developed civilisation.