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**Class**

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The first version of this paper was delivered at a Division on Criticism session titled "After Glasnost: Whither Marxist Criticism?" at the December 1990 Modern Language Association (MLA) convention. The year 1989, as *Time* and *Newsweek* were gleefully reminding us, had been the "big year" in which the decay and disarray of what has been called "actually existing socialism" became patent. The major upheavals were in the USSR and Eastern Europe, but the reverberations of the crisis were being felt by governing parties in China, Nicaragua, and Cuba, and by insurgent forces from South Africa and the Philippines to Peru. The word "after" carried apocalyptic overtones: after the fall; after the flood; after such knowledge, what forgiveness? "Whither?" injecting a tone of gentle pathos, presented the reverse side of apocalypse—abandonment, loss of bearings. The term "Marxist criticism" could be taken as denoting the residual form that Marxism, significantly reduced to adjectival form, might take in the future. *Glasnost*, the linchpin term that, in 1990, denoted the puny David of discourse that seemed singlehandedly to have destroyed the Goliath of monolithic state socialism, has by 1992 been virtually eradicated from the global political vocabulary—first by "perestroika," then by "free market capitalism." If the MLA were to sponsor such a panel in 1992, the
subtitle might well remain the same, but the main title would probably now read, "After Socialism."

The title of my own contribution to this symposium was and is "Class." I have deliberately kept this title free of the elaborate wordplays and subtitles that usually adorn academic papers, for I wish to direct attention to the term itself. Does the term "class" refer to anything real? Can it lay claim to significant explanatory status? Can it serve as the basis for an effective Marxist political praxis?

It is frequently proposed these days—not only by the Sunday a.m. pundits but also by many purported to be on the Left—that class, in the traditional Marxist sense, is dead. It is conceded that the term, frequently grouped with race and gender, may denote one among several "subject positions" that cultural commentators need to take into account. But class, we are warned, does not constitute a privileged point of departure for social analysis, much less a metatheory guiding political practice. Pronouncements on the death of class are frequently premised upon a retrospective historical narrative that, particularly in the light of recent events, has gained the status of a formal syllogism. It goes something like this. The present degeneration of socialism is attributable mainly to the horrors of Stalinism, wherein the state parades itself as "representing" the populace it oppresses. Stalinism, however, is traceable to Leninism, with its dogma of the vanguard role played by the revolutionary party. And Leninism is traceable to Marxism, which, in its insistence upon class struggle as the motor force in history and the working class as the bearer of historical transformation, established the reductive and monistic paradigm that has historically conflated class with party with repressive state apparatus. Marxist class analysis is thus not the victim but the culprit in the trajectory that has inevitably wrought the demise of almost all instances of "actually existing socialism."

My main purpose in this essay is to argue for the continuing utility of class analysis as the centerpiece of the Marxist project. The current crisis in Marxism requires us to engage not in less, but in more and better, class analysis. Rather than concluding that the widespread collapse of "actually existing socialism" is determined by a series of "isms" associated with the names of leaders of the world Communist movement, we should, I believe, begin at the other end of the trajectory. What we need is a historical and theoretical—and a posteriori—argument that takes into account the various choices that have been made over the past hundred years or so by participants in the movement for an egalitarian society. The basis for the establishment of the "red bourgeoisies" that ran—and, after a quick-change into "democratic" garb, to a large extent still run—these societies was laid, in the USSR, during the Stalin era and, in the People's Republic of China, during the late 1950s. But the movement toward repressive state capitalism became irreversible, I would argue, only in the Khrushchev era in the USSR, and only after the defeat of the Cultural Revolution in China (see Bettelheim 1976, passim, and Gollobin 1986, 457–506). (No doubt my settling on these dates rather than possible others sets various political antennae twitching!)
Regardless of when we might determine the qualitative shift toward state capitalism to have occurred, however, leftists should maintain that it is mainly good—from the standpoint of most of humanity—that these attempts to build socialism, and to move toward communism, have occurred. On the reform level, Communist-led movements have been the key catalysts for progressive change in this century. In the United States—as has been documented in recent excellent books by Mark Naison (1983) and Robin D. G. Kelley (1990)—the movements for racial justice and unionization were spearheaded by “reds” in the 1930s. The New Deal government granted many of the benefits we have come—perhaps unwisely—to take for granted largely out of fear of a Left-led revolutionary movement. On the global scale, the defeat of the Nazis—which was accomplished primarily by the Soviets—cannot be said to be an insignificant achievement. Nor could the dozens of national liberation movements that were actively aided by the USSR in the postwar period. On the level of revolutionary social transformation, the narratives of socialist construction give glimpses of the very different sort of world that had the potentiality to come into being. The Soviet five-year plans, the Chinese Great Leap Forward, the Proletarian Cultural Revolution—these and other moments in the modern revolutionary process certainly attest to the willingness of masses of workers and peasants to throw themselves into the making of a productive infrastructure that they felt they would control. But, more significantly, the histories of socialist construction point to the dramatic alterations in human relationships and values that were enabled by the movement toward egalitarianism. If one reads the relevant literature, which few in the academic left seem to have done these days, one comes upon account after account of people liberating themselves from oppression and struggling to articulate a higher morality—of the Uzbek women who made bonfires of their veils, of the Moscow bus riders who performed a citizens’ arrest of a fellow Russian who voiced a racist insult against a visiting black American, of the Chinese peasants who gathered at the town gate in Long Bow to practice criticism and self-criticism (see Halle 1933, 156; Haywood 1978, 170–71; Hinton 1966, passim). Even though this movement toward egalitarianism was halted and reversed, primarily through its own internal contradictions, there was no inevitability to the failure of socialism. Contrary to the opinions of both the mass media pundits and various self-proclaimed neo-Marxists (or, as they sometimes call themselves, “post-Marxists”), the history of twentieth-century Communist-led movements does not depict one grand abortive experiment, but instead the greatest advance in history toward human emancipation.

In order for Marxism to know where to go in its present crisis, however, it needs to develop tools that will enable it to analyze where it has been. The most important of these tools, in my view, is a fuller and deeper understanding of class and class struggle. Without grasping class as not merely confined to what Marxists have traditionally called the “relations of production” but as constitutive of the “forces of production” as well, there is no way of coming to terms with the deeply flawed doctrine of productive-forces determinism that has influenced and, albeit in altered
form, continues to influence much left-wing political discourse. Nor, without positing the centrality of class analysis, is there any adequate way of criticizing the antifascist strategies of the Popular Front and, in China, of New Democracy, which initiated a practice of class-collaborationism from which the Communist left never recovered. Nor is there any way of understanding recent events in the “former USSR,” where there is occurring not a struggle for “democracy” but a class struggle within the old state-capitalist “red bourgeoisie” and the market-oriented capitalists who have emerged from their ranks. Nor, without reference to class conflict and exploitation, is there any way of analyzing the rest of the current sordid global and domestic scenario—from last year’s escandade in the Persian Gulf, which provides a textbook case of interimperialist rivalry; to the brutal IMF-engineered superexploitation of the millions of peoples of color who inhabit what is increasingly being called the “Fourth World”; to the resurgence of reactionary nationalisms and civil wars apparently motivated by ethnic and religious rivalries; to the sharply fascist turn of events in the United States, including the increase in inner-city police violence and the assaults on welfare and reproductive rights. Class analysis does not mean romantic workerism or “vulgar” Marxism or the suppression of the multifariousness of contradiction in a monistic paradigm that denies heterogeneity and difference. Rather, it offers the best available means for Marxism to discern the method in the madness of contemporary events, take the measure of its own errors and failures, and forge an effective strategy in the post-glasnost—some would say post-socialist—world.

As my throwaway remarks indicate, I find much neo-Marxist theory inadequate to the task I have just outlined. In the remaining pages I shall sketch a critique of the approach to class in the work of various exemplary neo-Marxists. Neo-Marxism is, of course, a plural entity. “New social movements” advocates such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Stanley Aronowitz, and Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, while differing on some points, have all essentially abandoned class analysis and are in fact only questionably Marxists. Others, such as Richard Wolff and Stephen Resnick and Erik Olin Wright, retain much of the language of Marxist class analysis, although they reduce the range and force of its reference.

Among these neo-Marxist theorists Wright is perhaps the one most committed to retaining class as the pivotal category for analyzing social relations. In opposition to the “domination theorists” who relate the “contradictory locations within class relations” to questions of power, Wright insists that exploitation furnishes the basis of class hierarchy. “The marginalization of exploitation both undermines claims that classes have ‘objective’ interests and erodes the centrality Marxists have accorded class in social theory,” declares Wright. “The concept of domination does not in and of itself imply any specific interest of actors” (Wright 1989, 5). Moreover, Wright stipulates that “class” denotes real people occupying real situations. Indeed, as a sociologist, Wright devotes his empirical project to summarizing and measuring
ranges of opinion and attitude among these different classes. Finally, Wright points to the necessity for moving beyond the notion of private ownership of the means of production and purchase of labor power as the basis for defining exploitation. His discussion of a class-based monopoly of skills and credentials illuminates the privileged status of the middle strata in capitalist society and, still more crucially, the unequal access to resources and power that has allowed “red bourgeoisies” to constitute themselves as a class in socialist, and then state capitalist, societies. It is necessary, Wright urges, for Marxists to take into account the altered character of classes in the monopolist era and to abandon the “elegant and simple abstract picture” of “a fundamentally polarized class structure which constitutes the basis for the formation of two collectively organized classes engaged in struggle over the future of the class structure itself” (348).

Despite the integrity of Wright’s attempt to retain and develop the notion of class, his theory has some signal weaknesses. First, Wright tends to underrate the function of ideology in shaping consciousness: rather than viewing the individual as a nexus of the contradictory ideas and experiences pervading all corners of life in class society, he views class as a function of empirical situation, not of dialectical process. As Guglielmo Carchedi notes, “class consciousness . . . is not something which can be observed empirically aside from the modifications produced on class consciousness by other ‘effects’ generated also by the same structure” (Carchedi, in Wright 1989, 120). Second, Wright’s proposition that the professional and managerial classes exercise a monopoly over skills and credentials locates exploitation in the sphere of distribution rather than in that of production. The reason why managers came to constitute a new exploiting class in the USSR is not that they set out to usurp privileges for themselves (a “domination” thesis), but that the abiding division of mental and manual labor in the sphere of production in the socialist USSR permitted—indeed, encouraged—such usurpation to occur. Inequalities in relations of production were rooted in the class inequalities built into the forces of production.

Finally, Wright’s stipulation that the managerial and professional classes constitute not simply class fractions occupying contradictory locations between bourgeoisie and proletariat, but equally significant and perhaps historically determining social groupings, entails a radical departure from the Marxist axiom that social revolution will come from those who “have nothing to lose but their chains.” Like “new working class” theorists such as Alvin Gouldner, Wright displaces the proletariat as revolutionary agent, arguing that the principal contradiction in society may be transposed from the opposition between bosses and workers to that between capitalists and the technobureaucrats who serve them. “One of the upshots of this reconceptualization of the working class,” he declares, “is that it is no longer axiomatic that the proletariat is the unique or perhaps even the central rival to the capitalist class for class power in capitalist society” (27). Despite his insistence that “exploitation” and “objective interests” furnish the bases for the definition of
class, Wright strips these concepts of much of their explanatory and political force.1

Resnick and Wolff, like Wright, declare that class provides a privileged “entry point” for social analysis; they insist, moreover, that class is defined by different social groupings’ relation to the extraction and expropriation of surplus value. Cognizant, like Wright, of the necessity for taking into account the many non-commodity-producing laborers in advanced capitalist society, Resnick and Wolff build upon Marx’s distinction between productive and nonproductive labor. The “fundamental” class process, they assert, encompasses the labor of those who produce surplus-value at the point of production; the “subsumed” class process “refers to the distribution of already appropriated surplus labor or its products.” Both class processes, they argue, are “conditions of each other’s existences”; the terms imply no “hierarchy of relation” (1987, 118). Unlike Wright, however, Resnick and Wolff contend that classes cannot be separated out from one another as empirically specifiable entities; their insistence upon the use of the term “class process” rather than “class” suggests their commitment to a totalizing and relational paradigm for understanding the contradictory forces intersecting in the lives of given individuals in the social complex. That this model has value for illuminating the class contradictions informing socialism is revealed in their remark that “socialism refers to a particular period and form of transition and not to a particular social formation . . . A transition to communism [in the USSR] implies the presence of noncommunist fundamental class processes. The capitalist may be prevalent in the social formation while the object of social change is the precise undermining of that prevalence” (1987, 124). While this comment, made in 1987, may inaccurately forecast the historical tendency of Soviet socialist development, it suggests the usefulness of the authors’ paradigm for grasping the contradictory coexistence of different and opposing class processes.

Despite its apparent promise, Resnick’s and Wolff’s theory of class fails to provide a dialectical antidote to the empiricist and reductionist theories of class to which it sets itself in opposition. Their polemic is directed largely against what they call “class essentialism.” Proponents of “class essentialism,” they declare, “search for and usually find one aspect of capitalist society that then functions for them as an essence, that is, the final determinant of the other social aspects” (139). As an alternative, Resnick and Wolff offer a model of class based on the Althusserian

1. In fairness to Wright, it should be noted that in the 1989 Debate on Classes he evinces awareness of the problems accompanying this conception of an alienated managerial class, which he originally put forward more forcefully in his 1985 Classes (London: Verso). The “concept of contradictory class locations,” he concedes in 1989, “seem[s] much sounder . . . Top managers and executives . . . would be expected to be resolutely procapitalist because they are fundamentally part of the bourgeoisie with only minor contradictory elements in their class location” (311). Wright is in fact torn between, on one hand, a bipolar class model that assigns the various “middle classes” to “contradictory class locations” between capitalists and workers and, on the other, a multiclass model that posits nothing historically or politically privileged about the position of the proletariat. While he is drawn toward the logic of the former, his empiricist conception of discrete class consciousnesses—his relative inattention to the issue of ideology—continually leads him to assert the latter.
concept of "overdetermination," whereby Marxism presumably finds in the class process an "entry point" for understanding the social totality, but "make[s] no claim that [it] has any greater social determinacy than any other process in the social totality" (26).

There are, in my view, a number of problems with Resnick's and Wolff's theorization of "overdetermination." First, it entails a serious logical circularity. What is it that privileges the "class process" as an entry point, if not the fact that in reality class does in fact "determine" the structure and development of society more "essentially" than do other types of processes? In their justifiable eagerness to shun empiricist conceptions of class, Resnick and Wolff throw out the baby with the bath water: the fact that reality cannot be distilled within a single abstraction does not entail the conclusion that reality cannot serve as the ground for measuring and evaluating the relative adequacy of different theories, different "entry points." Second, their theory is based on what is, in places, a serious misreading of Marx. "Marxian theory," they claim, "rejects idealism and materialism as contesting essentialisms, both of which clash with its commitment to overdetermination" (5). They can make this claim, however, only by defining "materialism" as "any notion that natural or economic processes determine society and thinking." Marx, who held "historical materialism" in the highest esteem, would simply have noted that what Resnick and Wolff are describing is "mechanical materialism," not "materialism" as such. In order to enlist Marx in the ranks of the Althusserians, Resnick and Wolff are at times obliged to quote so selectively as effectively to distort Marx's meaning. For example, they cite the Grundrisse to the effect that "the concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure" (54). While they are right to conclude that "for Marx, what is (or can be) known is conceptually produced" (54), they then go on to state that "Marx cannot and does not, as we read him, presume that any statement he may make about [the] environment could ever be other than a statement within his own particular conceptual framework" (55). In other words, reality—here reduced, we should note, to the supremely empiricist conception "environment"—is the product of concepts. This conversion of Marx into an apostle of "overdetermination" can be effected, however, only by a strategic omission of other statements from the Grundrisse passage cited above, for instance: "Thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind. But this is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being" (Marx 1973, 101). Where Resnick and Wolff claim that "knowledge, for Marx, is the process connecting the concrete real to the thought-concrete" (55), for Marx this "connection" necessarily involves both reflection and determination: the "concrete itself comes into being" through a process independent of the process by which it is understood.

I have contested Resnick and Wolff's epistemological arguments because they furnish the basis of the peculiar stratagem by which they simultaneously assert the primacy of class analysis to Marxism and strip this analysis of its logical and
political force. "Class," they aver, "is an adjective, not a noun" (159): "there is no entity, no group of persons, that can be properly designated as a class" (161). Indeed, they claim, the "innumerable sentences written by Marx . . . in which classes are treated as functioning entities making history" are "a kind of theoretical shorthand inspired by an urgent polemical intent" (161). Marx "chose to personify, anthropomorpheize, class positions in his discourse"; this "personification" was a "discursive device" (162). When Marx called upon the workers of the world to unite because they had nothing to lose but their chains, then, presumably he was establishing metaphorical equivalences—not only between wage slavery and chains but between "class processes" and actual workers. If so, it is hard to know whom he was apostrophizing. Resnick and Wolff's use of "overdetermination" in Knowledge and Class is intended to enable a dialectical and nonreductionist formulation of the complex interrelations of the multiple processes, both class and nonclass, constituting the social totality. It ends up, however, divesting the term "class" of the power to signify people who might constitute themselves as agents intervening in processes on the basis of the "knowledge" that "class" might supply.

Wright and Resnick and Wolff at least retain class as a privileged category for social analysis. The same cannot be said for Laclau and Mouffe, Aronowitz, and Bowles and Gintis, who, while laying claim to a place in Marxist tradition, aim to dismantle that tradition. Since my space here is limited, I shall briefly summarize and comment critically upon some shared points in these theorists' attacks on Marxist class analysis.

The first argument advanced by the "new social movements" neo-Marxists is that classes are not constituted by "objective interests" derived from people's placement in the relations of production. To the extent that people form themselves into coherent social groupings—and classes are only one of these—they do so on the basis of articulating themselves as participants in those groupings. "Interests are formed through practices," write Bowles and Gintis. "People produce themselves and others through actions" (1986, 22); "identity, interests and solidarity are as much the outcome as the starting point of political activity" (8). Aronowitz, citing the "post-Marxist discourse" of Laclau, asserts that "classes, social formations, historical agents . . . are the categories of an old Hegelian essentialism the validity of which must be denied" (xiv). Following Adam Przeworski, he notes that "class formation results from struggles about class" (1990, 105). Laclau and Mouffe contend that the conception of the working class as an agent in history is a "Jacobin imaginary" (2) (or, interchangeably, a "Stalinist imaginary" [4]): it is "utopian" to move from the description of a "subject position" to the "naming of an agent" (118). Moreover, since "unfixity" is the "condition of every social identity" (85), the only way that "subject positions" can define themselves is through the "articulatory practices" that constitute "discursive structures" (95–96). Marxist class analysis is flawed, in other words, because it presupposes that classes are constituted by structures and forces prior to, and at times at variance with, the consciousness of
those who presumably constitute classes. Marxist class analysis is, as Aronowitz puts it, epistemologically “a priori” (107).

The second argument posed by these theorists, corollary to the first, is that class struggle has, largely if not completely, been displaced by “new social movements”—feminist, ethnic, racial, religious, ecological—through which people articulate their needs, desires, and identities. Bowles and Gintis applaud such movements for their concern with not a “politics of getting,” but a “politics of becoming”; by contrast with class-based battles over “resources,” they claim, these movements are focused on the “primacy of moral and cultural ends” (1986, 11). Aronowitz claims that “today the creative impulse in social theory comes from outside Marxism” (174). “Building from a micropolitics of autonomous oppositional movements, whether derived from production relations or not, a new historic bloc may emerge” (167), he declares. But there is “no question of the hegemony of the working class, as traditionally constituted, over the historic bloc, nor of the claim of Marxism to represent more than its own historic perspective” (168). Laclau and Mouffe, decrying any “discourse founded on the privileged status of ‘classes,’ ” note that the “common denominator of all of [the ‘new social movements’] would be their differentiation from workers’ struggles, considered as ‘class’ struggles” (1985, 159). While Laclau and Mouffe caution against a naive privileging of this “‘non-class of nonworkers’”—such as they discern in the work on André Gorz—they do so because this privileging “does not go far enough to break with the traditional problematic,” that is, it “really does no more than invert the Marxist position” (169). The “new social movements” have superseded Marxist class struggle not simply because they are the sites of recent political activity but also, it would seem, precisely because they are not class struggles.

Third, some of these critics of Marxist class analysis attack not simply Marxism’s stress upon working-class “objective interests” and agency, or even its emphasis upon the primacy of class struggle, but its very claim to offer a scientific analysis of social structure and development. This claim to analytical authority is frequently linked to the bureaucratic commandism presumably intrinsic to the Leninist party. Aronowitz, who believes that Marxism’s “economic logocentricity has constituted its major weakness, theoretically and politically” (1990, 166), lambastes Marxism for its “scientism”: Marxism’s tradition as “a master discourse of liberation signifies a fundamental will to dominate” (142); as a consequence, the party, “because of its scientific claims, gains domination over the working class” (162). With the “break-up of communist ideology in the seventies,” however, Aronowitz argues, there has been a “startling rediscovery of liberal political theory” (257). The Althusserian doctrine of the “relative autonomy of the state” has reopened the possibility that “the state is to become the arena, perhaps the arena for proletarian class struggle” (258–59). Laclau and Mouffe, along similar lines, pose that the very claim to “sure knowledge of the social”—whether from the Left or the Right—is “totalitarian” (187). Indeed, in Marxist theory “the centrality attributed to
the working class is not a practical but an ontological centrality, which is, at the same time, the seat of epistemological privilege: as the ‘universal’ class, the proletariat—or rather its party—is the depository of science” (56–57). Like Aronowitz, Laclau and Mouffe posit that “the task of the Left . . . cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy” (176). Democratic pluralism is, it would appear, the antidote to the repressive science—and authoritarian practice—emerging from class analysis.

Clearly one could write reams in response to these arguments. I shall content myself with making a few points. First, as regards the questions of “objective interests” and “articulation,” it should be noted that Marx himself distinguished between classes “in” themselves and classes “for” themselves; the Eighteenth Brumaire is largely “about” the issue of different classes’ degree of self-awareness and their consequent efficacy (or lack thereof) as historical agents (see Marx 1986, especially 123–25). He never asserted, however, that the proletariat’s slowness, or even its failure, in becoming a class “for” itself cancelled out its existence as a class “in” itself objectively in need of gains to be won through both reform and revolutionary struggle. If neo-Marxist critics of Marxist class analysis are as interested in discourses and articulations as they claim to be, it strikes me as peculiar that they have assigned so little significance to the issue of ideology. Is false consciousness too archaic a notion for theoretical consideration? Rather than conclude that the proletariat’s failure to announce itself consistently and unambiguously as a class negates its existence as a class, it would be more productive, I propose, to investigate the role of dominant ideology—racism, sexism, nationalism, anti-communism—in impeding the formation of working-class consciousness. Indeed, the expectation that the working class will, if it is a class, unproblematically articulate itself as a class, smacks of the “class essentialism” that has presumably been banned from neo-Marxist theory. For the notion that the modern-day proletariat, submersed as it is in a propagandistic quagmire without precedent in history, should transparently assert its identity, without political mediations, strikes me as both naïve and reductionist (and, Lenin would doubtless add, spontaneist).

As regards the questions of the “new social movements,” I would question, first, the track record of the new movements. It is certainly a good thing that struggles have gone forward to contest the discrimination experienced by women and people of color and to safeguard the environment. But I would deny that any of these movements, absent a class perspective, does or can pose a real threat to bourgeois hegemony. Some of them, indeed, help strengthen that hegemony: Aronowitz may claim that race and nationality are “transhistorical” (1990, 111), but the current global drives to organize people around ethnicity strike me as both profoundly historical and, for the most part, profoundly antiprogressive. I would also question the version of the track record of the “Old Left” that explicitly or implicitly accompanies advocacy of the “new social movements.” In the United States, for example, the Communist party was inconsistent on the question of race and
inadequate on the question of gender. But it was also, during the 1930s, the best act in town with regard to both these arenas of struggle, and it managed to organize hundreds of thousands, even millions, around a noneconomic politics—as, for instance, when it led a mass march of Italian-Americans through Harlem to protest Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia (see Foley 1990a and 1990b, and Naison 1983, 157). I would, furthermore, contest Bowles and Gintis’s notion that there is something superior about struggles over “the primacy of moral and cultural ends” and something inferior about struggles over “resources”—a formulation with overtones, for me, of a New Leftist scorn for greedy workers grubbing for more bucks. There’s nothing wrong with grubbing for more bucks if you haven’t got enough of them.

Finally, in relation to various neo-Marxists’ rediscovery of the virtues of liberal democracy, I would point out that here the chickens of post-Althusserianism come home to roost. The relative autonomy of the state dissolves, through the mediations of “overdetermination,” into absolute autonomy; “democracy” exists apart from class relations (see Wood 1986, passim). Marx, arguing that “equal right is still constantly stigmatised by a bourgeois limitation,” noted that “right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby” (1968a, 324). For some neo-Marxists, however, “democracy” replaces socialism—not to mention communism—as the goal of the new “historic bloc.” Since everything is “heterogeneous” and “plural”—power, oppression, hegemony—the pluralistic system of liberal democracy, if only humanized, offers the means to the best of all possible worlds. Class analysis, by contrast, is associated—in a language evoking Hannah Arendt as much as Jacques Derrida—with a totalitarian assault on “difference.” The critique of logocentricity comes full circle with Cold War liberal anticommunism.

Even at their most perspicacious, I have hoped to suggest, neo-Marxist treatments of class divest class analysis of both its logical force and its efficacy as a guide to political practice. At their least illuminating, these theories undermine Marxism’s critical and revolutionary program and rewarm the clichés of liberal pluralism. What Marxism needs at the present juncture is not a revised paradigm that relegates class to one among several “factors” working in mutual overdetermination. Rather, it needs to develop a series of auxiliary hypotheses that retain class as the central, essence- (yes, essence) determining category for social analysis while taking into account the changed realities of the monopoly-era global economy, as well as the political/ideological forces that operate as barriers—admittedly, formidable barriers—to the formation of revolutionary class consciousness. In particular, this revised and updated class analysis must develop a model for explaining the historical process that enabled the overturning of the movement toward eradicating classes in “actually existing” socialist states. This revised model will have to view classes—and levels of class consciousness—as relations and processes in a contradictory totality; if the neo-Marxists are to be thanked, it is for insisting upon the bankruptcy of reductionist equations of interest with agency. But
in order to accomplish this task, it is necessary to go more deeply into dialectics, rather than to develop pseudodialectical formulations—whether of "overdetermination" or "plurality"—that simply bring idealism in through the epistemological back door, denying the existence of real and potential class agents and foreclosing revolutionary practice. What is needed is not an abandonment of "scientism," but more, and better, science.

References


