

# CLASSES AND THE REAL STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY

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*conditioned complexity. We present this article here for the first time in English, in a translation by Ashley Davis. Missing bibliographic information and English translations of cited texts have been filled in by Pavel Siostrzonek. Editorial notes are included in brackets.*

## I

Although every Marxist analysis of society operates as a matter of course with terms such as class, bourgeoisie, proletariat, and class ideology, thus with categories which in their organic unity make up the Marxist theory of classes; a cursory critical glance reveals that the very commonplace nature of this contains within it a serious danger. In the immediate casual obviousness with which these terms are used, what is lost is, above all, the character and sense of the Marxist theory of classes; all that is new in Marx's contribution escapes us, and, moreover, that which makes of Marx's observations a genuine *theory* of class disappears. If we undertake a return journey from so-called "class analyses" and class interpretations to their theoretical starting point, we discover that their starting point is not the Marxist *theory* of classes as a whole, but rather various *isolated* aspects of this theory, which raise themselves up to the level theory itself. These include in particular the following:

1. Descriptive academism and scholastic socialism, which understands the theory of classes as a doctrine about the definition and classification of social classes and strata. In this approach, the Marxist theory of classes is *reduced* to a formally logical delineation of terms, to a determination of the differences between class, status group, and stratum. The critical spirit of this approach is exhausted in the accentuation of the fundamental aspect of classes – their connection to the ownership of the means of production – in opposition to bourgeois sociology, which for the most part situates social classes within the realm of distribution. A typical representative of this approach is Karl Kautsky.<sup>1</sup> It is entirely natural that bourgeois sociologists, who view the Marxist theory of classes from *this* perspective, reproach Marx for failing to define classes precisely anywhere in his work, for the fact that it is not clear *how many* classes he recognized, and so on.<sup>2</sup> This approach thus bases itself on the presupposition that correctly defining is enough to enable scientific knowing.

2. The apparent antithesis of the previous conception is empirical practicism, which identified the Marxist theory of classes with a system of rules for the waging of class struggle – that is, with a collection of empirical notions of the forms and methods of

<sup>1</sup> A textbook example is the extensive passage entitled "Klasse und Staat," with the subtitle "Definitionen," in the second volume of the eclectic work *Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung*, vol. II. (Berlin: Dietz, 1927), esp. pp. 3–31. [Cf. Karl Kautsky, *The Materialist Conception of History*, trans. Raymond Meyer with John H. Kautsky (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), esp. pp. 249–259.]

<sup>2</sup> Marx is reproached for this "scientific" imprecision by the contemporary French sociologist Gurvitch. Georges Gurvitch, *La vocation actuelle de la Sociologie* (Paris: P.U.F., 1950), p. 341.

class conflicts. The relationship between this conception and the theory of classes can be likened to the relationship of cameralism to political economy. It is not a theory of classes, but rather a collection of empirical notions and rules derived from *immediate* practice and focused *immediately* on practice, without any theoretical mediation. In contrast with the previous academic and scholastic approach, which “acknowledges” the Marxist theory of classes, with the exception of the dictatorship of the proletariat (which is rejected by both the Marxist Kautsky and the non-Marxist Gurvitch), this approach emphasises the cardinal significance of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a criterion for adherence to Marxism. Nevertheless, no matter how enormous the *practical-political* gulf between the two conceptions may be, they concur on one important point: they understand the dictatorship of the proletariat *only* from the perspective of political tactics, and in this one-sidedness they either accept it or reject it. In both cases politics and philosophy are separated, and the dictatorship of the proletariat is not understood as a unity of the methodological with the revolutionarily and historically transformative, but rather exclusively as a question of regular politics, tactics, and political programme.

3. The interpretation of the Marxist theory of classes as a matter of uncovering latent class *interests*, of uncovering the social being as an essentially economic being. This approach, which sees it as the task of science to reveal what *truly* lies behind political, aesthetic, philosophical, and other opinions, namely class interest, holds up *interest* as the primary driving force of social events; it thus understands Marxism as a theory of hidden *motivations* of social conduct, which of course places it amongst subjectivist theories. Interest becomes the real subject of history. In place of Hegel’s logical categories, which are incarnated and shape reality, class interest comes to the fore as the Demiurge of the real. Instead of real transitions and concrete analysis, it is sufficient to have in reserve “interest” as the universal explanation of social processes. In this conception, Marx’s thesis that the human being is a set of social relations has been inverted and disseminated in vulgar form as homo economicus.

4. The empirical-sociological interpretation of the theory of classes, which has found popularity especially in Poland over the last two years. Two antithetical tendencies in the investigation of the class structure of contemporary society, appearing in the capitalist world on the one hand, particularly in American sociology, and in the socialist camp on the other, primarily in Poland, give the impression at first glance of merely trading places with one another. Within American sociology, the international representative of empiricism, a number of scholars now recognise the inadequacy of mere social research for understanding the class structure of society. In Poland, by contrast, sociologists flock towards empirical research as the decisive factor that should liberate social science from sterility and enable concrete scientific knowledge of the working class and other social strata of socialist society. These opposing tendencies are advanced – as it appears from outside – because the old methods, whose place they are now taking, have proven disappointing and have failed to produce the expected results. However, the positive direction in which these opposing tendencies are advancing is not entirely

unambiguous. It contains within itself the seeds of its future breakdown. In the United States this tendency is characterised by a deviation away from the empirical methods of Warens<sup>3</sup> and an inclination towards the methodology of Max Weber. Although Weber need not be and is not the endpoint of this tendency, he becomes at least a visible and clearly formulated goal which can be aimed for, and whose method and conceptual apparatus can be accepted without modification. In the United States this represents a complex and contradictory process, which contains tendencies of refined apologetics for as well as deeper criticism of imperialist society (the typical representatives of both of these tendencies, Mayer<sup>4</sup> and Mills<sup>5</sup>, who shall be dealt with further below, take Max Weber as their starting point). But the path of Polish sociology contains the latent danger that it will remain captive to the very impotence and sterility against which it has risen up. The adherents of empirical research, who justify the legitimacy of their discipline by arguing that it is necessary to gain knowledge of the working class under socialism (since it allegedly remains something unknown),<sup>6</sup> fall prey to an obvious error if they imagine that they can arrive at such knowledge by *this* means. The empirical revolt against dogmatic sterility is merely a protest against a past state of affairs; it does not yet represent its overcoming. A *critical* adoption of bourgeois methods of empirical research *without* a critical adoption and elaboration of the *Marxist theory* of classes must inevitably lead into a blind alley. Attaining knowledge of the contemporary working class means attaining knowledge of contemporary *society* in its internal structure and its concrete historical tendency. The complexity of this task is determined by the complex character of the epoch itself: the existence of two social systems in their concrete historical form.

A common feature of all the above conceptions, however much they vary in their details, is the fact that they are detached from the Marxist *method*, and as a result they understand the theory of classes as a finished result, an isolated question, detached from both the materialist conception of history and the revolutionary historical praxis of the proletariat.

The Marxist theory of classes, the core ideas of which are briefly summarised in Marx's famous letter to Weydemeyer,<sup>7</sup> differs fundamentally from the one-sided and distorted

<sup>3</sup> [It seems likely that the name "Warens" is incorrect. There was, however, a well-known American sociologist who fits Kosík's description named William Lloyd *Warner* (1898–1970), author of numerous empiricist studies on social inequality. Warner's theory of class was, moreover, discussed at length in an article by Kurt Bernd Mayer cited by Kosík below. (Editors' note)]

<sup>4</sup> [Kurt Bernd Mayer (1916–2006), Swiss-American sociologist whose work will be discussed in this article. (Editors' note)]

<sup>5</sup> [C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), the influential US-based sociologist. (Editors' note)]

<sup>6</sup> See Julian Hochfeld, "O programu výzkumu pracovního prostředí na velkých stavbách socialismu," *Filosofický časopis* 4 (1956), no. 3, pp. 441–448.

<sup>7</sup> Karel Marx, "Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, 5 March 1852," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 39 (New York: International Publishers, 1983), pp. 61–65.

interpretations described above. The very fact that the ideas Marx expressed in this frequently quoted letter remain either misunderstood or vulgarly distorted in these interpretations testifies to the gulf between these approaches and the Marxist theory of classes. In the letter in question, Marx rejects the supposition that he had discovered the existence of classes and their struggle in society. Already before Marx, Ricardo in particular had uncovered the class anatomy of modern society, and French historians had also presented a *history* of classes and class struggles. Marx's contribution resides in the fact that *knowledge* of the historical role of the proletariat, thus the discovery of the *real* revolutionary subject of history, became the basis for establishing a *science* of society as a science of the *present*.<sup>8</sup> For Marx and Marxism, the issue of classes and the class struggle is not exclusively a political or tactical question; it is a fundamental issue of historical development, scientific understanding, and the revolutionary transformation of the present. On this basis it can be explained why classes and the theory of classes have not only tactical-strategic or sociological significance for Marxism, but also, and above all, philosophical significance, since from the perspective of *Marx's* theory of classes new formulations were developed for explicitly philosophical questions, such as the relationship between subject and object, necessity and freedom, absolute and relative truth. In a narrower sense, Marx's contribution to the theory of classes is characterised by two discoveries: Marxist historicism and the real revolutionary subject of history.

The connection of the Marxist theory of classes with both philosophy and political strategy and tactics fundamentally distinguishes Marxism from various sociological conceptions of classes, which essentially represent a mere description of the existence of classes but are not capable of uncovering the reality of classes – that is, they are not capable of becoming a theory of the real process of the abolition of *all* classes. These theories are either open apologia for capitalist dominion or mere sociological inquiries into partial phenomena of the class structure, torn out of their social context and developmental connections. In Marxist theory, based on *knowledge* of the historical role of the proletariat, praxis exists not as a foreign body which is attached from outside to a theory that has already been formed, but is rather a moment of this theory. Only on this basis can the traditional extreme of apologetics and utopia, in which bourgeois science operates today, be overcome: either ossification within the factuality of given relations and thus a petrification of these relations, or a creation of an ideal outside of society, outside of developmental tendencies, an ideal for whose realisation no forces exist.

<sup>8</sup> Engels considered “This eminent understanding of the living history of the day, this clear-sighted appreciation of events at the moment they occur” to be the principal characteristic of the materialist conception of history and the materialist theory of classes. See Frederick Engels, “Preface to the Third German Edition of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* by Marx,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 26 (New York: International Publishers, 1990), p. 302.

Marxist historicism resides in the fact that it understands the present as a transition, as a moment of historical development, thus as something mediated, though naturally it does not deny immediacy, that is, the uniqueness and specificity of each historical stage and epoch. The working class, as the real subject of the *present* epoch, is not an external and therefore impartial observer of the historical process, but an active, revolutionary agent thereof, which however stands above each of its concrete practical actions in the sense that it understands and realises this action as a *link* in the process of historical development and thus specifically places the action within the historical context.

Each epoch is immediate, that is to say unique, only thanks to the fact that it is mediated; nevertheless, as a product of prior development it is at the same time something different, since it is itself both a *producer* and a mediating link to the next developmental stage. From the standpoint of the proletariat, capitalist society is not only that which it is immediately, that which it is in its historical givenness, namely an exploitative order, but is at the same time something else, namely the material preparation for its own negation, the abolition of capitalism. The standpoint of the working class (that is, politically and methodologically, practically and philosophically: the dictatorship of the proletariat) is the search for a *practical* possibility for overcoming given relations. In this sense, this standpoint *more objectively* penetrates into reality than any so-called scientific objectivism, since it understands reality as *dynamic*, weighed down by internal contradictions, and does not cling to reality's facticity. The *unity* of the objective examination of reality (from the standpoint of the working class) and the revolutionary *transformation* of reality (the revolutionary struggle of the working class) is dialectical and dynamic: a higher degree of objectivity is made possible by the practical overcoming of existing conditions, by the discovery of a real path out of these conditions; but the search for this real path out is inseparably linked to a deep, concrete, and methodologically correct analysis of these conditions.

If it is not possible to understand the Marxist theory of classes as a finished *result*, which exists and can be used *separately* from its method, this means it is necessary to demonstrate positively how in the Marxist theory of classes the *discovery* of the proletariat as a historical subject connects to the elaboration of a dialectical, genetic-historical method (in opposition to abstract-analytical method).

Marx concurs with Hegel that all that exists is simultaneously immediate and mediated. Being is understood as a process. However, in contrast to Hegel, who as a consequence of his idealistic method *frequently* lapses into the speculative construction of mediation, Marx emphasises the mediated nature of things themselves and of objective processes; what matters for him is thus the logic of reality itself, not a logic that is an externally imposed. Whereas Marx infers transitions from the "*specific* essence" of the examined phenomena, transitions in Hegel form out of the "*universal* relation" of abstract categories. Marx remarks concerning Hegel: "It is always the same categories offered as the animating principle now of one sphere, now of another, and the only thing of importance

is to discover, for the particular concrete determinations, the corresponding abstract ones.”<sup>9</sup> This speculative method appears in vulgarised form in those proponents of class theory whose class analyses forego concrete examination and, in place of concrete determinations, find abstract determinations based on “class interest.”

In opposition to Ricardo and classical political economy, Marx *methodologically* points to the *existence* of mediation, and thus in opposition to the *analytical* method he holds up his genetic-historical method, and in opposition to general and forced abstraction he holds up his concrete abstraction. The analytical method of classical political economy bypasses mediation and reduces the various forms on which it is based, as if these forms were *given* presuppositions, to a single unity. Although this method reveals the *existence* and struggle of classes in bourgeois society, it considers these classes, together with the entire social order, to be a natural and therefore unchanging basis of historical development, which can be understood – as it is by Hegel<sup>10</sup> – as a *quantitative* growth, and not a qualitative development. “Ricardo”, writes Marx, “understands wage labour and capital as a natural, not specific historical, social form of the production of wealth [...]. Therefore he does not understand the specific character of bourgeois wealth.”<sup>11</sup>

In order for empirical forms of surplus-value – profit, interest, rent – to be developed genetically, that is, in order to abolish their givenness upon which they are based and which serves for Ricardo as a natural prerequisite for their investigation, it is necessary to arrive at a *deeper* abstraction, to uncover their common source, which is *independent* of them, to discover surplus-value as the substance of all of these historically phenomenal forms. Whilst vulgar economics petrifies the independence and isolation of the various empirical historical forms in which the individual components of the capitalist economy come to the surface and behave towards one another with complete indifference (profit as a function of capital, wage as a function of labour, rent as a function of land), thereby disguising capitalist exploitation, classical economics by contrast attempts to reduce these indifferent forms to their internal unity. According to Marx, this method is linked to the fact that “Ricardo exposes and describes the economic antagonism of classes [...] and that consequently political economy perceives, discovers the root of the historical struggle and development.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 10 [Kosik's emphasis].

<sup>10</sup> See G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), § 248, p. 269; see also Hans Freyer, *Soziologie als Wirklichkeitswissenschaft: Logische Grundlegung des Systems der Soziologie* (Leipzig and Berlin: B. G. Teubner, 1930).

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1857–58*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 28 (New York: International Publishers, 1986), p. 256.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 31 (New York: International Publishers, 1989), p. 392.

However, the limited nature of this abstract analytical method lies in the fact that it does not go beyond the *given* existence of the bourgeoisie and proletariat, and is therefore incapable of abolishing this immediate existence by finding mediating links.

If, in classical political economy, the natural and permanent existence of classes on the one hand and the analytical-abstract method on the other *mutually* presuppose and complement one another, in Marx, by contrast, the exposure of the capitalist order and of the existence of classes as historically *transitory* phenomena is linked to the genetic-historical method, which arrives at the existence of these phenomena through a series of mediating moments, which of course abolishes the givenness of these phenomena and reveals their historically transitory character.

A Marxist who examines one or another historical epoch cannot pretend to stand face to face with indefinite chaos, from which he or she arrives at the simplest abstract determinations only by means of analysis. On the contrary, these abstract determinations already exist, and the Marxist is a Marxist because he or she uses them as points of reference which protect him from drowning in a sea of empirical material, and which enable him to distinguish the essential from the secondary – even if only tentatively, and making constant allowance for the revisability of both initial presuppositions and partial results. These abstract determinations and points of reference are terms like class, bourgeoisie, proletariat, and petty bourgeoisie. The Marxist theory of classes considers these fundamental terms to be initial principles of examination, to be something whose concrete reality is an abstract determination, which attains concreteness and therefore scientific character only in the course of and as a result of the examination. The Marxist method of proceeding from the abstract to the concrete is thus antithetical to the external subsuming of empirical material under general theses. (It is no coincidence that, in his critique of Lassalle, Marx counterposes and connects two fundamental errors of Lassalle's thought: ideologism and subsumption.) A scholar guided by vulgar Marxism has a choice: either to subsume factual data and empirical material externally beneath rigid, metaphysical entities called classes, or to enumerate a number of isolated general facts from civil history, to present a body of basic statistical data related to production and economics, to observe quantitative, external and statistically expressed shifts in certain groups of the population (the growth of the proletariat, the decline of independent entrepreneurs, etc.). In the first case, the selected facts confirm theses known in advance, and the scholar – whether consciously or unconsciously – *feigns* scientific analysis. In the second case the scholar manufactures, on a conveyor belt of “historical-class framing,” some kind of universal historical backdrops that *precede* the actual interpretation and, in their temporal priority, are intended to serve as a “materialist” explanation of the problem being addressed. Empirical facts are entirely externally subsumed under prefabricated, rigid metaphysical terms. The facts can only confirm theses that are known in advance. Concepts, conceptions, and categories, which *enter* into the process of examination *as already-made* and definitive truths, emerge from it in the same form, the only difference being that they have attached to them examples, random empirical data.

Empirically selected data and externally attached facts cannot change anything in concepts and categories that are understood, due to the disposition of thought, as rigid and immutable. And if in some cases it seems that these conceptions are enhanced and developed by *new* determinations, in reality what we have are determinations just as abstract and general as those that came before, which do not lend those terms any new *content*. In this sense, for example, the working class under socialism is characterised as a “qualitatively new,” “qualitatively different” class.

Because Marxism has already elaborated a basic system of social categories, for every Marxist the journey “back” from the abstract to the concrete is of primary importance. In Marx (and similarly in Hegel), the relationship between the singular and the general is not a relationship of externality, contingency, and therefore reciprocal arbitrariness and independence; it is a relationship of progression, dependency, conditionality, and organic unity. If general categories are known and facts are gathered and sorted, what remains is to undertake the journey back, that is, to conduct a scientific analysis that would find the mediating links between singular, empirical facts and abstract categories, mediations which would only then organically link the singular and the general in an organic unity; that is, in in-depth scientific knowledge. As soon as this process is conducted, abstraction is no longer an initial empty or general abstraction, just as facts are no longer empirical facts: a new quality is created, a concrete abstraction, a deeper and enhanced knowledge. Abstraction is concretely filled; it develops and is infused with concrete content, not in such a manner as a sack is filled with potatoes, but organically. Facts enter *organically*, not randomly or *generally*, into a definite, concrete whole, where they can fulfil their dual role: in part to acquire their own genuine meaning, to define themselves, and in part to reveal the connections of this whole, this totality; that is, to speak and talk not only of themselves, but simultaneously to be revealers, speakers, for the other. So for example Bernstein and the modern revisionists and bourgeois sociologists, who in opposition to Marx elevate the existence of the so-called new middle class – just like Marx’s vulgar defenders who deny or trivialise the new middle class’s existence – start out from the same methodological bases, despite the superficial antagonism between their standpoints: for both sides, this fact, this phenomenon, is examined outside of the developmental tendencies and specific character of capitalism. Or, in other words: for both sides this phenomenon is something independent, whereas in reality the phenomenon exhibits tendencies that reveal the specific character of contemporary capitalism.

The concrete concept of the working class – and Marxism is always concerned with concrete concepts, with concrete truths – cannot be exhausted by its relationship to the means of production. The concrete concept of the working class is not a starting point for examination, but rather its *result*. The concretisation of this concept is possible only by virtue of the fact that the most general abstract (and therefore in this sense *fundamental*) determination of the proletariat (as given by its position within production and its relationship to the ownership of the means of production) is set within the context of reality, and within this context the relationship of the proletariat towards the other

classes, the internal dynamics of its development, its function, etc., are revealed. Through this placement within a historical context, through confrontation with other classes, through the tracing of connections with society as a whole, through the exposure of internal contradictions, through the unveiling of those functions that follow from social classification, only then can there emerge an *organic* linkage of the a priori with the empirical, of theory with factual material, and only in this manner does it become possible to arrive at an enhancement, development and therefore concretisation of concepts. Abstract determination, which is the *starting* point of examination, through this classification gains an internal dynamic, *is transformed*, ceases to be an abstract definition and becomes a concrete concept. The antithesis of this method of progression from the abstract to the concrete is the method of immutable entities and mechanical subsuming. In this second, metaphysical method, a certain conception is placed within the context of reality in such a manner that during the course of the examination it remains constantly the same, unchanging, inert, an abstract identity. The concept is determined already before the examination, the results of the investigation are known in advance, and the so-called “scientific examination” is merely a collation of illustrations in order to confirm the validity of a lifeless entity.

The classical definition of class as presented by Lenin is the most general abstract determination. But is science a complex of abstract general determinations? In such a case it would be eclecticism, since it would bring together abstract determinations without identifying the real unity of determinations and arriving at a concrete totality. Since science is not a complex of abstract determinations, but rather a dynamic unity of concepts, even the concrete scientific concept of class cannot be exhausted by abstract determination and definition. Vulgar Marxism, which *immediately* links (by subsumption) abstract definitions (bourgeoisie, proletariat, petty bourgeoisie) with empirical material, does not lead to further, deeper knowledge of an unknown reality, but only to an apologia for facts on the one hand and to a tedious repetition of abstract determinations on the other. And if such a pseudo-scientific theory claims to explain reality, it must eventually come to an unbridgeable gulf, since it wishes to explain the living by means of the dead (entities, universalities, realia), to understand the developing by means of the immobile, to identify the dynamic and contradictory by means of the rigid, the complex by means of the simplistic, the rich and diverse by means of the one-sided. Whereas in one case it *subsumes* empirical facts mechanically beneath rigid theses, in another it *reduces* contradictory, diverse, concrete reality to simple, immutable, inert abstraction.

The concrete concepts of the “proletariat” and “bourgeoisie” represent a dynamic unity of many determinations, a synthesis of *all* fundamental features and aspects, a developmental logic not of one or another period taken separately, but of all history. Marx’s idea that the anatomy of the human being provides the key to the anatomy of the monkey is not a denial of historicism, but on the contrary manifests a dialectical historicism that does not succumb to the relativism and subjectivism of bourgeois historicism. This opinion does

not at all mean that it would be possible to explain phenomena corresponding to a lower social level, or undeveloped phenomena, by means of categories which correspond to developed and fully constituted conditions. As a result, it is a mistake to take the categories of socialism and communism that Marx arrived at on the basis of an analysis of the *most advanced* capitalist countries of his time and transfer them without any modification to a socialist society that has barely emerged from semi-feudal and largely undeveloped conditions. This leads to a *twofold* mistake: firstly, a certain historical phase of socialism is explained not as a *phase* of socialism, but as socialism in general, and the conditions, relations, and structure of this phase are more or less petrified as the ideal of socialism. By this it is implicitly assumed that socialism does not develop: this does not mean that this attitude does not *empirically* admit the possibility of development. In fact, in this empirical aspect under socialism precisely, growth is emphasized. But this development is understood in exclusively evolutionary terms, as the quantitative growth of certain given constant elements, which are immutable. Secondly, that which is understood as the developed phase of socialist society, or as the initial phase of a socialist society that has emerged from a revolution in a highly industrialised country in which the proletariat forms the vast majority of the population – that socialism which is therefore, in a certain sense, the *programme* for every other socialist country – is interpreted as an actual state, is seen as a level that has already been reached.<sup>13</sup>

The Marxist theory of classes is a scientific theory because it is capable of presenting and identifying with maximum precision and specificity the following:

1. an image of the social stratification of each society taken as a whole at a given stage of historical development, illustrating all the relationships of the classes and groups within the framework of this whole;
2. the physiognomy of each class and social group in all their aspects, economic, social, political, moral, and intellectual, within their mutual relationships and with regard to society as a whole;
3. the developmental dynamic of each class and social group, analysing the transformation of the functions of social groups, and presenting a description and theory of their origin, development, and demise.

<sup>13</sup> The political and, naturally, also the methodological aspect of this reality is stressed for example by Lenin in his famous reflection on the Soviets. “The result of this low cultural level is that the Soviets, which by virtue of their *programme* [Kosik’s emphasis] are organs of government *by the working people*, are *in fact* [Kosik’s emphasis] organs of government *for the working people* by the advanced section of the proletariat, but not by the working people as a whole.” V. I. Lenin, “Eighth Congress of the R.C.P. (B.),” in *Collected Works*, vol. 29 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), p. 183.

## II

The famous characterisation of Max Weber as the Karl Marx of the bourgeoisie<sup>14</sup> shares the imprecision of all commonplace idioms. Above all it creates the impression of Weber as Marx's equal, bourgeois antipode, and that his work is therefore explicable primarily as a direct bourgeois-idealistic reaction to Marx. This characterisation disproportionately inflates Weber's significance, the originality of his thought and of his critique of Marxism. If we are to remain with this traditional image, we believe that a far more precise characterisation is that which places the intellectual production of Max Weber within the context of the Marxism of the Second International, namely of the contradictory continuation of Marx's work carried forth above all by the theoreticians of pre-war German social democracy. Weber's work is not an idealistic reaction to Marx's dialectical materialism, but rather to the vulgar and economic materialism of the Second International.<sup>15</sup> Weber is a bourgeois antagonist, critic and at the same time travelling companion of the opportunistic distortion of Marxism in the era of the Second International. This is not a mere historical matter. Coming to terms with Weber's theory of classes means essentially exposing the methodology of the vast majority of contemporary bourgeois sociologists engaging with the issue of classes and social stratification. The objections of these sociologists to Marxism are almost always a mere repetition of Weber's argument.

In Max Weber, the economic factor of vulgar Marxism is transformed into an economic aspect, from the perspective of which it is possible to examine society.<sup>16</sup> This transition from objectivity to subjectivism is a consistent elaboration of the idealistic critique of economic materialism. If the economic is no more than one factor and one aspect of reality amongst others, how is it objectively possible to justify the privileged position of this aspect, of this one factor in relation to the others? Max Weber, who replaced factor with aspect, merely performed the vulgar economists' intellectual work for them.

Marxism, however, acknowledges no privileged economic factor, which would, in a decisive manner, determine the other parts or factors of society. The economy occupies

<sup>14</sup> Albert Salomon: "[W]e may call Weber the bourgeois Marx." Albert Salomon, "German Sociology," in Georges Gurvitch and Wilbert E. Moore (eds.), *Twentieth Century Sociology* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1945), p. 598.

<sup>15</sup> See Karl Löwith, who however reaches these conclusions in a different context and from a different perspective. Karl Löwith, *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, trans. Hans Fantel (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 119.

<sup>16</sup> "The quality of an event as a 'social-economic' event is not something which it possesses 'objectively.' It is rather conditioned by the orientation of our cognitive interest, as it arises from the specific cultural significance which we attribute to the particular event in a given case." And elsewhere (even more emphatically): "[I]t is self-evident that [...] a phenomenon is 'economic' only insofar as and *only* as long as our *interest* is exclusively focused on its constitutive significance in the material struggle for existence." Max Weber, "Objectivity" in *The Methodology of Social Sciences*, trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1949), pp. 64, 65 [emphasis in the original].

a special position both in society and in the examination of society only because the economy is neither a factor nor an aspect but the *real structure* of society. If Marxists therefore use the concept of economy together with vulgar materialists (and their idealistic antipode Max Weber), the two camps understand something entirely different by this term.

Vulgar materialism, which reduces the individual realms of social reality to economic factors, is a late and economic modification of mechanical materialism, whose basic method of explaining reality resides in reducing all forms of movement to a single basic, elementary – the simplest possible – form. This mechanical materialism shares the same fate as vulgar economic materialism in that it must sooner or later be supplemented and surpassed – by idealism. In this sense it is understandable why Mills calls for the economic determinism of Marxists to be supplemented by “political determinism” and “military determinism.”<sup>17</sup>

The term “economy” in the work of Weber, Mills, and Mayer is not identical to the Marxist conception: in the first case it means the “economic” *distribution* of social *wealth*, whereas in Marx distribution is merely a moment of production, and therefore only one aspect of the economic relationship. What Weber and Mills call “the economy” and “the economic” is not, in Marx’s conception, a defining factor but rather a derivative one. Whilst Mayer for example asserts that Marxism means giving priority to this “economic” moment over the moment of power and over social status, Marxism in fact demonstrates that this so-called economic moment is just as derivative as the moment of power and as social status, since in all cases what we have are only certain aspects and relatively autonomous realms, whose concrete content is determined by the real structure of society. From the disharmony among these three of moments, Mayer infers a crisis in the current theory of classes: “the personal social status of the given individual in this industrial society [industrial society is what today’s ‘sensitive’ bourgeois sociologists call capitalism – KK] is not necessarily the exact equivalent of his class position at any given moment in time. It is precisely this difference between class position and social status, i.e. the problem of the interrelation between economic inequality and the differential distribution of power and prestige in contemporary society which has given rise to the conceptual difficulties and confusions which permeate modern class theory.”<sup>18</sup>

The confrontation of Marx’s and Weber’s conceptions of classes demonstrates that Weber and his American devotees are burdened in their theory by economic determinism, despite the fact that they attempt to incriminate Marx for this, whereas Marx’s conception of class conversely has nothing in common with economic determinism. This economic one-sidedness in Weber’s theory of classes is necessary in order to provide space

<sup>17</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 277.

<sup>18</sup> Kurt Bernd Mayer, “The Theory of Social Classes,” in *Transactions of the Second World Congress of Sociology*, vol. 2 (London: International Sociological Association, 1954), pp. 322–323.

for other autonomous factors, which are supposedly just as important as classes for the analysis of society and social stratification. We have here Weber's famous trilogy: class, social status and power, three independent and fundamentally autonomous dimensions of social stratification. Since Marxism views society one-sidedly from the perspective of the relations of ownership – as is argued by certain contemporary American devotees of Weber's theory of classes – it cannot grasp problems that are not directly linked to these relations of ownership and the phenomena that spring from them, problems such as power, status, and prestige. As a result it is necessary, if social stratification is to be grasped, to add to classes further independent dimensions – social status and power.

Marxism naturally does not deny that categories like power and social status have reality and usefulness as particular dimensions of social stratification. However, in contrast to Weber and Weber's school, Marxism does not consider these categories autonomous with regard to the social order.

In this respect it is necessary above all to clarify how Marx's conception of class differs from Weber's. Weber situates classes within the sphere of distribution (the market), whilst in Marxist theory classes are bound to the mode of production and to ownership of the means of production. The determining factor of class affiliation for Weber is the "economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income [*ökonomische Güterbesitz- und Erwerbsinteressen*],"<sup>19</sup> from which it follows that "[p]roperty' and 'lack of property' are [...] the basic categories of all class situations,"<sup>20</sup> and that "[c]lass situation is [...] ultimately market situation."<sup>21</sup> In light of this, having access to property on the market is decisive for class affiliation, and the fundamental difference between ownership of the means of *production* on the one hand and ownership of goods or commodities on the other is effaced, and in place of the fundamental Marxist categories – the *exploited* and the *exploiters* – there appear the imprecise, confused, and ambiguous categories of *the propertied* and *the propertyless*.

The American professor Bernard, who openly draws reactionary and apologetic consequences from Weber's theory, whilst simultaneously vulgarising it, reproaches Marxism for apparently failing to fulfil the prediction of its founder concerning the polarisation of society into the propertied and the propertyless. It is unnecessary to place excessive emphasis on the fact that the Marxist analysis of society in general and capitalist society in particular is not based on the categories of the "propertied" and "propertyless." These categories were used by *pre-Marxist* revolutionary and socialist literature in its attempts to express social antagonisms. It is clear that analysis employing these categories is extremely primitive and imprecise. The Marxist theory of classes is not based on the relationship

<sup>19</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 927.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 928.

between the rich and poor, the propertied and propertyless, but on the relationship of the immediate producers to the conditions of production, to the means of production. In contemporary bourgeois sociology, the above division has become the basis for an apologia, since it places the fundamental dividing line between the decisive groups in society within the realm of distribution. The opinions of professor Bernard concerning the American road to a “classless society,”<sup>22</sup> of professor Mayer on the idea that the class structure of contemporary American society shall be transformed in the near future into a middle-class society in which class antagonisms disappear,<sup>23</sup> of professor Schelsky<sup>24</sup> concerning the “destratification” (*Entschichtungsvorgang*) of West German society, are based on the fundamental categories of Weber’s theory of classes.

The scientific value of the modern theory of classes can be measured in terms of how capable it is of serving as a guide to the concrete examination and explanation of the complex and contradictory processes which are taking place within the class structure and social stratification of socialist and capitalist countries. From amongst the various types of social groups, Marxism has identified classes as large communities of people that have decisive significance for the character and determination of the structure of society and for the dialectic of social change and social development. This theory enables us to differentiate, within the entanglement of transformations that are already occurring in today’s society, between *structural* changes that alter the character of the entire social order and secondary, derivative changes that merely modify the given social order.

The American sociologist Mills reproaches Marxism entirely in the spirit of his teacher: “The simple Marxian view makes the big economic man the real holder of power.”<sup>25</sup> This conjecture is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the Marxist method as elaborated with the greatest thoroughness especially in *Capital*. Marxism asserts only that the ruling *class* of each social order is *simultaneously* the bearer of the wealth, power, and prestige of the given society. Whether each individual member of this ruling class, or each of its strata, components or groups, obtains a personal union of these spheres – wealth, power, and prestige – depends on the empirical circumstances. It is therefore entirely vulgar to imagine (and to attribute this nonsense to Marxism) that the richest capitalist in the land must at the same time make power-related decisions of a fundamental and nationwide significance, or that he enjoys the greatest respect, etc. Marxism insists that the distribution of wealth, the hierarchy of power, and the gradation of social status is determined by inherent regularities that ensue from the real structure of the social order at a specific stage of its development. The question of how power is

<sup>22</sup> Jessie Bernard, “Class Organisation in an Era of Abundance,” in *Transactions of the Third World Congress of Sociology*, vol. 3 (London: International Sociological Association, 1956), pp. 26–31.

<sup>23</sup> Kurt Bernd Mayer, “Recent Changes in the Class Structure of the US,” in *Transactions*, vol. 3, p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> Helmut von Schelsky, “Die Bedeutung des Schichtungs Begriffes für die Analyse der gegenwärtigen deutschen Gesellschaft,” in *Transactions*, vol. II., p. 360.

<sup>25</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, p. 277.

distributed within the given society, how the *power hierarchy* therefore operates, what is the measure and ladder of social esteem, what is therefore the *scale of social status*, and finally by what method wealth is allotted, how society is divided into the propertied, less propertied, and propertyless, thus how wealth is distributed – all of these dimensions, which Weber and his school consider to be autonomous, are in fact derived from the *real structure* of the social order.

We therefore return to the basic difference in the understanding of two fundamental categories – class and the economy – which differentiate Marx from Weber. For Marxism the economy is the *real structure* of a given epoch of human development, but is not an economic factor which conditions other factors, political, intellectual, moral, and other. As a result, economic categories are *simultaneously* social categories. Their specific nature as economic categories resides in the fact that they are an intellectual reproduction of the real structure of society. The social position of people in production and their relationship towards the means of production is therefore not a “purely” economic matter but rather an economically social matter, and *this is why* the materialist theory whose fundamental idea Marx formulates in *Capital* is possible: “It is in each case the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers [...] in which we find the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice.”<sup>26</sup> The difference between genuine Marxism and vulgar economic determinism (and its bourgeois-idealist counterpart) resides in the following: vulgar materialism considers economic power, which is expressed in terms of property and wealth, to be the decisive ultimate cause, which determines politics, ideology, morality, etc. In contrast with this, for Marx the economy is never a so-called economic category; it is always, rather, an economically social category, and in this sense the economy can create a real structure which determines the concrete content of politics, ideology, morality, etc. This in-depth socio-philosophical understanding of the economy has in the most recent period led certain critics to deny the “economic” content of Marx’s *Capital* and to speak of it as an exclusively philosophical work.<sup>27</sup>

The second fundamental difference between Marx’s conception and Weber’s conception is that for Weber class is exclusively or primarily an economic category (in the aforementioned sense, which is not the same as Marx’s), whereas for Marx class is a concrete social totality with several aspects and determinations. How would it be possible to interpret social phenomena in class terms, broadly understood, if class were merely an economic factor, if it were thus, in relation to society as a multifarious whole, only a single, economic aspect of reality? To remain in this position means either to replace class analysis with economic simplification and vulgarisation, or to reject class inter-

<sup>26</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 927.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, the Catholic critic Jean-Yves Calvez, *La pensée de Karl Marx* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1956).

pretation as one-sided and flattening. Class in the Marxist conception, understood as a group of people occupying a definite position within social production and in relation towards the means of production, contains within itself *all* moments of social life, since the people who form classes are not mere abstractions (they are not for example “*homines economici*”) but rather are sets of social relationships in all spheres of the human essence, thus practical, intellectual, emotional, moral, and others.

Those vulgar notions that reduce class analysis to a mere “objective state,” which is understood to be a purely quantitative description of the external aspects of classes and of the class composition of society, are at best *merely* one element of class analysis. From here there also springs a frequent error on the part of philosophers, literary historians, and art historians, who believe that for their historical analyses of philosophy, literature or art they can take these “situational schemes” from historians and on *this* basis explain the issue in question, namely the historical form of social consciousness, in materialist and class terms. The reconstruction of a certain historical reality as a concrete historical totality does not presuppose a mere “historical framework” or a bare class skeleton, but on the contrary this bare skeleton is a mere abstraction and the historical framework is merely a pedagogical introduction to the “atmosphere” of the time. The Marxist analysis of classes, and therefore also the class-based analysis of reality, means the reproduction of reality as a unity of economics, politics, and social and intellectual life as determined by the real socio-economic structure.

The scientific significance of the categories of Marxist political economy, such as the law of value, surplus-value, and the concentration of capital, resides in the fact that they provide a theoretical explanation for observable phenomena of social life that, repeating themselves *a million times* and operating daily, determine human existence. The materialist theory of classes is an ideological reproduction of reality not in one, single aspect, be it economic, political, intellectual, moral or emotional, but in a concrete, dynamic totality, which gathers together all of these moments as parts and moments of the whole. A historian who for example studies the foundation of popular democratic Czechoslovakia and conducts a class analysis focusing only on *economic* and political aspects must be aware that in *this* form his or her analysis is incomplete and one-sided. This naturally is not the kind of bias that is necessarily shaped by the choice of this subject matter; it is rather a methodological bias that shapes the examination of the selected subject. The thought and sentiment of people, their ideology and psychology, are not determined by *abstract* relationships and definitions, however fundamental and important they may be, but by a complex of real, tangible, everyday living conditions which grow out of these fundamental conditions and relationships. What determines the thought and sentiment of people, their behaviour, conduct, style of life and naturally also their conception of the world, is not abstract affiliation to one or another class *in and of itself*, nor even their relationship to the means of production taken in abstraction, but rather the million-times-repeated regularity, the everyday existential conditions which reproduce these thoughts and feelings. A scientist who wished to study the working class

in Czechoslovakia after 1945, to demonstrate its concrete, real character, who thus wished to present a conception of this class as a concrete historical totality and not as a one-sided abstraction or an empty scheme, would naturally have to start out from fundamental determinations such as revolutionary change in the relations of ownership, but could not remain on the level of these most simplest determinations or, worse, consider them the *result* of his or her investigation. The decrees on the nationalisation of key industries in Czechoslovakia, a legal act by which capitalist ownership of the means of production is transferred to socialist ownership, could not *by themselves* create a socialist working class from the earlier proletariat. The main factors in the formation of the socialist working class were, first of all, the *revolutionary* process, the revolutionary class struggle, one legal aspect of which was the transfer of key industry into state ownership, and, second, the *real* position of the working class in the system of production. This, however, means that the relations of production are not identical to the relations of ownership, to ownership of the means of production. The relations of production of socialist society involve not only the legal fact that the means of production are in the ownership of the whole nation, but also, and above all, the real conditions in which the workers practically realise their role as the new *ruling class*.

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