

Class and Politics in the 21st century

Hegel for Social Movements, Lecture 9

To finish up this series of talks I am going to explore some questions of class and politics in present day capitalist society in this country and their significance for the prospects for transformative political change. I will briefly reflect on some fixed beliefs which have persisted on the Left since the nineteenth century.

From the outset I want to recall the observations I made on the very first day about Idealism and Materialism. In particular the materialist conception Marx refers to in Theses on Feuerbach:

“The materialist doctrine that people are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is people who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.”

Marx is warning us against overrating this idea that a person’s politics is determined by their material circumstances, a view invariably interpreted to suggest that the various political parties “represent” one or another social class, class interpreted sociologically as a person’s relation to the forces of production, particularly as sellers or buyers of labour power. As Marx points out, it is a view which also rules out any prospect for self-emancipation, the foundational conception of all emancipatory politics – people have to be *rescued* from their social position.

But in an 1890 letter, Engels clarified:

“According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Other than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted.”

While it remains true that what a person does is chiefly determined by their situation, the polar opposite view, the voluntarist view which sees in politics purely and simply the struggle of ideas, remains equally valid.

For his part, Marx always talked of political actors in a way which referenced both social prejudices derived from a person’s upbringing *and* political imagination. In the Eighteenth Brumaire, for example, he explicitly talks of the role of mythology in political life and enumerates literally dozens of political actors in the 1848 crisis in France. Neither the materialist nor the idealist view is coherent on its own.

And nor do I accept the formulation by Colin Barker and his comrades, that social movements are merely *mediated expressions* of the class struggle. This is a misrepresentation. Equally misleading is the conception of politics from below versus politics from above; this is just a false dichotomy. Both are self-justifications for sectarian politics in which a party acts *on behalf of* a class. A revolution in the absence of supporting social movements is inconceivable.

What I want to encourage is *concrete* conceptions of the political players which include all the moments of the party’s social personality: the *class composition* of the party’s support base; the kind of *organisation* connecting them to their base; and their *ideal* or self-conception. As a rule, these three moments are not in alignment.

I will begin with a synopsis of the formation of today’s working class.

The Industrial Working Class from Taylorism to heteromation

At the time Marx wrote *Capital*, the industrial working class to which his politics were oriented worked and lived in large concentrations, and shared much the same situation with their neighbours, always pushed to the brink of survival. The London Dockers who went on strike in 1889 would receive their morning pay in cash so they could eat and have the strength to work the rest of the day. This is the population which provided the immigrant labour force which settled early Australia and built its unions, and which founded the mass unions and the Labour Party in Britain. The founding rules of the Transport and General Workers Union, not to mention the Labour Party, dedicated their organisations to the struggle for Socialism. These are the people Marx talked about in his political writings and the labour process in which they lived corresponded to the social and economic conceptions Marx and Engels documented.

While the modern mode of production is even more aptly described as “capitalist” than was the Britain of Marx’s day, the labour process has changed, changed repeatedly and deeply, and consequently, so has the situation, structure and consciousness of the working class.

In 1898, Frederick Taylor introduced his scientific management into Bethlehem Steel, Pennsylvania, promoting 25% of the workers into supervisory positions with a 30% wage increase, and increased productivity by a factor of 10, negating the axiom that the number of ‘unproductive workers’ had to be reduced to a minimum. As Taylor’s insights spread throughout capitalist industry, the working class became a class with numerous social layers, and the upper, better educated supervisory layers to a great extent sharing the point of view of the employer as well as getting a small share of the surplus.

In 1914, the truism that the manufacturer made a profit by keeping hours as long as possible and wages as low as possible was turned on its head by Henry Ford, who cut 1 hour from the working day, doubled wages, and made a mint, while creating a corporatist layer within the industrial working class.

These transformations had evidently not yet penetrated Kautsky’s Germany in 1892 when he wrote that “this system multiplies the number and the strength of the exploited, and diminishes the number and strength of the exploiting classes, and it will finally lead to such unbearable conditions for the mass of the population that they will have no choice” but to overthrow capitalism, and so in 1909 that “If there is one thing that will rob us of the confidence of all the honest elements among the masses ... then it is participation by Social Democracy in any bloc.” Sectarianism is mass politics.

Nevertheless, the fragmentation of the working class did not save capitalism from the Great Depression, but Roosevelt’s New Deal and a World War combined to save the day. The threat from a powerful, armed and relatively united working class which returned from the War was contained by Keynesianism, and thereafter the state took on the role of regulating the market and rebuilding infrastructure with state enterprises. The mutual aid practices built by the working class which underpinned its unity and solidarity were finally abolished, now that welfare was mediated by the state. The price the working class paid for welfare was the evisceration of its own body, tying it to the state.

The historic compromise with Social Democracy was matched on the international arena by the division of the world between Imperialism and Stalinism. Left out of this deal were the people of the former colonies, African Americans and women,

triggering a series of social upheavals which decisively dislodged the organised working class from its hegemony over progressive politics.

The socialisation of women's labor transformed the entire social landscape, just in time for Toyota to break down corporations into their smallest components, each managed by teams of shopfloor employees, meeting the demands of an exhaustively researched market, every niche individually catered for with the emphasis everywhere on difference, distinctiveness, uniqueness, recoiling in horror from Fordist conformity, bringing market relations *into* the company, outsourcing everything and shattering the last remnants of solidarity between fellow employees. Every ditch-digger or porter is now a small businessperson. And make no mistake, selling your labour rather than your labour-power is a significant change in your class position and your consciousness.

With manufacturing and even services completely globalised with the majority of actual production being done in low-wage economies, workers in countries where they have rights, largely share the benefits of exploiting workers in China and Bangla Desh. The process is completed when Google and Facebook cream the profits off the unpaid labour of the users of their product, people pay more for brands than they pay for products and Amazon makes Frederick Taylor look like an amateur.

So this is the working class of today. 9% of workers in the private sector belong to unions. Very few of those are blue collar workers; most union members are in the professions and the caring and education industries, and most of them are women and in the public sector. Whoever the *industrial* working class is, it does not see itself, or in practice constitute itself, as the working class. As a group, they exist only as numbers in a sociologist's spreadsheet or the imagination of socialists.

Marx saw the proletariat as the revolutionary class because they had nothing to lose, and because, while everyone else was tied to capital, the proletariat owed nothing to anyone. They were the only class capable of overthrowing the "general stumbling block," the industrial capitalist. This situation has long since ceased to be the case. So just as the industrial working class of the interwar years had to win to its side the middle-classes and lumpen proletariat if it were not to succumb to fascism, the task today is even more daunting.

I think it is fair to say that nowadays *no single class can solve the social crisis*. There is no "universal class." If there is to be a social transformation it will be led by an alliance of many classes.

Knowledge Workers

Knowledge workers have been around a long time – doctors, accountants, teachers, scientists, and so on – and have generally been seen as occupying a middle position between the two great classes buying and selling labour-power. But this view is unsustainable in the context of today's labour process. Data, knowledge, code and technique are all commodities and in the main are produced either by wage-workers or by outsourced workers who sell their product in competition with the sellers of intellectual labour-power, and very often in precarious conditions of employment.

Nonetheless, the knowledge class constitutes a kind of aristocracy of labour. If we believed the aphorism that "the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class," then we would conclude either that this knowledge class is the ruling class – something implausible, because although they write the user manual for capital, they own very little of it themselves – or that the knowledge class play a very crucial role in the bourgeois form of rule today.

They staff *all* our political parties, they convince us to agree to same-sex marriage, sing “We are One but we are Many” along with the ABC, and diagnose our lactose intolerance. Marx must have had them in mind when he wrote: “Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.” Marx had in mind that the on-going transformation of the productive forces would *require* this destruction of tradition, but the ideological work of making it happen – that has been the work of the knowledge class. But when we sing “We are One, but we are many,” that very much implies equals facing one another in a frictionless market, each one a property owner, recognised as free and equal by other property owners. The progressive mantra sits very easily with Neoliberalism.

The climate crisis cuts right across this though, doesn’t it? Without a doubt one issue above all others confronts every class, whether they like it or not, the ultimate commons, the natural conditions for human life, are in the process of destruction. The deregulation, privatisation and outsourcing of labour is costing too much. To its credit, the knowledge class has led the way in making us aware of this wanton destruction by capitalist industry. The cross-cutting of these two imperatives: regulation in defence of the commons, deregulation for individual freedom, have created a complex ideological field.

These contradictory tendencies are here to stay. If the average household is 2.6 persons today, that is not because anyone is forcing the children to leave home or forcing couples to separate – to the contrary according to housing prices. We are *choosing* to do that. When we can, we’re also choosing to work from home. We put our parents into care homes. And we’re much better off on Industry Super than relying on the government pension. That is of course all part of the Neoliberal plan, but it is the reality we live with.

The ALP

The connection of the ALP to the trade union bureaucracy is pretty well established, if arcane. But the connection of that section of the bureaucracy which the ALP controls to the *membership* of their unions is tenuous, and the connection to the broader demographic working class is extremely tenuous. I spent a lifetime in the union movement, and to be honest I spent almost as much time fighting the Labor Party as I did fighting the employer.

Since the late 1940s, ALP branch meetings have been largely attended by lawyers and other “knowledge workers.” Not that this is any different now from parties to their Left. Historically, the ALP has been central to the Australian nation-building project; they led the country through two world wars, set up the welfare state, opened up the country economically and culturally after 14 years of conservative rule, moved the country decisively into the neoliberal era in the 1980s, through the global financial crisis and are currently leading the capitalist economy through the sustainable energy transition. The ALP has *always* been the party whose project was the modernisation of Australian capital. The Liberal and National parties have always been parties representing conservative sectional interests within Australian capital. But the differences between the two sides should not be exaggerated. The welfare state and public enterprises fared perfectly well under Menzies.

The differences have always been more cultural than class political. That is to say, both parties are competitors for management of Australian capitalism. Capital has maintained a hegemony over political life in Australia, unperturbed by its exercise through competing political parties. The LNP differs from the ALP only in that the knowledge class shares its role in running the LNP with individuals who have come to politics *as* owners of capital, which is less so in the ALP. Very few ALP MPs actually rose from the shopfloor through the ranks of their union, however.

Hegemony

Dating from ancient Greece when a state was said to be a hegemon when it ruled Greece by sharing the benefits of its rule with other states on the basis that: you agree that the hegemon's enemy is my enemy. That is, capital rules in Australia on the basis that while classes may fight against each other, in exchange for a share of the surplus, they all agree to support capital accumulation. The opportunity to exercise hegemony arises from the failure of the situation Kautsky had looked forward to: capital was confronted not by one homogeneous mass of workers, but by a plethora of competing social classes, who could all be offered a stake in the system.

It is abundantly clear that the knowledge class has emerged as the leading beneficiary of the hegemony of capital; "small business" is in reality little more than another client of the hegemon. Most small businesses exist largely as vehicles for distribution of the surplus extracted by mining, finance and the few highly efficient, large manufacturing, retail and other service sector corporations.

Liz Truss's Prime Ministership of the UK lasted only seven weeks, most of which was spent in mourning the death of the Queen. What her leadership demonstrated is that bourgeois ideology exists and promulgates itself through the action of the market. Her attempt to impose an ideological solution to Britain's post-Brexit crisis, enthusiastically supported by Tory Party members, collapsed almost immediately as a result of the finance market's response to her policy.

Macedonia exercised its hegemony over the Greek peninsula by military might; capital exercises its hegemony today, mainly through the world market. Consequently, the class struggle generally takes place through the struggle to upvalue the price of whatever a given class has to sell. This rule is by no means restricted to relations between employers and employees, but is universal.

Alternatives

Under these conditions it is difficult to imagine a way to escape the hegemony of capital. Nonetheless, the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2020 pandemic demonstrated that on its own, without state support, capital is ever vulnerable, rushing cap in hand to the state when things turn bad. The sharpening climate crisis suggests that other such moments of vulnerability will follow. But at this moment I see little sign of a movement capable of seizing the opportunities such moments provide.

One maxim which may be of use in imagining a way to square the circle of the paradox is this: any social arrangement which is to withstand the *spontaneous resurgence* of bourgeois relations would have to be able to flourish *within the bosom* of late capitalism itself.

This suggests something closer to the old IWW perspective than what are questionably labelled as revolutionary or reformist programs. To illustrate the point. Those heroes who manage to run their own households and businesses without

putting carbon into the atmosphere or plastic waste into the environment in the midst of a world doing exactly the opposite exemplify the same idea with respect to the natural environment. Of course, ultimately, only regulation of the giant corporations can solve the environmental issue, but “environmental self-management” does two things. One, it builds a movement around an activity which is indicative of the environmental *ideal* and therefore generates the corresponding *consciousness*, and two, it works out *in practice* the problems which have ultimately to be resolved on a mass scale.

Revolutionary perspectives

The so-called revolutionary perspective is the complete opposite of this. So long as Socialism is taken to be an economic system which displaces the market, then the socialist movement has to be built in the absence of socialism, solely on the basis of ideology and imagination without an explicit basis in activity. This implies no socialist practice while struggling to achieve the hegemony of socialism in civil society and thus control of the state. *After this*, actual measures against the market are to be implemented and *then* the spontaneous resurgence of bourgeois activity suppressed forever after.

The hopelessness of this strategy (of which this author was an advocate for most of his life, it has to be said) is exhibited in the activity of organisations dedicated to this concept. Invariably, their internal activity is sustained by a rather illiberal cultural regime.

Hegel was on to something in his critique of the French Revolution. Hegel was a supporter of the aims of the Revolution, as reflected in the welcome he gave Napoleon in Germany, but the reason for the disasters which followed the Revolution, he said, was that the Revolution attempted to turn Rousseau’s philosophy into a State doctrine. Not because of any error on the part of Rousseau, but simply because the State had no business in legislating Philosophy any more than the State should legislate on Art, Science or Religion. The problems of the unfolding of “objective spirit” had to be solved in the terms of “objective spirit,” that is, forms of economic and political activity. Art, Religion, Science and Philosophy could then *reflect* on this activity freely, without external constraint.

Socialism

I have heard it said one of that the old heads of one of our Socialist parties believed that their membership would have to swell to two million, before they would be able to lead a revolution. Which means we’re safe. But think of it. An organisation which recruits according to agreement with a party ideology, and which contra Hegel, has the *aim* of using state power to impose this ideology on a population, 90% of which still do not believe in it. And *this* is called Socialism?

The idea of Socialism as a form of society imagined to exist in the future is a kind of *reification*. In reality, Socialism is a movement constituted, like any social movement, by its ethics. Rather than rendering its ethics in terms of socialist rules of action, some Socialists imagine a future state of society in which everyone has already adopted the socialist ethic. To suggest, as anarchists sometimes do, that socialists should therefore act *as if* such conditions already exist, is sheer madness. But the converse, that socialists should act instrumentally in order to bring about this imagined future state is also misconceived. Socialist society is not the outcome of the

actions of any one party, but of the joint action of *everyone*. The objects of all our actions are far more immediate.

No, the truth is that Socialism is the ethic of the socialist movement. But it is fair to ask: *what kind of ethic* is it that fosters the development of socialism? The answer to this is I believe two-fold. In the first place, the ethic of Socialism is Solidarity. The concept of solidarity was invented by the workers of Paris after 1830 when workers had defended the barricades in their own neighbourhood, while the army simply overturned one barricade after another. The French workers learnt that lesson, brought the idea to the Chartists at their Convention in 1848 and Marx wrote it into the founding documents of the International in 1864. Solidarity is the practice and duty to aid another party who is in struggle, but to aid them according to *their own* direction, not your own. The Socialist ethic therefore is a virtue ethic directed at educating our people in the duty and practice of solidarity. You don't wait for the Revolution to practice Solidarity.

To conclude, I will return to the materialist thesis I began with. People's actions *are* determined by their situation. If someone is struggling to overcome their situation, then solidarity is exercised by *helping* people overcome their own situation by their *own* efforts. Only self-emancipation develops the necessary practices on which socialist consciousness arises. Ideology critique is a dead end. Nowadays, everyone believes that everyone else is a victim of capitalist ideology. But you can assist people in constructing forms of activity which resolve the problems they face in their own terms by their own efforts. That is our task.