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The working class today

The probable working class

- Debate -

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This article is a contribution by the author to a seminar organised by the Communia Network in Italy in July 2014 on the question of the working class today.

Marx and the active dimension of class

The discussion on class is one of the three big topics that Communia has to tackle. The others are the state and the forms of organisation through which the proletariat has been constructed and those through which it could constitute itself again as a class. This seminar has been conceived as a follow up to the contributions on the website and as an exchange of individual reflections which have not yet been brought into the debate. A single meeting will not be sufficient, but it will already be a step forward if we succeed in setting up future sessions on the theme and clarify what the political implications are of resolving the theoretical difficulties.

We should necessarily begin with some thoughts on the contributions made on the website. A certain number allude to an absence: the lost class, the class that isn't, a class whose traces we have to search for... Since I cannot be the interpreter of other people's ideas and I am not even certain we are talking about the same thing, I will try and say what I think about this idea of an absence.

What does it mean to say that there is a dramatic absence of a class?

It means to go back to a red thread within Marx's thinking that is very evident in both his work as an intellectual and as an activist. Many times he said that a class is a class when it is capable of thinking and acting as one. In the *German Ideology* he stated that numerous individuals become a class when they carry forward a common battle against another class. In a letter to Kugelmann he said he saw his programme as a means to bring about the transformation of workers into a class. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, he referred to the small property-owning French peasantry as both a class and not a class at the same time. They formed a class because they lived in economic conditions that differentiated their way of living, their interests and their culture from those of other classes and they confronted the latter in a hostile way. However they did not form a class because they did not constitute a community and were not able to express a political union or organisation.

Certainly Marx also said other things – he distinguished between a “class in itself” and a “class for itself”. But at a certain point he abandoned these concepts. He used the term class when he spoke of the worker as a “beast of burden” or a “brutalised soul” prior to “subversive practices” that could redeem him/her.

This rather catch-all use of a concept does not cancel out numerous statements by Marx where he sees class as something alive and active, in tune with his political practice. Indeed he identified the industrial working class as the protagonist in the conflict against the division of society into classes because when he decided to join its ranks workers had already been involved in very hard struggles for decades. Only later did he start to research for the criteria and logic underlying these definitions. This research was left unfinished since his death prevented him completing projected work on a theory of classes.

The difficulty of grasping and defining class when a class does not perceive itself as a class, is also shown in Marx's uncertainty in applying the term class to various social groups. Bertell Ollman documents this in an article. Is class struggle possible without classes, without a class capable of constructing a community, a political union and organisation, in other words without the formation of a real class? Clearly for Marx it is possible, given that he considered class struggle to a constant feature of human history, indeed its dynamic force. At the same time he thought industrial workers would be the first subaltern class in human history capable of acting as a class and therefore becoming the quintessential class.

If we are going to refer to class in terms of an absence then at least in discussions like this one, and to reach a clearer understanding, we need to make certain distinctions. For example between proletariat and class or between working class and workers movement. This is useful due to the confusion that using the same name for different things engenders. For example when people respond to us that the working class and its struggles still exist, that de-industrialisation is a simplistic interpretation of reality and that service sector staff are often workers either in house or outsourced. As if we did not know that or as if we have been afflicted with some sort of collective amnesia.

The problem is quite different. The thing is, if we just look at the twentieth century experience, the 'class in itself' very rarely existed as a 'class for itself' if you really want to continue to use formula that Marx himself abandoned at a certain point and that Bensaïd considered to be an idealistic illusion. In other words the topographical model of a proletariat in itself would only show the existence of a vast territory but not where or how the class would express itself as a class, nor what its identity would be. No structural definition of the class can resolve the problem of its formation. There are multiple ways in which the subordinate classes in contemporary society have participated in social conflicts. The forms of participation have been very diverse and heavily conditioned by the historical contexts. The two scenarios that have traditionally inspired the radical left have been shown to be reducible to a paradigm of unrepeatable historical events or a model which has not been replicated. I am referring to the self-emancipation of a class according to Marx and the experience of the First International. Or the model of a class capable of developing strong forms of self-organisation guiding the party and letting itself be guided by the party in the virtuous circle of 1917. These events have been obviously fundamental because they created the conditions for events that followed, but the ways in which the labouring masses became a class always varied.

That same factory proletariat - similar in terms of the productive process, the organisation of the work process and the degree of numerical concentration - was to have radically different trajectories in the various historical contexts. In 1917 Marx's prophecy seems to come true, but in the exceptional context of a strong proletariat and a weak bourgeoisie, which had not yet established the conditions for its own rule. In the United States, where a racist hierarchy of waged labour exists, you can get at one and the same time extraordinary trade union struggles while the same workers voted for the racist right-wing of the Republican party. In Italy at the end of the 60s we saw a reformist period which took place under the vigilant and worried eyes of the trade union apparatuses and the PCI (Italian Communist Party).

Not only can the same class have different trajectories but the same class can be substantially different. Marx knew not just one but two - a working class with an artisan background which was only formally subordinated to capital in France and maintained a greater capacity for self-organisation and a working class which was much more subordinated/integrated to the demands of capital and which had already begun to produce a solid trade union bureaucracy. Furthermore the proletariat did not only exist where there was industrial production. Among the events that formed the workers movement **in the 20th century were also the Chinese and Cuban revolutions where the protagonist classes were hardly similar to those that had built the Paris Commune or took the Winter Palace.**

The extent to which this paradigm of events falsifies reality can only be really grasped if you take account of the fact that already in the twentieth century the formation and actions of the working class were diverse and changeable and that this is even more the case if you look at the changes in the last decades. Among these changes we have the dissolution of what we have called the 'workers movement'. I want to return to this argument because I have

realised that younger comrades often use the formulation in the same way as others of the same type. The 'student movement' means a movement of students and 'women's movement' means what it says, a movement of human beings of the female sex. With the formulation 'workers movement' the second term has ended up indicating a genesis, emphasising only one of the components of a more complex construction. The term here is not used in a post-modern sense but indicates a series of material forces and interests. If 'workers movement' is defined as the synergic totality that in Europe and the world has constrained capitalism to change in order not to die then this totality is only partially something to do with being a class. Certainly the working class, especially in the big industrial centres, was the nucleus around which the rest of the class aggregated. But the final product was an historical, social-political and cultural construction with uncertain limits, extremely differentiated and internally conflictual but synergetic. This workers' movement was made up of:

- a working class with a significant structural force that was able to make itself the centre of social conflicts;
- bureaucratic and nepotistic structures which gave positions and power to the most dynamic and ambitious sectors of the petty bourgeoisie;
- state entities with their economic and military power;
- liberation movements in the colonised countries, who found an interest in putting themselves under the protective wing of the Soviet Union and sometimes ventured into the creation of more or less credible 'socialist' states on a national scale;
- social democracies which kept open spaces in which revolutionaries could continue to intervene;
- revolutionaries who punched away at the side of the social democrats and the trade union apparatuses, occasionally forcing them to rekindle their relationship with their own social base;
- creative intellectuals attracted by the progressive myths built up through the revolutionary events of the century;
- occasional mobilisations;
- organisational implantations;
- faithful electorates;
- fellow-travellers and allies...

Now many of the components of this totality no longer exist or have been maintained in name only without any corresponding reality or have undergone a dynamic of disaggregation, which has left each element isolated from each other. You have to give up any sort of materialist judgement to believe the enormous destruction of the material forces produced by the disaggregation of the twentieth century workers movement has left intact those old paradigms, imaginative narratives, language, symbols and expectations.

The immense territory of the 21st century

working class

If we limit ourselves to coming to terms with history and only take into consideration the diversity of ways in which the proletariat has acted and expressed itself then today we are in a living in a night where all the cats are black. In other words we have no image of the identity of the 'probable class' as Bourdieu calls it. Nothing remains but the totally empirical practice of being where we are and where there is some movement already happening. That is what we are really doing but only within the limit of our forces. Empirical practice must be accompanied by the understanding that present struggles and their logic can end up petering out without much consequence and that other social groups, other subjective dynamics can develop without any relationship with the present struggles that can come into play and have a greater impact. So it is worth name checking *Where are our people?* in the Clash City Workers book. But who is a proletarian today and what is the proletariat? Defining them is not an exact science and it is insufficient to carefully read documentation from ISTAT (Italian state statistics agency) and other institutions. In fact it is not a neutral operation because the choice of criteria is necessarily partial. Is there a criterion for conceptualising class when there is no class which thinks and acts like a class? Not because you can imagine a 'class in itself' as an inert body but because the processes of formation of a class will highlight objective determinations.

If we look back at Marx again we can note that when he is referring to concrete historical events the proletariat for him means the factory workers. However when he developed concepts that functioned as criteria then the category was extended to the point that it helps us understand the breadth of the present process of proletarianisation. The proletarian is in fact a free worker who is forced to survive by putting him or herself on the market like any other commodity to sell their own labour power – in other words the totality of their physical and intellectual attributes. Already in Marx's time the definition did not only include the industrial working class but other social groups like the office workers who often found it hard to make ends meet. This confirms the political sense of the concept of class in Marx who is interested in the most dynamic and active working class sectors who least identified with bourgeois values. During the 20th century there has been a growth in the number of office workers in insurance, the banks and those companies directly producing wealth. Labour productivity is not the criteria we should use for working out 'where our people are' but it is not completely irrelevant in the process of the making of the working class which is achieved above all through conflict.. Workers in these sectors directly producing surplus value were able to use the weapon of stopping that flow and at certain times this was something that terrified the capitalists. De-industrialisation, outsourcing, the repression of trade union rights, organised scabbing under the aegis of institutional racism and precarious work also has meant the weapon has been disarmed.

Marx also said something else in one of those reflections about the future that appear quite prophetic, but which shows his capacity to identify the very logic of the capitalist mode of production. He said that the profitability and effective employment of capital is not achieved only with immediate labour but with the totality of social activity. To understand the present phenomenon of proletarianisation you can also use the concept of subsumption that Marx also provides us with. Real, substantial or effective (whichever formula is used) subsumption is the process through which capital not only exploits labour through the appropriation of surplus value but also organises, divides it up, makes it an appendage of the machine or imposes forms of cooperation which it controls and that are often not part of workers' direct experience. Always penetrating into new areas capital has produced a global proletarianisation of vast proportions with its own logic and in diverse forms.

A strong working class has developed in Asia and Latin America whose force has been shown in southern China, the so-called workshop of the world, where there have been numerous struggles that have been ignored in a conspiracy of silence. We see quite different features in the late capitalist countries where a great number of industrial workers remain and often engage in struggle.

In this part of the world proletarianisation was achieved with the reduction to proletarian conditions of the relative independence in working conditions that were enjoyed in the past and now work has the same characteristics as those already imposed elsewhere - in other words extreme division of tasks, a cooperation at work that is external to

the experience of those who are involved, a subordination to machinery and its system. The crisis has also contributed to further proletarianisation, squeezing hard the former middle layers who not only live and work in proletarian conditions but see themselves as working class contrary to the lower middle class identity often adopted in the first half of the last century. So is everyone proletarian today? Not really everybody but certainly a great many if for theoretical reasons we distinguish the concept of proletariat and class.

The problem, if we take up what the comrades from Precarious Connections say, is that we are seeing a paradoxical disconnection between proletariat and class and we are facing a reality which prevents its spatial concentration and identity. The decomposition of the 20th century workers movement, the disappearance of the big working class strongholds, the disarticulation of the productive process, the new class stratification with the multiplication of new productive roles and the increasing precarity of labour, makes the reconstruction of collective identity very difficult.

Precarity at work is the first consequence of this state of affairs, the intended and planned effect of the outcome of the last century's class struggle. Working people have always suffered from a high level of precarity. Proper rights at work and a welfare system of social insurance were only established after the Second World War, even if some elements of both existed here and there in the previous period.

Stabilisation was not the consequence of struggles against precarious labour although there certainly were some. On their own these struggles would not have obtained much if they had not been backed up by the relationship of forces established in the thirty years following the Second World War. This relationship of forces was not only the product of the structural strength of the industrial workers and the need capital had for labour at this time. What was determinant were the political, cultural and even military factors. We could say – rather glibly but without being too far from the truth – that this stabilisation also had something to do with the national liberation struggles and the revolutions following the war.

Feminisation of the workforce and immigration does not simplify things but makes the connection between working people more complex but it would be really superficial to attribute divisions to workers' racial prejudice. Not because it does not exist but because sexism and racism as a function of a lower cost of labour power have a specific origin. These attitudes are constructed and reproduced not only within the overall institutions of capital itself but also in the adaptation of those organisations that should defend all workers, to the existing reality. Laws that make it impossible for immigrants to defend themselves from exploitation induces the local worker to see the immigrant, who is ready to sell his labour for a lower price, as a scab. If there is no development of a common struggle, the intervention of political parties then transforms this hostile reaction into support for authentically racist and xenophobic policies and actions. The way in which the extreme right wing in France has won over significant sections of the PCF's (French Communist Party) former working class electorate is a very clear lesson to us.

For women entry into the labour market in a precarious and subordinated way draws on a naturalisation of their reproductive role (which is not only or especially a question of biological reproduction) in a context in which all the material and cultural conditions exist for its socialisation and sharing. **Where the proletariat is made up of so many immigrants and women the cultural and political struggle against sexism and racism is quite simply a class struggle.** Homophobia is less directly tied to the appropriation of surplus value but this does not mean it is extraneous to it. The interest the owners of capital have in maintaining conservative institutions (the family, the Church, the monarchy and so on) allows it to sustain its political control even if their precise significance varies according to a country's history, traditions, religious influence and political/cultural hegemony.

Given this state of affairs it would appear to be really problematic to identify the dynamic capable of transforming this proletariat into a class. Apart from anything else we are not capable yet of understanding what processes in the future will express the centripetal force previously exerted by the trade union and the political organisation of the industrial working class in the twentieth century. I do not agree with the objection that the disarticulation of the labour

process renders the search for a centre (a new one or the old one) and a socially more mature protagonist irrelevant or a waste of time. Certainly it is not our job to search out the path of a central nucleus of a probable class and nothing can guarantee that this really exists anyway. Nevertheless there are two good reasons to not exclude such a concern [i.e. seeking a central protagonist role for working class – Tr] from our project. The first is that not all the fall outs from a conflict are equal and have the same potential for mobilisation and resistance. **Concentration in a workplace for example still represents today a non-negligible element of strength** even if we are talking of a strength that to a large extent is only a potential (for reasons we have already discussed). The second reason is that it appears unlikely, in fact I would say anthropologically hardly credible, that a series of fragmented struggles knit together into a convergent dynamic spontaneously and at the same time. Referring back to the question of political organisation would in this case be wrong since it would skip a stage because a form of organisation with the necessary force to sustain a confrontation with capital and its institutions have as a necessary condition a class capable of forming and recognising itself as a class. Are we once again in a night where all the cats are black? Are we faced with a multitude but with the signs reversed – negative instead of positive. This seminar is really about discussing whether processes and dynamics exist today which go in the direction of class formation.

The varied and diverse dynamics of becoming a class subject

All those who suffer from capitalist rule have in reality never stopped struggling but that does not mean that today they form a class. The dispersed members of Orpheus continue to sing but their voices do not make a choir. It is not only a question of a lack of connections, which is above all a symptom. When a whole world is crumbling the civilised conquests of that world become forgotten. One of those is precisely the need to connect. Starting from struggles is a more coherent way to continue to roll out the red line of Marx's research with the obvious difficulty that in Italy the people in struggle are often reciprocally invisible. Even the hubs around Communia (see website of same name – Tr) do not really know each other and often speak different languages because in different work sectors the languages and slang of antagonistic cultures have become crystallised. In that culture there is also a more structured militant intervention with a greater capacity to communicate it.

We need to ask the following questions when discussing struggles. Who are the protagonists? What relations do they have with the institutions and the trade union apparatuses? Are they self-organised and to what extent? What significance can we assign to the self-organisation – is it the only way people can react given the context of overall regression or is it the sign of a class composition more capable of self-organisation than that of the 20th century workers movement? Or is it a varying reflection of both realities at the same time? In the desolate world of the 21st century proletariat are more mature social protagonists emerging which we should search out in a similar way to the workers from the big and medium sized industries at the end of the 1960s? Or can we simply identify the probable class with economic recovery, the development and the connections of waged labour where it is most concentrated? Let us hope that future discussion on these questions can at least respond to some of these, but we can already say something about them now.

From the beginning of the new century the proletariat has defended itself in all or nearly all of its sectors – factory workers, teachers, students, local communities defending the environment, women and the temporary art workers, the health workers and patients, the homeless and precarious, the LGBT community and the urban ghetto residents.. But there is a long way from this to having any consciousness of being part of the same class. For example I was amazed to hear someone when speaking in an interview from the theatre and cultural occupations that the occupiers belong to different social classes. In fact it is already a political step forward if someone at least recognises themselves as proletarian. The identification of a large number of working people with a presumed middle layer is traditionally one of the common features of the bosses' ideology. We have every interest to transform this stereotype into one that is more useful for our side and which is above all closer to the truth. It is not a question of covering up or ignoring internal differentiation – there is a great deal and it is problematic - and one thing you have to accept is that

the working class is not homogenous. Above all we have to begin to point out the clear frontier between them and us.

In fact in recent years self-organisation have frequently been the form struggles have taken. There are two reasons for this and it is difficult to say which is the most important. One reason is the ossification of the political and trade union forms of organisation, that had led the struggle in the last century – even if this was done in a limited way and with notable contradictions. The ‘do it yourself’ approach is often the reaction to a well-founded lack of confidence in those traditional bodies and is a necessary condition for action being taken. But at the same time it produces problems such as isolation and difficulty of connecting. However there is also another reason. This proletariat in all or nearly all its forms has a greater capacity for self-organisation than that which characterised waged labour in the past. While the idea of ‘knowledge workers’, as pointed out by Formenti, is a ‘dangerous utopia’ at the same time it is also clearly an acceptance of the overall growth in the ability and expertise of working people. Certainly a great amount of the knowledge necessary today for the accumulation of capital is absorbed by machines of which new and older workers are only appendages condemned to executing tasks requiring no autonomy or creativity. Nevertheless it is also true the relationship with machinery today demands higher cultural levels. In this way we see men and women, with competence and expectations that their work does not fulfil, become assimilated to proletarian conditions. The level of education comes into play here, which while it has declined in Italy in recent years, had risen for many decades before. The multiplicity of information channels – which we must not accept uncritically - certainly has created a more cultured working class. At the same time as people are more imbued by capitalist values and stereotypes this is only maintained until these come into clear conflict with their desperate living conditions. Consequently the same dynamic can be triggered which Marx described as the “brutalised souls” and “beasts of burden” becoming human class subjects. Indeed self-organisation is the expression of a loss, of abandonment but also of the proletariat’s historically acquired potential, included the industrial working class. It is on this potential that we can base our hopes of self-emancipation, which includes political organisation but defined in different terms and processes to the past.

This proletariat is also precarious in those sectors which have permanent contracts because restructuring, outsourcing, the crisis and the indebtedness creates an unstable and threatening situation. This precarity is also internally diversified because, while from the point of view of guarantees and certainty working class employment is being levelled to the bottom, the different contexts means there are still possibilities of resistance. The existence of larger groups of workers in certain workplaces who also have some trade union experience means there will be at least some attempts to struggle for the stabilisation and defence of jobs. However where there are smaller groups the struggle against precarious labour conditions can appear almost impossible but if it does break out it can spark off something more interesting. In other words there are precarious work conditions where the very lack of a concrete possibility of trade union negotiations can push workers to become more political.

The survey of temporary creative arts workers in Italy showed that isolated workers who are often unemployed or who work irregularly can come together, involving thousands of people and develop effective action through a politicised approach. What did they do?

- They used the institutions, the constitution and old laws to demand the right to employment;
- they set up political relationships with more militant trade unions and movements to avoid isolation;
- they worked on forms of communication on a community level to involve people in defence of a “common good”;
- they sought to raise revenue and to discuss the contents and commitments of artistic production.

You can object that there remains the risk of dissipation of those fighting in this way and that this means these forces

are marginal in a conflict in which shifts of the masses are what really count. Such shifts, it is argued, are only possible where the very organisation of the work process produces a concentration of working people in particular workplaces or big university centres. While this observation is partly true it omits a vital aspect – the people involved in this particular struggle were mostly young or youngish and highly educated and had a certain level of consciousness. Therefore they represent a sector of society that is more involved in movements and conflicts and are more able to bring them towards a liberation perspective, preventing them being dragged into scapegoating or against false enemies. In cases like these the struggle of people living in precarious working conditions can also be considered as an expression of the presence of marginal intellectuals in class conflicts. These people obviously do not resolve the problem of the class because they only represent a fragment of it. They are a vanguard but with a difference significance to the one that was crystallised in the 20th century. But here we are already beginning another discussion on forms of organisation, which we will take up later on.

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