

The working class, contrary to popular myth on the Left, has never been intrinsically socialist. And the myth is even less true today.

Class Conundrum

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AS HEADS ARE PUT TOGETHER to 're-think' the future of the Labour Party, the Communist Party, and the Left in general, the call goes out to put thoughts into action. Some would say that the 'pessimism' of the Left's think tank positively precludes the other side of Gramsci's famous couplet: optimism of the will. There can be no complacency on this score. Why is it that the 'so what do we do, now' sections of acute analytical articles feel like the air has leaked out of a bright balloon?

Yet there is a danger here which we should avoid, of believing that serious reflection at best precedes the charge into action, and at worst deflects real struggle. On the contrary, fundamental analysis should accompany, harness, and direct renewed practical energy. With that point in mind, I want to focus on the basic idea of class politics in the context of socialist strategies. Many of the valuable contributions to recent issues of *Marxism Today* on Labour's current crisis have touched on this question; the debate may benefit from a treatment of it in its own right.

The crisis facing Labour and the Left is certainly to do with the force of Thatcherism's assault on the postwar social democratic consensus, and with the dramatic loss of Labour's votes. But beneath this, it is the very idea of a politics based upon assumptions about the working class which is at issue. One of the notable features — probably *the* feature — of Labour's electoral decline has been its loss of support in the manual working class, 23% of whom (according to survey data) changed their vote from Labour between 1979-1983. Consequently, Labour's traditional perception of the relationship between class and party is less adequate to a changing reality.

Indeed, socialists in general are having to adapt and alter their conceptions of class politics, in two main ways. First, in response to the changing structure and culture of the working class. Increasingly, little of direct political significance can be deduced from the fact of being working class. This is a relatively recent historical

problem for the Left. A second weakness has roots further back, and that is that when a strong conception of class politics dominates, *non-class* issues tend to be marginalised or even scorned. The Marxist tradition in particular has always found non-class issues politically uncomfortable.

Occupational change

To gain a sense of the challenge facing the traditional conceptions, we need to focus on the character of work tasks, their sectoral locations, and their cultural ramifications.

In proportional terms, the numbers of workers employed in agriculture, fisheries, mining, and textiles has been reduced by over one half in the twenty years from 1961 to 1981¹. Under the Thatcher era this rate has certainly accelerated. In the metal trades, there have been job losses of perhaps one third in the same period, and manufacture as a Whole now accounts for only 28% of work. Craft or skilled manual labour has been reasonably estimated at only 18% of all work tasks. Within manufacture, the great heavy industries have declined sharply, being replaced, if at all, by lighter advanced technology requiring fewer workers of various kinds.

The service trades, by contrast, have grown from just over ten million people in 1961 to thirteen million in 1981. Among these, transport has declined in importance (though not dramatically), whilst public administration has grown slightly. However, professional and scientific categories account for a substantial jump from some two million jobs in 1961 to about four million today. The numbers engaged in banking, insurance, and the like have almost doubled. As far as gender is concerned, women are now about 40% of the workforce, two thirds of women workers being in the service trades.

Overall, then, there have been major changes, some of which will be irreversible. The size of the workforce has been reduced, and within that total the proportion of 'productive' workers has fallen. There has been a lightening of onerous

physical work in some manufacturing areas, and a relative growth in labour-intensive services. The range of work experience has consequently broadened, and though a number of tasks have been 'de-skilled', it is also clear that the 'slavery' of wage-labour is less apparent than in earlier phases of capitalism or in many other countries of the world today. And at least amongst the (widening) band of technical, professional, and administrative workers, there is a significant degree of individual autonomy over the direction and pace of work.

These structural changes make the political complexion of the working class less certain to estimate. There cannot be many socialist households which have not been disrupted by inconclusive arguments about the consequences of adopting the 'broad' or the 'narrow' definition of the working class! In my view, this question has been settled for some time. The priority given in analytical terms and in political weight to productive labour in general, and to manual labour in particular, requires revision. Productive labour — that work which directly produces 'surplus value' — now

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involves less than 30% of working people. The productive labourers in the new technologies will come to bear little resemblance to those in heavy industry. For the rest of the 'broad' working class (the collective labourer of hand and brain), it is a necessarily heterogeneous collection. It includes the low paid hairdresser, but also the well paid doctor; the downtrodden shop-assistant, but also the lower ranks of management. Finally, the important recent literature on women's role in the labour process and the home make it plain that ideas of class based on men's manual

¹ Central Statistical Office, *Social Trends*.

labour, or which take class to be reflected by the 'head of the family' will fail to grasp the politics of gender *within* the working class itself. In sum, the idea of a spontaneous class politics arising from a typical kind of labour is much less convincing than it once was.

Sectoral and cultural politics

In terms of sectoral and cultural change, similar conclusions can be drawn. The state is now the ultimate boss for one third of the working population, divided almost equally between the public corporations, central government, and local government. Now the work performed in the state sector is not necessarily different in character from that in the private sector, but the employee/employer relation is different. The time-honoured picture of workers in struggle against *private* capitalists must therefore be radically altered. Publicly owned companies may or may not be governed by the criterion of profit-making: this will depend somewhat on the type of utility, and on the politics of the party of government. And public companies are liable to be judged as national assets in a way which few private firms are. In its administrative branches, the identity of the state as an employer is even less assimilable to that of the capitalist firm. The politics of the complicated relationship between public and private spheres in this sense cannot be brushed aside — as it is for example in the simplistic proposition that since the state is a *capitalist* state all the workers remain in principle subject to the tyrannies of private capital.

Sectoral location is thus coming to be recognised as an independent factor which can help explain some recent voting patterns. The Labour Party, for instance, is less popular amongst manual workers in private industry, but it is heavily supported by state sector workers. This has less to do with an identification with Labour based on *class* considerations, and more to do with the fact that Labour is the party which defends, for good or ill, a large public sphere and nationalised industries. For that reason too, it attracts a higher proportion of the public service 'middle class' vote, as compared with private industry.

In the cultural realm, the number of hours worked, the forms of flexitime and paid and unpaid leave are changing to the benefit of working people. This enables them to structure the working day, week, and even year more in accordance with their needs and desires. Whether regarded as good or bad, the leisure industries have come to play a greater part in everyone's lives. Of course, the picture of enjoyment

and affluence conjured up by the idea of more leisure is more real for some than for others. For every golden handshake or freelance occupation there are many more squalid redundancy payments, pensions, and social security cheques.

Yet on both counts, the socialist movement has to act if it is not to be politically disadvantaged. As Stuart Hall outlined in January's *Marxism Today*, the politics of leisure is a challenging area to which the Left is only reluctantly and belatedly beginning to respond. One particular junction of class and culture seems to me important for our perceptions of shifts in working class life: the disappearance of apprenticeship. This traditional mode of entry into the male working class is virtually non-existent today. Gone too, therefore, is one of the major ways in which class-conscious workers are formed and active socialists recruited. For many years this channel of socialisation into craft labour values and class solidarity overlapped with other influences on young people. Now it has been replaced by the various

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subcultures of the school, the dole, and the training schemes. Here too, politically, the Left has struggled to cope with new social developments. Many are left blinking in puzzlement about how to relate to the diverse and sometimes exotic concerns of the young working class. This general problem is exacerbated by the historic decision of a majority of unemployed first-time voters to avoid organised politics completely by not turning up to the polls. We must assume that they regard all options at the ballot box as intrinsically manipulative. In one sense this is a positive sentiment of suspicion — as it is with many black and Asian people. But socialists are in no better a state to benefit from and channel this distrust of the system than are the Tories.

Class interests

The shifts in the types of work, its location, and its cultural consequences mean that some of the preferred socialist images of the working class may be more of a hindrance than a clue to political advance. The main image is that the labourer hews out of the very earth, by sweat and blood, the wealth which sustains us all. It is a powerful, resonant tribute to certain forms of wage-labour, and perhaps more accurately to

peasant production. However, it contains a dubious element of inaccuracy and moralism. By comparison, the vast majority of jobs look different, and many look positively 'decadent'. And the implications of a gendered division of labour make it difficult to accept as appropriate the herculean virtues of male extractive strength which the image conveys.

In the context of these problems, the idea that a common class identity will assert itself over the differences only helps to confuse the issue. This is especially the case where the existence of deep rooted working class *interests* is invoked for political effect. There are three main ways in which class interests are claimed to direct political forces.

The first is the reformist conception that in return for their electoral allegiance, the Labour Party will look after the interests of working class voters. Obviously, this perspective has some impressive historical evidence to commend it. Until quite recently, the political culture of manual labour sustained the party's efforts to secure non-revolutionary advances for working people, both in terms of material conditions and political clout. Actually, the golden age of 'alignment' between Labour and the manual working class can be exaggerated in both depth and span, but certainly from the 1960s on, there has been a period of serious 'de-alignment'. Even by the later 1960s it was estimated by political scientists that the typical image of Labour voters — those who left school early, joined a union, rented a house, and worked manually — applied to barely a fifth of the electorate. How much more patronising and inaccurate today is the Labourist conception of a passive class whose affairs are understood exclusively by the Labour Party? At least the 1983 disaster at the polls has caused some radical reconsideration.

The second version of class interests puts the working class in a much more *active* light. The basic idea is that working class experience brings it daily up against the intrinsic hostility of capitalism. Through the labour *movement* this class experience can be galvanised and turned into an anti-capitalist drive. Such an idea lies behind programmes aimed at creating an 'anti-monopoly' alliance, for example. Despite its richer view of class politics, this version assumes a too-direct connection between workplace grievances and anti-capitalist politics. Also, its reliance on the traditional labour movement and 'core' working class leaves it vulnerable in the face of the changes in class composition mentioned earlier. The basis of recruitment into the



new 'big battalions' of labour is likely to shift further away from an obvious sense of anti-capitalist class interests.

The third version is to assume that the interests of the working class can be expressed politically in terms of socialism itself. Tony Benn, for example, holds that to vote Labour is to express commitment to socialist change. The class structure will always ensure a majority reservoir for that socialist appeal. Now few would deny that this picture is a congenial one. But it is rampant wishful thinking. It seems manifestly not the case today, for one thing. But also, it again reflects the general fallacy of the idea of 'class interests'—that you can, from a consideration of economic class position, speculate that socialist politics, now or later, will be perceived to be at the heart of people's needs. That rather determinist assumption affects also the Marxist tradition, and it is no longer clear what political benefits are gained from its adoption.

A range of issues

I have certainly not been arguing that class or class interests are no longer relevant. There remain vast differences in wealth and power in Britain which should be politically central. And the 'new' working class is certainly not a totally metamorphosed breed, as any glance round some of the new town estates will confirm. There is no question, then, of recommending that the Left abandons Glasgow to home in on Dorking as the melting pot of the new politics. Yet it is a mistake in judgement to maintain that the labour movement and working class are the same as of old, that deep down they share a profound anti-capitalist interest which socialists alone can winkle out. Even the most cogent of observers of the persistence of class

divisions accept that class position fails to supply a ready-made agenda for socialist politics.²

In practice, I think that most socialists know these things, but they have been reluctant to risk the impurity in openly saying so. Consequently, I'd want to stress that there are key issues which are non-class based, as well as those which are class-based. There are clearly *workplace* matters to do with conditions, and wider class questions of pay and jobs. But there are also *consumption-based* demands and aspirations to do with the quality of services, the nature of leisure, and the provision of housing and transport. Whilst these are certainly related to class, they are not directly centred around production—the crucial notion in the Marxist definition. If we are to confront the shifts from production towards services and consumption, these questions must be accepted as having a dynamic of their own, and they will bring into political contact an increasingly diverse range of people. Then there are *non-class* issues. These might include law and order, patriotism, and other questions which have often been claimed by the Right as their home ground. But non-class issues would include the plethora of democratic concerns, gender issues, and peace. So they are not intrinsically unprogressive or minority matters.

If we accept this kind of distinction between different sorts of interests, it becomes clear that there can be no single political channel at the political level for their expression. Instead, there should be multiple forms of organisation and representation: campaigns, pressure groups, locality councils, unions, clubs, and political parties. Not all socialists or activists will choose to be in political parties, and there will probably be more than one left

party. In all probability, then, coalitions are going to have to play a greater role in political life, both between formal parties, and between different kinds of organisations and movements,

Pluralism

The often-scorned notion of pluralism is part of this scenario. Pluralism should not be thought of as simply the liberal idea of being tolerant to enemies or of letting everyone have a say. It refers to the existence in social reality itself of a series of different contradictions or sites of struggle. These may overlap: amongst those so far mentioned are production and consumption, class and non-class issues, public and private spheres, and gender divisions of interests. The extent to which they do overlap will largely be the product of the way in which they are worked through politically. Similarly, pluralism is not intrinsically a matter of cross-class alliances; but the extent to which alliances can be forged in and across the diversity of working class life, or connected to more narrow class questions, is a political issue of some subtlety, not a fact about the 'interests' supposed to exist in the social structure itself.

One upshot of this way of thinking is that Labour's recovery at the polls should not be worked for as merely a way of bringing the whole working class back in line behind the electoral party of the class. This has proved a misleading conception in the past, and will not materialise in the future. Indeed the very idea of one party being the exclusive authentic spokesperson of the working class or the people is a faintly absurd and dangerous one—whether it

² Eg, John Westergaard 'Class of 84' *New Socialist* Jan/Feb 1984.

applies to the Labour Party in Britain, communist parties in the socialist countries, or the nationalist parties in Africa.

Parties, especially left parties, remain crucial however. Their role should be to mobilise the people into self-activity, and draw together the common strands of popular action, at the representative level. In this way leadership can be provided through cohesion and unity across diverse interests, not by seeking to define and delimit them according to a privileged, assumed, identity.

Non-class issues, let me say, are eminently issues which working class people rank as important. But they are not best described as class issues, because they affect everyone regardless of class, and they are important to working people as *citizens* rather than as workers.

The Tories have been a step ahead of Labour in this area, and on that basis have always secured a good one-third of the working class vote. This is sometimes, patronisingly, termed the 'deference' vote, as if humble people willingly succumb to the wisdom of their social betters. But the working class Tory vote represents the Conservatives' long-standing ability to appeal to some traditional non-class issues, which are then tied into the moral framework of capitalism and social reaction.

One such traditional concern has been law and order. Despite some valuable historical and agitational work in this area, it remains true that the Left does not have many *constructive* ideas about how to handle anti-social behaviour. Our attitude to state policing is, quite rightly, negative, in the sense that there is an ongoing need to monitor police behaviour and to advertise the discrepancy between its image and its conduct. But we are also negative in the main about victim-oriented support schemes, probation facilities, forms of community policing, and neighbourhood

watches. There is a general danger here of thinking that any enemy of the police is a friend of ours, and that the only cure for crime is socialism. If this is to be overcome, we are going to have to be more positive in our approach to the facts which statistics (even police statistics) tell us, to the worries of 'respectable' working class people, and to the real problem that forms of crime may be endemic to any complex society, not just capitalism.

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Another central non-class issue where I think the Left is capable of winning important backing is democracy. Extensions of democracy are certainly in the interests of working class people broadly speaking. But no more than law is democracy a class issue *per se*. There may be short-term setbacks in coming to terms with this. The Labour Party for example would do even worse under proportional representation, and this note of panic has led some people superficially to argue that democratic issues like that must be subordinated to our old friend 'class interest'. Yet it is clear that in the long run, these terms of debate should be addressed as intrinsically important, not just as the best way in the circumstances to present a class point of view.

It is clear that there is now widespread opposition to the anti-democratic core of Thatcherism. The growth of a militarised state, personal surveillance, removal of local councils, and curbs on trade unions: these developments will decide the future of politics in Britain as much as questions of monetarism, unemployment, or profitability. They are not for that reason more important than class issues or totally separate from them. But they do pro-

foundly matter; like all non-class concerns they refer to things that arise as routine questions about the quality of life and access to power: things that can be confidently expected to arise in any socialist society short of Utopia.

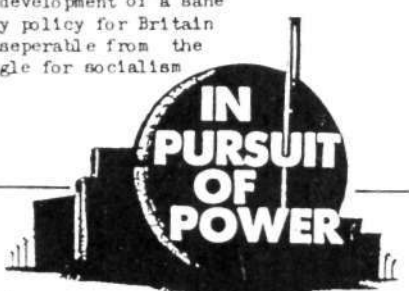
Conclusion

I have tried not to pretend that the articulation of class and non-class issues is easy, or is somehow an easy recipe for overcoming the serious decline in the traditional organisations of working class politics. It is certainly easy to exploit the *differences* between them. This is the approach of the Tories and to an extent the SDP — a supposedly 'middle class' party which has nevertheless won a significant block of working class votes.

Nor would I pretend that this necessary 'articulation' is new-fangled. The Communist Party, as I understand its programme, has for some time sought to bring together in an integral way a class perspective and an awareness of the indispensable role played by non-class issues and movements. But the weakness of the CP is a problem: its decline suggests (misleadingly) that it is the 'new' approach which is responsible. In fact, both the larger Labour Party and the revolutionist groups are weakening for the very same reasons, and they have stuck to the unrealistic and speculative scenario of class interests being expressed eventually at the political level.

My conclusion would be that if ever there was a realm of pure class politics, the nature of structural trends makes this unlikely to reappear in the same way in the future. A plausible socialism, in that sense, will not emerge if we think of it as the political reflection of the position of the working class in capitalist society. Objectively most of us by now have become aware of this. As yet, psychologically and practically, we have not come to terms with its implications.

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