

Politics and the Communist Manifesto—Part 1 - On class struggles under capitalism

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“Every class struggle is a political struggle.”

“The executive committee of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.”

I’VE BEEN ASKED to comment on two quotations from the *Manifesto*: “Every class struggle is a political struggle”; and “The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.” The particular question I’ve been asked about these famous aphorisms is “Was Marx’s class theory of politics reductionist”?

I’m simply going to change the question to suit my own preoccupations. In the first place, I honestly don’t think there’s much to say about the question of “reductionism.” Marxists used to be attacked from the right as “reductionists.” Today, that accusation has become a favorite of the (postmodernist) left. We’ve reached a point where any attempt at explanation, any tendency to think in terms of causality, is “reductionist.” But let’s be clear at least about this: Marx is no more “reductionist” than anyone else who has tried to explain some social or historical process, to make it intelligible.

I will, though, add one more thing before I move on: as far as I’m concerned, you can’t get reductionist enough in characterizing the relation between the state and capital. And that’s now more true than ever, when the neo-liberal state is withdrawing from even its mildly ameliorative functions and the complicity between capital and state is more transparent than at any other time since the 19th century.

So there’s nothing in the *Manifesto* that seems too reductionist to me. I do, though, have some other problems with the statements I’ve been asked to comment on especially the first. Let me put it baldly: every class struggle is not a “political” struggle in any conventional sense, at least not in capitalist societies. That, in fact, is one of the biggest problems that capitalism poses for socialists. It has created historically unprecedented conditions in which class struggle can be not “political” but purely “economic.”

Of course “economic” struggles have to do with power and domination. But there was a time, in pre capitalist societies, when conflicts over economic exploitation directly implicated “political” powers, the jurisdictional and coercive powers of lords or states. Capitalism has shifted many of these conflicts to a new and separate “economic” sphere, and even into the workplace, which is generally sealed off from the “political” or “public” sphere, even while the power of capital ultimately depends on the coercive powers of the state.

This brings me to another point about the context in which that observation about class struggle appears. It’s in a paragraph that talks about the ways in which modern technologies and especially the means of transportation and communication are helping to unify workers, bringing them in contact with each other across widely dispersed workplaces and localities. “It was just this contact,”

the passage continues, “that was needed to centralize the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle between classes.”

The *Manifesto*, at least for rhetorical purposes, seems to take for granted the more or less immediate translation of class struggles into political terms because of this unifying effect. Yet we know now that the development of capitalism, even with the most advanced technologies and with powers of communication far beyond anything Marx could have imagined, hasn't produced an increasingly united working class.

What the *Manifesto* doesn't talk about is the ways in which the very structure of capitalism, its specific mode of exploitation, fragments the working class. It does so, among other things, precisely by domesticating what might, in other conditions, be political struggles, enclosing them within the walls of the workplace and turning them into purely “economic” conflicts.

In other words, the same conditions that prevent every class struggle from being a political struggle also militate against the unification of the working class. Capitalism creates distinctive political problems, distinctive obstacles to political struggle, that need to be overcome by active organizational efforts which often work against the grain.

But if the political vision of the *Manifesto* is incomplete, what it has to say about the direction of capitalist development in other respects is stunningly prophetic. In fact, now that capitalism has more or less realized the *Manifesto's* prophecies about the universalization of capitalism, now that capitalism really has “battered down all Chinese walls,” spreading its imperatives of accumulation and competition into every corner of the world, and now that the complicity between neo liberal states and “globalized” capital is becoming increasingly transparent (reductionism vindicated!), it may turn out that economic class struggles will indeed move onto the political plane, and that the working class will indeed be unified in new and unprecedented ways.

Let me just repeat something I've often said about this lately (see, for instance, *Monthly Review*, February 1997 and July/August 1997): contrary to conventional wisdom, “globalization” has made the state not less but more important to capital. Capital needs the state to maintain the conditions of accumulation and “competitiveness,” to preserve labor discipline, to enhance the mobility of capital while blocking the mobility of labor, and in many other ways. After all, so called “neo liberalism” isn't just a withdrawal of the state from social provision. It's a set of active policies, a new form of state intervention designed to enhance capitalist profitability in an integrated global market.

Some people on the left have been terminally discouraged by these developments. The open and brutal complicity between capital and state seems to them the final blow, the end of the socialist project. But I see things differently. It seems to me that capital's dependence on the state can turn into new opportunities for anti capitalist struggle and a genuinely socialist one. Capital's need for the state makes the state again an important and concentrated focus for class struggle. And the fact that the state is visibly implicated in class exploitation has consequences for class organization. The examples we've recently seen of people taking to the streets in various countries in opposition to neo liberal policies of “globalization,” “competitiveness,” and “flexibility” demonstrate the possibilities that may open up as the fragmentation of the working class gives way to unity against a common enemy. Now more than ever is the time for every class struggle to become a political one.

Many people, even on the left, have accepted that There Is No Alternative. It may be true that the social democratic alternative, if it was ever viable at all, has now been squeezed out. There may indeed be no alternative form of capitalism besides the ugly one we're seeing now except an even worse one. But for those of us who never believed in the possibility of capitalism with a human face, that's not the end of the story. There still remains a real alternative called socialism.

Ellen Meiksins Wood

P.S.

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* Ellen Meiksins Wood is co editor of *Monthly Review*. Her most recent books are *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism* (Verso, 1991), *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge, 1995) and, with Neal Wood, *A Trumpet of Sedition: Political Theory and the Rise of Capitalism, 1509 1688* (Pluto and NYU Press, 1997).