

*Class in Political and Social Philosophy**Stanley Aronowitz*

"Seeing is believing?"

"I'm from Missouri, show me."

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating."

CLASSIFICATION: HOW WE MAKE SENSE OF THE WORLD

These time-honored sayings encompass two of the ways humans figure out what's going on: by their and others' observations; and by reflecting on the multitude of everyday practices by which we constantly negotiate our relationships with our built and social environments—principally at work, in the home, on the street, and in our dreamwork. Making sense also entails making and forming concepts of two kinds: classification of objects, material and social, and creating concepts that select from the welter of experiences that would otherwise remain random and confusing. Apart from those who think and write about concepts and produce them intentionally, ordinary concept formation is mostly unacknowledged by producers. Concepts are extrapolated from elements of the cultural climate as well as more enduring world-views. Without them neither observation nor practice would take shape in our collective understanding of the social world and of material objects.

Just as concepts such as atoms and molecules—most recently quarks and strings—help us grasp and order our material world, the concept of class is a typical way of organizing and understanding the social world. Despite the humanist/liberal cry to treat persons equally, without prejudice, and ultimately as individuals rather than as a "class" or collective, ordering experience demands we classify people and thereby discern difference. Concepts are also used to evaluate our observations and social interactions. How we differentiate the elements of our social environment and organize them, in a system of classification both in public discourse and in our imagination, changes with historical situations. What is crucial in one social space/ time, may be marginal, ancillary or absent in another. Although some modes of classification disappear, at least for a time, the most persistent concept used for ordering the social world is to divide people by how they earn their living, by their occupation and its place in the historically evolved imaginary social hierarchies. Here the term "imaginary" signifies a model, that is, a fiction that, nevertheless, we believe describes how social things are really ordered. "Fiction" does not imply that the model is false. It refers to the Real but does not necessarily correspond to it. Yet, since we tend to act on our concepts,—which are also reworkings of social life—these fictions become

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social things and assume an independent existence. To be sure the system of classification often becomes a prisonhouse of thought and action. Few can shift their categories to accommodate the new. Our concepts are as habitual as any ordinary routine. They prevent us from making sense of new experiences; they are the dead past that tend to “weigh on the brains of the living.”¹

We may cite some of the worst examples of this process. As good industrial and craft jobs become hard to find a majority of high school graduates who once might have become electricians or relatively well paid assemblers enter tertiary (or “higher” education) hoping to qualify for available jobs in administration, technology or in the “helping” professions—education, social work and health care. In the last twenty five years of the 20th century, those obliged to enter semi-skilled manual labor or low paid service jobs have been stigmatized; their low paid jobs are taken as signs of social character rather than a reflection of the labor market situation. If these workers had any talent or initiative they would not be working at McDonald’s, unless they were attending school as well. The student who, under earlier circumstances, might have held in a blue collar job “forgets” that he has been obliged to seek educational credentials out of necessity rather than choice. The perch from which to pejoratively evaluate manual and clerical labor is as wobbly as a termite-ridden platform. A man observes a woman driver creeping along the highway at 40 miles per hour in the outside lane and, in irritation and contempt, ascribes her inept behavior to gender difference. She is not seen as an individual; she is a member of a class—women—who, among other characteristics, are not risk-takers and because of this inherent conservatism, unintentionally drive in a thoughtless and dangerous manner. Similarly, reading an account of a murder in the newspaper it is not surprising to many whites that the perpetrator of the crime is a black man. The class of poor black men is identified in the minds of many with murder, rape and robbery. Needless to say these judgments are not rooted in nature, they are conditioned by a multiplicity of social influences, not the least that, in many circles, color is a marker of anti-social behavior. Unfortunately given the prevailing conception of blacks as beings congenitally incapable of self-control, an everyday encounter with a black male on a deserted street, even in day-light, may provoke considerable anxiety in his caucasian interlocutor.

¹. Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. by C.P. Dutt. International Publishers, 1969.

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How social or economic class helps us interpret events may be illustrated by our evaluation of statistics showing that students attending schools in working-class districts perform below the national average when measured by standardized tests. We may ascribe this performance “deficit” to the lack of educational attainment in their families which might be reflected in the absence of books and other artifacts of cultural capital in their homes; or, before the conflation of racial thinking with color (say, the 19th century), attribute poor grades to inherent or cultural characteristics of certain immigrant groups such as Irish, Poles and Italians. In 19th and early 20th Century parlance, these groups had racial designations. They were the subjects of phrenological investigations which purported to show that they had smaller brains than members of the white race, an allegation that was also pinned on blacks as a justification for slavery. In these times white working class school performances are largely ignored by the media and by education policy-makers. Despite ample evidence that high school and college drop-out rates among working class white students are far higher than for middle class students and not much lower than that of blacks and Latinos, these statistics are ignored because white working class kids rarely make it into public discourse except when they commit acts of mass suicide or mass murder. In public discourse, the fundamental class divide is between the undifferentiated class of whites and a parallel aggregation of “minorities.” The reason is fairly plain: in the post World War Two period nearly all whites have been recoded as “middle class,” a designation that connotes not occupational position but levels of consumption that, for a considerable fraction of blue collar industrial workers, compare with some professional and technical occupations. Since the middle class is presumed to have no significant educational deficits as measured by the norms set by school authorities, whites who fail to meet the standards are assumed to suffer individually but not as a class.

But, class is beginning to be recognized as a basis for affirmative social policy. For example, against conservative arguments for race neutral policies for access to higher education and other mainstream public goods, Glenn Loury insists that blacks be treated by institutions of higher education as a class with historical deficits that need remedy. He distinguishes between “race blind” and “race neutral” criteria for awarding access to scarce public goods such as elite higher education. In this view schools should not admit blacks who do not meet their academic standards. On the other hand, failing to adopt a policy of black admissions on race neutral grounds will surely have deleterious consequences, particularly in relation to the goal of diversifying the intellectual and managerial elite. If society wishes to make sure that

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access to membership is broadly distributed given limitations such as the number of places, schools have little choice but to adopt special measures to assure black admissions. Otherwise, in a race blind policy blacks would be required to perform at a higher level than whites in order to secure their place(s).²

For the present, I want to evoke class loosely rather than subjecting it to rigorous definition. My main point here is not to engage in the scientific debate about what are the determinants of classes. Here I want to focus on its importance in organizing both individual and social perception. I make the further claim that the most salient concepts are those of difference, which constitutes the foundation of knowledge. Something or somebody is this and not that; we measure and know thisness with reference to thatness. In the course of making everyday judgments we tend to define them in relation to what they are not. The manual worker is not an intellectual worker; in turn the intellectual works with her brains rather than with her hands. These binaries are extreme reductions. They contradict what, with a little reflection, is obvious: that nearly all work has both physical and intellectual components. The labor of producing things and services is not literally divided by head and hand. Intellectuals use tools such as pens, word-processors, calculators and other machines which are operated manually. And from the highly skilled toolmaker or plumber to the “unskilled” laborer manual work involves knowledge of science and technology and the considerable use of judgment. Homeowners understand that the plumber is a prestigious possessor of rare and necessary knowledge whose manual tasks are accompanied by analysis and prognosis. Everybody who has cleaned her or his home knows the variety of skills needed to get the job done. In the contemporary household the worker (whether the unpaid member or a professional cleaner) must know how to use a variety of tools and operate various machines such as vacuum cleaners (an instrument which requires more than a little maintenance), perhaps a waxing machine and dishwashers. In addition, the cleaner knows and uses a wide array of cleaning chemicals ranging from soaps to sprays and oils. That many experimental physicists spend considerable time and energy literally making their own tools of observation and experiment goes unnoticed as a descriptor of their job. Despite this indisputable fact they are still classified as intellectual rather than manual workers. Thus there is a measure physical toil in most work but all work involves knowledge and judgment, the hallmarks of intellectual

². Loury, Glenn C. *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*. Harvard U. Press, 2003.

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labor. Still we know what we mean when we divide labor in this manner. We are designating educational credentials as a marker of social difference.

Concept-formation is not limited to the social world. They help us as well to understand what we have called “nature” that is, visible and the invisible heterogeneous material objects and processes. Whether these concepts are always already present in the sinews of comprehension itself, on our inherent capacity for making sense, or are produced in conjunction with our historically conditioned social existence belongs to the problem of explanation. For now it is enough to remark that we cannot do without organizing concepts, in science and in everyday life. The Ancient Greek scientists/philosophers debated what substances constituted the material world. Some reduced matter to four: earth, air, fire and water. Thales, who has been called the first scientist in written history, proclaimed that water is the fundamental substance of nature. But Leucippus and Democritus theorized the world as consisting of an infinite number of closely packed atoms and provided a detailed account of their origin and development. As opposed to later physical theory they posited no empty space, although others thought that space was the void between material objects. In their view, atoms are invisible and indivisible. Despite different permutations for 2500 years atomic theory has been a leading concept of physics and has withstood frequent attempts to override its fundamental premise. While some have challenged its adequacy as a description of the physical world, declaring that the matter is also organized in waves or strings, even as atomic theory has been refined by adding several layers of microparticles under atoms and molecules, the world understood as particle remains at the leading edge of both description and explanation. While many believe its persistence, despite the invisibility of several classes of microparticles, is a testament to the veracity of (sub)atomic theory—that it corresponds to the actual organization of the physical world—for our purposes what counts is that it remains an organizing concept in science and in our collective understanding.³

WHO IS A CITIZEN?

There is a long tradition in western political philosophy which understands human societies as, in part, constituted by social differences and some even

³ Kirk, G.S., Raven, J.E. and Schofield, M. *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd edition. Cambridge University Press, 1984.

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recognize that there are not merely distinctions between individuals and groups but some of these are antagonistic. Marx was not the first to discover that the concept of interest was rooted in the position people occupied in society. In fact, it may be argued that class pervades the entire history of western political philosophy and is among its organizing principles. From Plato to James Madison, political theorists believed social relations were inherently hierarchical and conflictual. Not suprisingly perhaps the first written class discourse occurs in ancient Athens where, alongside its democratic polity, there flourished a system of slavery. Owned by landowners and proprietors of medium-sized and large businesses slaves performed a considerable portion of the agricultural and urban labor. They were considered non-persons and appear in the great works of classical Greek philosophy as the “other” of the human community or a tool of the citizen’s household. The condition of slavery is employed as a continuous sign of that which the citizenry—invariably composed of free, leisured men—must avoid.⁴

Plato informs us in his *Republic* that slavery is the condition a free man most abhors. But this does not mean that all others are to be accorded equal status. In *The Republic* and other dialogues he names the classes of society: rich landowners, artisans, guardians—a very small “class” charged with the protection of the whole state—the urban poor who, he infers, are often the repository of evil, and the slaves who are invoked in a variety of contexts. *The Republic* accords a special significance to mastery and slavery. These terms are employed as metaphors for Socrates’s ideal State as much as descriptions of the state of Athenian society:

There is something ridiculous in the expression ‘master of himself’; for the master is also the servant and the servant the master, and in all these modes of speaking the same person is denoted.

Certainly the meaning is, I believe, that in the human soul there is a better and also a worse principle, and when the better has the worse under control, then a man is said to be master of himself; and this is a term of praise: but when, owing to evil education or association, the better principle, which is also the smaller, is overwhelmed by the greater mass of the worse—in this case he is blamed and called the slave of self and unprincipled.⁵

⁴. Aristotle. *Politics*, trans. by Ernest Barker. Oxford University Press, 1957.

⁵. Plato. *The Republic*, pages 575-884 in *Collected Dialogues*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Princeton University Press, 1961.

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How are classes determined? To this day conservative philosophers following Plato's formula claim that classes are formed from nature's endowment of intrinsic qualities in each individual. While through education and association one learns a profession or craft, the capacity to learn and perform the duties appropriate to these occupations is always already given many now claim, by genetic predisposition. Accordingly the necessary qualifications for ruling the state are present only in a very few individuals whose nature it is to be more wise and enlightened than those of other classes. Book Seven, where one finds the famous allegory of the cave, poses the limits of mass education and book eight is a sustained argument for the view that social rule should be grounded neither in oligarchic nor democratic principles but in a natural aristocracy of the intellect. In Plato's view most humans are shackled in the chains of illusion and are incapable of liberating themselves from ignorance without the guidance of the precious few who, in his allegory, are naturally endowed with the capacity to see the light.

Socrates contrasts the status quo with his own vision of the Ideal State. As he makes clear in Book Four: "any city, however small, is in fact divided into two one the city of the poor, the other of the rich; these are at war with one another."⁶ The existing state of affairs the powerful rich and political leaders have defined justice in terms of their own interest and have construed the law in this image. But the economically and politically strong are by no means necessarily endowed with qualities of wisdom or of genuine justice. For the just ruler acts in the interest of the weak rather than defining justice as the self interest of the strong. Socrates' solution to the state of affairs that defines justice in terms of the interests of the strong is to install a small class of philosopher-kings at the helm—a frank aristocracy of intellect—and to educate a class of guardians to provide the means of force by which they may rule.

These guardians, too, must possess the natural talents to perform their task. But they require moral as much as physical education. Accordingly, Socrates outlines a curriculum that, in sum, may be the first open enunciation of education as ideology, if by that term we mean knowledge presenting itself as truth but actually disseminated in the interest of a particular class in society. The guardians will be spared knowledge of Homer's statement that the gods are the source of evil as well as good and will be taught the values appropriate to the new form of rule. In these passages it may be said that

⁶. Ibid.

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Plato invents the concept, but not the name, ideology. The education of those assigned the security of the state is plainly partial and, perhaps more to the point, in sync with the prevailing values. While the guardians and the philosophers would share goods in common and eschew material riches Socrates has no intention of disturbing the economic class system of the Greek city-states. Instead he wants to found the state on natural intellectual superiority and to construct civil society on the basis of a “natural” division of labor. Each is to remain in her or his place, as the gods have decreed.

For those who regard this perspective as profoundly inegalitarian and properly consigned to historical memory, they might find it useful to consult the early influential writings of the American journalist and political philosopher, Walter Lippmann. In his widely read book *Public Opinion*, published in the aftermath of World War One, Lippmann argues that mass democracy is, regrettably, not possible in a society rent by large and petty rivalries, mass media which, even at the turn of the century, had gripped the popular imagination and irreparably twisted it, and particular interests that distort the public interest. Like Plato’s slaves, the masses could only see one side of the truth—their own. But public life cannot be held hostage to perennially warring factions. Its management requires a modern version of the philosopher-king, the expert. Lippmann favors a democracy of consent rather than broad participation, if only to control the few experts who, by virtue of their broad educational preparation and technical skill, are charged with the responsibility of managing large-scale governmental institutions and managing the multifarious functions of public life. If the professional managers must run society, the political class acts as the mediator between these largely shadowy figures and the electorate. The electorate remains the final judge of expert actions, but must be excluded from day to day decisions. Needless to say, what Lippmann so bluntly describes is our own representative democracies today.

In many respects Aristotle’s *Politics*⁷ is a reply to his teacher, Plato. Aristotle focuses on the question: who is entitled to citizenship? Consistent with his abiding passion for the “mean” he rejects the “extremes” of oligarchy—an option to Statecraft equally abjured by Plato— and a State of “extreme” democracy, the definition of which is that the “working class”(the term is Aristotle’s) has citizenship and, in accordance with the norm of Greek society, entitled to participate in making state decisions. Like his mentor, he

7. Aristotle. *Politics*, trans. By Ernest Barker. Oxford University Press, 1957.

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warns against the rule of the mob. But Aristotle takes the argument against mass democracy a step further. He argues that the tasks of labor and the tasks of citizenship are in fundamental contradiction: "Certainly the good man and the statesman and the good citizen ought not to learn the crafts of inferiors except for their own occasional use; if they habitually practice them, there will cease to be a distinction between master and slave"⁸ and again. "That in a well ordered state the citizens should have leisure and not have to provide for their daily wants is generally, acknowledged. ..."⁹ Like Plato, the necessary work of keeping the polity going must be performed by "inferiors;" more, labor is de facto equated with slavery for reasons that will become clear.

Aristotle's "mean" is a democracy in which citizens are able to participate in rule: "He who has the power to take part in the deliberative judicial administration of any state is said by us to be a citizen of that state; and speaking generally a state is a body of citizens sufficing for the purposes of life."¹⁰ What enables a citizen to acquire the power to participate? That he is the head of a household and performs only the limited work of management and has the time needed to enter the public arena. Women, although vital for the State because they perform the work of raising children and other household duties are disqualified, as are artisans, because they are too busy performing the labor of the physical reproduction of the household to concern themselves with affairs of state. As for the slaves or servants, they are excluded from citizenship by definition: since they are property, they cannot freely participate in any activity; they serve at the pleasure of their master.

Aristotle reserves a special discussion for a class of freeholders, the merchants. Summoned into existence by need—one household cannot provide all of its needs so it must trade with others—the merchant becomes the mediator of these exchange relationships. At a certain stage direct barter no longer suffices to satisfy trade requirements so the instrument of money is invented as a universal medium of multiple, complex exchanges. As long as money is exchanged for goods used to satisfy naturally endowed and the merchant remains a necessary intermediary, he serves the good. The problem arises when merchants and some other property owners accumulate

⁸. Ibid.

⁹. Ibid.

¹⁰. Ibid.

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money for its own sake, engage in chrematistics, the “freeing of the (monetary) sign of any relation to its natural referent.”¹¹ Thus, the city becomes “emptied” and is no longer a presence to itself:

the most hated sort of trade and with the greatest reason, usury, which makes a gain out of money itself, and not for the purposes it was meant to serve. For money was intended to be used in exchange, but not to increase at interest. And this term interest, which means the birth of money from money [...] is applied to the breeding of money because the offspring resembles the parent. That is why all modes of getting wealth this is the most unnatural.¹²

Unnatural because it is not earned but instead is the consequence of the self-birth of money. That is “interest” accrues only because one possesses it and lends it for a specified period of time to another and not as the “natural” product of the exchange of commodities need for “life.”

Accordingly the merchants must be excluded because they are too busy making money.¹³

Aristotle’s discourse on class calls attention to the question of the good and bad uses of time. The “leisure class” is always a relative term: those who have power over their own time are ill-advised to squander it on frivolous pleasures or on the pursuit of money for its own sake: their leisure makes possible their participation in the juridical functions of the State and this is an ethical obligation. As in Plato, the inference here is that nature should rule human conduct. But the deformation of time and money in the service of avarice, their abstraction from concrete material and juridical need, is a violation of nature. As Aristotle makes plain, the chief difference between his conceptions of democracy and of citizenship and that of the “extremists” rests on class doctrine. The fundamental distinction is between those who are masters of their time and those who are not. Seen in the context of political economy “slavery” consists not only in the fact that some humans have become the property of other humans but also that propertylessness condemns those who are ostensibly free to labor and therefore cannot engage in statecraft. Through-out most of the subsequent millennia political

¹¹. Ibid.

¹². Ibid.

¹³. Ibid.

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theory has adopted the core of Aristotle's position, which integrates some, but not all, of Plato's arguments. In sum, only those who are freed from the concerns of labor and of commerce can rule.¹⁴ Since Plato and Aristotle, political and social philosophy has, tacitly or explicitly, recognized that class is for society what atoms are for nature, a building block upon which the whole edifice of being rests. Some, like Aristotle, have viewed the distinction between those who hold productive property and those who are obliged to labor to provide the necessities of physical existence, as a benign division of labor: slaves, women and artisans work in the Household or to supply goods. The work of the master and, by extension, a fraction of the nobility and capitalists in subsequent feudal and bourgeois eras is to rule. In the ancient sense their role in the social order is to practice the art of government.

But in the modern epoch many political theorists argued that the division between the ruler and the ruled has become an antagonistic relationship. While the underlying population has been formally freed of bondage to a master or to the land, until the 19th and 20th centuries they remained deprived of citizenship. At the dusk of the feudal order Machiavelli was among the first to recognize that a new situation had arisen in the Italian city state. However powerful the monarch, a new social group, the people, had come into being which called into question his claim to divine right. Although subordinate to the Prince the people would no longer automatically view him as God's representative on earth and award him their undying loyalty. While riches can facilitate the Prince's ascendancy to power, Machiavelli argued wealth could no longer secure its maintenance. Security of rule can be achieved only if the Prince wins the loyalty of the people. Anticipating the emergence of a democratic populace rather than taking their fealty for granted Machiavelli urges the Prince—an abstraction from the class of rulers in the multitude of Italian city-states—to win the consent of the masses by, among other innovations, to live among them. Tacitly recognizing their citizenship Machiavelli argues that in order to "hold" the cities the Prince should not rely on coercion as the prime instrument of direct rule and, instead, recognize the right of the people to self-government. Although favoring the maintenance of a strong militia as a guarantee of independence from foreign armies, Machiavelli advises the prince to forge friendly relations with those accustomed to liberty, on condition that they "pay tribute" and recognize his ultimate sovereignty.¹⁵

¹⁴. Lippmann, Walter. *Public Opinion*. The Free Press, 1962.

¹⁵. Machiavelli, Niccoló. *The Prince*, trans. by George Bull. Penguin Classics, 2005.

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A century later, having been expropriated from the land, millions of individuals presented themselves in the market as possessors of a single commodity, their own labor, Thomas Hobbes argued that, left to itself, civil “society” had devolved into a morass of incessant competition between individuals which always threatened to break out into war, the war of all against all. In the situation of 16th and 17th century English capitalism the concept of the social order was more hope than reality. As Karl Polanyi has shown, the Enclosures, whose effects were to drive hundreds of thousands of peasants into the city and amounted to a “revolution of the rich against the poor,” may have increased the domestic food supply but constituted a “catastrophic dislocation in the lives of the common people.”¹⁶ The peasants were “freed” from feudal obligations but were also deprived of their collective livelihoods. Possessing formal freedom but lacking Rights—to vote, to organize into trade unions and other voluntary associations, to form political factions, and to stay out of jail or workhouses—the most dangerous class was the “bondsmen made free,” newly formed multitude of wage workers.¹⁷ But at the dawn of the industrial revolution they were offered few jobs. In the absence of opportunities to earn a living many crowded the narrow streets of the major English cities begging for change, engaging in petty crimes and periodically staging bread riots. In a chaotic economic situation, far from remaining a nightwatchman whose job was to protect owners’ property but to stand aside of the marketplace, the State was charged with the task of keeping order and typically came down on the poor and destitute with an iron fist. Moreover, the liberal dogma of free market capitalism became untenable: in the 17th and 18th century the disruptive effects of geographical and industrial dislocation drove some of the most enthusiastic proponents of market liberalism to propose state intervention to provide subsistence income to the long-term poor.

In the wake of the English revolutions of 1640 and 1688 it was impossible for political philosophers to ignore class in their consideration of the proper form of government. Led by an emergent middle class of proprietors and their intellectual and political allies these revolts were directed against the monarchy’s oligarchic power. Writing in the heat of the civil war of 1640 that challenged the traditional monarchy, Hobbes’s treatise *The Leviathan* was received at the time as a spirited defense of the need for a state in which

¹⁶. Polanyi, Karl. *The Great Transformation*. Beacon Press, 2001.

¹⁷. Ibid.

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sovereignty would be concentrated in the royalty. Like Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes argued from the perspective in which politics derived from human nature. Reflecting the prevailing social philosophy of his day he viewed society as an agglomeration of individuals who, he added, were possessed of appetites and desires that were, for some, uncontrollable. In contrast to Adam Smith who later postulated that the market was regulated by the "invisible hand of God," Hobbes viewed the market of individuals seeking to satisfy their appetites with alarm. Although most members of society are peace-loving because they can be induced to exercise self-control over their natural appetites, a small number of individuals will inevitably disrupt the peace and act aggressively towards others. Civil war was the outcome of the anarchy of civil society, that is, of the chaos that attends untrammelled liberty. Left to itself the marketplace results in the "war of all against all." Hence, in the interest of peace there is need for members of society to surrender their sovereignty to a higher secular power.¹⁸ As C.B. Macpherson points out, Hobbes was sharply critical of "bourgeois morality." Hobbes observes that "the generality of citizens and inhabitants of market-towns' being at ease with 'the lucrative vices of men of trade or handicraft; such as are feigning, lying, cozening, hypocrisy, or other uncharitableness' and about merchants 'whose only glory [is] to grow excessively rich by the wisdom of buying and selling' and 'and by making poor people sell their labor to them at their own prices'."¹⁹ Hobbes's model of man is derived from the very social relations he criticizes. His scientific hypothesis is that avarice is constitutive of human nature and that market society provides the occasion for the manifestation of its most detestable features. On the other hand, he shares Aristotle's loathing for making of money for the sake of money and views the self-aggrandizing merchant as the exemplary figure from which to argue for a system of constraint. For it was the merchant class as much as the small manufacturers who strained against the remnants of the old feudal system, especially the monarchic oligarchy which, they believed, were standing in the way of progress.

The historian William Appleman Williams argued, referring to the relation of the rising industrial and commercial classes in 18th and 19th century America, that "laissez faire" never meant a genuine free market to which, as John Locke theorized, individuals brought the products of their own labor

¹⁸. Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*, with an intro. by C.B. MacPherson. Penguin Classics, 1982.

¹⁹. *Ibid.*

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and should be paid to the extent of their own labor rather than trading on the labor of others. From a Hobbesian point of view the slogan laissez faire meant laissez nous faire (let us do what we please) and this was the main obstacle standing in the way of the quest for perpetual peace.²⁰ No less that the gluttonous industrialists of the late 19th century, the new middle class of the early capitalist era, whose greatest prophet was John Locke, wished to transfer sovereignty over the state to themselves in order to insure their unfettered ability to produce commodities and trade them. If Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* were written to justify, in advance, the 'glorious revolution' of 1688 whose objective it was to lay the monarchy to rest since it had survived the earlier civil war, his justification was based on a conception of human nature that marked a breakthrough in political theory. For Locke as much as Rousseau, nearly a century later, God has created us all equal and, as individuals we are free in a state of nature. Government is constituted, according to Locke, to preserve the natural rights of individuals. Its main job is punish those who would inhibit the individual's freedom. As Peter Laslett points out, the exception to this rule is that parents must impose their authority on children because, while they are born to reason, they have not yet attained a state of reason.²¹

Locke believed that in primitive societies—his chief contemporary example was the American Indian civilization, at least before the European conquest—humans shared the fruits of the earth in common.²² So how does he justify the cornerstone of middle class society, bourgeois, that is, individual property?:

Though the earth, and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a Property in his own Person. This no Body has any right to but himself. The Labour of his Body, and the work of his Hands, we may say are properly his.²³

So the products of our individual direct labor are inalienable, "no man but he can have a right to what is once joyned to, at least where there is

20. Ibid.

21. Locke, John. *Second Treatise on Government*, ed. by C.B. MacPherson. Hackett Publishing, 1980.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

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enough, as any good left in common for others."²⁴ In these sentences we can see the model of a society of individual producers, each of whom has property rights only to the extent of their own labor. This is the model that impelled many American revolutionaries for whom Locke's political philosophy was inspiration. As we shall see, however much the doctrine of natural law and individual freedom infused revolutionary slogans, Hobbes' pessimism informed the ideas by which conservatives who dominated the Constitutional convention developed the model of American government.

But Locke himself could not reconcile his labor theory of property with his acknowledgement that the emergence of money as the intermediary of exchange renders the theory more than problematic. While in the end he maintains that labor is the measure of exchange value—a discovery which precedes Smith's nearly a century later and Marx's further development of the labor theory more than one hundred fifty years after the publication of the *Second Treatise*, the concept that a person should limit their accumulation of capital to the extent of their own labor, and its relation to natural law, yields to a theory of contract:

...it is plain, that Men have agreed to disproportionate and unequal possession of the Earth, they have by a tacit and voluntary consent found out a way, how a man may fairly possess more land than he, himself, can use the product of, by receiving in exchange for the overplus, Gold and Silver, which may be hoarded up without injury to any one, these metals not spoiling or decaying in the hands of the possessor. This portage of things, in an inequality of private possessions, men have made practicable out of the bounds of Societies, and without compact, only by putting a value on gold and silver and tacitly agreeing in the use of money. For in Governments the Laws regulate the rights of property and the possession of land is determined by positive constitutions.²⁵

Once again, here is Aristotle's position on the corrosive role of money in altering human relations but without the condemnation of accumulation for its own sake. Locke's conception of history's stages corresponds to some modern anthropological periodizations: we start with primitive communism which gives way to property, but only as the result the labor of its possessor, to a money economy where accumulation for its own sake produces inequality, but which is instituted by the tacit consent of free men. While

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

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he sees no reason why, in the vast expanse of America's riches in natural resources, property should exceed products that individuals can themselves use, in Europe the scarcity of land gives rise to "controversies" over Title and the appearance of certain individuals who will exchange their "overplus" for silver and gold. That Locke retreats from the implications of his own philosophical anthropology is not surprising in the light of the stark inequalities that surrounded him, both in England and in France. Then, as many political theorists do now, he ends up on the confident note that a society of laws can remedy the inevitable contradiction between natural equality and social inequality. And, at the same time, Locke introduces the by now commonplace fiction that those whose labor is bought and sold by Hobbes's hypocritical merchants and manufacturers have done so voluntarily and blithely ignores the tyranny of economic necessity motivating people to sell their labor.

To Rousseau fell the task of reversing many of the precepts of his philosophical ancestors. That human action is ruled by the passions he readily admits. But instead of insisting that the passions are rooted in the evil side of human nature and the exercise of reason is the solution to most social problems, he argues that the passions are grounded in needs which are clearly good and that the civilization's attempt to suppress bodily needs is at the heart of social ills. For the fundamental criterion of the good society is that which conforms most nearly to how man lived in a state of nature, born free and equal. But his most vociferous criticism is reserved for capitalism: "the extreme inequalities in the manner of living of the several classes of mankind, the excess of idleness in some, and of labor in others, the facility of irritating and satisfying our sensuality, and our appetites, the too exquisite and out of the way foods of the rich, which fill them with fiery juices, and bring on indigestions, and the unwholesome food of the poor, of which even, bad as it is, they very often fall short, and the want of which tempts them, every opportunity that offers, to eat greedily and overload their stomachs;" and, he adds many other batterings we administer to our own bodies; "these are the fatal proofs that most of our ills are of our own making," especially the drive to accumulate property.²⁶

In contrast to his friends, the Philosophers who, like Diderot, proclaimed the interests of the bourgeoisie to be identical with those of mankind, Rousseau breaks ranks and declares the revolution had already failed to

26. Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. by Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge U. Press, 1997.

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bridge the gap between rich and poor, master and slave in England, and is further seriously flawed because, no less than the monarchy against which it was arrayed, it represents particular interests, those of property owners. If Rousseau's own version of ethics depends on a reading of human nature as inherently good, his critique of contemporary social relationships and the consequences of a civil society governed by the accumulation of wealth is, together with the writings of Vico, the first modern discourse of social science. For unlike his forbearers, he ascribes the origin of inequality not to innate natural gifts or to evil passions but to the exact machinery that makes the capitalist world go round: private property in the means by which survival of each and of all depends. In consequence an inquiry into the origin and causes of inequality must seek purely social causes.

Moreover, rather than viewing government as the mediator of social conflicts that flare up in civil society, he sees the state as a mirror of these conflicts: "The various forms of government owe their origin to the various degrees of inequality which existed between individuals at the time of their execution." Therefore "where a man happened to be preeminent in power, virtue, riches or credit, he became the sole magistrate, and the State assumed a monarchical form." Concomitantly the aristocratic form reflects the dominance of "several of pretty equal eminence" and democracy is the expression of a society which has deviated "less from a state of nature" and is of greater, but not necessarily perfect, equality.²⁷ But sadly, according to Rousseau, the revolutions do not occur to produce greater democracy but, rather, to "authorize" existing inequalities. Whatever the governmental form, as long as it is based on the class divisions of rich and poor, powerful and weak, and master and slave they will not result in greater human freedom.²⁸ Thus unlike Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau places little weight on reform of the state and its laws.

CLASS IS AS AMERICAN AS CHERRY PIE

Contrary to the loud proclamations among American critics and social theorists that class is an imported idea, class is as American as cherry pie. When, in the wake of what is sometimes termed the "age of democratic

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

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revolutions," political expediency, if not always conviction, requires that farmers, merchants and artisans (but not the economically and socially disinherited), be included in the polity their rights must be specified, but also limited by constitution and by statute. Thus, the concept of passive participation enters political discourse, as in the definition of democracy as government which rules by "the consent of the governed." In addition even the minimalist idea of citizenship remains defined by property possession, a stricture which insures that only those who have a genuine interest in state affairs: taxation, foreign and internal trade and whether the government can appropriate private property for public purposes, such as roads, can constitute the electorate. Since the propertyless are governed by their passions, are hostile to government and especially to taxation, have no interest in the preservation of private property and have shown throughout history to be indifferent to the national interest in times of war, they must be disqualified from voting.²⁹

In the debate that preceded the adoption of the constitution of the new American nation Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison published a series of essays directed to their fellow citizens intended to argue for a new form of government and a conception of citizenship which, remarkably, set the contours of the American state for more than two hundred years. Among other objectives *The Federalist Papers* were addressed to the problem of how to achieve national unity in the wake of the pervasive factionalism—the contemporary term for class—within the post-revolutionary America. For the American victory over the British did not erase the internal factionalism that, even in times of war flickered now, raged then. Even as the three political leaders wrote their epistles to the fledgling nation the danger to the fragile unity forged in 1776 was ever present: farmers, the overwhelming majority of whom were smallholders, were arrayed against merchants for whom money was the end rather than the means of economic activity; slave-holders were opposed by artisans and laborers for whom free labor was identical to the idea of liberty; groups that had sympathized with the British and even collaborated against patriots of all social classes. Perhaps no more eloquent statement of the problem was written than Madison's in *Federalist 10*:

²⁹. Hamilton, Alexander, Jay, John, Madison, James. *The Federalist : A Commentary on the Constitution of the United States* ed. and intro. by Robert Scigliano. Random House paperback edition, 2000.

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By a faction, I understand a number of citizens whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interests, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community. So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts. But the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have forever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors fall under a like discrimination. A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, and with many lesser interests, grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes, actuated by different sentiments and views. The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principle task of modern legislation, and involves the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of the government...No man is allowed to be a judge of his own cause, because his interest would certainly bias his judgment, and, not improbably, corrupt his integrity...³⁰

Since “the latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man” the question of how to form a nation that is unified in purpose and particularly able to resist incursions into its territory from foreign powers, becomes the decisive issue facing the leading framers of the constitution. Hamilton put the matter even more bluntly: “A firm Union will be of the utmost moment to the peace and liberty of the States, as a barrier against domestic faction and insurrection.”³¹ In Hamilton’s view a strong central government which commands a near monopoly over the means of violence and has the legal power to issue money and to intervene to deal with the excesses of faction[as represented, for example in Shays rebellion, a veteran’s movement demanding public support for its largely indigent constituents].³² Madison finds little hope for “adjusting these clashing interests” through reliance on the prevailing political party, even if its leaders are composed of enlightened statesmen.³³

³⁰. Ibid.

³¹. Ibid.

³². Ibid.

³³. Ibid.

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Since social difference is natural, one way to cure the causes of factionalism would be to suppress the liberties of one or more of the contending parties. In Madison's view this course of action is unacceptable. "The inference to which we are brought is, that the causes of faction cannot be removed [because they are rooted in human nature,sa] and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its effects."³⁴ One solution that was quite popular among small farmers and some intellectuals in the early of post-revolutionary years was "pure democracy" which, as in the Greek polis, inevitably consists of a small number of citizens who make, in person, all decisions for the community, inevitably because, in its Aristotelian mode, citizenship is restricted to the minority of property holders who can make the time to deal with affairs of state. Of course the anti-federalists who advocated this form of governance also favored a highly decentralized state, where the small community would retain a high degree of sovereignty, especially on questions of taxation and what later became known as "eminent domain"—the power of government to seize property for public purposes such as the construction of roads and dams.³⁵ According to Madison the de facto exclusions entailed by direct democracy will only exacerbate factionalism and interest politics. To cure the problem Madison proposes a Republican form of government, in which representatives may claim the public good and thereby can legitimately suppress the insurrectionary impulses of the minority—small holders on the farm or in the workshops, and the city laborers— which is chronically discontented with the state of things.³⁶

Hamilton and Jay were the leading advocates of establishing a third branch of government to mediate the excesses of the elected executive and legislative branches. They urged the formation of an independent judicial system to adjudicate conflicting property claims, contract disputes and other civil matters. More to the point of their proposals for the constitution, the three authors sought other mechanisms to settle disputes between the factions and to correct the excesses of congress which, from their perspective was much too subject to the popular will—a Supreme Court. The highest court would have the power to override congress when it exceeded its powers

³⁴. Ibid.

³⁵. Ibid.

³⁶. Ibid.

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under the constitution. It would present itself as the chief arbiter of disputes between the states and the federal government and between a recalcitrant, underlying population driven by its particular interests and wanton passions, and the state. In order to safeguard its impartiality, at least between various disputants among the propertied classes, members of various levels of the Federal courts would not be elected but would be appointed by the president subject to the advice and consent of the Congress. In other words, the more distant from the popular will, the better the courts would be able to perform their mediating and overriding functions.

Among their many objections to the proposals advanced in *The Federalist*, the anti-federalists were vehemently opposed to the establishment of a separate judicial department of government. They understood this proposal to be directed against popular sovereignty, specifically against legislative powers, at a time when many at the local level were close to being popular assemblies. In fact the insurrections that Hamilton feared often flared up against efforts by state governments to form independent judiciaries even before the passage of the Constitution in 1789. A crowd burned down a Massachusetts courthouse in 1783. Moreover they read the courts as voices of the most oligarchic among the federalists, that is, those who would centralize power against the farming and working classes.³⁷

In general the anti-federalists were proponents of what Madison had termed “pure” or “direct” democracy, holding that “representatives” tended to be recruited from the upper reaches of society. Needless to say they were defeated at the convention but, contrary to the consensual accounts of historians, the convention was by no means a love-fest of national unity. It was, at times, raucous because it mirrored the class divisions that were the real subject of many of the *Federalist Papers*. The main features of the constitution, excluding the first ten amendments which were added after the initial draft under pressure from the Jeffersonians and the anti-federalists, ratified republican, representative government, the tri-department structure of government rather than the English parliamentary system but, like England, provided a bi-cameral legislature—a popular chamber and an aristocratic chamber, aristocratic because it was not directly chosen by the electorate and, since it equalized representation between the states regardless of the size of their populations, discriminated against those which had large urban populations. Since no legislative proposal could become law without

³⁷. Ibid.

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approval of both houses and of the President who, like the senate was not elected directly, it enlarged the power of the executive and undercut the sovereignty of the popularly elected House, many of whose members were of distinctly modest means and were often seen by the statists and large landholders as tribunes for the rabble. It further reinforced the class system by refusing to challenge slavery (in order to win the support of the slave states for the constitution they permitted slaves to be counted as 3/5 of a person, thereby increasing the south's congressional delegations), the exclusion of women from suffrage, and maintained the English system of property qualifications for voting. As Hamilton averred it was patterned, in part, on Montesquieu's notion of the confederated republic and on the Hobbesian idea that at its pinnacle the national state should constitute a "supreme authority" a formulation echoed by Montesquieu.³⁸

The English proved unable to abolish the monarchy even as they established a House of Commons that gradually assumed the supreme state authority. A hundred years later, the French Revolution crushed the royal Court and proclaimed the "Rights of Man," England remained in the partial thrall of the Crown. It was the French Revolution rather than the English that inspired the young George Wilhelm Frederich Hegel to believe that humankind was on the threshold of Freedom. For Hegel Freedom was more than the establishment of individual right; it signified the unity of humans with nature and the unification of humankind in an indissoluble bond. Eleven years before the birth of Karl Marx, in 1807 Hegel published his monumental *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, perhaps the most influential work of philosophy in the 19th century. Its most compelling concept is, perhaps, the development of the dialectic as the leading thread of Being, natural and social. The dialectic is the immanence of nature, including human affairs, according to which things are constantly in flux and in the process of becoming and passing away, a proposition that underlies the work of the ancient "presocratic" Ionian philosophers, Thales, Anaximander, and especially Heraclites.³⁹

Hegel's development of the dialectic was inspired by his strong attraction to the ancient Greeks and to Spinoza but also to the example of the French

³⁸. Montesquieu. *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. by Anne Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller and Harold Samuel Stone. Cambridge University Press, 1989.

³⁹. Kirk, G.S., Raven, J.E. and Schofield, M. *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd edition. Cambridge U. Press, 1983.

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Revolution which, at first, seemed to have sounded the death knell to the two thousand years of the economic subordination of the overwhelming majority of people and their political disenfranchisement by aristocratic rulers. The slogans of the revolution used to overthrow the monarchy posed freedom as the defining political as well as philosophical question of his as well as our century. The thirty seven year old Hegel lived in a Germany that had not yet come to terms with the political ideas of the Enlightenment let alone modernity with their powerful invocation of the individual and of freedom. After all, echoing Hobbes, the great Immanuel Kant, still promulgated a political philosophy which, in the interest of perpetual peace demanded obedience to the oligarchic German state.⁴⁰

The dialectic attempts to answer the question of how, in the wake of centuries of human oppression change and the movement toward freedom is possible. Hegel's answer has a strong element of teleology: the end is present as a kernel at the very beginning of the process. Even if One, as opposed to antagonistic interests is the goal, Hegel refuses to posit the unity and self-identity of Being in advance of History. History is the process of the unfolding of the Totality through contradiction and negation. "Men" are obliged to fight it out without guarantees of victory either on the side of the status quo or of the revolutionaries. As with the Greeks strife is ineluctably constitutive of being. The dialectic presents itself as the "unfolding" through a spiral of contradictions—resolution of "warring opposites" through their mutual destruction, preservation and transformation at a higher level—only to give rise to new contradictions until the final unity of opposites is reached. If, for Hegel, the end is always already present at the beginning the passage from being to essence and back to Being is, nevertheless, a process of overcoming a series of contradictions within being, not the result of external force. To make concrete these highly abstract concepts, Hegel is compelled to offer an allegory. We may represent human relationships and their fate in the image of the fissure of lordship and bondage.

For Hegel as for Locke, Labor is the mediation between humans and nature, the mode of appropriation of the external world by man, an appropriation necessary for the preservation of humanity. But if, as Locke argued, there once was a primitive communist society marked by collective, egalitarian sharing of the fruits of labor, by the turn of the 19th century it was clear that society was rent by two great classes opposed over the division of the

⁴⁰. *Kant's Political Writings* ed. by H.S. Reiss, trans. by H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge University Press, 1991

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products of labor. The Lord commands the results of the bondsman's labor and dominates him in the social sphere. But the bondsman enjoys one element of superiority over the Lord, his direct interaction with nature. Thus, although subordinated to the Lord in social relations, the bondsman is the master of nature upon which human life depends. The Lord gains material satisfaction from appropriation of another's labor and retains the power over the laborer. But the lack of equality between the two deprives the Lord of that which he craves: Recognition by the Other. For even if the bondsman grants his superior his desire, it is the recognition of a slave for the master, and not of peers. Inevitably after stages of self-consciousness in which he, successively is proud of his station in life and hostile to the Lord, but still subservient, the bondsman finally understands the disparity between the sovereignty he enjoys in his relation to the natural world which his labor commands and his alienation from ownership and control over the products of his labor. He begins to see the Lord as a parasite on his labor and, finally, an antagonist. But in Hegel's dialectical allegory the contradiction cannot be resolved because the bondsman's consciousness of exploitation and oppression is not followed by the means by which bondage can be overcome. Like Aristotle and Plato, Hegel cannot imagine the bondsman transcending his alienation; he can achieve only an Unhappy Consciousness of his own oppression, unhappy because he has no power to overcome his subordination. The laborer cannot achieve freedom by his own efforts and become the master of his own destiny. As Kojève has argued, in the fight the "slave" fails because he refuses to risk life while the "master" is dominant precisely because he is willing to risk death.⁴¹

Following the publication of the *Phenomenology* Hegel continued to grapple with the problem of how freedom was possible if the class divide could not be overcome. In *The Philosophy of Right* (1821) he returns to the unfinished problem posed in the Lordship/ Bondage dialectic, unfinished because, contrary to Hegel's logical principle of overcoming, the contradiction between the two antagonists is never resolved. *The Philosophy of Right* begins with a discussion of two central social forms, the family and civil society. Hegel finds the protagonists of family life, husband and wife, parent and child, in perpetual conflict. In civil society he finds commodity owners confront each other as competitors in the marketplace, including labor and capital. The 18th century ideal of a civil society of individuals who, as peers discuss the affairs of state and of everyday life and may reproduce the condition of Greek

⁴¹ Hegel, G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller. Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1977.

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Democracy without the encumbrance of slavery, has been irreversibly submerged in the triumph of commerce as a new cultural as much as an economic norm. Even at the level of the relatively privileged, the war of all against all arising from commodity exchange in the market dominates the public sphere. At the level of the family and of economic relations which, he argues, increasingly occupies the space of civil society there is no possibility for the resolution of social cleavages. The classes of modern society—the peasantry, the commercial class [which includes wage workers, in a subsumed form] the businessmen—are engaged in constant mutual strife. These contradictions can only be resolved only at a higher level, the State, particularly the German State which negates the opposition while preserving the classes within civil society.⁴²

The class which constitutes the institutional apparatuses of the state, the bureaucracy, is charged with the task of transcending the limitations of family which remains in the private sphere, and of civil society which, albeit a public sphere, is reduced by exchange to an agglomeration of self-interested individuals and groups. Although suffused with his characteristic dialectical language, in this last great work Hegel succeeds in returning to themes first developed by Hobbes: only by surrendering their sovereignty, gained in the private sphere, to the State and the Laws can citizens achieve human freedom. As Marx notes “every particular class in Germany lacks not only the consistency, the penetration, the courage, or the ruthlessness that could stamp it as a negative representative of society. No more has any estate[class] the breadth of soul that identifies itself, even for a moment, with the soul of the nation, the geniality that inspires material might to political violence or that revolutionary daring which flings at the adversary the defiant words: I am nothing, I must be Everything (emphasis in the original).”⁴³ As one of the so-called Young Hegelians which, in addition to Marx included Arnold Ruge, Moses Hess and Max Stirner, whose obsession with Hegel’s allegory of alienation and domination defined German philosophy in the 1840s, who later inspired a flowering of anarchist thought, Marx was alone to draw the ineluctable conclusion from Hegel’s failure to resolve the political contradiction among classes, except by reproducing in the State the subordination of the proletariat to the dominant class, especially the bourgeoisie. The consequence of Hegel’s logic of negation and contradiction was, for Marx, that human emancipation is only possible through the

⁴². Hegel, G.W.F. *Philosophy of Right*, trans. by T. Knox. Oxford University Press, 1967.

⁴³. Marx, Karl. *Early Writings*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, ed. by Quentin Hoare and intro. by Lucio Colletti. Vintage Press, 1975.

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formation of a class in radical chains, a class in civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no particular right because no particular wrong but wrong generally is perpetrated against it; which can invoke no historical but only its human title;...a sphere finally which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society, and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the complete loss of man, and hence can win itself only through the complete rewinning of man. The dissolution of society as a particular estate is the proletariat.⁴⁴

Marx argues that the proletariat is a universal class because unlike all other previous classes, the outcome of its struggle is to abolish classes as such rather than to reproduce domination by achieving its own particular interest against those of others. Or, put another way, as the propertyless class whose labor which, as Hegel discovered, is the absolute condition for the production and reproduction of human life and of society, its "interest" is the abolition of private property in the ownership and control of the means of production. According to Marx what Hegel and the German "ideologists" who followed him could not envision is that the self-emancipation of the proletariat is only possible if everyone is liberated from the bondage of the wage relation and of the private mode of capital accumulation which, for Marx, is the abstract, that is, money form, of surplus labor. Although "production for the sake of production" has increased economic wealth manyfold, Marx is not so far from Aristotle's condemnation of merchants whose goal is to accumulate money. The main contradiction of capitalism is the cleavage between production as an activity of creating "use" values and its production of exchange values whose aim is not to increase the personal consumption of employers and workers but accumulation for its own sake.⁴⁵

Four years after the critique of Hegel's philosophy of politics when, in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and his collaborator Frederick Engels declare that "All History is the History of Class Struggles," they are linking two distinct concepts in all previous social theory, history and class. For philosophers from Plato through Hegel the slaves, serfs and the workers were, however subordinated by property relations, hardly capable of becoming history-makers; the two concepts were considered virtually incommensurable by those who came before them. By "history" Marx and Engels signify not only

⁴⁴. Ibid.

⁴⁵. Ibid.

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events but underlying changes in the relations of humans to nature and to each other that propel societies forward. According to the theoretical framework developed in their materialist conception of history humans organize themselves into social groups, in the first place, to effectively conduct the struggle with their external environment in order to extract their fundamental means of existence. Facing the wrath of the physical world as well as other animals they are obliged to band together and, at least in the process of production of use values, to cooperate. Human groups gain greater mastery over nature by the development of the means of production-tools, practical and theoretical knowledge of the cosmos, including the weather, how the earth yields or does not yield crops and, of course through observation of how their fellow animals and other living things negotiate their own relation to nature.⁴⁶

These ideas were developed in *The German Ideology*, written by Marx and Engels only a year after the critique of Hegel's doctrine of the state and law and *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, which developed the concept of alienation, but no longer in allegorical form, but as a philosophical anthropology of the condition of the working class and a further argument for its emancipatory task. Marx and Engels do not construct a model of historically evolved class divisions in the analogy of a biological need or of any other natural necessity. Consistent with their evolutionary perspective, they draw on Rousseau and Hegel's social theories of inequality and exploitation and on contemporary anthropological studies which show that early human societies, the hunters and gatherers, organized themselves in an egalitarian manner. Citing the American, Lewis Henry Morgan whose work among the Iroquois in New York State demonstrated a "primitive" communist community but also one based upon Mother Right rather than patriarchy, they develop a theory of historical periodization that purports to verify Locke's postulate of primitive communism at the dawn of humanity.⁴⁷ The materialist conception views humans in the context of natural history. As if to underscore this point the first material act is the physical reproduction of humans. As humans produce their livelihood by transforming nature so they produce themselves. Only after thousands of years of hunting and gathering do human groups discover the value of engaging in cultivation. From the development of agriculture we first acquire the

⁴⁶. Ibid.

⁴⁷. Ibid.

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knowledges that produce technologies of production, communications, and the means of violence. As these technologies enable groups to produce a surplus beyond their immediate needs they begin to engage in trade with others at first by barter, and, at the same time, as they recognize other groups, they develop “collective” private property. In time, through war and other means, the expansion of clans to tribes to “nations” in the ancient sense, gives rise to private property within the society. To these correspond the forms of social power and the ideas by which humans live.

The concept of class, according to Marx, signifies the development of collective or individual private property which, at a certain moment of social time, replaces a system of collective labor based on more or less equal sharing. Consequently whereas earlier groups collectively wrested from nature their means of subsistence, now the process and product of labor is “owned” by relatively exclusive groups or by individuals, and sometimes they own labor itself as slaves, the main means of production. Classes are formed in the course of struggle over the division of social production. The outcome is determined by the power of those who own “productive” property, that is, property in means of production and the means of distribution which, in turn, determines the level and the differentiation of consumption. This is the class that ordinarily rules and reinforces its rule by its monopoly over the means of violence.

Although class struggles have existed throughout history the outcome is never, or almost never, in doubt: the dispossessed lose because, even if united in opposition to those in power over the means of production, in the first place they lack force. Or, put another way, they lack the means of violence to effectively oppose and displace those who own the means of production and their retainers. But, since among the characteristic forms of their subordination none is more powerful than illiteracy, they also lack the means of generating knowledge of their social situation and the tools of communications by which to disseminate their ideas. Since humans do not live by bread alone—they have so-called spiritual as well as material needs Marx argues that the ideas about how we should live are crucial aspects of social power. The ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class. It is the class which owns productive property and extracts the “surplus” from the laborer that imposes its cosmology, the moral code, the idea of Right, the values of everyday life.⁴⁸ If articulated and

⁴⁸ Engels, Frederich and Marx, Karl. *Collected Works, 1845-1847 Volume 5, The German Ideology*. International Publishers, 1976.

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circulated, the ideas of the dispossessed are usually ignored or marginalized by those whose possession of productive property—including the means of communication—enables them to define the common sense of society.⁴⁹

Since the emergence of Aegean city-states based on slave labor about six thousand years ago, societies have been structured along the model of social hierarchy based on the labor of subordinate classes. But in each stage of human history the forms of class struggle differ according to the level of development of the productive forces—tools, skills and scientific knowledge of nature—and the specific relations between those who own the means of production and those who don't. According to Marx's historical perspective, only with the development of capitalism is the laboring class capable, by virtue of its organization by capital as collective labor, of organizing itself on a continuous basis as a major social force: At first spontaneous resistance to its expulsion from the land, its degradation by the factory system from skilled to semi-skilled labor and through protests against its immiseration and finally, through its self-organization in trade and industrial unions and the formation of its own political parties, is the working class able to contest the power of capital.

Contest for what? Not for power over the existing state in order to substitute itself for capital on the same terms as it has been subordinated. In various writings Marx is unmistakably clear that he means to bring into being communist society. But unlike early or primitive communist societies, Marx views the coming communism as emergent from capitalism itself. The argument goes something like this: With the development of large-scale industry and the concentration and centralization of capital, capitalism has already "socialized" the productive forces; in comparison to the early capitalist regimes—the society of Adam Smith and the classical economists—production and distribution are no longer dispersed in many small firms. Moreover labor is not only socialized labor in the technical sense that its products are exchanged for the products of other laborers or, indeed, that it sells its labor power as a commodity in order to reproduce itself and its family. Owing to the concentration and centralization of capital which brings labor into huge workplaces for the first time in human history labor can recognize its own exploitation, its own position in society and draw the necessary conclusions from this knowledge. In time it goes beyond contesting shares of its own labor and begins to pose the question of emancipation

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* This modern type of concentration of capital was anticipated by Marx in the 1840s.

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from the wage relation as such. At the same time capital advances towards the consolidation of its own economic and political power.⁵⁰

In the late 19th century Marx could only observe the beginnings of a high degree of capital concentration. In effect, his forecast of the erosion of competition awaited the emergence of what one of his followers, Rudolph Hilferding, termed “finance” capital—the merger of banking and industrial capital into huge, international combines that dominate the extent and rate of technological change, the markets for capital, labor and goods. Since the turn of the 20th century the tendency towards oligopoly—the control by a few large firms of markets and patents within a given industrial sector has accelerated tremendously. For example, today the world’s oil supply is essentially held by a few oil producing nations and transnational corporations with whom they are allied. There are only two commercial aircraft producing companies in the world and car corporations are merging across national borders so that a handful of transnational companies produce the lion’s share of the world’s vehicles. And, with each passing year, the global concentration of ownership and control of the latest computer mediated communications technologies in a few hands is becoming evident. For example, a recent United States government anti-trust suit against Microsoft revealed that it controls eighty five percent of the computer software industry.

What remains an obstacle to the further progress in humankind’s quest for social and economic equality and for the development of the productive forces was the private appropriation of achievements of labor, intellectual as well as manual. Marx viewed the struggle between labor and capital as inevitable. With the exception of the *Manifesto* which, after all, was a call to arms as much as an analysis of the contemporary state of affairs, his later writing was concerned with the question of whether communism, in which the means of production would be held in common by the producers was the inevitable result of the tendency of capitalism to produce ever deepening economic crises which lead to the material immiseration of a large fraction of the working class through unemployment and reduced wages. Surely, in his later writings Marx reiterated and expanded Rousseau’s critique of the state form as the means by which the contradictions in civil society could be resolved; but he did envision a “transitional” state to secure the victory of the revolution which he termed a “dictatorship of the proletariat.”⁵¹

⁵⁰. Marx, Karl. *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, ed. by C.P. Dutt. International Publishers, 3rd edition, 1977.

⁵¹. *Ibid.*

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For Marx, as for his contemporary and adversary, the anarchist intellectual and agitator, Mikhail Bakunin, there was no question of positing a permanent state, proletarian or otherwise. Marx envisioned communism as a “free association” of producers, not congealed into a conventional political party that would seize the capitalist state. *The Communist Manifesto* was written more than one hundred fifty years ago. If Marx refused to engage in utopian speculation there are indications in his works that he fully expected the first stage of communism to be forged in the near term, if not in his lifetime. In fact, during his lifetime (he died in 1883) a vital labor and socialist movement emerged in nearly all of the leading capitalist countries, including the United States, and he witnessed the Paris Commune (1871), perhaps the first instance of a (short-lived) workers democracy, he had reason for optimism that sooner than later vast epochal changes would be made.

That his concept of the transitional state of proletarian dictatorship—largely drawn from the Commune’s example—became the justification for many tyrannical regimes of social inequality and oligarchical power may be traced to the concrete circumstances of economic and cultural “backwardness” that attended their creation, as much as to the characteristic exercise of arbitrary power and brutality of their rulers. The question that arises from the miscarriage of Marx’s vision of the good society in the plethora of 20th century revolutions carried out in the name of his theory of human development has always been whether the crimes of Stalin and of lesser despots who invoked Marx as the inspiration for their perfidy can be traced to a fatal flaw in the elements of historical materialism. Some have answered by carefully separating its methodological and descriptive components from the prescriptive side, particularly the doctrines of socialism and communism. But for Marx the resolution of the class struggles under capitalism is bringing the relations of production into line with social character of the productive forces. This resolution entails a society of rough economic and social equality based on the abolition of private property in the ownership of the decisive means of production even if, according to Marx, the accumulation of surplus labor for the purposes of the further development of the productive forces remains necessary in order to shorten working hours, a condition of the full development of individuality, and provide the resources for raising living standards and universal education and health.

It is not a question of whether the new society Marx envisioned was inevitable; he almost always posed the question of the consequences that might attend the failure of the proletariat to carry out its historical “mission”

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of abolishing private ownership of productive property and hence the growing inequality arising out of it. He and many of his followers saw that “barbarism” would return if capitalism was not overturned—where the term came to mean that capital on an international scale would ignore or otherwise abrogate even the feeble constraints placed upon it by the working class and her social movements and by state regulation. In the dark corners of his later writing Marx theorized that, in the words of the philosopher Georg Lukacs “the commodity-form penetrates every corner of the social world.”⁵² If left unabated, capital could sweep before it every manifestation of economic, political and cultural autonomy, by transforming all social relations into little more than goods to be bought and sold. That we are not too far from this hideous eventuality is a leading theme of social criticism since the middle of the 20th century, but has picked up considerable steam in the last decade of state deregulation, the defeats suffered by the labor movement and the completing of the globalization process. Needless to say, as if to justify these developments the formal elements of representative democracy have spread around the globe, simultaneously, the only real freedom has become the freedom of capital to transgress national borders in order to exploit new sources of wage labor, as much as seeking raw material by scavenging hitherto pristine spaces of the earth.

Born in 1864, three years in advance of the publication of the first volume of Marx’s monumental critique of political economy, *Capital*, Max Weber was educated in the shadow of the explosion of social-democratic movements which, in Germany, were based on Marx’s ideas. Although an economist by training, as was often the case among the intellectual elite of his time, his was not a “specialist” in the late modern sense. For example, he wrote pioneering works in history, notably his early “Marxist” agrarian history of the ancient world, investigated world religions and made important contributions to the study of the origins and development of capitalism. And perhaps most significant he is honored as one of the three founders of sociology as an intellectual pursuit and an academic discipline. But however much he strayed from the pursuit of professional economics his education in the prevailing neo-classical economic doctrines, the precursor to contemporary neo-liberalism at the turn of the 20th century, infused his social theory throughout the length of his intellectual life. At the same time he was a fervently attached of the ideas of Kant, particularly the concept that scientific knowledge could not be obtained through the senses alone but

⁵² Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone. Merlin Press, 1971

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required a synthetic “method” of combining observations of the social world with theoretical hypotheses to construct ideal types against which to measure accumulated data.⁵³

Weber’s political liberalism was matched by his adherence to the idea that market relations are both the context for the development of social classes and as the best guarantor of freedom. In contrast to the tradition that asserted that the culture and politics as well as the economic relations of society were structured by class antagonisms, Weber argued that classes were formed on a contingent basis when groups sought access to goods and employment. Trade union and professional associations might demand employers respond affirmatively to their grievances and, lacking agreement, withhold their labor. In turn laborers might combine through political parties or legislative pressure to enlist the state to intervene in their behalf. Professional Associations too seek to limit the supply of intellectual labor in order to drive up its price but also to enhance their status. In the last century their main weapon to create a degree of labor scarcity was the credentialing systems of higher education and state certification through examinations. Since neo-classical theories are confident that the market, itself sensitive to the movement of supply and demand, will ultimately adapt to these demands, Weber argues that classes are not the key social category. As soon as a group attains its objectives, it tends to break apart, only to be reconstituted by other groups who seek the same advantages. So class and class conflict in industrial societies is temporally specific; moreover the effects of these specific struggles were empirically variable. No epochal changes could be inferred from them.⁵⁴

Weber did not hold that social justice would result from resolute class struggle. Its achievement was, instead, made possible by the rationalization of social life, especially the formation of bureaucratic procedures for the revindication of grievances. Like many others before and after him as a liberal he placed considerable reliance on the rule of Law to mediate and resolve social conflicts. Bureaucracy in its state form had the deficit of flattening the romance of social conflict, including workers struggles. It was a form of what might be called the “disenchantment” of history. Thus the revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries had the unintended consequence of creating the

⁵³. Weber, Max. *Economy and Society*, Volumes I and II, ed. by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. University of Calif. Press, 1978.

⁵⁴. *Ibid.*

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liberal state where faceless functionaries such as judges and administrative officials administered laws that often settled disputes between contending parties through negotiation and mediation. But for Weber who witnessed the great strikes of the turn of the 20th century and particularly the violence and devastation of world war one, opposed his own conception of the democratic constitution to the socialist revolutions in Germany, Russia and Hungary which he regarded as continuous with the irrationality that many of his generation had attributed to both the dying monarchies and their leftist opponents. For him the revolutions were made by aggressive politicians who, loudly proclaiming emancipation would, if successful, result in another repressive regime. In this regard it might be argued that Weber's liberalism—which saw no alternative to a society of individuals who face each other in a complex series of market relations—infused both his social theory and his political judgment.

Perhaps the most influential of the 20th century ideas for explaining social relations is the concept of the unconscious. According to its most important theorist, Sigmund Freud, the unconscious is the basis of our psyche and is rooted in the instinctual structure. In this respect, Freud follows the main drift of political and social thought from Plato through Hobbes to locate the “passions” in nature which, in turn are situated, in social terms, within the underlying classes. The seat of the pleasure principle, the sex drive, may be likened to the cunning of nature, a common theme in political philosophy. Political philosophers locate reason in the state and the upper reaches of society. The task of the state was to prevent the passions/drives of the lower classes from overflowing social order. As we have seen early philosophers were more explicit than later scientific thinkers like Freud about the class location of these drives. Hence the basis of the mind/body split. But it is no long stretch to note the homology between political philosophy's class discourse and Freud's theory of the psychic structure. We may understand the body as the site of turmoil, the mind as the hope for the rule of reason.

The foundation of human action, Freud held, is propelled “behind our backs” by forces over which we have only a small measure of control. Psychoanalysis may be understood as the science of the “irrational” which, according to Freud governs human actions far more than any of the products of conscious activity like law. In truth, for psychoanalysis human institutions such as religion, concepts like civilization, political ideologies and other human productions are due to the cunning, not of reason as Hegel thought, but of the unconscious whose driving force is sex. The pleasure principle or, in another locution, the id may be viewed as the suppressed proletariat of the psychic structure. In the last instance Freud believed that

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history could best be understood as the monumental struggle between the unconscious drive for pleasure and society's demand upon individuals and groups to address the vicissitudes of nature and social life through the repression or sublimation of sexuality which, if indulged, may disrupt or destroy the building and maintenance of civilized society. As he correctly understood it, if alienated labor is the condition for the reproduction of civilization, the ineluctable rebellion against it, in the first place the instinctual drives for pleasure, must be suppressed by the imposition of a repressive morality and then by coercion. Of course the best mechanism is sublimation. According to Freud only those engaged in art and science can expect to find fulfillment in the actual work they perform. The rest require religion to provide spiritual solace from society's demand for the subordination of pleasure. The activity that fulfills this demand is labor which, in the best circumstance, becomes the moral imperative of human activity even if only a few of us can truly achieve satisfaction in the content of our work.⁵⁵

Freud was not the first to discover the unconscious but, even among his colleagues and followers, most of whom remained tied to the clinical side of the new science, he was perhaps the pioneer in elaborating the ways in which the unconscious has broad social power. At the beginning of the development of psychoanalysis through often successful clinical work, he thought possible an accommodation between the demand for happiness and the inevitable demands of civilization that pleasure be subordinated in a large measure, to the rigors of labor. But, prompted by the huge sacrifice of human life during world war one Freud conceded that, lacking the means to find satisfaction in the routines of everyday life, including work, family and sexuality, humanity increasingly succumbed to its own collective destructiveness. He speculated that life itself was a struggle to harness the destructive effects of what he came to believe was the necessary work of repression of the most basic instincts. In the course of his investigations he discovered that, at best, we could achieve only a modicum of control over them. Thwarted by civilized institutions the id or libido, the core of the pleasure principle, tends to seek expression either in war and civil disorder, or death, the final triumph of pleasure.⁵⁶

For others who followed Freud's theoretical precepts, but not his political and social prognostications, the discovery of the unconscious provided

⁵⁵. Freud, Sigmund. *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. by James Strachey and intro. by Peter Gay. Norton, 1989.

⁵⁶. *Ibid.*

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hope that humans could eventually achieve rational social arrangements. Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm (until his final work), Norman O. Brown and Herbert Marcuse among others, refused Freud's "discovery" of the death instinct, nor were they resigned to the triumph of the destructive and repressive tendencies of society. Instead, while fully embracing the power of the pleasure principle and acknowledging the role of labor in building and sustaining social life, their writing may be seen as an attempt to realize the unfinished task of finding ways to achieve universal happiness, not primarily through individual therapy or social resignation but through social transformation. In agreement with Freud most of the so-called radical or left Freudians viewed labor as a problem rather than a solution, as religious and liberal thought would have it. And like Freud they focused on the distorted relationship between sex and the authoritarianism of the family. While Marcuse and other writers in the critical theory tradition were already familiar with the importance of economic relationships in shaping individual and social destinies, particularly social class, those trained in medicine and clinical psychoanalytic practice were obliged to turn their attention to the study of class in order to "complete" their grasp of the factors that influence mental pathologies. For example, they found that the place of individuals, their families and their associations in the social structure had profound influence on how they experienced the world.⁵⁷

While Freud drew many of his conclusions from a close reflection on his clinical practice, largely among middle class patients, some analysts who worked in the environment of post-war Germany of the 1920s were exposed to people suffering emotional dislocations from an assortment of social backgrounds. In order to deepen their knowledge of how different individuals and groups responded to the poverty and social chaos of the post-war world they turned to Marxism, or more precisely to historical materialism which understood history, the nature of social conflicts and such apparent "personal" problems such as health and family troubles in the perspective of the fate and struggle between social classes. If Freud joined the preponderant tendency of evolutionary theory to argue that "biology" was individual and group destiny, many of his followers came to understand that "class" was also destiny for most people. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Reich and later members of the Frankfurt School, especially Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, conjoined the struggle for class emancipation with

⁵⁷. Horkheimer, Max. "Authority and the Family" in *Critical Theory*, intro. by Stanley Aronowitz. Continuum, 1972.

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the emancipation of pleasure from the shackles imposed by patriarchal and class society. In this struggle the proletariat is at once the object of repressive sublimation in the form of what Reich called the "imposition" of a repressive sexual morality which, in Fromm's terms manifests itself in the "fear of freedom."⁵⁸

To be sure there are differences among these thinkers. After his migration to the United States Fromm largely abandoned the language of collective action and focused, conventionally, on the individual who suffers. Reich maintained that the central contradiction was the biological-energetic need for orgasmic fulfillment and society's damming up of the pathways to happiness. He argues that patriarchal capitalism, which tends towards fascism, constitutes the barrier to the essence of human happiness and identifies the working class as the subject and the object of the struggle to achieve it. Twenty years after Reich analyzed the Nazi cultural dimension and showed that the hierarchical structure of the family prepared the repressive fascist state, Marcuse adapted many of Reich's ideas to advanced industrial society. Marcuse advanced the notion of repressive desublimation, where "pseudo" pleasures are permitted within modern democratic societies, but genuine sexual fulfillment still inhabits the space of the underground. Still the bedroom remains a crucial scene of combat and, as Reich first argued, it bears close relationship to the authoritarian state, where democracy is reduced to the ritual of voting, to the militarized workplace and to consumer society which, for Marcuse is, in the wake of alienated labor and the fragmented family, the key mechanism of desublimation.⁵⁹

In the 1960s these arguments found fertile reception among radical youth who became the energy and motivators of popular social movements. Now at the tail end of a counter-revolutionary period critical psychological reflection has fallen into dispute as questions of freedom are subordinated to elementary survival and preservation of already punctured institutions of liberal democracy. What unites the Freudian left is its argument that freedom and pleasure are class issues, that is, are struggles intimately bound with the struggle against Capital.⁶⁰ That these ideas, forged more

58. Reich, Wilhelm. *Sex-Pol: Essays, 1929-1934*, ed. with an introduction by Lee Baxandall. Vintage, 1972.

59. Fromm, Erich. *Escape from Freedom*. Holt paperback, 1994.

60. Marcuse, Hebert. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Beacon Press, 1974.

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than seventy years ago, remain controversial is both a testament to their continuing challenge to all forms of authoritarianism and their relevance to the constitution of class relations in our time. For while the names may have dimmed in our collective memories there is considerable reason to insist that the confident postmodern prognostications that we have transcended scarcity and for this reason have no need for class analysis, ideological flags and utopias are premature, to say the least.

CLASS AND POLITICAL THEORY TODAY

In the wake of the rise of Stalinism as the leading form of “really existing” socialism and the perceived integration—“territorialization”—of the working classes of advanced capitalist societies, political philosophy since World War Two has, in the main, drifted toward endless disquisitions on the limits and possibilities of representative, liberal democracy. At the level of perception the labor question has faded, if not disappeared in political and social theory in proportion, as the main sites of material production have shifted from the global North to the global South and the composition of the labor force in industrial production has gradually shifted from manual to intellectual and administrative labor. As capitalism has entered its epoch of global interdependence, any discerning observer must conclude that the working class has not disappeared; it has been recomposed and deterritorialized. Recomposed within advanced industrial societies from the predominance of manual labor to, on the one hand, a vastly expanded technical intelligentsia that leads industrial production as far as it concerns those aspects of the economy that engage in the functions of design, development and distribution; and, on the other, to a plethora of low-wage factory and service jobs, most of which carry no benefits and no security. “Deterritorialization” refers chiefly to the exclusion of increasing numbers and sectors of workers from the legal framework within which production, distribution and services occur. The emergence of an informal or underground economy, a symptom of what has been described as “Post-Fordism”—the disarticulation of mass production from mass consumption—places many workers at the margins of the prevailing system. Those who remain at the centers of industrial production are, in the main, desperately fighting to retain their niches, even as the largest industrial corporations cut the ground from under their feet. Material production has been partially displaced to what has come to be known as the developing or postcolonial world of former colonies and semi-colonies; which, after World War Two, gained formal political independence, even as they remained in the political and economic thrall of the

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metropolitan countries and transnational corporations. I say “partially” displaced for, contrary to the received wisdom about globalization, the United States and Western Europe, however diminished in their domination of the worldwide production of goods, retain control of the terms of distribution and investment in important sectors of production and of the general economy. For example, the Big Three auto companies have invested considerable capital in Mexico and Southeast Asia, even as capital flight has afflicted many US Northeast and Midwest cities; while Japanese and European car companies have established an impressive number of assembly plants in the Southern and border states of the US, almost always on a non-union basis. While the number of goods-producing workers in the car industry has shrunk, this reduction is due as much to the introduction of computer-mediated technologies as it is to offshore outsourcing. But flexible specialization (just in time production) dictates that parts be produced near assembly plants, a technology that limits offshoring. Much of parts production is increasingly non-union, but even when unionized these jobs offer wages and benefits below the standards established over many years. US steel output no longer leads, instead having given way to China, but the industry produces as much tonnage as it did twenty five years ago when the migration of steel production began. Similarly one of the two leading global aircraft producing corporations, Boeing, has its main facilities in the United States, although employment has plummeted because of technological innovation and increasing outsourcing off-shore. The highly automated oil and chemical refining sectors are still here, although imports have increased, but only because the big oil corporations refuse to build new refineries, and technological transformation has reduced workforces by six or seven hundred percent. Appliances are still produced in the United States and so is electrical machinery. And a myriad of small and medium sized “niche” producers have survived the bleeding of industrial sectors and provide many production jobs. What the United States has lost is the bulk of its textile, apparel, and consumer electronics industries; the sum of which were once the leading source of industrial jobs and accounted for a substantial portion of the service industries as well.

Political and social theory has pronounced, in one account, these transformations as the “coming of post-industrial society” (Daniel Bell), a term which entails the definitive eclipse of one of the most striking features of modernity, the emergence of a vast industrial working class whose institutions—unions and political parties—once constituted the heart of the era of social reform within a framework of representative democratic governmentality. But Bell’s retreat from class analysis is only one of many: the oldest

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post-War version of American Exceptionalism, the doctrine of political pluralism, still dominates political theory. Even as its leading proponent, Robert Dahl, owing to observations of growing social inequality, partially reversed his own 1950s exercise in the American celebration, most of political philosophy and political theory remained ensconced in the premises of consensus rather than conflict in their descriptions of American social and political life. Perhaps the most celebrated alternative view is that of John Rawls who, in his *Theory of Justice*, calls attention to the persistence of economic inequality within the pluralist framework. While refusing any move to challenge the institution of productive private property as an explanatory category of inequality, Rawls advocates a measure of distributive justice that would allay the widening gap between rich and poor, an indication of an increasingly polarized society in which the “middle class” (in income terms) is rapidly suffering economic erosion, even when it has not entirely disappeared. Despite his gesture towards recognizing class inequality, Rawls shrinks from drawing *structural* lessons from its ubiquity and, in the modern liberal tradition of “tinkering” rather than opting for radical transformation, he contents himself with offering a new series of palliatives.

Now, in the wake of the decline of interest in the labor question—and general disillusionment with not only prospects for fundamental change in the social and economic system, but also with its desirability—most have accepted the permanence of capitalism and agreed that, while representative democracy is imperfect, it remains preferable to authoritarianism, an evaluation that is little more than a version of the doctrine of the lesser evil. For, what political theory has learned from the collapse of the Soviet Union—indeed world Communism—is that socialism was always identical to its regimes. Consequently, since class has been reduced and, for some, disappeared as a world-historical force, many Western political theorists have, openly or tacitly, embraced political pluralism as an adequate description of contemporary political power. Else, how to account for the pervasive preoccupation in mainstream political theory and philosophy with correcting some of the egregious features of representative democracy? We are speaking of the tendency to oligarchy in the executive branch manifested in a pervasive lack of transparency in government operations; in the name of the war on terror, widespread surveillance of citizens; corruption, even in parliamentary systems; and, for the self-proclaimed radical democrats, the decline of citizen participation in political decision-making in late capitalist societies, even where voting rates remain relatively high. (Of course, in the United States where, for national elections, voter participation has not reached 60% in two generations and off-year congressional and local

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elections the rates are much lower, even the ritual is in jeopardy.) Hence the enthusiasm among a relatively wide swath of political commentators for the Obama phenomenon. In the United States, political philosophers sometimes bemoan our winner-take-all system and suggest that some version of proportional representation would broaden political representation, but have as yet failed to offer specific proposals to achieve this goal.

But the dominant tendency on the left, broadly conceived to include critical liberals, is made of various sorts of postmodern politics. It bears recalling that postmodernism renounces the totality as an intellectual framework; and it also renounces the subject-object dialectic, whose political expression is the revolutionary proletariat or in a more contemporary version a new overlapped *historic* bloc of workers, women, racialized minorities and fractions of the professional/managerial class. In its political version, postmodern politics abjures the rhetoric and organizational forms of systemic change: if socialism, then it simply signifies an ethical ideal; if not, against its will, left postmodern political philosophy revives a version of Bernsteinism, that is, it has reverted to the belief that the movement is everything, the goal nothing. For left postmodern philosophers, like Sheldon Wolin, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, “radical” democracy signifies a shift from the modern political parties and their class-based constituencies to “new” social movements based on identities—among them, race, sex, ethnicity.

And then there is the figure of Antonio Negri and his collaborator, Michael Hardt. Although they retain the fundamental proposition of historical materialism that society is divided into antagonistic classes, the subalterns are described, following a suggestion of Spinoza, as the “multitude,” whose location, both spatially and historically, remains indefinite with respect to economic, political and cultural relations.. Moreover, after decades of advocating “workers power” in contrast to reformist socialist and communist movements, Negri remains vague on the basic issue of political organization, possibly because the experience of parties in the Italian context has been tragic, when not outright farcical. In fact, the practices of those who are inspired by his writing must be counted in the post-modern camp insofar as their politics remain, to put it in Sheldon Wolin's terms, “fugitive” and mainly local. Others, like Frances Fox Piven, walk a line between a perspective of protest and resistance characteristic of social movements and a close ideological affiliation with the progressive wing of the United States Democratic Party; and this being the case, they are hostile to proposals suggesting that the two-party duopoly and their respective ties to Big Capital is

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bankrupt and needs to be challenged by an independent electoral force. Finally, there are progressive and conservative versions of communitarianism, a political philosophy associated with Alisdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel and Amitai Etzioni. This philosophy deplores the fragmentation of mass society and postmodern life and, in its stead, offers a program of the beloved community as the best guarantee of democratic participation, accompanied by a quasi religious creed of mutual recognition and mutual aid. Of course, the political unconscious of the communitarians suppresses the class/race basis of the community. On the contrary, some argue that the community enjoys the right to set its own rules of inclusion and exclusion, an unintentional invitation to segregation, especially along racial lines.

It may be argued that much of contemporary political philosophy presupposes: a) a distinctly Western (Northern) orientation with respect to class. Ignored is the explosive expansion of the proletariat in the developing world, the mounting evidence of strikes, demonstrations and riots in China and India, the growing political instability of many African countries many of whose economies have entered free-fall and where ethnic conflicts displace class relations, and the open class-based revolt against capital in the Global South, notably Latin America where once stable political regimes have been toppled and new forces struggle to forge an alternative. b) a positivist view of politics and agencies—pluralist and “radical” democratic philosophies, excepting Negri and Wolin, have failed to analyze the enormous concentration of economic and political power in the global North and have absolutely no conception of the recomposition of class and other social forces. In sum they have not absorbed the contributions of social theory. c) Liberal political philosophy, in addition, has refused to undertake a reevaluation of state theory. In this connection, the work of Nicos Poulantzas, Bob Jessop, Giovanni Arrighi, and, more recently, Peter Bratsis, among others, is almost totally ignored. They have even failed to address the provocative critique of the liberal state offered by Carl Schmitt, whose work hoists liberalism on its own petard by calling into question the assumption of consensus as an empirical description of late capitalist states. As a result, the presupposition of most contemporary political philosophy is the liberal state, a hangover from 17th century political philosophy. It is no exaggeration to remark that we are witnessing the eclipse of the imagination in contemporary bourgeois political theory and philosophy. Always prone to substitute morality for sharp analysis, the most egregious tendency today is the absence of a fundamental theoretical framework for understanding the contemporary world. Instead, as in John Rawls' influential theory of distributive justice, we are treated to a series of prescriptions for making the division of the

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economic surplus slightly more equitable, but on the basis of the doctrine that private property, and therefore class privilege, is inviolate.

Needless to say, class theory is in need of significant rethinking and revision. Elsewhere, I have offered a new theory of class based on the concepts of power and the historicity of classes as a framework. If power is the referent, then in any historical moment formations that are deprived of power over the conditions of economic, political and social life constitute, in varying degrees, a "class." Conversely, holders of the main productive property (finance capital today) in alliance with fractions of the national and global political directorates constitute the ruling class. Since the composition of both main classes is entwined with their temporality, it does no good to remain faithful to the configuration of social forces as they existed, say, in 1848 or even 1948. One must perform a concrete analysis for our own time, taking into account the changes that have forced a realignment of class forces. It follows that the key agents of contestation of perhaps a half century ago may now still contest power, but at a different level and with differential effectivity. But mine is only one contribution to the project of theorizing and historicizing class in political philosophy. For those who adhere to the project of fundamental social transformation, there is no more urgent task than to enrich class theory.

BACK TO ARISTOTLE

The main defect of mass representative democracy is its flawed conception of citizenship. Let us recall Walter Lippmann's less than rueful statement that the electorate should act exclusively as a veto over the sometimes irresponsible decisions of the bureaucratic elite. In Lippmann's scenario, ordinary citizens are better left to their banal lives and awakened only periodically. Needless to say, this formulation is not merely a prescription, it describes the state of political being. Politically, the individual citizen has been removed from history; and, to the degree that classes and movements accede to the prevailing political system, they too have, at best, the right to say "no" in the forms of protest and resistance. But, in their fragmented situation, they cannot reach for the "not yet" of an alternative, revolutionary future. The ritual of voting all but sets the boundary of political participation in contemporary societies; the process of governance is almost completely delegated to the vocation of politics and perhaps more saliently to the top experts: economists, professional bureaucrats, officials recruited from the top financial and industrial corporations and, occasionally, from the elite

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professoriate, who rotate from government service to the corporate board room, and the veritable army of capital's lobbyists. Various writers, especially the communitarians, have attempted to revive the fabled New England town meeting, where almost all decisions affecting the community were/are made in a face-to face-assembly, which John Dewey advocated in the 1920s. Many have said that the slogan "small is beautiful" remains a romantic projection of the frustration shared by many critics, but that it cannot serve as a practical program of reform. Yet, if the size remains so large that people cannot grasp, conceptually as well as in practice, the totality of decisions that constitute our polity, then any political philosophy that seeks to overcome the deeply disabled governance structures that dominate our corporate-dominated liberal capitalist reality must address the oligarchic character of its massive size or renounce the search for genuine democracy. Proposals such as those advanced by Kirkpatrick Sale, Murray Bookchin and others would dismantle the huge national and global markets and create "human scale" regional economies that grow their own food, produce their own clothes and many other products on a subsistence basis, and also devise new forms of exchange that replace money and largely renounce planetary economic interdependence. In this context, they would, as well, create manageable structures of governance that depend on instituting direct democratic structures, such as town and regional meetings.

But most ideas that have been advanced to overcome the deficits of mass politics and global economics circumvent what Aristotle understood to be central to the problem of governmentality: genuine participation in every self-governance requires the individual to have time away from the burdens of necessary labor. As Marx argued, freedom presupposes that society distinguish industrial time from autonomous time for the self-development of the individual, a self development that literally creates the individual who, in capitalist society, remains an ideological concept. If everyday life is liberated for most of the day from the labor needed to provide for basic material needs, questions of politics as well as education and art may be widely shared among the citizenry. And in terms of our present concern, the absolute precondition for the creation of a democratic polity is a drastic reduction of hours devoted to earning a living.

Many have called attention to the speeding up of everyday life. Intellectuals as well as other categories of labor are plagued with work without end. Intellectuals, proclaimed by Gramsci as key actors in the struggle for hegemony, have become de facto technicians of the existing setup. Their

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interventions are sporadic and, for the most part, they have been subsumed under the career imperatives of the system. Technical and scientific workers, professors, and those engaged in the tasks of running organizations find themselves taking their mostly-administrative work home, staying late most nights at the office or laboratory. When they return home, if their male partners do not share housework and childrearing, women are hit with the double shift; in the interest of advancing their careers or earning more money than their salaries allow, professionals take on extra jobs or administrative tasks or squander their creative activities on work which serves the organization, but has little lasting value.

We are reminded that self-organization and self-governance requires a considerable amount of unencumbered time. And, our encumbrances are not confined to workplace tasks, whether performed at a factory or office or at home. We are encumbered by the vicissitudes of a severely privatized everyday life. Raising children, performing housework, shopping, paying bills are activities that weigh upon an ever-shriveling family unit.

In the cities and suburbs, we have lost touch with collective living; even its concept evades the imagination. Child-care has become commodified and for most parents frightfully expensive. Even publicly-financed after-school programs are routinely reduced or eliminated; and wherever the state provides for child care, rigorous poverty-line income constraints prevent most working-class and professional people from qualifying. Mass democracy and its concomitant creation of a self-valorized oligarchy is the result of the ability of capital and the state to impose a labor regimen that, with the exception of a few hours a week, gobbles up all or most of the time available to workers, professionals and almost everybody else. The struggle for the shorter work day was linked to these considerations, but when the labor movement and its constituents literally bought into consumerism, the prevailing wage was never enough and gave rise to crippling personal and collective debt.

Aristotle argued that the sole consideration of those possessing time unencumbered by necessary labor meant the exclusion of the bulk of the Athenian population from citizenship. In this respect, the outcomes of both the French and the Russian revolution carried on the tradition of exclusion. Amidst the praise for liberal democracy in most societies where liberal-democracy prevails, citizenship is, to a large extent, restricted to the ritual of voting; civil society, in which ordinary people congregated in cafes or in the town square to debate issues affecting the entire community, is increasingly "ideological"—by which I mean, it has been relegated to nostalgia, to

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a past that never really existed, except in very specific geographic and temporally narrow instances, notably some large cities of Germany and France and small towns of New England. Unless we create forms of organization that assert the primacy of the struggle for reducing hours of paid labor, we can never resolve the 2500 year old problematic that plagues all political philosophy. That is, must we capitulate to the notion that democracy is inevitably for the few, or will we create a situation in which the individual emerges as the subject of history?