

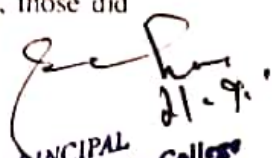
MARXIST THEORY OF CLASS

Class, for Marx, is defined as a (social) relationship rather than a position or rank in society. In Marx's analysis, the capitalist class could not exist without the proletariat, or vice-versa. The relationship between classes is a contradictory or antagonistic relationship, one that has struggle, conflict, and contradictory interests associated with it. The structure and basis of a social class may be defined in objective terms, as groups with a common position with respect to property or the means of production. However, Marx may not be primarily interested in this definition of class. Rather, these classes have meaning in society and are historical actors only to the extent that they do act in their own interests, and in opposition to other classes. Unlike much other sociology, Marx's classes are defined by class conflict.

The concept of class poses profound problems for theory and practice. This is true across the academic disciplines and in the confused incoherence around "class issues" when concepts of class surface in economic, political and cultural discourses. Ever since ancient Greece, many people analyzing societies have used that concept of class *defined in terms of owned wealth and/or income* to think, speak or write about social problems and to undertake actions for their solutions.

The social distribution of property is not identical to the social distribution of power. In any society, the individuals and subgroups who own the most property may or may not wield the most power, and so on. Periodically in human history, social revolutions took "class" seriously. Revolutionaries then undertook to change a society's class structure as a key, necessary component of the social transformation they sought. These transformations can be summarized as establishing equality and democracy.

Marx was one who asked such questions. In producing his answer Marx generated another new and different concept of class even as he also made frequent use of the ancient property and power concepts of class inherited from previous generations of revolutionaries. Marx believed that those generations had not achieved their basic goals of equality and democracy because they had not understood a basic process in all societies that had worked to undermine their revolutionary projects. Because they did not understand and transform that process, their revolutionary projects failed. Even when their revolutions did achieve significant and socially progressive changes in property and power distributions, those did


21-9-
PRINCIPAL
Dhruva Chand Halder College
P.O.- D. Barua, P.S.- Jaganpur
South 24 Parganas, Pin- 743372

not progress to the levels of equality and democracy they had hoped and worked for. Often, the progressive changes they achieved could not be sustained beyond a few years.


Even though Marx devoted much of his life to the research and exposition of his new surplus conception of class, many readers and followers since have missed the originality of his new and different concept. They read his work instead as if it were an important new application of the old property and power concepts of class to analyzing capitalism. That is indeed one of Marx's contributions.

Class, for Marx, refers to how, in production, a surplus gets produced. All human societies produce such surpluses. However, societies differ in how they organize the production and distribution of this surplus. In Marx's view, there have always been subsets of populations in communities (from families through villages to whole nations) that have performed labor in the production of goods and services. Those subsets have always produced more output than they themselves consumed: the "surplus" output or simply the surplus. That surplus has then been distributed to other persons inside or outside the community.

His earlier pre-Marxian concepts of class (qua property or power distributions) had no place for such a surplus concept of class. When those pre-Marxian concepts were applied to understand and/or transform societies, the results were class analyses that did not recognize, know, or use the surplus concept. Capitalist exploitation negates social movements toward egalitarianism. The exploitation makes production a conflict-ridden tension between the worker and the employer. The former's self-interest leads to demands for higher wages – to enhance and secure his/her standard of living – in exchange for the labour performed.

Aspects of the capitalist class structure and of class-qua-surplus as a concept become clearer when applied to a non-capitalist class structure and, in particular, to the communist class structure as envisioned by Marx. The difference between the two class structures is simple and straightforward. Communist class structures are defined by the absence of exploitation. The producers and appropriators of the surplus in a communist class structure are the exact same people, whereas in the capitalist class structure, they are different people.

The class-qua-surplus analysis of income is simple and straightforward. An individual obtains income by being a performer of surplus labor (and therefore paid a wage or salary for that performance) and/or by being a recipient of distributions of the surplus. The capitalist is merely a middle-person, someone who appropriates the surplus and then distributes it.

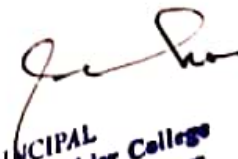

PRINCIPAL
Dhruva Chand Halder College
P.O.- D. Baranati, P.S.- Jajpur
Gandi 24 Parganas, Pin- 743372

For Marx, the analysis of social class, class structures and changes in those structures are key to understanding capitalism and other social systems or modes of production. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels comment that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Analysis of class divisions and struggles is especially important in developing an understanding of the nature of capitalism. For Marx, classes are defined and structured by the relations concerning (i) work and labour and (ii) ownership or possession of property and the means of production. These economic factors more fully govern social relationships in capitalism than they did in earlier societies.

Elite is not necessarily a class for Marx. Examples of elites are military elites, priests or religious leaders, and political elites – these may be very powerful and oppressive, and may exercise formal rule at a certain time or place. An elite could form a class, but a political or military elite is not necessarily a class – an elite may be based on recruitment (rather than ownership) and may not have much ultimate say in determining the direction of society. At several points, Marx notes how the class defines itself, or is a class only as it acts in opposition to other classes.

Co-ordinator M. Mandal.


PRINCIPAL
Dhruva Chand Halder College
P.O.- D. Barant, P.S.- Jaganpur
South 24 Parganas, Pin- 743372