CLASS AND CLASS CONFLICT IN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

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PART ONE

The Marxian Doctrine in the Light of Historical Changes and Sociological Insights

I

Karl Marx's Model of the Class Society

THE SOCIAL ETYMOLOGY OF THE CONCEPT OF CLASS

The concept of class has never remained a harmless concept for very long. Particularly when applied to human beings and their social conditions it has invariably displayed a peculiar explosiveness. The logician runs no risk in distinguishing "classes" of judgments or categories; the biologist need not worry about "classifying" the organisms with which he is concerned—but if the sociologist uses the concept of class he not only must carefully explain in which of its many meanings he wants it to be understood, but also must expect objections that are dictated less by scientific insight than by political prejudice. As Lipset and Bendix have stated: "Discussions of different theories of class are often academic substitutes for a real conflict over political orientations" (55, p. 150).[1]

We shall have to show where this impermissible and unfortunate confusion of judgments of fact and value originates in this case, and we shall have to find ways and means to weld the concept and theory of class into useful tools of sociological analysis without evaluative overtones. However, for the time being we have to resign ourselves to the fact that using the concept of class may cause misunderstandings of many kinds.

Evaluative shifts of meaning have accompanied the concept of class throughout its history. When the Roman censors introduced the word *classis* to divide the population into tax groups, they may not have anticipated the eventful future of this category. Yet even their classification implied at least the possibility of evaluative distinctions: on the one end of their classification were the *assidui*, who might well be proud of their 100,000 *as*; on the other end were the *proletarii*, whose only "property" consisted in their numerous offspring—*proles*—and who were outdone only by the *lumpenproletariat* of the *capite censi*, those counted by their heads. Just as the American term "in-

[1] Figures in parentheses refer to the corresponding numbers in the bibliography at the end of the volume.

come bracket," although originally no more than a statistical category, touches upon the most vulnerable point of social inequality, it was true for the *classes* of ancient Rome that they divided the population into more than statistical units. "The movie was classy," teen-agers say, meaning "high-class," "first-class." Similarly, to say that some Roman was *classis* or *classicus* meant that he belonged to the *prima classis*, to the upper class—unless he was explicitly described as a "fifth-class" proletarian. Since Gellius we know the adjective *classicus* in its application to "first-class" artists and works of art, a usage which survives in our word "classical" and was eventually related to the authors of the term themselves and their times: they lived in "classical" antiquity.

When more recently sociologists remembered the word, they naturally gave it a slightly different connotation. Initially the word "class" was used—for example, by Ferguson (2) and Millar (15) in the eighteenth century—simply to distinguish social strata, as we should say today, by their rank or wealth. In this sense the word "class" can be found in all European languages in the late eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century the concept of class gradually took on a more definite coloring. Adam Smith had already spoken of the "poor" or "labouring class." In the works of Ricardo and Ure, Saint-Simon and Fourier, and of course in those of Engels and Marx the "class of capitalists" makes its appearance beside the "labouring class," the "rich" beside the "poor class," the "bourgeoisie" beside the "proletariat" (which has accompanied the concept of class from its Roman origins). Since this particular concept of social class was first applied in the middle of the nineteenth century, its history has been as eventful as that of the society for which it was designed. However, before we embark on a critical journey through this history it appears useful to survey the meaning and significance of the "classical" concept of class as it was formulated by Karl Marx.

CONSEQUENCES OF INDUSTRIALIZATION

"The history of the working class in England begins with the last half of the past [eighteenth] century, with the invention of the steam engine and the machines for manufacturing cotton," wrote the young Engels in 1845 (1, p. 31). With the industrial revolution also, the history of the concept of class as a tool of social analysis began. Earlier, the concepts of "class" and "rank" could be interchanged as by Ferguson and Millar; indeed, that of "rank" could be preferred. The superficial observer at least was above all struck by "distinctions of rank"

in late feudal society.[2] In the emerging industrial society, however, rank and social position gave way to much cruder distinctions. As capital, property became transformed from a symbol of rank to an instrument of power growing steadily in strength and effectiveness. Much as nobility and small independent peasants might resent it, both became witnesses and victims of the disappearance of an old and the emergence of a new social order, before which all well-tried categories of understanding and explanation failed.

The history of the industrial revolution and its immediate consequences is too well known to be repeated here. However, one aspect of this history appears essential for our discussion. Wealth and poverty, domination and subjection, property and propertylessness, high and low prestige—all these were present before the industrial revolution as afterward. Thus it might appear as if all the industrial revolution effected was to replace old social strata by new ones: landowners and nobility by capitalists, laborers and small peasants by proletarians. This presentation, however, not only is oversimplified but overlooks the revolutionary character of the changes which accompanied industrialization. The difference between the early stages of industrial society in Europe and its historical predecessor was not just due to a change in the personnel of social positions; it was due above all to the simultaneous abolition of the system of norms and values which guaranteed and legitimized the order of preindustrial society. The "distinctions of rank" in preindustrial societies of even the eighteenth century rested as much on a myth of tradition, an intricate system of age-old, often codified rights and duties, as on the comparatively crude gradations of property, power, and prestige. Preindustrial society, of course, had also had its beginnings. Its claim to the legitimacy of the present was also a product of history or, perhaps, an ideology. Yet when it was hit by the revolution of industry, this society had an order endowed by the patina of centuries with a special claim to legitimacy and a special solidity. The power of the landlord was not based on his having money, land, or prestige, but on his being a

[2] Of course, Ferguson and Millar understood by "rank" by no means only what we call "prestige" today. In fact, Millar's formulation sounds surprisingly "modern": "According to the accidental differences of wealth possessed by individuals, a subordination of ranks is gradually introduced, and different degrees of power and authority are assumed without opposition, by particular persons, or bestowed upon them by the personal voice of the society." The difference indicated above and caused by the industrial revolution is rather a difference of perspective, which may be expressed by the terms "estate" and "class."

landlord as his fathers had been for time immemorial. The conditions of the master craftsman, his journeymen and apprentices, and even that of the laborer resembled that of the landlord in their legitimation by the authority of tradition. In this sense, preindustrial society was what contemporary sociologists like to call, with a somewhat doubtful expression, a "relatively static social order" (cf. Cox 40, p. 467).

Precisely these features were eliminated by the industrial revolution.[3] Surprisingly soon it created—to begin with, in England—two rapidly growing new strata, those of entrepreneurs and workers. There was no "precedent" for either, even if in England the Poor Laws mixed the old and the new poor in the same way the Crown mixed the old and the new aristocracy. Both these strata, "bourgeoisie" and "proletariat," which had grown up together and were tied to each other, had no tradition of rank, no myth of legitimacy, no "prestige of descent" (to quote Max Weber). They were characterized solely by the crude indices of possession and nonpossession, of domination and subjection. Industrial capitalists and laborers had no "natural," no traditional, unity as strata. In order to gain it, they had to stabilize and create their own traditions. They were, so to speak, *nouveaux riches* and *nouveaux pauvres*, intruders in a system of inherited values and messengers of a new system. And for these strata, bare of all traditions and differentiated merely by external, almost material criteria, the concept of "class" was first used in modern social science. In the analysis of these strata this concept became a sociological category. It is significant that in conversational German the word "class" is even today confined to the two strata of entrepreneurs and workers. Neither the nobility nor the professions nor the older groups of craftsmen and peasants are called classes. They are "estates"—a concept which in the case of the "middle estate" (*Mittelstand*) has been retained even for the newer groups of white-collar workers and civil servants.[4] An estate, however, is something else than a stratum or

[3] A schematic sketch like the one attempted here obviously ignores local differences as well as the gradual character of the emergence of industrial societies. All social historians of industrial development—from Weber (189) and Sombart (28), Tawney (187), and the Hammonds (175) to Bendix (138) and Jantke (178) in recent years—emphasize the gradual breakdown of the traditions of agrarian society. Concentration on the imaginary point of an "industrial revolution" can be justified only by the analytical purpose of these introductory remarks.

[4] The significance of this German usage is of course only partly open to generalization. While on the one hand it documents the thesis here advanced about the historical context of the concept of class, it testifies on the other hand to the continued