

The Contemporaneity of Class Relations

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‘Class’ is a fiendishly complex and dynamic concept. This is of course true for those working with and through class explicitly, but perhaps even more so for those of us working on social issues in general. We often hear talk of ‘the’ working class, ‘the’ middle classes, or indeed ‘the’ capitalist class, which can give the impression that they are pre-determined, even static, categories; or that their very nature is something inherited, passed down from one generation to the next, and that perhaps they come with certain guarantees – particularly in relation to political identity and electoral politics.

This last point is a lesson the current UK Labour Party are themselves having to relearn, as the 2019 General Election saw ‘more low-income voters [back] the Conservatives than Labour for the first time ever’ (Blakely 2020). In reifying ‘the’ various class categories – rendering them immutable, abstracting their practical nature, and ascribing them agency – it is easy to lose sight of what they actually are, which is historically contingent groupings of social relations; they describe real people living antagonistically in the world together.

Each class category is itself filled with all manner of contradictions, mounting tensions, and increasing complexity, not least as they encompass and overlap with intersectional concerns such as gender and race. The great theorist of class struggle, Karl Marx, was himself guilty of this simple presentation of the classes as autonomous categories. In his economic writings in particular, Marx’s use of abstraction often results in somewhat ‘flat’ versions or presentations of what are messy and chaotic material social realities under the capitalist system.¹ However, this can be attributed to his dialectical method, which, as he described it, entailed ‘rising from the abstract to the concrete’ (Marx 1973, 34). Readers of Marx will be familiar with his method, which is how he framed his analysis of capitalist political economy as distinct from the approach of bourgeois economists such as David Ricardo and Adam Smith; for him social analysis began with the simplest and most abstract definition of a concept, building up and out to the complexity of concrete reality, not the other way around.

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In her book *Capital is Dead. Is This Something Worse?* media and cultural theorist McKenzie Wark encourages us to confront the notion of class anew in the context of an emerging mode of production. Admittedly, this short post is neither the place for a review of Wark’s book or a

¹ In the political writings on the other hand, not least in *The Communist Manifesto*, it is clear to see Marx’s idea of class, and especially the working class, as a relation defined by its struggle against capital.

detailed excursus on what constitutes class today (for those interested in the former, check out Mark Steven's thorough review). However, the book centres around what for some seems to be a radical thought experiment: that capitalism has been rendered historical and the economic-structural reality of today is worse (Wark 2019, 26). That such an idea could be construed as radical leaves Wark in a state of bewilderment – bewildered: not because a particular group of people with vested interests actively want capitalism to go on forever, but because it appears to be generally accepted on either side of the political divide that it will. For Wark, such a perspective evidences a desire to stay with Marx in the context of his historical moment, that of the mid-nineteenth century, rather than confronting the conditions of our own situation. Wark's directive is not to move away from Marx per se—in whom she finds much contemporary use evidenced in her wider writings—but to carry out his project as it applies to the historical specificity of the day. That is, 'to understand the situation of [our] times from the labour point of view' (Wark 2019, 30).

The antagonistic relation Wark proposes in the book is not between worker and capitalist (at least not in those terms) but between that of the hacker class and the vectoralist class. 'Hackers' are an emergent—that is, historically specific—form of labourer distinct from agrarian and industrial workers and are chiefly responsible for producing new information. 'Information' in this context is not necessarily understood in its historically recent definition as denoting computational data or technology. Instead, it refers to a broader notion of heterogeneous types of intellectual output that permeate the present political economy (Wark 2019, 48). The occupants that constitute the hacker class include the artist, the engineer, the scientist, the designer, and so on, all of whom are tasked with the perpetual production of novel products of the imagination.

As Wark puts it, 'The workplace nightmare of the worker is having to make the same thing, over and over, against the pressure of the clock; the workplace nightmare of the hacker is to produce different things, over and over, against the pressure of the clock.' (Wark 2019, 43) And those with whom the hackers mount their struggle, the vectoralist class, are a group who do not so much own the 'traditional' forces of production—such as machinery and buildings—but take control of the 'vectors' of information, Wark's abstraction for the infrastructure through and on which information is stored and travels. Vectoralists are not the traditionally suited-and-booted 'personification of capital itself', as Marx once described the capitalist. Rather, their archetypal form is that of the Silicon Valley CEO, who has traded the suit for jeans and New Balance sneakers—think Google's Sergey Brin or (of course) Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg.

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Capital is Dead is a useful text for a number of reasons. The first, as I have touched upon above and pick up again below, is the way it highlights 'class' as a concept that is always in the making. As material conditions evolve and take new form, so too do social relations. The second

point that will take some development but can nevertheless be hinted towards here is what I want to describe as the ‘contemporaneity of class relations’. Wark doesn’t frame her discussion in these terms, but she does highlight the coexistence of a number of class relations that come together in the present: ‘Modes of production co-exist and interact’, she writes (Wark 2019, 7). For me, rather than pointing to a new periodisation either of or after capitalism, this observation contributes to the discussion of what has come to be called ‘contemporaneity’—a term that describes the condition of the historical present as a site constituted by the global interconnectedness of multiple types of time and temporality, the experience of which is registered in the times of people’s lives (see Osborne 2018). Coexisting modes of production and their accompanying class relations, in other words, signal the coexistence of historical forces in the present—conditions that developed along distinct trajectories.

While the critical conception of contemporaneity has been taken up time and again in the art world, philosophy, and political theory over the last decade or so, it has received relatively scant attention in social, and less so in sociological, research. But as a nuanced way of understanding historical forces as they manifest in the present, contemporaneity provides the imperative for researchers to confront concepts in the present not as static categories but as emergent, relational, and contingent. The ‘sociological imagination’ is very good for synchronic analysis – cutting through the social constitution of (perhaps, arrested) concepts in the present to reveal their anatomy – but possibly at the expense of conceiving them as historical and dynamic phenomena.

As I highlighted in the opening paragraph, this is what happens when ‘class’ is reified, treated as a fixed category. Thinking through notions of class today, we must recognise our interventions become bound up in the messy process of social lives in the making. Our working definitions of class should always be on the move. As Wark (2019, 42) puts it, ‘Starting with what may be emerging provides a suitable derangement of the senses, a giddy hint that all that was solid is melting into air.’

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