

Why Class Struggle Is Central

BY Ellen Meiksins Wood

THE QUESTION WE'RE dealing with—and let's not forget this—is the *centrality*, not exclusivity, of class. To the question "is class central?" my answer is that there are two distinct questions involved.

1) Assuming that socialism is our objective, is class politics central to the struggle for socialism?

2) *Should* socialism be our objective, or should we be talking about other, perhaps more comprehensive, emancipatory projects?

Both of these questions presuppose that there must be some connection between *objectives* and the *agencies* for achieving them.

Question 1:

If socialism is our objective, is class central? The answer would seem self-evident. If the core of socialism is the abolition of class exploitation and its replacement by a classless organization of production by the direct producers, and more immediately the abolition of capitalist exploitation, then presumably the socialist project has something *centrally* to do with the emancipation of the specific class whose exploitation defines capitalism.

Questions can be raised about exactly who constitutes that class, and about the specific means by which the people who constitute it will be motivated and organized to prosecute their struggle to the end; but there can't, surely, be much doubt that the class whose exploitation is the target of the socialist struggle has both the most immediate stake and the most strategic location in that struggle.

What, then, have been the grounds for denying the so-called "privileged" (i.e. special and central) position of the working class, and of class politics, in the struggle for socialism?

Elaborate theoretical constructions have been devoted to establishing the *autonomy* of ideology and politics from class, in order to justify the expulsion of class politics from the center of the socialist struggle. These theoretical constructions come down to some fairly simple propositions, and one very large conceptual leap.

The argument can be reduced basically to this: Many workers are not socialists, some even support Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher. To this might be added the observation that there are many socialists who aren't workers; and in any case, a lot of political education and organization is generally required to transform workers, even militant ones, into socialists.

So far so good. Now comes the stratospheric leap: workers therefore have no objective interest in socialism

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The meaning of "True Socialism," Old and New.



(that is, in the abolition of their own exploitation), and more particularly, they are no different from anyone else in their relation to the socialist project, in that like everyone else they require *discursive construction* (or whatever) to turn them into socialists.

There isn't time here to engage in an elaborate theoretical criticism of this monumentally false logic, or the false duality between absolute determination and absolute contingency which it entails, nor to discuss how it renders any conception of history and social process impossible, or for that matter any political strategy. Instead, let me try out on you an analogy which will, I think, illustrate the complete emptiness of this argument more dramatically than any theoretical treatise.

Consider the following propositions: many women are not feminists; some are even violently anti-feminist; in fact it can be argued that the women's movement has been less successful in recruiting its constituency than the labor movement has been in recruiting its own. And men can be feminists too. Okay so far? How about this, then? Therefore, it follows that women have no objective interest in the abolition of gender oppression, and they have no special connection with, and no privileged position in, the feminist project.

Everyone will surely recognize this for the fallacy that it is, not to mention the thoroughly inadequate—or non-existent—conception of historical and social determination that underlies it, its irreducible *idealism* and *subjec-*

tivism. And maybe we can also detect the tendency toward elitism in this rootless, idealist politics, which denies people their own self-emancipatory motivations in the absence of "discursive construction" by some more enlightened agency (but that's another story).

In any case, if we recognize the fallacy in this reasoning when applied to the detachment of women from the feminist project, it is not because we believe that it is the biological destiny of women to become feminists, but rather because we acknowledge some other kind of connection between the social condition of women and the political project directed at transforming that condition. This connection between women and the feminist project falls well short of logical necessity or absolute inevitability but is substantially more than, and different from, the position of non-women in relation to that project.

Presumably we also believe that any political project that goes beyond the simple statement of a program and the passive hope that people will eventually rally round it, any political project that entails transformative action—and this goes for socialism no less than feminism—has to proceed from a conception of the constituency that must, in the first instance, be mobilized for struggle. And this primary constituency is likely to be the one whose objective conditions—whose *interests* and *capacities*—are most organically connected to the project in question.

But if the basic question concerns the connection between objectives and agencies, there is another question that needs to be asked.

Question 2:

Are we focusing on the right objective at all? Is socialism the right goal, or is there some other emancipatory project with a higher priority, one which would therefore also displace class as the principal agency?

I shall assume that no one in this audience needs to be persuaded that socialism, or specifically the classless administration of social production, is in itself a desirable goal, especially now when in the context of crisis and mass unemployment it has become painfully clear that we simply can't afford capitalism, however plausible its claims may have been in boom years. The question is whether—and how—the socialist goal is related to other emancipatory projects which go to make up the totality of human emancipation.

The question can be framed in this way: Is the socialist project more comprehensive than other projects of emancipation, so that they can be subsumed under it, or is it narrowly particularistic so that it must be subsumed under some larger political project which can encompass a whole range of particular emancipatory struggles?

The easy answer is that of course all socialists must be committed to all emancipatory struggles, against gender oppression, racism and so on. I wholeheartedly accept this as a statement of principle. But it doesn't really answer the question. Is the socialist struggle, and hence is class politics, *central* to the project of human emancipation?

A full answer to that question would have to begin with a restatement of the materialistic argument about the centrality of production and exploitation in the organization of social life, and there is clearly no time for

that here. I could say that the burden of proof is on the other side, since those who deny the centrality of class politics have yet to offer a comprehensive alternative to the materialist conception of history.

In any case, I think that even to frame the question clearly would be a big advance over the confusion of issues that tends to dominate the debate. But let me just make a couple of points which I think are critical.

There are currently two principal ways of denying primacy to the socialist struggle. One is to treat it as simply one facet of a larger project that includes a whole plurality of struggles joined together by some unifying discourse. The other is to propose one specific project that claims greater priority and/or greater universality than class emancipation.

The main claimant as unifying discourse combining a plurality of struggles and agencies is something called *democracy* or *radical democracy*. My answer to this claim is that it begs all the critical questions. To qualify as a unifying discourse in the sense intended, a common denominator that cuts across all social boundaries and bypasses the centrality of class, "democracy" has to be, and consistently is, conceived in terms so vague and non-specific as to be vacuous.

In fact, the first premise of this view is what has been called by its advocates the indeterminacy of democracy. It must, for example, smudge over all the differences between, say, capitalist and socialist democracy, or even ancient Greek democracy. It must be careful not to specify the institutional forms of democracy in its various specific incarnations; and more particularly, it must treat "democracy" as *socially indeterminate* and deny any correspondence between institutional forms and the social foundations on which they rest. Above all, it must remain very vague about the obstacles between one form of "democracy"—capitalist—and another, namely socialist.

I maintain that there is no such thing as a socially indeterminate "democracy" and that renaming our struggle an indeterminate "democratic" struggle will not get us past the *class* barriers between capitalism and human emancipation. And, by the way, it seems especially ironic that this notion of an indeterminate democracy and the "autonomy" of politics should become so popular just at the moment when capitalist states are responding to crisis by demonstrating how abjectly responsive they are to the imperatives of capitalist accumulation.

The particular struggle which most persuasively rivals class emancipation in its claims to universality is, I think it's fair to say, feminism. And here I can only touch on a few major points having to do with the connection between feminism and socialism. First, let's consider the relation between gender oppression and capitalism, in order to help situate the struggle against gender oppression in the struggle against capitalism.

Capitalism is uniquely indifferent to the social identity of the people it exploits. Unlike previous modes of production, its mode of exploitation is not inextricably linked with extra-economic, juridical or political identities, inequalities or differences.

Further, unlike modes of production in which the domestic unit has been the principal unit of production, capitalism does not structurally link the organization of

production with the organization of the household, gender relations, sexual division of labor, and so on. The ways in which capitalism utilizes extra-economic social identities such as gender or race differ from their utilization in systems where these identities are more organically bound up with the mode of exploitation.

For one thing, capitalism is very flexible in its ability to make use of—or to discard—particular social oppressions. It can co-opt whatever social oppressions are available, but it can also give them up or trade them in for others. In principle, it can conduct its exploitation without any consideration for color, race, creed, gender, any dependence upon extra-economic inequality or difference.

Typically, capitalism in advanced Western capitalist countries uses gender in two principal ways: as a means of ideological mystification, disguising the true character of exploitation, dividing men and women so that they will not constitute a unified *class* opposition; and second, as a way of organizing social reproduction in what is thought to be the least expensive way.

In particular, since the reproduction of labor-power is a principal need of capitalism, the existing organization of gender relations, by keeping the costs of child-bearing and rearing in the private sphere of the family, may serve as a way of minimizing the costs to capital (though there are those who would argue that the socialization of this function may even prove less burdensome to capital).

In any case, we have to recognize that, from the point of view of capital, this particular social cost is no different from any other. From the point of view of capital, maternity leaves or day-care centers are not qualitatively different from old-age pensions or unemployment insurance, in that they all involve an undesirable cost which capital seeks to unload whenever possible.

Although capitalism cannot tolerate all these costs all the time, and is in that sense inimical to the emancipation of women insofar as it would entail unacceptable social costs, it is no more inimical to this cost than to any other. Capitalism is capable of absorbing such a cost if it becomes politically necessary, even if this means shifting the burden by cutting somewhere else.

Capitalism in this respect is no more incapable of tolerating gender equality than Medicare or social security. In other words, although capitalism can and does make ideological and economic use of gender oppression, that oppression has no privileged position in the structure of capitalism. In this sense, capitalism could survive the eradication of all oppressions specific to women as women; and the feminist struggle does not go to the heart of capitalist exploitation as, by definition, the class struggle does.

At the same time, if capitalism has no specific structural need for gender oppression, it certainly has not made the liberation of women necessary or inevitable. It is possible, even likely, that the abolition of class will come before the complete abolition of gender oppression—though not if gender divisions continue to be a major obstacle to working-class organization itself.

I would go even further and say that even the advent of socialism will not necessarily guarantee the disappearance of age-old cultural patterns of women's oppres-

sion. In that sense, although the feminist project is not large enough to encompass the destruction of capitalism, neither is the socialist project large enough by itself to guarantee the liberation of women.

But there are one or two more things to be said on behalf of socialism on this score. It may be true that capitalism has already deprived gender oppression of any *specific* structural foundation. It remains for socialism, however, not only to abolish those forms of oppression that men and women share as members of an exploited class, but also to eradicate the ideological and economic needs that under capitalism can be served by gender (as well as racial) oppressions.

Socialism will be the first social form since the advent of class society whose reproduction as a social system is endangered rather than enhanced by relations and ideologies of domination and oppression.

For at least these reasons, I conclude that the struggle for socialism, as the most potentially comprehensive emancipatory project we have, is central to the struggle for human emancipation, and hence that class politics is the primary means of advancing, and uniting, the various emancipatory struggles.

Of course, recent attacks on class politics have forced us to recognize various oppressions other than class that have often been neglected by traditional socialism. And it is certainly one of our principal tasks to incorporate a wider conception of human emancipation into the idea, and the practice, of socialism. Although Marxists have often been insensitive to other oppressions, there is no reason why granting a central position to the working class as the agent of social transformation has to involve this kind of insensitivity.

The judgment that socialism, as a comprehensive project of human emancipation, will come about, if at all, through the self-emancipation of the working class by means of class struggle, is not necessarily a judgment that class oppression is the only form of oppression, or even the one that is the most oppressive to its victims. Above all, it is a judgment about the structure of power in society in general and capitalist society in particular, about the configuration of historical forces, about the nature of the obstacles to human emancipation and the conditions and possibilities for overcoming those obstacles.

There may be a tendency to think that if we assert (correctly) the human and moral importance of all oppressions and refuse to grant a higher moral status to one than others, we can forget about the historical analysis and the assessment of the configuration of social power, the *political* judgment, on the basis of which Marxism identifies the working class and class struggle as the primary agency of socialist transformation. But we can't simply dismiss this political judgment without replacing the Marxist analysis of social power in capitalist society with a more convincing one, however strongly we may be convinced of the moral imperative to encompass all human oppression in the socialist project.

However strong the moral case for emphasizing other social oppressions and movements, I don't think we've yet been offered an alternative analysis of social relations and power to justify displacing class politics from the center of the struggle for human emancipation. □