

“The History of all Hitherto Existing Society:” Class Struggle and the Current Wave of Resistance

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Abstract: Across the last decade we have witnessed a growing wave of resistance across the globe. In this article we argue that it is critical to utilise class analysis to understand contemporary social movements. We maintain that class analysis begins with understanding class as a series of relations and/or processes that condition both the objective and subjective dimensions of class. Following this, we illustrate how sectors of the contemporary working class are in struggle, yet struggle differently, based on their structural location as well as differing nature of their resistance. In taking this approach to class and social movements, we argue that scholars can begin to unmask the central role of capitalism and the attending regimes of accumulation in the current wave of resistance even when they appear disconnected.

Keywords: Karl Marx, social movements, resistance, class analysis

“Only struggle educates the exploited class. Only struggle discloses to it the magnitude of its own power, widens its horizon, enhances its abilities, clarifies its mind, forges its will.” (Lenin 1917, 241)

1. Introduction

Over the last ten years we have lived through a profound wave of struggle. In response to the 2008 economic crisis, communities have been rising up across the globe, forging diverse forms of political organisation, both temporary and permanent, through which to build power and make change. This emergent wave of struggle has often times been focused on the state, and ranged from occupations, and armed militias to electoral campaigns and party-building projects. Scholars of contentious politics have kept pace with as social movement studies have produced a great deal of scholarship. Moreover, through the lens of the current wave of struggle, social movement scholars have seemingly loosened the shackles of some of the dominant theories of the field from resource mobilization and political opportunity structures to new social movement theory.

Punctuated by research focused on North Africa and the Middle East, the Anti-Austerity struggles across Europe, Occupy Wall Street and the more recent wave of resistance from the Umbrella Protests in Hong Kong and Nuit Debout in France to #BlackLivesMatter, the growing field has offered compelling concepts around the complex role of social media, the short-term efficacy of protest camps, the rapidly changing repertoires of contention and the possibility of a neo-anarchist populism to

¹ This article was written collaboratively by the two authors: there is no first author. The authors' names appear in random order.

name a few critical insights. However, while there has been some significant research into the contemporary wave of struggle, in the majority of this scholarship there is scant mention of capitalism and the changing nature of class or the role of class-based resistance therein. In fact, the bulk of social movement scholars dismiss class and capitalism as useful categories for analysing socio-political dynamics in general, and social movement politics in particular.

In many ways, the current state of social movement studies reflects Ellen Meiksins Wood broader critique of the academy as infected by a contagion she identified as “the retreat from class” (Wood 1986). Her broad argument is that scholars have abandoned the concept of class arguing that there is no necessary relationship between material circumstance or one’s position within the social structure, and their correspondent ideology or worldview. However, along with a few other social movements scholars including the contributions in Barker et al.’s volume (2013), Cox and Nielsen (2014), Della Porta (2015) and Fuchs (2013) we contend that within social movement studies it is critical to bring back both capitalism, and in the case of this essay, class (see also Lamas, Wolfson and Funke 2017; Funke et al. 2017; Wolfson 2014).²

While we have witnessed a diversity of struggles emerge in the last decade, we argue that the central engine of this wave of resistance is the 2008-09 economic crisis and the growing instability of neoliberal capitalism as well as inequality and growing precarity of people across the globe. An analysis of both the current logic of capitalism and the character of contemporary class struggle is thus critical to understanding the nature of this profound current wave of protest.

Given the above, in this essay, we seek to begin to redress this gap in the literature by offering a structural analysis of social movements through a re-articulation of a theory of class struggle that is congruent with both this conjuncture in our political and economic order as well as the burgeoning forms of resistance to this order. Broadly we argue that to understand the current wave of resistance it is critical to use a class analysis. Accordingly, in the remainder of this article we aim to make two main interventions. First, for us, a class analysis begins with understanding class as a series of relations and/or processes that condition both the objective and subjective dimensions of class. With this in mind we use the categories of “exploitation” and “collective struggle” to examine how different regimes of accumulation create different fragments of the working class (i.e. wage-labour, precarious labour, the dispossessed). Following this, we illustrate how these class fragments struggle, yet struggle differently, based on their structural location as well as differing nature of their resistance. We argue that in taking this approach to class and social movements, we can unmask the central role of capitalism and the attending regimes of accumulation in the current wave of resistance even when they appear disconnected. Moreover, with this lens we believe scholars can begin to see both the fragmentation or class de-composition and possibility for class re-composition in this broad epoch of contention.³

² For a more general defence of class as an explanatory category see Wright (2015, 139-156).

³ In this essay, we focus on the relationship between the capitalist mode of production and class at the point of production. In a planned future project, we seek to encompass the other dimensions of the social relations of production such as production, exchange, and distribution as well as modes of regulation

2. Mapping the Coordinates of Capitalism and Class

In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx offered one of his most extended discussions on the process of class formation. He wrote:

“Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle [...] this mass becomes united and constitutes itself as a class for itself” (Marx 1847, 211).

Here Marx articulates the objective (in-itself) and subjective (for-itself) dimensions of class or what can also be seen as two moments in the process of class formation. It is fair to say that the process of transforming from a group of people with a set of shared lived conditions and common interests into a cohesive political force is somewhat mystified in Marx’s class-in-itself and class-for-itself formation. At the same time, the quote opens the door for the two key interconnected premises in the theory of class we want to develop. First, class is relational and shifting over space and time. Second, class exists at the intersection of its objective and subjective dimensions. Classes of people are structurally situated, but as history has shown, that alone does not create class-consciousness or forms of class-based resistance. It is through, what E.P. Thompson calls a process of “self-making”, that people see themselves as aligned as a class with a set of shared interests.

2.1. Class as a Relationship

In contrast to much of the writing on class, we hold that class is not a static category and cannot be understood simply through a social stratification model, instead class is a series of social relationships that are conditioned by capitalism and its shifting instantiations over space and time. Detailing this argument Ellen Meiksins Wood explains:

“The concept of class as relationship and process stresses that objective relations to the means of production are significant because they establish antagonisms and generate conflicts and struggles; that these conflicts and struggles shape social experience ‘in class ways’, even when they do not express themselves in class consciousness or in clearly visible formations; and that over time we can discern how these relationships impose their logic, their pattern, on social processes. Purely ‘structural’ conceptions of class do not require us to look for the ways in which class actually imposes its logic, since classes are simply there by definition” (Wood 1986, 82).

Her point is that if we want to understand the impact of the material dimensions of capitalism on class, we must look at the processes or relationships that emerge out of the mode of production and therefore play a key role in conditioning the lived experience of class. In this essay we point to three relationships that condition how class is experienced:

1. The relation between a class and the regime(s) of accumulation
2. Class intra-relationships, or the relations amongst individuals within a class or across sectors of a class
3. Class interrelationships, or relation between classes

To the first, different lived experiences emerge through diverse dynamics of exploitation. For instance, take the Fordist regime of accumulation as compared to neoliberal or a more flexible regime of accumulation. It is clear that the nature of work has transformed under the more flexible and informational regime of accumulation and this impacts the nature of work and the interaction amongst workers along with other things. To see class as a set of processes or relations is to see how the structure of the accumulation process operates on the working class. Moreover, this can be seen across time as well as across space if we look at different models of capitalism in a particular moment, across the U.S. and Europe for instance.

Second, it is critical to analyse the relationships within a class, in other words across sectors of the same class in a particular conjuncture. One of the key contributions of the Occupy Movement was the introduction of the concept of “the 99%”. A class concept to be sure, the 99% allowed the burgeoning Occupy movement to unmask the dynamics of capitalism while prophesising the battle lines in the struggles to come. While the 99% was a clarion call, the concept also obfuscates the divisions amongst the broad working class in the 21st century as it does not allow for us to recognise the differences amongst the broad 99%. This reality impacted the ability of the Occupy movement to forge powerful links across different sectors of the working class as there was not an integrated analysis of those differences and how they impact protest dynamics. Therefore, we argue, that in order to understand the working class or classes in general and movement dynamics in particular we must recognise the relationship of different sectors within the same class. We discuss this in more detail later, when we look at the relationship between three broad sectors of the working class: traditional working class, precariat, and the dispossessed.

Finally, relationships between classes play a critical role in class formation. Thompson speaks to this in his preface to *The Making of the English Working Class* when he argues “[a]nd class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared) feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves and against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs” (Thompson 1963, 9). Here Thompson is marking that class-consciousness is more completely expressed once class actors understand that their interests are opposed to other class interests. This point echoes a famous from Marx and Engels at the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto*:

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes” (Marx and Engels 1848, 482).

In this quote, Marx and Engels famously argue that the conflict between classes is the engine of history. They add however, that at times it is hidden and at times it is open. Here they are touching upon the fluid relationship between the classes driven by the process of recognising class interest, a point that has become increasingly mystified as the ruling class aims to govern through consent.

2.2. Objective and Subjective Class Dimensions

This brings us to the second interrelated premise that we contend is key for thinking through class as it pertains to social movements in the 21st century. To understand class, we must recognise the subjective processes through which people become a class for itself, but these processes must still be rooted in an understanding of the objective dimension of class. Class is not open. Unlike many of the post Marxist theorists that have overturned the materialist dimension of class dynamics (Holloway, Laclau and Mouffe), we see class as conditioned by structural location vis-à-vis the mode of production in general and the specific regime of accumulation in particular (Wright 1979).

At the same time, as we have seen throughout history, one's material conditions do not necessarily account for when and how people begin to think and act as a class. The mediation between structural location of individuals and forms of class-based collective struggle is precisely the aspect of class and class formation that we want to explore in the remainder of this essay. Adapting the more abstract conception of objective and subjective class dimension in order to capture complexities of the ongoing mediation between structural location and class consciousness "on the ground" we offer two categories: exploitation and collective struggle.

We take the category of exploitation from the different regimes of accumulation in contemporary capitalism, which call forth at least three objective and distinct sectors of the working class (wage-labour, precarious-labour, and the dispossessed). In this sense, exploitation allows us to show the variety of currently co-existing modalities of objective class positions. Collective struggle we derive from the subjective class dimension and use it to discuss the identity and identity constructing aspects of class formation; the multiple ways by which the various objective class sectors gain (or not) class-consciousness.

In the remainder of the essay we will explore these two aspects in class making through the lens of the contemporary wave of resistance. First, we will look at how movements are conditioned by structural location as it relates to the regime(s) of accumulation and the resulting forms of exploitation. Following this, we will examine how differently situated sectors of the working class have dominant patterns whereby they have undertaken the process of self-making through collective struggle. We contend that through this we can begin to see multiple structural locations of the working class and how these locations and the difference in forms of exploitation lead to different forms of resistance.

3. Exploitation: Objective Class Dimension

In the most general terms, capitalist exploitation, the appropriation of surplus-value from the actual producer, occurs through regimes of accumulation. Following Harvey and Cini et al. (2017), we suggest that in contemporary capitalism there are two regimes of accumulation or ways that surplus-value is appropriated, and argue that they in turn, generate three distinguishable sectors of the working class:

1. accumulation through expanded production, which generates wage-labour and precarious-labour;
2. accumulation through dispossession, which generates the diverse sector of the dispossessed.

While these two regimes (expanded production and dispossession) can bleed into each other, we think it useful to differentiate between them as ideal-types as they

bring forth three distinct objective class locations or sectors of the working class, which in turn – as we will argue in the following part – generate variegated protest and mobilising dynamics. Still, and unlike for instance Guy Standing, we are not suggesting that these class sectors are distinct classes but rather that the respective regimes of accumulation generate variegated experiences of exploitation within the same broad working class.

To elaborate, we build on David Harvey. Examining the ways in which profits were generated since World War Two, Harvey differentiates between two types of capital accumulation. Alongside accumulation through expanded production, which is the process within a capitalist economy where surplus-value is converted into capital, Harvey building on Rosa Luxemburg argues that there is also a distinct socialised dynamic of capital accumulation whereby society is dispossessed of what are publicly held realms by way of turning them into sites for private profit. While Marx, who conceptualised this process as “primitive accumulation”, saw it as an initial way that capitalism fashioned class winners and loser, Luxemburg and more recently Harvey see it as an ongoing and necessary dynamic of capitalism. Harvey calls this ongoing process “accumulation by dispossession” (2005, 159). Through this bifurcation, Harvey differentiates between profit generated within the existing capitalist system and “accumulation by dispossession” where sectors that were formerly outside the capitalist market logic, are now governed by the profit motive. The consequences of these two coexisting regimes of accumulation are different forms of class-based struggles given differing experiences of exploitation.

Somewhat schematically put, accumulation through expanded production, which generates profits extensively (i.e. increasing working hours) or intensively (i.e. increasing productivity), brings forth two distinct segments of the current working class. First, what we might call the traditionally understood wage labourers: the so-called Old Left, ranging from factory workers to service sector employees. Alongside this, however, we see accumulation through expanded production as forging another segment of the class, which we call precarious labour or the “precariat”. Akin to Engels and Marx’s discussion of the “reserve army of labour”, this sector of the working class is made up of the un- and underemployed.⁴ Here, capital is generated directly through the exploitation of the individuals in this sector as well as indirectly through the pressure this “reserve army of labour” puts on the on other sectors of the working class. Put simply, the presence of potential wage labourers stifles resistance by the contemporary wage labourer as the threat of being replaced looms.⁵ An additional aspect to be considered is that with the gig economy where a growing mass of workers are employed, the conditions of work are rapidly transforming, changing protest dynamics among this sector of the working class, as we will discuss in the next section. Lastly, the precariat bridges the traditional wage labourer and the dispossessed, as this more insecure worker is particularly vulnerable to the effects of dispossession.

According to David Harvey, accumulation by dispossession generates profits in four main ways (2005, 160): “privatization and commodification”, “financialization”, “the management and manipulation of crisis”, and “state redistributions”. As Cini et al. (2017) detail, this modality of capital accumulation in turn generates a particular sector of the working class, or, as we argue, a particular class location. It is clear that the majority of the population is affected by the dynamics of accumulation by disposses-

⁴ Marx divides the reserve army of labour into four layers (floating to pauperized)

⁵ While we do not have the space in this essay to develop this further, we explore elsewhere the utility of linking this precarity sector of the working class to a distinct third regime of accumulation by precarious-labour.

sion as capital expropriates public assets such as water or energy utilities, pushes debt on society (e.g. housing bubble), orchestrates and uses crisis (e.g. banking crisis become sovereign debt crisis). At the same time, accumulation by dispossession also brings forth a distinguishable sector of the working class such as students, the elderly, and those living at the margins that are disproportionately affected by these dynamics of accumulation.

To reiterate we are offering this schema for heuristic purposes as these groups can and do partially overlap and bleed into each other, are relational, and constitutive of each other. For instance, a former unemployed person might move to the wage labour segment, privatisation of schools lead to the expansion of wage labour industry, etc. Important for our purposes here is that these three groups call for different practices of how the subjective class dimension unfolds in general and how the sectors mobilise and protest. Moreover, it can help us devise strategies for struggles over class formation across these sectors. It is to these dynamics we now turn.

4. Collective Struggle: Subjective Class Dimension

Building on the work of Henri Lefebvre, Peter Marcuse (2009) convincingly argued that different parts of the working class are differently located, experience exploitation differently and thus forge diverse types of resistance. Marcuse differentiated between the deprived (e.g. poor and working class) on one hand and the discontented (e.g. students and the new poor) on the other.

Here there are two important points we want to highlight. First, in this analysis, those materially oppressed by capitalism (the deprived) and those alienated by the terms and conditions of capitalist society (discontented) are oppressed differently and consequently the character of their struggles emerges differently, with the deprived fighting predominately on material grounds while the discontented struggle largely on ideological grounds around issues of freedom, power and fulfilment of self. These differences in structural location, lead to different forms of struggle and shapes the relationship across sectors of a class. In this section we want to build on Marcuse, recognising that social location plays a critical role in logics of resistance. However, in order to better understand the process by which capitalism creates deprivation and discontent as well as respectively different mobilisation dynamics, we diverge from Marcuse as he does not offer a structural analysis for why the deprived or discontented emerge, whereas we focus on different processes of capital accumulation (as sketched above) and link them to diverse protests logics (as discussed in the next section).

As we argued above, objectively, the contemporary working class – in our typology – is made up of three core segments (wage-labour, precarious labour, and the dispossessed), which come about through two regimes of accumulation. In the following section we want to suggest that these distinct regimes of accumulation and the diverse sectors of the working class that they bring forth, call for different dynamics and strategies for generating class struggle. Organising on factory floors, or among students concerned with growing debt and joblessness, or across the atomised and splintered work environments of Uber drivers, take on different strategies and organisational forms.

Overall, we argue that the processes to generate class consciousness (subjective dimension) today are arguably more challenging as the dynamics of neoliberalism have compelled class fragmentation or what autonomist Marxists would call “class decomposition” and therefore there is a lessening of shared work and life experienc-

es, which in turn makes it more difficult to create organisation and develop a class-based identity.

5. Struggles over Class-Formation within Each Sector

While the different regimes of accumulation condition the ways in which exploitation is experienced as well as other lived aspect of class, they do not help us understand why or how class location leads to processes of class struggle. In the rest of this paper, we look closely at the different sectors of the working class. While we do not have the space to fully examine the subjective processes of struggles over class formation across the sectors we do look at the dominant logics of protest as they have been expressed within these sectors in the last 10+ years. In particular, we emphasise 4 dimensions:

- 1) The dominant figure of resistance,
- 2) The emancipatory horizon
- 3) The dominant organisational form
- 4) The dominant movement-building strategy

6. Expanded Production and its Protest Logic

For Marx and many Marxists the principle regime of accumulation works through expanded production. While the logic of this regime of accumulation has transformed over time from a Fordist to a flexible regime, accumulation operates through extensive and intensive processes. Capital is thus generated by thrusting increasing numbers of workers into a relationship where they create surplus-value, which in turn is converted into capital. This regime of accumulation has led to two distinct sectors of the current working class: the traditional working class of wage-labour and precarious labour.

6.1. Wage-Labour/Standard Labour

This sector of the working class is dominated by traditional working class actors, ranging from the industrial proletariat to service and public sector workers. The ideal-typical form political protest of this segment of the working class takes, revolves around struggles for (expansion of) the welfare state including publicly funded education, health and disability insurances, and pension systems. The dominant form of organisation that has emerged in response to this form of exploitation are labour unions, the labour movement more generally and political parties that have been tied to the labour movement.

Accordingly, the organising model tends to rely on representative and hierarchical organisational formations, focused on economic issues. Finally, Marxists have typically seen this segment of the working class as the primary protagonist because of their location vis-à-vis the point of production, and accordingly, this class segment has played a critical role in class struggle as well as class compromise across the 20th century into the 21st century.

6.2. Precariat

The second sector we derive from the accumulation by expanded production is the precariat. Guy Standing defines the precariat as those “people living through insecure jobs interspersed with periods of unemployment or labour-force withdrawal (misnamed as ‘economic inactivity’) and living insecurely, with uncertain access to

housing and public resources” (2014, 16).⁶ Composed of the under- and unemployed, the dominant figure of resistance ranges from the low-wage service sector workers in the so-called “pink colour” retail industry (e.g. janitors, Walmart employees) to the growing mass of adjunct teachers. This segment of workers is employed but stands apart from the standard labour sectors as they are under-salaried and importantly have very little security. Alongside these workers, the precariat also includes the growing mass of independent contractors and gig workers, from cab and Uber drivers, to domestic workers, graduate students and many others who find themselves in temporary or insecure work situations. Finally, we see workers who are unsalaried (and mostly women) such as partners and mothers, performing reproductive work in homes as a further key actor of the precariat. The emancipatory horizon of this group is arguably diverse but during times of low class consciousness mainly aims to “escape” this sector, seeking to join the standard labour sector. The dominant organisational form and movement-building strategy (or lack thereof) is similarly diffuse as the work and life worlds of individuals in this sector are atomized and isolated.

7. Dispossessed

Harvey’s work has introduced the concept of accumulation by dispossession. Indebted to Rosa Luxemburg, accumulation by dispossession is the ongoing process of taking what were public goods and placing them under the capitalist profit logic by way of privatization and commodification, financialisation, through crisis and state action (Harvey 2005, 160). Consequently, accumulation by dispossession generates very different mechanisms of amassing profit compared to accumulation by expanded production as it is atomising and incremental, often obscuring the underlying profit motive.

The dominant figure of resistance of this sector of the working class is highly diverse, ranging from students to people fighting against racism, patriarchy, or environmental degradation. In addition to struggles that appear to be predominately defensive battles (e.g. preventing the expansion of charter schools or opposing new drilling or mining explorations), the focus and aim of many of these struggles revolve around questions of identity and self-actualisations. The dominant organisational form and strategy of mobilisations by the dispossessed have also taken on distinctive characteristics, stressing unconventional forms of political organising including working outside of formal institutional channels (Calhoun 1993), shifting away from more hierarchical organisational forms to networks as alternative configurations (Melucci 1985), and seeking bottom-up and participatory political practices.

Contrary to the more traditional struggles against accumulation by production, movement-building strategies of struggles against accumulation by dispossession have in large part been critical of representative structures and institutional politics. Instead, voluntarism, spontaneity, and grassroots consensus-based decision-making and prefigurative politics have been embraced.

Important for our purposes here is that while organisers and activists of the dispossessed ordinarily do not rely on a deep critique of capitalism as it pertains to their struggles, we argue that the often-claimed post-material character of these struggles is misleading (see also Cini et al. 2017). Rather than understanding them as uncon-

⁶ While we focus in this essay on production relations as the dimension of class relations, Standing adds relations of distribution and relations to the state as dimension of class relations.

cerned with capitalism, they are “born of the crisis of Fordism, as manifestations opposing various processes of dispossession, which took place globally after the 1970s economic crisis as way to solve the problem of falling capital profitability” (Cini et al. 2017, 441). Accumulation by dispossession (e.g. expropriation) is fundamentally about generating new capital opportunities and commodification attempts. While fighting off shore drilling is of course an environmental problem, it is only fully understandable when we recognise the underlying class-nature. Similarly, the LGBT movement, as Hetland and Goodwing convincingly show, has been significantly shaped by capitalist dynamics (Barker et al. 2013). Hence, through class analysis we see that issues of the dispossessed are also structured by the capitalist profit logic, leading their struggles to be what E.P. Thompson calls “class struggle without class” as participants (and analysts) often do not recognise these struggle’s class character (yet).

8. Conclusion

From a Tunisian revolution in 2010 that was sparked by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi to a farmer rebellion that rocked India in 2017, the world has watched a groundswell of resistance movements. Recognising the material dimension of these struggles, the goal of this essay has been to bring capitalism and class back into the analysis of mobilisations, protests, and social movement politics writ large. Our contention is that in order to make out the distinct nature of these resistance movements it is critical to see class as a series of relations. This in term allows us to see how the structural dimensions of capitalism condition different class fragments (using the category of exploitation) while recognising the importance of subjective class dynamics (employing collective struggle as analytic window) in the “making of the working class”.

While this is an initial exploration into the role of class in the contemporary wave of resistance, there are critical research questions scholars must address pertaining to questions of class formation across the splintered fragments of the working class. Further developing this lens will enable scholars to recognise the differences in protest dynamics across the class and the possibility of a broad class re-composition.

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