

Overcoming Binary Logic: A Difficult, Unfinished Process

1 MUTILATION OF THE CLASS STRUGGLE

In its most mature formulation, the theory of ‘class struggles’ takes the form of a general theory of social conflict and theoretically reflects, whilst at the same time encouraging a multiplicity of struggles for recognition. But it is not easy to attain this vantage-point and retain it. Not infrequently, figures and movements engaged on one front do not attend to other fronts or even regard them with disdain. While he had a powerful sense of the social question, Proudhon branded the incipient feminist movement as sheerly synonymous with ‘pornocracy’,¹ and showed no sympathy for oppressed nations aspiring to shake off the yoke of tsarist autocracy! He was unable to understand the tangled skein of class contradictions: the proletarian exploited by the bourgeoisie might be a participant in the ‘first class oppression’ affecting woman; the Polish noble who oppressed his own serfs might be involved in the struggle against national oppression.

Proudhon took a very narrow view of the class struggle ranging the subaltern classes against privilege and the ruling power in France. In his eyes, the protagonist of the coup d’état of December 1851 was not the inheritor, however contradictory, of the June 1848 massacre of Parisian workers, was not the one who, on the basis of the bourgeoisie’s desire to unsheathe the sword against the insurgent proletariat, ended up

unsheathing it against French society as a whole, including the bourgeoisie (see Chap. 9, Sect. 2). Far from sharing Marx's interpretation, Proudhon at times seemed fascinated by Louis Bonaparte, to the extent that immediately after the coup he wrote to a friend and noted in his diary: 'I have reason to believe that I am regarded very favourably at the Élysée ... On this date, I reckon to raise the banner of the social Republic once again, in from two to three months, neither more nor less. This is a magnificent opportunity and success is almost certain'; 'it is said that the Élysée has more than once expressed a desire to address me, and that great pains have been taken to dissuade it'.² Marx's verdict was bitter. He denounced Proudhon's two 'basenesses'—that is, '[h]is work on the *coup d'état*, in which he flirts with Louis Bonaparte and, in fact, strives to make him palatable to the French workers, and his last work, written against Poland, in which for the greater glory of the tsar he expresses moronic cynicism'.³ In any event, the French author, who had the merit of challenging bourgeois private property, performed an anti-educative role, preaching or recommending to the working class 'abstention from the political movement', from the struggle against Bonapartism at home and national oppression abroad, as well as from the struggle for women's emancipation.⁴ The binary interpretation of social conflict, which perceives only one contradiction (opposing rich and poor), does not make it possible to understand emancipatory movements, whose social basis is not formed exclusively of poor people. Concentration on the social question in France turns into a prison stamped by insular corporatism.

While Proudhon harboured illusions about Louis Bonaparte, Lassalle cultivated them in Bismarck, whom he hoped to win to his cause. In arguing against the view of the state as a 'night watchman' of property and public order indifferent to the desperate condition of the working class, Lassalle primarily or exclusively targeted the liberal bourgeoisie.⁵ Marx was not wrong to reprove him for pursuing an 'alliance with absolutist and feudal opponents against the bourgeoisie',⁶ flirting with someone who later promulgated ruthless anti-socialist (and anti-working class) laws.

We may repeat what has already been said in connection with Proudhon. In the case of this great intellectual and charismatic agitator, commitment to the social question—more precisely, the attempt to extract gracious concessions from the existing government in the direction of a welfare state—went hand in hand with neglect of other fronts in the class struggle

and a narrowly economic view of working-class struggle itself. As we shall soon see, Lassalle did not understand the historical importance of the struggle for the abolition of black slavery in the USA. As regards France, he gave vent to odd declarations on Louis Bonaparte's coup d'état. Having attained power, the latter had proceeded to abolish censitary discrimination, already liquidated by the February 1848 revolution, but reintroduced by the liberal bourgeoisie with the law of 30 May 1850. In the circumstances of Bonapartist dictatorship, the return to universal (male) suffrage simply meant that the poorest popular masses could participate in plebiscitary acclamation of the leader. Lassalle did not argue thus. For him, Louis Bonaparte had overthrown not the 'republic', but only 'the bourgeois republic, which sought to impress the seal of the bourgeoisie, of the rule of capital, on the republican state'.⁷

Similar trends to those observed in France and Germany also emerged in other countries. Engels criticized those Russian intellectuals and circles who liked to positively contrast their country (where communal property forms persisted) with France and Britain (where bourgeois private property and capitalist social polarization were now ubiquitous). There was a current of thought that argued as follows: 'the introduction of a better order of things is greatly hindered in Western Europe by the boundless extension of the rights of the individual ... in the West the individual is used to unlimited private rights. ...In the West, a better system of economic relations is bound up with sacrifices, and that is why it is difficult to establish.'⁸ The view was not foreign to Alexander Herzen. For him 'there may be a political question for Russia; but the "social question" is already solved as far as Russia is concerned'.⁹ We are confronted with a populist current which (Engels observed) liked 'to describe the Russian peasants as the true vehicles of socialism, as born communists, in contrast to the workers of the aging, decayed European West, who would first have to go through the ordeal of acquiring socialism artificially'. Subsequently, '[f]rom Herzen [the] knowledge came to Bakunin, and from Bakunin to Mr. Tkachov' that the Russian people were 'instinctively, traditionally communist'.¹⁰ The underestimation of the task of abolishing an *ancien régime* notable for its oppression of nations and women, as well as the working class, was patent. Once again, the class struggle is heavily mutilated and, even when it comes to engagement on behalf of the subaltern classes, what remains is trifling.

2 'IMPERIAL SOCIALISM'

Mutilation of class struggle can take another form: closing one's eyes to the fate visited by capitalism on colonial peoples or peoples of colonial origin. From the outset, calling attention to the 'millions of workers' forced to die in India, to allow capitalists to make modest concessions to British workers, Marx underlined the connection between the colonial question and the social question in the capitalist metropolis (see Chap. 2, Sect. 3). This was a demanding intellectual perspective. In sharp contrast to Proudhon, Fourier was a champion of the cause of women's emancipation. But it happened that, in the very years when Marx and Engels were expressing their hopes in the proletariat as the agency of universal emancipation with youthful hyperbole, followers of Fourier (and Saint-Simon) planned to construct communities of a more or less socialist kind in Algeria, on land taken from the Arabs in a brutal, sometimes genocidal war.¹¹

Later, utopian socialism mostly viewed the abolitionist movement with condescension or suspicion. After the February 1848 revolution, Victor Schoelcher and the new government proceeded to the definitive abolition of black slavery in French colonies, almost half a century after it had been reintroduced by Napoleon, who had thereby cancelled the results of the black revolution on Santo Domingo led by Toussaint L'Ouverture and the laws emancipating blacks enacted by the Jacobin Convention. However, Etienne Cabet, an eminent representative of French utopian socialism, criticized Schoelcher for focusing on a narrow objective—the emancipation of black slaves—rather than committing himself to the universal emancipation of labour.¹² On the outbreak of the Civil War in the USA, Lassalle argued similarly, judging at least from a letter to Engels of 30 July 1862 in which Marx criticized the 'antiquated, mouldering speculative rubbish' of Lassalle, for whom the gigantic clash underway in the USA was 'of no interest whatever'. Rather than developing positive 'ideas' for transforming society, 'the Yankees' confined themselves to mobilizing a 'negative idea' like 'the freedom of the individual'.¹³ For the two representatives of socialism cited here, commitment to the abolition of slavery in the colonies or the North American republic distracted attention from the social question, which remained a burning issue in the capitalist metropolis.

To the American Civil War—in Marx's view, an epic event—Lassalle made only distracted, reductive references. Because of the blockade

imposed by the Union on the secessionist South, and the consequent shortage of cotton for the textile industry of Britain, and Lancashire in particular, British workers were forced into unemployment and risked having to 'emigrate to the colonies'. It was 'one of the most bloody and horrible wars that history has ever seen'. What was at stake in it was not touched upon. In fact, rather than the institution of slavery, Lassalle indicted 'federalism' and the self-government accorded states as allegedly responsible for the 'absorption in particular interests' and 'mutual hatred' of the contending parties, which were thus put on par.¹⁴

The economic or corporatist limitations of representatives of the labour and socialist movement were not unconnected with the initiative of the dominant classes, whose effectiveness was in fact underestimated by Marx and Engels. Having included 'Young England' in the 'spectacle' of 'feudal socialism' staged by 'aristocrats', the *Communist Manifesto* concluded: 'the people, so often as it joined them, saw on their hindquarters the old feudal coats of arms, and deserted with loud and irreverent laughter'.¹⁵ In fact, things turned out rather differently. The historically most important member of Young England was Disraeli. In him (as in the organization he joined) are to be found elements of the transfiguration of the *ancien régime*, but he may be regarded as the inventor of a 'socialism' more appropriately defined as 'imperial' than 'feudal'. Far from meeting with derision from the popular classes, this was socialism that often enchanted and ensnared them.

In the same years as *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology* proclaimed the irreducible antagonism between proletariat and bourgeoisie, Disraeli published a novel that in its own way dealt with the same themes. We find a Chartist agitator bitterly challenging the existing order and denouncing the reality of the 'two nations' ('rich and poor') into which England is divided. In the *Communist Manifesto*, the Chartists are included among the 'existing working-class parties';¹⁶ and the agitator seems to exhibit the revolutionary consciousness attributed to the proletariat by Marx and Engels. It is interesting to observe Disraeli's response: it made no sense to speak of 'two nations'; a bond of 'fraternity' now united 'the *privileged* and prosperous English people'.¹⁷ The key word is the one emphasized by me: the English aristocracy had shelved the caste, even racial arrogance it traditionally displayed towards the popular classes; and now it was the 'fraternal' national English community as a whole that adopted a pose of supreme aristocratic disdain for other nations, especially colonial populations.

In other words, rather than disappearing, the racialization traditionally suffered by the British popular classes was displaced. It is no accident if Disraeli, who subsequently became the author of the Second Reform Act (which extended political rights beyond the circle of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie), and of a series of social reforms, was simultaneously the champion of imperialism and the right of the 'superior' races to subjugate 'inferior' ones. In this way, the British statesman proposed to defuse the social question and class struggle in his own country: 'I say with confidence that the great body of the working-class of England [...] are English to the core. They are for maintaining the greatness of the Kingdom and the Empire, and they are proud of being subjects of our Sovereign and members of such an Empire.'¹⁸ These were the years when in France Proudhon adopted the position (according to Marx) of a 'socialist of the Imperial period'—to be precise, the Second Empire.¹⁹

Thus, we see a new political movement emerge. In the late nineteenth century, alluding to Napoleon III and Bismarck as well as Disraeli, a German observer spoke of an 'imperialist social policy' or 'imperial socialism' (*Imperialsozialismus*).²⁰ Already brought out by Marx, the connection between the colonial question and the social question in the capitalist metropolis was recognized and put at the centre of a new political project, which proposed a kind of quid pro quo: the popular masses and proletariat were invited to respond to the dominant classes' limited social reforms with patriotism and support for colonial expansionism.

3 'CLASS AGAINST CLASS' ON A GLOBAL SCALE?

The quid pro quo was scornfully rejected by the artisans of the theory of class struggle. But a problem persists. A situation of relatively peaceful development and, *a fortiori*, a major historical crisis is characterized by a tangle of multiple contradictions and various forms of class struggle: there is no pre-established harmony between them. An adequate understanding of a concrete historical situation requires overcoming the habitual binary logic that claims to explain everything on the basis of a single contradiction. In Marx and Engels themselves, this was a difficult, unfinished process.

The Condition of the Working Class in England, published in 1845, ends by evoking the imminent—in fact, already initiated—revolution of the 'workers' against the 'bourgeoisie', or 'open, declared war of the poor against the rich', of the 'cottage' against the 'mansion'.²¹ The Irish

national question, to which Engels forcefully drew attention, does not seem to play any role in the impending clash. Approximately two years later, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx issued a kind of watchword: ‘the struggle of class against class’.²² The *Communist Manifesto* clarifies its basis: ‘[o]ur epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses ... this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat’.²³ It is true that other social subjects must be taken into account, but the capitalist bourgeoisie—a handful of exploiters—becomes ever more isolated. The prospects for revolution were decidedly encouraging: the proletarians (we read in *The German Ideology*) constitute ‘a class which forms the majority of all members of society’.²⁴ Besides, adds the *Manifesto*, ‘entire sections of the ruling classes are, by the advance of industry, precipitated into the proletariat’.²⁵

In the (early) writings cited hitherto, the new revolution (set to emancipate, over and above the proletariat, humanity as a whole) ultimately breaks out from a single contradiction, opposing bourgeoisie and working class; and this new revolution is ineluctable because of the progressive, unstoppable expansion of the working-class and pro-working-class front.

There were no pertinent differences between one country and another. In fact, national borders were tending to decline in importance. This is a view that found its most eloquent expression in a speech made by Engels on 9 December 1847, during a demonstration in London in favour of Polish independence. In Britain, ‘as a result of modern industry, of the introduction of machinery, all oppressed classes are being merged together into a single great class with common interests, the class of the proletariat’, more united than ever thanks to ‘this levelling of the living standards of all workers’. ‘[O]n the opposite side all classes of oppressors have likewise been united into a single class, the bourgeoisie. The struggle has thus been simplified and so it will be possible to decide it by one single heavy blow’. As to the international stage, machinery ‘has evened out the position of all workers and daily continues to do so’ everywhere, so that ‘the workers now have the same interest, which is the overthrow of the class that oppresses them—the bourgeoisie’. In sum, ‘[b]ecause the condition of the workers of all countries is the same, because their interests are the same, their enemies the same, they must also fight together, they must oppose the brotherhood of the bourgeoisie of all nations with a brotherhood of the workers of all nations’.²⁶ Not only does everything revolve around

a single contradiction, but politics, national peculiarities, and ideological factors seem to play no role.

The binary interpretation of social conflict does not figure only in Engels and is not even limited to the early period. It is enough to think of a very famous passage in Volume One of *Capital*: '[c]entralisation of the means of production and socialisation of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated'.²⁷ Four years later, in the conclusion to *The Civil War in France*, Marx drew up this balance-sheet: the 'cosmopolitan blacklegism' of the Second Empire was countered by authentic internationalism. The Paris Commune, 'as a working men's Government, as the bold champion of the emancipation of labour' (to be achieved in an international framework), was 'emphatically international'. It was no accident if 'the Commune admitted all foreigners to the honour of dying for an immortal cause'.²⁸

The picture became even clearer after the repression conducted by the French bourgeoisie (with the complicity of the Prussian army) and the witch hunt (against members of the International) unleashed by the dominant classes throughout Europe: '[w]hile the European Governments thus testify, before Paris, to the international character of class rule, they cry down the International Working Men's Association—the international counter-organization of labour against the cosmopolitan conspiracy of capital—as the head fountain of all these disasters'.²⁹ The thesis of the 'cosmopolitan conspiracy of capital' errs in forgetting the competition and conflict between the different bourgeoisies to which the *Manifesto* drew attention, and in absolutizing a temporary, short-lived situation. Volume One of *Capital* recalls that 'the June insurrection in Paris' united the different bourgeois countries and 'all fractions of the ruling classes'.³⁰ The observation dates from 1867. Three years later, the Franco-Prussian War broke out and in its wake emerged the Paris Commune, crushed courtesy of an understanding between the former enemies. But it was an understanding that soon gave way to chauvinistic hatred, destined to result in an 'industrial war of extermination between nations', the First World War. During the struggle against that carnage, the first revolution to identify with Marx and Engels broke out and in its wake there developed an anti-colonial movement on a global scale, which targeted the 'exploitation of one nation by another' referred to by the *Manifesto* and contemporaneous texts, but which was totally ignored in 1871 in the wake of the contempt

elicited by Franco-German collaboration in repressing the Paris Commune and the well-nigh general applause of the international bourgeoisie for the attendant massacre.

In other circumstances too, a tendency emerges to interpret the revolutionary process with the binary logic of ‘class against class’. In the late 1850s, as the peasant agitation that shortly led Tsar Alexander II to abolish serfdom in Russia intensified, premonitory signs of the impending civil war become ever clearer in the USA. On the night of 16–17 October 1859, John Brown, a fervent abolitionist from the North, invaded Virginia in a desperate, failed attempt to incite the slaves of the South to rise up. On 11 January of the following year, Marx wrote to Engels:

In my view, the most momentous thing happening in the world today is the slave movement—on the one hand, in America, started by the death of Brown, and in Russia, on the other. ...I have just seen in the *Tribune* that there’s been another slave revolt in Missouri, which was put down, needless to say. But the signal has now been given. Should the affair grow more serious by and by, what will become of Manchester?³¹

What is intimated here is a scenario of well-nigh global revolution, whose protagonist would be black slaves in the USA, serfs in Russia, and wage slaves or workers in Britain. In all three cases, it would involve revolutions from below and class struggles directly confronting their exploiters and oppressors.

It scarcely needs to be said that the gap between such expectations and the actual unfolding of the historical process was considerable. In Britain, despite the fact that the Union’s naval blockade of the slaveholding states occasioned a particularly serious crisis in the textile industry, the workers condemned to unemployment did not allow themselves to be used by those sections of the ruling class which would have liked to urge them onto the streets to demonstrate against Lincoln (and in favour of war against the Union). Marx acknowledged this, although, at the same time the absence of revolution was met with disappointment and even scorn. In a letter to Engels of 17 November 1862, he scoffed at ‘the bourgeois and aristocrats [for their] enthusiasm ... for slavery in its most direct form’ and at ‘the working men [for] their servile Christian nature’.³²

There was no revolution by wage slaves in the wake of a black slave revolution across the Atlantic; in fact, the latter did not materialize either. The courage and dignity with which Brown faced his trial and execution

stirred great emotion in the white community and strengthened the abolitionist party. But the slaves of Virginia and the South did not propel themselves into insurrection, as Brown had hoped and, along with him, Marx and Engels, who followed events from Europe with trepidation. Not only did the desired revolution from below by black slaves not occur, but for a long time, there was no place for them in the conflict waged from above. The call for ‘the arming of all slaves as a military measure’, made by the most radical (white) officers in the Northern army, and favourably highlighted by Marx, fell on deaf ears.³³ To the serious disappointment of Marx and Engels, the American Civil War mostly took the form of a typical inter-state war, waged by both sides with traditional armies. Only towards the end did the Union proceed to enrol free blacks and black slaves who, escaping their masters in the South, encountered the advancing Northern army. Overall, it may be said the Civil War resulted in a kind of abolitionist revolution, but one conducted chiefly from above and whose protagonists were whites—primarily the statesmen and generals of the industrialized North. Marx and Engels were right to deprecate this outcome. The revolution from above proved wholly incomplete. It abolished slavery, but did not involve genuine emancipation of the blacks, who after a brief interval of inter-racial democracy were subjected to a terroristic regime of white supremacy. The point is that the expectation of a general revolt from below by black slaves, serfs and wage slaves clouded the capacity for historical prediction.

The capacity was restored when Marx and Engels distanced themselves from the binary interpretation of social conflict. Some months before Brown’s desperate endeavour, in early 1859, Marx published an article on developments in the situation in Russia, which had just suffered a serious defeat in the Crimean War (against France and Britain) and which, with Alexander II, was to abolish serfdom two years later. There was no reduction in social tension as a result. On the contrary, ‘insurrections of serfs’ had become ‘epidemic’ so that, according to the official statistics from the Interior Ministry, around 60 nobles were killed every year. So determined were the serfs that they entertained the idea of exploiting the advance of French troops to unleash a large-scale revolt.³⁴ Here, as opposed to a general insurrection of the poor against the rich, revolution is anticipated from a conjunction of international war and internal social conflict. We are reminded of October 1917.

4 BINARY LOGIC AND THE ‘SELF-EVIDENCE’ OF EXPLOITATION

Complementing the binary interpretation of the revolutionary process and social conflict is a theory that seems to derive revolutionary class consciousness from direct sensory self-evidence. Capitalist society, observed *The German Ideology* in 1845–6, presents us with

a class ... which has to bear all the burdens of society ... and forced into the sharpest contradiction to all other classes; a class which forms the majority of all members of society, and from which emanates the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution, the communist consciousness, which may, of course, arise among the other classes too through the contemplation [*Anschauung*] of the situation of this class.³⁵

So intolerable are the material living conditions forced on the proletariat that they cannot but rebel and, ‘contemplating’ these, members of other social classes may be induced to challenge the existing order. In other words, sensory self-evidence imposes itself with such force that revolutionary consciousness can, in a way, be taken for granted. In the words of *The Holy Family*,

Since in the fully-formed proletariat the abstraction of all humanity, even of the *semblance* of humanity, is practically complete ... since man has lost himself in the proletariat, yet at the same time has not only gained theoretical consciousness of that loss, but through urgent, no longer removable, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative *need*—the practical expression of *necessity*—is driven directly to revolt against this inhumanity. ...It cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing *all* the inhuman conditions of the life of society today which are summed up in its situation. It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment *regards* as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do.³⁶

The strength of sensory perception entails that proletarians are largely immune from the ideological influences of the dominant class. In dedicating *The Condition of the Working Class in England* ‘to the working-classes of Great Britain’, Engels wrote: ‘[w]ith the greatest pleasure I observed

you to be free from that blasting curse, national prejudice and national pride'. In fact, 'English nationality is annihilated in the working-man'.³⁷

In reality, in contradictory fashion, the same text draws attention to the fact that the competition of Irish workers has 'forced down ... the wages' of English workers. The train of recriminations and resentments can be imagined. In any event, Carlyle (a writer hitherto sympathetic to the Chartist movement) took his cue from this to paint a negative picture of the Irish.³⁸ Three years later, with his focus now on Central and Eastern Europe, Engels summarized the principles adhered to by the dominant classes: they 'employ their skill and efforts to set one nation against another and use one nation to subjugate another, and in this manner to perpetuate absolute rule'.³⁹ Clearly, the proletariat was not immune from the chauvinist wave. The 'obviousness' of exploitation and, with it, the unity of the exploited class disappears so that a binary interpretation of social conflict becomes unsustainable.

All the more so because the class that is the proletariat's antagonist is far from unified. Having drawn attention to the multiple conflicts in which the bourgeoisie of each country is engaged at home and abroad, the *Manifesto* adds that such conflicts 'further, in many ways, the course of development of the proletariat'. In other words, underlying the emergence and development of revolutionary consciousness is a multiplicity of conflicts; and it cannot be deduced exclusively from the antagonism between working class and bourgeoisie.⁴⁰

Hence, far from deriving from some putative sensory self-evidence, revolutionary consciousness presupposes an understanding of political and social relations extending far beyond the conflict between bourgeoisie and proletariat. Revolutionary consciousness is configured as the product of the direct or indirect action of a multiplicity of social subjects and conflicts: the various factions of the bourgeoisie struggling for power within a single country; the bourgeoisie in power in different countries contesting hegemony internationally; the proletariat, which acquires ideology and political autonomy in resisting the influence and blandishments not only of the new ruling class, but also of the old landed aristocracy, which (as we know) seeks to seduce it with the siren songs of 'feudal socialism'.

The process of acquiring class consciousness is all the more tortuous because, in the absence of robust, stable 'combinations' (far from easy to form and maintain), workers, even those in large-scale industry, constitute 'a crowd of people unknown to one another' and 'an incoherent mass ... broken up by their mutual competition'.⁴¹ This is not simply a matter of

competition and conflict between individuals. Later, Engels noted that in Britain unskilled workers were regarded and ‘treated with contempt’ by skilled workers.⁴² Competition can even assume very bitter forms, like the ‘literal battles’ engaged in ‘every morning’ by London dockworkers hoping to be hired on a casual basis.⁴³

It might be said that the protagonist of such battles is the lumpen-proletariat, rather than the proletariat proper. In reality, Engels speaks of ‘poor devils’ who are ‘in the borderland’ between these two classes;⁴⁴ and it is a very fluid border. In fact, on closer inspection, the category of lumpen-proletariat refers to a mutable political function rather than a clearly defined social condition. Depending on the case, it can place itself at the service of the dominant bloc or, more rarely, let itself be drawn into the revolutionary movement. The whites in the USA, who allied with the slave-holding oligarchy, were stigmatized as a ‘mob’ and ‘white trash’—ultimately, as a lumpen-proletariat⁴⁵—on account not of their social condition (which was modest but certainly on the borderline of subsistence), but their political attitude.

Later, in 1870, Engels identified the ‘lumpen-proletariat of the cities’ (along with the ‘petty bourgeois’, ‘small peasants’ and ‘farm labourers’) as a possible ally of the proletariat, which continued to form a minority of the total population, and hence, could aspire to win power only if, by means of appropriate political action, it succeeded in isolating the ruling class.⁴⁶ Here, manifestly, ideological and political maturity and the politics of alliances have taken the place of the decisive role of direct sensory self-evidence and the binary reading of social conflict and the revolutionary process.

5 ‘CLASS STRUGGLES’ OR THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN ‘OPPRESSOR AND OPPRESSED’?

The shape of social conflict is extraordinarily variegated, and its protagonists can be very diverse. However, having drawn attention to ‘class struggles’ (in their various shapes and forms) as the key to interpreting the historical process, the *Communist Manifesto* proceeds:

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 re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.⁴⁷

I have italicized the phrase which, ‘in a word’, equates ‘class struggles’ (in the plural) with the struggle (in the singular) between ‘oppressor and oppressed’. Is this summary correct? To be clearer: does this formula really encapsulate Marx and Engels’ vision of history, politics and ‘class struggles’?

We should first of all observe that in Marx and Engels conflicts between exploiting classes are the rule, not the exception. They explain the French Revolution primarily on the basis of the contradiction between feudal aristocracy and industrial bourgeoisie. The latter, although not forming part of the ruling bloc in the strict sense before 1789, can scarcely be included in the ranks of the ‘oppressed’. Not only did it enjoy increasing wealth and incipient social prestige. But in the factories it already exercised power over an exploited and oppressed class; in the colonies, it had no hesitation in resorting to genocidal practices. Crossing the Atlantic, if we concern ourselves with the ‘bourgeois revolution’ in America, we see that a decisive role was played in it by slave-owners and, above all, those, at odds with the London government, who were determined to expand beyond the Alleghenies and accelerate the process of expropriation and deportation (and decimation) of the Native Americans. Far from being ‘oppressed’, the protagonists of this revolt were sometimes more ferocious ‘oppressors’ than the ruling class overthrown by them. The class struggle which, on Marx and Engels’ interpretation, at any rate, determined both the revolutions we are referring to in no way coincides with the struggle between ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’. Similar considerations apply to the fall or end of the *ancien régime* in nineteenth-century Italy and Germany.

Even if we confine ourselves to class struggles of an emancipatory kind, the picture does not change. While it exploited and oppressed workers, when it led the revolution against the *ancien régime*, the bourgeoisie played an essential role in the struggle against the ‘oppressor’ to be overthrown at that time. The liberation struggles of an oppressed nation or women also witness the participation of social strata that cannot be unequivocally included in the category of ‘oppressed’. As regards the proletarian class struggle, it can sometimes count on the support—but more often must reckon with the hostility—of the sub-proletariat, which may be allied with the oppressed or, more often, the oppressor.

The ambiguity is not dispelled if we confine ourselves to the proletariat in the strict sense. Exploited in the factory, the worker (e.g., the English worker) can be indifferent or even sympathetic to the subjugation of Ireland or India, and thus become an accomplice of the oppressor in this

respect. Let us then take the Irish or Indian worker, doubly oppressed as a member of an exploited class and, at the same time, an oppressed nation. Yet he is the ‘bourgeois’ within the family, while it is the woman who represents the proletariat and is subjected to ‘domestic slavery’. Let us then take a woman who is working-class and Irish. She is trebly oppressed—in the family, in the factory, and as a member of an oppressed nation. But, within the patriarchal family, she too participates in ‘the exploitation of children by their parents’ referred to by the *Manifesto*,⁴⁸ to which communists are determined to put an end.

In other words, each individual (and even group) is located in a contradictory set of social relations, each of which allocates him or her to a different role in each instance. Far from being based on a single ‘relation of coercion’, the world capitalist system is a tangle of multiple and contradictory ‘relations of coercion’. What determines the ultimate location of an individual (and group) in the camp of the ‘oppressor’ or of the ‘oppressed’ is the hierarchical ordering of these social relations in accordance with their political and social relevance in a determinate concrete situation, on the one hand, and the political choice of the single individual (or group), on the other.

6 EXPORTING REVOLUTION?

The difficult, unfinished process of overcoming the binary interpretation of social conflict also makes itself felt negatively in another respect. What are the tasks of the proletariat, once power has been won? It is enjoined by the *Communist Manifesto* to promote the development of the productive forces and the socialist transformation of the country governed by it. Nearly a quarter of a century later, Marx credited the Commune with being engaged in France in ‘uprooting the economical foundations upon which rests the existence of classes, and therefore of class rule’.⁴⁹ Are we dealing with a class struggle from above, whose protagonist is the proletariat in power?

This is a picture that contrasts with the passage in the *Manifesto* which, ‘in a word’, equates class struggle with the clash between ‘oppressor and oppressed’ and, more exactly, with the insurrection of the latter against the former. On these premises class struggle becomes inconceivable after the conquest of power. The eternal antagonist of the ‘oppressor’, the victorious proletariat holding political power cannot any longer be included among the ‘oppressed’. On the other hand, if we

regard proletarians in power as protagonists of a new phase of the class struggle, we shall not only have a class struggle conducted from above but one whose protagonists are not, precisely speaking, the oppressed. Such was the road taken by Lenin, and which Marx himself seems to embark on when he theorizes the ‘revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat’.⁵⁰ But there was considerable hesitation. Perhaps because the prospect of the conquest of power was remote, and regularly frustrated by developments, the one-sided view of class struggle as an uprising by the oppressed situated below against the oppressors located above never completely disappeared.

Given this presupposition, if a class struggle can be conducted by the victorious proletariat in a single country, it is the one that sees it rebel against the domination which the capitalist bourgeoisie continues to exercise in every other country and, ultimately, globally. Accordingly, it is no cause for surprise that the lesson drawn by *Class Struggles in France* from the repression of the workers’ revolt of June 1848 by the French bourgeoisie, and of national uprisings in Hungary, Poland, and Italy by the Austrian and Russian empires, was that the proletarian revolution would be ‘forced to leave its national soil forthwith and conquer the European terrain’ (see Chap. 2, Sect. 6). Here the class struggle of the victorious proletariat seems to consist in exporting the revolution. In its way, this resolves the theoretical difficulty mentioned above. When the whole international picture is taken into account, if they have won power in a single (isolated and surrounded) country, proletarians continue to be the ‘oppressed’ who are called upon to confront the much stronger alliance of ‘oppressors’. Still in 1850, deceiving themselves about the approach of a new revolutionary wave, Marx and Engels explained the objectives of the Communist League as follows:

It is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent, until all more or less possessing classes have been forced out of their position of dominance, the proletariat has conquered state power, and the association of proletarians, not only in one country but all the dominant countries of the world, has advanced so far that competition among the proletarians in these countries has ceased and that at least the decisive productive forces are concentrated in the hands of the proletarians.⁵¹

Having prevailed in one country, the struggle of the revolutionary class crosses state and national borders. It might be said that the ‘anachronistic and unnatural “Napoleonism”’ for which Gramsci reproached Trotsky,⁵² can

already be glimpsed in Marx. Especially given that, at least in his early writings, he tended to conceive socialist revolution by analogy with the bourgeois revolution. *The German Ideology* credits the Napoleonic occupation of Germany with having delivered powerful blows to the feudal edifice, 'by cleaning out Germany's Augean stables'.⁵³ *The Holy Family* is even more emphatic, identifying Napoleon as the ultimate expression of 'revolutionary terror'; he 'perfected the [Jacobin] Terror by substituting permanent war for permanent revolution'.⁵⁴ Although assuming a new form, the anti-feudal class struggle and liquidation of the *ancien régime* continued and, in fact, assumed a European dimension. Here too the bourgeois revolution is interpreted in a binary logic, as if the only operative contradiction is that between bourgeoisie and feudal aristocracy, and as if Napoleonic expansionism did not generate profound national contradictions. In the early writings, at any rate, Marx tended to conceive the socialist revolution on the model of revolution interpreted thus. In late 1847, he addressed the British Chartists as follows:

Of all countries, England is the one where the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is most highly developed. The victory of the English proletarians over the English bourgeoisie is, therefore, decisive for the victory of all the oppressed over their oppressors. Hence Poland must be liberated not in Poland but in England.⁵⁵

National emancipation of the less developed countries of Eastern Europe is represented as a product of the initiative of the proletariat that has arrived in power in the most advanced country.

Export of the revolution does not represent a problem, because the export of counter-revolution was underway or on the agenda. This applies to 1848, as to 1871, when the victorious Prussian army backed up the French bourgeoisie in suppressing the Paris Commune. As we know, on the latter occasion Marx saw the world divided in two between a globally unified bourgeoisie and a proletariat urged to create an 'international counter-organization of labour': the different forms of class struggle were, in effect, reduced to a single form.

NOTES

1. See Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *La Pornocratie, ou les femmes dans le monde moderne*, Paris: Librairie Internationale, 1875.
2. Quoted in Mario Albertini, 'Nota biografica', in Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *La Giustizia nella rivoluzione e nella chiesa* Turin: UTET, 1968, pp. 50–1.

3. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974–2004, Vol. 20, p. 32.
4. *Ibid.*, Vol. 44, p. 255.
5. See Ferdinand Lassalle, ‘Arbeiterprogramm’, in *Reden und Schriften*, Leipzig: Reclam, 1987, p. 221.
6. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 24, p. 89.
7. Lassalle, ‘Arbeiterprogramm’, p. 225.
8. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 27, p. 423.
9. *Ibid.*, Vol. 27, p. 422.
10. *Ibid.*, Vol. 24, p. 45.
11. I derive this information from a note by André Jardin to Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Jacob-Peter Mayer, Paris: Gallimard, 1951–, Vol. 3, pt. 1, pp. 250–51.
12. See Seymour Drescher, *From Slavery to Freedom: Comparative Studies in the Rise and Fall of Atlantic Slavery*, London: Macmillan, 1999, p. 193 n. 58.
13. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 41, p. 390.
14. Lassalle, ‘Arbeiterprogramm’, pp. 280, 310.
15. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, pp. 507–8.
16. *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 518.
17. Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil or The Two Nations*, ed. S.M. Smith, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 65–6, 442.
18. Quoted in William John Wilkinson, *Tory Democracy*, New York: Octagon Books, 1980, p. 52.
19. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 43, p. 429.
20. See Georg Adler, *Die imperialistische Sozialpolitik. Disraeli, Napoleon III, Bismarck. Eine Skizze*, Tübingen: Laupp’sche Buchhandlung, 1897, pp. 43–4.
21. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 582–3.
22. *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 211.
23. *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 485.
24. *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 52.
25. *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 493.
26. *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, pp. 389–90.
27. *Ibid.*, Vol. 35, p. 750.
28. *Ibid.*, Vol. 22, p. 338.
29. *Ibid.*, Vol. 22, p. 354.
30. *Ibid.*, Vol. 35, p. 290.
31. *Ibid.*, Vol. 41, pp. 4–5.
32. *Ibid.*, Vol. 41, p. 430.
33. *Ibid.*, Vol. 19, p. 115.
34. *Ibid.*, Vol. 16, p. 147.
35. *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 52.

36. Ibid., Vol. 4, pp. 36–7.
37. Ibid., Vol. 4, pp. 298, 502.
38. Ibid., Vol. 4, pp. 392, 390.
39. Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 165.
40. Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 493.
41. Ibid., Vol. 6, pp. 210, 492.
42. Ibid., Vol. 48, p. 365.
43. Ibid., Vol. 48, pp. 364, 369.
44. Ibid., Vol. 47, p. 403.
45. Ibid., Vol. 41, pp. 307, 416.
46. Ibid., Vol. 21, pp. 98–9.
47. Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 382.
48. Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 501.
49. Ibid., Vol. 22, p. 334.
50. Ibid., Vol. 24, p. 95.
51. Ibid., Vol. 10, p. 281.
52. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, p. 241.
53. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, pp. 195–6.
54. Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 123.
55. Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 389.