

Class Struggle, Commodification and Modernized Society

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“Forget those commies, I don’t want to work in their factories. Why is it that all these intellectuals and rich college kids think work is cool...It’s only people who have never worked at a dead end job with no future that thinks us working class people give a shit who runs the factory. Work is work; no matter if the boss is a capitalist or all of us.” —Craig E. quoted from *Essays Towards a New Eco-Anarchism*, Chris Kortright

Is class struggle still relevant? The relics of decaying leftist movements would still like us to hold onto this bit of his-story long past its due. As the anti-State publication Black Star North claims, “Suggestions that class struggle is no longer relevant to revolutionary theory and practice should be met with high suspicion. Those who make such claims are either naïve, misguided, or middle/upper class and unwilling to confront their privilege.” (“Towards an Understanding of Class Struggle in the 21st Century”, BSN #3 pg. 27)

Class struggle undoubtedly has its specific origins within the rise of industrial society. The stages of society permeating the social turn in emphasis on production from food rearing to specialization within the varying fields of material goods that accent the idealistic wealth of the times. Agrarian societies certainly had their rich, but most class warriors will focus their attention towards the industrial age that will follow (a detail that will always cause a major problem of historical analysis in the class struggle perspective).

The Rise and Fall of Class Struggle

The rise of class struggle, in the industrial sense that it is most commonly referred to as, comes along during the ages of increasing mechanization and automation. A steady increase from human based power sources to machine based. The technological “advancements” made during this progression made a huge impact on the degrees of severity felt by the working class (the producers). Needless to say, this was accompanied by increasing profits for the upper class (the owners).

It seems extremely important to recognize the differences between the societies of that time and now. The consumer society we live in now is a world apart from the industrial period of yester years (Granted that the same situation still exists, but has just changed on scale considering that the industrial process has not yet been fully automated, but relocated into the extending ‘labor pools’ of second and third world peoples thanks to our globalizing economy.). The vast amounts of labor required by industrial production, and the little amounts of wealth left off to the working class, made such nuances as general stores and vast shopping areas close to nonexistent. The service sector was therefore a mere percentage of the workers, compared to our current society in which this makes up the majority of work being done.

This constant force of dividing labor into more mundane and meaningless positions has completely altered the face of the work force. The worker in our modern stratified society has become even further alienated than the pre-Ford assembly line factory models that Marx spoke of. The effect, in turn, has caused an even greater loss of individual ‘meaning’ in a society flooded with workerist ethics. The entire scenario was hardly even something to be considered in the times of social uprising prior to the Second World War, despite the major steps towards modernization being made throughout the 1800s’ up until this time of ‘material prosperity’, or more commonly misconstrued as the ‘affluent society’ (see Clive Pontings’ *Green History of the World*). This is the

society in which we (the privileged first world, who most likely make up the entire readership of this essay) exist. It seems appallingly apparent that we have moved into post-industrial society (a step which the socialist currents have patently rejected).

Industrial and Post-Industrial Workers

The industrial factory worker slaving away on an hourly wage is a commodity. This is indisputable. The economy turns us all into prostitutes for the capitalists, merely renting our bodies and abilities for the designated economic value (always in light of the capitalist demands or those they have cleverly crafted for the yearning workers [which of course, is all we really are within the religion of economics]). In the period spawned by the times of heavy industrial maturity, we still become further alienated as commodity value. The intrinsic capitalist interests in having producers are of a different nature than the capitalist interests in consumers, a tender breed. While the latter requires more attention and gratification (the effects of synthetic and virtual e-gratification are huge issues in themselves), the industrial worker requires a strict reinforcement of social position as dominated in the physical sense. This is central to an understanding of our current dilemma.

The industrial worker has a clear function within the realm of production. The workerist ethics of our society are born of this situation, and therefore, the industrial worker will be prone to a larger sentiment of solidarity within that context. Doing something so inherent to our way of 'life' creates a profound sense of worth for a large portion of the vanishing industrial worker class (that of which is idealized by the roots of class struggle), despite the blows made to this by the increasing roles of specialization and automation.

The Ford model assembly line of production has in itself been one of the more severe forms of modernization within the factories, and serves as an example for the sentiments within the overall post-industrial society (highlighted by an increasingly economically stratified society, with a constantly raising 'standard of living' accompanied by further stretches towards ultra-rich and its bastard child, ultra-poor). This has only been aided by the atmosphere of corporate assimilated unions, which carries forth a greater blow towards notions of worker solidarity and nurtures the disillusionments of capitalist fantasies. (see *Unions Against Revolution*, J. Zerzan and G. Munis)

The industrial worker was well aware of their role in industrial society as their most recognized value was as a producer. This creates a contingency within the working class, which was easily identified, and even more easily aligned with. It is clear to see that such a context will only bring rise to worker solidarity, of a oneness through the community of exploited. The industrial worker of this era was definitely a commodity to the capitalist system, but within that system, there existed a community, which produced its own value system (while we will clearly recognize the notions that were carried over from their other selves). There was a definition and multifaceted existence of a working class; it was clear and apparent to everyone. Such notions as class-consciousness were hardly radical or economic fringe notions, but a daily reality that could be seen everywhere. It should be no surprise that socialist, communist and syndicalist ideologies would find a place within that era. Yet, contemporary class strugglers aren't willing to let this go. For some the 'working class' remains a constant infallible section of society that no matter what happens, they have their working class solidarity. It is likely such never existed, but any

radical theory is going to have to be realistic about the situation they are in and just whom they are dealing with.

The Death of Class-Consciousness

The ideals of class struggle (the movement that a conscious, working class could take over the means of production and base a society 'each to their own needs, from their own abilities') are of course contextual (not to mention faulty, as we can see from a plentitude of perspectives in hindsight. Including the environmental effects of industrial society as a whole on the planet and individual, the failures in China and Russia, to mention the major ones.).

The general mood of the industrial era was going with the flow of the capitalist vision of constant progression and of worth in the industrial system (with obvious exceptions as the Luddites). The permeating notions of 'Progress' and emphasis on the level of production and standard of living were taken as a norm. The working class was usually a bit more optimistic about the distribution of wealth accumulated, but taking into account the areas of immersion with capitalist conceptualizations, it seems that the outcomes of such a society would still hold to be as lethal as our own (an issue to be dealt with in coming sections).

The most conflicting aspect of Class Struggle and our current society lies here. The times have drastically changed and the attitudes of class-consciousness that were once flagrant in industrial society have been lost into the pages of his-story. Where there was at one point a position in society that a mass of people could relate to, there now exists a field of competition and the lines have all been blurred. There is no solid working class that can identify with the mass collectivized movements that characterize class struggle. Even if such a group did exist, there are few means of productions remaining for them to take over.

There is undoubtedly a large portion of the population, just within the belly of the beast, who would definitely constitute a poor 'class'. The entire notion of work has been completely revamped to fit with the new economy, the almost fully automated workplace, and the ever-expanding realm of the service sector. It is very unlikely to find a solid mass of working class enthusiasts working in supermarkets and super outlet stores. Are there some remnants of organizing labor and class-consciousness? Yes, but the large portion of Marxists and Class Warriors are not out in the mainstream, but in academic pockets of universities or the downsizing remains of factories. There is a reason behind this, that simply is that the exploitation is all still there, but there no longer remains a massive community of consistency that those workers can relate too. The entire face of work has been forever changed.

The Effects of Commodification

The new forms of wage slavery have had profound effects on the contemporary worker. Long gone are working situations in which one can expect to be in the same place in 10, 20, or more years (although who really wants to be?). The centuries of being valued in terms of productivity, output, and all the other economic equations of degradation, have scared the mind to think in no other terms. The bounty of being the 'affluent society' has left us with a whole new set of institutions to further alienate and mediate our existence. The backlashes have been unforeseeable.

Just with the solution to eliminating child labor (forced schooling) has been another depravation of childhood; the most important time for personal development and laying out the limitations of ones own future (see Paul Shepards' *Nature and Madness*). Not that work should ever be considered the alternative; the 'civilized' solution to the original problem has hardly helped the image of the word 'humane'. The child is now forced to spend the majority of their days until the age of 16–18 (at least within the United States) within the confines of one of the more efficient socializing devices available, the school system.

It is in this institution that the children are soaked with the glorious, self-gratifying his-stories of "their" own trials and tribulations. From the beginning of the day, when they are subjected to the 'Pledge of Allegiance', through mind numbing hours of conditioning to the scientific state of mind. The world is laid out, flat on paper, as the map of Empire, subjected to the simplistic equations of mathematicians, the proper dialect of language, the etiquette of proper domestication, and the Pride of being part of the greatest nation to ever grace the face of the flat planet depicted by graphs. Any way you look at it, you come out the product of the capitalist system. The well-rounded consumer: the tuned, efficient worker to further the cause of progress.

In this we will find that we end up in distinguishable social classes. However, the subjective classes of today are very much different from the set social standings of industrial society.

The citizen of post-industrial society is not the conscious industrial worker by any stretch of the imagination. The end product of the early socializing pattern is eager and ambitious. No longer going to be content with a set social standing, but constantly looking up and forward into a dreamy future of becoming wealthy (more of a disease than ghetto anymore).

To be apart of the economy of today is far from that of the inclusive workers of industrialism, and anyone who has been subjected to this degradation knows it. The current working class is hardly any concrete orientation or job category. If we attempt to draw lines as to who is where, we will find more people belong to the middle class than anything, the truth of the matter is that the structure of our society does actually have loopholes that make it possible for the poorest of poor to become superrich. In fact, such occurrences are highlighted excessively to keep such a loophole as being seen as a possibility for all (the reality being that capitalism will always require its 'shit pool' to rob at will, generally consisting of the natural environment, but always inclusive of the poor [poverty itself being the creation of such an intrinsic capitalist need]).

In modernized society, there are no setlines, and that is the selling point of the 'free market'. Essentially anything is possible (most definitely including its' own destruction), but the reality, as class strugglers have constantly kept in light, is that the whole society is 'unjust'. The capitalist system is dependent upon its mainframe of exploitation. This should come as little surprise to most readers here, which in itself could be seen as a kind of monument to the past 'fellow workers' dedicated to the class revolt (not that this was any great feat, in ever emerging trend there are always the whistleblowers). The notion of set social classes in modernized society has less base in reality as all lines are being blurred in the upsurge of capitalist-utopia delusions flood the 'common' vision, better sold as 'OUR future'.

In almost every aspect within our current condition, commodification has succeeded with the influx of misguided notions that we can all be rich. Whatever forms that notion reappears; the individual in consumer society sees the world in terms of capitalist value. The notion that food grows on trees is not seen as much of a truth, but a pipe dream, and generally a not very preferable one. The new domestication (preferred enslavement to technological industrial society) has taught us that food is not something that exists freely, but can be purchased freely at the

many convenient supermarkets that have become a sick satire of the simplicity of finding food in pre-agrarian society.

There are, and always will be, exceptions to this. The many 'revolutionaries' that live off the fringes of our urban lifestyles are as much dependent on this way of 'life' as those who sell their life away at an hourly wage. While the individual sickness of existing in such a world is surely clearly different, one cannot realistically recommend a large-scale revolutionary current of dumpstering and/or stealing food.

The simple truth of the matter is that our society is not any kind of strict class society, regardless of how academics and social theorists map it out. Such a notion is not merely coming from a refusal to confront one's own 'privileges', but from taking in the obvious observation that our society is structured in a completely unique manner, although as with all capitalist systems, the rich are becoming richer, and the poor are becoming poorer. This alone, however, is by no means any indication that class will be, or should be, the determining factor for insurrection or revolution. People know that they're being fucked, the poor know who is rich, but there is no comfort in being a part of a social class. This is why class struggle has continually lost its large-scale devotion and is only met by more cynicism.

The passive nihilism of consumption has absorbed and resold us as many packages of helplessness as can be imagined. It is always possible to break through that domesticated mentality, but the attempts to do so through a dated movement as class struggle has hardly proven to be much of a solution to the problems intrinsic to this way of 'life'. One need only spend at least a little time with the working class of our society (the extreme poor being another 'class') to realize that there is little interest with re-arising as a massive class determined to take the means of production and distribution into their own hands. The drive to find avenues to venture further into the patently optimistic self-reflection of our society (pounded with the required capitalist reminder that 'we have never had it so good') the downtrodden of our society will be more prone to taking this to heart. One's social situation is taken less as a way of life, but as an indication of the effort one has put into 'bettering' their own situation. The scenario has succeeded in drawing many further into the beast than making radicals or class-conscious individuals. The stratification of social standing has only furthered alienation from collective efforts in exchange for a bloodthirsty lust for competition.

The Dangers of Industrial Society

There is no sanctuary in an idealized world of industrialism. The mode of thinking at the time (although still ever stronger in our own time) was on a collision course with the disasters that accompany any society that places such excesses on the environment and the peoples in the culture. This way of living, as best exemplified as our current society that has kept on the path laid out well before the industrial era, has an internalized mechanism that will always cause its own downfall. That is the aspect of continual growth that has remained a constant in civilized society. An industrial system is based upon a readily available and determinable system of agriculture to provide for the new centralized mode that has been developing along side the whole.

With industrialism, we have a situation in which the common necessary resources pertaining to food rearing and distribution have moved from being the base of all occurrences within society, to becoming a support network for the newly emerging base, production. Capitalism (a

symptom of the civilization which sprouts it) has always been dependent on a centralized system of distribution, thus granting power to those in the center, the government. The power in this sense has no longer been left in those who merely produce the foods (the increasing development of new technologies and methods involving and based upon automation have built upon the now century old systems of rearing and brought about a climate of greater manipulation to enhance production). In a sense, the age-old problem of providing adequate food is being dealt with (the overall ecological impacts still out of sight, to only later reappear to give a good kick in the ass, this however, was not something that would necessarily cause immediate problems for said society).

The problem with overcoming this hurdle is that, as human history has shown, the excesses of food have come hand in hand with expansion in population. The system is faulty in that there is no means to essentially enact bounds upon the population. The span of human life within mass society, especially pertaining to fixed living situations, primarily the vastly growing industrial cities (made possible by increasing abilities to move food), has been marked by the common occurrences of outbreaks of diseases. In any other society, this would in essence be one method of keeping the population in check. The civilized response in turn has been to consistently ignore the warnings, find a quick solution and carry on full speed (the problem of increasing immunity to super antibiotics should come as no surprise, our modern medicine is meant to 'heal' in the most superficial immediate sense of the word, we are constantly finding the downfalls of such an approach).

What this means is that industrialized living, without any kind of massively implemented program of limitation, will always be bound to the situation of constant growth (these programs, as even failures in historical senses, will lead towards fascist tendencies, and the likelihood of their success should be considered as ridiculous as past attempts to 'weed out'). The costly effects of which have been dealt with in great deals elsewhere. There simply cannot be (and we are seeing increasingly that there should not be) a sustainable or suitable industrial society, which is the only ideal society for the outcomes of class struggle.

The Revolt Against Work

It is becoming increasingly clear that the problem is not whom is the boss (be it an individual, a corporation, or the majority of the 'working class'), but that we have to work at all. We are always looking for the 'path of least resistance'. Communal work is still work, especially when it feeds the production/consumer dichotomy.

Every bit of work we do, especially any that would be available should the class struggle wish to attempt to maintain cities, feeds the alienation that accompanies life within a synthetic reality. There is hardly anything that can be done anymore that a person can see a process all the way through. There is very little sowing and reaping of harvests in cities (overlooking the fact that there is little glory in this tediously mechanistic labor, despite what the peasant idealizers would suggest), or any kind of sustaining project. The larger the society, the less 'meaningful' work there is to be done, but there will always be those 'little things' which become necessary in order to provide for the whole. It will therefore always be someone's job to produce and maintain such things. Any way you look at this, it will always be work. It is not much of a stretch to see the possible joy of communal food gathering or production (most especially by the endless

possibilities of doing this on an individual basis), but it really stretches to think that there will be that same feeling of enthusiasm and joy for building tractors and all the mundane shit work that would have to make such an event possible. This is a realistic feat that class strugglers have downplayed. Granted post-capitalist/civilized situation is going to be filled with obstacles, but it seems clear that some are easier to just skip entirely, the industrial system being one of the more obvious of choices.

The Transitory Dilemma

It is not at all uncommon to hear of class struggle as a means to an end. As has been shown in the previous pages, however, that seems very debatable outside of certain industrialist areas. This brings light to the whole notion of possible transitions from a capitalist/civilized order, a constant sore spot in revolutionary theory. It seems that to merely have a vision of what is likely or possible must be accompanied by a play-by-play scenario with how to jump from here to there. That aspect of revolutionary theory seems, at most, to be almost completely useless as any kind of praxis. Revolutions failing have hardly been due to a lack of guidelines, but exceedingly more common is the failure of oversight.

This aspect of theory is where we will most likely find the traces of civilized thought that refuse to let go. For some reason or another, the possibility of revolution occurring spontaneously is always upheld, but moving beyond is hardly given much credit. Transitory theories are laid out from every angle, but why is it that we think that those theories will work? In most cases, it seems that those 'stages' are a progression of letting go of certain vices of capitalism. For class struggle, that vice would be the notion of a ruling class, bosses. For others, those vices could be centralized governing structures, some could be schools, some could be work, but what could really be more utopian than the thought that there will be some massive, voluntary downgrading of civilized vices? Why do we think we could get so far, but still 'need' this and that, or that something will spark in people and put them in the position to be 'enlightened' into groupthink?

I would never claim to possess any special or original knowledge on the subject, but it seems that if we are serious about taking out this way of life, that it would do us much better to work at dismantling all this as many ways as we can. I don't think making up possible scenarios for what may happen will be as successful as attempting to take this whole thing out of commission. Not that anyone one can do that, but if there is going to be anything, why not that? We live in a very fucked up society, and there is arguably more depression and alienation now than ever, but people aren't going to always just give up on it. And no matter what anyone thinks, those grips they have on capitalist society aren't going to stop the inevitable collapse from happening. It seems apparent that any realistic revolutionary praxis would lie in welcoming the inevitable and working to make the crash not so harsh as it would be.

I will be the last to say that many transitory actions are worthless. Certain acts, especially permaculture and other attempts to help 'rewild' our lives and our bioregions, are absolutely vital to the permanence of this planet and life on it. Movements that attempt to stop civilization from destroying all wildness play an extremely important role. Actions that seek to help people overcome the alienation and depravation of our mediated life are some of the most important ones. These are all important things, but we should always take them just as what they are, things that lessen the blow and make life more meaningful again.

Colonization and its Discontents

The problem that has commonly been overlooked (or in even worse scenarios, assimilated) by class strugglers is that the new nations that are being brought into the global economy are intrinsically different from our own situation. For class struggle to have any real meaning to those who are in the processes of being colonized (despite the mass media conceptions, this is most definitely non-voluntary for the most part) they would have to further move into the capitalist economy and continue the process of industrialization (which Marx and Engel's had been known to suggest they ought to do). So the destined path of humans, as pushed by the colonizers, remains that progress and development are the reason for our existence. Even from the supposed 'resistance' movements within the 'first world nations', the colonized are given no chance to remain autonomous. (This debate has been pursued for some time now, and a bit of it has been well chronicled in *Marxism and Native Americans*, edited by Ward Churchill.)

Is the above situation a per se aspect of class struggle? Not necessarily, but none-the-less, it is an aspect of the greater indication of the limits that class struggle offers, and highlights the minute contextual basis that it currently holds. This is what globalizing capitalism is working off of, and further evidence of the need for a total revolution. There are no more means of production that exist to be taken over, or at least any that would provide any kind of sustenance for societies, unless they remain within the globalized economy.

It simply is not going to provide any good for the sweatshops to be seized by the workers, the clerks to seize control of the convenience stores, the relocated farm hands to seize the control of the harvest, the rig workers to seize control of an offshore oil rig. The examples could go on, but they all point to one thing, that is the inevitable fatality of this way of life. If we are going to move beyond this, it is going to have to be something intrinsically different from the direction we are heading.

Contemporary Revolt

To conclude, we come back to the initial question of, "is class struggle still relevant?" It seems, that based on a more broad based analysis of our current situation that class struggle is relevant, but that its' relevance is becoming increasingly less important to the end of our current exploitative framework. The role of class struggle, as a historical and cumulative effort, will forever be apart of revolt against civilization. The State is best maintained by a fluid changing of situation, as a form of progression, but also serves a greater function of severing the movements of revolt from their earlier forms. With this understanding, we must always consider the changing times require new perspectives against the common delusions of things being forever 'better than before.' Such is the way that the totality of civilized thought seeks to eradicate and neutralize any radical currents into a state of passive nihilism and further assimilation into the faceless masses of existence.

The present, in its current standings and the resistance to it, has been shaped by the history of class struggle (on top of all those who throughout the past of civilized existence have fought to keep the Megamachine from expanding). I'm personally reminded of these things on a daily basis, as is everyone within our society so prone to building monuments to itself. Here in western Pennsylvania, within range of Pittsburgh, one can everywhere see the his-torical jabs that the capitalists have made. Not far from here is Carnegie-Mellon University, across the city is Carnegie

Science Center, throughout the city and surrounding areas you will find the many Henry Clay Frick parks and hospitals. One who is aware of the social past of these industrialists and their deadly social endeavors (the community contributions of Frick and his Pinkertons lay great example), can only feel a greater feeling of solidarity for such class warriors as Alexander Berkman for making their stand and (literally) taking a shot at the capitalist system.

Revolt against this system will always require critical analysis with stress on historical resistance, but we can never dwell upon anyone more than others. We are people with a plentitude of origins that create our subjective reality. It seems apparent that revolt aimed at dismantling the giant beast of civilization will require constant adaptation to the current situation. So perhaps the initial question should not be of the relevance of class struggle, but the role in which class society has played in the creation of our current society and how that may help us dismantle it.

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