



Reflections on Class Theory

I

According to theory,¹ history is the history of class struggles. But the concept of class is bound up with the emergence of the proletariat. Even when it was still revolutionary, the bourgeoisie called itself the third estate. By extending the concept of class to prehistory, theory denounces not just the bourgeois, whose freedom, together with their possessions and education, perpetuates the tradition of the old injustice. It also turns against prehistory itself. It destroys the illusion of a good-natured patriarchy that had been assumed by prehistory following the victory of inexorable capitalist calculation. The venerable unity of a traditional structure, the natural right of hierarchy in a society that was presented as having grown organically, turned out to be a unity of interested parties. That hierarchy had always been a coercive organization designed for the appropriation of the labor of others. Natural law is historical injustice that has become obsolete; the articulated organism is a system of divisiveness; the picture of the estates is the ideology that—with its themes of honest merit, loyal work, and, lastly, the exchange of equivalents—was ideally suited to the newly installed bourgeoisie.

By exposing the historical necessity that had brought capitalism into being, political economy became the critique of history as a whole, whose immutable nature was the source of the privileged status of capitalism as well as its forbears. To recognize the catastrophic violence in the latest form

of injustice, that is to say, the latent injustice contained in fair exchange, means simply to identify it with the prehistory that it destroyed. If all the oppression that man has ever inflicted on man culminates in the modern age in the cold inhumanity of free wage labor, then the past is revealed in conditions and things—the romantic contrast to industrial reason—as the trace of former suffering. The archaic silence of pyramids and ruins becomes conscious of itself in materialist thought: it is the echo of factory noise in the landscape of the immutable. Jacob Burckhardt hazards the suggestion that the parable of the cave in Plato's *Republic*, with its sublime symbolism of the doctrine of eternal ideas, derived from the horrendous image of the Athenian silver mines.^a This implies that the philosophical idea of eternal truth had sprung from the contemplation of present torment. All history is the history of class struggles because it was always the same thing, namely, prehistory.

II

This gives us a pointer as to how we can recognize what history is. From the most recent form of injustice, a steady light reflects back on history as a whole. Only in this way can theory enable us to use the full weight of history to gain an insight into the present without succumbing in resignation to the burden of the past. Members of the bourgeoisie and their supporters have been loud in their praise of Marxism on account of its dynamism, in which they detect the same industrious mimicry of history that characterizes their own efforts. According to the appreciative comments of Ernst Troeltsch in his book on historicism, Marxist dialectic has “preserved its constructive power and its ability to adapt to the fundamental mobility of the real.”^b This praise of the constructive ability to adapt arouses our distrust of that fundamental mobility. Dynamism is merely one side of dialectic: it is the side preferred by the belief in practicality, masterful action, the indefatigable “can-do” attitude, because constant change is the best way to conceal the old untruth.

^a See Jakob Burckhardt, *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, vol. 1, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1908), p. 164 n. 5.

^b Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1922), p. 315.

The other, less popular aspect of dialectic is its static side. The self-movement of the concept, the conception of history as a syllogism, as it is to be found in Hegel's philosophy, is no developmental doctrine. It was only turned into one by the collusive misunderstanding of the humanities. The law that, according to the Hegelian dialectic, governs the restlessly destructive unfolding of the ever-new consists in the fact that at every moment the ever-new is also the old lying close at hand. The new does not add itself to the old but remains the old in distress, in its hour of need, as it becomes topical as an immanent contradiction through its act of reflection, its indispensable confrontation with the universal in the old. Thus throughout all its antithetical mediations, history remains one vast analytic proposition. That is the historical essence of the metaphysical doctrine of the identity of subject and object in the Absolute. The system of history, the elevation of the temporal to the totality of meaning, abolishes time and reduces it to an abstract negation.

As a philosophy, Marxism remained true to this. It confirms Hegelian idealism as prehistory's knowledge of its own identity. But it puts it back on its feet by unmasking that identity as prehistorical. For Marxism, the identical truly becomes a state of need, the need of the human beings who are merely articulated by the concept. The irreconcilable power of the negative that sets history in motion is the power of what exploiters do to the victims. As a shackle binding one generation to the next, it functions as an obstacle to both freedom and history. The systematic unity of history, which is supposed to give meaning to individual suffering or else demote it from on high to the level of something fortuitous, is the philosophical appropriation of the labyrinth in which men have toiled to this day, the epitome of suffering.

Within the sphere of influence of the system, the new—progress—is, like the old, a constant source of new disaster. Knowing the new does not mean adapting oneself to it and to the movement of history; it means resisting its inflexibility and conceiving of the onward march of the battalions of world history as marking time. Theory knows of no "constructive force" but only of one that lights up the contours of a burned-out prehistory with the glow of the latest disaster in order to perceive the parallel that exists between them. The latest thing is always the old terror, the myth, which consists in that blind continuum of time that continually retracts itself, with patient, stupidly omniscient malice, just like Oknos's ass, which

eats the rope as fast as he twines it. Only he who recognizes that the new is the same old thing will be of service to whatever is different.

III

The latest phase of class society is dominated by monopolies; it tends toward fascism, the form of political organization worthy of it. While it vindicates the doctrine of class struggle with its concentration and centralization, extreme power and extreme impotence directly confronting one another in total contradiction, it makes people forget the actual existence of hostile classes. The monopolies are assisted much more by such forgetfulness than by the ideologies that have meanwhile become so attenuated that they declare themselves to be lies in order to show those who believe in them how impotent they really are. The total organization of society by big business and its ubiquitous technology has taken such utter possession of the world and the imagination that even to conceive of the idea that things might be otherwise calls for an almost hopeless effort. The diabolical image of harmony, the invisibility of the classes caused by the petrified mold in which they are held fast, can only gain such power over people's minds because the idea that the oppressed, the workers of the world, might unite as a class and put an end to the horror seems doomed in the light of the present distribution of power and impotence.

The leveling of mass society that is so bitterly lamented by cultural conservatives and their sociological henchmen is in truth nothing but the desperate elimination of difference from the identity of the masses. They, the prisoners of the system, strive to bring about this leveling by imitating their stunted rulers in the hope of receiving a pittance in their old age, if only they can prove themselves worthy. The belief that they might be able to form an organized class and conduct a class war crumbles in the minds of the dispossessed along with liberal illusions. This is not very different from the way in which, once upon a time, the desire of the bourgeoisie to dress itself up as an estate could be undermined by the mockery of revolutionary workers' associations. Class struggle is dismissed and sent to join the ranks of ideals, where it has to make do with slogans about tolerance and humanity in the speeches of trade-union leaders. The age when people could build barricades now lies almost as firmly in the past as the time when a craftsman's trade was a solid foundation for life.

The omnipotence of repression and its invisibility are the same thing. The classless society of car drivers, cinema goers, and comrades makes a mockery not only of those who do not belong but even of those who do, the objects of domination who dare not admit as much to others or even to themselves because simply knowing one is such an object is punished by gnawing fear for one's job and one's life. So great has the tension become between the poles that never meet that it has ceased to exist. The immeasurable pressure of domination has so fragmented the masses that it has even dissipated the negative unity of being oppressed that forged them into a class in the nineteenth century. In exchange, they find they have been directly absorbed into the unity of the system that is oppressing them. Class rule is set to survive the anonymous, objective form of the class.

IV

This makes it essential to scrutinize the concept of class closely enough for us to take hold of it and simultaneously change it. Take hold of it, because its basis, the division of society into exploiters and exploited, not only continues unabated but is increasing in coercion and solidity. Change it, because the oppressed who today, as predicted by the theory, constitute the overwhelming majority of mankind are unable to experience themselves as a class. Those among them who claim the name mean by it for the most part their own particular interest in the existing state of affairs, much as the leaders of industry make use of the word "production."

The distinction between exploiters and exploited is not so visible as to make it obvious to the exploited that solidarity should be their ultimate ratio; conformity appears more rational to them. Membership in the same class by no means translates into equality of interests and action. The contradictory nature of the concept of class that is wreaking such havoc today is to be sought less among the labor aristocracy than in the egalitarian character of the bourgeoisie. If the critique of political economy means the critique of capitalism, then the concept of class, its center, is modeled on the bourgeoisie itself. As the anonymous unity of the owners of the means of production and their various appendages, the bourgeoisie is the class par excellence. But the egalitarian character that makes it so is dissolved by the critique of political economy, not just in comparison with the proletariat but also as a defining factor of the bourgeoisie itself. Free competition

among capitalists entails the same injustice as they, when taken collectively, commit against wage laborers.

For exploitation does not occur just in the process of exchange but is rather produced through the system as such. Equal rights and equal opportunities among the competing parties are largely a fiction. Their success depends on the power of their capital outside the competitive process, a power they already possess on entering the marketplace. It depends further on the political and social power they represent, on old and new conquistador spoils, on their affiliation with feudal property that a competitive economy has never entirely liquidated, and on their relations with the direct governing apparatus of the military. The equality of interests reduces itself to sharing in the booty of the large owners, something that is granted when all owners concede to the large ones the principle of sovereign ownership that guarantees them their power and the scope for expanded production: the class as a whole must be prepared for utter surrender to the principle of property ownership, by which is meant the property of the large owners in the first instance.

Bourgeois class consciousness aspires to protection from above, the concession that the truly dominant owners make to those who sell themselves to them body and soul. Bourgeois tolerance wants to be tolerated. It does not mean justice for those at the bottom of the pile, not even for those members of its own class who find themselves condemned by those above them "in the spirit of objectivity." The law of the exchange of equivalents and its reflexes in the political and the legal systems is the compact that regulates the relations between the core of the class and its majority, the bourgeois vassals, and it regulates them tacitly in the interests of existing power relations. In other words, real though the class is, it is also ideology in equal measure. If theory shows that there is something questionable about the idea of fair exchange, bourgeois freedom, and humanity, this sheds light on the dual nature of the class. This duality consists in the fact that its formal equality has the function both of oppressing the class with which it is contrasted and of using the strongest to control members of its own.

Theory denounces the bourgeois class as a unity, a class against the proletariat, in order to expose the fact that the universal interest it claims to represent possesses a particularist dimension. But this particularist unity is necessarily a non-unity in itself. The egalitarian form of the class serves as an instrument to protect the privilege of the dominant segment over its supporters while concealing it. The critique of liberal society cannot stop

short at the concept of class, which is both as true and as false as the liberal system itself. Its truth is its critical aspect: it designates the unity in which particular bourgeois interests are made real. Its untruth lies in the non-unity of the class. Its immanent determination by the state of power relations is the tribute it is forced to pay to its own particularity, which its unity benefits. Its real non-unity is veiled by its no less real unity.

V

In the market economy the untrue aspect of the concept of class was latent: in monopoly capitalism it has become as visible as its truth—the survival of classes—has become invisible. Competition and its struggles have led to the disappearance of much of the unity of the class, which previously held the competitors together in the form of the rules of the game and of common interests. It is so easy for the bourgeoisie to deny its own class character to the proletariat because in fact its organization has cast off the consensual form of like interests that had constituted it as a class in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It has replaced this with the direct economic and political command of the large capitalists that used the same threat of the police against both their own supporters and the workers. This imposes on both sections of the population the same function and the same need, and it is this that makes it almost impossible for the workers to see that class relations are at work.

Theory's prognosis of a few owners and an overwhelming mass of the expropriated has come true, but instead of becoming glaringly obvious, this has been conjured out of existence by the mass society in which class society has culminated. The ruling class disappears behind the concentration of capital. This latter has reached a magnitude and acquired a weight of its own that enables capital to present itself as an institution, as the expression of society as a whole. By virtue of its omnipotence, the particular is able to usurp the totality: this overall social aspect of capital is the end-point of the old fetish character of the commodity according to which relations between men are reflected back to them as relations between things.

Today, the entire order of existence has turned into such things. In this social order, the proletariat discovers that with the free market, which for the workers had always been a lie, the path to the formation of a class is now objectively blocked. And now it is even closed off by the conscious

will and practical measures of the rulers in the name of the great totality, in other words, them. However, if the workers wish to live, they must fall into line. Everywhere, self-preservation pushes them via the collective in the direction of conspiratorial cliques. The division between leader and led to be found in the ruling class reproduces itself compulsively further down the ladder. The trade unions become monopolies, and their officials become bandits who call for blind obedience from those permitted to become members. They terrorize outsiders but are loyally prepared to share the spoils with other monopolists, if these have not already taken over the entire organization in the form of open fascism.

This development has put an end to the episode of liberalism; the dynamics of yesterday are unmasked as the ossified prehistory of today, namely, the anonymous class as the dictatorship of the self-appointed elite. Even political economy, the conception of which theory grimly gave to liberalism, is proving to be ephemeral. Economics is a special case of economizing, lack prepared for domination. The laws of exchange have not led to a form of rule that can be regarded as historically adequate for the reproduction of society as a whole at its present stage. Instead, it was the old form of rule that had joined the economic apparatus so that, once in possession, it might smash it and thus make its own life easier. By abolishing the classes in this way, class rule comes into its own. In the image of the latest economic phase, history is the history of monopolies. In the image of the manifest act of usurpation that is practiced nowadays by the leaders of capital and labor acting in consort, it is the history of gang wars and rackets.

VI

Marx died before he could develop the theory of class, and the working class let the matter rest there. Even in its rudimentary form, the theory was not merely the most effective tool of agitation but an active instrument of conflict in the age of bourgeois democracy, the proletarian mass party, and strikes, before the open victory of monopoly and the growth of unemployment had become second nature. Only the revisionists entered into a discussion of the class question, and they did so in order to cloak the initial stages of their betrayal with the denial of class war, their statistical appreciation of the middle strata, and their praise of a generalized progress.

The hypocritical denial of the existence of classes moved the responsible exponents of theory to guard the concept of class as a pedagogic tactic, without attempting to take it any further. This was a source of weakness, and it means that the theory must take some of the blame for the degeneration of practice. Bourgeois sociology of all nations exploited this weakness to the full. Bourgeois sociology may have been deflected from its own course by Marx, as if by a magnet, and become the more strident in its own defense, the more it insisted on value-free neutrality. Nevertheless, its positivist ideology, its close adherence to the facts, was able to score points wherever the facts put a stunted theory in the wrong.

For the theory had declined to the point where even in its own eyes statements of fact had become an article of faith. The nominalism characteristic of its method of research reduced the essential fact, namely, class, to an ideal type and banished it to the realm of methodology, while abandoning reality to a cult of unique events that the theory merely garnished. This pattern went hand in hand with studies that found the concept of class—for instance, in its specific political equivalent of the Party—guilty of possessing those oligarchic features that the theory had neglected or treated reluctantly in an appendix entitled “Monopoly Capitalism.” The more thoroughly the facts were cleansed of the concrete concept—namely, the concept of their relation to the present state of exploitation, which is contained in all factual material and determines it—the more easily they fitted into the abstract concept that applies to all times and places and over which that general framework has no influence precisely because it is an abstraction.

Oligarchy, integration, and division of labor cease to be aspects of the history of domination, a dark forest you can no longer see because it is obscured by the green trees of people’s own lives. Instead, they become general categories of the socialization of mankind. The skepticism toward the so-called metaphysics of class becomes the norm in the realm of formal sociology: classes are said not to exist because of the unshakable facts. The facts are unshakable because they are made to take the place of class, and wherever the sociological gaze seeks the stones of class, it discovers only the bread of the elites, and learns daily that you simply cannot dispense with ideology. And since sociology always acts in this way, the cleverest thing it can do is to leave the forms of socialization unscathed and, perhaps with bleeding heart, adopt the cause of the unavoidable elite as one’s own ideology.

It would be a sign of pure impotence to try to ward off this deeply rooted delusion by appealing to counterexamples—by denying the oligarchic nature of the mass party, or by refusing to acknowledge that the theory really had become ideology in the mouths of its officials. To argue in that way would mean importing the spirit of apologia into the theory against which the apologists of the bourgeoisie have already spun their web.

Nothing helps but to turn the truth of the sociological concepts against the untruth that produced them. What sociology can advance against the reality of classes is nothing but the principle of class society: the universality of socialization is the form in which domination has historically been able to prevail. This abstract unity has been assembled from blind facts, and from these sociology imagines it has been able to perfect its mirage of a classless society. But in reality this unity means the demotion of human beings to objects, a demotion brought about by the system of domination and adopted by the classes themselves today. The sociologists' neutrality reiterates that social act of violence, and the blind facts that conceal this are the ruins to which the world has been reduced by an ordered system with which the sociologists get on famously.

The general laws are no argument against the lawless future because their universality is the logical form of the repression that must be abolished if mankind is not to relapse into the state of barbarism from which it has never emerged. That democracy is oligarchy is the fault not of human beings who, according to the opinion and the interest of their mature leaders, are not mature enough for democracy, but of the inhumanity that inscribes privilege in the objective necessities of history. The fact that the dialectic of class ends in a naked clique system spells the end of sociology, which always intended that very thing. Its formal invariant factors turn out to be predictions of the latest material trends. The theory that learns how to identify the different gangs within the classes today is a parody of the formal sociology that denies the existence of class in order to make those gangs permanent.

VII

The aspect of the Marxist theory of class that is most susceptible to an apologist critique seems to be the theory of pauperization. Shared poverty turns proletarians into a class. Their poverty follows from their place in the

production process of the capitalist economy and develops with that process to the point where the poverty becomes unbearable. In this way poverty becomes a force in the revolution that aims to stamp out poverty. The proletariat has nothing to lose but its chains and has everything to gain: the choice will not be difficult, and bourgeois democracy is progressive enough to give scope for the formation of class organizations that will bring about the revolution by weight of numbers.

Against this argument all the statistics can be marshalled. The proletariat does have more to lose than its chains. Measured against conditions in England a century ago as they were evident to the authors of the *Communist Manifesto*, their standard of living has not deteriorated but improved. Shorter working hours; better food, housing, and clothing; protection for family members and for the worker in his old age; an average increase in life expectancy—all these things have come to the workers with the development of the technical forces of production. There can be no question of their being driven by hunger to join forces and make a revolution. This puts the possibility of organization and mass revolution in doubt. The individual thrives better in an organization of special interests than in one opposed to them; the concentration of technical and military resources on the side of the employers is so formidable as to consign old-style uprisings to the tolerated realm of heroic memory. Moreover, it is quite improbable that bourgeois democracy, where its facade still exists, would permit the emergence of a mass party that really contemplates the revolution it talks about. Thus the traditional argument about pauperization collapses. To try and shore it up with a makeshift concept of “relative pauperization,” as was attempted at the time of the revisionist debate, could occur only to social-democratic counterapologists whose ears have been so deafened by their own shouts that they could not even hear the ridicule that the term “relative pauperization” would bring down on their heads.

What is essential here is the concept of pauperization itself, not its sophisticated modification. However, it is a strict concept from economics, defined by the absolute law of accumulation. The industrial reserve army, overpopulation, and pauperism grow in proportion to “functioning capital,”^c and at the same time they depress wages. Pauperization is the flip side

^c Karl Marx, *Capital*, ed. Friedrich Engels, vol. 1 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1967), p. 644.

of the free play of economic forces in the liberal system, whose theory is reduced ad absurdum by the Marxist analysis: with the growth in social wealth there is also, under capitalist relations of production with their immanent systemic compulsions, a corresponding growth in social poverty. Presupposed here is the undisturbed, autonomous running of the mechanisms of the economy postulated by liberal theory, in other words, the coherence of the *tableau économique* to be analyzed in each case. All other modifying factors are consigned to the various "circumstances" "the analysis of which does not concern us here."^d However, this shows that the pauperization thesis is itself dependent upon the dual nature of class, the distinction between direct and indirect repression that its concept contains. Pauperization does exist to the degree that the bourgeois class really is an anonymous and unconscious class, and that both it and the proletariat are dominated by the system.

As a purely economic necessity, the process of pauperization is absolute: if liberalism were the liberalism for which Marx takes it, there would be the same pauperism even in times of peace that is to be found today in the countries defeated in war. But the ruling class is not just governed by the system; it rules through the system and ultimately dominates it. The further modifying factors lie outside the system of political economy but are central to the history of domination. In the process of liquidating the economy, they are not modifying factors but the essence. To this extent they affect pauperization: pauperization must not become visible lest it blow the system apart. In its blindness the system is dynamic, and it accumulates poverty, but the self-preservation it brings about through its dynamism also peters out vis-à-vis poverty in a static condition that has always been the pedal point of the prehistorical dynamism. The less the acquisition of alien labor under monopoly conditions is carried out through the laws of the marketplace, the feebler, too, the reproduction of society as a whole. The pauperization theory implies the direct application of market categories in the shape of competition among the workers, leading to a fall in the price of the commodity of labor power, whereas in reality this competition with all it entails has become as questionable as competition between capitalists.

The dynamics of poverty are brought to a halt by the process of accumulation. The improvement or stabilization of the economic situation

^d Ibid.

of the lower classes is extraeconomic: the higher standard of living is paid for out of income or monopoly profits, not out of variable capital. It is unemployment benefit, even if it is called by some other name, or indeed even if the semblance of work and wages is maintained: in the minds of the rulers, it is a gift, a handout. Goodwill and psychology have nothing to do with it. The rationale of such progress is the system's consciousness of the conditions that enable it to be perpetuated, not the unconscious mathematics of the processes concerned. Thus Marx's prognosis finds itself verified in an unsuspected way: the ruling class is so well fed by alien labor that it resolutely adopts as its own cause the idea that its fate is to feed the workers and to "secure for the slaves their existence within slavery" in order to consolidate its own. At the start, the pressure of the masses, the potential revolution, could bring about a change of course. Later, with the strengthening of the monopolistic centers, the position of the working classes was improved further by the prospect of benefits beyond their own firmly defined economic systems—rather than directly through colonial profits. The final consolidation of power is included in all elements of the calculation. The theater of a cryptogenic—as it were, censored—poverty, however, is that of political and social impotence. It turns all men into mere administrative objects of the monopolies and their states, on a par with those paupers of the liberal era who have been allowed to die out in our own age of high civilization. This impotence permits wars to be waged in all nations. Just as war confirms the *faux frais* [incidental expenses] of the power apparatus as profitable investments once the war is over, it also cashes in the credit of poverty that the dominant cliques cleverly managed to defer, although that same cleverness finds itself confronting an immovable barrier when it comes to poverty itself. Poverty can be eliminated only by the overthrow of the dominant cliques, and not by a process of manipulation, however disguised.

VIII

"If something falls, give it an extra push." Nietzsche's dictum expresses in the form of a maxim a principle that defines the actual practice of class society. It becomes a maxim only against the ideology of love in a world full of hate. Nietzsche belongs to the tradition of bourgeois thinkers since the Renaissance whose indignation with the untruth of society drives them

cynically to play off its truth as an ideal against the ideal. Through this critical force of confrontation, they come to the aid of that other truth that they fiercely deride as the untruth into which it has been transformed by the magic of prehistory. However, the maxim says more than the thesis of *bellum omnium contra omnes* [the war of all against all], which stands at the gateway to the age of competition. The alliance of pushing and falling is a symbol of the ancient double character of class that is only becoming visible today. The objective tendency of the system is always duplicated, stamped, and legitimated by the conscious will of those who control it. For the blind system is the domination itself; this is why it always benefits the rulers, even when it seems to threaten them. The midwife services of the ruling classes testify to their knowledge of this and restore the meaning of the system whenever it is concealed by the objective character of the historical process, its alienated shape. There is a tradition of free bourgeois actions, from the Gunpowder Plot—and perhaps even the mutilation of the statues of Hermes in Athens [in BC 415]—down to the Reichstag fire, and of intrigues such as the bribing of the Hindenburgs and the meeting with Schroeder, the banker,² upon which the connoisseur of the objective tendency looks down with disdain. He evidently regards such episodes as mere coincidences that the world antispirit seizes upon in order to bring about its own triumph. However, such actions are perhaps not as coincidental as all that; they are acts of freedom testifying that the objective historical trend is a delusion unless it harmonizes with the subjective interests of those who use history to order history about.

Reason is a good deal more cunning even than Hegel believed. Its secret is less that of the passions than of freedom itself. In prehistory freedom is the power of the cliques over the anonymous catastrophes that go by the name of fate. The cliques are overwhelmed by the illusion of essence that they have themselves brought into play, and for that reason they only appear to be overwhelmed. History is progress in the consciousness of their own freedom passing right through historical objectivity, and this freedom is nothing but the flip side of the unfreedom of others. That is the true interaction between history and the gangs, the “inner identity . . . in which . . . necessity is raised to freedom.”^e

^e G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 570.

Idealism, which is rightly accused of transfiguring reality, is at the same time the most terrible truth about the world: even in its moments of positive assertion, its doctrine of freedom, it transparently contains the covering image of its opposite, and where it claims men have escaped, that is precisely the point in prehistory where they have succumbed to their fate. Not, indeed, in the Prussian state but in Hitler's charisma freedom comes into its own as the repetition of necessity. If the masses are reluctant to listen to any more talk of freedom, this is not simply their fault, nor a reflection of the way the word has been abused. They suspect that the world of coercion was in fact always the world of freedom, command, assertion, and that the free man is the man who is in a position to take liberties. Anything truly different has no name, and what stands in for it at present—solidarity, tenderness, consideration, reflection—has precious little to do with the freedom of the men who are free today.

IX

The social impotence of the proletariat is the product of conflicting tendencies. On the one hand, there is economic pauperization, on the other, the extraeconomic improvement of the standard of living. This impotence was not foreseen by the theory. The predominating insight into the first tendency goes hand in hand with the expectation that the pressure of poverty would lead directly to the power to resist the oppressor. However, the idea of impotence is not alien to the theory. It appears under the name of dehumanization. Just as industry calls for victims of physical mutilation, sickness, and deformation, it also threatens to deform consciousness. The theory explicitly mentions the brutalization of the workers who compulsively do to those who are dependent upon them what has been done to them, as well as their growing alienation from the mechanized labor process that they can no longer comprehend.

But the theory does not inquire how people so affected could become capable of action that calls not just for cleverness, an overview, and presence of mind, but also for extreme self-sacrifice. The danger of psychologism was averted at the outset—it is no coincidence that the author of *Psychology of Socialism* finally became a fascist, just like the sociologist of political parties³—long before bourgeois philosophy doggedly set out to

defend its objective nature. Marx refused to be drawn into the psychology of the working class. Such a psychology presupposes individuality and a kind of autarchic view of motivation in the individual. Such individuality is itself a socially constructed concept, which comes under the rubric of political economy. Even among the competing members of the bourgeoisie, the individual is in great measure ideology, and those at the bottom of the heap are denied individuality by the property system. This can only be called dehumanization.

The dichotomy between bourgeoisie and proletariat negates the bourgeois conception of man as well as the concepts of the bourgeois economy. That conception is retained only so that its contradictory nature can be exposed; it is not there to be confirmed by a Marxist "anthropology." The disappearance of the autonomy of the market economy and the bourgeois individuality formed by it also spells the disappearance of its opposite, the blood-stained dehumanization of those rejected by society. The figure of the worker who comes home drunk at night and beats his wife and children is pushed right into the background: his wife has more to fear from the social worker who counsels her than from him.

Nor are we confronted by the stultification of the worker allegedly unable to comprehend the work process in which he is involved. The great intensification of the division of labor does indeed distance the worker further and further from the end product with which the craftsman was thoroughly conversant. But at the same time, the individual work processes are increasingly undifferentiated, so that the man who can perform one can perform virtually all and can understand the whole operation. The man on the production line at Ford who always has to perform the same action knows very well how the finished car works, since it contains no secrets that cannot be imagined on the model of that action. Even the distinction between the worker and the engineer, whose work is itself increasingly mechanized, is gradually turning into a question of privilege. The demand for technical specialists during the war showed how flexible the different technicians were and how the distinctions between specializations have been eroded.

However, none of this does any more to mitigate the impotence of the workers, initially at least, than, previously, stark poverty had turned into revolution. It is no easier for the alert mechanics of today to become individuals than it was for the dulled inmates of the workhouse a century

ago, and of course it is unlikely that their individuality will accelerate the revolution. In the meantime, the work process that they understand shapes them even more thoroughly than the process they did not understand shaped them in times past; it becomes a "technological veil." The workers have their share of the dual character of class. The system may have called a halt to the process of dehumanization that jeopardizes the ruling classes until the latter take it over in the service of their own inhumanity. But in return, Marx's insight that the system produces the proletariat has been fulfilled on a scale that was absolutely unforeseeable.

By virtue of their needs and the omnipresent requirements of the system, men have truly become its products: under the monopoly system the process of dehumanization is perfected on the backs of the civilized as an all-encompassing reification, not as naked coercion; indeed, this dehumanization is what that civilization is. The totalizing character of society proves itself in the fact that it does not just take utter possession of its members but creates them in its own image. This is ultimately the point of that polarization into power and impotence. The monopolistic power confers the rewards on which the stability of the system depends today only upon those people who resemble it. This process of leveling, civilizing, and slotting-in consumes all the energy that might be used to do things differently, to the point where a conditioned universal humanity gives birth to the barbarism that in fact it is.

By reproducing the life of society in a planned way, the ruling classes reproduce the impotence of those that are planned. Thus domination becomes an integral part of human beings. They do not need to be "influenced," as liberals with their ideas of the market are wont to imagine. Mass culture simply makes them yet again what they already are thanks to the coercion of the system. It keeps a watchful eye on the anomalies, introduces the official complement of practice in the shape of "public morality," and provides people with models for imitation. The task of influencing people who beg to differ cannot be entrusted to films that stretch the credulity even of the like-minded: the vestiges of the ideologies that mediated between autonomy and domination disappear along with the vestiges of autonomy. Dehumanization is no external power, no propaganda, however conceived, no exclusion from culture. It is precisely the intrinsic reality of the oppressed in the system, who used formerly to stand out because of their wretchedness, whereas today their wretchedness lies in the fact that

they can never escape, that they suspect that the truth is propaganda, while swallowing the propaganda culture that is fetishized and distorted into the madness of an unending reflection of themselves.

This means, however, that the dehumanization is also its opposite. In reified human beings reification finds its outer limits. They catch up with the technical forces of production in which the relations of production lie hidden: in this way these relations lose the shock of their alien nature because the alienation is so complete. But they may soon also lose their power. Only when the victims completely assume the features of the ruling civilization will they be capable of wresting them from the dominant power. The only remaining differentiating factor is reduced to naked usurpation. Only in its blind anonymity could the economy appear as fate: its spell is broken by the horror of the seeing dictatorship. The mimicking of the classless society by class society has been so successful that, while the oppressed have all been co-opted, the futility of all oppression becomes manifest. The ancient myth proves to be quite feeble in its new omnipotence. Even if the dynamic at work was always the same, its end today is not the end.

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Translated by Rodney Livingstone

4. REFLECTIONS ON CLASS THEORY

NOTE: All numbered notes in this chapter are by the translator.

1. Throughout this essay, Adorno uses the term “theory” as a code word for “Marxism” or “dialectical materialism.”

2. This refers to a meeting between Franz von Papen and Hitler at the home of the Cologne banker Kurt von Schroeder on 4 January 1933. The negotiations

that gave Hitler the support of sections of German industry and finance were initiated at this meeting; they would culminate in his appointment as chancellor at the end of the month. The mention of bribery refers to properties that were given to President Hindenburg in the summer of 1933 and to his son, some years before, in 1927. These gifts were then linked to a scandal in which government subsidies for agriculture in the East were said to have been diverted into the pockets of the Junkers and perhaps also the Hindenburg family. In his play *Arturo Ui*, Brecht uses the idea of Hindenburg's fear of exposure to explain why he acquiesced in Hitler's appointment, to which he had earlier been bitterly opposed.

3. This reference to "the author of *Psychology of Socialism*" is not entirely clear. It is conceivable that Adorno was thinking of Gustave Le Bon, whose *Psychologie du socialisme* appeared in Paris in 1899. Many of Le Bon's attitudes—his anti-Semitism and racism, for example—fitted in easily with fascism. His major work, *Psychologie des foules* (*The Crowd*) had a direct influence on both Hitler, who copied passages from it directly into *Mein Kampf*, and Mussolini, with whom he corresponded. Nevertheless, there is no evidence that in his old age (he died in 1931) he adopted fascist views. A stronger case can be made that Adorno's reference is to Hendryk (Henry) de Man, whose book, also entitled *Psychologie du socialisme*, appeared in English translation in 1928. When the Germans invaded Belgium in 1940, de Man, who was president of the Socialist Party, made an official declaration praising Hitler and claiming that the arrival of the Nazi troops meant the "liberation of the working class."

The "sociologist of political parties," to whom Adorno also refers here, was Robert Michels (1876–1936). His chief work, *Political Parties*, appeared in English in 1915, translated from the Italian edition of *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie*.