

To Radically Change the Prevailing Social Order

*On the 200th anniversary of Marx's birthday,
The 170th of the Communist Manifesto
and the 160th of the Grundrisse*

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In this paper we will refer to the method that Marx contributed to in order to have a coherent and objective view of today's society —and thus avoid a subjective and arbitrary vision of it— to the leading role that corresponds to the oppressed and exploited ones, for their radical transformation and the necessary confluence in the struggles for this transformation of all sectorial demands.

I. Marx's favoured method

In point 3 (The Method of Political Economy) of his Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1857) Marx wrote:

When examining a given country from the standpoint of political economy, we begin with its population, the division of the population into classes, town and country, the sea, the different branches of production, export and import, annual production and consumption, prices, etc.

It would seem to be the proper thing to start with the real and concrete elements, with the actual preconditions, e.g., to start in the sphere of economy with population, which forms the basis and the subject of the whole social process of production. Closer consideration shows, however, that this is wrong.

Population is an abstraction if, for instance, one disregards the classes of which it is composed. (Ours is the underlined).



These classes in turn remain empty terms if one does not know the factors on which they depend, e.g., wage-labour, capital, and so on. These presuppose exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage-labour, without value, money, price, etc. If one were to take population as the point of departure, it would be a very vague notion of a complex whole and through closer definition one would arrive analytically at increasingly simple concepts; from imaginary concrete terms one would move to more and more tenuous abstractions until one reached the most simple definitions. From there it would be necessary to make the journey again in the opposite direction until one arrived once more at the concept of population, which is this time not a vague notion of a whole, but a totality comprising many determinations and relations. The first course is the historical one taken by political economy at its inception. The seventeenth-century economists, for example, always took as their starting point the living organism, the population, the nation, the State, several States, etc., but analysis led them always in the end to the discovery of a few decisive abstract, general relations, such as division of labour, money, and value. When these separate factors were more or less clearly deduced and established, economic systems were evolved which from simple concepts, such as labour, division of labour, demand, exchange-value, advanced to categories like State, international exchange and world market.

It was by applying this method that Marx and Engels wrote the following in the Communist Manifesto of 1848:

I. BOURGEOIS AND PROLETARIANS

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. In ancient Rome we have patricians, knights, plebeians, slaves; in the Middle Ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices, serfs; in almost all of these classes, again, subordinate gradations.

The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.

Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified 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.*

** By bourgeoisie is meant the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour. By proletariat, the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live. [Engels, 1888 English edition].*

This note by Engels anticipated those who, in order to "overcome" Marx, attribute to him the simplifying idea that class antagonism is reduced to the confrontation inside the company between bosses and workers.

Albeit already in the Manifesto ... there is talk of a complete division of society in various strata, a multiple gradual scale of social conditions, Marx specified this idea in Chapter VI (called unpublished) of Book I of Capital, where he writes:

... as with the development of the actual subsumption of labor in capital or of the specifically capitalist mode of production, it is not the individual worker but increasingly a socially combined work capacity that becomes the real agent of the process of labour as a whole, and as the diverse work capacities that cooperate and form the total productive machine participate in a very different way in the immediate process of merchandise formation or better here of products -these work more with the hands, that one more the head, the one as director (manager), engineer, technician, etc., the other as foreman (overlooker), the one beyond as a direct manual labourer and even as a simple labourer- we have more and more functions of the labour capacity that are included in the immediate concept of productive work, and its agents in the concept of productive workers, directly exploited by capital and subordinates in general to their process of valorisation and production. If one considers the collective worker in which the workshop consists, its combined activity is materially realised (materialiter) and directly in a total product that at the same time is a total mass of goods, and here it is absolutely indifferent that the function of this or that worker, mere link of this collective labour, is closer or more distant from direct manual labour. But then the activity of this collective labour capacity is its direct productive consumption by capital, that is, the process of self-valorisation of capital, the direct production of surplus value and hence, as it should be analysed later, the direct transformation of it into capital...

In other words, the capitalist exploitation of the labor force is not only the appropriation —paid below its value— of the physical strength of the human being, but also of their abilities and knowledge, of their ability to imagine, to create and invent. Exploitation that explains the poverty of the majorities and the enormous wealth (the capitalist benefit) of a tiny minority.¹

II. This vision of capitalist society, which is verified daily in the facts, is at odds with the populist approach, both left and right, which speaks of "populace and anti-populace", of "those above and those below", of "us" and "them" and ignores the existence of irreducibly antagonistic classes and its necessary consequence: the struggle of the oppressed and exploited against the insatiable voracity of the exploiters.

This struggle of the oppressed and exploited classes is the indispensable articulator of sectoral, environmental, feminist, cultural, political struggles, for the rights to health, to a healthy and abundant diet, to free and secular education, to decent housing, to urban infrastructures (sanitation, supplying energy, running water) and transport within reach of the entire population, etc, and whose common objective must be the abolition of the capitalist system in order to establish a radically different society where the rule is the general interest and not the profit or benefit of the capitalists; for all these denials of rights, deficiencies or deficits that motivate sectoral claims have a common root: the capitalist system.

In most cases the relationship is self-evident. The ecological catastrophe, which is no longer a forecast but a reality, the increasing degradation of public services, because they are not a source of profit, etc. It is also obvious that the unemployed and those who still do not have enough income do not have the right to a healthy and sufficient diet.

But it should be added that the poverty of the workers is not due exclusively to the **expropriation** of the fruit of the labour practiced by the capital in the process of the real economy (obtaining surplus value), but also to that which is done by financial capital and capital in general without participating in this process. For example, lowering real wages and pensions, liquefying both incomes through inflation, making essential public services more expensive, swindling

¹ Suggested reading on the subject: Olmedo Beluche, [La crisis del "progresismo" y la necesidad de una izquierda revolucionaria](#). 17/09/2018

small savers, escaping capital, evading the treasury, bribery and corruption,² increasing external debt, etc. Offensive forms against the standard of living of workers of all categories that has been accentuated brutally in recent times on a global scale.³

On the political arena, what we have called *Agony, death and decomposition of the bourgeois myth of "representative" democracy* (see: <https://www.alainet.org/article/183091>) is intimately related to the need to concentrate the decision-making power in the large monopolies, to which the political elites are —now more than ever— serving as obedient conveyor belts. In this work we show figures about endorsement, where the representation rate of the socio-economic layers in parliaments is proportionally inverse to the social reality. In other words, the richest and least numerous social layers are overrepresented and the most modest and numerous are underrepresented. There is then, relative to the exercise of the parliamentary function, a process of selective and class recruitment that passes through the economically strongest political instances and corporate groups (both on the right and on the left). To be sure, this is not resolved — which can be attested by the facts— by increasing the proportion of young people and women in parliaments, as some argue.

A flagrant case is France, with a forty-year old President, who many bourgeois young females have said they voted for him because he was "mignon" (cute), and who has a high proportion of young people and women MPs in Parliament, who is, nonetheless, financially massacring workers and retirees and rapidly deteriorating public services.

III. Although the contradiction between feminist demands and the capitalist system may seem less obvious, such antagonism exists and cannot and should not be ignored. On the other hand, discrimination against women in the field of labour rights is evident. It starts with the fact that they receive lower salaries than men for the same work. Moreover, many protective measures for women in employment, both at the ILO Conventions and national levels, have been repealed or modified regressively (as is the case of the revised Convention 183 on maternity protection, which modified regressively Convention 103 of 1952).

It is alleged that such measures are an obstacle to equal treatment and opportunities for women and it is said that the prohibition of the employment of women in certain jobs closes opportunities, or that the different conditions to which they are entitled, in some cases, makes labour more expensive or it reduces performance at work, all of which leads to discrimination. It is argued that the fact that women focus on traditionally female industries and low-skilled activities prevents their salaries from being high, hinders their chances of promotion and exposes them to unemployment. In fact, in industries that traditionally employ female labour, salaries are lower not because they require less qualifications, but because employers use the social devaluation of women (because they often are women not only receiving, but also disseminating cultural notions undervaluation) and take advantage of their qualifications without adequate consideration. Employers also claim that women's higher absenteeism due to family obligations, the prohibition —in some cases— of night work, the obligation to set up day-care centres or independent services, maternity leave or the protections that are due to them during maternity and lactation, make them less profitable as workers.

² See my article, published in 2010, Corruption. Also in <http://www.argenpress.info/2010/07/la-corrupcion.html> that ended with this sentence: But it is true that in each country corruption seems to respond to certain guidelines of its own. For example now corruption in Argentina is closer than in some other countries to direct mafia practices, such as extortion, pressure, threats, etc., seeking to obtain, for example, the participation of friends of power who take shares in large companies or take over important public works. You can also see, from my authorship, The corruption: the tip of the iceberg, August 2018 (<https://www.alainet.org/en/article/194971>). Indeed, the amount of corruption may be insignificant in relation to the amounts of other appropriation of resources - cunning or "legal" (capital flight, foreign debt, transfer of dividends abroad, tax evasion) - by the capitalist class. But corruption is usually a determining factor in the management of the capitalist State. It is not a farce, nor an anecdote, nor a secondary issue.

³ You can see about this question in my book *The Armour of Capitalism*. Editorial Icaria, Spain, 2010, the paragraph Specific features of capitalism at the beginning of the 21st century. And a summary of it in *Inside Capitalism* in <http://www.argenpress.info/2012/03/el-capitalismo-por-dentro-parte-i.html> and in *Jus Semper*. On the same subject we can see from our authorship the article Capitalist exploitation: modern times and current times in *Rebellion* (<http://www.rebellion.org/noticia.php?id=178326>).

In 1976, Directive 76/207 / EEC of the European Community, on the application of the principle of equal treatment for men and women, led to a review of the various protection measures that exist in the Member States of the Community. Thus, in April 2001, the French Parliament finally adopted the text of the law abolishing the prohibition of night work for women, thus adjusting France to Directive 76/207 / EEC of the European Community. In 1999, the European Commission imposed a fine of 900,000 francs per day on France until such time as this labour legislation was adjusted. Also, provisions in favour of working women have been repealed in several countries, for example in the field of lifting heavy loads and jobs involving exposure to lead compounds and other polluting materials, etc. The European Community Directive deliberately confused the equal treatment that women are entitled to with respect to men with the right to a difference for women as such in many aspects and not only in the workplace. The reasonable thing should have been to extend to men those measures tending to protect the health of women in the workplace; reasonable in a production system that was not based on the exploitation of work.

Many workers' organisations in different countries and in different categories have repeatedly spoken about the maintenance of protection measures for women and the extension of these to men. Among them, the Confederation of Trade Unions of the Federal Republic of Germany (DGB) opposed any derogation from the special measures for the protection of women at work because there were biological differences that justified such special measures and, in addition, the traditional division of functions between the sexes continued to exist in today's society, subjecting millions of workers to the double burden of engaging in a paid activity and, at the same time, dealing with household and family chores. Because the workers were experiencing changes in working conditions, due to the increased intensity and pace of work, new technology, noise, dangerous substances, etc., they felt that it was necessary to increase in a general way these protections instead of weakening them (ILO, 1987, page 139).⁴ But the feminist currents that seem to be ideologically hegemonic tend to detach gender claims from the class struggle and, in general, do not question the capitalist system as such.

The main speakers of this orientation, among others Nancy Fraser from the US, rely on the theories of Foucault, a theorist of rebellion against power in all its forms but who ignores the power relations between exploiters and exploited that characterise the capitalist system or of Habermas with his theory of communicative action according to which "every social action is oriented towards understanding" and dissociates from it the antagonism between social classes.⁵

In opposition to these currents, the feminist movements have analyses of the relationship between the demands of gender and the class struggle with an anti-capitalist strategy. Among them is Tithi Bhattacharya, a Marxist historian of Hindu origin and professor at Purdue University in Indiana, United States, in [How Not To Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class](#).

Professor Bhattacharya has contributed to put gender issues on solid foundations by linking them to the dominant capitalist system. To accomplish this she has taken Marx's concept of labour force reproduction, developing it from the angle of women as the social reproduction of the labour force. Tithi Bhattacharya leads her essay with a blunt phrase from Marx: «... *labor-power is a commodity which its possessor, the wage-worker, sells to the capitalist. Why does he sell*

⁴ See, Alejandro Teitelbaum, The current crisis of the right to development, Cuaderno No. 11; Cuadernos Deusto de Derechos Humanos, University of Deusto, Bilbao, year 2000, Paragraph: La eliminación de las medidas de protección para las mujeres en el empleo, págs. 69 a 72, extracted from a work by Mirta Sofia Teitelbaum) <http://www.deusto-publicaciones.es/deusto/pdfs/cuadernosdcho/cuadernosdcho11.pdf>

⁵ We have critically analysed the ideas of Foucault and Habermas in a book of our authorship, published in Buenos Aires in 2015 (Editorial Dunken) with the title El papel desempeñado por las ideas y culturas dominantes en la preservación del orden vigente and in Colombia in 2017 (Editorial La Carreta) with the title El colapso del progresismo y el desvarío de las izquierdas. On the Internet: <https://fr.scribd.com/document/384769799/Libro-Teitelbaum-Varios-El-papel-desempenado-las-ideas-culturas-dominantes-El-Colapso-Progresismo-pdf>.

it? It is in order to live.». (Karl Marx, Wage, Labour and Capital, 1849). And she begins her text with a crucial question for the oppressed and exploited all over the world: *how to overcome all its divisions to appear in ship-shape in full combative form to overthrow capitalism. After global working class struggles failed to surmount this challenge —the author continues— the working class itself became the object of a broad range of theoretical and practical condemnations. Most often, these condemnations take the form of either declarations or predictions about the demise of the working class or simply arguing that the working class is no longer a valid agent of change... What many of these condemnations have in common is a shared misunderstanding of exactly what the working class really is. Instead of the complex understanding of class historically proposed by Marxist theory, which discloses a vision of insurgent working class power capable of transcending sectional categories, today's critics rely on a highly narrow vision of a "working class" in which a worker is simply a person who has a specific kind of job. In this essay, the author declares, I will refute this spurious conception of class by reactivating fundamental Marxist insights about class formation that have been obscured by four decades of neoliberalism and the many defeats of the global working class. The key to developing a sufficiently dynamic understanding of the working class, I will argue, is the framework of social reproduction. In thinking about the working class, it is essential to recognize that workers have an existence beyond the workplace. The theoretical challenge therefore lies in understanding the relationship between this existence and that of their productive lives under the direct domination of the capitalist. The relationship between these spheres will in turn help us consider strategic directions for class struggle.*

This intrinsic relationship between the place of the worker in production, where he / she obtains the minimum necessary to reproduce his / her labour force through his / her wages and his / her social existence outside the workplace is explained by what the author calls the reproduction of social work. This consists of all the elements that, beyond wages, make the existence of the worker, such as education, healthcare, care of the children, the sick and the elderly, access to public services (transport, water, sewer, electricity) and to entertainment, etc. They also allow the worker to continue selling his labour force to the capitalist.

In *Capital and Value, Price, and Profit* Marx wrote that it is necessary to try to discover what exactly the worker sells in exchange for the wage he receives. When a worker accepts a job, when he "rents himself" to a capitalist, he actually makes available to him, during a specific period of time—an hour, a day or a week— his capacity for work; that is, the sum of the mental and physical capacities existing in a human being, which he puts into action to produce a use value of any kind. **This distinction between work —the actual expenditure of human capacities and energies (on which the value of goods depends)— and labour power —the capacity or power to work (which the worker sells in exchange for wages)— is of great importance.**

Wages are the price of the labour force. Since price is the expression of value in money, we must find out how the value of the labour force is determined. *The value of the labour force is determined, like that of any other commodity, by the time necessary for production and, consequently, also for the production of this specific article. To the extent that it has value, it represents only a certain amount of social work materialised in it* (Capital, Book I). The value of the labour force depends, then, on the amount of work time that must be consumed in order for it to exist.

To live, human beings must have means of subsistence, food, clothing, fuel, housing, etc. In order for the labour force to continue to exist, the workers must reproduce, have children; therefore, they must have sufficient means of subsistence, not only for themselves but also for their children. *The value of the labour force is determined by the value of the articles necessary to produce, develop, maintain and perpetuate the labor force* (Marx, "Value, price and profit").

The quantities and nature of the food, clothing, etc., that are required vary according to the nature of the work performed. Consequently, the value of the different species of labour force will vary. It will also vary because certain types of capacity or ability demand special education or training that requires a certain period during which the worker has to live and may have to incur in other expenses; all these expenses make up the value of the labour force. Again, the natural needs of the worker, such as food, clothing, fuel and housing vary according to the climatic conditions and other physical conditions of their country. On the other hand, the number and extension of their so-called natural needs, as well as the ways of satisfying them, are themselves products of historical development (...) and therefore depend to a large extent on the degree of civilisation of a country, and more especially of the conditions and, consequently, of the habits and standards of comfort under which the class of free workers has been formed. Consequently, in contrast to the case of other commodities, a historical and moral element enters the determination of the value of the labour force. However, in a given country and period, the average amount of subsistence resources necessary for the worker constitutes a fixed factor (Marx, Capital). Based on these concepts, Professor Bhattacharya explains her thesis.⁶

It should be added that this intrinsic relationship between the place of the worker in production, where he / she obtains the minimum necessary to reproduce his / her labour force through wages and his / her social existence is explained in what the author—as we have already said— calls the social reproduction of work, which consists of all the elements that, beyond wages, participate in the existence of the worker and also contribute to the worker being able to continue selling his labour force to the capitalist.

The capitalist class, which obviously needs the labour force to reproduce itself, tries nevertheless to do so at the lowest cost, keeping low and even shrinking wages (which only have the appearance of an exchange between equivalents: labour force on the one hand and wages for the other) and also—as a dominant social class— reducing the costs of their social reproduction.

Bureaucratised unionism is limited to struggling (or simulating that it fights) to improve the conditions of the reproduction of the labour force in the place of production, demanding better wages, arguing that the—apparent— equivalence between the price of the labour force sold by the worker and the price paid for it (wage) by the capitalist has been broken, without questioning the wage relationship in itself—which generates the surplus value, the source of the capitalist profit—and without questioning the conditions of the social reproduction of labour, that spreads out the capitalist exploitation and oppression to the whole social field.

Bhattacharya writes: *To concentrate on the surface “economy” (of the market) as if this was the sole reality is to obscure two related processes: 1) the separation between the “political” and “economic” that is unique to capitalism; and 2) the actual process of domination/expropriation that happens beyond the sphere of “equal” exchange. Marx, Bhattacharya declares, is inviting us to see the “economic” as a social relation: one that involves domination and coercion even if juridical forms and political institutions seek to obscure that.*

In regards to feminine rights specifically, such as using contraceptive methods or interrupting a pregnancy in the best therapeutic conditions, with all expenses covered by social security or through the eventual benefit of gratuity without risk of any criminal penalty, they are determined as a matter of social class, which depends on the economic resources of each woman and her level of education. Moreover, the latter is conditioned by the social strata in a society where the level and quality of everyone's education is directly proportional to our income level. In other words, a woman with a

⁶ Also developed by other authors, including Susan Ferguson, in the book *Social Reproduction Theory* (Pluto Press, 2017), compiled by Professor Bhattacharya.

reasonably high income and a good level of education is much better informed about contraceptive methods and their use and has greater possibilities of interrupting her pregnancy under good sanitary conditions, even if she lives in a country where abortion is illegal, without risking a penalty. And if she finds it necessary, she can travel to a country where abortion is legal. That is not the case of a worker, a poor peasant or a woman who is part of a low-income family, not the least forgetting the negative influence of the Church in this sphere, which is generally greater on the most vulnerable classes.

What has been said up to now does not deny the existence in people of all social classes, in public and private institutions and even in language, of a patriarchal and chauvinist subculture. Take as an example the daily sexual harassment suffered by the employees, much less publicised than the events denounced by some famous Hollywood actresses. Or the fact that the vast majority of rape crimes go unpunished, as is the case in France (see *Quand le viol n'est plus un crime*- <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2017/11/BOUTBOUL/58085>).

IV. The rigorous analysis of social facts advocated by Marx, opposed to the idealist ramblings that currently predominate in the left, suitable to unmask the populist demagoguery left and right, can help to open the way to a new society without exploiters or exploited, without oppressed or oppressors such as Marx envisioned in the Grundrisse. Marx writes: *The free development of individualities, and hence not the reduction of necessary labour time so as to posit surplus labour, but rather the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific etc. development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them*, and adds that the measure of the value in the communist society happens to be not truly the quantity of work time, but the amount of free time: *It is not then, in any way, labour time the measure of wealth, but disposable time.*⁷

There is urgency, therefore, because given the fascist tide that is gaining increasing strength on a global scale, the phrase popularised by Rosa Luxemburg is updated: SOCIALISM OR BARBARISM.⁸



⁷ Carlos Marx, Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Grundrisse), Siglo XXI Editores, 12 edición, 1989, tomo 2, págs. 227 and ss. [Contradicción entre la base de la producción burguesa (medida del valor) y su propio desarrollo. Máquinas, etc.].

⁸ In January 1919, when the Social Democrats ruled Germany with Friedrich Ebert as President of the Council of People's Representatives and Gustav Noske as Minister of Defense, the Spartacist revolt took place, which was repressed in a bloody manner by the freikorps (groups of soldiers demobilized by the end of the war but still armed) recruited by Noske. On January 15 Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht are murdered by members of the Freikorps and their bodies thrown into the river. In 1962 the German Federal Government (Christian Democratic Union led by Adenauer) declared that the assassination of Rosa Luxemburg and Liebknecht had been an "execution in accordance with martial law".

Useful links:

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