

Gramsci meets Veblen:

On the search for a new revolutionary class

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Abstract:

Veblen's attempt in (Veblen, 1899) to provide an update of class analysis was not only provocative for most of his mainstream colleagues. It also was a critique of a class analysis of Marxists who reduced the interdependence between economic basis and ideological superstructures to a simple causal link from the former to the latter. Veblen's emphasis on the necessity to take into account what he calls culture reoccurs later in Antonio Gramsci's theoretical innovations: the class struggle for cultural hegemony, and the importance of the organic intellectual as ferment for class emergence. Gramsci was experiencing the catastrophe of the mass movement of Fascism – classic analysis of social classes clearly was in urgent need for an extension to be able to explain class *evolution*.

Capitalism now again is in deep crisis. This paper suggests that the drivers of the next revolutionary break will be social classes again – partially newly emerging classes. We will graft ideas of Veblen on concepts suggested by Gramsci to enhance the theoretical toolbox necessary to understand contemporary global class dynamics.

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1. Introduction:

The practice of struggle for a better society, for social progress, always has been linked to the emergence and distribution of theories about class relationships, of interpretations of political economy dynamics. When in the middle of the 19th century Karl Marx set out to purify the concepts of class and exploitation, he already could look back on a rich history of descriptive work on class struggles. In particular during the decades preceding the French revolution, when the dogma of the church lost credibility, the view that history is man-made led to theories describing *how* humans made history. An important insight - almost self-evident for those who proposed it - was that human individuals in a society are organized in different groups, in different classes: slaves in ancient regimes have to be distinguished from simple farmers, which in turn have to differ to representatives of nobility as well as to different sets of priests of different religions, etc. The border lines between classes were thought to be diverse, but in principle be easy to draw. The position in the production process seemed to be important, but in no way decisive. Ethnic, biological and cultural properties were mixed to produce a large set of classes producing a dynamics of class conflicts, which was too complicated to be understood analytically¹.

It is this somewhat confusing terrain of interpretations, which Marx was able to structure. The essential concept he had to emphasize as a starting point was social value, which - using the dialectics he had learned from Hegel - not only remained in the sphere of ideas of humans, but also had to appear in the material world: money. Social value appearing as money enabled Marx to define exploitation as the process of extraction of social value. A well-organized process which takes place on class level, and a process which - turning the argument around (another Hegelian trick) - in turn allows to define classes. Exploiting classes and exploited classes frame the historical trajectory he envisaged. To clean the ideological landscape of his time, and to prepare his theory as an ideological weapon of the exploited class, Marx underlined the primacy of the material exploitation status of class members: Only the actually materially exploited can become a social force, which can drive social progress. Nevertheless he immediately adds that this is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition for progress. Class action needs class consciousness of class members, which breeds and is nourished by class organization. The ferment, which catalyzes this feedback of the superstructure on the economic base (a third inverted element of Hegelian logic) can only be a group of progressive individuals, which subscribes to this social function - Marx and Engels founded the 'Bund der Kommunisten'.

When in 1883 Marx died, class struggle dynamics in England already were reacting on the surging labor movement organization. New labor laws were introduced; class struggle was shifted more and more to the ideological battlefield². Marx' dictum concerning the dominance of economic exploitation status became a bit difficult to interpret if British workers compared their role to the slaves in the colonies - and too often Marx' caveat concerning the important feedback

¹ It was this confusion, which led Jean-Jacques Rousseau to propose a return to a theoretical construct he called 'natural state of affairs'. In this 'nature' the other important theoretical construct 'individual man' was placed - a procedure, which two hundred years later was revived as methodological individualism. The latter evidently emerged as an ideological weapon against Marx, who already had opposed Rousseau-like approaches and had called them 'Robinsonades' (referring to Daniel Defoe's bestseller) of political economy.

² An important premise for this development was the first wave of globalization, which enabled the British Empire to organize the fiercest forms of exploitation as trade with its colonies; local pre-capitalist exploitation forms being used as British affiliates.

of an organized progressive political leadership was forgotten³. Proletarian class consciousness in the advanced European countries started to deteriorate. Major competitors for the mental models of the members of the exploited class were put forward by ideological entrepreneurs, ranging from variants of nationalism to religious streams (e.g. Zionism), and finally Fascism.

In this ideological vacuum on the left during the last decade of the 19th century the American economist Thorstein Veblen argued for a return to a much broader class concept, which was inspired by his anthropological studies. There are many more dimensions along which an exploiting class can be recognized, he argues. And it is this visibility, which could pave the way to an enhancement of class consciousness of the exploited class, one could add today.

A few decades later the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci provided a much more elaborated theory, which also highlighted the importance of a broader view on class consciousness. While Veblen concentrated on the consciousness of the exploiting class (he calls it leisure class), Gramsci set the focus on the exploited class, on how its class consciousness can be organized by a progressive intellectual elite. In doing so he moves class struggles in an ingenious way towards the ideological battlefield of the interwar period⁴.

The following section tries to provide a synopsis and an update of parts of the theories of these two outstanding scholars. This should then enable an integration of their contributions into a brief description of a possible revolutionary class in contemporary capitalism, which will be provided in the last section.

Veblen and Gramsci revisited – an update

Veblen and Gramsci highlighted the importance of Marx's concept of class and class consciousness what he described that 'Sein' (being) determines the 'Bewusstsein' (consciousness). Nevertheless both scholars pointed to different aspects of the class consciousness concept:

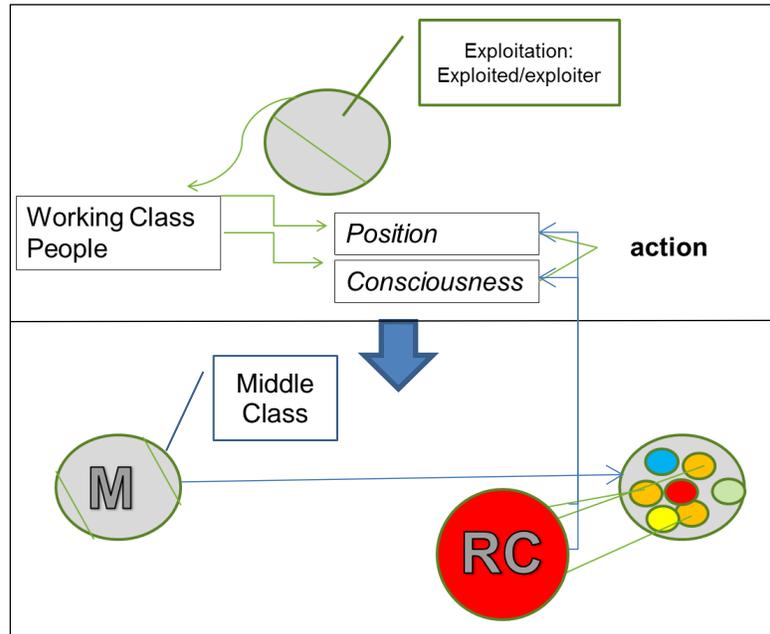
Veblen focussed on the class consciousness of the exploiting class (leisure class) and argued that the members of this class recognize each other by being aware of the class characteristics. Gramsci emphasized the necessity to concentrate on the exploited class and the question how the exploited class can be activated by implementing and fostering class consciousness.

³ It is interesting to see that the discussion of this so-called 'economistic' interpretation of Marx was only revived with respect to the Soviet Union by Lenin much later.

⁴ This move, of course, was not at all voluntary since Gramsci was imprisoned by Italian Fascists for most of his life.

Facing in particular the latter, Hanappi and Hanappi-Egger (2012) propose therefore the idea of a new “revolutionary class” which can be sketched in the following figure:

Figure 1: From the traditional working class to the new revolutionary class



Source: adapted from Hanappi and Hanappi-Egger (2012)

Veblen and Gramsci (following Marx) defined classes as position in the production process by distinguishing between exploiting and exploited with according class consciousness enabling both classes to stand up for their interests. It is a tricky ideological way of contemporary capitalism to waive the idea of different classes and in particular of class consciousness by stating that “we all are middle class”. Consequently the middle class (M) seems to be the most representative group of Western societies, together with a (negligibly) small upper class and lower class. Furthermore a positive class consciousness of “working class people” is undermined by systematically demonizing working class people as “chavs” (Jones 2011) and pushing people to “move upwards”.

Consequently the question is – how in the sense of Veblen and Gramsci the working class concept can be updated in a positive way, or as Hanappi and Hanappi-Egger (2012) called it how to establish a new revolutionary class (RC). This has to be done in a two-fold approach.

In a **first step** the “position” of the members of the revolutionary class has to be identified (compare fig. 1). This can be done by applying Veblen’s leisure class concept to the so-called middle-class.

Treating the middle class as hidden in a black box, in the course of time this box produces visible surface phenomena which can be systematically collected and can serve as a preliminary substitute for the correct knowledge about the working of the black box. Hence, Hanappi and Hanappi-Egger (2012) propose the following five indices to explore the middle class and to specify the position of the different groups:

- Power in terms of the possibility is to exert power by constraining the set of actions of other individuals living in the same environment be it in forms of individual power or structural power as e.g. given in patriarchy.
- Wealth and income: The stock as well as the flow variable measuring what social value is possessed by an individual and how much is added to this stock during every time unit are the most important component of the class index.
- Consumption: The way income and wealth is turned in the specific consumption bundle of an individual has always been considered as indicative for its class status. Today consumption bundles containing goods and services surmounting reproductive needs might again be considered as counter indication of class being.
- Education understood as measure of individual access to education as well as the profile of formal education of a given society at a certain moment.
- Leisure time: Consumption needs time, and since part of each day has to be devoted to production there only remains a limited amount of time for consumption and idle recreation. This is leisure time. The amount of leisure time per day thus might well add another component to an overall index of class status as well as the extent of time autonomy.

These indices are results of the same global process, and therefore interdependent. Once arranged in a consistent way this combined ‘class-index’ can serve as a didactic instrument helping to identify the members of the exploiting class as well as the members of the new revolutionary class.

The second step – as indicated in figure 1 – of defining a new revolutionary class – is following Gramsci to raise class consciousness. This clearly needs what Gramsci called “organic intellectuals”.

The revolutionary class in contemporary capitalism

Antonio Gramsci had the rare capacity to combine in his theoretical writings two completely different experiences he encountered in his early years: The intellectual experience of an outstanding education in philosophy and general cultural thought, and the most challenging practical experience of building an Italian revolutionary party. His tragic – though from the point of Italian Fascism logical – imprisonment did not prevent him to produce the highly innovative texts on how to cope with the problems of the necessary social revolution. These texts have later been edited as Gramsci’s ‘Prison Notebooks’.

The experiences made in the interwar period are of particular importance today. The current deep and global, political and economic crisis in its fifth year now is the most severe breakdown of the capitalist process since the Great Depression 1929-1934. The *economic* recovery in the 30-ties was at the same time the *political* triumph of Fascism in state power, the extinction of labor movement institutions – at least in some important states in Europe. In the end the total defeat of Gramsci’s project of a revolution catalyzed by organic intellectuals lead to an ever more aggressive and expansionist nationalism, which needed a World War to be defeated. Seventy years later it seems to be reasonable und urgent to reconsider the ‘organic intellectual’, how a

global revolutionary party can be victorious to prevent a repetition of history. What are the lessons for organizing a revolutionary class, how can the ‘organic intellectual’ be conceptualized today?

Gramsci correctly emphasized that intellectuals are not a distinct social class; they rather fall into two groups to be distinguished by their social function:

- (1) ‘Traditional’ professional intellectuals necessary to run the capitalist engine, the physical and spiritual capital stock which today is indeed a highly sophisticated system.
- (2) ‘Organic intellectuals’, who are not characterized by the job they are doing, but can be distinguished by their activities as thinking and organizing elements of the class to which they organically belong.

For the capitalist mode of production during its revolutionary stage (overcoming feudalism) the entrepreneur assumed the role of capitalism’s ‘organic intellectual’. The special technical ability of entrepreneurs to organize production was transcended to organize goals and actions of the upcoming class, finally to catalyze the bourgeois revolution. Gramsci notes that technical abilities in a limited field usually are the heralds of a generalized ability of organic intellectuals of an upcoming class⁵.

The breakpoint for a mode of production is approaching if this generalized special ability of its organic intellectuals becomes visibly incapable to master an aggravating series of crisis. Such a series of crisis may still take more than a lifetime to be successful. From the French Revolution via 1848 to the final break in WW1 feudal political hegemony was not easily broken. The downturn of capitalism might only just have begun. Nevertheless it now is rather evident that possibilities for sufficiently high expected profit rates – ignoring for a moment the possibility of global war – are not really in sight. The usual escape to a (geographical or psychological) territorial expansion of the capital process has found its limits as these worlds reveal themselves as being finite⁶.

On the other hand the organic intellectuals of today’s new revolutionary class clearly have to excel in another socio-technical specialty. This ability, which later will have to be proved on a generalized global level, mainly consists in being competent to return class consciousness to the global class of exploited. On the more restricted level on which this currently is possible it is necessary to reintroduce Veblen’s insights on the forces of visible social identity. Old style enlightenment techniques are quickly reaching their limits in a world with changed language styles and fundamentally new modes of communication. Modern organic intellectuals will be those who are able to organize resistance of the exploited class in this new world of global communication, who ‘can swim in this class environment like a fish in the water’ – to paraphrase a famous sentence of Mao Zedong. As explained previously the difficulty for organic intellectuals to identify class members can be alleviated by the use of the seemingly superficial set of indices proposed. The second step after identification evidently is coalition building,

⁵ For the feudal class this narrower technical speciality was military capacity, Gramsci adds.

⁶ It is tempting to interpret Fascist intermezzos as desperate attempts to escape from the necessities of political economy by straight and brutal, coercive dictatorship based on an (arbitrary - though often justified by ‘biological’ arguments) hierarchical command structure.

coalitions which at first might look difficult but in action will reveal themselves as organic coalitions of the exploited.

From more limited, but victorious coalitions it certainly is a big step – not necessarily a long time – to *hegemony* in the global political economy. Hegemony, of course, is a second central concept of Gramsci referring to this transformation process. It captures the fact that there exists a certain point from which onwards the revolutionary class can be considered as dominant, but that even after this point has been passed there will be remnants of the old system for a long time. The unity of the revolutionary class, of the coalition forming it, thus is of utmost importance, which is just another way of emphasizing the importance of modern organic intellectuals. Perhaps what has happened in the late sixties as culture shock has just been the first sign of the seemingly ‘cultural’ character of the next social revolution. The two global economic slumps of 2001 and 2008, just after global capitalism with the demise of the Soviet Union had proclaimed its final victory over all other systems, show increasing helplessness of the ruling class, but little additional aptness of a new revolutionary class – yet. The idea to combine theory elements from Veblen and Gramsci to revive a global group of organic intellectuals is put forward in this paper to change that.