



The Concept of Social Class Applied to the World-System

Antonio L*

University Carlos III of Madrid, Spain

***Corresponding author:** Dr. Antonio Lopez, PhD researcher, Program in Humanities of the University Carlos III of Madrid, Spain, Email: antonio.l.cansinos@alumnos.uc3m.es, antoniocansinos@gmail.com

Conceptual Paper

Volume 5 Issue 4

Received Date: December 02, 2022

Published Date: December 21, 2022

DOI: 10.23880/phij-16000280

Abstract

At present, the concept of «social class» is in a pauperized cultural state, fully integrated within political channels that are unfavorable to its identification, understanding and acceptance. As it has been defined in two previous works by the present author, the concept can only be associated with territorially undelimited and specialized societies, originated in post-industrial western Europe, under a division of labor based on productive objectives rather than professional roles. The notion of «social class» is nowadays subsumed within the communicative peculiarities channeled by the ruling class, so that it has been practically abolished from the mass communicative scene. Given this social conjuncture, which deeply affects both its academic and popular conception, the present research intends to offer a critical and final vision, after the two previous works, of its contemporary sense. First of all, the pauperization and collapse of the concept will be addressed, to later expose the reasons that make social classes perpetual and, finally, to delineate its role within the world-system as it was defined in the second half of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Bourgeoisie; Circulation of Capital; Class Struggle; Social System; Working Class

The Collapse of the Concept

The main reason that has led to the pauperization of the concept of «social class» has been the lack of cohesion of the middle class. As a social mass, the middle class came to consider itself the «working class» in the 19th century. The Reform Bill passed in England in 1832 promised to include the «working class» in parliament, until then reserved for the territorial or landed elite. The reasons were various, but beyond intentions based on satisfying real social demands, there was a filling of social fear related to the *statu quo*. Little or no public political action is taken without an unprecedented political fear accompanying the sense of real danger that a popular mass would be capable of undertaking. In a sense, in fact, the building of the foundations of working class self-consciousness in the industrial European West was

generated due to the anti-revolutionary bourgeoisie social position.

Already in the Karl Marx work *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* it can be seen how, even having opposing interests, the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat are dialectically utilized, interdependently, because «the petty bourgeoisie, who then found themselves at the head of the revolutionary masses, fell prey to vacillation and indecision at crucial moments» (p. xiv) [1]. Marx demonstrates how alliances between enemies during the vital development of a mode of production are practically unavoidable when the economic contradictions place a class in a weaker social situation. For example, «the peasantry [...] as the result of the further ruin of the small-holding economy, would drive them into irreconcilable contradiction with the bourgeoisie and a

close alliance with the working class» (p. xix) [1], although the permanence of their revolutionary achievements may be more quickly compromised if their interests differ with respect to the needs of the system. As the reputed historical social scientist Immanuel Wallerstein puts it:

It means we must do away with the ahistorical idea that the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy were two radically different groups, particularly in this period of time. They were two heavily overlapping social groups that took on somewhat different contours depending on whether one defined the dominant stratum in terms of social status or in terms of social class. It made a lot of difference which definition was used. The social and political struggles were real, but they were internal to the ruling strata (p. 120) [2].

This reflection allows us to appreciate why the notion of «social class» has been compromised today. Its use would probably only benefit the working class, which to date and from a global perspective, has not found support in the needs of other social groups capable of promoting their interests. The current situation is similar to the end of the 18th century, in the French revolutionary context and its relation to the popular and republican Jacobins Club. According to the scholar Dror Wahrman, the *jacobins* saw how «the political alignment of the language of ‘middle class’ in the 1790s was not somehow inherent in its nature, but rather contingent upon the peculiar circumstances of that decade», as the Estates General of 1789 (États Généraux) attempted to hijack the term (p. 101) [3]. In a similar sense, Wahrman himself explains how in the *Edinburgh Review* and *Newcastle Chronicle* newspapers of 1819, the terms «middle class» or «middle rank» were still common, while from 1825 onwards the term «social class» began to be associated with the lower, middle and generally popular classes of society (p. 202) [3].

Social Class as a Perpetual Social Fact

Karl Marx began to deal with the problem of social classes in his work *Foundations of a Critique of Political Economy* (1857-1858), an unfinished manuscript unpublished until 1939, historically taken as a draft of *Capital* (*Das Kapital*) and known as *The Grundrisse*. In addition, he also dealt centrally with the problem in the work *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859, known as *Contribution*). The notion of «social class» gradually took over the philosophical space of the 19th century, but few intellectuals realized that the relevance of the concept did not lie in its own content, but in a clear inference from it.

One of the most clear ideas about it, rarely clarified, was stated by Louis Althusser when he presupposed that «at least

with respect to the capitalist mode of production, it takes the form of the *primacy of class struggle over classes*» [4,5]. Several authors, especially those who developed notions related to the Theory of Conflict, already considered as central the idea that social conflict was a historical resolution fully associated with «class». In this sense, it is not surprising that, the American Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson considered that «social class cannot be defined, it can only be provisionally approached in a kind of parallax, which locates it in the absent center of a multiple set of incompatible approaches» (p. 7) [6].

For a long time, owners were not named with such benevolent terms as they are today, given their historical needs to improve their social perception from the perspective of third parties. Today’s business magnates, entrepreneurs or investors have historically been merely putative oligarchs. Their names have varied throughout history, alluding to a set of terms such as industrialists, robber barons, captains of industry, czars, speculators, tycoons, moguls, rentiers, plutocrats, *Taikun* or *taipans*. Throughout the history of mankind, owners, regardless of the linguistic conceptions used to define them, have been just holders. As the French historian of social economy Camille-Ernest Labrousse pointed out, «the owning class (*la classe propriétaire*), which includes the nonannual, nonpeasant world of the nobility, the clergy and the well-to-do (*bonne*) bourgeoisie, “confounds the three orders [7]. It in no way denies their existence. Class, here, does not contradict order”» —according to Wallerstein see C.-E. Labrousse’ work— (vol. 2, p. 120) [2].

Labrousse’s assessment is not too different from Karl Marx’s classic ideas on property and social class. Marx already pointed out in the journal *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (German-French Annals) how «[the] privilege, the special right, is considered as something corresponding to private property inseparable from social classes, and law as something corresponding to the state of competition, of free private property» (p. 209) [8]. The reason why the social class may not be easily identified can be found in its own expansive needs. Wallerstein assumed, for example, as «the economic expansion of the sixteenth century permitted the clear emergence of the bourgeoisie as a social class whose relationship to the dominant status-group was unclear», on which he adds «once the economic limits of the expansion were in view, the struggle of defining who had a right to control the state-machinery became acute» (p. 121) [2]. Braudel, for his part, puts it in other words: «over the centuries the “bourgeoisie” was a parasite clinging to this privileged class [...] ceaselessly destroyed the ruling class in order to satisfy its own appetite» (p. 69-70) [9].

In the sense in which Braudel uses the term «bourgeoisie», it acts as a simple name, as that which

the medieval problematic of universals called «nomen» or simply *flatus vocis*, that is to say, a vain word without content, literally a «breath of voice». The term «bourgeoisie» is used to represent a group of people who have been able to accumulate capital and who prioritize their status quo over the general welfare. And these types of human groups will always be perpetual as long as needs and commodities are «an object outside us» (p. 45) [10], something that can be monopolized only under conditions imposed by them.

A social group that can be categorized as «bourgeoisie» and has the «appetite» for accumulation mentioned by Braudel, is not only historical, but also systemic. As the brilliant German sociologist Lewis Coser noted:

[...] groups also, due to their interdependence, help to maintain the social system within which they function. In general, the division of labor creates interdependence and hence exerts pressure against radical breaks away from the system (p. 75) [11].

The Role of Social Class in the World-System

Especially since the publication in 1951 of Talcott Parsons' *The Social System*, sociologists, philosophers and historians have expressed different opinions on the existence of a single or several social systems [12]. This paper argues that, ultimately, there is only one social system determined by the economic relations on a planetary scale that make human needs interdependent. The completeness and organization of social life, given the closed nature of the system, has as a direct consequence the constant occupation or loss of areas whose purpose is to deploy the full extent of the possibilities offered by the system. As a direct consequence of this, no area remains deserted if it can *belong* to the system's function, which is why the system can acceptably be called a «world-system».

The dynamics of social relations is thus destined to develop through a perpetual organizational conflict in which different actors fight for control of the system's parts. Picking up an idea of the Spanish historian Jaime Vicens Vives in his work *An Economic History of Spain*, in the absence of an «urban bourgeoisie [in Spain], as in the other countries of the West», such absence was «filled by a social class alien to the Christian religion: the Jews» —according to Wallerstein see also the work *The Genoese in Seville and the Opening of the New World* by Ruth Pike— (as cited in [13] p. 150). It would be tempting to claim that the notion «social class» as used by Vicens Vives is simply too broad, but the question is not about a religious issue between Jews and Christians, but about the occupied spaces and how the Spanish historian categorizes the Jews as a «class», mainly because of the economic implications of their occupation and expected position.

Indeed, there would be no occupation possible, at least when speaking of human beings, if there were not economic relations, exchange and interdependence with respect to the transformation of vital needs. Wallerstein, the modern founder of world-system analysis, had previously clarified in relation to the social classes that:

They too came into social existence within the framework of states and of the world-system, simultaneously and sometimes in contradictory fashions. They are a function of the social organization of the time. The modern class system began to take its shape in the sixteenth century (p. 67) [13].

Wallerstein refers, in particular, to the form of social relations for capitalism, speaking of the long and sometimes illegible 16th century. Marx, however, stuck to a greater extent to the 18th and 19th centuries and the social significance of industrialization as Capitalism's escape route to be able to continue reproducing itself:

[...] the celebrated «unity of man with nature» has always existed in industry and has existed in varying forms in every epoch according to the lesser or greater development of industry, and so has the «struggle» of man with nature, right up to the development of his productive forces on a corresponding basis [substructure]. Industry and commerce, production and the exchange of the necessities of life in their turn determine distribution, the structure of the different social classes and are, in turn, determined by it as to the mode in which they are carried on [...] (p. 39-40) [8].

The word «industry», note, is probably not used by Marx in a literal sense, any more than were many other words. Industry is simply a way of connoting the movement that, in an epoch, channels the interests of a social class, whose nature commonly rests on technique and financing. All systems constantly need to reconstruct their sources of power, and that is precisely what makes them closed systems in terms of the whole, but open in terms of their models of management and determination.

Braudel himself, once again, presents a historical reflection in which he states that «the Turkish Empire seen from within [...] was a feudal system [in which the] dominant class [...] was constantly being recruited from new sources. Its struggle for power punctuated the internal rhythm of the imperial story [...]» (vol. 2, p. 669) [14]. The idea of «social class» is probably more difficult to identify within the world-system, since the awareness of it is confused by the greater interaction of social phenomena. Social movements and their forms, the spatial and chronological distance between them,

and especially their mutual recognition, make the present 21st century a place where classes are still searching for their identity. The bourgeois revolutions, in their historical time, demonstrated how difficult it was for Westernism to shape such a consciousness:

For the revolution which broke out in the first months of 1848 was not a social revolution merely in the sense that it involved and mobilized all social classes. It was in the literal sense the rising of the labouring poor in the cities —especially the capital cities— of Western and Central Europe. Theirs, and theirs almost alone, was the force which toppled the old regimes from Palermo to the borders of Russia. When the dust settled on their ruins, workers—in France actually socialist workers— were seen to be standing on them, demanding not merely bread and employment, but a new state and society (p. 305) [15].

The working class consciousness of Western Europe in the 19th century is, so to speak, a necessary exception, not uncommon, but unique. Somehow the strong consciousness of the Western European social class was the consequence of an internal look, on the everyday and mundane way of life (mainly industrial and in the middle of the 18th century), which could depart from the pure trade of the world-system; as Braudel exposes, in a similar sense, concerning a historical review on the Moldavian and Romanian expansion, «at the end of the sixteenth century, and the strengthening of the feudal system which it produced, were connected with the demand created in the Black Sea by a grain trade then in a period of full expansion» (vol. 1, p. 84) [16].

Once again, Wallerstein is able to offer an explanation of the relationship between class consciousness and revolutionary political realization when, taking up the words of the French historian Albert Mathiez, he recalls that «what the saris-culottes overthrew was not merely a party; it was up to a point a social class. After the minority of the nobility which fell with the throne, it was now the turn of the upper bourgeoisie...» (vol. 3, p. 109) [17]. Social class within the world-system has, so to speak, a differentiated historical role. It is not confined to technical and developmental arenas, where conflicts are associated with the demands and requirements of a geographical spectrum, where class consciousness is progressively shaped. In an interconnected world where distances are not exclusive, «the industrial enterprise no longer appears to be a social system and collectivity but a system of relations between external and internal demands, [...] no system of norms, roles, and tasks that stably define the conditions of its balance» (p. 143) [18].

The relationship between the internal and the external has as its main function to delegate conflicts with the

objective, from the perspective of the powers that be, of removing any form of class consciousness on the part of the oppressed human groups. As Lewis Coser has pointed out:

Rigid systems, such as contemporary totalitarian societies, may succeed, as has been suggested previously, in partly canalizing hostile feelings through safety-valve institutions [...]. Flexible systems, on the contrary, by allowing occurrences of conflict, make the danger of breakdowns of consensual agreements remote (p. 79) [11].

A world-system is characterized not only by its constant and necessary tendency to expand, but also by the fact that its markets are perpetually open to accelerate the circulation of capital. Thus, the main cultural and political objective of the elites thus becomes the retention of revolutionary movements, and this task can be achieved mainly through civil disorganization (vol. 1, p. 228; vol. 2, p. 690) [14,16]. Following Alexis de Tocqueville, Marx and Engels identified the concept of «civil society» as the economic base interrelated with the political superstructure—the base (*Basis*), foundation and support in every sense—. Such a society, as Althusser himself observed, relates different principles whose origin is to be found in the «social class», such as «social attributes of labor», the «substance of labor», the «commodity relations» or the «not 'private' individuals» (p. 133) [4].

In this way, and given the «immense variety of groups» such as «castes, feudal orders, clans, families, hordes» able to exercise dominance, the control of class consciousness and of «extracting its surplus value from a laboring class» has increased significantly (p. 133-134) [4]. The explanatory nature of the world-system presupposes that every existing region on the planet tends towards expansion, and that world-economies are the consequence of this expansion. Expansion needs, however, differed greatly from period to period based on the needs of capital from the 16th century onwards. In relation to the European peoples in the 16th century, whose nature is as significant as it is paradigmatic, Braudel exposes how:

At local level [...] the town might play a dominant or subordinate role. At national or international levels, it implied systems of relationships, depending on distances within the Mediterranean or even the Greater Mediterranean region. Finally there was political change. In the sixteenth century political change destroyed the old independence of the city-state, undermined the foundations of its traditional economy, creating and imposing new structures (vol. 1, p. 323) [16].

Braudel, likewise, exposes how «the great cities remained in their dominating positions, with the advantages

of high prices, high wages, and many customers for their shops, while satellite towns surrounded them, looked towards them, used them, and were used by them», on which he adds that «these planetary systems, so typical of Europe and the Mediterranean, were to continue to function virtually unimpeded» following itself «a fairly logical pattern. In the first place an increase in population [and] secondly, the cities were no longer undisputed rulers of the world» [16,19,20].

Conclusion

Regardless of the objectives and political tools used by the powers that be to eliminate the notion of «social class» from public debate, the use of the concept itself is not useful given the current social context. The domination of the public sphere and the capitalization of its space is currently ineffective for the popular classes, largely given the accelerated flows of movement of people, information and financial capital. The domination of the elites, given the self-interests of large groups of individuals, does not require aggressive planning and control of information but, to an unexpected degree, the perception of domination that workers hold over their possibilities for social change.

Given the organizational particularities of the world-system, the different social models within it are in a situation of absolute inability to control the popular masses, largely because there are no particular «axes» or «frameworks» of centralized struggle. The differences between the countryside and the cities, agriculture and industry or the private and the public have given way to hetero debates on morality, authority and ultimately identity, as principles that utopically offer meaning to domination. The simplest conclusion, *sine qua non* can explain the cultural nature of social classes today, is that one class is always dominant and, since the economic system is just that, a system in its entirety, the other is subordinate. This reality generates a necessary, constant and not spontaneous conflict between classes, with the objective of reproducing the *statu quo*.

The production process based on property has gradually drifted into a process related to occupation and the division of labor has lost part of the affinity and customs that in the past united the members of the groups. Capital has not only diluted tradition, but has adjacently divided the consciousness of belonging through diversified labor activities that the performance of the same labor can only be understood as casual. The situation is, in fact, absolutely no different from that of the 16th century, when the implementation of capital accelerated the speed of life again and again.

References

1. Marx K (1979) The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis

Bonaparte. In: MECW 1851-1853. 11th (Vol.), Lawrence & Wishart, pp: 99-197.

2. Wallerstein I (2011) The modern world-system II: mercantilism and the consolidation of the European world-economy, 1600-1750. University of California Press.
3. Wahrman D (1995) Imagining the middle class: the political representation of class in Britain, c.1780-1840. Cambridge University Press.
4. Althusser L (2006) Philosophy of the encounter. Verso.
5. Althusser L (1984) Reply to John Lewis. In: Essays in ideology. Brewster B, Lock G (Trans.), pp: 61-139.
6. Jameson F (2011) Representing capital: a reading of volume one of Das Kapital. Verso.
7. Labrousse CE (1970) Les 'bons prix' agricoles du XVIIIe siècle. In: Braudel F, Labrousse E (Eds.), Histoire économique et sociale de la France, II: Des derniers temps de l'age seigneurial aux préludes de l'age industriel (1660-1789). Presses Universitaire de France.
8. Marx K, Engels F (1976) The German Ideology. In: MECW 1845-1847. 5th (Vol.). Lawrence & Wishart, pp: 15-584.
9. Braudel F (1977) Afterthoughts on material civilization and capitalism. Ranum PM (Trans.). Johns Hopkins.
10. Marx K (1996) Capital Volume 1. In: MECW, 35th (Vol.). Lawrence & Wishart.
11. Coser LA (2001) The functions of social conflict. Routledge.
12. Parsons T (2005) The social system. Routledge.
13. Wallerstein I (2011) The modern world-system I: capitalist agriculture and the origins of the European world-economy in the sixteenth century. University of California Press.
14. Braudel F (1972) The Mediterranean and the mediterranean world in the age of Philip II. 2nd (Edn.), 2nd (Vol.), Harper & Row.
15. Hobsbawm E (1996) The age of revolution 1789-1848. Vintage.
16. Braudel F (1972) The Mediterranean and the mediterranean world in the age of Philip II. 2nd (Edn), 1st (Vol.), Harper & Row.
17. Wallerstein I (2011) The modern world-system III: the second era of great expansion of the capitalist world-

economy, 1730s-1840s. University of California Press.

society. Stanford University Press.

18. Touraine A (1971) The Post-Industrial society. Random House.

20. Mészáros I (2011) Social structure and forms of consciousness, Vol. II: the dialectic of structure and history. Monthly Review Press.

19. Dahrendorf R (1959) Class and class conflict in Industrial

