

After his sixty-sixth birthday dinner, my friend Martin Eisenberg commented to me that the group of us there were arguing about who is working class in the United States today without first discussing what we mean by class. I have been thinking about Martin's comment and thought I would email out my thoughts to the party revelers and other friends who have been arguing about similar issues with me. I would like to hear what others think. I will start by laying out some principles that I consider important for understand both history and the present. This is meant as a thought piece to promote interchange and not carefully organized or final in any respect. If anybody emails me back, I will send it back to everyone else. I would also welcome reading suggestions.

1. All societies have some form of internal social conflict, especially during times of crisis, but I think class as a meaningful concept is historically related to capitalism. I would not call earlier conflicts class conflicts. Now this may be because a start as an historian, rather than as a sociologist or political scientist.

2. Modern classes and class conflict emerge with capitalism. I define capitalism as acquisition, production, and distribution and general control over the goods and services people need to survive organized for the short-term private benefit of those in power who control these resources and processes.

3. Historically, there are elements of capitalism in earlier societies and around the world, including ancient river valley civilizations, early empires, and medieval commerce, and these early factors influence later development. However, I think capitalism as a meaningful system is rooted in the economic revolution brought about by the exploitation of the resources of the Americas after the Colombian encounter and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The wealth of the Americas, the labor of Africa and the trade with Asia, provided European societies with the capital or money to develop the infrastructure of Europe and North America and finance the Industrial Revolution.

4. Capitalist economies develop social and political institutions, super-structures, that are essential features of the system. I don't believe there are any predetermined formulas or formats [capitalism has been associated with relatively democratic societies (Western Europe), social welfare systems (Scandinavia), fascism (Germany and Italy), autocratic corporate states (Singapore), monarchies (Saudi Arabia) and state socialism (current China)].

5. In *Guns, Germs and Steel*, Jared Diamond talks about the "Neolithic package" that makes possible development of river valley civilizations in the ancient world. It included specific geographical and climate conditions, especially reliable water supplies, the availability of suitable grains and animals that could be domesticated, people, minerals and other resources in the region, and the ability to expand into other areas as population increased. As a result of this "package," the world gets government, armies, literacy, religion, technology and both war and progress. I would argue that in a similar way, there is a "capitalism package." Historically, capitalism in Western Europe and North America developed in conjunction with industrialization, the nation-state, private corporations, relatively democratic political institutions and imperialism. As a result of the capitalist package, the world also gets military alliances and war and class and ethnic-based political reform and revolutionary movements.

6. Although socialists have defined themselves as internationalists, class-based movements in capitalist societies have primarily been organized within nation-states where most decisions affecting people's lives have been made. At most, they have been national movements with an international perspective.

7. Social class is fluid over time and easier to define for core groups than it is to define people on the borders. During the capitalist industrial era, factory workers were the core group of the working class. Other groups were peripherally related to them and could be considered working class. This would include some self-employed members of working class communities and semi-professional service workers with racial or ethnic ties to working class communities. The status of government and white

collar employees has changed over time and some jobs previously considered semi-professional have been proletarianized. A good example is office workers. Some workers have had privileged economic positions because of control over special skills or unionization but generally this has been a temporary phenomenon and technological changes have shifted their position. This has been the case in some construction trades.

8. I defined capitalism to include the acquisition, production and distribution of goods and services. Within capitalism, social class is defined by your relationship to control over these three features of capitalism. I consider people who work in the distribution area (of both goods and services) as working class, whether they are employed by private concerns or by the state. This would include sanitation workers, truck, bus and train operators. Social class shapes group behavior and suggests collective political strategies but does not predict individual choices. Too many other social and individual factors shape identity to insist that class is the only or primary determinant of the choices made by any particular individual. I do not think the idea of false consciousness is meaningful or useful. It is rooted in determinism and the belief that class has priority over all other forms of identification and somehow is the only truthful perspective on the world.

9. On the periphery of the working class, there are groups that have historically identified their economic and political interests with opposition to working class rights, even when then these groups have adapted collective organizational structures such as unions. I do not think it is meaningful to call members of these groups working class in the past or at this time, although I concede their positions could change. Within this category I include college professors, police officers and fire fighters. Public school teachers are an interesting category because they have been torn between the desire to be seen as professionals and efforts to organize as workers. While some public school teachers always saw themselves as workers, I would not have identified the group as working class in the past. However, I think they are now undergoing a process of proletarianization in the United States. In addition, in New York City and other urban areas, the teacher force is becoming increasingly members of ethnic minorities and part of working-class communities.

10. In capitalist society during the industrial era, I believe that class based organization offered the most effective challenge to capitalist domination of the state and the economy. Unions were part of this opposition. This does not mean that all union actions are supportable in the name of working class political solidarity or progressive politics. Many unions rejected broader class identification and sought advancement for their members at the expense of other workers. Union leaders often saw themselves as managers of labor within, and supportive of, the capitalist system and all the social inequalities that it entails.

11. I think the biggest issue facing the world today is economic and political globalization and the impact of globalization on the environment, nation-states and the condition of people's lives. I think as capitalism has led to globalization, the capitalist package is breaking down and we are looking at a potentially new social, economic and political system. I think this change may in the end be comparable to the transformation from feudalism to capitalism, but this is just conjecture.

12. Some changes are already observable. First, the core of the American working class no longer lives in the United States. In the industrial era, workers migrated to jobs, from Europe to the United States, from southern Italy to northern Italy or from Ireland to England. These workers were integrated into the core group of the working class. They organized unions and political parties and became part of the political process within the nation-states. In the global era, jobs migrate to workers. "America's workers" living and working in India and China in impoverished and slave-like conditions have no institutional ability to shape the political climate in the capitalist metropolis. Migratory workers are seen as temporary guests and are denied political rights.

13. Second, capital has no home country and no sense of obligation. It is not that individual capitalists are greedy, immoral or evil (although most are). The problem lies in the rules of capitalism. Corporations operate all over the world without loyalty to anything other than to short term profit. Their motto is "Rape, Pillage and Abandon." If they do not act this way, other corporations will and will replace them. It is meaningless to talk of American products or companies. I don't think anything is made in the United States anymore.

14. Third, the power of the nation-state is in decline as it is abandoned and superceded by corporate power that was once integrated into the state system. On one hand, international agencies dictate government policies and can over ride democratic decisions. I do not expect the United States to remain immune as its global debt rises. On the other hand, national corporations abandon contractual responsibilities and expect the states to pick up the cost of environmental clean-ups and health and welfare programs.

15. I have no idea what will happen next. I do believe we are entering a period of major transformation of historic proportions. I cannot predict the role of the working class in the future. Maybe it will take on global dimensions to change the power of global capitalism. Maybe it will grow less politically and organizationally significant and a new basis for organization such as global citizenship will replace class at the center of progressive political struggle.

16. Politically, I do not expect the "left" or the working class to ever take power in the United States, the major capitalist metropolis. My political goals as a leftist and a citizen of the United States are more modest. I hope to raise social justice issues that call for an extension of democratic process, values and economic distribution and challenge right wing activity at home and abroad. My goal is to help create space for people around the world to experiment with new forms of organization and ideas that can challenge globalization and environmental degradation. I see possibility in political challenges to globalization in other regions of the world, particularly in Latin America. While I am less hopeful about Islamic populist movements, there may be hope there as well.

Enough. What do you think?