In her article, “Working Class Hegemony and the Struggle for Socialism,” Chantal Mouffe calls for a redefinition of the socialist project. The traditional Marxist argument that the working class must be the hegemonic force within any socialist movement should, she contends, be re-examined and discarded.

Mouffe's challenge needs to be answered. The significance of the debate extends well beyond her article alone, because the views expressed in it exemplify what is becoming a new orthodoxy on the left. This trend represents a distinct step backward, both theoretically and politically. It will be argued here not only that this conception of the socialist project is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of Marxist theory, but also that it is in many ways a throw-back to a variety of pre-Marxist, elitist and utopian vision that was effectively criticized by Marx himself.
Mouffe's Argument Summarized  We can begin by examining Mouffe's interpretation of Marx. The object of this exercise will not be simply to engage in an academic, textual debate about the meaning of Marxist scripture. The point is that Mouffe's misreadings of Marx can serve as a useful guide to her perception of the theoretical and political issues — both those which she regards as worthy of engagement and those which she seeks to avoid.

Mouffe begins by identifying two “radically different” conceptions of the proletariat as a revolutionary class whose historic mission is to bring about socialism. The first is Marx's earlier, philosophical conception, still bearing the traces of Hegel's “universal class.” The second is Marx's more mature, “economistic” version, grounded in a conception of history as the progressive development of productive forces, and determined by the laws of the “economic dialectic,” according to which, historical movement is propelled by the contradictions between the forces and relations of production. In this version, according to Mouffe, the historic mission of capitalism is to develop the productive forces of social labour; this mission comes to an end when capitalism itself, with its form of private appropriation, begins to fetter the further development of productive forces. The proletariat will be driven to perform its historic mission — the collective appropriation of productive forces — because capitalism will inevitably propel the increasing pauperization of the working class.

It is the latter version which Mouffe sets out to criticize by attacking what she takes to be its three principal assumptions: (1) that productive forces are neutral; (2) that the working class will be homogenized by the “double process of proletarianization/pauperization”; and (3) that this homogenized working class has a fundamental interest in the construction of socialism (p. 8). She proposes a “definitive break” with economism by introducing “political struggle into the heart of the economy” and abandoning the thesis that capitalism will create the material and social base of socialism. These criticisms entail an attack on Marx's conception of labour-power as a commodity, which, she argues, “allows Marx to reduce the worker to an objective element in the economic system, completely subject to its laws” (p. 11).
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Mouffe's answer to the fundamental assumption, which she attributes to Marx, that the development of productive forces is "natural and neutral," is that the economic sphere — the labour-process itself — is the "seat of social relations of domination," and that the forms of control in the capitalist labour-process, "far from corresponding to the simple logic of efficiency" (p. 17), are the result of capital's need to control the labour-process as a condition for the extraction of surplus value. This fact, she suggests, is enough to negate Marx's assumption that the development of productive forces under capitalism will create the material base for socialism. Furthermore, a rejection of the economistic view (according to which classes are determined by "places in production") entails a rejection of the assumption that there are purely economic interests — such as the alleged interest of the working class in the construction of socialism — that will be reflected on the ideological and political levels. The working class thus has no "fundamental interest" in socialism.

While some of Mouffe's interpretations of Marx could perhaps be justified (if not always by a straightforward and unproblematic reading of the texts, then at least by certain ambiguities in Marx's own formulations and by a few — very few — of his aphoristic, short-hand formulations), for the most part, her reading is truly breathtaking in its misconceptions. We shall examine each of these misconceptions, exploring their theoretical and political assumptions and consequences.

The Labour Process in Capitalism  The perversity of Mouffe's reading is most strikingly apparent in her argument that, because the development of productive forces by capitalism is not "neutral," but instead embodies social relations of domination, Marx's contention that capitalism creates the material base for socialism stands condemned. This is a truly startling proposition. Particularly astounding is her suggestion that the social relations of domination and struggle inherent in the capitalist development of productive forces and the capitalist organization of the labour-process were unknown to Marx. Is it really possible to misunderstand so completely Marx's whole life's work? Would it really have come as news to Marx that the object of capital is to extract maximum surplus value from living
labour? Did he really not know that the organization and control of the labour-process in capitalism are shaped by that objective and by the difficulty of imposing the demands of capital on living, labouring, struggling human beings? Really? Where, if not here, is the critique in Marx's critique of political economy? Or has Mouffe mistaken Marx for the very political economists whose mystifications Capital was meant to uncover?

Without a perception of the antagonisms and struggles inherent in capitalist production, most of what Marx has to say about the production process in capitalism would be meaningless. What did he have in mind when he spoke of the "two-fold" character of capitalist production, if not the many ways in which both the techniques and the organization of the labour-process are shaped and distorted by the exploitative character of capitalist production, and the fact that capitalism is unique among modes of production precisely in the extent to which the process of production and the process of exploitation are inseparable (as the production of use-value is at once and inseparably the production of surplus value)? Has Mouffe really failed to notice that all these discussions of the instruments and organization of labour — about the evolution of the factory, of machines, and of the working day — are permeated by the history of the struggles surrounding these developments?

Long before Chantal Mouffe "discovered" the labour-process as a terrain of struggle, Marx, in an effort to debunk the myth that capital's control of the labour-process is simply "made necessary by the co-operative character of the labour-process," and to show how the forms of control are "necessitated by the capitalist character of that process and the antagonism of interests between capitalist and labour," wrote:

The directing motive, the end and aim of capitalist production, is to extract the greatest possible amount of surplus-value, and consequently to exploit labour-power to the greatest possible extent. As the number of co-operating labourers increases, so too does their resistance to the domination of capital, and with it, the necessity for capital to overcome this resistance by counterpressure. The control exercised by the capitalist is not only a special function, due to the nature of the social labour-process, and peculiar to that process, but it is, at the same time, a function of the exploitation of a social labour-process, and is consequently rooted in the unavoidable antagonism between the exploiter and the living and labouring raw material he exploits.

Again, in proportion to the increasing mass of the means of production, now no longer the property of the labourer, but of the capitalist, the necessity
increases for some effective control over the proper application of those means... If, then, the control of the capitalist is in substance two-fold by reason of the two-fold nature of the process of production itself — which, on the one hand, is a social process for producing use-value, on the other a process for creating surplus-value — in form that control is despotic.

Long before Mouffe informed us that the development of capitalist productive forces was not "neutral," but penetrated by social relations of domination, Marx had already demonstrated that the constant revolutionizing of productive forces was not a universal natural law but a unique characteristic of capitalism and the specific logic of its mode of exploitation in the interests of the capitalist class (in contrast to other appropriating classes whose interests lay in the conservation of existing productive forces); that the modern "science of technology" was not neutral but an expression of capitalist exploitative relations, emerging from, shaped and distorted by, the exploitative needs of capitalist accumulation; that the very instruments of production — the machines of modern industry — have developed, not as neutral means of saving labour, but as means of exploitation and oppression; and that from the beginning, workers have struggled against these technical embodiments of capital:

The contest between the capitalist and the wage-labourer dates back to the very origin of capital. It raged on throughout the manufacturing period. But only since the introduction of machinery has the workman fought against the instrument of labour itself, the material embodiment of capital. He revolts against this particular form of the means of production, as being the material basis of the capitalist mode of production.

All of this also makes nonsense out of the proposition that Marx treats labour-power as a commodity "like any other" — as a mere "objective element" in the economic system. It is, after all, not Marx, but capitalism, that treats labour-power as a commodity; and it is precisely Marx who unmasked the "fetishism of commodities"; who insisted on the specificity of what he called that "peculiar commodity," labour-power; who revealed the distortions arising from capital's attempt to reduce labour-power to an "objective element"; and who eloquently recorded the struggles of workers against that reduction.

In short, far from representing alien territory for Marx, these perceptions are, self-evidently, the very essence of his analysis of capitalism. There is an even greater irony in
Mouffe's criticisms of Marx on this score, as we shall see: when she attacks the Marxist conception of working-class interests, she can do so only by completely side-stepping the fundamental antagonism that lies at the heart of capitalist production. What she takes to be her strongest argument against Marxist analysis is in fact the most telling case against her own.

**Capitalism and Socialism** Mouffe appears to assume that, according to Marx, capitalism creates the conditions for socialism through a smooth, non-contradictory, evolutionary process. Yet precisely the opposite is true. Marx *did* maintain that capitalism would lay the groundwork for socialism, but it would inevitably do so only partially and in a contradictory manner. Marx pointed out that inevitable, cyclical crises (with their consequent waste and destruction) would both advance and destroy the productive forces of capitalism. Similarly, he noted the need for relations of supervision in the capitalist labour-process — relations that would hamper and distort the "progressive" elements it also included. One can go on proliferating examples. Mouffe clearly misses the point of the notion that production relations become a "fetter" on productive forces — perhaps because she begins by reducing historical materialism to a crude technological determinism which has more in common with bourgeois ideas of progress than with Marxism. (It is worth noting that her source here seems to be G.A. Cohen rather than Marx. This is not the only occasion on which her attack on Marx has been one by proxy, in which one or another second-hand, and often problematic, account is allowed to stand in for Marx's.) Marx did not maintain that capitalism would create socialism, or even a socialist economy. Rather, he argued that it would create conditions out of which socialism could develop *and* that it would create barriers and distortions that socialism must overcome (hence the need for *constructing* socialism).

From a Marxist point of view, there are at least four senses in which capitalism creates the conditions under which socialism can develop. First, Marx argued that although capitalism distorts the labour-process with hierarchical supervisory relations, it *does* create a collective labour-process. That is, it brings together once-isolated producers into a co-ordinated, co-
operative production process. This is not a socialist labour-process; but it is the basis on which one could be built. At the same time, capitalism advances the productive forces to such an extent that the creation of socialism becomes an increasingly real possibility. A long dispute has raged within Marxist circles over whether or not a certain level of prosperity is a necessary precondition for the creation of socialism. However, without attempting to resolve this dispute here, it seems safe to say that conditions of relative affluence facilitate the development of socialism. At the very least, it is true that the technical forces of production have reached a uniquely high level under the pressure of capitalist accumulation, and that the technical instrumentalities for the curtailment of human labour, which are crucial to the emancipatory project of socialism, have thus been created under the auspices of capitalism. (Does Mouffe really want to deny this?)

Marx also argued that capitalism has the paradoxical consequence of socializing production. Although it does so within the structures of private property and private gain, capitalism has a tendency to reveal the social character of the production process it has created. An example of this can be seen in Marx's analysis of the joint-stock company. Here he remarks that such a company is at once the apotheosis of private property and a revelation that the capitalist (private interest) serves no useful function in the enterprise.

There is, however, an even more fundamental sense in which capitalism lays the foundation for socialism and the central project of abolishing class exploitation — something that explains not only the technical possibility of socialism, or the contradictions it must overcome, but also the driving force of the emancipatory struggle, without which there can be no socialist project. Capitalism has created a class that contains the real possibility of a new society free of exploitation — a class for which the abolition of exploitation can be a specific and immediate class interest and not simply an abstract ideal. With the final, definitive separation of the direct producer from the means of production that characterizes capitalism, the development of exploitation has, as it were, reached its perfection; and a class has emerged with no rights of property to defend and no exploitative powers to entrench — a class whose own emanci-
pation requires the emancipation of humanity from classes. It is in this sense that capitalism is the end of an historical process that Marx characterizes as the increasing separation of labourers from the means and the materials of labour — the conditions of their own reproduction. This aspect of capitalism, and not simply its development of productive forces, is what provides the moving force of the emancipatory project. At the same time, the particular structure of productive forces places the working class at the strategic centre of the social system and gives to that class a collective force and a potential for collective agency unprecedented in the long history of class struggle. The absence of these dimensions from Mouffe’s account is a truly monumental omission that tells us perhaps more than anything else about her theoretical and political perspective.

By rejecting Marx’s arguments on the relation between capitalism and socialism, Mouffe effectively eliminates the possibility of a materialist analysis of socialism. One of Marx’s great advances over the utopian socialists was his demonstration that socialism is not simply something to be desired. Socialism had been “put on the agenda” by the process of capitalist development; indeed, there are powerful forces within capitalism itself that push towards the rise of socialism (this does not mean that the rise of socialism is automatic). In Mouffe’s account, there is nothing in capitalism that makes socialism possible, no organic link between the two modes of production. The socialist project becomes ahistorical and utopian.

The Revolutionary Proletariat Mouffe’s misunderstanding of the sense in which capitalism lays the foundation for socialism is, of course, inseparable from her misconception about the revolutionary potential that Marx ascribes to the working class. Here again, the most essential and distinctive element in both Marx’s theory of history and his political project is absent.

The distinctively Marxist conception of the revolutionary proletariat, grounded in a theory of history that represents a radical break from bourgeois ideology, is something quite different from either of Mouffe’s “versions.” And this distinctively Marxist version has no place in her account, nor, apparently, in her political perspective: the proletariat is the revolutionary
class in the sense that it is the first and only class that cannot fully emancipate itself from class exploitation without abolishing class exploitation itself.¹¹ It is also the first and only class with the strategic position and the potential collective identity and power to carry through the emancipatory project.

This is the only conception of the revolutionary proletariat that has its roots in the distinctively Marxist theory of history as the history of class struggle, and in the fundamental principle of historical materialism which underlies it — that “the specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers [i.e., the specific mode of exploitation] reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding form of the state.”¹² It is not technology that represents the touchstone of each mode of production: “The essential difference between the various economic forms of society . . . lies only in the mode in which this surplus-labour is in each case extracted from the actual producer, the labourer.”¹³ And it is these distinctively Marxist principles that lie at the heart of the Marxist conception of socialism as the end of class exploitation. The “historic mission” of the proletariat is to bring about this goal. Seen from this Marxist perspective, and not from the vantage point of technologistic, bourgeois conceptions of progress, the “mission” of the proletariat, like the role of capitalism in laying the foundations of socialism, must be conceived differently.

Mouffe offers a number of reasons for rejecting Marx’s view: that it is historically suspect (based on a misperception of working-class struggles in the nineteenth century); that Marx mistakenly predicted the increasing homogenization of the working-class and failed to foresee its changing structure; that working-class struggles have varied historically, invalidating any conception of a unified revolutionary objective; that the working-class has no fundamental interest in socialism — indeed, that there is no such thing as an “economic” class interest that can be translated into political terms.

Mouffe maintains that the revolutionary mission Marx ascribed to the working class was the result of his misperception of specific historical events between 1848 and 1870. According to Mouffe, Marx saw these great upheavals as “the paradigm-
matic form of the struggle of the proletariat” (p. 21); yet they were in fact artisanal struggles which resisted capitalism in the name of the old, not the new. The real form of working-class struggle, which did not seek to turn back the historical clock, appeared only later in the nineteenth century. When it did, it had ceased to oppose capitalism as a system, struggling instead for what Mouffe calls “the transformation of relations in production” (p. 22).

Leaving aside the question of whether or not Mouffe has correctly characterized the revolutions of 1848 and 1870, it is simply untrue to imply, as Mouffe does, that the Marxist idea of the revolutionary character of the proletariat was a figment of the overheated imagination of the revolutionary émigré, excited by the outbreak of fighting in the streets. To begin with, one must point out that Marx developed this idea before any of these events had occurred; it appears as early as his “Preface to a Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right.” Moreover, his analyses of the 1848 and 1870 revolutions are extraordinarily nuanced; Marx was well aware of the complex class relations behind them and of the limitations of the working-class movements themselves (this is particularly true for 1870). When the 1848 revolutions failed, Marx did not idealize them. Rather, he admitted his “error” in overestimating their strength. Yet, this did not prevent him from continuing to believe that the working class was potentially a revolutionary force. Why?: because it was based, not on a momentary enthusiasm for specific events, nor on some metaphysical abstraction, but on a carefully thought-out, complex, and sophisticated analysis of capitalism and the class it had created.

Mouffe goes on to argue that Marx “stated incorrectly that the expansion of the wage form would coincide with that of industrial workers” (p. 18). (Oddly, Mouffe’s only reference here is to an article by Adam Przeworski.) This apparently led Marx to neglect the new types of wage-labourer that have appeared since the early days of capitalism (all of which Mouffe classifies as non-productive), whose class position is “problematic.” Recent commentators, such as Braverman, who do take these new types into account, are criticized on the grounds that they, too, fall prey to the erroneous thesis that the working class is being increasingly “homogenized” by the process of capitalist devel-
opment (pp. 18-9).

There is perhaps some justice in Mouffe's critique of Braverman, although it is probably unfair to accuse him of being unaware of the divisions that exist within the working class. However, the thesis that Marxist theory predicts the homogenization of the working class is indeed questionable. There are, of course, places in Marx's work where he appears to be predicting something like this. But, there are at least as many where he indicates the opposite. More importantly, the logic of Marx's overall analysis of capitalism suggests that he was well aware of the complexity of capitalist social structure.

For example, Marx frequently observed that capitalism has a built-in tendency to penetrate into new, previously "untouched" spheres of society, including what he referred to as the "sphere of immaterial production." As a result, it would hardly come as a surprise to him that the spread of capitalism should have the effect of creating a diverse group of workers, in a variety of economic sectors and structural positions. In this connection, Marx was also well aware of the proliferation of unproductive labour under capitalism; he discussed this phenomenon on several occasions, including in a lengthy section of Theories of Surplus-Value and in two sections on commercial capital in Capital. Finally, Marx pointed to the tendency of capital to create intermediate strata in the labour-process as certain of its functions were delegated to specialized wage-labourers (e.g., supervisors). Furthermore, Marx's discussion of mental and manual labour and the rise of a collective labourer indicates his sensitivity to the diversity of those involved in the capitalist labour-process:

With the development of the specifically capitalist mode of production in which many labourers work together in the production of the same commodity, the direct relation which their labour bears to the effect produced naturally varies greatly. For example, the unskilled labourers in a factory... have nothing directly to do with the working up of the raw material. The workmen who function as overseers of those directly engaged in working up the raw material are one step further away; the works engineer has yet another relation and in the main works only with his brain, and so on. But the totality of these labourers, who possess labour-power of different value (although all the employed maintain much the same level), produce the results, which, considered as the result of the labour-process pure and simple, [are] expressed in a commodity or material product; and all together, as a workshop, they are the living production machine of these products — just as, taking the production process as a whole, they exchange their labour for capital and
reproduce the capitalist's money as capital, that is to say, as value-producing surplus-value, as self-expanding value.\textsuperscript{17}

If anything, Marx, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, shows noteworthy prescience.

Mouffe, like Daniel Bell, seems to think that because twentieth-century capitalist society differs in certain respects from nineteenth-century capitalist society, and because Marx did not describe the former in full, it is impossible to sustain a Marxist analysis any further. This brings her dangerously close to the view that capitalism no longer exists — that we are living in something called "post-capitalist" society. Of course Marx did not offer a fully developed class analysis of twentieth-century capitalism; but a useful Marxist analysis of contemporary social structure is clearly possible and requires only that we drop the assumption that a "Marxist" working class is homogeneous. (We have already seen that this assumption is not necessary to, or implicit in, Marx's analysis.) Many of the "problematic" workers with whom Mouffe is concerned are clearly wage-labourers (secretaries, teachers, nurses, etc.). Some of them may be unproductive workers (although even this is not always true); but, as has been demonstrated time and time again, this in no way alters the fact that they are exploited wage-labourers who are in conflict with their employers.\textsuperscript{18} This is a crucial characteristic that they share with industrial workers — a fact that Mouffe completely ignores. The differences and stratifications to which she points are undoubtedly real, but why should we regard these as class differences, with (say) productive labour on one side, and unproductive labour on the other? Why not treat them instead as barriers to the process of class organization — as differences among workers who share the fact of being wage-labourers? This would make it possible for us to understand why such diverse workers are all in conflict with their employers (a fact that Mouffe's approach cannot accommodate), yet at the same time to explain why it is so difficult for them to unite around this common struggle.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Class and Class Interests} Ultimately, Mouffe is not really interested in the changing structure of the working class, for it is her contention that interests cannot be "imputed" to a class, whether or not that class is homogeneous. She argues that this
is a form of “class reductionism” — a form of “economism” — which treats the economic base as conceptually prior to politics and ideology, reducing the latter to mere superstructural emanations from the former:

How can it be maintained that economic agents can have interests defined at the economic level which would be represented a posteriori at the political and ideological levels? In fact, since it is in ideology and through politics that interests are defined, that amounts to stating that interests can exist prior to the discourse in which they are formulated and articulated. This is contradictory. [p. 21]

The first and most obvious objection is that Mouffe is here confusing several distinct issues. Quite apart from the conventional, if difficult, distinction that must unavoidably be drawn between immediate and “long-term” interests, there is a considerable difference between interests and objectives. Whatever the specific objectives of working-class struggle at any given time and place, would Mouffe want to argue that there has actually been a time when the advantage of the working class lay in being exploited rather than not being exploited? In other words, has there ever been a time when it would not have been in the interest of the working class to cease being an exploited class?

It is one thing to maintain that for the abolition of exploitation to become a political objective, the fact of exploitation must be perceived in certain ways, and that its sources and foundations (not simply its consequences) must be understood. But it is quite another matter to suggest that working-class interests do not lie in the abolition of exploitation. This is to go so far in collapsing material reality into “discourse” that the fact of exploitation itself — its advantages to the exploiter and disadvantages to the exploited, its effects on workers’ lives, and the whole structure of domination built upon it — become nothing but Idea. In the rather sloppy notion that interests are constituted at the ideological and political “level,” Mouffe has confused and conflated a number of large and varied processes: the formation of political movements, the elaboration of their specific goals, the translation of material interests into political objectives, the constitution of those material interests themselves, and indeed, the formation of the social relations by which those interests are defined. Down that road lies absolute Idealism.

Mouffe is in effect telling us that people have no material in-
interests; they only have more or less autonomous ideas about their interests. Thus it becomes meaningless to ask whether and how any actual disposition of class power works to the advantage of one class at the expense of another, whatever the participants may think about it at any given moment. As to how ideas about interests are constituted, Mouffe gives us little coherent guidance. On one hand, since interest-ideas apparently bear no relation, actual or potential, to any material interests grounded in the social relations of production, the process of idea-formation appears to be purely arbitrary and contingent, at best determined by the mystical powers of the available "discourses." From this perspective, a caveman would be just as likely to become a socialist as would a proletarian — provided only that he came within hailing distance of the appropriate "discourse." On the other hand, since Mouffe attaches great ideological and political importance to the differences among workers, based upon their degrees of privilege in the hierarchy of income distribution and the technical organization of the labour-process (notably the differences between white-collar workers, or the "new middle class," and the "traditional" working class), it would seem that consciousness is, in her view, rather crudely determined by "economic" factors (see, for example, p. 19). She castigates Marx for his alleged "economism" and "reductionism" — a criticism she can sustain only by systematically confusing materialism with "economism," thereby reducing Marx's materialism to a simple-minded preoccupation with factors such as income distribution, rates of economic growth, and technological change (the "economy"), while missing his essential point about the determinative effects of productive activity and the organization of production, in class societies, on the basis of exploitation. Having constructed and attacked her economistic straw man, she shows alarming signs of reproducing herself in its image. What are we to make of these wild swings between Mouffe's customary idealism and her lapses into crude economism?

Mouffe also attaches a great deal of importance to the fact that workers' struggles have varied historically. But how does this represent a challenge to a materialist analysis of class interests? Not even the most confirmed materialist would contend that the working class is fully conscious of, and united around,
its long-term interests at all times. Indeed, there has been a long debate, within very orthodox Marxist circles, on precisely the question of how to “bridge the gap” between the “actual” consciousness of working-class groups and the long-term goal of socialism. Nor need Marxists regard these “actual” instances of working-class consciousness as “false.” Gramsci, for example, referred to several levels or forms of working-class consciousness, ranging from “common sense” to more fully developed class consciousness. None of these is “false”; rather, they represent different degrees of development and organization, as well as the varying pressures and possibilities, and the real available options, that confront the working class in any given historical context. It is certainly true that workers do not automatically acknowledge that socialism is in their interest just because they are workers (human beings do have to “make their own history”). But the reason that this can (and does) happen, and the reason that it did not happen to slaves or to serfs, is that the worker’s situation makes socialism an immediate issue and a real possibility.

Moreover, what needs to be added to this discussion of class consciousness is the fact that there are powerful forces within capitalist society that seek to deflect, distort and/or hinder the development of working-class consciousness. Mouffe would surely not wish to deny that, for a variety of reasons, it is very difficult to organize the working class around a socialist project under capitalism. To repeat the obvious, the repressive force of the state can be, and has been, used to break such attempts at organization. Capitalist ideology and the various institutions through which it is promulgated can be, and have been, used as weapons against working-class self-organization. It is even possible for capitalists to exploit the structural divisions within the working class (e.g., skill, occupation, race, gender, nationality) as a means of disorganizing it. It is clear that the diversity of working-class struggles and organizations has a great deal to do with the power of the opposition against which they must struggle; but this hardly means that the working class has no fundamental interest in the aboliton of class exploitation.

What of Mouffe’s analysis of contemporary working-class struggles? Here she comes very close indeed to implying that if the working class is anything by nature, it is reformist (surely a
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grossly "economistic" proposition!) (see p. 22). In making this argument, she points to the "fact" that most working-class struggles since 1870 have not posed a fundamental challenge to capitalism as a system. Once again, Mouffe's analysis does not do justice to the historical realities. She needs to be reminded that working-class movements have, on a number of occasions, posed very substantial challenges to established capitalist orders (e.g., in Italy or Germany during the post-World War I period). Moreover, Mouffe, like many of the Marxists she is criticizing, seems to have a very narrow conception of what a challenge to capitalism as a system would look like. She apparently wishes to argue that, while the revolutions of 1848 and 1870 were "traditional," a "modern" assault on capitalism would have to look essentially like them. It may be that an insurrectionary workers' movement would represent a challenge to capitalism (although a mere riot would not). But must we argue that this is the only form that a rejection of the capitalist system can take? Perhaps as Winton Higgins and Nixon Apple have recently suggested, even "reformist" movements may sometimes represent a real commitment to fundamental social change. Whether or not they are likely to succeed is another question; but there is considerable evidence indicating that the goal of many "reformists" is in fact the replacement of capitalism by socialism. If "radical" challenges to capitalism are relatively rare, it is not because the working class has independently rejected fundamental social change, deciding that it was not in their interest. Rather, they are rare because, for such a challenge actually to be articulated, organized and sustained, powerful political and ideological counterpressures originating with the dominant class (not the working class) must be overcome. It should hardly be necessary to remind Mouffe, who is a student of Gramsci, of the latter's remarks regarding the peculiar tenacity of fully developed capitalist societies.

The fact that workers' struggles have not (yet) definitively challenged capitalist production relations, and/or that their forms of struggle have been varied rather than homogeneous, does not affect the fundamental issue. In one sense, of course, every working-class struggle — even the most limited demand for improvements in the terms and conditions of work or in trade-union rights — represents a challenge to capital and its
power to extract surplus value. We are not entitled to dismiss these struggles as inconsequential and to treat them as if their objectives were fundamentally different from, or even opposed to, a challenge to capitalism (as Mouffe appears to suggest). To impose a radical discontinuity between these lesser forms of struggle and the ultimate battle against capitalism itself, we must at the very least assume that capitalism has an unlimited capacity to move forward the boundary beyond which the struggle for workers’ interests will threaten the capitalist system itself.

In fact, we need look no further than Mouffe’s own insistence on the antagonisms and struggles inherent in capitalist production to find an incontrovertible answer to her argument on working-class interests. The mystery in her criticism of Marx on this issue stems not only from how she has managed so completely to miss his point, but also why she believes that a perception of these antagonisms in production can serve her theoretical and political strategy when exactly the opposite is true. It is precisely because of the fundamental and irreconcilable conflict of interest between capital and labour — presumably the basis of the struggles that Mouffe is so anxious to locate in the labour-process — that the interests of the workers can never be fully served within the wage-relation. Within the wage-system, the working class can struggle, with varying degrees of success, against the opposing tendencies of capitalism, and it can improve the terms and conditions of work — but only up to a point. Even short of the absolute limit beyond which their demands would challenge the capitalist system itself, they must constantly run up against the limits imposed by the needs of capital accumulation — which in practical terms means that excessive demands will lead to responses like the closing of plants, unemployment, the curtailment of trade-union rights, and so on.

Mouffe grossly caricatures and trivializes Marx’s argument — indeed the whole question of working-class interests — by reducing it to a matter of “absolute” poverty and the tendency of capitalism to drive wages down. Quite apart from the fact that a “general tendency,” as Marx conceives it, is not always present as an empirical reality (since there are other, counterbalancing forces at work), it is ludicrous to suggest that he
refused to acknowledge the possibility of rising wages. Indeed, whatever mistakes he may have made about “absolute” impoverishment, this tendency played a far less important role in his argument than “relative” impoverishment and, particularly, the argument that workers, in the very process of production, reproduce and expand the capitalist relation itself and hence the conditions of their own exploitation. In fact, his argument was that, in the very process of improving their material conditions and raising their wages by promoting the growth of productive capital, they actually strengthen the exploitative powers that oppress them. In his lecture, “Wage Labour and Capital,” Marx might have been replying directly to Mouffe when he wrote:

Even the most favourable situation for the working class, the most rapid possible growth of capital, however much it may improve the material existence of the worker, does not remove the antagonism between his interests and the interests of the bourgeoisie, the interests of the capitalists. Profits and wages remain as before in inverse proportion.

If capital is growing rapidly, wages may rise; the profit of capital rises incomparably more rapidly. The material position of the worker has improved, but at the cost of his social position. The social gulf that divides him from the capitalist has widened.23

The critical question, then, is not the depression of wages (though it must be said, of course, that any improvement in the terms and conditions of work must always be achieved against the natural tendency of capital to drive wages down), but rather the antagonism of interest between capital and labour: “The indispensable condition for a tolerable situation of the worker is, therefore, the fastest possible growth of productive capital. But what is the growth of productive capital? Growth of the power of accumulated labour over living labour. Growth of the domination of the bourgeoisie over the working class.”24

If this is true of periods when productive capital is expanding and wages are rising, what are we to say about the — inevitable — periods of contraction and stagnation? What does Mouffe want to tell us about the interests of capital and labour at this very moment in advanced capitalist societies — about high unemployment, deindustrialization, the shift of capital from large-scale industry and high-wage jobs to low-pay sectors such as “service” industries, and the clawing back by capital of labour’s hard-won rights? Marx may have underestimated the
resilience of capitalism and the duration of its characteristic fluctuations, but does Mouffe really want to maintain that the recuperative capacities of capital and its power to expand belie the conflict of interest between capital and labour?

The concept of antagonistic interests is clearly alien to Mouffe. The critical issue has to do with the inherent limits of capitalist relations. Workers cannot serve their interests beyond a certain point without challenging the wage-relation itself. They have repeatedly come up against that boundary without breaking through it, even when (as now) that boundary has become more constricting, and as workers have been compelled to moderate their claims — even to give up what they have gained — because the ceiling at which those claims begin to threaten capital accumulation has been lowered. It cannot be predicted with certainty that the working class will acknowledge the necessity of breaking through that boundary; nevertheless, the boundary is there. To deny that it is in the fundamental interest of the working class to struggle for the abolition of class exploitation is tantamount to saying that no such boundary exists — in which case it becomes incomprehensible that the labour-process should be a terrain of struggle at all, in the sense that Mouffe insists it is and must be. Or does she simply want to argue, in the style of classical bourgeois ideology, that the interests of capital and labour are fundamentally the same, so that the object of workers' struggles (if there is a legitimate object) is simply to bring the capitalist class to its senses? On consideration, it would perhaps not be so surprising to find her arguing precisely this. Her conception of class seems unable to apprehend that it is the relations of exploitation and their inherent antagonisms that define classes and constitute class interests. If interests are constituted simply at the ideological and political "levels," why should any insurmountable class antagonisms and conflicts of interest exist at all?

Mouffe's Political Project Mouffe's theoretical discussion of class and class interests leads, ultimately, to a political punch line. Her contention is that any of a number of "oppressed" groups in society could become the key stone of a socialist movement. It could be the working class (although she seems
pessimistic); it could also be women, racial minorities, environmentalists, or a variety of others. In making this argument, Mouffe has touched on an important issue for contemporary socialist strategy — namely, the problem of the “new social movements” and their relationship to socialism. But she has done so in such a way that she has reverted to a pre-Marxist notion of what socialism is.

First, Mouffe’s socialism is inevitably utopian. For Marx, socialism was rooted in capitalist society: the proletariat had an inherent interest in the creation of socialism and would itself be the agent initiating the revolutionary process. Its conditions of existence would place socialism “on the agenda,” forcing the proletariat to choose between continued exploitation and fundamental social change. Mouffe can give us no comparable answer to the question of where socialism will come from. In fact, she explicitly rejects the notion that pressures towards socialism exist within capitalism. The working class does not have an objective interest in socialism; indeed, no one has! The development of such an interest by any group occurs at the political and ideological levels and appears to be wholly contingent.

The essential question remains: If the object of socialism is to abolish class and class struggle, who has the most immediate social interest in this project and the social capacity to undertake it? If the abolition of class exploitation is the essential objective of socialism, for whom can this be a real objective, grounded in the realities of their life-situation, confirmed by their own experience of struggle, and rendered realistic by their strategic social power and their capacity for collective agency? Who, if not the working class? Mouffe maintains that “it is perfectly possible to imagine the realization of such a struggle [for socialism] in the form of a vast popular movement in which the working class does not play the central role” (p. 23). But precisely how is it possible to imagine such a thing? If the working class has no essential interest in the construction of socialism, what would be the grounds for assigning such an “interest” to any other social group — to people who are not directly subject to capitalist exploitation? What would be the grounds for attributing the social capacity to play this role to people who are not strategically situated at the heart of capitalist production and appropriation? How could they not be far
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less likely than the working class to have as their collective goal the abolition of class exploitation, or to possess the power and cohesion to constitute the collective agent of this transformative project?

Mouffe has, of course, absolved herself of any need to answer such awkward questions. The “autonomization” of ideology and politics from any social base, which is Mouffe’s theoretical and political stock-in-trade,26 has the inestimable advantage of making it possible arbitrarily to designate any collection of people as revolutionary agents — as the bearers of a revolutionary ideology and political will — without demonstrating that they have a fundamental collective interest in performing that historic role, the social capacity to do so, or even some fundamental principle of cohesion to unite them as a collective agent. By the same token, needless to say, it is equally possible to disqualify any other social group, irrespective of its material interests and social capacities. But short of accepting this principle that anything goes, we must still ask: If it is fanciful to suppose that the working class will be the principal agent of the transition to socialism, is it not infinitely more fanciful to imagine that this role will be played by Mouffe’s inchoate mass?

If no one has a built-in interest in socialism, who, then, will (at the ideological and political levels) raise the possibility of socialism in the first place? Since no social force has the need or the power to create socialism, then it must be brought to the exploited from outside; not only must someone tell the down-trodden about socialism, and help them to organize around this idea, but even more fundamentally, someone must create their “interest” in it (since they have no such intrinsic interest). Marx and Engels had some choice words for this brand of socialism:

The founders of these systems see, indeed, the class antagonisms, as well as the action of the decomposing elements in the prevailing form of society. But the proletariat . . . offers to them the spectacle of a class without any historical initiative or any independent political movement.

Since the development of class antagonisms keeps even pace with the development of industry, the economic situation, as they find it, does not as yet offer to them the material conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat. They therefore search after a new social science, after new social laws, that are to create these conditions.

Historical action is to yield to their personal inventive action, historically created conditions of emancipation to fantastic ones, and the gradual, sponta-
Mouffe’s preoccupation with “popular” movements of various kinds no doubt distinguishes her from the utopians here described. Yet, there is a sense in which her own project is even more utopian. These utopian socialists actually confronted an historical situation that did “not as yet offer . . . the material conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat,” while for Mouffe it would appear that no such material conditions could ever exist.

From the Marxist point of view, socialism is the self-emancipation of the proletariat, the abolition of class, the ending of exploitation. Mouffe’s approach seems to call all of this into question, leaving us unsure of what is really meant by socialism. She generally appears to accept that socialism is the abolition of class exploitation; but since she can contemplate a socialist project in which the working class does not play a central role, hers is at best an elitist vision. The image of the proletariat, the principal object of liberation, being “led by the hand,” or emancipated by proxy, is most effectively conjured up by her curious notion that the agents of “class struggle” need not be “social classes” (p. 23).

It is just possible, however, that Mouffe’s account of the struggle for socialism implies a complete revision of the socialist project. It may be that she is suggesting that socialism is not about the abolition of class. Perhaps, despite her disclaimers, she intends to question the centrality of class exploitation in human history, as distinct from other forms of domination and oppression, and to displace the abolition of class as the core of the socialist project. If that is so, she may have better grounds for dismissing the working class. But then, she has a truly daunting task in front of her: she must do nothing less than rewrite history and supply us with a convincing theoretical alternative to historical materialism as a means of gaining access to historical understanding. The burden of historical materialism has been to show why and how production relations, exploitation, and class struggle have been central to social experience and historical processes. If we are to accept Mouffe’s political programme, the very least we can expect from her is an equally persuasive account of how historical and social pro-
cesses have been determined by a whole range of social relations and forms of domination other than those related to class — all of them surpassing the relations of production in their determinative effects, and all of them more capable of generating collective agents strategically placed to regulate the course of history. And she must also convince us that the emancipatory project she (presumably) proposes on the basis of her historical vision will be more effectively and universally liberating than that afforded by the abolition of class.

It has often been remarked that one of capitalism's greatest strengths is its ability to obscure, at least temporarily, the fundamental class conflicts that divide it. This has never been more true than it is now, as the category of wage-labour has become extremely diverse, and as racial, sexual, national and other conflicts have intersected with, and complicated, capitalist class relations. We need to learn a great deal more about these "new" complexities so that we can understand them better and develop appropriate political strategies. But we will not do so if, like Chantal Mouffe, we capitulate to the bourgeois illusion that class is not the crucial contradiction in capitalist society. Class is not something incidental to the socialist project; it is its very foundation. Socialism is the abolition of class, and the abolition of class exploitation can only be accomplished by the exploited class itself.

Notes


2. Karl Marx, Capital, 3 vols. (Moscow 1971), 1:313-4. If anything, Marx overestimates the degree to which capital's control of the labour-process must be "despotic" to overcome the antagonisms and resistances inherent in the process.


4. Marx, Capital, 1:402-3. (See n. 2 above.)

5. It should be added that Mouffe's argument about labour-power as a commodity is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept of "ab-
She maintains that labour-power is not a commodity because it is not the product of abstract labour — as if abstract labour were a specific kind of labour (distinct from something called "necessary labour"), rather than simply the presupposition implicit in the process of commodity exchange.

6. For Marx's remarks on co-ordination and supervision, see Marx, *Capital*, 1:330-1

7. This point has been argued by Isaac Deutscher in his various works, and by Rudolf Bahro in *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* (London 1978).


9. This argument is developed especially in the *Grundrisse*, in Marx's discussion of the relation between capitalism and pre-capitalist forms.

10. For a more detailed discussion of how theorists like Mouffe factor-out exploitation and class struggle, see E.M. Wood, "Marxism Without Class Struggle?" *The Socialist Register* (1983); and Peter Meiksins, "New Middle Class or Working Class," *Against the Current* 2:4 (Winter 1984), 42-8

11. The most famous statement of this principle occurs in Engels's 1887 preface to *The Communist Manifesto*.


13. Ibid., 1:209


17. Idem, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, 1:411. It is interesting to note that this passage contradicts Mouffe's assertion that all of the "new" strata are unproductive.

18. See, for example, Peter Meiksins, "Productive and Unproductive Labor and Marx's Theory of Class," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 13:3 (Fall 1981), 32-42

“Marxism Without Class Struggle?” esp. 256-64 (see n. 10 above); and Peter Meiksins, “White Collar Workers and the Process of Class Formation” (Paper presented at the Fifth Conference on Workers and Their Communities, Toronto, Canada, May 1984). Our discussion here has deliberately omitted consideration of more “élite” occupations such as those of professionals, since those in such occupations constitute a minority within the new strata with which Mouffe is concerned. However, it is possible, and perhaps even necessary, to apply the same argument to such occupations. For an application of this approach to the case of engineers, see Peter Meiksins, “Scientific Management and Class Relations: A Dissenting View,” *Theory and Society* 13:2 (March 1984), 177-209.

20. It would also be worth drawing Mouffe’s attention to the meaning of “determination” as “a complex and interrelated process of limits and pressures” (rather than the rigidly mechanical notion of her “economistic” straw Marx), so brilliantly outlined by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford 1977), 83-9. There is also a useful discussion of base and superstructure in this book (pp. 75-82).


24. Ibid., 215

25. For a forceful consideration of these points, especially as they affect the women’s and peace movements, see Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London 1983), 92-3

26. In the light of this principle, there is a nice irony in Mouffe’s criticism of Marx on the grounds that he separates the economic sphere from other “levels.”