

Unity Without Uniformity: Class, Heterogeneity, and Culture

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At the beginning of the Twenty-first Century, an exciting movement for global justice ties activists together in many ways, forming a diverse and decentralized unity. People engage with each other in local, regional and world social forums, across the internet, during encuentros, and in networks of mutual support and communication like People's Global Action. PGA initiated the global days of action which included "the battle for Seattle" and other confrontations with global capital. A Peoples' Global Action Asian and Gender conference will be held in Dhaka, Bangladesh in April, 2004. "The Krishok Federation of farmers, women, indigenous and landless are convening this week-long conference of which two days will be devoted to gender and the struggle against patriarchy."

PGA unites Bolivians who successfully prevented the Bechtel corporation from privatizing their water and forced a change in the central leadership of the country, farmers in India struggling against Monsanto, women in Colombia fighting Plan Colombia, Mexicans opposing Plan Puebla Panama, Canadian postal workers, and thousands if not indirectly millions of others. The PGA is "a grassroots movement of all continents" which is a "coordination network of resistance to the global market, a new alliance of struggle and solidarity . . . for all those who fight the destruction of humanity and the planet by capitalism and [seek to] build local alternatives to globalisation." It is not only anti-corporate, but also explicitly anti-capitalist. [1](#)

The variety of activist forces fighting the neoliberal model of global capitalism dominated by Washington does not represent a communist movement, of course, but socialists the world over participate and many are in leadership positions. Objectively, the movement can be said to represent a historical force through which the working class is constructing itself internationally. To participate effectively in such struggles Marxists need to be able to demonstrate a serious commitment to diversity and democracy.

Thus, there are strategic reasons for Marxists to be concerned with diversity. But there are theoretical reasons too, ones not foreign to classical Marxism but ones that can be seen as grounded within its core. I will argue, contrary to some Marxist theoreticians, that capital is not a material force that homogenizes everything in its greedy path. An attention to cultural heterogeneity is a necessary correction and further elaboration of a Marxist philosophy of human development. Taking Marx's thought as a paradigm rather than a dogma, we see that it has core assumptions, but that there is also room for disagreement, growth and change. I will argue that articulating an appreciation of diversity is necessary in the following four areas:

- A.** A theory of class formation consistent with Marx's own emphasis on class as a social relation that is historically constituted;
- B.** A recognition that the direct producer is a collective laborer distributed throughout the productive process;
- C.** A methodology that blends abstract and concrete modes of analysis; focusing on capitalism as it "actually exists."
- D.** An appreciation of the power of culturally based resistance

Marxists have too often seen class as a monolithic entity. I will claim that class relations are not

homogenous but are a complex and multifaceted unity of many concrete determinations. Also, we need to appreciate the complexity and attention to empirical detail that Marx brings to his own analysis of actually existing capitalism. Capitalism and socialism do not exist as abstractions: they exist within local, concrete forms of life that are profoundly diverse, containing many variations. For example, in *Capital, Volume 3*, after discussing how the “direct relationship” between “the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers. . . [reveals] the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice,” Marx cautions his readers to remember:

This does not prevent the same economic basis – the same in its major conditions – from displaying endless variations and gradations in its appearance, as the result of innumerable different empirical circumstances, natural conditions, racial relations, historical influences acting from outside, etc., and these can only be understood by analysing these empirically given conditions ” (927-28).

I will argue that the dynamic of capital accumulation itself creates heterogeneity. Capital cannot effectively spread itself without capturing real economic and political forces that make possible the extraction of value. Following Marx, we see that attention to local conditions and cultural forms make it necessary for our theory to have an appreciation of diversity.

A. As a culturally and historically constructed relation, class is heterogeneous.

In his important article “Experiences and Perspectives of the Socialism in Cuba,” Miguel Limia, points out:

Concrete people make [history] by carrying out their personal projects and connecting their vital activity in a form sui generis. The subjective talents, the spiritual culture, of the makers of history are essential for the unfolding of the social reality, including its regularities” (7).

Limia’s attention to how spirituality and culture form important components of individuals’ lives is a crucial step forward. He feels that Marxist philosophy has too often portrayed class as static and undifferentiated, a view that impedes the full development of popular participation in revolutionary change. He stresses that Cubans form a diverse, multiracial ethnos (9, 13-4). In order to move the revolution forward and stabilize it, social scientists must investigate how the multiple aspects of people’s actual material lives interact. Their political participation stems not only from their national and class identity (which is stratified or heterogeneous too), but also from their ethnicity, race, gender, age, and spiritual identity.

Another Cuban theoretician, Maura Salubarria Roig adopts a similar approach in her paper “Political Culture as an Instrument of Social Change.” She points to a crisis of politics – a disconnect between changes in Cuban social structures and the diversity of meanings, reactions, and perceptions of everyday people, who have varying concepts of time or place and disparate interpretations of symbolic political codes. They have diverse priorities and exercise distinctive forms of political participation. She argues for a nuanced understanding of the relationship between class and culture, where class is a junctural phenomenon, not a monolithic abstraction. In addition, she calls for a new cultural form of politics that appreciates multiple subjectivities and strategizes alternative forms of resistance.

Limia’s and Salubarria’s approaches exemplify the sort of theory needed for building a truly democratic society. They recognize unity without uniformity as an approach to solidarity, and they put forward a compelling politics that opens many possibilities for concrete alliances across different social strata. Their embrace of diversity is reminiscent of Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, where he argues that treating everyone the same sees individuals “from one definite side only” ignoring their concrete material differences (615). Liberal notions of equality that dictate treating everyone the same are

inherently undemocratic. They promote privileges for some over others because people have different abilities and concrete circumstances. This writing is the piece where Marx stresses that a genuinely democratic principle of distribution is “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (615). In a document on the Internet called “The Politics of Karl Marx,” Terry Eagleton comments on this passage as follows:

Socialism, then, is not about some dead-levelling (sic) of individuals, but involves a respect for their specific differences, and allows those differences for the first time to come into their own. It is in this way that Marx resolves the paradox of the individual and the universal: for him, the latter term means not some supra-individual state of being, but simply the imperative that everyone should be in on the process of freely evolving their personal identities.

According to Limia and Salubarría, successfully developing the Cuban Revolution’s values of social emancipation, national independence, and human dignity requires careful attention to the heterogeneous identities through which individuals in different classes, levels or social groups subjectively feel and express their own needs.

These considerations make it possible to have a theory of class that accommodates an appreciation of diversity. Class is presented as a material and relational process. Marx’s own texts exhibit a dialectical methodology through which universals are taken to be concrete unities of many contradictory determinations constantly and continuously intertwining. Understanding class dialectically requires attention to the way that general processes manifest themselves in particular ways and the ways that concrete processes construct the general.

As Ellen Meiksins Wood insists in “Class as Process and Relationship,” working classes are made up of real individuals who are “active and conscious *historical* beings” not “blank and passive raw material” (80). She points out that a primary goal of both her work and E.P. Thompson’s (*The Making of the English Working Class*) is “to render class visible in history and make its objective determinations manifest as historical forces, as real effects in the world and not just as theoretical constructs that refer to no actual social force or process” (93). Quoting Thompson, she argues that:

*Class formations emerge and develop as men and women **live** their productive relations and **experience** their determinate situations, within “the **ensemble** of the social relations,” with their inherited culture and expectations, and as they handle their experiences in cultural ways” (80).*

Noting the way class operates in history, we see then that it brings into play the various encultured motivations, insights, commitments, and concrete experiences of actual people. Thus, an appreciation of cultural diversity should be seen as already present in Marxism. Indeed, as John Saul argues, we can still “emphasize the production process as our chosen entry-point into social analysis and political practice while also taking seriously the concerns of those who wish to highlight, alternatively or simultaneously, the claims to our attention of other nodes of oppression and resistance” (354). Being sensitive to the dialectical play of identity, differentiation, and unity, we realize that culture constructs class and vice versa.

B. The direct producer is a collective laborer with a heterogeneous identity.

Therefore, class is not static, but a heterogeneous nexus of social forces. This viewpoint underscores a need to see “the direct producer” as a collective laborer. The working class is a collectivity with a distributed identity that combines within itself variations of generalized local culture as well as individual reactions. In a chapter called “The Working Day” in *Capital, Volume One*, Marx says, “Hence, in the history of capitalist production, the establishment of a norm for the working day presents itself as a struggle over the limits of that day, a struggle between collective capital, i.e., the

class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e., the working class” (344). Marx argues that the working class forms itself historically in and through struggle. As such, it manifests itself by pulling together an array of local peculiarities and diverse cultural forms.

In a compelling article published in *New Left Review* called “Beyond the Boundary Question,” Peter Meiksins discusses this collective laborer. Stressing the complexity of Marx’s approach to class, he argues that to grasp the revolutionary potential of working class unity, it is not enough to point out that workers have the same relationship to the means of production, because workers respond to their exploitation from an individual point of view.

Furthermore, there are always a number of factors such as gender, race, locality and occupation that can complicate the workers’ reaction to exploitation. Unlike the relations of production, these factors do not automatically generate conflict; they do so only when they are culturally defined as conflictual (110, emphasis mine).

Workers react in various ways to the following sorts of experiences: “low wages, close supervision, the threat of unemployment [. . .] being treated as a cost, being exposed to de-skilling tendencies,” etc. (110-11). Developing a sense of class unity, Meiksins argues, requires that they recognize a pattern among the diversity of experiences they share. This pattern is what I am calling a unity without uniformity.

Two features of Marx’s theory make it possible to accommodate both the disunity and the unity of the working class “without resort to non-Marxist concepts” (111), according to Meiksins. These are the necessary complexity of Marx’s account of why, in a society built upon an apparently equal exchange between two commodity owners – capital and labor, the real relations of the capitalist mode of production promote class inequality. The second is the collective nature of socialized labor. *A single product or service depends upon a wide range of employees, from specialized production workers, through clerical workers who keep track of the paper work involved in ordering materials, coordinating production, marketing goods, etc., to technical specialists who design products and the production process, and even managers who coordinate the work. This is true not simply of material production but of virtually all sectors of the economy (111).*

The direct producer is a collective laborer because effective valorization requires the *heterogeneous* distribution of productive capital. Seeing the direct producer as a collective reality also captures the socialized nature of labor under capitalism. Today this distributed collectivity is even more globalized than it was when Marx remarked on capital’s tendency to reach worldwide in *The Communist Manifesto*. Emphasizing the heterogeneity of working classes does not have to lead us, however, to liberal forms of multiculturalism that ignore the proletariat’s emancipatory historical role. Meiksins concludes by saying: “From a political point of view, it can be argued that only an approach that bases itself on the essential unity of the working class is able to take seriously its real segmentation and heterogeneity” (119).

C. A focus on capitalism as it “actually exists.”

Marx’s theory is paradigmatic of efforts to weave together the theoretical and empirical, because actually existing capitalism gathers up a multiplicity of factors that present themselves in a complex array of local determinations and particularities. If we look at how capitalism works “on the ground” so to speak, we can notice local variations in the extraction of value.

Let us consider an example of the way that Marx combines abstract and concrete analysis by looking

again at “The Working Day.” His theoretical point in this chapter is that the defining characteristic of capital is its need to constantly increase the rate of surplus value. “Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (342). Marx hypothesizes abstractly that perhaps, due to physical and moral constraints, “the interest of capital itself points in the direction of a normal working day” (377). However, a study of actually existing conditions reveals that the ready availability of surplus populations makes such restraint unnecessary.

As an example of his reasoning, he points out that plantation owners in Georgia or Mississippi who “are drawn into a world market dominated by the capitalist mode of production” do not limit the working day to preserve the physical existence of living labor because a fresh supply can be imported from Kentucky, Virginia, or Africa. In actuality, a slave owner “takes out of the human chattel” over a span of just a few years “the utmost amount of exertion it is capable of putting forth” (376). He draws an analogy then to England where workers can also be easily replaced and thus worked to an early death. “For slave trade, read labour-market, for Kentucky and Virginia, Ireland and the agricultural districts of England, Scotland and Wales, for Africa, Germany” (378). Thus, Marx claims, “experience shows” (380) that real concrete factors are appraised to allow the greatest degree of exploitation possible. Marx links an abstract mode of reasoning with empirical data, and in doing so, he corrects his initial abstraction and asserts that the opposite is true: capital does not need to calculate the health or morbidity of the worker *unless it is forced to* (381).

Furthermore, the *extent* to which restrictions on capital’s wanton greed exist or not will depend on local culture, for instance, the level of working class resistance, the rigor of collective bargaining agreements, and the enforcement of labor laws or environmental regulations. Many sources of heterogeneous variability interact with capital’s constant, general need to reproduce suitable conditions for increasing valorization: “Under free competition, the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him” (381).

Many Marxists have argued that the dynamics of surplus value extraction make capitalism a uniquely homogenizing force. Supposedly, technological development and a desperate drive to promote consumption will ultimately destroy all local cultures. It is certainly true that capitalism has such tendencies as we can see today by noting the tragic destruction of the environment and indigenous culture the world over. In my opinion, however, these tendencies cannot be viewed one-sidedly because an inclination to differentiate always accompanies capital’s propensity for uniformity. In a very important study called *Persistent Inequalities: Wage Disparity under Capitalist Competition*, Howard Botwinick argues this point as follows:

. . . Marx’s analysis of the general law of capitalist accumulation is also far more complex than is often assumed. In fact, out of the very same processes of accumulation and mechanization that will tend to deskill workers in the long run, there comes a profound process of continual redifferentiation within these narrowing limits. What results is an increasingly deskilled work force and a constantly redifferentiated working class (100-101).

Botwinick explains that Marx’s dynamic analysis of the conditions of capitalist competition demonstrates that capital consistently creates ever more inequality and heterogeneity. Such segmentation under competition is due to changes in the organic composition of capital, growth or contraction in various sectors of the reserve army of labor, and fluctuations in the success of workers’ efforts to organize (9).

To understand how and why Marx sharpens his abstractions with careful attention to rich empirical

detail, we can point to the need to differentiate between real control of the capitalist labor process and formal control. The latter entails the availability of labor power as a commodity and the separation of labor from the means of production, but the former brings into play much more. Local variations may impede, enable, or even exacerbate capital's ability to profit off the labor available. In my hometown of Ithaca, New York, for example, a progressive counterculture that values ecological sustainability and small business prevented Wal Mart from locating here for many years. Capital must be sensitive to the actually existing conditions it finds in a particular locale for the labor power it has purchased to produce surplus value at increasing rates. Notice the difference between extracting value by drawing peasants off the land to work in urban centers and outsourcing white collar technology jobs from North America to Asia: different technical and ideological strategies are entailed in each case.

Furthermore, capitalism meets a diversity of conditions because of its necessity to globalize. Unable to satiate itself with labor from which it has already fed and exhausted, capital chases itself around the world looking for favorable conditions to satisfy its voracious appetite for ever more wealth. It must work with empirically given legal institutions, trade restrictions, and investment rules. Wherever it goes, capital must obtain strategic, political control of global resources and culturally situated human beings.

An example of how the capital accumulation process adjusts itself to local conditions can be found in Chandra Talpade Mohanty's recent book *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. She contrasts the local culture of women lace makers in Narsapur, India with that of female electronic workers in the Silicon Valley of California. She shows how "class and gender proletarianization through the development of capitalist relations of production, and the integration of women into the world market, is possible because of the history and transformation of indigenous caste and sexual ideologies" (150). These contrasting cultures contain ideological differences that allow for the extraction of surplus value, though they are specific to each locale.

While in Narsapur, it is purduh and caste/class mobility that provides the necessary self-definition required to anchor women's work in the home as leisure activity [concealing its nature as wage labor], in the Silicon Valley, it is a specifically North American notion of individual ambition and entrepreneurship that provides the necessary ideological anchor for Third World women (155).

These cases demonstrate that exerting sufficient real, not simply formal, control over the labor process brings different factors into play depending on the local culture regarding gender.

Furthermore, it is important to notice the specific way workers are incorporated into the capitalist mode of production to appreciate differences in the manner of exploitation due to gender, race, national culture, age, sexuality, etc. Analyzing the specificities of the lace makers' point of entry into capitalist collective labor makes visible differences between women and men of various ethnic groups and reveals how capital is able to utilize existing culture to extract a surplus. Mohanty argues that "work, in this context, was grounded in sexual identity, in concrete definitions of femininity, masculinity, and heterosexuality" (149). Attending to local culture allows us to analyze the sexual division of labor where men become merchants living off the commodities produced by women. Practices of secluding women in the home and seeing them as in need of protection cause women to experience relative disadvantages compared to men since the domesticated nature of their labor renders it invisible.

Consider another entry point that illuminates heterogeneity in forms of exploitation. During the first half of the 20th Century, African American agricultural workers were drawn into Northern urban centers due to the Great Depression and the mechanization of agriculture. The timing of their entry point and its particular geographical nature influenced the manner of their inclusion into urban working

classes in terms of where they settled, how they were treated by “native” workers, and how they felt about the changing nature of their exploitation. African American women workers were mostly slotted into domestic service where they had to endure long working hours, insensitive employers, and sexual harassment. Of course these conditions were not unfamiliar to them, and they drew from their history of gender, race and class oppression to react to them. Understanding their response and analyzing the nature of their entry, however, allows us to appreciate the way their exploitation differs objectively and subjectively from black male workers and from white workers of either gender.

Capitalists certainly take advantage of sexism per se, for example, but they do so in ways that vary according to local conditions. At a general level, the importance of working class women’s sexuality under patriarchy, their role in the biological reproduction of labor power, and the sexual division of labor make the terms of their exploitation different from those of male labor. In maquiladoras, for example, women are subjected to inhumane forms of domination, which include being forced to participate in beauty pageants and take birth control pills. In Manhattan, beauty pageants may not be staged, but a parade of the latest fashions takes place in offices where a culture encourages conspicuous consumption enabled by the purchasing of inexpensive clothes, clothes made, interesting enough, by their sisters in the sweatshops. Also, women from different cultures experience their exploitation differently from a subjective viewpoint. Their feelings about birth control, for example, will differ according to their religious practices. While each of these examples focuses on birth control and beauty pageants, the differences among them illustrate that understanding the complex mechanisms at work in the process of capital accumulation requires attention to both abstract regularities and concrete, local particularities.

D. The power of heterogeneous cultures of resistance.

As I have argued, variations in local cultures serve as resources for accumulation but also as sources of resistance. As Ellen Meiksins Wood suggests, we must attend to “authentic expressions of class in popular consciousness and culture” that represent an effort “to live the contradictions and options under pressure” (106). Workers develop struggles that express their subjective orientation to what is important or unimportant in life. Consider the determination of farmers in India, who burn fields of crops instead of succumbing to Monsanto’s attempt to coerce them into using agricultural methods that are inconsistent with their identity and history.

The 1990's brought forth a qualitatively new form of global activism. After many years of preparation, in January of 1994, the Zapatistas emerged on the world stage in opposition to NAFTA. They occupied five towns in the Mexican state of Chiapas, representing over a thousand indigenous groups and demanding education, health care, electricity, water, recognition, and the right to live with dignity. Their movement brought new life to protests the world over and inspired a new generation of activists.

Part of the reason many activists are attracted to Zapatismo is its emphasis on democracy and diversity. The Zapatistas are not a hierarchical organization, and they do not propose a single alternative. Their “Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle” announced “The world we want is one where many worlds fit.” They are led by a council of at least two dozen commanders chosen by their communities. The mysterious Marcos insists that he is not the head of the movement – he is a *subcommandante*. Who is he? Here is the sort of response he is famous for:

Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristobal, a Jew in Germany, a Gypsy in Poland, a Mohawk in Quebec, a pacifist in Bosnia, a single woman on the Metro at 10 p.m., a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy

student, and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains.

This sort of presentation of “self” captures the spirit of our time. Marcos is at once here, there, and everywhere. He is a woman and a man. His identity is *distributed* across the world. It symbolizes the solidarity of people whose lives are damaged by capital’s violent and greedy reach for domination of nature and human society. It represents the heterogeneity of sites of capitalist penetration and the multiplicity of cultural forms gathered up in resistance to it. It represents the collective laborer.

Finally, if we attend to actual historical struggles through which workers oppose capital, we see that cultures of resistance are not uniform either. As Miguel Limia argues, we need to account for “the differentiation among the members of society in their daily constructive lives, conducive to common emancipatory purposes” (14). In my view, those who stress the virtually complete hegemony of capitalist development – the McDonaldization of the world – risk ignoring everyday life activities of workers who may have to adapt themselves to capitalist relations of production, but who also use their culture to resist this incursion: popular traditions don’t simply disappear. They mediate the possibility of the reproduction of capitalist relations and continue to develop in conjunction with and in contradiction to new ways of life. Seeing class as culturally constructed and heterogeneous puts forward the necessity of unity. My approach recognizes unity without uniformity not only as a necessary moment of international solidarity, but also as a way to analyze concrete material conditions that make this solidarity necessary.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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