

To What Extent Does the 'Working Class' Identity in Russia and Eastern Europe Exist Today?

Written by Sashenka Lleshaj

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/08/28/to-what-extent-does-the-working-class-identity-in-russia-and-eastern-europe-exist-today/>

SASHENKA LLESHAJ, AUG 28 2013

What about the workers?[1]

According to Marx, the capitalist system was supposed to create a society that was divided into classes, where the working class was the one excluded from the ownership over the means of production. At the other side, the socialist system had to be the final stage of the dialectic development of the human society, which had to be based on a classless principle of social organization. Paradoxically, the working class was the creature and the venerated social group of the socialist period.[2] The communist ideology based on Marxism-Leninism, in a liturgical style, referred to this group as the leading revolutionary group, as the basis of the socialist society and as the real ruling power of the new system. By referring to the proletariat, the vanguard party itself was legitimized as such. The worker status was the declared norm of the socialist system. But in the post-socialist period, new claims were made, a new system was venerated (capitalism was seen as the ultimate truth, as socialism was believed to be once), and a new normality was introduced. What was, then, the position of the old socialist working class in the new capitalist system?

This essay analyses the position (and existence) of the working class in the post-communist period by applying Pierre Bourdieu's (1987) definition of class. According to him, the logical class[3] is:

a set of agents who, by virtue of the fact that they occupy similar positions in social space...are subject to similar conditioning factors and as a result, are endowed with similar dispositions which prompt them to develop similar practices (p. 6).

According to his definition, there are two elements that constitute class: the proximity of individuals in a given social space, which makes them subject to similar conditioning factors, and "the homogenizing effect of homogenous conditions" (p. 6), where similar or neighbouring positions in this space bring similar "dispositions and interest", thus a similar "habitus" (p. 5).

From his analyses, we can conclude that Bourdieu considers these two elements as necessary but not sufficient conditions for the existence of a social class. Consequently, starting from the ontological assumption that "groups are not found ready-made in society" but are constructed as such, he concludes that a class exists as long as there is a representative agent of the class who speaks in its name and through the existence of which the members of the class perceive themselves as participants of the class; in doing so, they are actually constituting the class itself as an existent entity (p. 15). This "existence by delegation" (p. 15) represents the class-consciousness about its existence, and just by being aware of this, the class socially exists.

It is through these three conditions that the essay will discuss the extent to which the working class exists in the post-socialist period. In the end, the essay concludes that the post-socialist period is lacking a working class as such because it is missing the three conditions: workers do not have the same positions in the social space, they are not developing similar interests, and most of all, there is no representing agent of the class that "speaks"[4] in its name.

Proximity in the Social Space

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In the post-socialist period, workers are subject to very diverse working and social conditions. At the beginning of the 90s, post-socialist countries experienced economic reconstruction and massive privatization that changed the working environment and the availability of work. The new system's working environment was characterized by the following: small business, enterprises, massive innovation, and the introduction of new technologies, as well as the emergence of a predominant service sector (Deacon, 2000). More importantly, the agricultural and industrial massive employment of the socialist period was not the same. This represented a dismantling of the old state that including its worker unions, welfare provisions, norms, and organization of society in general.

In trying to adapt to these new conditions, workers found themselves dispersed in space (physically and functionally). First, as the state was not the provider of total employment and as the working place was not 'assigned for life', there was a chaotic mobility of workers into new unstable working-places (Ost, 2010). The "labour market segmentation" (Smith et al, 2008) brought to a detachment of the workers from the working places and, as a result, from one another. Second, there was a mass migration of workers from Eastern Europe and the post-soviet countries toward Western Europe, especially in the 90s, which represented a major loss of the young and skilful workers for these countries. Third, another dimension of the fragmentarization and dispersion of the 'old' working class was the withdrawal of many workers from the labour market and the retiring to the household. This was the case with many women workers who under the new circumstances permanently left the working environment. Fourth, workers were no longer living together in common spaces. For example, Stenning (2005) describes the organization of the social life around the working places during socialism. Accordingly, the working place had a multidimensional character that was able to construct a 'working class community', because there was no such community in the post-socialist period where the old working and living places, especially the ones situated around industrial plants and factories, were being abandoned. As a result of all these new developments, there was an alienation of workers from what was previously believed to be a common position in society.

Similar "Habitus"?

Do workers still perceive common dispositions and interest in the new environment? Have they developed similar practices? The new dispersion of workers in the social space, analysed in the first section, reduce their meeting points and their perception of similar needs and interests. Apart from the spatial dispersion, there is a functional fragmentarization of the working class.

Working positions are colourful and develop dynamically. They vary from physical jobs, to mental ones, from the construction industry to the service sector, from digging into mines to constantly standing in front of a computer. If the working class before had a more egalitarian profile in position and wages, there is no such unifying picture, as there is a very large spectrum of practices and incomes that make it difficult to find a defining and unifying profile for the working class in the labour market. In many ways, the dismantling of the old system diversified workers' interest and practices: "The labour market restructuring...lead those who would traditionally have been seen as workers into a diversity of class positions" (Smith et al, 2008, p. 284). The new diverse working environment contributed to diverse workers.

In the new consumerist society, incomes became more important in defining social groups than the old affiliation of class and working-places. As a consequence, subgroups/subclasses came out of the old working class. First, people working in the service sector for insurance companies, major businesses, or big enterprises were totally detached from "the bottom" of the working society. Thus, it was difficult to think of common interest that could categorize these workers as belonging to the same class again.[5] Second, the new wages' 'system' was incompatible with the old appreciated positions and their previous social importance. Teachers, nurses, and many other previously prestigious professions and working positions found themselves earning less money than construction workers during the post-socialist period. Third, a poor and marginalised part of the working class came into existence. The "working poor" (Smith et al., 2008) in the post-socialist period was defined and auto-defined more as a poor person than as a worker.[6] Accordingly, smaller groups with different needs, living conditions, and consequently, with different interests—which previously would have been classified as a working class—were being constructed during the transition period.

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Moreover, the workers' perceived position in the social space and in relation to each other has changed. Today, workers are competitors for working-places rather than being colleagues in guaranteed places such as in factories or industries (Ost, 2010, p. 109). This does not mean, however, that there was no competition in the socialist working-places for quota achievement or for workers' prestige and distinction in the eyes of their managers and superiors; but in the market economy, labour itself was part of the market, and the level of competition in securing a job and in maintaining it was higher. As workers were treated as an asset, as part of the capital, the human capita, they perceived themselves as such. This became a question of survivor in the labour market. Consequently, the perceived immediate interests of these workers today look incompatible to them.

The "Existence by Delegation"

According to Bourdieu (1987), occupying similar positions in the social space and developing similar interest and practices does not necessarily bring to the self-consciousness of a certain group of people, who consequently would represent a class. Through a Foucauldian approach, he concludes that social classes always present a degree of "semantic elasticity" (p. 13)—in defining their boundaries: who is inside and who is out—which is politically or socially decided upon by an instrument of power. Just by the existence of a representative agent (a third condition) who define them and talks about them[7], the awareness of their position and of their similarities comes into being. In the socialist time, the working class was the Class (with a capital C): the party represented this class; the power was derived from it; and the whole discourse (declarative politics or visual and verbal art) was constructed for and from referring to the Class, the working class. In this way, the working class had an agent (party, system, ideology, official discourse) that represented and defined its boundaries and substance. Does the working class have such representativeness today?

In the post-socialist period, the workers found themselves not part of a working class. There was no agent to represent them at a time when defining the borders of this class became more and more difficult. There was no agent to discursively construct this class border. The communist parties of the region became marginalized, and even when they were active in elections, they were not the working class' parties at the time. In fact, no longer were the old unions that once represented workers active or reliable agents.[8]

The new system, which worked through the "hegemonic liberal ideology" (Buchowski, 2006), relied largely on a consumerist logic that promoted a new normality—the middle class. Political parties promoted this popular new fetish by developing a 'catch-all' profile and by appealing naturally to the middle class. There was no specific "need" to instrumentalize or reconstruct the working class as such. Furthermore, the post-socialist period introduced new definitions, identifications, and borders to these societies: starting with ethnic identifications from the 90s (in the case of the dissolving USSR or Yugoslavia, this was a central issue), and moving on to religion, gender, and other post-materialist identifications.[9]

Conclusions

By using Bourdieu's definition of class and the three conditions it implies, this essay tried to trace the existence of the working class in the post-socialist period. The transition from a theoretical/logical definition of class and its objective existence to the public construction of a certain class requires the existence of a third condition—the representativeness of the class through an agent, who by representing it, simultaneously constructs it. In the post-socialist period, the old system was dismantled, workers faced new challenges, and a new functional logic was introduced. The three constituent conditions for a class to exist were missing in this period. First, workers were physically and functionally dispersed into the social space. Second, as they were functionally dispersed, and as the 'what are you able to buy' represented the new tool in defining social groups, the workers could not perceive their interests as congruent. Third, there was no agent to represent and define the working class; there was no discourse to identify workers with the working class or to reconstruct another class by defining its borders. Instead, there were other agents that dismantled the working class who did not consider people as primarily workers, but rather defined them in other social identity terms. Consequently, as society stopped considering them workers, they stopped defining themselves in those terms. No one was "speaking Bolshevik" anymore.

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[1] The question asked at the beginning of the 90s (Clarke et al., 1993).

[2] It can be argued that the working class was a construction of this system, especially in a Soviet Union that inherited a society that was close to a feudal stage.

[3] Which is what theoretically constitutes a class.

[4] The discursive dimension.

[5] Even though many employment politics, taxation, working conditions, and working security can affect workers in different positions in a similar way, it is difficult for them (especially when they perceive their social positions to be very different from each-other) to think of their interests as similar or compatible.

[6] Incomes became more a defining tool than a class.

[7] The same way as the "Speaking Bolshevik" (Kotkin, 1995) implies.

[8] Ost (2010) talks of an "illusionary corporatism" in Eastern Europe that instead of protecting workers rights as in the West, it is instead generating neo-liberal outcomes.

[9] Inglehart's analysis of the post-materialist social values and of the new cleavages of the western society is becoming relevant for Central and Eastern Europe societies that do not differ so much from their western counterparts in terms of values.

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Date written: March 2013

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