

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND CLASS POLITICS IN THE US

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SECTION I THE DISMISSAL OF CLASS IN THE US

The US as a 'Middle Class' Society: The Politics of Compassion

Class is considered by the media and by the political establishments of the US to be an 'un-American category'. Class, as a category of analysis and bearer of power relations, is rarely mentioned. Aside from references to the United States as a middle class society (a society in which the majority of US citizens are supposed to be in the middle, between the rich and the poor), the category of class is seldom taken seriously, or even mentioned. Thus, the US population is supposed to be divided not by classes but by biological (e.g., gender, age, race) or ethnic (e.g., Polish, Italian, Hispanic) categories. In this hegemonic political scenario the majority of people are supposed to be in the 'middle', a 'middle' satisfied with its lot, with only a minority being in the category defined as poor. This specific reading of US realities leads to the political conclusion that the task of the progressive forces in this country is to call upon the compassion of the majority (the middle class) for the care of the poor and the marginal vulnerable minorities. Witness the call made by the Democratic Party's candidate in the 1984 Presidential election, Walter Mondale, for the Democratic Party to become the party of compassion.

This interpretation of American realities and the specific call for compassion as the main motivation for political action has been recently reinforced by the publication and distribution in the English-speaking world of the works of Glotz, the Secretary General of the Social Democratic Party of West Germany, and a main theoretician of that party." Glotz considers that the main task of the progressive forces in western capitalist countries is to mobilize the majority of western populations—which are assumed to have benefited from current government conservative policies—to express their compassion for the poor and the downtrodden. Glotz indicates that we are witnessing in developed capitalist countries what he calls the 'two-third societies', in which the top two-thirds of the societies (the employed, skilled, and organized) have benefited from current conservative policies, while the bottom one-third has suffered

from them. From this analysis he concludes that the role of the progressive forces is to mobilize the top two-thirds in support of the bottom one-third. As he puts it,

The left has to bring together a coalition in which the greatest possible numbers of the strong identify with the weak—against their own interests. For strict materialists, who believe that self interest is a more effective tool than ideals, this is a paradoxical task; but it is our present task, nevertheless.'

At the risk of being called a strict materialist by Glotz, I believe that his (and Mondale's) strategy of compassion is wrong because it is based on a faulty understanding of our realities. The majority of the population of the US (and of any other western developed capitalist country) does not belong to the middle class. It belongs to the working class. Erik O. Wright has shown that no less than 60 per cent of the US labour force (and a larger percentage of the US population) belongs to the working class.⁴ Vanneman and Cannon, using 1983 census figures, estimated even higher numbers. Lower white collar, skilled, and unskilled workers and farm labourers represent 70 per cent of the labour force, and again a higher percentage of the US population.⁵ Actually, even subjectively, there are far more people in the US who define themselves as members of the working class than of the middle class,⁶ and they have done so for quite a long time, since they were first asked in 1947 for their class identification. Nevertheless, the media and political establishments of the US do not refer to the majority of the US population as working class, but rather as middle class.

This US majority—the US working class—has been hurt by the conservative austerity policies initiated by the current Republican administration and approved by the majority of Republicans and Democrats in the US Congress. The percentage of income received by the bottom 60 per cent of the population in the last year was the smallest since this information has been collected (1947). Conversely, the share received by the top 20 per cent was the highest ever recorded. Indeed, during these last years there has been an unprecedented income (and even more markedly, wealth) transfer from the majority—the working class—to the minority—the capitalist class and upper middle class—in this country.⁷ The social costs of this transfer for the working class (and farmers) have been enormous.⁸ The social well-being indicators have deteriorated substantially, not only for the black, Hispanic, and other minorities, but also for the other components of the working class and for the farmers, showing that this class has indeed been hurt by these austerity policies.⁹

Moreover, because of the highly regressive nature of taxation in the US, the federal programmes for the poor are paid with revenues obtained primarily from working-class Americans, who, during this period when

they are hurting, are not keen on paying increased taxes for programmes of no direct benefit to them.¹⁰ Under these conditions, to offer the electorate a choice between compassion and self-interest is a recipe for disaster, and the outcome of the 1984 US Presidential election proves it. The candidate for compassion, Mondale, won in only one of the fifty states of the Union. Similar experiences have been reported in other developed capitalist countries.¹¹ Compassion is not the name of the game.

The 'Co-optation' of the Working Class and the Politics of Legitimation

There is another interpretation of our realities, widely held among sectors of the US radical community, that excludes the working class as an agency for change because of its assumed co-optation into the current social order. This radical view posits that the capitalist class of the US has co-opted the working class and bought its acceptance of the social order by the development of the highest standard of living ever known and by the establishment of the welfare state, which has legitimized the system. In this theoretical scenario, consensus is the basis for the reproduction of the system. This radical position, heavily influenced by the Frankfurt School and by the World Systems Theory, does not see the working class as the main agent for change in developed capitalist societies.¹² Indeed, the working class is considered to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution. In its stead, other forces are perceived as carrying the task of forcing change in our society. In this analysis, students, the black underproletariat, the third world population, and more recently, the social movements now occupy the role once held by the working class. Wallerstein, for example, considers US society closer to a revolutionary transformation than any other western capitalist society because it has the strongest third world and feminist movements.¹³

I am aware, of course, that these two theoretical positions, the Frankfurt School and the World Systems Theory, are very different traditions. But what unites them is their dismissal of the working class and the reasons for their dismissal, based on the co-optation of that class and the consensual reproduction of the social order. This interpretation has led many authors to analyze how that consensus is being reproduced, mainly focusing on the study of culture in general and working-class culture in particular to explain the working class's supposed acceptance and support of the capitalist order.

Here it is important to clarify one point. The absence of a socialist or communist mass movement in the US and the nonexistence of a left-wing mass media explain the continuous reproduction by large numbers of left-wing authors of the hegemonic interpretation of our realities. The only difference between the right and the left is that while the first applauds the second laments,¹⁴ but their interpretations of reality are remarkably similar: the working class has been integrated or co-opted by the highest

standard of welfare ever known in our society. The right uses the term integrated; the left uses the term co-opted. But the interpretation of assumed working class acquiescence is the same.

Both interpretations, right and left, are wrong. But before explaining why they are wrong let me make another clarification. The enormous chauvinism that exists in the US (on both sides of the political spectrum) is an extremely important obstacle to understanding what is going on there, which is why the right reproduces this chauvinism. But its reproduction by the left weakens rather than strengthens our understanding of American realities. The US media continuously presents an image in which Americans are better and 'have it better' than anyone else in today's world. This hyperbole, created by the organs of the US establishment, is logical and predictable, but it is most worrying when similar chauvinism also appears in large sectors of the left. Michael Harrington (Chairman of the Democratic Socialists of America), for example, writes that, 'this country [the US] is, in social terms, the most left-wing nation on the face of the earth... Pragmatic and anti-ideological, we are still the only western nation based upon an ideology. . . we are united by a democratic ideal rather than a gene pool and cultural inheritance.'¹⁵ What is worrying in this position is not so much its internal contradictions (how can we be 'anti-ideological' and at the same time be 'based upon ideology' and 'united by ideals'?), but most importantly, the absence of what Marx used to call 'the uncompromising critical evaluation of our realities'.¹⁶ The US is not the most left-wing nation in the world—not politically, not economically, and not socially. Far from it. Social policies in the US are among the most regressive in the western advanced capitalist world. Similar chauvinistic hyperbole appears in the latest volume by B.R. Reich, a main adviser to the neo-liberal wing of the Democratic Party, when he approvingly repeats Carl Friedrich's statement that, 'To be an American is an ideal, while to be a Frenchman is a fact.'¹⁷ De Gaulle and Petain said the same, reversing the nationalities: Americans were the facts. Not satisfied with that exaggeration, Reich goes on to underline that 'our history is punctuated with wrenching national contests between competing versions of the ideal; both world wars, for example, forced us to decide whether we must love peace more or justice more'.¹⁸ But the 282 military interventions outside the US borders that have taken place in the course of US history in defence of US economic interests do not testify to those ideals. The recipients of these interventions have different views of US ideals and US idealism.¹⁹

An uncompromising critical evaluation of American reality shows that not only are we not the best but (contrary to what the right wants us to believe) we do not have it better here than anywhere else in the world. Quite to the contrary: the US population and the US working class have a lower degree of economic, political, and social well-being than their

counterparts in western capitalist countries with similar levels of development of the forces of production.

A study comparing standards of living for advanced capitalist countries, using a wide variety of economic, social, and political indicators, has shown that among these countries the US has one of the lowest standards of living.²⁰ Other studies confirm this. The average worker in the US, for example, works longer hours and has less paid vacation than workers in the majority of advanced capitalist countries. The average workweek for full time US workers in 1986 was 42.3 hours, compared with 37 in Denmark, 37.5 in Norway and Finland, and 39 in France and Britain and 37 in West Germany. The list of countries could go on and on.²¹ US workers work harder and get less in return than workers in other advanced capitalist countries. The level of disposable income of US workers is lower than that of workers in the majority of advanced capitalist countries. Disposable income as percentage of gross earnings is 78.9 per cent in the US, lower than in France (98.72 per cent), Japan (89.10 per cent), Canada (88.03 per cent), Italy (86.19 per cent), West Germany (79.22 per cent), and the United Kingdom (78.98 per cent).²² Actually, in spite of the widely held perception that we in the US pay fewer taxes, US production workers pay amounts similar to those of production workers in other advanced capitalist countries. But the level of government benefits received is dramatically different. European workers get from the government, for the most part, many social benefits that the US workers do not get. And the level of benefits (both from the public and from the private sectors) is much lower in the US than in most western European countries. For example, the percentage of US unemployed receiving unemployment benefit is only 39 per cent, compared with 87 per cent in Canada, 81 per cent in Denmark, 77 per cent in Finland, 52 per cent in France, 65 per cent in West Germany, 55 per cent in Japan, and 79 per cent in Sweden.²³

In summary, US workers have a more difficult life than workers in the majority of other advanced capitalist countries, and the social indicators show it. Life expectancy of US workers is shorter than that of workers in other advanced countries. Levels of illiteracy are higher, rates of accidents (mortality and disability) at the work place are higher, poverty rates are larger; suicide rates are higher; homicide rates are higher, personal and household bankruptcy rates are higher; alcoholism and drug addiction are higher, and mental diseases and stress-related conditions are more prevalent in the US than in the majority of advanced capitalist countries.²⁴ Here again the list could go on and on.

The US working class has it worse not better than the working classes of other countries. It is frequently not understood that the US working class is one of the victims rather than one of the beneficiaries of the current capitalist power relations in America and the western world. The avoidable and preventable amount of pain, harm, and suffering that exists

among our working people is heartbreaking. Nowhere in the advanced capitalist world is the working class as weak as it is in the US. This weakness is rooted in the enormous strength of the US capitalist class, the strongest in the western capitalist world due to its central position in the western system of power.

In the same way that the American workers do not have it better than anyone else, we can also see that the US power relations are not reproduced merely by consensus. There is more popular alienation towards the political institutions, lower political electoral participation, and greater distrust of the political institution in the US than in any other advanced capitalist country. Recent studies show that 55 per cent of the US population felt that 'the people running the country don't really care what happens to you';²⁵ 68 per cent felt that 'corporations and people with money really run the country';²⁶ and 65 per cent felt that 'they did not have any power to change things'.²⁷

This feeling of powerlessness is reproduced not by consensus among the powerless but by an enormous repression, which appears not only as an expression of physical force but most importantly, as a dictation of the rules of the game in such a skewed manner that the chances for the powerless to win are very limited indeed. The absence of a socialist party in the US is rooted in that situation.

This point needs to be stressed in the light of the huge amount of literature, based on the culturalist tradition, that aims at explaining the absence of a socialist instrument in the US (presented as part of American exceptionalism) by referring to characteristics of the working-class culture (such as its racism, sexism and individualism). Without denying the political importance of changing working-class values that divide rather than unite that class, it is important to break with the victim-blaming underlying much of this culturalist approach, i.e. the working class is weak because of its culture. These cultural behaviours are important but they are not at the root of the problem. Working classes in other western countries are racist and sexist, and still they have class instruments at their disposal. The majority of working-class Americans have acquiesced to the current social order not because they agree with it, but because they do not see any alternative or feel that they can change it.

The Assumed Shrinking of the Working Class and its Political Consequences

The most recent dismissal of class as a political agency of change appears in the writings of many authors who root the assumed decline of the left in advanced capitalist countries in the shrinking of the working class, a shrinking that is explained by the transition towards a post-industrial society. The decline of the goods-producing sector in general and of manufacturing in particular is presented as the cause of this reduction of the working class and the decline of left-wing parties and the unions.²⁸ This

interpretation has frequently been accompanied by the abandonment of class as a meaningful category of power, and of the working class as the specific agency for transcending capitalism and moving towards socialism. Heavily influenced by Foucault, this position considers power to be widely distributed in society, with a plurality of minipowers that denies the existence of unifying totalities of power such as classes (or the state) or of the *a priori* agencies for change.²⁹ Consequently, current capitalism is supposedly divided into a growing number of loci of power, which disaggregates its totality into disorganized capitalism.³⁰ With classes and the working class out of the picture, the social movements become the new transforming agencies. I am aware, of course, that the different theoretical currents that I refer to here are varied and hold many disagreements among themselves. But on one point they all agree: the disappearance of the working class as the major agency for change.

What I find remarkable in these positions is how far they have reproduced the American 'pluralist' perspective of capitalism that used to be hegemonic in US political science circles in the 1950s and 1960s, and how much they have accepted the 'post-industrial' interpretation of Daniel Bell and collaborators.³¹ These recycled versions, however, reproduce the same disregard for observable facts as the older versions.

We are not in a post-industrial society, nor are we witnessing a shrinkage of the working class, or a decline of left-wing parties and unions in all western capitalist countries. In the US there are 71 million labourers (of a 110 million labour market) in goods-producing activities. Most of the changes in the labour force have occurred within this majority sector, with shifts from one subsector to another.³² Manufacturing, the most important part of this sector, is projected to maintain its share of employment at about the same level up to 1995, at least.³³ In some advanced capitalist countries, manufacturing as a percentage of employment has increased, while in others it has declined. There is no universal trend towards 'de-industrialization' in the western advanced capitalist world. For example, manufacturing as a percentage of employment increased from 1960 to 1978 in Japan (from 21.7 to 24.8 per cent), West Germany (from 34.3 to 34.8 per cent), and Italy (from 24.0 to 27.3 per cent), while it declined in Canada (from 24.7 to 19.6 per cent), Sweden (from 31.9 to 25.0 per cent), and France (from 28.2 to 26.6 per cent).³⁴ Nor is the working class limited to workers in the goods-producing sector of the economy. Personal and social services and sales workers, for example, are also members of the working class, and they have been increasing quite rapidly in all advanced developed capitalist countries. This growth has taken place not only in percentage but in absolute numbers because of the overall growth of the labour force (and increased percentage of the 15-65 age group in the labour force) that has occurred in the majority of advanced capitalist countries.³⁵ Consequently, the size of the working class has been

increasing, rather than declining in the western capitalist countries, including the US.

The decline of the unions in the US cannot be explained by the shrinking of the working class, not even of its manufacturing sector. In fact, while union membership in goods-producing sectors declined in the US by 1.9 million between 1980 and 1984, these sectors had an increase of 1.1 million new jobs.³⁶ If US unions are declining it is not because they have run out of workers to be organized. Among industrial production non-supervisory workers alone, 12 million are unorganized. Moreover, 50 per cent of the metal, machine and electrical workers; 69 per cent of the chemical, oil, rubber, plastic and glass workers; 69 per cent of all garment and textile workers; 64 per cent of all wood, paper and furniture workers; and 67 per cent of all food processing workers are unorganized in the US.³⁷

Here again, it is worth stressing that there has not been a universal decline of the unions in all advanced countries. The percentage of unionized non-agricultural workers rose between the early 1970s and early 1980s in Australia, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Canada.³⁸ Similarly, there has not been a universal decline of the left-wing parties in advanced capitalist countries. Their electoral following increased rather than declined during the post World War II period, reaching a peak in the early 1980s when several left-wing parties reached majorities with explicitly socialist programmes.³⁹ Actually, in the same year that Prezowski and Sprague published their book, which ended with the statement 'the era of electoral socialism may be over', the left-wing parties reached a majority for the first time in the European

The decline of some socialist and progressive forces in the last few years cannot be attributed to the sudden collapse or shrinkage of the working class but is explained by the behaviour of the unions, of the parties themselves and by the correlation of class forces. The decline of the US union movement and of the Democratic Party has to be explained by the behaviour of those instruments. Canada and the US have similar class structures, but while the Canadian unions and the Social Democratic Party of Canada (NDP) are growing, the US unions are declining and the Democratic Party is losing in presidential election after presidential election. As I will detail later, their decline is caused by distancing themselves from class practices and by the increasingly aggressive class policies of the US Establishment. This last point bears repeating in the light of the thesis that we are living in disorganized capitalism with great diffusion of power: the US capitalist class has not for a long time been as organized, cohesive and aggressive as it is today. We have witnessed a most dramatic move to the right by US establishment institutions—political, media, academic and foundations—showing a remarkable cohesiveness in ideo-

logical position. The loss of diversity within these establishments has been facilitated by the virtual disappearance of the liberal alternative to the conservative message. The capitalist class is indeed very well organized, with an enormous (and growing) concentration of political, economic and social power.⁴¹ A symptom of that power is the class ability to disaggregate the dominated (i.e. working) class, facilitated by its great racial and ethnic diversity. In the absence of a unifying force, this diversity expresses itself in a great variety of forms, which leads me to the second part of this article: a discussion of the social movements and their assumed non-class practices.

SECTION II SOCIAL MOVEMENTS RATHER THAN CLASS

A Social Movement's Reading of Rainbow Politics

The dismissal of class as a category of analysis and of the working class as the primary agency for change has led many US radicals to believe that the social movements are the forces that occupy the place previously held by the working class. Representative of this position is Sheila Collins, past co-ordinator of the 1984 Presidential Campaign of Reverend Jesse Jackson and author of the influential book, *The Rainbow Challenge*.⁴²

Collins starts the book by dismissing the validity of class and class conflict as categories of analysis and the working class as an agent for change, quoting with approval historian John Lukas: 'we may be moving into an era of a certain classlessness at least in the traditional sense of the word'.⁴³ Collins goes on to indicate that following Weber, Lukas saw status rather than contract as the emerging category of social discrimination.⁴⁴

In Collins' analysis, social movements rather than class were and are the main categories of analysis and agents for change. The motor of history in the 1960s was the social movements of the disenfranchised, in particular the black, the chicano and the American Indian movements. These and other movements, which Collins groups under the overall category of The Movement, achieved enormous victories, including, in her opinion, the eradication of McCarthyism and the most massive redistribution of wealth since the New Deal legislation of the 1930s.⁴⁵ Collins, however, notes that the proportion of black families earning more than \$24,000 declined from 12 per cent to 9 per cent between 1972 and 1976.⁴⁶ This reflected a backlash by the white establishment which was successful because of the white/black divide within the social movements. As Collins puts it, the white left did not understand the black perspective nor did it accept the black leadership of the movement.⁴⁷ As a consequence, 'the Utopianism and cultural vitality that had dramatized the mass movements of the 1960s was in eclipse by the end of the 1970s'.⁴⁸

Also, developments in the economy allegedly rendered irrelevant many

of the left's categories of analysis and organization. For example, changes in the labour force, it is suggested, 'made obsolete' the old definitions and subjective experiences of 'working class', 'middle class', and even 'management'.⁴⁹ Consequently, Collins writes that 'neither race, nor class, nor gender categories alone could describe the experiences of most people who benefited or suffered from that restratification [changes in the labour force], yet the movements were stratified along those old lines'.⁵⁰ There arose a need to create a new movement that could synthesize all those experiences and give them a political meaning. This movement—the Rainbow Coalition—will be an 'antidote to the politics of narrowed self interest'.⁵¹ It will be the movement of the 'rejected because of race, nationality, origin, gender or sexual orientation, age or ideology';⁵² and it will have to be based on 'bridge-building between races and across class lines'.⁵³ The coalition will most probably be led by the black movement and will be given cohesiveness by the black perspective.⁵⁴ At the electoral level, the key alliance between blacks, Hispanics and women will provide a majority electoral block.⁵⁵ This electoral base will expand to include other forces, thus constituting a new social democratic force that will humanize and liberate our society.

This briefly summarizes Collins' scenario in which classes are out and social movements are in. This dichotomy, however, is a faulty one for a number of reasons. Firstly, classes and social movements are not separate categories related to each other in conditions of exteriority: classes are always inside the social movements. Collins herself, in her perceptive discussion of the feminist movement, indicates that the National Organization of Women does not represent the women of the US but rather upper middle-class women whose demands are different from, and frequently in contradiction to, the demands of working-class women, including working-class black women. Also, the black movement is not uniform. There are class cleavages within the movement that have clear political implications. Tom Bradley, Mayor of Los Angeles, and Wilson Goode, Mayor of Philadelphia, represent different class interests than does Reverend Jackson.

Secondly, class struggle does not take place between a well-defined working class with clear-cut boundaries on one side and a capitalist class with clear-cut boundaries on the other; nor is class struggle limited to struggles at the point of production; nor is the historical interpretation claiming that once upon a time there was a class struggle which has now disappeared accurate either. Class struggle is an objective reality based on the exploitation intrinsic to class societies; it is always there. What varies is the focus and forms that it takes. The focus may be on work related issues, community issues, interpersonal relations, or on many other questions. The forms of its expression may vary from armed police repression to discrimination and other forms of domination by the ruling class; and from armed struggle to sabotage or passive resistance and other

forms of rebellion by the dominated class. Moreover, class conflicts appear not only between whole classes but between factions within them. (Of course, there are other classes besides the working and the capitalist class that struggle in the pursuit of their interests.) Also, the working class is not limited to the industrial section: the sanitation workers supported by Martin Luther King when he was killed were members of the US working class.

Thirdly, the majority of Americans are more class conscious than status conscious. The majority of US workers are aware of the existence of classes in the US and their location within that structure, and they consider class a very important bearer of power relations, with greater importance than race. It is important to stress this point in view of the widely held perception, reproduced by Collins, that what counts in terms of popular perception is status rather than class. Vanneman and Cannon have shown that the majority of workers in the US are aware that there are classes and that they belong to the dominated working class. And they understand class as a relation of power (given by their position in the world of production) rather than a status (reflected in prestige, income, or positional level in a continuum within a social scale divided by rank).⁵⁶ Indeed, one recent study suggests that the degree to which workers identify themselves as working class is higher in the US than in France, Germany, Italy, and Norway,⁵⁷ and similar to that in the United Kingdom.⁵⁸ Several researchers have also shown that black workers are more class conscious, have a stronger sense of social injustice, and are more militant than white workers.⁵⁹ For both white and black workers, class divisions are more significant than racial divisions.⁶⁰ Similar opinions have been found among women: they are more progressive than men, favour unions at higher rates and are more sympathetic to labour than to business (74 per cent of working women say they have confidence in organized labour versus 64 per cent of working men).⁶¹

In view of these realities it is far too premature to add our voices to the growing Gorzian chorus singing farewell to class and to the working class. Class continues to be critical not only in popular perceptions and identifications but in terms of explaining our realities. Class is everywhere, and class conflicts determine how racism and sexism appear and are reproduced. Indeed the heightening of racism and sexism in the US in the late 1970s and 1980s is very much related to and part and parcel of the class struggle that took place during that period. What we saw during those years was not only a race war or a gender war but primarily a class war. Indeed, in the 1960s the working class was exerting its pressure through a variety of social expressions and instruments. The capitalist class saw its capacity for response dramatically reduced by successful revolutionary movements throughout the world (one per year on average) and by international competition from other capitalist poles. This heighten-

ing of the class struggle occurred worldwide, including in the developed capitalist countries: the May Events in France, the Hot Autumn in Italy, the miners' and steelworkers' strikes in the United States (which President Nixon saw as threatening the whole US system).

The civil rights movement in the United States played a critical role in that period of social unrest. Its real threat to the capitalist class appeared when Martin Luther King linked race with class. The significance of the killings of King and Malcolm X lay in this linkage. The 1960s and the 1970s were not only the struggle of the white establishment against the blacks, as Collins put it, but the aggression of the capitalist against the working class—a multiracial class in which blacks and other minorities are the most exploited and the most militant. It was Martin Luther King who saw the civil rights movement as part of the class struggle in the US. Shortly before his assassination he indicated that 'we are engaged in the class struggle, the critical struggle in the US'. And after 1967 he stressed over and over again that 'we are dealing in a sense with class issues'.⁶² In the last period of his life King considered himself to be a Marxist. His understanding of the nature of American capitalism, of the class struggle in the US and his political practices were in accordance with that self identification. This fact about one of the most popular figures in the US is rarely, if ever, mentioned by the American media because of the McCarthyism that (contrary to what Collins believes) endures in many forms. In summary, King's observation and practice (he died while supporting a workers' strike) did not make him a class reductionist. Rather, his political practice—always the best teacher—led him to conclude that class struggle continues to be the engine of history not only abroad (which Collins recognizes) but in the US as well (which she does not).

Class struggle includes not only working class pressure in defence of its interests but capitalist aggression in defence of its own. This is what we clearly saw in the recession of 1972-73 and after. The heightening of expectations raised by successful struggles of revolutionary forces abroad and working class forces at home, and the appearance of newer powers such as the feminist and ecological movements (led by progressive middle class forces), threatened the US capitalist class. This triggered a response in which the centrepiece of capitalist class strategy was a frontal attack on the US working class. As the Chairman of Kaiser Aluminum put it, 'This is war. The battle is over our political system.'⁶³ The class attack took many different forms, including the decline of individual and social wages; reduction of social expenditures; reduction of regulations to protect workers, consumers, and the environment and the increase of race, gender and social tensions aimed at dividing the working class. This attack was accompanied by a dramatic move to the right by the political, media and academic establishments in this country.⁶⁴

A marked decline of the standard of living of US workers testifies to

the success of this aggression against the working class. In 1986, workers received the same disposable income as in 1961, and 20 per cent less than they did in 1972, the year in which the recession started.⁶⁵ This class aggression was particularly marked during the last years of the Carter Administration and specifically during the Reagan Administration. The most serious loss of income occurred between 1979 and 1985 when real income for median income families fell from \$27,676 to \$26,786—a loss of almost \$1,000—a decline that is particularly disturbing in the light of the growth in numbers of two-earner families during the same period. Had it not been for this growth, median family income would have fallen roughly twice as much.⁶⁶ The attack was not only, as Collins suggests, against black families; it was against all working families.⁶⁷

The working class did not have instruments, either unions or parties, that could defend its class interests. Collins and others, such as Mike Davis, seem to attribute the absence of class behaviour by the working class during this period to its racism.⁶⁸ Class and race are often assumed to be two mutually exclusive categories of power: if workers invest their emotional energy in an attachment to an ethnic group (or to a race) they have no energy left for the class struggle. But workers can be racist and still behave in class terms. As a steel worker told me once, 'I would not let my daughter marry Jesse Jackson, but I will vote for him.' There is no question that racism hinders class unity, but it does not explain the absence of class instruments in the US. As noted before, other working classes, no less racist than that of the US, have class instruments at their disposal. I want to repeat that nothing I have said so far is intended to minimize the enormous importance of eradicating racism within the US working class. However, I think it is a mistake to believe that racism is the main reason for the absence of socialist parties or class oriented unions or for the weakness of labour in the US. Too much is being written about the exceptionalism of the US working class and its culture as the reason for the exceptionalism of US society, i.e. the absence of a socialist party. We cannot understand the weakness of the American working class by referring primarily to its racism, its ethnic variety, its immigrant status or other similar factors.⁶⁹ As indicated before, this focus of analysis, rooting working class weakness in its culture, behaviour, or history, seems to replicate the 'victim blaming' type of analysis. In the same way that we reject an explanation of the oppression of blacks and women based on the characteristics of those social groups, we should also reject this type of explanation of working class weakness.

None other than Samuel Gompers once recognized the real basis of US exceptionalism:

Nowhere in the civilized world is there such relentless, bitter, brutal war made upon the labor organization and the laboring men as here in the US. In no country on the face of the globe is corporate wealth so powerful as it is here."

The enormous space for manoeuvre of the American capitalist class enables it to shape the rules of the political game in such a skewed way that the chances for the working class to express its interest are very limited indeed. No other advanced capitalist country faces this situation. Let us focus on its impact on unionization for example. The state right-to-work laws reduce union organization by about one-third. In contrast, Canadian labour laws restrain management's ability to obstruct union organization. One consequence of this reality is that unions expand in Canada while they falter in the US. In the US the percentage of the labouring population that is unionized decreased from 27 per cent to 17 per cent between 1976 and 1986 while in Canada it went up from 27 per cent to 38 per cent.⁷¹ Needless to say, the capitalist classes are not omnipotent—not even in the US. The working class rebels in many different ways and forms, but the absence of class instruments weaken those rebellions most substantially, a weakness that is further reproduced by the corporatist rather than class practices of the current instruments that labour has at its disposal (the unions and, to a much lesser degree, the Democratic Party). Indeed by law—the Taft-Hartley Act—the US working class cannot act as a class. Steel workers cannot strike in support of coal miners. They can only take care of their own. This leads to a situation in which the roughly 20 million workers covered by collective bargaining in the US are covered by no less than 150,000 separate agreements.⁷²

The Class Polarization of the Political Scene in the US

This capitalist class repression heightened after 1972. In response to the perceived threat to its interests, capitalist class aggression has appeared in all areas of economic, social and political life. At the political level we have witnessed a shift of financial support by the banking, oil and insurance (and other financial) interests away from the Democratic towards the Republican Party.⁷³ We have also seen the shift of capitalist and upper middle-class voters (the top 20 per cent of the population) towards the Republican Party, which exhibits an unprecedented class cohesiveness and ideology: to be rich is to be the best for America, and what is best for the rich is best for America. And the majority of people see the Republican Party in this way; it is the Party of the rich.⁷⁴ Consequently, there has been an increased class polarization of political parties. As Robert Teeter of Marker Opinion Research concludes 'income has become the clearest determinant of party allegiance'.⁷⁵ Also, Petrocik and Steeper, in their review of the political landscape in 1980, indicate that 'in the 1970s a stronger relationship between income and partisanship began to develop. It became more visible by 1980 and continued through 1986.'⁷⁶ This further shift of well-to-do voters to the Republican Party was accompanied by the movement of that party to the far right. But this was not followed by a

move to the left by the Democratic Party—quite the contrary. The class polarization of parties did not translate into a polarization of programmes. The Democratic Party also moved to the right, abandoning its commitment to the New Deal. Even the *New York Times* expressed concern about the similarities between the two parties' platforms.⁷⁷ The dominant forces within the Democratic party have become the yuppies, the professional-technical strata, which, while adopting progressive positions in some social areas, support economic policies that are anti-labour.⁷⁸ This situation has led to an increase in the absenteeism of the working class from the electoral process. The difference in percentage voter turnout rates between professionals and blue collar workers, for example, grew from 24 percentage points in 1968 to 33 points in 1980.⁷⁹ The working class increasingly abstains. As Walter Dean Burnham indicates:

The 'real' class struggle, the point at which class polarization is most salient, is not found in the contests between Democrats and Republicans in the active electorate, but between the active electorate as a whole and the non-voting half of the adult population as a whole."

Although Burnham establishes too strict a separation between voters and non-voters, the reality is that the majority of the working class has stayed at home in the last two Presidential elections. As Burnham indicates 'The exceptional working class abstention rate today very much fills a gap in the active American electorate that was filled elsewhere by socialist parties.'⁸¹ In a typical presidential election only half of the voting age population casts a ballot. In off-year congressional elections this proportion falls to one third. The electoral absenteeism is accompanied by a growing sense of alienation. The Louis Harris alienation index rose from 29 per cent in 1966 to 60 per cent in 1986. And the number of people believing that 'the rich get richer and the poor get poorer' rose over the same period from 45 to 81 per cent.⁸² Left-wing parties are virtually excluded from the electoral process by the institutional and political obstacles which they encounter.

In summary, the electoral failure of the Democratic Party results from its inability to mobilize working-class support, based on the enormous ambivalence of the Democratic leadership towards such mobilization. This uncertainty is partly explained by the fear that class mobilization might threaten the leadership's class interests. Non-voters in the US are more progressive (in economic and social policies) than voters and are more willing to support radical policies.⁸³ The Democratic leadership prefers to compete with the Republican Party for the vote of the top 40 per cent of the income and occupational ranks, ignoring for the most part the fate of the bottom 60 per cent.⁸⁴ The size and importance of the working class abstention is shown by the fact that if the 1984 turnout

had been the same as that in 1960, there would have been an extra 16.5 million voters, which, incidentally, is the margin by which Reagan defeated Mondale in that year.⁸⁵

From the electoral point of view the solution for the Democratic Party would be a move to the left, precisely the opposite of what the national leadership intends to do. In this context it is interesting to note how the Democratic leadership and the US establishment have dealt with Reverend Jackson. In 1984, Jackson started his campaign running primarily as a black candidate, putting forward the voice of the marginalized. By the end of his campaign a shift had occurred. Jackson realized that unless he reached out to other forces, he would remain a minority candidate. After the 1984 presidential election, Jackson's experience led to the establishment of the Rainbow Coalition, as the coalition (the aggregate) of the different social movements. It would aim to be (as Collins suggests) the aggregate of blacks, Hispanics and women, with other discriminated forces.

A Class Reading of the Rainbow

The political practice has shown, however, that such categories as blacks, Hispanics, women and whites are not homogeneous. Their interests are class dependent, and this is the primary element of universality among these groups. As E.O. Wright has shown, the major components of the US working class are blacks, Hispanics, and women.⁸⁶ Thus, there has been an increasing realization within the Rainbow that in order to establish a linkage among these social groups the Rainbow must have a working-class perspective.

To have a working-class perspective does not mean having a 'workerist' approach, i.e. to focus only on worker interests and to struggle only from a working-class perspective. But there is a growing awareness that the working class and groups within it—blacks, Hispanics and other over-exploited minorities—need to be the backbone of the movement aimed at mobilizing non-voters and sectors of the voting population on the electoral and many other fronts. This approach should not pre-empt the importance of the social movements, such as the feminist movement, in the Coalition. But it should change the character of that movement to properly reflect and give priority to the interests of the black, Hispanic and white working women, whose interests are separate from and even in conflict with those of professional women (who tend to be well represented in most visible feminist movements). Let me focus on one example. At the very beginning of its existence the Rainbow Coalition accepted the interpretation of poverty among women given by the feminist authors who promoted the concept of the feminization of poverty, i.e. that a growing number of the poor were women. However, this interpretation of poverty and the political practice that derived from it conflicted with the demands of the black, Hispanic and other workers, members of the Rainbow who felt that this

position was wrong. The concept of the feminization of poverty gave the impression that sexism is the fundamental problem. It is not. Black men as well as black women face a higher poverty rate than either white women or white men. If a black woman could change her race she would have a better statistical chance of escaping poverty than if she were to change her gender. Also, divorce was not a primary reason for black women's poverty. The argument that 'poverty is just a divorce away' did not have the same validity for black women. Marriage may improve the situation of middle class white women but does not improve much the tenuous economic position of black women." Nor did white women workers, members of service unions active in the Rainbow, feel that the 'feminization of poverty' explained their situation of bordering poverty either. This political experience led the National Rainbow Coalition to change the approach towards feminist demands, towards poverty among women and the type of demands to be made. It is not that the Rainbow added class and race to gender. Class was always there. The issue was not class or non-class but *which* class of women the Rainbow should give priority to. The Rainbow changed the class and race demands to give different meaning, interpretation and political strategies to the gender demands present in the feminist cause. It was a different (class) reading of the feminist cause with different policy implications.

Another factor has contributed to the class redefinition of the Rainbow: the awareness that the primary focus on social movements as the instruments for political practice was more the result of US backwardness than of its assumed political vanguardism (i.e. a political *modus operandi* that other countries will catch up with). The absence of a political instrument that could advance the interest of all these forces, and the plurality of responses to a cohesive and united class aggression, was weakening substantially the interests and demands of each social movement's constituency. Looking at the experience of other advanced capitalist countries one could see that the US working women (the majority of adult women in the US) have it worse not better than working women in other countries. For example, as the feminist and other progressive movements are trying to force on the US Congress the need to pass a law allowing parents to have leave without pay for birth and infant care, the overwhelming majority of advanced capitalist countries already have laws allowing for such care, with pay: Sweden for 84 weeks, the UK for 44 weeks, Italy for 48 weeks, and West Germany for 26 weeks.⁸⁸ The list could go on. Similarly, the American environment is less not more protected than that of other advanced capitalist countries, and our environmental standards are worse, not better.⁸⁹

The primary reason for these differences is that these other countries have class instruments that enable them better to defend the majority of their populations. Their absence in the United States is a grievous weak-

ness. The awareness of this has led important sectors of the Rainbow to work towards adding a class perspective to the Rainbow and calling for a coalition among the different sectors of the working class and the

These changes should not be interpreted as abandonment of social movements but rather the need for their articulation within a coalition in which the class perspective establishes the matrix in which race and gender interests are realized. The advanced capitalist experience shows that in countries where the working class has strong class instruments, the overall population has more civil, political and economic rights than in those countries—such as the US—where no such instruments exist. Needless to say, this approach is strongly resisted both within and outside the Rainbow. Some sectors of the US establishment—the most class conscious group in US society—have detected that change. They all have warned that the Reverend Jackson is not one more populist candidate. He is perceived as a leader who increasingly addresses the needs of US workers and farmers. As *The Economist* put it, he is a class candidate.⁹¹

This class reading of the Rainbow does not exclude its addressing also the needs of the middle class or the professional-technical strata. But there is an awareness that the broadening of the Rainbow cannot be done at the cost of losing its natural constituency. This, incidentally, is what has been occurring to many Social Democratic, Socialist and Communist parties in Europe. Their shift to broaden their base has taken place at the cost of losing their working-class foundation. The task for the Rainbow is to build a broad coalition within the working class first and among classes afterwards. This awareness led to demands that aim at resolving the problems of specific groups (such as minorities) through the development of programmes that also benefit the majority of the population and the working class. Contrary to what Collins suggests, the welfare state has had redistributive effects not from the capitalist to the working class, but within the working class. Thus there is a need to develop programmes based not only on compassion but primarily on solidarity, responding to the needs of the majority as well as to the specific needs of the minorities. One example of this type of demand is the development of a National Health Programme benefiting the majority of the population as well as specific vulnerable groups in special need.⁹² To ask for programmes aimed only at these latter groups is likely to divide the working class. It is more popular to ask for a National Health Programme than to ask for a medical programme for the black children of Harlem or East Baltimore. This situation cannot be explained by referring to workers' racism. It has to be explained by the realities of funding the welfare state in the US. Thus, paradoxically, to ask for more profound and extensive changes is more feasible than to ask for gradual and small changes. This is the operational meaning of a class approach.

Needless to say this approach is strongly resisted and denounced by the class conscious US establishment. All types of campaigns are being put forward to discredit the Rainbow and its President. Witness the major media coverage of Jackson's campaign that borders on the hysterical.⁹³ Although Jackson is the front runner within the Democratic Party (with a percentage of Democratic Party followers almost twice that of the second candidate, Governor Dukakis) the press rarely refers to him as the front runner, dismissing that support as a black vote that cannot grow. In fact, he has more white supporter votes (even in the South) than the majority of other candidates (with the exception of Dukakis and Gore).⁹⁴ Large sectors of the left media, reproducing once again the establishment perceptions, keep referring to Jackson as the black candidate.⁹⁵

This discussion of the prospect for the presidential campaign is not meant to imply that the Rainbow sees itself as primarily an electoral instrument. It does not. Internal debate exists within the Rainbow as to whether it should transform into the left-wing branch of the Democratic Party (a mere electoral machine) or a movement that operates both within and outside the Democratic Party and within and outside electoral politics. The last convention of the Rainbow on October 10-11, 1987, strongly endorsed the second alternative. At this point, there is a real possibility that the Rainbow, the largest association on the left in today's US, could become a political force that would be the first major progressive mass movement since the 1930s.

Needless to say, a possibility is not a certain reality. A natural rainbow is after all the light of the sun that struggles to get through the dark clouds. And there are enormous clouds on our horizons, of which the largest is the overwhelming dominance that the capitalist class of the US has over economic, political and communication agencies and institutions in this country. Another one is the emphasis on charismatic politics, focusing on individuals and personalities, rather than on democratic organizations. But the increasing class polarization of the US also opens new possibilities for the development of a mass organization that can establish the material linkage for the production of class politics by the dominated forces. This is indeed the Rainbow challenge.

NOTES

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6. 'Social Class: Opinion Roundup', *Public Opinion*, October-November 1984, P. 21.
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8. There are many references documenting the economic and social consequences of the economic and social policies of the current US Administration. For a well documented one see Center for Popular Economics, *Economic Report of the People* (Boston: South End Press, 1986).
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10. For a discussion of how the major US social programmes are being funded and the political consequences of such funding see Navarro, V., 'The 1980 and 1984 US Elections and the New Deal', *Socialist Register, 1985-86*, pp. 158-210.
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44. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
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46. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 80.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
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54. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
56. Vanneman, R. and Cannon, L.W. *op. cit.*
57. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
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