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What is Class?

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Class struggle, or the struggle within and against capitalism, is an intrinsic guiding force of anarchist theory and practice. Nonetheless, many enduring myths and misconceptions continue to cloud popular understanding of the social relationship that lies at the root of this conflict... namely, class itself.

So... what is it, exactly? And what do anarchists have against it? Most people today primarily associate someone's class with how much money they make. And while it's true that the size of a person's bank account is generally a good indication of their class position, this over-simplified definition tends to obscure the way that class actually operates, on both an individual and social level, while masking its inherently antagonistic nature. A more accurate way of defining class would be to say that it's a hierarchical social relationship characterized by exploitation, and anchored through an interconnected, state-based system of laws governing the ownership of property. Or to put it more simply... class is a way of organizing people according to who owns what.

Of course, both hierarchy and exploitation have been around far longer than capitalism. From the priest-kings of Mesopotamia's earliest city-states, to the Roman Empire and

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its gradual disintegration into Medieval feudalism, human civilizations have always been ruled by a small elite, who've ensured the highest concentration of wealth and prestige for themselves. The rise of capitalism displaced early feudal systems of social and economic control, such as the Divine Right of Kings in Europe, and the Mandate of Heaven in Imperial China, replacing these outdated superstitions with new, more sophisticated social myths based on the sanctity of private property and the unquestioned domination of the free market.

Back in the mid 19th century, the famous socialist philosopher Karl Marx carried out an exhaustive exploration at how capitalism worked and the historical processes by which it had developed. Many prominent anarchists at the time, such as Mikhail Bakunin, bitterly disagreed with Marx and his followers on the question of revolutionary strategy, particularly the role of the state. Overall, however, they agreed with his description of capitalism as a system characterized by the emergence and spread of two mutually opposing classes. Those are: the working class - also known as the proletariat, and the capitalist class - also known as the bourgeoisie.

Members of the capitalist class are defined by their ownership and control over capital, while members of the working class are defined by the fact that we don't own capital and are thus forced into exploitative relationships with capitalists in order to survive. Capitalists can be subdivided into three different categories based on the type of capital they own and how they generate profit. The first of these are industrial capitalists, who own and control the means of production - a fancy phrase to describe the tools and equipment necessary to produce commodities. In earlier stages of capitalism this usually referred to owners of factories and mines, but nowadays could refer to the owners and shareholders of a wide variety of businesses - anything from fast-food restaurants to software development companies. In other words, an industrial capitalist is your boss.

They are someone who makes a profit by exploiting their workers. Second is landowners - capitalists who own land and real estate, and who make a profit by exploiting their tenants, or, as is increasingly common these days, through gentrification and other forms of real estate speculation and development. And finally, financial capitalists - who make a profit by loaning money at interest. This could be anyone from small pawnshops and payday loan centers, all the way up to the globe-spanning banks who loan money to other capitalists and even governments.

The shift towards neoliberal capitalism beginning in the 1970s, saw financial capitalists massively expand their influence over the global economy. This expansion has allowed them to ramp up their direct exploitation of the working class through the introduction of new household debt instruments, such as personal credit cards, student loans and subprime mortgages. Over the years, the character of class exploitation has transformed as capitalism has evolved. In spite of this, many anti-capitalists still cling to narratives from an earlier era. Even today, the stereotypical image of a member of the working class tends to be the burly-chested, white factory worker of IWW lore - whereas the truth is that the majority of the global proletariat are female, and the overwhelming majority are of non-European descent.

Yet even as capitalism has changed, the essential elements of the class relationship remain the same. It's pretty well understood that the working class and capitalist classes have mutually opposing interests. The less our bosses pay us, and the more our landlords charge us rent, the more profit they make, and the poorer we get. What's less understood, however, is that capitalist laws of universal competition and constant growth, create and shape internal divisions within each class. Capitalists within a certain industry are constantly competing with rivals over market share, which means that they must maintain a certain rate of profit, or risk going out of business. And

capitalists from one industry sometimes have interests that run entirely contrary to those of another. High oil prices, for example, will lead to higher rates of profit for corporations like BP and ExxonMobil... but they can be devastating to capitalists in the manufacturing or transportation industries.

While all members of the working class have a shared interest in ending capitalism, we are also often blinded by our own competing short-term interests. Not only do we have to compete with one another over the scraps capitalists give us to survive... but also, many of our jobs negatively impact the lives of other working-class people. And on a broader scale, the lower the wages paid to workers in the Global South, the cheaper the products on department store shelves. On top of that, our class is divided into hierarchies based on oppressive systems such as race and gender. Women, for instance, are often doubly exploited under capitalism in that we are expected to perform unpaid reproductive labour, such as cooking, cleaning and raising children, while simultaneously being paid less than our male counterparts at work. The role of the state is to manage the economy in a way that balances the interests of competing segments of the capitalist class, while protecting them all from the threat of working-class revolution. This is often achieved by playing up divisions within the working class based on nationalism, religious sectarianism, white supremacy and patriarchy. It is only by destroying these oppressive and divisive systems that our class can come together to wage a unified class war and begin to liberate ourselves from the shackles of this parasitic system of exploitation. We will only cease to be slaves when together, we seize everything.