



Domenico Losurdo's Historical Interpretation of Class Struggles

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores a misunderstood aspect of the Marxist scientific paradigm. It proposes to develop the idea first elucidated by Domenico Losurdo that the class struggle approach to history, as theorized by Marx and Engels, is in fact a general and scientific theory of social conflict. This general theory was consciously developed by Marx and Engels in opposition to certain irrational and subjectivist paradigms that attempted to explain the political behaviour of subaltern groups living under capitalist conditions. By returning to Losurdo's explanations of Marxism but also by revisiting classical Marxist works on this topic, this paper reinforces the class struggle centric understanding of Marxism against other possible readings of this worldview. The emphasis on class struggles in no way diminishes the discoveries made by Marx in his critique of Political Economy that also deserve to be actively pursued. This research paper also demonstrates that a scientific understanding of human history requires an insistence on the centrality of class struggle and that the critiques of Marx's elaboration of his general theory of social conflict are often partial and undialectical. This paper responds to some of these critiques through an exegesis of several key Marxist writings, from Marx to Fanon, that demonstrate the non-dogmatic approach that historical materialists adopted when examining history and social conflict. This return to classical Marxist works also demonstrates that despite certain differences in tone and style the major revolutionary theoreticians shared a common strategic and intellectual framework regarding the class struggle.

KEYWORDS: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Gramsci, Losurdo, Marxist philosophy, class struggles.

For a Scientific Study of Class Struggles

There seems to be little consensus in the social sciences about the most appropriate methodology to study human history. Several approaches are competing for hegemony and there is an acceptance that no single theory can provide global answers about social dynamics. Marxism has been

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criticized for its attempt to provide a general theoretical framework to understand the history of class-divided societies. This has led to a partial abandonment of historical materialism by new generations of researchers in favour of other paradigms. Few researchers comprehensively discuss the political and theoretical issues raised by the gradual disappearance of sociological analyses using the concept of social class as developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. But what exactly is this Marxist definition of social class in the broadest sense? This is the main topic we shall explore in this article. In the era of late capitalism and global imperialism, historians should attempt to re-evaluate the legacy of more than a century and a half of Marxist theorizing on this question. One political thinker that will serve as a connecting thread in this article and who attempted to summarize Marx's conceptualizations of this topic is Domenico Losurdo. His fundamental statement on this issue is developed especially in his book *Class Struggle*. The subtitle *A Political and Philosophical History* reveals Losurdo's ambitions. Unfortunately, this Marxist philosopher passed away in 2018. Losurdo initiated what can be termed a new philosophical reading of Marxist political views that combined theoretical analyses of political economy with a historical study of the development of capitalism. He attempted to bridge the gap between abstract-conceptual applications of Marxist notions and concrete historical analyses of specific social formations. In his efforts, Losurdo drew on the tradition of historical materialism, from Marx to Gramsci, and beyond. His exegesis of the class analyses of these authors enriches his own research. This article explores the merits and some limits of Losurdo's approach and how it might contribute to refining current historical research programs. The theory of *class struggles*, the plural being emphasized by Losurdo, is the key to his reappraisal of the Marxist paradigm, which he presents as a central theoretical current. Losurdo proposed a systematic re-examination of the *Communist Manifesto* by comparing this work and other writings of Marx and Engels to those of non-Marxist intellectuals. This article deals with two essential points that orient contemporary efforts to revitalize the utilization of the Marxist paradigm 1) The genesis of the use of the concept of social class or classes in the social sciences and 2) Some attempts to update, redefine, or refute the concept. The article is divided into four key sections mainly to facilitate the understanding of the whole.

Originality of This Scientific Approach

The first step in defining the Marxist concept of social class is to reexamine some fundamental texts of this tradition. Losurdo offers a close reading of some writings of Marx. He notes that, from an early stage in his intellectual career, Marx elaborated the concept of social class by going beyond any economic vision of social formations. In his early writings, Marx noted the simplification of the class structure in the nineteenth century. For example, in *the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx underlined the gradual economic transformation of landowners into a type of bourgeois who exploits land workers capitalistically: “The final consequence is thus the abolishment of the distinction between capitalist and landowner, so that there remain altogether only two classes of the population the working class and the class of capitalists” (Marx 1988, 63). This transformation pointed to the fact that classes can be integrated into fractions of another class. In the same way, intermediary classes can transform themselves to form segments of the proletarian class. It is important to note that Marx did not claim to have discovered social classes. For example, French historians had preceded him: “And now as to myself [Marx], no credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society [...] What I did that was new was to prove: (1) *that the existence of classes is only bound up with particular historical phases in the development of production*” (Marx and Engels 1969, 679). Another idea developed by Marx is that the class struggle can only intensify once the dominant class consolidates: “So long as the organization of bourgeois class rule is incomplete, and has not taken on its purest political expression, the opposition of other classes cannot emerge in a pure form” (Marx 2002, 56). These notions of purity and form as relates to class formation and struggle, are important as they involve the idea that a variety of ideological and political superstructures can contribute to hiding or exposing the fundamental antagonisms existing between social classes. The class struggle is a dialectical and political process with progressive developments as well as defeats and setbacks. As Henri Lefebvre explained: “At once objective and subjective, the class conflict is perpetual, though sometimes only latent or hidden and sometimes overt and explosive” (Lefebvre 1969, 102). The historical reality of class struggles as noted by Marx takes, according to Losurdo, complex forms, which Marx detailed when he deemed it necessary to explain specific outcomes. To substantiate this claim, one needs to look no further than the first pages of *Wage-Labour and Capital*. As Marx states: “The June struggle in Paris, the fall of

Vienna [...] the starving of Ireland into submission—these were the chief factors which characterized the class struggle between bourgeoisie and working class” (Marx 1978, 15–16). For example, the social question in Ireland took on the form of a national struggle for liberation. As Losurdo explains: “The ‘social question’ is the more general category here—the genus—which in the concrete situation of the unhappy island [...] takes the form of the ‘national question’” (Losurdo 2016, 14). According to Losurdo, it is the domestic, national, and international division of labour that determines the forms the class struggle will take. Losurdo affirms that the three main social protagonists of the struggle against capitalist domination have historically been the proletariat, colonized populations, and women: “Each of these three struggles challenges the prevailing division of labour internationally, nationally, and within the family” (Losurdo 2016, 44). By “prevailing division” he means the patriarchal and racially based hegemonic capitalism humanity has experienced over the last few centuries. He goes on to state that these struggles challenge, each in their own way, an aspect of the relations of compulsion capitalism imposes on subaltern groups: “The three struggles for emancipation challenge the three fundamental ‘relations of compulsion’ constitutive of the capitalist system as a whole” (Losurdo 2016, 44). His historical assessment of capitalism and his identification of the fundamental protagonists are convincing and well documented. Losurdo affirmed that Marx, as well as Engels, elaborated, without systematizing it in a single treatise, what he termed a general theory of social conflict. One element that appears underdeveloped in Losurdo’s genealogy of the concept of social class is what G.A. Cohen calls the primacy of the productive forces. According to him, Marx emphasized that certain forces of production allow specific types of social relations to come into being. This is the key to understanding the economic structure of a given society and the forms of class power. As he explains:

But why does the successful class succeed? *Marx finds the answer in the character of the productive forces* [...] The class which rules through a period [...] is the class best suited, most able and disposed to preside over the development of the productive forces. (Cohen 2000, 149)

This view of history does not remove agency from social classes. Cohen illustrates this by stating that Marx obviously believed that the bourgeoisie played an active role in the English Revolution. Yet it played this role in large part because it was the class best suited to manage the produc-

tive forces that were developing at that time in England (Cohen 2000, 160). It must be mentioned that the limitations of what classes can accomplish are largely determined by the level of development of the productive forces and the corresponding social relations of production. For his part, Werner Bonefeld explains that the concept of class is a contradictory one: "The category class has thus a double meaning: it entails the notion of class unity as the manifestation of the class antagonism between the classes, and it entails class disunity as a competitive relationship between the sellers of labour power" (Bonefeld, 2014, 107). This idea, of class as a contradictory category, was not always affirmed unequivocally by Losurdo and thus weakens certain of his positions.

This can be explained by Losurdo's desire to promote the idea that social classes exist and play the main role in shaping human history. He highlights this role without always delving into the economic foundations of class formation. The main thing for Losurdo is that the theoretical model developed by Marx and Engels avoided the pitfalls of naturalism, psychologism, or ethno-racialism. Many of the competing theories to explain social conflicts developed in the nineteenth century were based on one of these perspectives. As Georg Lukács remarked, they were sometimes a combination of all of them, for example in the social philosophy of Nietzsche (Lukács 1981, 61–62). For his part, Losurdo notes that Nietzsche's political valuations observe similar situations of servitude as does Marx's but with an opposite appreciation: "The implacable critic of revolution as such [Nietzsche], including the feminist revolution, compared the condition of woman to that of 'sufferers of the lower classes', 'slave labourers [*Arbeitsklaven*] or prisoners'" (Losurdo 2016, 18). Nietzsche took a contrary attitude to the Marxist tradition which saw in the resistances to exploitation the potentiality for greater freedom. They were mainly viewed by Nietzsche as unhealthy manifestations of a slave morality. Contrary to such elitist interpretations of history, the Marxist theory of social conflict, focused on the productive forces of capitalist social formations, offered rational tools to analyze class-divisions. It analyzes social formations without falling into idealist mystifications. For example, Marxism does not develop one-size-fits-all descriptions of the history of humanity, divided between superior elites, on the one hand, and servile masses, on the other.

The Marxist theory of social conflict, according to Losurdo, has implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, opposed other paradigms that attempted to explain social movements articulated by groups that Antonio Gramsci

called subaltern. Gramsci insisted that the understanding of history can only be achieved through a study of resistances to class power:

Hence it is necessary to study: 1. the objective formation of the subaltern social groups [...] 2. their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations, their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own. (Gramsci 1992, 53)

He also stated that the integral study of history must analyze the formation of these groups in the overall division of labour. This is a key aspect of any research program that claims to be inspired by the principles of historical materialism. According to Losurdo the main paradigmatic opponents of Marxism were: 1) What can be described as an ethnological-racial paradigm, sometimes taking the form of a clash of civilizations paradigm 2) A psychopathological paradigm that can be found notably in the writings of Tocqueville, Taine, Le Bon, and Nietzsche (Losurdo 2016, 28–29). Sometimes the two paradigms intertwine in peculiar ways. For example, Tocqueville viewed racial mixing in a negative light and attributed French socialism and the propensity to revolt, typical of his countrymen, to a form of congenital-national-mental disease. The identification of group pathologies replaced the concrete analysis of social relations of production. This was the case in Gustave Le Bon's psychological analyses of crowds. Little thought was given to the objective economic contradictions of society and the social reactions they provoked. Many reactionary thinkers expressed in more abstract terms the shock caused in the upper classes by the Paris Commune, among other significant events involving class struggles. These philosophies of history nourished irrational currents of thought on social conflict.

The movements of economically exploited classes and subaltern groups in class-divided societies would not be, according to these paradigms, the result of the different forms of class struggles, based on objective economic antagonisms. They are rather explained by various forms of irrationality inherent to the working masses, to women, to colonized peoples, or to other subaltern groups. Rather than viewing human nature as being essentially determined by the ever-changing ensemble of objective social relations of production and by class relations connected to the economic structure, these theories postulated an innately defective nature to some groups. Losurdo explains that, according to the Marxist paradigm, it is the concrete experience of exploitation and oppression by ruling classes which engenders organized movements for emancipation.

This is the key to understanding revolutionary social change. Other Marxists, such as Raya Dunayevskaya, emphasized the importance of Hegelian dialectics in the formation of Marxism as a radical philosophy of universal human emancipation: “The Hegelian dialectic was the crucible wherein materialism was transformed into a world-historic philosophy of freedom” (Dunayevskaya 1982, 75). The alternative theories of social conflict postulated that the resistances of subaltern groups stem from an inherent irrationality. The intellectuals who promote these theories view the political status quo as the only acceptable form of society and interpret disturbances from below as emotional outbursts. They lack a dialectical, materialist, and class based, view of history. The subaltern groups were often described as essentially inferior in comparison to the supposed normative standard of the civilized bourgeois man. This aspect of Losurdo's historical analysis of bourgeois and imperialist modernity is covered in his book *Liberalism. A Counter History*.

The Pitfalls of Revisionism

In the two aforementioned books, Losurdo points out that the attacks on Marx and the general theory of social conflict he developed with Engels affirmed themselves soon after Marxism began to gain attention. Critiques came from within the ranks of Social Democracy itself. The spread of Marxism, first in Europe, then across the globe, provoked reactions among intellectuals of all persuasions. It is impossible to list all the opponents of the new theory of social conflict. Every generation sees a new refutation make an appearance on the theoretical stage. Losurdo remarks that in the mid-twentieth century the well-known sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf attempted to put the final nail in the coffin of the Marxist paradigm. Social classes in the Marxist analysis, which Dahrendorf tended to mechanically reduce to the opposition between capitalists and proletarians, no longer held up, according to the eminent thinker's results (Losurdo 2016, 1). The less sharp divisions that Dahrendorf claimed characterized advanced social formations of capitalism, invalidated, in his view, the basic principles of Marxism. But Losurdo resituates the theoretical positions developed by Dahrendorf in their proper context, the so-called Golden Age of Capitalism. He asserts that what disappeared was not the fundamental classes themselves nor their struggles, but rather the capacity of modern sociologists to correctly understand Marx's dialectical method. These thinkers became masters at ignoring certain facts and

tendencies that might validate Marxism, especially concerning political conflicts structured around class antagonisms (Losurdo 2016, 260). They ignored the fact that class struggles took on many forms. In his critique of the modern revisionisms and refutations of Marxism Losurdo was preceded by Rosa Luxemburg. For example, in *Reform or Revolution*, Luxemburg took Eduard Bernstein to task for caricaturing historical materialism. She reminded Bernstein of the class nature of the state:

Its class character obliges the state to move the pivot of its activity and its means of coercion more and more into domains that are useful only to the class character of the bourgeoisie and have for society as a whole only a negative importance. (Luxemburg 2008, 64)

The increased involvement of the state in civil society does not rhyme automatically with the improvement of the condition of subaltern groups. Increased militarism and wars during the imperialist stage of capitalism spelled the doom of millions of workers. Or, for example, the mass incarceration of subaltern groups such as racial minorities in North America, especially among the poorer classes. One can speak not only of a military industrial complex but also of a carceral industrial complex that forms an integral part of the economic structure of the United States. Lenin was correct in his explanation of the process by which the state comes into being. It develops on the basis of irreconcilable class interests. He was also correct in describing the state as an armed force that subjugates those who reject the rule of the dominant class: “What does this [state] power mainly consist in? It consists in special bodies of armed men which have prisons, etc., at their command” (Lenin 1976, 12). Max Weber’s alternative definition of the state and of state power simply reformulates these Leninist ideas using complex sociological jargon that adds little to the comprehension of their essence. For their part, the early revisionists of Marx’s theory of social conflict tended to reduce Marxism to an economic paradigm. They refused to see that from quite early on, Marx and Engels understood class struggle as a broad genus which could manifest itself in a variety of specific forms. Yet, for all his merits, Losurdo does not engage enough with certain structural considerations concerning the class struggle. For example, Moishe Postone explains that although class struggles are important, they only play a key role in history because of the structuring effects of certain social forms: “class conflict is a driving force of historical development in capitalism only because it is structured by, and embedded in, the social social forms of the commodity and capi-

tal” (Postone 2003, 319). For Postone, it is capitalism as a totality in movement that pushes the class struggle forward. According to him, a thinker such as Losurdo does not pay enough attention to the dynamic and totalizing aspects of capitalism or to social forms. This is indeed a limit to his more descriptive approach.

For his part, Losurdo gives the example of another key figure in contemporary social science, Jürgen Habermas, who is recognized as a serious reader of Marx. According to Losurdo's understanding of Habermas, there is no longer for him any antagonistic conflict between two clearly defined groups in capitalist society, but rather a general pacification of class struggles (Losurdo 2016, 2). However, as Losurdo notes, this pacification, perceived especially in the context of advanced capitalist states, is precisely the result of major class struggles led by the working class and its allies against economic exploitation and constraints since the end of the Second World War. The welfare state and the socioeconomic rights for its citizens are not some unexplainable offerings sent from above to the workers and their allies, nor a concession freely offered to the subaltern groups of capitalist economies by ruling classes. They are the product of protracted social struggles by workers and other groups against the fundamental economic tendencies of capitalism (Losurdo 2016, 3). According to Losurdo, it is currently the capitalist counter-revolution of neoliberal financial elites which is destroying what is left of the welfare state and its socioeconomic benefits for subaltern classes. It is a coordinated dismantling of socioeconomic rights acquired through direct class struggle in the last several decades. In other words, a coalition of fractions of the dominant classes have been engaging in direct class warfare. Losurdo could have added nuance to his political vision of the class struggle if he used the notion of the power bloc developed by Nicos Poulantzas: “The State maintains its relative autonomy of particular fractions of the power bloc [...] so that it may ensure the organization of the general interest of the bourgeoisie under the hegemony of one of its fractions” (Poulantzas 2000, 128). Indeed, Losurdo does not provide a thorough analysis of state power, of its hegemony, nor of its relative autonomy. On this issue, Lenin believed that a correct understanding of the motivations of the ruling classes, and its hegemonic fraction, was the key to interpreting their management of international affairs:

Proof of what was the true social, or rather, the true class character of the war is naturally to be found, not in the diplomatic history of the war, but in an

analysis of the objective position of the ruling classes in all the belligerent countries. (Lenin 1970, 4)

For his part, Losurdo reminds the critics of Marxism, that Marx and Engels included the struggles of the dominant classes among themselves as one form of class conflict.

According to him, the two thinkers, Dahrendorf and Habermas, seem to relegate the struggles that occurred all over the colonial world to a marginal phenomenon. This is incompatible with a Marxist understanding of history. Masses of exploited human beings on every continent fought to obtain their political independence from imperialist powers and to construct socialism. These transformations of the capitalist world order cannot be brushed aside, as having little to do with class struggle, despite the limits to organizing socialist economies in the peripheral zones of capitalism (Losurdo 2016, 3–4). These forms of class struggle, involving several subaltern groups on an international scale, would have little to do with the Marxist theory of social conflict in the narrow sense of Dahrendorf and Habermas. In this sense, Losurdo is closer to Postone’s critique of modern sociology. Both authors criticize Habermas for slightly different reasons. According to Postone, Habermas attacks what he perceives as Marx’s romantic critique of capitalism. This reading of Marx is based on a misunderstanding of his theory:

The categorical social forms of commodity and capital do not simply *veil* the real social relations of capitalism, according to Marx; rather they *are* the fundamental social relations of capitalism, forms of mediation that are constituted by labor in this society. (Postone 2003, 256)

One should mention that there already existed a correction to such erroneous readings of Marx during the era in which Dahrendorf and Habermas were writing their revisionist works. Circulating globally, the theories of Frantz Fanon utilized the tools of historical materialism to study the nature of the struggles occurring in the peripheral countries of capitalism. Fanon noticed that in a situation of colonization certain classes play a different role from the one they did in advanced capitalist countries. According to Fanon, only a class-centric analysis of social formations can make the proper distinctions: “In certain circumstances, however, the peasant masses make a crucial contribution to the struggle for national liberation [...] For the underdeveloped countries this phenomenon is of fundamental importance” (Fanon 2004, 76). Dunaevskaya, writing at the same time as Habermas and Dahrendorf, noted

the revolutionary aspects of Fanon's Marxism: "Clearly, the dialectics of liberation is not anything pragmatic, nor something only black [...] It is global as well as revolutionary; it is total as well as historically continuous. It is, as he [Fanon] put it, a 'new humanism'" (Dunayevskaya 1982, 284). This is the dialectical approach that any critical researcher, convinced of the scientific character of historical materialism, should ideally adopt. Losurdo finds it odd that these forms of struggle are excluded by some. In fact, the economistic reading of Marxism contradicts the actual analyses produced by such militants as Luxemburg, Lenin, Gramsci, and Fanon. The expert academic interpreters of Marx such as Dahrendorf and Habermas, supposedly acquainted with the analytical grid of historical materialism, seem not to understand the idea that Marx never reduced class struggles exclusively to the conflict between capitalists and proletarians. Nor did he dogmatically give a political essence to certain classes who must behave politically in a predetermined way.

To demonstrate this, Losurdo rightly recalls Marx's famous sentences in the *Communist Manifesto* according to which: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian [...] in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another" (Marx and Engels 2002, 219). Losurdo then affirms that Marx specifies that the class struggle takes multiple forms: "The transition from the singular to the plural clearly signals that the conflict between proletariat and bourgeoisie is but one class struggle among others and the latter, running throughout world history" (Losurdo 2016, 4). And to make sure that the reader of the *Manifesto* has understood what is at stake in his analysis, Losurdo shows that a little further on in Marx's text, he recognizes not only the multiplicity of class struggles throughout history, but also the multiplicity of the specific forms that they take. In all three major struggles that Losurdo identifies there are two elements that link them together: "On the economico-political level, it comprises the objective of altering the division of labor [...] on the politico-moral level, that of overcoming the dehumanizing and reifying processes which characterize capitalist society" (Losurdo 2016, 83). He thus takes up where Dunayevskaya left off in her understanding of Marxism as an emancipatory and humanist project. The adversaries of Marxism have, according to Losurdo, tried to reduce this paradigm to a purely economic analysis which ignores the importance of ideological, political, and moral aspects of social conflict. For example, a Roman slave or prisoner living during Julius Caesar's or Octavian's reign, given the

productive forces and social relations of production, could perhaps join a slave revolt to escape his miserable fate. Perhaps he could find solace in an eschatological religion circulating among subaltern groups of that social formation or follow a philosophy of indifference such as stoicism. In contrast, he could not join something like a modern-day labour union or vote in an election for a leftist party that defends slaves' interests. His class position, historically situated, limited his capacity to act in many ways. Even non-marxist historians admit the importance of sociohistorical context and material conditions. The same basic idea applies even more to a female slave in this specific context. She might find other, perhaps even more limited ways of resisting class constraints and exploitation, due to the patriarchal nature of Roman society. She could not, for example, join something akin to a modern feminist movement or actively support politicians promoting women's rights. These examples illustrate in a concrete manner the idea of the forms of class struggle developed by Domenico Losurdo. For any person with some historical sensibilities, these statements are self-evident, as they would have been for Marx and Engels. For his part, G.E.M. de Ste-Croix, a historian who wrote a study of antiquity using the tools of historical materialism, class is the key factor to explain history:

I have no wish to pretend that class is the only category we need for the analysis of Greek and Roman society. All I am saying is that it is the fundamental one, which *over all* (at any given moment) and in the *long run* is the most important. (De Ste-Croix 1998, 45)

This is a point of view shared by most Marxist historians and which Losurdo develops at length. Some social theorists argue that class is a term that is fully valid only for the capitalist era and does not apply to previous societies. But it is Marx himself who, in *Capital*, gives the readers the key to understanding the nature of the class struggle in ancient Greece and Rome: "The class struggle in the ancient world, for instance, took the form mainly of a contest between debtors and creditors, and ended in Rome with the ruin of the plebeian debtors, who were replaced by slaves" (Marx 1976, 233). This passage is important, not only because it does away with the idea that the mature Marx only applied the notion of class struggle to the capitalist era, but also in that it validates Losurdo's claim that the class struggle—the genus—takes on specific forms according to how productive forces and social relations of production are organized. To give another example, Lenin did not content himself with

restating general remarks about capitalism from an abstract theoretical perspective but tried to understand how it was developing concretely in Russia and in other peripheral zones of the world economy. The theoretical result was the publication of a major work on the development of capitalism in one of its peripheries, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (Lenin, 1977).

The specific forms the struggles of antagonistic social groups change according to the evolution of the economic structure of the societies in question and according to the specific developments of the various groups that compose them. As mentioned, the development of productive forces plays a central role in transforming the economic structure which in turn allows certain classes to push for social changes. There is not some universal key that allows Marxist researchers to know exactly which elements will play a determining role at what precise time. Fundamental contradictions emerge when social relations of production become fetters on developing productive forces. It is at this point that new class relations emerge. A view of the totality of the developmental process appears only after the historical phase has passed. It is then easier for the researcher to examine the relative weight of the productive forces, social relations of production and antagonistic class relations that produced a given result. In general, Marxist studies give a determining role to the development of productive forces and to the social relations of production, which are the material and social foundations of any class-divided community. The class struggle pushes the economic process forward and is the mechanism by which contradictions are overcome. A materialist approach to history includes the factoring in of the uneven development of various modes of production in interaction as well as phases within modes of production. For example, the pre-imperialist and imperialist phases of capitalism are qualitatively different as are also the pre-monopoly and monopoly phases of capitalist production. The study of each social formation must always be fleshed out concretely. The methodological tools of historical materialism are what allow the researcher to do this. This materialist fleshing out of economic structures does not invalidate the general principles of Marxism but tends to demonstrate their epistemic strength. Marx and Engels's theory of social conflict is often presented by its adversaries as an economic strawman. The core of Losurdo's defence of a Marxist, class-centric analysis, consists in showing that this strawman is at best a misunderstanding of the theory, at worst, a purposeful misrepresentation. By placing class struggles at the

heart of his approach, Losurdo hoped to reinvigorate Marxist analysis. This centering on class struggles allows Marxism to do what it does best, analyze the social forces in each situation to orient the social struggles aiming at emancipation from class oppression.

Unfinished Aspects

In *Class Struggle* Losurdo explains that Marx and Engels left unfinished analyses of some forms of class conflict in capitalist societies. These forms are present today and determine our political horizons. According to Losurdo, Marx and Engels perceived, and analyzed, three major forms which are 1) The economic and political struggles of the working class against the capitalists in the industrial metropolises 2) The economic and political struggles of oppressed nations against imperialism and colonization 3) The economic and political struggles of women against exploitation within the capitalist division of labour in the workplace, but also within the context of the patriarchal family. This bourgeois family structure was pushed, through proselytism, onto colonized peoples who had often developed less patriarchal social arrangements that were incompatible with capitalism. What is interesting about Losurdo's explanations is that they demonstrate, using Marxist texts, that this plural vision of the class struggle and its multiple forms was indeed the vision elaborated by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Gramsci, Luxemburg, Trotsky, and Mao. Moreover, Losurdo argues that none of these revolutionary thinkers ever exposed this way of interpreting class-divided societies in an exhaustive manner. There is no equivalent of *Capital* for the study of class conflicts in general, although *Capital* itself is filled with examples of struggles from previous modes of production as well as from capitalism. This partial failure by the Marxist tradition at explaining that class struggle is a sort of genus which takes on multiple forms has facilitated the popularization of irrational interpretations of history. Also, the lack of systematicity in the exposition of key Marxist principles has fuelled reductive currents within Marxism itself, making its use by new generations of social scientists less attractive. The complex effort to dialectically relate the current international division of labour and economic exploitation to specific forms of class struggles is sometimes lacking in contemporary research. For his part, Bertell Ollman criticized readings of Marx that do not appreciate the relational aspect of his theory. According to the subject being explained by Marx the concepts he uses are modified. As Ollman explains: "Class, for

instance, has a vital role in explaining the state, but only a small part in accounting for exchange, and the size of the Relation, class, in Marx's thought (and the meaning of 'class' in Marx's writings) varies accordingly" (Ollman 1996, 21). This difficult aspect to grasp in Marx's writings has led some to view his theory as inconsistent. Yet this flexibility of Marx's approach is the only dialectical way to approximate social reality. The undialectical limitation of some Marxist approaches has led to the reinforcement of non-scientific forms of sociohistorical approaches in the social sciences. For his part, E.P. Thompson also noticed this weakness in some corners of the Marxist tradition and attempted to remind historians that the Marxist paradigm is richer than is generally assumed by its critics. The proof of the scientific superiority of Marxism is often to be found in the Marxist studies themselves. He believes, as does Losurdo, that social class is a historical phenomenon that can take many forms and manifestations: "By class I understand an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events [...] the notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship" (Thompson 2003, 9). Losurdo's project of renewal of Marxism consists not only to return to the classical texts, but to see that at the methodological level, the theory of the forms of class struggle, as specific historical struggles, allows researchers to deepen their understanding of social conflicts.

This return to the classics of Marxism operated by Losurdo allows Marxist researchers to engage in a debate with other paradigms: rational choice theory, Michel Foucault's analyses of power, Carl Schmitt's friend-enemy paradigm, feminist and decolonial theories, and others that occupy an ever-larger portion of research in the social sciences. A better understanding of the limits of other perspectives can only be achieved once the solid foundations of historical materialism are understood. To do so effectively, the centrality of class struggles is the terrain that should be reclaimed by Marxists. Some alternative paradigms which seek to delegitimize Marxism cannot be properly confronted from a weak standpoint. There is a tradition of Marxist theorists that confronted alternatives to Marxism, integrating their stronger points within its own framework. One can mention, for example, Gramsci's confrontation with Benedetto Croce as well as Paul Mattick's critique of John Maynard Keynes (Mattick 1969). Neither of these Marxist thinkers attempted to confront and absorb their adversary without first possessing a firm grasp of their own intellectual tradition. Paradoxically, Losurdo contrasts the reductive reading of Marxism that he calls usual, with the unusual interpretation, his

own, which is more faithful to the letter and spirit of Marx. How, indeed, do adversaries of Marxism explain, for example, the mention of the national liberation of Poland in the *Communist Manifesto* and the frequent references to the colonial situation in Ireland in which the social question takes the form, according to Marx, of a struggle for national liberation. As the exploitation of one nation by another does not necessarily imply the direct struggle of workers against capitalists, Marx's critics believe he is speaking about something outside the purview of his specific theory of class struggles when he approaches such topics. When one can understand that a people's resistance to imperialism is also a form of class struggle in the Marxist perspective, the apparent contradiction evaporates.

Unless one believes that Marx and Engels were confused in their own methodology one must provide a rational explanation for their studies on colonialism, patriarchy, etc., that go beyond the pure capitalist-worker relation. Losurdo notes that while the emancipation of the proletariat directly concerns an economic and political struggle against the capitalist class, the national liberation struggle of a colonized nation concerns a complex conflict involving a multiplicity of class actors (petty bourgeois, proletariat, peasantry, various fractions of the capitalist class, imperialist agents). The mechanism that explains the outcome of the national struggle comes down to the basic rules elaborated in the general theory of social conflict developed by Marx and Engels. Gramsci put it in terms of an analysis of the social forces in contention, the final political result is the product of the struggles that play out historically. He also expressed the activist and partisan aspects of Marxism which wishes to radically change society through struggle:

If one applies one's will to the creation of a new equilibrium among the forces which really exist [...] basing oneself on the particular force which one believes to be progressive and strengthening it to help it to victory – one still moves on the terrain of effective reality. (Gramsci 1992, 172)

In other words, Marxism is both a scientific method and a partisan camp in class struggles. It not only studies the various forms of historical exploitation, but it also tries to promote the social forces that could be able to overthrow them. This does not mean that Marxism possesses an unerring capacity to predict the results of social struggles. Ellen Meiksins Wood explains the revolutionary aspects of Marxism as follows:

Class struggle is the nucleus of Marxism. This is so in two inseparable senses: it is class struggle that for Marxism explains the dynamic of history, and it is the abolition of classes [...] that is the ultimate objective of the revolutionary process. (Wood 1998, 12)

Her standpoint is close to Losurdo's although she does not attempt to identify three social protagonists that have defined the recent history of class struggles. As Marx specified, it is once the dust has settled that the materialist historian can fully analyze the various forces in presence and explain causally why a particular outcome rather than another took place. Yet, as Marxism is also a revolutionary doctrine, it attempts to promote the cause of the classes that are struggling for emancipation. As Losurdo remarks, many critics of Marx have seen in his interest in national liberation and anti-colonial resistances a deviation from his main economic analyses. The international division of labour structured according to a global class hierarchy would, on the contrary, according to Losurdo, be central to Marx's attempt at understanding capitalism: "Far from being of minor relevance from the standpoint of class struggle, the exploitation and oppression that obtain internationally are a precondition, at least methodologically, for understanding social conflict and class struggle at a national level" (Losurdo 2016, 12). A little further on, Losurdo repeats that it would be wrong to understand the class struggle according to Marx as being only focused on the political actions of the proletariat. Marx understood that the changes occurring in advanced capitalist nations were transforming the face of the world and that the struggles of those nations being dragged into capitalism's nets would play a determining role in its overthrow.

The Sacred Circle of the Ruling Classes

If the examples given by Losurdo were not convincing enough, he turns to another text presented at the beginning of the article and which, on the surface, should have been primarily concerned with the economic struggle between proletarian and capitalist. Losurdo analyzes the pamphlet entitled *Wage Labor and Capital*. As he notes, we see that Marx does not hesitate to broaden his horizon and include elements other than the typical mechanism of economic exploitation found in capitalist industry when analyzing various forms of class struggle. He remarks that Marx mentions explicitly, among other things, "present class struggles and national struggles" and concludes that the second element must be sub-

sumed under the general category of class struggle in the generic sense. For Marx there could not exist a pure national struggle which is separate from the objective mechanisms of economic and political class struggles. These national struggles could not be explained by a national spirit or by a presumed racial or psychological factor proposed by other paradigms. According to Losurdo: “The species cannot be understood if it is detached from the genus [...] class struggle is the genus which, in determinate circumstances, takes the specific form of ‘national struggle’” (Losurdo 2016, 14). A more recent example which would have stood out to Marx, is the national liberation struggle of black South Africans against the the apartheid regime led by a minority oligarchy of white capitalists. To want to mechanically separate the struggle against economic exploitation from the national liberation struggle, in this colonial context, would be an undialectical approach that separates the species from the genus. Yet, as Losurdo notes, a liberal historian of imperialism, who always receives a warm reception in the academic world, Niall Ferguson, argues that the twentieth century was not fundamentally determined by class struggles or economic antagonisms. According to Ferguson’s subjectivist view of history and social change, the century developed under the sign of ethno-racial conflicts on a global scale. In other words, Ferguson detaches the external form from the social and economic genus. He operates as if the racism that accompanied capitalist imperialism had little to do with the historical spread of capitalism and the consequent geopolitical division of the world by advanced capitalist states. Nonetheless, Losurdo’s vision is not perfect. An approach to Marxism which could seriously challenge his views should be mentioned here. Siyavez Azeri, in an important article on social classes, presents arguments from the Open Marxism approach and other critical perspectives. This theoretical model presents class struggles in a different manner. The article also highlights the work of creative Soviet Marxist thinkers, notably on the topics of class and class consciousness. Class, in this perspective, is the manifestation of particular social relations: “Class and class struggle emerge simultaneously; they are two forms of appearance of the same essence, that is, capitalist social relations of production” (Azeri 2016, 440). The antagonistic relations of production are what fundamentally define the identities and the development of classes and their struggles in capitalism. Losurdo, who does not make this clear, may be open to the criticism that he conceptualizes human labour and exploitation transhistorically. This potentially weakens his argument.

In a certain sense one can say that Losurdo shares Gramsci's historicism which perhaps downplays certain structural differences between various societies and forms of economy. In the case of capitalist imperialism, Losurdo states that Ferguson not only misrepresents Marxism in general, but also affirms that this historian offers a weak alternative analysis. He adds that Marx was not an amateur historian, unable to understand the differences between social struggles in different material contexts: "The specific difference that characterized the social question and class struggle in the colonies [...] has to be registered. There the international division of labour converted the subject peoples into a mass of serfs or slaves" (Losurdo 2016, 14–15). It is this specific distinction which alters the nature of the class struggles and continues to this day through the exploitative mechanisms of neocolonialism explained by Samir Amin (Amin 1976). And to be as precise as possible, in his interpretation of Marx's general theory, Losurdo returns to the latter's use of the plural to describe class conflict: "The plural is not employed to denote repetition of the identical, the continual recurrence of the same class struggle in the same form. It refers to the multiplicity of shapes and forms that class struggle can assume" (Losurdo 2016, 15). Here, Losurdo might be criticized for being too historicist and insufficiently conceptual. Azeri notes that Marx's economic analysis is simply not descriptive: "Marx's analysis of capitalist relations of production is not historical-descriptive, but conceptual-critical. It aims at explaining the logic of capital and how, once constituted, it metamorphoses all phenomenon preceding it historically into moments of itself" (Azeri 2016, 450). Losurdo does, on occasion, signal the importance of the capitalist division of labour and its specific social relations as the determining factor. He offers something in between the conceptual and the historical-descriptive visions of Marxism, which might very well disappoint both theoretical camps. In any case, his reading of Marx has nothing to please the opponents of Marxism, because it highlights its continued relevance. But Losurdo's understanding of class struggles also causes problems for a very small minority of theoreticians in the anti-racist and feminist camps who affirm that Marxism has little of import to say about contemporary forms of neocolonialism and patriarchy, as these issues are outside what they claim is Marxism's only area of theoretical competence.

For any researcher who is convinced of the correctness of the principles of historical materialism, there is no great difficulty in subsuming the struggles identified by Losurdo as particular historical forms of class

struggle within the context of the hegemonic international division of labour imposed by global capitalism. However, for those who reject the theory of class struggle, Losurdo's affirmations are unacceptable. Opponents of Marxism believed that Marxist analysis of society had been discredited since the fall of the Soviet Union. One of the shortcomings of Losurdo's arguments is that he mostly criticizes alternative currents opposed to historical materialism that can be classified as liberal or conservative. He engages only minimally with more recent currents of critical theory. It is here that more intellectual effort is needed to validate Marxism. Paraphrasing Marx and Engels, Losurdo notes that for them the oppression of women "was the first class oppression" and adds:

Taken as a whole, the capitalist system presents itself as a set of more or less servile relations imposed by one people on another internationally, by one class on another in an individual country, and by men on women within one and the same class. (Losurdo 2016, 16)

For example, one could see all three species of class subjugation at work during the Vietnam War and through the simultaneous social protests of the 1960s in the United States, France, and elsewhere. One could first include the species of the class struggle of the Vietnamese people and the Communist party against American imperialism, but also the anti-war and socialist student movements in the United States which temporarily threatened the hegemony of the capitalist class and its allies. Simultaneously to these two forms of struggle, the women's liberation movement was ramping up in several countries, and the radical movement of the large exploited black population in the United States also became very militant at that time. The appearance of an open struggle against racial oppression materialized itself in the form of militant political organizations such as the Black Panther Party and in the civil rights movement at large. All these struggles were, in Losurdo's view, manifestations or forms of the class resistance against the capitalist organization of social relations on the international, national, and domestic levels. They mobilized social classes and subgroups within classes in what one could even term a revolutionary cycle of subaltern forces. Losurdo's main hope for the future was to show that the Marxist tradition still possesses conceptual tools that allow for a relevant reading of complex historical developments. Losurdo takes inspiration from Antonio Gramsci, with his notions of war of position and war of movement and from Mao Tse-Tung and his

distinction between the principal and secondary contradictions, for innovative theoretical elements that can enriched Marxism.

Indeed, Gramsci asserted that the preference of subaltern groups for a war of movement or for a war of position depended on the specific kind of hegemony exercised by the dominant class, the power of its state and the trenches it built in civil society. By trenches Gramsci meant the types of cultural and educational systems that are laid in place to promote the legitimacy of the capitalist social order in each country. For his part, Losurdo argues, for example, that in the context of the Japanese invasion of China in the twentieth century, Mao was correct to assert that the priority class struggle was the struggle of all social groups against imperialism and for the national liberation of China. This meant a collaboration between workers and peasants against foreign invaders and national elites: "At such a time, the contradiction between imperialism and the country concerned becomes the principal contradiction, while all the contradictions among the various classes in the country [...] are temporarily relegated to a secondary and subordinate position" (Mao 2007, 87). Once national independence was achieved and the foreign imperialist forces defeated, other contradictions and priorities would take priority such as building a socialist economy and ensuring the hegemony of the working class in China. Losurdo may be giving power to certain movements while forgetting the most powerful subject in capitalism, capital itself:

Subject-ness of capital is the consequence of the constitution of the specifically capitalist relations of production based on bourgeois private property (separation of the immediate producers from the means of production) that amounts to the separation of the head to the hand. (Azeri 2016, 451)

One cannot put aside the fact that none of the political movements mentioned by Losurdo managed to completely abolish capitalist social relations of production.

For Losurdo the different revolutionary thinkers he mentions are not heretics deforming the pristine theory of Marx. Rather, they were trying to apply it according to a reading of their specific historic context. The specific social configurations within a wider capitalist world order make some options for emancipation more plausible than others. An understanding of the class forces involved informed Gramsci on how to proceed with no guarantees of success. This is a principle observed by Trotsky who remarked that opposing classes may utilize similar means: "the evolution of humanity exhausts itself neither by universal suffrage, nor by

"blood and honor," [...] The historical process signifies primarily the class struggle; moreover, different classes in the name of different aims may in certain instances utilize similar means" (Trotsky 1973, 14). Marxists and subaltern class movements can adopt a variety of strategies and tactics according to the concrete situation. Obviously, Trotsky never stated that he could not be mistaken in his evaluations, he simply affirmed that he based his judgments on a Marxist reading of events informed by the class struggle. Losurdo agrees with this understanding of history and highlights the contributions of different revolutionaries. The simple attempt to show the richness of this intellectual tradition opens itself to criticism. Different Marxist camps: Leninist, Trotskyite, Maoist, could claim that Losurdo neglects a particular thinker, party, or movement. Beyond this critique, academic proponents of the political Marxism school such as Wood, might criticize him for his less-than-optimal understanding of the origins of capitalism (Wood 2002). Similarly, the Neue Marx-Lektüre school, with thinkers such as Michael Heinrich, could criticize Losurdo for his marginal interest in the Marxist theory of value and for his overstatement of the importance class struggles (Heinrich 2012, 191–192). The Open Marxism approach could reproach him his lack of a sufficiently abstract conceptualization of capitalism. Despite his differences with various schools of thought Losurdo would mostly agree with Azeri's statement about the political nature of class relations and class politics: "Politics is the form of existence of class relations, exertion of power, domination, resistance, and struggle in capitalist society [...] Class is a conceptual constitution: it is the conceptualization of political horizon that participates in class struggle" (Azeri 2016, 456). Gramsci expressed this idea differently when he wrote: "the general notion of State includes elements which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society in the sense that one might say that State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion" (Gramsci 1992, 263). Class, State and Capital are all intertwined in the economic tendencies and relations which constitute capitalism.

Most disagreements among Marxists can be debated within a somewhat common theoretical framework. The case is different when debating those who attempt to disqualify Marxism as a scientific approach to history. In *Class Struggle*, Losurdo remarks, for example, that Hannah Arendt finds the mechanism of the class conflict to be a kind of collective nightmare and that those militants and organic intellectuals who promote it, often lead subordinate groups of society to their ruin. It is, in her assess-

ment, largely an aggressive doctrine of social catastrophism and is politically dangerous for humanity. It is better, according to Arendt, to wish for a partial escape from extreme poverty for the exploited masses through the gradual development of technology, mass production, and science. It would thus be necessary, in her perspective, to exorcise the class struggle from society and from popular consciousness (Losurdo 2016, 269). Habermas, for his part, according to Losurdo's understanding of his social philosophy, affirms that if the mechanism of class struggle perhaps made some sense in Marx's time, the post Second World War period would be characterized mainly by a pacification of social struggles based on class. According to Losurdo, even when inequalities begin to grow again and the figure of the working poor re-emerges globally in the North and South, as well as that of the lumpenproletariat, Habermas, would still attempt to repress at all costs the return of an intensified class struggle in the Marxist sense (Losurdo 2016, 275–276). Yet, for Losurdo, the greatest danger for Marxism would not come from either of these two revisionist perspectives but from a populist-religious current characterized by the return of a moralizing, almost theological, understanding of Marx. The great ideological representative of this populist and moralistic-religious tendency in the twentieth century was best articulated by Simone Weil. In Losurdo's view, Weil did not understand how Marx explained that class struggles manifested themselves in several political forms. The only authentic class struggle, according to Weil's ideological reading of Marx and Marxism, would be that of the poor and the wretched of the earth against a powerful oligarchy of capitalists. All those who would attempt to nuance this tragic vision of history would be viewed as opportunist and Machiavellian politicians seeking power. In this populist worldview of emancipation, the Marxist analysis of the complexity of the struggles is replaced by a binary and moralistic vision of social struggles (Losurdo 2016, 310–311).

Regarding Losurdo's book *Liberalism*, he notes that liberalism, in the broadest sense of the term, despite its claims of universalism, has tended to create marked distinctions between the elitist circle, hailing from imperialist countries, and the various subaltern groups that are part of a profane world of exploitation: the working classes, the colonized or recently decolonized peoples, and women. The great strength of liberalism, according to Losurdo, has been to allow a small fraction of these subaltern groups to partially enter the periphery of the inner circle of the privileged classes. This ideological current sometimes even goes so far as to

legitimize certain struggles for recognition by oppressed groups to better corrupt their leadership and submit them to capitalism's global hegemony. According to Losurdo, for Marx and most Marxists, the class struggle is almost always and profoundly an ethico-political struggle for recognition and respect. Whether it is the struggle of the working class to be recognized as something more than a source of surplus value, the struggle of colonized peoples for recognition as free, independent, and equal human beings, or the global struggle of women for the same type of respect and dignity, Losurdo affirms that these struggles go beyond economics and the exploitation of labour power. He thus joins Gramsci, Dunayevskaya, Fanon, and other revolutionaries who refused to reduce Marxism to an economistic doctrine. Losurdo recognizes the importance of the ethical-political issues that are an integral part of the class struggle. This is a strong point in favor of his interpretation of history.

As indicated at the beginning of the article, there exist contemporary thinkers influenced by economistic readings of history who have reduced the explanatory value of the class struggle. But there are also some intellectuals who fall into more grave errors. What unites all these reductive critiques of Marxism is that they tend to naturalize social conflict and attribute it to the defective natures of exploited groups living under capitalist constraints. Instead of recognizing the social struggles of oppressed groups as manifestations of the class struggle in a generic sense, they attempt to justify the status quo by essentializing the groups who revolt against the capitalist order. They sometimes end up defending what Losurdo called "a master race democracy." This reactionary tendency within liberalism is a continuation of a long-standing intellectual tradition. For this elitist worldview, workers and the poor in capitalist metropolises should never have been given full political rights. Freedom is useful only for the rational and bourgeois man living in imperialist nations. It should therefore not be accorded to women, especially not to those who do not enjoy a certain level of economic prosperity and supposed racial purity. Full human rights and the respect of basic rules concerning war are applicable only between bourgeois nations and among so-called civilized peoples, not in the colonies. These arguments held sway for long periods in many developed capitalist nations. This elitist vision naturalized the difference between those living within the sacred space and those subaltern groups living outside it. As Losurdo explains: "But the metropolis/colonies opposition, with its tendential exclusion of the latter from the sacred space of civilization and liberty, was bound to pro-

voke a reaction” (Losurdo 2011, 49). Losurdo reiterates that not only is every class struggle a political struggle, it is almost always also a struggle for recognition and dignity. Disparaging remarks about subaltern groups, to different degrees, and concerning their specific forms of class struggle, can be found in the works of Tocqueville, Le Bon, Mill, Spencer, Gobineau and Nietzsche. Beyond their different ideological allegiances, they each promoted, in one way or another, a similar elitist vision of the world. Historically, liberals, conservatives and even reactionaries get along better than is believed. Losurdo demonstrates this with references to numerous texts by the most important thinkers of these currents. Against this shared elitist vision of freedom and rights for a minority of masters of the world, Losurdo opposes a radically democratic political tradition that has its origins in republican texts and discourses produced since at least the Enlightenment and the French revolution. It has also been expressed in the praxis of emancipatory movements, notably during the famous San Domingo-Haiti revolution which ended slavery in that nation. C.L.R. James reminds us that a common trait of ruling classes is their incapacity to understand the motivations of subaltern groups. For the elites, these groups are inherently inferior and incapable of initiative: “The slaves had revolted because they wanted to be free. But no ruling class ever admits such things. The white cockades accused the Patriots and the Friends of the Negro of stirring up the revolt, while the red cockades accused the royalists” (James 1989, 95). According to Losurdo, Marx, Engels, and their followers would be the heirs of this radical political tendency. Going politically further than the Enlightenment project ever did, Marxism developed a coherent theory of social conflict that did not rest on any form of naturalism which eternalizes the unequal division of labour typical of capitalism. Losurdo’s political hope was to have these diverse struggles recognized as authentic forms of class struggle. Only by dialectically relating them together as a totalizing movement can a comprehensive portrait of the forms of resistance to capitalism emerge.

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