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Reconsidering the gravedigger thesis

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Was Marx wrong about the working class? Reconsidering the gravedigger thesis

Matt Vidal

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels sketched what has come to be known as the gravedigger thesis, widely believed to propose that the objective conditions of capitalism would inevitably produce a revolutionary working class, which would overthrow capitalism. It is also widely believed that history has proven this thesis – and therefore Marx's theory of history – wrong.

As Hal Draper noted, “There are few writers or thinkers in history whose every word and grunt has been examined by hostile critics so minutely as Marx's has.” Curiously, however, that Marx articulated a gravedigger thesis which was not only wrong but a fundamental element of his theories of history and capitalism is a position propounded by Marx-influenced scholars and even some Marxists. This position has been particularly influential within labour process theory.

Harry Braverman’s path-breaking *Labour and Monopoly Capital* reoriented the sociology of work around the deskilling of labour, just as mainstream organisation theory was on the rise and sociology was losing sight of industrial conflict. In Braverman’s wake, there was extensive theoretical debate and development within the emerging labour process tradition – including some scholars who contrasted Braverman’s thesis of a universal and inexorable process of deskilling with a reading of Marx emphasising capitalist development as a contradictory process, including a tension between deskilling and the need to harness and develop the productive power of labour.

In this debate, some influential scholars attempted to divorce labour process theory from the bugbear of “orthodox Marxism.” Thus, Paul Edwards felt obliged to write an appendix in his *Conflict at Work* instructing the reader what “needs to” be included in a theory for it to be Marxist, asserting “there must be some claim that there is an inherent tendency for the working class to identify and struggle for specific class interests, in particular, the overthrow of capitalism.”

Edwards articulated a tortured argument that his “materialist” theory of the labour process was “opposed to any proper Marxism” because it rejected the gravedigger thesis, even though his theory deployed a suite of Marxist concepts including modes of production, forces and relations of production, capitalist exploitation, the circuit of capital, use-value, exchange-value, surplus value, the law of value, falling profit rates, overproduction and contradiction!

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2 Draper, 1978, Forward, paragraph 5.
4 Elger, 1979; Cressey and MacInnes, 1980.
5 Edwards, 1986, pp 58, 94.
Similarly, Paul Thompson articulated what he called the "core theory" of the labour process, consisting of four propositions: (1) the capital–labour relation is a privileged focus of analysis; (2) the capital–labour relation is inherently antagonistic, although the labour process is relatively autonomous from and may operate independently of broader class relations; (3) competition compels transformations in the labour process; thus (4) managers have a control imperative, although there are a range of control strategies, including but not limited to deskilling.\(^6\)

While Thompson acknowledged that the "core theory draws heavily on Marxist categories", he argued "it is not in my view Marxist" because it severs labour process theory from the thesis that "the proletariat would be compelled to challenge and transform class society by virtue of its objective location in the system of production." Fourteen years later, Thompson was still reprising the refrain.\(^7\)

Others, working within the Marxist tradition, assert that Marx made fundamental mistakes in his analysis of the working class. Thus, Michael Burawoy claimed – incorrectly – that "Marx's analysis of the labour process in general [rests] on the assumption that the expenditure of effort is decided by coercion."\(^8\) Further, Marx "had no place in his theory of the labour process for the organisation of consent, for the necessity or willingness to cooperate in the translation of labour power into labour." These claims were made despite the fact that Chapter 1 of *Capital*, Volume I presents Marx's theory of the fetishism of commodities. Capitalist social relations mystify the true source of profit by presenting the relations between people as relations between things. Rather than seeing their own labour as the source of profit, workers see commodities as having intrinsic value. The market – as both exchange relations and the ideology legitimating them – obscures the exploitation of labour by capital. This theory constitutes an explicit argument about how capitalism generates consent.

Further, in Chapter 13 of *Capital*, I, entitled "Co-operation," Marx wrote of how "mere social contact begets in most industries a rivalry and a stimulation of the 'animal spirits,' which heightens the efficiency of each individual worker."\(^9\) This comment needs to be understood in terms of Marx's theory of human nature, which holds that humans are inherently creative and realise their full potential through work; they become alienated under the detail division of labour but they still have a creative drive to do high-quality work.

Most directly relevant to the gravedigger thesis, Burawoy asserted "Marx claimed that there were tendencies immanent in capitalism that would reveal to workers the movement behind appearances," namely increasing interdependence, the homogenisation of work and class struggle.\(^10\) Burawoy did not present any textual support – not even a single citation – for his attribution of these immanent tendencies to Marx. Rather, he simply concluded that

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\(^6\) Thompson, 1990, pp 102, 115.
\(^7\) Thompson, 2004.
\(^8\) Burawoy, 1982, pp 27, 29.
“History has shown that Marx’s prognosis was inadequate.” Developing a trick later honed into a fine art by the “analytical Marxist” Jon Elster, Burawoy motivated his analysis by starting with what Marx got wrong in order to valiantly ride in to rescue the latter from his own muddled thinking.

But what does the gravedigger thesis actually express and how central is it to "proper Marxism"?

The gravedigger thesis was published in the *Communist Manifesto*, a political pamphlet whose first edition was just 23 pages long. The thesis is articulated in a section of the Manifesto called "Bourgeois and Proletarians," which presents a sketch of historical materialism beginning with ancient Rome and running through the 19th century in ten pages!

It is often forgotten that Marx and Engels spent a considerable portion of this pithy sketch praising the historically progressive character of capitalism:

Modern industry has established the world-market ... This market has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land. ... The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. ... National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible ... The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation. ... It has created enormous cities ... and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life. 11

Of course, Marx and Engels also vigorously condemned the capitalist exploitation of labour, the despotic character of capitalist management and the degrading nature of the detail division of labour. But their entire discussion of the capitalist labour process, of the fettering of the forces of production by the relations of production, and the impending, "inevitable" capitalist revolution is articulated over just six pages. What, specifically, do they argue?

The growth of technology ("the forces of production") threatens capitalist class relations ("relations of production") because crises of overproduction expose the irrationality of the system and hence threaten its legitimacy. In the recurring crises of capitalism, “a great part not only of the existing products, but also of the previously created productive forces, are periodically destroyed. In these crises, there breaks out an epidemic that, in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity – the epidemic of over-production.”

In other words, capitalist class relations restrain the further growth of the productive forces because increasingly bad crises of overproduction – overinvestment in productive capacity and production of more goods than there is demand for, due to the anarchy of

11 All quotes in this section come from Marx and Engels, [1848] 1978, pp 475-84.
market competition – lead to the destruction of wealth and physical capital. "The conditions of bourgeois society," Marx and Engels observed, "are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them." Capitalism cannot fully utilise the productive capacity it creates.

Meantime, deskilling under the detail division of labour and mechanisation, along with the despotic nature of capitalist management, degrades the worker, robbing her of autonomy: “Owing to the extensive use of machinery, and to the division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. ... As privates of the industrial army they are placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants.”

The detailed division of labour, along with the centralisation of the means of production into the hands of a small number of capitalists, leads to the homogenisation of working conditions:

But with the development of industry, the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalised, in proportion as machinery obliterates all distinctions of labour, and nearly everywhere reduces wages to the same low level.

Following from this, workers begin to organise trade unions. It should be noted that such equalisation of working conditions via deskilling and mechanisation was the dominant tendency in the labour market of Marx and Engels' time. The Trade Unions Congress was established twenty years after the Manifesto, in 1868, and the 1870s witnessed the development of a mass labour movement and intensified industrial struggle between capital and labour. Eighty years after the Manifesto was published, the Austin Longbridge factory in England employed over 20,000 workers and the Ford River Rouge complex in America employed 100,000 workers. Today, 150 years after the Manifesto, the Volkswagen Wolfsburg plant has over 73,000 workers.

Another little-noted aspect of their thesis that the working class might become capitalism's gravediggers is because the contradictory development of capitalism includes an increasing education levels for the working class alongside degrading or boring work: “The bourgeoisie itself ... supplies the proletariat with its own elements of political and general education.”

In the final three pages of the section, Marx described the development of a revolutionary situation:

The bourgeoisie finds itself involved in a constant battle. At first with the aristocracy; later on, with those portions of the bourgeoisie itself, whose interests have become antagonistic to the progress of industry; at all time with the bourgeoisie of foreign countries. ... entire sections of the ruling class are, by the
advance of industry, precipitated into the proletariat ... These also supply the proletariat with fresh elements of enlightenment and progress.

Ultimately, “the more or less veiled civil war ... breaks out into open revolution, and ... the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat.” The section concludes: “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”

Whew! What a whirlwind tour through centuries of history. Such vibrant language and urgent writing. The working-class reader is surely ready to take up arms against the bourgeoisie. But Marx just told us our victory is inevitable! Do we even need to do anything?

The pamphlet goes on. We read about the Communists and how they must work with the working-class parties toward the same goal: “formation of the proletariat into a class.” In other words, there is organising to be done! Class consciousness does not automatically, mechanically follow from the homogenisation of working conditions.

We read about the platform of the Communists, laid out in great detail in order to persuade the working class to join the movement. Finally, the pamphlet famously concludes by urging: “WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!”

**Politics and science**

Although the Manifesto does use the term “inevitable” with regard to the gravedigger thesis, it must immediately be noted that it is a political pamphlet whose express purpose was to educate and organise the working class! It’s very existence assumes that the development of revolutionary class consciousness is not inevitable; if it were, there would be no need for a political manifesto aimed at organising. It presents a sketch of history aiming to show that capitalist economic relations generate class struggle, "lay the foundation" for a united working class and make possible the revolutionary transformation of capitalism into socialism.

The gravedigger thesis was never a scientific prediction based on a fully elaborated theoretical analysis. As Serge Mallet noted, in the Manifesto and Capital, “Marx elaborated the philosophical concept of the proletariat as the universal agent of history.” But in his journalistic writings, including The Eighteenth Brumaire and The Class Struggles in France, Marx was deeply attuned to the fragmentation of classes and the complex set of political and ideological processes needed for structurally based classes to develop into class-conscious social movements. And while Marx emphasised “two great classes” in both the Manifesto and Capital, in the latter, as I show below, his mature analysis emphasised the obstacles to the formation of a united, class-conscious proletariat, including the

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mystification of class relations by the dominant ideology, the material dependence on a wage, and rising living standards.  

The gravedigger thesis is almost completely absent from Marx’s mature scientific writings. In the three volumes of Capital, comprising over 2,000 pages of text, Marx discussed it only in a three-page section of Volume 1, reprising the sketch advanced over six pages in the Manifesto. 

By contrast to the six pages Marx spent on the gravedigger thesis in the Manifesto, in Capital literally hundreds of pages are spent on each of the following topics: the commodity form and value, money, the labour process and the production of surplus-value, the division of labour, mechanisation, wages, capitalist accumulation, the circuits of capital, the turnover of capital, accumulation and reproduction, the production of profit, the equalisation of profit rates, the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, the forms of capital, rent and revenue.

Class structure

I have argued that Marx did not consistently argue or systematically theorise that capitalism would automatically produce a working class with revolutionary class consciousness. His statement that “the victory of the proletariat” is “inevitable” was a rhetorical flourish intended to bolster the spirits of the working class. In contrast, more fundamental to Marx’s class analysis of capitalism are a deeply held political-philosophical position and at least two scientifically falsifiable claims.

As briefly noted above, the political philosophical position underpinning Marx’s analysis of the working class is that the working class is the only class in history whose interests represent the universal interest. The early socialists, Draper explained, took pity on the working class, seeing it as suffering, incapable of self-organisation and in need of philanthropic help. While the young Marx also saw the proletariat as victim, he came to reject this argument, proposing instead that the people were capable of helping themselves. What is more, they saw the working class, in Draper’s terms, as “an embodiment of humanity’s interests.”

While the bourgeois revolution concentrated power in the hands of a minority class, the proletarian revolution would transfer power to a class representing the majority. Further, all previous revolutions have substituted one form of private property for another. By contrast, if the working class could seize power, Marx and Engels thought, it would abolish class society as such. In Marx’s terms, “the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation—and it contains this, because the whole of human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production.”

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15 For the three pages in Capital, see Marx, [1867] 1990, p 927-30.
Calling the proletariat the revolutionary class, capitalism's gravedigger, was, as Draper observed, “not a description of current events” but rather a designation of the proletariat as “a class with the historical potential of making a revolution.”

Second, Marx proposed that capitalism is based in an objectively determined class structure consisting of a small capitalist class and a large working class encompassing the vast majority of the population. Rather than seeing a universal process of deskilling resulting in a homogeneous, unskilled working class, Marx argued that capitalism would require a complex division of labour including unskilled workers, skilled workers and a hierarchy of managers to coordinate it all.

Even under the detail division of labour, there will remain “a hierarchy of labour-powers, to which there corresponds a scale of wages. ... Alongside of the gradations of the hierarchy, there appears the simple separation of the workers into skilled and unskilled.” The capitalist implementation of the detail division of labour would simplify the complex functions of skilled labour but not completely eliminate it. Further, the detail division of labour would require a complex managerial hierarchy: “An industrial army of workers under the command of a capitalist requires, like a real army, officers (managers) and NCOs (foremen, overseers), who command during the labour process in the name of capital.”

In a contemporary study of the class structure of six advanced capitalist economies – the US, Canada, UK, Sweden, Norway and Japan – Erik Olin Wright found that across all six countries, “the capitalist class, defined as self-employed people who employ ten or more employees, comprises no more than about 2% of the labour force.”

To measure the internal differentiation of those in wage or salary employment, Wright developed a model of the class structure distinguishing nine fragments based on skill level (expert, skilled, nonskilled) and authority (manager, supervisor, no authority), as indicated in Figure 1.

The category of expert managers includes members of the top one percent such as investment bankers, corporate lawyers, hedge-fund, private-equity managers and corporate executives. More broadly, the entire category of experts (occupations that require advanced degrees) and managers are the salariat, salaried workers with high incomes and dense organic ties with the capitalist class proper (owners of the means of production), including the sharing of authority over wage workers and/or involvement in organisational policy making, and a deep financial stake in the capitalist system. As such, the salariat of experts and managers should be distinguished from the working class.

Figure 1. Class structure

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The remaining class fragments consist of workers on hourly wages: nonskilled workers, skilled workers with no authority, nonskilled supervisors and skilled supervisors. Given that the latter two categories (nonskilled and skilled supervisors) are likely to have been promoted from the former two positions (nonskilled and skilled workers), these four sets of locations have an organic labour market relation. As such, I define these four locations as the working class.

Based on the foregoing definition, the working class as a percentage of the total labour force (including capitalists, small employers and self-employed) is 76 percent in Sweden, 71 percent in the UK, 67 percent in the US, and 66 percent in Canada and Norway. Japan was an outlier in this study, having fully 23 percent of its population in self-employment, with 1.6 percent in the capitalist class and 53 percent in the working class.

In terms of stock ownership, the top 10 percent of American households own a staggering 84 percent of all stocks, including pension plans, 401(k)s and mutual funds. Only 23 percent of households own stock in the form of direct corporate shares, financial securities or mutual funds. This 23% of households is consistent with the Wright data indicating that roughly 25-35 percent of workers who are in the salariat.

Just 52% of American households own some form of pension. Considering all stocks, both direct ownership of shares and indirect ownership through mutual funds and retirement accounts, just 40% of households have more than $5,000 invested. In other words, fully 60% of American households have less than $5,000 invested in the stock market in any form, with the vast majority having zero ownership stake. Again, this is consistent with the definition of the working class consisting of between 65-75% of the total labor force, according to the Wright data. The vast majority of the population are wage workers with no ownership stake in the capitalist economy in any form.

Marx’s prediction that capitalism would generate an expanding working class, constituting the majority of the population and having no ownership stake in the means of production, has been borne out. However, it remains internally differentiated and this is the central issue for class analysis and class politics. While the organic labour market relation between supervisors, skilled workers and unskilled workers is likely to generate a close subjective class affinity, there is likely a substantial subjective class distance between this group and the salariat. The question of cross-class alliances is key here, and Draper shows that in their letters to each other and various additional parties, Marx and Engels were deeply concerned with these questions of differentiation and alliance.23

Finally, a central developmental dynamic of capitalism that Marx elaborated in detail in *Capital* is the concentration and centralisation of capital. Specifically, he argued that there would be increasing the concentration of capital into the hands of a small number of capitalists and firms, and centralisation of capital in the form of ever bigger enterprises. Both predictions ring true today.

On concentration of wealth, in 2016 the top one percent of the US population held 40 percent of total net wealth, while the bottom 80 percent held just 10 percent.24 Combining this with Wright’s class structure analysis suggests that the top 1 percent is a combination of capitalists and expert managers. The next 20 percent by wealth consists of the remaining capitalists and firms, and centralisation of capital in the form of ever bigger enterprises. The bottom 80 percent by wealth consists of the bottom third of the salariat and the entire working class (wage workers and supervisors). The fact that the bottom 80 percent has such a meagre proportion of total wealth reflects in part wage stagnation. In the US, from 1969–2008, wages for high school educated males aged 25–44 and college educated males aged 25–34 declined in real terms.25

On centralisation, in the contemporary economy mega-corporations employ hundreds of thousands of workers (McDonalds, Amazon, Tesco), sometimes over a million (Walmart, Foxconn), in identical working conditions. In the US, the 25 largest employers each employ over 166,000 workers, with each of the top nine employing over 300,000 workers. While there has been substantial growth in and differentiation of high-skilled occupations, 35 percent of the US labour force is in a low-autonomy job, such as a machine operator, clerk, nursing aid or cook, with another 27 percent in semi-autonomous jobs such as sales person, sales supervisor, secretary or primary school teacher. Just 38 percent of workers are in high-skill, autonomous jobs.26 These data too are consistent with the roughly 25-35 percent of workers who are in the salariat according to the Wright data.

In sum, the march of history has demonstrated that Marx’s analysis of the class structure of capitalism was remarkably accurate. Over a century after *Capital Vol 1* was published, its

26 Vidal, 2013.
analysis of class structure and the organisation of capital remains valid: Ownership and wealth are obscenely concentrated, the economy is dominated by giant mega-corporations, and the vast majority of the population are wage workers, most of whom have zero ownership stake in stocks and limited skills and autonomy at work. What, then, did Marx see as the relation between such objective conditions and the development of class consciousness?

Class consciousness

Marx's writings on class are fragmentary, but he consistently argued that it is only through active struggle that working-class consciousness spreads. In The German Ideology, Marx and Engels wrote that “Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution.” In other words, it is only in the struggle itself that the mass spread of revolutionary class consciousness will develop.

Similarly, as argued in The Poverty of Philosophy, common interests are not sufficient for the development of class consciousness:

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself.

And again, in The Eighteenth Brumaire Marx wrote that “interconnection” and “identity of interests” are insufficient to ensure the development of a class-for-itself: “In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organisation among them, they do not form a class.”

The foregoing comments suggest that Marx saw the development of class consciousness as contingent, requiring not simply common material conditions but political agitating and organising. A balanced reading of Marx, shows that his analysis was anything but a mechanical analysis in which the development of a revolutionary working class would inevitably be produced by the intensifying contradictions of capitalism.

On the one hand, as we have seen, Marx’s brief comments on class consciousness suggest a contingent view of the outcome of class struggle. On the other hand, his extended discussions of capitalism emphasised the obstacles to the development of revolutionary working-class consciousness.

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In *Capital, I*, Marx emphasised how a combination of dominant ideology reproduced outside of capitalist production along with the material dependence on a wage worked to *obstruct* the realisation of working class consciousness:

> The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws. ... In the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the “natural laws of production”, i.e. it is possible to rely on his dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them.”

Marx’s theory of the fetishism of commodities held that capitalist institutions mystify the operation of the market economy and the true source of profit (the labour of workers).

Marx also argued that capitalism increases living standards for the majority of the population (while increasing inequality and creating a growing class of paupers and labourers with intermittent, insecure work). His theory of relative surplus value elaborated how productivity improvements in the consumer goods sectors lead to a fall in the value of labour power, by cheapening the means of subsistence and hence shortening necessary labour-time and increasing surplus labour-time. Thus, even if real wages remain stagnant, the continuous cheapening of consumer goods means that workers can afford more goods over time.

Further, Marx noted that societal norms of what is considered a minimal standard of living increase over time: “the determination of the value of labour-power contains a historical and moral element.” Thus, wages must “be sufficient to maintain [the worker] in his normal state as a working individual,” including “so-called socially necessary needs” that “are themselves products of history, and depend therefore to a great extent on the level of civilisation attained by a country.”

These insights of Marx on consciousness and its relation to material social relations provided the foundation for the most compelling theories of ideology in the 20th century, including the hugely influential work of Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser.

For Gramsci, hegemony refers to the political and moral leadership by which the capitalist class incorporates the working class into society. Hegemonic ideologies present the interests of the ruling class as the universal interests of society. The power of Gramsci’s analysis, however, comes from argument that effective hegemonic ideologies must be rooted in material forms of class compromise, including relatively high wages, democratic election of political leaders and other forms of integration into the system.

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For Althusser, ideology forms subjectivity in two senses: by providing meaning systems that constitute individuals as subjects, and by ensuring such individuals are subjects of a particular social order (e.g. “subject of the king”). As Göran Therborn elaborated, subjects are formed through the ideological constitution of capacities and desires, means and hence ends; they are thus qualified to become particular types of subjects. In subjectifying individuals, dominant ideologies present many layers of defence of capitalism: denying that capitalist exploitation exists; barring that, proposing that it is just; barring that, maintaining that it is the only system possible.

**Conclusion**

Did Marx and Engels expect the revolution to have begun during their lifetime? They certainly dedicated their lives organising to that end. In any case, the failure of the workers’ revolution does not constitute evidence against the core theses Marx articulated regarding history and capitalism. Nor does the growth of a professional salariat to 25-35 percent of the overall labour force. Neither development would have surprised Marx or Engels.

On revolution, I have shown that Marx consistently argued that the institutions of society present capitalism as natural and inevitable, that workers are dependent on wages for a living and that under capitalism living standards increase, even for the working class (but at a much slower rate than productivity growth and the accumulation of capital). Marx also consistently argued that only active class struggle – that is, an active labour movement and party organisation – can change worker consciousness; absent such, the structural commonality of working class jobs will be insufficient to ensure the development of revolutionary working-class consciousness.

Draper showed that in various letters in the 1860s, Marx was keenly concerned with “bourgeois infection,” division and competition within the working class. Indeed, while the *Manifesto* discussed how “Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps,” in an 1870 letter, Marx wrote that “England now possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians.” Marx was all too aware of the severe obstacles to the development of a united, revolutionary working class.

On occupational differentiation, Marx did not systematically and consistently argue that capitalism would produce a homogeneous class of unskilled workers. Although he may have done so in his youthful writings or his political pamphleteering, in *Capital*, his magnum opus, he was much more nuanced. While he clearly – and correctly – saw a powerful tendency toward deskilling within the early stages of capitalism, he also argued that skilled labour could not be entirely eliminated and that a complex division of labour requires layers of managerial hierarchy.

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More broadly, Marx saw capitalist development as a contradictory process developing through stages. Technical change would generate pressures for upskilling of labour, which would butt against the specifically capitalist division of labour: “Modern industry never views or treats the existing form of a production process as the definitive one. Its technical basis is therefore revolutionary .... large-scale industry, through its very catastrophes, makes the recognition of variation of labour and hence of the fitness of the worker for the maximum number of different kinds of labour into a question of life and death.”

What, then, of the gravedigger thesis? I have argued the thesis that capitalism would automatically and inevitably generate a united, revolutionary working class was not articulated by Marx in any detail beyond a couple of sentences in a political pamphlet and was not a fundamental part of his theories of history or capitalism. In fact, such a mechanistic thesis was inconsistent with the broader thrust of his historical analyses and his mature, in-depth analysis of capitalism. The two sentences in the Manifesto on the bourgeoisie’s production of its own gravediggers and the latter’s inevitable victory are best understood as a breathless entreaty to the working class, based in a firm belief that due to the material conditions created by capitalism the working class is historically unique in having the potential to be the revolutionary class representing the interests of the majority.

What Marx argued more systematically is that the concentration and centralisation of capital would increase, centralisation via giant oligopolies would place hundreds of thousands of workers into similar working conditions, and class struggle and periodic crises would be ongoing. These predictions have been validated by history.

Marx also argued that the forces of production would be increasingly fettered by the relations of production and that this would intensify class conflict. Certainly class conflict has been intensified since the crisis of fordism in the 1970s and the 2008 financial crisis, with the mainstream of economics and politics now agreeing that the continuous increase in inequality over the last four decades has become indefensible and unsustainable.

Have we reached the point where the working class has had enough and is beginning to forge alliances with the salariat against capital? These questions remain open, but one thing is for sure. Socialists need to start where Marx and Engels did with the Communist Manifesto – by actively educating and organising the working class and its allies!

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