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The working class and the middle classes: Allies or foes?

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1. Classes in Marx's Critique of Political Economy

I will start with some theoretical remarks on the notion of social classes in Marx's analytical framework.

The notion social class attains a clear theoretical content in the works of the classical political economists, who defined classes on the basis of the specific income-form that each category of people (: class) obtains.

“The produce of the earth [...] is divided among three classes of the community, namely, the proprietor of the land, the owner of the stock or capital for its cultivation, and the labourers by whose industry it is cultivated” (Ricardo, 1992: 3).

This approach, when combined with the classical labor value theory, may lead to a theory of class exploitation of the laboring class by the owner classes.

As Adam Smith writes:

“As soon as land becomes private property, the landlord demands a share of almost all the produce which the laborer can either raise, or collect from it.

His rent makes *the first deduction from the produce of the labor* which is employed upon land. [...] Profit, makes a *second deduction from the produce of the labor* which is employed upon land” (Smith 1981: I.viii.6 and 7, emphasis added).

Marx adopts the approach of classical political economy concerning classes only as a point of departure for the formulation of his own class-theory. His theory, especially what he described as Critique of Political Economy, constitutes a major theoretical rupture in the history of the social sciences that opened up a radically new theoretical field.

Marx’s notion of classes implies a theory of *class power* within *class struggle*.

As Marx and Engels wrote in 1879, addressing the leadership of the German Social-Democratic Party, “For nearly 40 years we have raised to prominence the idea of the class struggle as the immediate driving force of history” (Marx-Engels 1989, MECW Vol. 24: 269).

The classes are defined exclusively on the field of class struggle. They do not pre-exist class struggle, and consequently, as Étienne Balibar writes, “they cannot be defined separately one from the other, but only through the social relations of an antagonism, which brings the one class in confrontation with the other” (Balibar 1986: 620).

Class practices, which always develop within the framework of a system of class power and domination, have an objective dimension, independently of whether or not there is the capacity (in each circumstance) to acquire consciousness of their common social interests, especially of those who are part of classes that are oppressed and subject to exploitation. In fact, a crucial element of class power is its capacity to avert the realization of common class interests by those who belong to classes that are being dominated and are sustaining economic exploitation.

According to Marx, if we seek the deeper structural elements of class relations, we will conclude that there are certain characteristic modes of organization of societies (of social power), which in each case are dominant. Marx named these modes of social organization “modes of production”. He thus describes the mode of production as the structural interconnectedness of a certain social system of class domination and exploitation.

This notion of the mode of production implies not only the economic level of a society, but the unity of economic, political, and ideological structures: that is, a specific type of economic domination and exploitation and a corresponding specific type of organization of political power and the domination of a specific type of ideological forms.

Each mode of production refers to only two classes: the class of the dominant-exploiters, and the class of those dominated, who become the object of exploitation.

The capitalist mode of production constitutes precisely the causal nucleus of the totality of capitalist power relations, the fundamental social-class interdependencies that define a system of social power (a society) as a capitalist system.

It is established in the capital-relation initially on the level of production: in the separation of the worker from the means of production (who is thus transformed into a wage-laborer, possessor only of his/her labor-power) and in the full ownership of the production means by the capitalist. Simultaneously, capitalism as a social system implies the formation of a specific state form and specific forms of concealment of class domination and exploitative relations (the ruling ideology).

With Marx’s words:

“It is in each case the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers [...] in which we find the innermost

secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice, and hence also the political form of the relationship of sovereignty and dependence” (Marx 1991: 927).

Specific societies, however, consist of a mosaic of social-class relations, which do not all belong to the same type of social coherence (the same type of class power). They constitute the specific historical result of the evolution of society, which may allow the “survival” of elements with roots to previous types of social organization, to previous historical systems of class power (e.g., feudalism).

The articulation of different modes of production is contradictory and is always accomplished under the domination of one particular mode of production.

The domination of the capitalist mode of production is connected to the tendency toward the dissolution of all antagonistic modes of production. Historically, in most cases, the break-up of the pre-capitalist modes of production takes the form of agricultural reform, precisely since it involves modes of production that are mainly based on pre-capitalist property relations in the land.

2. The Middle Classes in Contemporary Advanced Capitalist Societies

In contemporary advanced capitalist societies all pre-capitalist modes of production have been swept away. However, beside the capitalist mode of production other non-capitalist forms and modes of production are being reproduced.

a) First of all, I am referring to self-employment (self employed merchants, artisans, peasants, scientists, etc.), that is defined in Marxist literature as the *traditional petty-bourgeoisie*. In this case we deal with simple commodity production and not with capitalist production: In other words, production of commodities that do not include profit but only the remuneration of the direct producer.

Marx (1975) states that:

“independent producers who employ no labourers and therefore do not produce as capitalists [...] are *producers of commodities* [...] not [...] sellers of labour [...] their production does not fall under the capitalist mode of production”.

The predominance of the capitalist mode of production implies that independent simple commodity producers *must* produce for the market in order to survive (within competitive conditions) as owners of the production means. According to Marx (1991, 941-942, 946),

“The only absolute barrier he faces [...] is the wage that he pays himself, after deducting his actual expenses [...]; and he often does so down to a physical minimum [...] [P]roduction [...] proceeds without being governed by the general rate of profit”.

b) The second case of a non-capitalist mode of production in contemporary advanced capitalist societies is that of the small entrepreneur.

Marx shows, that not every entrepreneur or owner of the means of production who hires wage-laborers shall be regarded as capitalist. For the owner of the means of production to be “capital”, the *scale of production* and the number of wage-earners employed by the entrepreneur must be such that *the capitalist is disengaged from actual labor*, and thereby focused on the supervision-direction of the production process. The capitalist’s income (i.e. profit) depends on the magnitude of the capital advanced. This precondition differentiates the capitalist class from the class of small entrepreneurs, who employ wage labor aiming at a sizeable income, and whom we refer to as the “middle bourgeoisie” (Miliotis and Economakis 2011).

Marx writes:

“Capitalist production only really begins [...] when each individual capital simultaneously employs a comparatively large number of workers [...] A certain stage of capitalist production necessitates that the capitalist be able to devote the whole of the time during which he functions as a capitalist, i.e. as capital personified, to the appropriation and therefore the control of the labor of others, and to the sale of the products of that labor” (Marx 1990: 439, 423).

In accordance with the above citation by Marx it can be argued that, on the economic level, the mode of production can be comprehended as the ensemble of three different relations to the means of production: *use*, *possession* and *ownership* of the means of production.

Use of the means of production is defined as the exclusive performance of actual labor with a view to producing use-values. In all modes of production the use relation lies in the hands of the direct producers.

Possession of the means of production refers to the management of the production process, namely the power to put the means of production into operation.

Ownership as an (real) *economic relationship* is the control over the means of production in the sense of having the power to dispose of the surplus obtained. In every mode of production the ownership relation lies in the hands of the ruling class.

In the capitalist mode of production, both ownership as an economic relation, and possession of the means of production, coexist in the hands of the ruling capitalist class. In other words, there is *homology* of ownership and possession by the capitalist. The capitalist and the working class are the fundamental classes in all societies where the capitalist mode of production prevails.

This means that an entrepreneur must be *disentangled from the use of the means of production* in order to become a capitalist.

The capitalist is directly *present* in the enterprise as the *top manager* who holds the possession of the means of production in the production process, personifying the enterprise as such. The same top manager shares the ownership of the means of production with the “money capitalist” who personifies the financial form of existence of the enterprise.

Capital takes on a Janus-faced existence, as both a means of production and as financial securities, as we have already discussed in the past.

It shall be noted parenthetically, that, by contrast to the capitalist mode of production, *non-homology* of ownership and possession of the means of production is characteristic of *pre-capitalist* modes of production. As possession of the means of production remained in the hands of direct laborers, extra-economic coercion (a relation of servitude or bond service) was rendered necessary, for safeguarding the appropriation of the surplus product by the owner of the means of production. In capitalism, in contrast, homology of ownership and possession of the means of production connotes that “free-laborers” work for the benefit of the owners’ class without extra-economic coercion: the economic structure of society becomes predominant.

Focusing on contemporary advanced capitalist societies, which lack pre-capitalist modes of production, the following points can be concluded so far:

(i) The capitalist possesses both the *ownership and the possession* of the means of production, but not their use: She/he has both the power to place into operation the means of production as well as the power to acquire the final surplus value. The working class holds the *use relation*, the ability to perform of actual labor.

(ii) Social groups that are not carriers of this fundamental capital-labor relation are defined as *non-fundamental* or *middle* social classes.

Small entrepreneurs who exploit a marginal number of salaried laborers and perform similar activities as laborers in the production process are entangled in the use relation and do not therefore belong to the capitalist class. They constitute an intermediate social class, the “middle bourgeoisie”, pertaining to what may be named the “hybrid mode of production”. The laborers of this hybrid mode of production may be designated as the *spurious working class*.

Self-employment is also related to the unity of the ownership and possession with use relation *in one* class “carrier”. Consequently, within capitalism we find another historically particular non-capitalist *form of production*, the simple commodity production. In simple commodity production, *one social class* is defined: the *traditional petty bourgeoisie*. We may call the simple commodity production a “form” (and not a mode) of production inasmuch as its production process does not entail surplus-product appropriation.

Of course, the hybrid mode of production and simple commodity production constitute production forms non-antagonistic to the capitalist modes of production.

c) Let us now turn to a third middle class, the *new petty-bourgeoisie*, which is formed on the one hand inside the capitalist enterprise, and on the other in state apparatuses.

According to Marx (1990: 458, 468, 1039-1040), with the emergence of capitalist enterprise “the *real lever* of the overall labour process is increasingly not the individual worker”; the “collective worker formed out of the combination of a number of individual workers”.

The question, which is now posited, is the following: is the collective worker, i.e., capitalistically hired labor identical with the working class?

c-1) The collective worker and the new petty-bourgeoisie.

According to Marx (1990: 450) within the collective worker, who forms an “industrial army [...] like a real army, officers (managers) and N.C.O.s (foremen, overseers)”, of a special kind of wage-laborers is formed, whose exclusive function is the work of management-supervision (*as opposed to the performance of actual-manual-labor*).

Consequently, wage-earners belonging to this special category of wage-labor do not *exclusively* perform the function of labor (use relation) but, on the contrary, *exercise powers of capital*. Although they are productive workers – exploited by capital –, they also “function as capital”. That is, despite the subjection to capitalist exploitation, they are not elements of the working class. Consequently they are part of an intermediate social class, situated between the capitalist and the working class. This intermediate social class is the so-called *new petty bourgeoisie*. Engineers and technicians (technologists) belong to this class, performing specific forms of management-supervision labor, which emanates from the specifically capitalist division between science and experience.

The new petty bourgeoisie is characterized by an internal hierarchy. However, as a whole, it is clearly differentiated from the working class, as it is the “conveyor belt” of capital’s will in the workplace.

However, the case differs if engineers and technicians are located in branches in which they themselves form the main labor force. In this case they become the class “carrier” of the use relation and a process of “proletarianization of intellectual labor” may appear.

c-2) The state and the new petty bourgeoisie

So far, we have defined the new petty bourgeoisie as a middle class of the capitalist production process.

Following Nicos Poulantzas (mainly 1973, 1975) we maintain that the new petty bourgeoisie also comprises all those wage-earners who staff the apparatuses of the capitalist state, and so exercise powers in the name of the capitalist system in the process of its social reproduction.

The question posed is why different social groups belong to the same social class, despite the fact that they undertake different roles in the capitalist division of labor (capitalist production vis-à-vis state apparatuses)?

The answer is that these groups *exercise the same type of social functions within capitalist production and social-reproduction*, despite being active in different social areas.

There is a *structural interaction* that *unites* their social functions: on the one hand the domination of the economic structure in the capitalist mode of production in-the-last-instance determines the functions of superstructure (the state) and on the other hand the superstructure overdetermines capitalist economic domination – i.e. it harmonizes the economic level with the needs of the overall capitalist reproduction.

The state plays a *central organizational role*, representing and organizing the long-term interests of the bourgeois class, politically unifying its various fractions, all of which occupy positions in the terrain of domination over the ruled-exploited classes of society.

Thus, it is through this interaction that these different social groups find their common class place within capitalism. Their functions converge at the capitalist power reproduction level.

Thus, the *new petty bourgeoisie* is the *middle social class* of capitalism that comprises *wage-earners* who are not part of the working class, precisely due to their role in the exercise of capitalist powers. Parallel to this, these wage-earners are not part of the capitalist class, since they are not owners of the means of production,

often being subjected to capitalist exploitation. They exercise the following functions:

i) functions that insure the extraction of surplus-value, such as the supervision-overseeing-control of the production process (technicians, engineers, etc.);

ii) functions that insure the cohesion of capitalist political power (state bureaucracy, the judicial apparatus, the military, etc.) and the systematization and dissemination of the ruling ideology, such as education.

The new petty bourgeoisie includes therefore both productive wage-earners (i.e. those who exchange their labor for capital and produce surplus-value): category (i), and non-productive wage-earners (i.e. those who are employed in the public [non-entrepreneurial] sector and do not produce surplus-value): category (ii).

We are ready now to tackle a final issue, which is related with the political stances of the middle classes in different conjunctures.

3. Class Struggle and the Middle Classes

As Nicos Poulantzas has extensively argued, the determination of social classes (“class places”) must be distinguished from ideological-political “class positions”, the latter of which reflect the “stance” of a class at a specific conjuncture, i.e. at a concrete situation of class struggle within a social formation.

A link between class place and class position can be achieved provided that “class instinct”, which corresponds to class place, is transformed into “class consciousness” – corresponding to the interests of a class. Although class places may *potentially* indicate class positions, the opposite does not exist: *class positions cannot indicate class places*.

As Poulantzas writes, “A social class [...] may take up a class position that does not correspond to its interests” (Poulantzas 1975: 15-16).

I remind you at this point that we detected three intermediate or middle classes in contemporary advanced capitalist societies: The *traditional petty bourgeoisie* of self-employed simple commodity producers; *the new petty bourgeoisie* of wage-earners which exercises powers in the name of the capitalist system, within the process of capitalist production and social reproduction (related to the capitalist state); *the middle bourgeoisie* of small self-employed entrepreneurs, formed within the hybrid mode of production, who exploit a marginal number of salaried labor force.

Focusing now on potential political stances of classes in advanced capitalist societies, we will conclude that every middle class sub-collectivity is characterized by different political “tendencies” that correspond to the peculiarities of the structural class features of every sub-collectivity.

A first demarcation line is shaped in relation to the capitalist strategy of austerity, market liberalization and privatizations. As the living standard of labor is the “labor cost” of capitalists, this line polarizes on the one side the bourgeoisie as a class strategy expressed by the capitalist state, and on the other the working class. However this polarization does not mean that the working class primarily tends towards anti-capitalism. It rather develops a propensity towards reformism in an effort to preserve their income levels and labor rights, especially as a large part of the working class faces the risk of unemployment.

The second demarcation line arises from the capitalist strategy of privatizations of public services (the dismantling of the welfare state) and public enterprises, and creates a tendency towards confrontation of the majority of state employees with the capitalist neoliberal agenda.

The already mentioned tensions favor the polarization of the majority of the new petty bourgeoisie to the side of the labor reformist social camp, whereas the *middle*

bourgeoisie of small-scale entrepreneurship approaches the capitalist strategy of austerity, i.e. the strategy of reducing labor costs.

The *traditional petty bourgeoisie* of self-employment seems rather to be divided between these two positions; on the one hand building a social continuum, albeit with significant contradictions, with the middle bourgeoisie, and on the other joining the struggles for a solidary pension system and against further cuts in popular incomes, along with the realm of wage labor.

As in the case of the middle bourgeoisie, it is a class external to the large enterprise and the state, as opposed to the new petty bourgeoisie, who staffs state apparatuses and large companies.

Moreover, throughout recent history it has repeatedly been demonstrated that in phases of economic crisis and destabilization of parliamentary relationships of representation, small entrepreneurship and certain marginalized strata are attracted to the ultra-nationalist and far-right movements.

This support for the far-right could be interpreted by the specific elements of common character of an “anti-capitalism-within-capitalism” that are shared by the middle bourgeoisie and the traditional petty bourgeoisie, in relation to the “anti-plutocratic” declarations of the far-right:

Against “plutocrats” and *large capitalist companies* which constitute a potential threat to their survival as classes that own means of production; against “redistribution” (i.e., rise in labor costs), therefore in favor of wage austerity, since it is a class of small employers, or potential small employers (as in the case of some sections of the traditional petty bourgeoisie).

From this aspect, a large part of the entrepreneurial world approaches the capitalist class interests.

The same is valid for the top ranks of the new petty bourgeoisie, who function as trustworthy managers of the social order, but also for those who staff the core repressive apparatuses of the state (police, secret services, etc.).

Concluding my whole analysis, and leaving aside possible isolated cases or exceptions, I may say that while a class alliance between the working class and the majority of the new petty bourgeoisie seems likely in many cases, an alliance with the traditional petty bourgeoisie seems more arduous, while an alliance of the working class with the middle bourgeoisie appears to be rather unlikely.

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Appendix

Class Places and Potential Class Positions of Middle Classes				
	Middle bourgeoisie	Traditional petty bourgeoisie	New petty bourgeoisie	
Class Places	Hybrid MP	Simple Commodity Pr.	CMP: Economic level and non-economic level	
Ownership plus possession of the means of production	Yes	Yes	No	
Use of the means of production	Partial	Yes	No	
Relationship with the capitalist enterprise and the state	External	External	Internal	
I. Ideological-political positions				
“Anti-capitalism”				
• as opposition to large corporations	Yes	Yes	No	
• as opposition to the private ownership	No	No	Possibly	
• Redistribution of wealth	No	Possibly	Yes	
Aspirations to upward social mobility				
• through profit	Possibly	No	No	
• through progress in big companies and the state	No	No	Yes	
Substantiveness of cohesion of family unit				
	Partial	Yes	No	
II. Political polarization				
In favor of				
• right-wing extremist movements	Yes	Yes	No	
• reformist movements	No	Possibly	Yes	
III. Autonomous class strategy				
	No	No	Possibly	