

# The Middle Classes, Class Places, and Class Positions: A Critical Approach to Nicos Poulantzas's Theory

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*Through a critical rereading of Marxist class theory, a reexamination of the border line between the working and middle classes is undertaken, focusing on the class identity of middle classes with respect to the question of class place and class position. In this context we summarize the arguments in Nicos Poulantzas's approach to the subject (mainly his theory of "pertinent effects," according to which all basic subcategories of the middle classes are affiliated with the self-same petty bourgeoisie), submitting these arguments to criticism and supporting a more accurate view of middle-class subcollectivities, not as parts of the same class but as different classes: the middle bourgeoisie, the traditional petty bourgeoisie, and the new petty bourgeoisie.*

**Key Words:** Modes of Production, Class Analysis, Middle Classes, Class Fractions, Althusserian Marxism

Nicos Poulantzas aptly states that "the definition of the class nature of the petty bourgeoisie is the focal point of the Marxist theory of social classes" (1974, 237). Most of the difficulties or unresolved issues related to class analysis in contemporary capitalist societies are connected with the difficulty of class analysis of the petty bourgeoisie and generally of the middle classes.

From the viewpoint of Marxism as a theory of class struggle, the determination of class places and of potential class positions of middle classes gives an indication of possible class alliances that either support or struggle against the reproduction of the capitalist regime. The basic conclusion of our analysis is that the middle classes consist of nonhomogenous class totalities, both from the aspect of their class places and from the aspect of their potential class positions.<sup>1</sup> Our focus, then, on the study of middle classes aims at comprehension of the composite frame of class conflict, which still poses unsolved theoretical issues in a conjuncture where new anticapitalist movements are breaking out again throughout the world.

1. With the term "middle classes" we mean the nonhomogenous class totality of the so-called traditional and new petty bourgeoisie and the class we define as the "middle bourgeoisie."

In the next four sections we provide our basic theoretical schema on social classes' determination, under capitalist domination, focusing especially on the issue of middle classes' class places. A summary of Poulantzas's approach follows. Finally, on the basis of our theoretical schema, we submit Poulantzas's arguments to criticism, regarding the relation between class places and potential class positions of middle classes.

### Basic Concepts for a Study of Social Classes

Following the "Althusserian school," it is argued that the relations of production can be comprehended as the ensemble of *ownership, possession, and use* of the means of production, where the means of production are the "*objective conditions of labour*" (Marx 1990, 1026).<sup>2</sup> The use of the means of production is defined as the exclusive performance of actual labor: that is, participation in the labor process with a view to producing use values (see Carchedi 1977, 66). Ownership as an (real) economic relationship is control of the means of production—"i.e. the power to assign the means of production to given uses and so to dispose of the production obtained" (Poulantzas 1975, 18). It presupposes possession of the means of production, or management of production—"the capacity to put the means of production into operation" (18). Accordingly, ownership as an economic relation exists in a relation of homology with possession.

A mode of production refers to the particular combination of these three fundamental relations (Milios 2000; Economakis 2005).<sup>3</sup> This particular combination forms the economic structure of a mode of production and defines which of its three constituent structures (economic, juridico-political, or ideological) is *dominant*.

According to Althusser (1986, 180), social classes are formed within the modes of production as "occupants" of the fundamental relations insofar as they are "carriers" of these relations. Thus, social classes are characterized by relations of production—that is, by *structural class places* (see also Marx 1991, 1019–20). Here, social classes are defined as the *fundamental* social classes of a mode of production. Correspondingly, we define *nonfundamental* or *intermediate* social classes as social groups that are not "carriers" of fundamental relations.<sup>4</sup>

2. See mainly Althusser (1976, 1984, 1986), Althusser and Balibar 1986, Balibar (1983, 1986), Bettelheim (1968, 1970, 1973), Harnecker (2000), Poulantzas (1973a, 1975, 1976), and Rey (n.d., 1973).

3. These relations must not be considered invariant, regarding concrete content (and functions), from one mode of production to the other (see Poulantzas 1976, 78; Dedoussopoulos 1985, 161; Gerstein 1989, 123, 125).

4. This distinction between fundamental and nonfundamental social classes does not correspond that, posed by Resnick and Wolff (1982, 2 ff.; 2002) between "fundamental and subsumed classes." According to Resnick and Wolff's analysis, the "performers" and "extractors" of surplus labor belong to the fundamental classes whereas the "persons who neither perform nor extract surplus labor" belong to subsumed classes. According to our analysis, performers of surplus labor belong to nonfundamental classes as well.

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The above also apply to a production process that does not entail surplus-product appropriation. According to Poulantzas (1973a), such a process constitutes a *form of production* (whereas the mode of production presupposes relations of exploitation).

In a given historical social formation, different modes or forms of production may exist, creating a complex class configuration (Milios 1999). The articulation of different modes or forms of production constitutes the *economic base of a social formation* and is always dominated by one particular mode of production. The two basic classes “of any social formation are those of the dominant mode of production in that formation” (Poulantzas 1975, 22).

In specific societies a complex class configuration exists due to two causes: (1) the articulation of more than one mode or forms of production (the level of the economic base); and (2) the functions of the social power of the ruling class (the level of superstructure), which may be entrusted to social groups not belonging to the ruling class. These groups must be designated as intermediate social classes, like those that are not “carriers” of fundamental relations (the level of a mode of production). This especially concerns part of the “new petty bourgeoisie,” as seen below.

Consequently, social “classes are defined principally (but not exclusively) by their place in the relations of production” (Jessop 1985, 165, see also 160, 170); “a complete definition of classes must be worked out in terms of economic, political and the ideological [factors]” (Carchedi 1977, 43), with the precondition that *any class definition opposed to the structural definition on the economic level cannot exist*.

According to Poulantzas (1975, 14–7), the determination of social classes (“class places”) must be distinguished from ideological-political “class positions,” which have “each specific conjuncture” as their field, the latter being “the concrete situation of the class struggle” within the “unique historic individuality of a social formation.” A link between class place and class position can be achieved *provided* that what Lenin calls “class instinct” (which corresponds to a class place) is transformed into “class consciousness” corresponding to the interests of a class. The latter is a class position that corresponds to a class place. Although class places may *potentially* indicate class positions, the opposite does not exist: *class positions cannot indicate class places*. “A social class . . . may take up a class position that does not correspond to its interests” (15–6). As seen below, Poulantzas ignores this thesis, attempting to provide, in his theory of “pertinent effects,” proof of class places from manifestations of class positions.

### The Capitalist Mode of Production, the Capitalist State, and Social Classes

The capitalist mode of production (CMP) emerges on the basis of a unified, double historical movement: emancipation of producers from feudal or Asiatic relations, and their separation from the means of production (and subsistence) that they possessed under those historical conditions in favor of the new exploiting class

(see Marx 1990).<sup>5</sup> This movement both creates the free worker in the double sense (the free expropriated individual) (Marx 1990, 272–3) and massively transforms labor power into a commodity (Marx 1981a, 1990), forming the *elementary feature* (of the economic structure) of the CMP. The latter is the *homology of the relation of ownership and possession* in the class “carrier” of ownership (real ownership) by the separation of free producers from possession of the means of production. Real ownership connotes that free workers work for the benefit of the owners’ class without extraeconomic coercion: dominant economic structure.

Thus, on the political and ideological levels of society, laborers’ separation from possession of the means of production has as a counterpart their transformation into free citizens, with all that this entails for the structural characteristics of the capitalist state (its “neutral” hierarchical-bureaucratic organization, its “classless” function on the basis of the rule of law, etc.) and the ruling ideology (the ideology of individual and equal rights, etc.) (Milios, Dimoulis, and Economakis 2002). From this viewpoint, the domination of the economic structure in the CMP (the dominant mode of production of the capitalist system) *in the last instance* determines the structural characteristics of the capitalist state and the ruling ideology (see Marx 1981b, 1990).<sup>6</sup>

However, the elementary feature of the CMP cannot itself define the owners of the means of production as the capitalist class, as is inferred from Albritton’s (2000, 150) analysis, for example. According to Marx (1990), 423, 439, 453, 1020, 1022, 1027, 1035), the CMP has as benchmark the augmentation of the number of workers laboring in order to jointly produce the same commodity. Thus, for the appearance of the owner of the means of production as “capital” (supervision-direction of the process) and the producer as “labor,” the scale of production, the magnitude of capital, and the number of wage earners employed by the entrepreneur must be such that *the capitalist is absolutely disengaged from actual labor*. The capitalists’ income (i.e., profit) depends on the magnitude of total capital advanced, not on their labor.<sup>7</sup> The owners’ full disengagement from actual labor is *the necessary precondition* of the CMP. This precondition transubstantiates the elementary feature of the CMP into the specific one. As seen below, this precondition differentiates the capitalist class from that which is called the “middle bourgeoisie.”

5. “Productive labor” from the standpoint of the capitalist production process is the labor paid from variable capital (see Marx 1981a, 1990). Correspondingly, “production” from the standpoint of the capitalist production process is any process in which labor power is exchanged immediately for capital. (For a review of the contradictions among Marxists in relation to the concept of productive labor, see, among other works, Resnick and Wolff 1982, 6–10. See also below.)

6. In the feudal and Asiatic modes of production, ownership of the means of production by the ruling class was never complete since the working/ruled classes still maintained their possession. This fact is connected to significant corresponding characteristics in the structure of the political and ideological social levels as well. Economic exploitation had as its complementary element direct political coercion (see Marx 1991, 927 ff.).

7. Only from this viewpoint the capitalists are “non-laborers” and “the means of production ... are the property of non-laborers (capitalists)” (Hindess and Hirst 1979, 10).

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## The Capitalist Class, the Working Class, and the New Petty Bourgeoisie

140 According to Marx (458, 468, 1039–40), with the emergence of capitalist enterprise  
 “the *real lever* of the overall labour process is increasingly not the individual  
 worker” but the “collective worker formed out of the combination of a number of  
 individual workers.” This collective worker is identified with productive labor. The  
 145 managers,<sup>8</sup> engineers, technologists, overseers, and manual laborers constitute this  
 collective worker. Therefore, the collective worker stands on the level of the  
 technical division of labor in the capitalist production process as the bearer of overall  
 combined labor, which is identified with the total wage earners (productive-labor-  
 productive-workers).

Which are, then, the fundamental classes of the CMP?

150 The *capitalist class* is the “carrier” of real ownership. The other class of the CMP  
 is the *working class*, the “carrier” of the use relation, which is the exclusive  
 performance of the actual labor within the capitalist labor process. From this  
 viewpoint, the fundamental classes of the CMP are the capitalist and working  
 classes, and consequently these are the *basic classes* of a capitalist social  
 155 formation.

The question is as follows. Is (capitalistically) hired (i.e., productive labor,  
 including all these different kinds of labor) identical with the working class?

160 According to Marx (450), within the collective worker 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, the wage earners belonging to this special category of wage labor  
 do not exclusively perform the function of labor (use relation) but, on the  
 165 contrary, *exercise powers of capital*. Although they are productive workers,  
 exploited by capital, they also “function as capital.”<sup>9</sup> That is, despite subjection  
 to capitalist exploitation, they are not elements of the working class (see also  
 Poulantzas 1975, 228–9). Consequently, they are part of an intermediate social  
 class situated between the capitalist and the working classes. This intermediate  
 170 social class is the so-called *new petty bourgeoisie*. Engineers and technicians  
 (technologists) also belong to this class, performing specific forms of management-  
 supervision labor, which emanates from the specifically capitalist division between  
 science and experience (234, 236–7, 239–41). However, the case differs if  
 “engineers and technicians ... are located ... in branches in which they  
 themselves form the main labour force” (242). In this case, they become the  
 175 class “carrier” of the use relation and a process of “proletarianization of intellectual  
 tasks” may appear (Pestieau 1998).

8. Excluding the *top* managers who “belong to the bourgeois class even if they do not hold formal legal ownership” (Poulantzas 1975, 180); see also Marx (1991, 568).

9. For the “*double nature*” of the work of supervision and management” see Marx (1991, 507–8); see also Carchedi (1977, 62–92).

## Poulantzas's Limitation of the Working Class and Expansion of the New Petty Bourgeoisie

180 Poulantzas argues that “[t]he working class is not defined by a simple and intrinsic negative criterion, its exclusion from the relations of ownership, but by productive labour” (210). Consequently, he argues that the new petty bourgeoisie is limited by nonproductive labor. He also supports the idea that “productive labour, in the capitalist mode of production, is labour that produces surplus-value while ... [it] is directly involved in material production by producing use values that increase material wealth” (216). Wage earners who do not produce new use values in physical form are nonproductive and are therefore not part of the working class: “wage-earners in commerce, advertising, marketing, accounting, banking and insurance ... do not form part of the working class” (211).

190 In our opinion, Poulantzas's apprehension of the Marxian concept of productive labor, and his implementation of productive labor as a criterion of class definition (Harnecker 2000, 105), are false. According to our analysis, all wage earners (such as shop assistants) belong to the working class because they exclusively perform the function of actual labor within the capitalist labor process, without undertaking any functions of direction of this process; that is, they are the “common soldiers” of this process (Pannekoek 1909) and not its “officers” or “NCOs.” Besides, Poulantzas's criterion of productive labor is of no use in the case of non-working-class members of the productive-collective-worker, such as engineers and technicians. According to the above analysis, although the relation of exploitation is required for class affiliation as working class, *the relation of exploitation is not identified with class affiliation as working class.*

200 It can also be inferred that a determination of social classes on the basis of surplus production (see Resnick and Wolff 2002) cannot differentiate between class exploitation and class affiliation with the working class. Therefore, the surplus criterion cannot itself indicate the borderline between working class and new petty bourgeoisie: that is, the split of the productive-collective-worker in the working class and new petty bourgeoisie part.<sup>10</sup>

## The State and the New Petty Bourgeoisie

210 We have defined the new petty bourgeoisie as the intermediate class of CMP. Following Poulantzas (1973a, 1975), we maintain that the new petty bourgeoisie also comprises all those wage earners who staff the apparatuses of the capitalist state, hence exercise power in the name of the capitalist system in the process of its social reproduction.

215 The question posed is: Why do different social groups and agents 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)?

10. Thus, for example, Resnick and Wolff (1982) include (productive) technicians in the working class, overlooking the specifically capitalist division between science and experience.

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The answer is that these groups *exercise the same type of social functions within capitalist production-social-reproduction* despite the different social levels. There is a *structural interaction that unites these social functions: on the one hand, the domination of the economic structure in the CMP in the last instance determines the functions of the superstructure and, on the other hand, the superstructure overdetermines capitalist economic domination—that is, it harmonizes the economic-level functions with the needs of overall capitalist reproduction* (Althusser 1976, 1986a). Thus, it is through this interaction that these different social groups find their common class place within capitalism and the corresponding social functions.<sup>11</sup> These functions converge at reproduction of capitalist power at any social level.

Thus, the *new petty bourgeoisie* is the *intermediate social class* of capitalism that comprises *wage earners* who are not part of the working class precisely due to their place in the exercise of capitalist power. In parallel, 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:

1. Ensuring the extraction of surplus value, such as supervision-oversight-control of the production process (technicians, engineers, etc.);
2. Ensuring 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 (see also Pannekoek 1909).

The new petty bourgeoisie includes therefore both productive wage earners (i.e., those who exchange their labor for capital and produce surplus value)—category (1); and nonproductive wage-earners (i.e., those who are employed in the public [nonentrepreneurial] sector and do not produce surplus value)<sup>12</sup>—category (2).<sup>13</sup>

### Noncapitalist Modes/Forms of Production and the Middle Classes

The CMP and capitalist development coexist with noncapitalist modes or forms of production, forming particular models of reproduction under capitalist domination.<sup>14</sup>

11. Such a structural interaction seems incomprehensible in a frame of analysis like that of Resnick and Wolff (2002). Here the Marxian notion of the decisive-in-the-last-instance economic structure has been loosened, leading to the disconnection of economic domination from the juridical-political-cultural superstructure.

12. As Resnick and Wolff (1982, 5–6, 16; 2002) point out, the income of these class fractions comes from the “distribution of the surplus value extracted by the capitalists from productive workers.”

13. A problem exists in relation to the class identity of the lower-ranking civil servants (e.g., “workers” or cleaners employed as permanent staff in public utilities, local government, etc.). One possible approach would be to regard them as layers not affiliated with any class (see Harnecker 2000).

14. Here “production” is any process that entails costs offering commodities. In the case of the mode of production that we call hybrid, the production process presupposes limited hired labor paid by capital.

The dominant CMP modulates the fundamental relations of all other modes or forms of production, intertwining them with the process of its expanded reproduction (see Marx 1981a, 106–7; Althusser 1986, 98–9; Lipietz 1983, 21).

## Simple Commodity Production and the Traditional Petty Bourgeoisie

Marx (1975, 407–9) states that “independent” (i.e., non-wage-earner) 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.” This producer “is cut up into two persons. As owner of the means of production he is capitalist; as labourer he is his own wage-labourer.” His means of production “are therefore not capital.” One class place “unites the separate function.”

Marx’s thesis refers to a homology of the ownership relation and possession (real ownership) with use relation in *one* class “carrier.” Consequently, within capitalism we find a historically particular, noncapitalist *form of production*, simple commodity production (SCP).<sup>15</sup> The predominance of the CMP implies that simple commodity producers *must* produce for the market in order to survive (within competitive conditions) as owners of the means of production. As a result, production is production for the market without any form of extraeconomic coercion being required for this. In SCP, *one fundamental social class* is defined: the *traditional petty bourgeoisie*. This class is then the historically particular class of capitalism that merges the capital function (real ownership) with the labor function (use) in one class place. However, these condensed functions cease to be functions of capital and labor. The “schizophrenic coexistence ... of the bourgeois and the proletarian” (Harrison 1977, 328), in one class place, sets a historical discreteness of these relations. They are inseparable functions of “a collective entity consisting of all family members involved ... in the (technical) production process” which is organized “on the basis of kinship relations within the elementary family unit” (Dedoussopoulos 1985, 172–3): that is, on the base of unpaid household labor. As a result, the formation of this collective entity of real ownership *does not lead to relations of exploitation within SCP* (146, 171–2). In such a process of “self-exploitation” (see Gabriel 1990), any relation of exploitation must be sought in the sphere of circulation, in the form of taxes, and so on (see Marx 1975, 407).<sup>16</sup>

What is the model of reproduction of SCP?

According to Marx (1991, 941–2, 946), “The only absolute barrier he [the traditional petty bourgeois] faces ... is the wage that he pays himself, after deducting his actual expenses.” He produces “as long as the price of the product is sufficient for him to cover this wage; and he often does so down to a physical

15. We call the SCP “form” of production inasmuch as its production process does not entail within it surplus-product appropriation.

16. We are not taking into account the question of the existence or not of exploiting relations *within* the family-collective-entity. An answer to this question is given by Resnick and Wolff (2002, chap. 7).



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minimum ... here ... production ... proceeds without being governed by the general rate of profit." SCP competitiveness is thus based on augmented "self-exploitation" expressed as reduction of "consumption standards" and in general as a "squeeze" of the terms of simple reproduction (Bernstein 1979, 429).

Consequently, it can be inferred that the SCP "designates" a particular form of production within capitalism, "the 'logic' of which is subsistence ... as opposed to the [capitalist] logic of the appropriation and realization of surplus-value and the accumulation of capital" (425; see also Banaji 1977, 33). Moreover, "The attempt for profit maximization undermines the reproduction of the family unit ... by bringing about a *permanent removal* of the surplus labor force ... The mentality of the reproduction of the family unit is expressed through ... removals of some surplus labor force in an attempt to acquire additional incomes coming from wage employment" (Dedoussopoulos 1985, 198). These additional incomes constitute the status of semiproletarianization according to Lenin (1961; see also Dedoussopoulos 1985, 152).

## 295 The Hybrid Mode of Production and the Middle Bourgeoisie

The hybrid mode of production (HMP) is a historically peculiar, noncapitalist mode of production within capitalism. In this production mode, unpaid (family) labor coexists with marginal *but permanently* hired (nonfamily) labor. Like the CMP, permanently hired labor exists and, like the SCP, the real owner (the family-collective-entity) is also a "carrier" of the use relation. Simultaneously, there is explicit diversification.

In comparison to the CMP, the HMP is diversified by the fact that the owner is also a "carrier" of the use relation. This implies that, in order to jointly produce the same sort of commodity within a unified labor process, the scale of HMP production and the magnitude of capital employed by the collective entity and, therefore, the number of workers employed must be such that the employer *is disengaged only partially from the use of the means of production*. Therefore, the labor process can only be in part a process of exploitation of hired labor, and only a fraction of the surplus product (if it exists) is produced by the exploitation of hired labor. In other words, in the case of the HMP, the precondition that we have called *necessary* for the formation of CMP (full disengagement of the real owner from labor) does not exist. Contrary to SCP, the existence of hired labor in HMP means that a relation of exploitation emerges in this mode of production. Thus, within the HMP *two fundamental social classes* are constituted: the wage-earning producers class,<sup>17</sup> and the class that is the "carrier" of real ownership and (partially) of use relation. This "small employers" class is the *middle bourgeoisie* (see also Carchedi 1977, 87).

Similar to SCP, HMP is formed in accordance with capital domination. That is, the middle bourgeoisie *must* produce for the market, without extraeconomic coercion being required, in order to survive (within competitive conditions) as a collective entity that, in this case, employs hired labor.

17. The class that is alone the "carrier" of use in HMP (hired labor) may be called the *spurious working class* to distinguish it from the working class that is constituted within the CMP (Economakis 2005).

We must note at this point that our view about the HMP is similar to Wright's approach (1980, 1983, 1997) regarding the distinction between SCP and HMP or between CMP and HMP. We refer especially to his notion of the "contradictory location" of "small employers" or "non-pure petty-bourgeois producers," which corresponds to what we call the middle bourgeoisie (see Economakis 2005).

Which is the model of reproduction of HMP?

The capitalist production "aim is that the individual product should contain as *much unpaid labor as possible*" (Marx 1990, 1038). The SCP aim is the reproduction of the traditional petty bourgeois as an owner of the means of production, and this aim presupposes the maintenance of family labor. The hybrid production aim is hybrid inasmuch as *the structural necessity of family labor interweaves with the existence of hired potentially exploited labor*. In other words, the nonmaximization of profit coexists with the "law" of "the *maximum of profit with minimum of work*" (1037).<sup>18</sup>

### The Middle Classes: Coincidence or Divergence of Class Practices?

As Labica (1986) demonstrated, no *theoretical* treatment of the question of the middle classes can be found either in the work of Marx and Engels or in that of Lenin. What one sees in these texts is rather a political position stating that the middle classes are situated "between" the two basic classes in capitalist societies and that in the class struggle they "vacillate" between bourgeois and proletarian politics and strategy. The same is true of Mao Tse-Tung (1968), who declared that the petty bourgeoisie constitutes a single class.

From the viewpoint of their *class place*, the middle class subcollectivities are not positively but negatively correlated. They do not belong to any of the two fundamental classes of the CMP. However, this negative feature does not constitute sufficient ground for including them in the same class.

Baudelot and Establet maintained that the petty bourgeois are united in a single class in accordance with chiefly ideological criteria, presupposing that a conscious class strategy and ideology (a bourgeois and a proletarian) is a constituent element in the definition of the basic social classes in capitalism. "This unity is welded together at the ideological level, and is expressed in compromise arrangements that are constantly renewed ... between bourgeois and proletarian ideology" (quoted by Poulantzas 1975, 295, see also 294).

Such a subjectivist approach is not comparable with the approach we are adopting here.<sup>19</sup> "[T]he ideas of the dominant class are in every age the dominant ideas," via their materialization as a "modus vivendi," as a "way of life" not only of the ruling class but, in an altered form, of the ruled classes as well (see Marx 1990, 899).

18. Between SCP and HMP there are mediate class situations like the existence of seasonal temporary hired labor in the SCP labor process. Our intention here is only to suggest two theoretical, clearly differentiated class places.

19. As Ste. Croix correctly pointed out, "If ancient slaves are indeed to be regarded as a class, then neither class consciousness nor political activity in common ... can possibly have the right to be considered *necessary* elements in class" (1984, 102).

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Consequently, the dominant bourgeois ideology is generally dominant within the working class (albeit in modified forms by comparison with other classes).

In our opinion, the first and best-documented attempt so far to provide a theoretical grounding for the thesis that the middle-class subcollectivities are parts of the same class is the one discussed here. This thesis, formulated by Poulantzas (1974, 1975, 1976), does not resort to subjectivist conceits of a “proletarian line and ideology,” and is based on his theory of politically and ideologically “pertinent effects.”

### “Pertinent Effects”

According to Poulantzas, the new petty bourgeoisie is part of the same class with the traditional petty bourgeoisie. The traditional petty bourgeoisie refers to the poor peasants, petty merchants, and small industry employing a marginal number of wage earners. The artisans employing more than five wage earners mark “the advance of certain petty bourgeois to the status of small capitalists” (Poulantzas 1975, 328–9). Thus Poulantzas identifies the traditional petty bourgeoisie with the middle bourgeoisie, calling both of them “traditional” petty bourgeoisie. He therefore theorizes the total of middle classes as if they belonged to a single social class, the “petty bourgeoisie.”

Let us now explore the main argument behind this single social class approach.

Poulantzas writes, “If certain groupings which at first sight seem to occupy different places in economic relations can be considered as belonging to the same class, this is because these places, although they are different, nevertheless have the same effects at the political and ideological level” (205). Hence, “Reference to political and ideological relations is absolutely indispensable in order to define the place of the petty bourgeoisie in the structural class determination” (207).

Poulantzas’s (1976, 69) analysis is based on his theory of political and ideological “pertinent effects.” These “pertinent effects” acquire particular significance in identifying how classes that are not basic are to be defined “in a capitalist society.” Poulantzas’s (1974, 237) thesis is that self-employed simple commodity producers (the traditional petty bourgeoisie) and the (productive and nonproductive) wage earners not included in the working class (new petty bourgeoisie) as well as the middle bourgeoisie are parts of one and the same social class, *the petty bourgeoisie*, because they “reveal themselves” through the same or identical “pertinent effects”: they “*have the same effects on the political and ideological plane.*” Therefore, “pertinent effects” are *manifestations (revelations) of class positions* from which, according to Poulantzas, *a single class place regarding middle classes* may be delineated.

Poulantzas’s arguments may be summarized as follows. First, on the *ideological plane*, both the *traditional* petty bourgeoisie and the *new* petty bourgeoisie are recognizable through the following “pertinent effects.”

- “*Status quo anti-capitalism*”: The traditional petty bourgeoisie is “against ‘big money’ and ‘great fortunes’, but in favour of the *status quo*, for this group ...

fears proletarianization” (Poulantzas 1974, 241). The new petty bourgeoisie’s “anti-capitalism” (242) is experienced from the viewpoint of the salary earner and so “leans strongly towards reformist illusions.” It may be summarized as “redistribution of income by way of ‘social justice’” (1975, 290).

- “*The myth of the ‘ladder’*”: “[T]he [traditional] petty bourgeoisie aspires to join the bourgeoisie, by the individual rise of the ‘best’ and ‘most able’” (1974, 241). For the new petty bourgeoisie this myth is expressed as “upward aspirations” through “[t]he ideological tendency to look to the ladder and ‘promotion’” (242). “[T]his is particularly focused on the educational apparatus, given the role that the latter plays in this aspect . . . [and] to the demands for a ‘democratization’ of the apparatuses, so that they offer ‘equal opportunity’ to those individuals best fitted to take part in the ‘renewal of elites’” (1975, 292).
- “[*P*]ower fetishism”: “[T]he [traditional] petty bourgeoisie believes in the ‘neutral’ State above classes . . . This often leads to ‘statolatry’” (1974, 241). In the case of the new petty bourgeoisie, this power is expressed through a “complex attitude of identification that the petty bourgeoisie has towards a state which it sees as being by rights *its* state, and *its* rightful representative and political organizer” (242; 1975, 293).

Second, on the *political plane* and at moments of *political crisis*, both the *traditional* petty bourgeois and the *new* petty bourgeois reveal, according to Poulantzas, identical “pertinent effects”: support for the state and thus (mediated) support for the bourgeoisie. At the same time, unstable and vacillating intervention in the political *conjuncture of crisis*, “manifested in the well-known fact of . . . political instability . . . between a bourgeois and a proletarian class position . . . (the development in France between May and July 1968 is a case in point)” (298).

However, Poulantzas (314 ff.) recognizes that there are fractions of new petty bourgeoisie, which, occupying lower hierarchical places in the capitalist production process and state apparatus, could be polarized toward the working class. There are three such fractions: the first “includes the great majority of lower level workers in the commercial sector (shop assistants, etc.),” the second includes “the subaltern agents of the public and private bureaucratized sectors,” and finally the third (see also above) “is that of the technicians and subaltern engineers directly involved in productive labour.”

Finally, on the *plane of class strategy*, Poulantzas also considers that all the middle classes display the same “pertinent effects” through absence of an autonomous class strategy. They “*can have no long-term political interests ‘of their own’*” (1974, 243).

## Structural Class Places and Potential Class Positions

On principle, we do not reject the validity of the theory of “pertinent effects” *as a posteriori indicator of the relation between class places and positions*. However, the

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way Poulantzas utilizes it leads to erroneous conclusions about social classes and to a false comprehension of “pertinent effects.”

From our viewpoint Poulantzas, in his theory of “pertinent effects,” not only confuses structural class places but also, contradicting his analysis, completely disconnects these “effects” from class places, providing proof of class places from manifestations of class positions. It has already been pointed out that class definition on the ideological and political levels, in contrast to its structural definition on the economic level, cannot exist, and that class positions do not provide proof of class places (see also Harnecker 2000, 127). Besides, every middle-class subcollectivity produces specific or different “pertinent effects.”

*The ideological-political positions of the middle-class sub-collectivities.* The categorizations of Poulantzas (“anticapitalism,” “upward aspirations,” “power fetishism,” etc.) are very general, obscuring the *particular forms* appearing in every class collectivity examined here.

Reminding the reader that the “traditional petty bourgeoisie,” according to Poulantzas, corresponds to the traditional petty bourgeoisie plus the middle bourgeoisie, we may state the following.

The anticapitalism of the middle bourgeoisie and traditional petty bourgeoisie is directed against large capitalist companies dominating smaller ones (the fear of proletarianization). However, the middle bourgeoisie’s commitment to the status quo is primarily a stand against “redistribution” (rise in labor costs) since it is a class of small employers vis-à-vis the traditional and new petty bourgeoisies. From this aspect, the middle bourgeoisie approaches capitalist class interests. Moreover, the aspiration for upward mobility is registered in the economic structure of HMP (as far as profit is contained, even inconsistently, in the hybrid production aim). This places the middle bourgeoisie strategically in the capitalist camp.

The anticapitalism of the traditional petty bourgeoisie reaches its limit as the latter tries to reproduce itself within competitive conditions as a class that owns means of production. This is a point of view similar to that of the middle bourgeoisie (see also Pannekoek 1909). Nevertheless, contrary to the middle bourgeoisie, the traditional petty bourgeoisie favors a “redistribution of wealth” since its reproduction (as a class of owners) does not depend on exploitation of other’s labor but, more or less, on additional income from wage employment. This status of semiproletarianization, and the intense “self-exploitation” of the traditional petty bourgeoisie in production (“squeeze” of simple reproduction terms as a condition of its competitiveness), place it nearer the working class under specific conditions of social conjuncture. In addition, SCP’s “logic of subsistence” also places the traditional petty bourgeoisie nearer to the working class<sup>20</sup> with regard to (lack of) “upward aspirations,” based on structural class places.

The new petty bourgeoisie occupies middle and lower managerial places in large companies. Its aim is the further development of these enterprises: that is to say, “the country’s economy going ahead” (see also Cliff 2000, chap. 6) and an increase in “competitiveness.” From this point of view, there is no *prima facie* new

20. Obviously, the above also apply for the spurious working class.

petty bourgeois “anticapitalism” against large capitalist companies. The new petty bourgeoisie’s “anticapitalism” partly approaches that of the traditional petty bourgeoisie (and working class) on the issue of income “redistribution” since, as a class of wage earners, it favors “wealth redistribution.” In contrast with other middle-class subcollectivities, the new petty bourgeoisie also favors the increase in responsibilities for all those commanding knowledge and manning intermediate places in the state and enterprise hierarchy, “being strangled by the lack of recognition” for the powers that they exercise.

The aspirations to upward social mobility of the new petty bourgeois are to be identified with the progress in big corporations and the state apparatuses. Their relationship with the large capitalist enterprise and the state is one of *interiority*. In the case of middle bourgeois and traditional petty bourgeois, the relationship with the large enterprise is *antagonistic* and likewise toward the state it is one of *exteriority*. Therefore, an economic policy protecting them from capitalist competition is demanded.

Regarding in particular the state, the new petty bourgeois who occupies the state apparatuses (and also those capitalist enterprises juridically under public ownership) considers the state its own state, as indicated by Poulantzas. A “democratization” of institutions is demanded, through which they extend their own responsibilities and power toward the state and the enterprise. On account of the exteriorized relations with the state apparatus, the middle bourgeois and the traditional petty bourgeois by contrast display their fetishism of the state and power through their defense of the traditional values of the dominant ideology, especially of the “*family*” (see also Poulantzas 1975, 296).<sup>21</sup>

The *polarization of the middle-class subcollectivities in conjunctures of political crises of representation or even in “normal” conjunctures*. Throughout history it has repeatedly been demonstrated that, in phases of destabilization and disintegration of parliamentary relationships of representation, the traditional (in the sense of Poulantzas) petty bourgeoisie is attracted by fascism, staffs the far-right movements, and constitutes the main bulk of their popular base. Frequently, this tendency also appears in periods where the bonds of “citizen” representation by political parties are weakened and in periods where the state is restructured in a conservative direction. Regarding fascism, this support could be interpreted by the specific elements of common character of anticapitalism-within-capitalism that are shared by the middle bourgeoisie and the traditional petty bourgeoisie, in relation to the “antiplutocratic” declarations of fascism. As noted, this common character is based on the middle bourgeoisie and the traditional petty bourgeoisie’s common interest against large capitalist companies, which constitute a threat to their survival as classes that own means of production. Poulantzas writes in this connection: “The ‘anti-capitalist’ aspect of petty-bourgeois aspirations has an important place in this. Declarations against ‘big money’ are aimed mainly at those

21. Since the significance of the coherence of the family-collective-entity is much more crucial in the case of the SCP labor process than that of the HMP, we expect that traditional values may be nested par excellence within traditional (according to our analysis) petty bourgeois entities.

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fractions of big capital whose interests most obviously harmed those of the classic petty bourgeoisie” (1974, 254).

Moreover, “the ‘traditional’ petty bourgeoisie ... is more strongly attracted to *right-wing extremist movements* in ‘normal’ conjunctures than the new petty bourgeoisie: for example McCarthyism in the United States and Poujadism in France” (244). This tendency toward right-wing extremism of the traditional (as defined in this paper) petty bourgeoisie may, of course, fade away in all those conjunctures when reformism is politically strengthened, becoming thus also a vehicle for the petty bourgeoisie’s political demands (mainly “wealth redistribution”).

On account of its propensity to favor “democratization of the state,” “wealth redistribution,” and the growth of collective competences, the new petty bourgeoisie is to a great extent oriented toward trade-union activity and reformist political parties, while a significant proportion of the cadres of *socialist revolution* also emerge from its ranks. “After the war, a section of the petty bourgeoisie seems to have swung ... onto the side of the working class. Employees and civil servants openly participated in the big strikes and street demonstrations, and joined unions. They also gave their electoral support ... to social democracy, and more rarely to the Communist Party” (260). It should be remembered that, according to Poulantzas, three fractions are formed within the new petty bourgeoisie that could be polarized objectively toward the working class. However, as we have already argued, one of these fractions (that of “shop assistants”) is structurally part of the working class and not of the new petty bourgeoisie

Given the above, *Poulantzas’s politically and ideologically “pertinent effects” cannot define a single social class and, in any case, cannot displace structural class determination on the economic level.* (For a critique, see Wright 1980; Laclau 1977; Pannekoek 1909). Moreover, Poulantzas’s analysis is inconsistent with other developments in his work.

*The “lack of an autonomous class strategy” in the middle classes.* The lack of a *strategic class interest* (the potential prospect of class power of its own) is patently clear in the case of the middle bourgeoisie and traditional petty bourgeoisie. As fundamental social classes of capitalism, their model of socioeconomic reproduction corresponds to and exists exclusively under the conditions of private (capitalist) ownership since both SCP and HPM are formed in accordance with capital domination (see also Pannekoek 1909). However, this is not obviously true of the new petty bourgeoisie, which does not own means of production.<sup>22</sup> Irrespective of individual or collective “consciousness,” the tendency toward control of enterprises and the state apparatus derives from the class place of the new petty bourgeoisie: that is, the exercise of capitalist powers as the “depositories” of the scientific knowledge needed for the country’s economic progress. This class place potentially entails the prospect of transition toward a regime of “state capitalism” (“actually existing socialism”), following the model that first emerged in Russia-USSR, at least in the late 1920s (Cliff 1955), and in Eastern Europe after 1945, or in some countries of the

22. “The new middle class [new petty bourgeoisie] has not the slightest interest in keeping for others a privilege in which they themselves have no part” (Pannekoek 1909).

565 Third World such as Nasser's Egypt (Poulantzas 1975, 297; see also Cliff 2000, chap. 6; Howard and King 2001, 118). This is the case when the new petty bourgeoisie's "anticapitalistic" position is expressed as opposition to private ownership.

570 In the state-capitalist regimes of Eastern Europe after 1945, the "bourgeois class of a new type" gained control of the real ownership of the (juridically) "public" means of production, taking control of the surplus product created (Bettelheim 1970; Mao 1975, 1976). This class originated from the transformation and rise to power of sections of the new petty bourgeoisie. In such cases the new petty bourgeoisie (or rather some upper parts of it) *is transformed into a (state) bourgeoisie* (Poulantzas 1975, 297). Nevertheless, the strategy of this potential transformation constitutes a "pertinent effect," which can be located in the class place of the new petty bourgeoisie.

### Conclusion

580 This analysis represents a preliminary formulation of arguments that provide the viewpoint that the petty bourgeoisie does not constitute a single class within capitalism, but is polarized into three classes: the traditional petty bourgeoisie, the new petty bourgeoisie, and the middle bourgeoisie. This conclusion is based on the assumption that there can be neither a unique class definition for all middle-class subcategories on the economic level nor any class definition on the political and ideological levels in contrast to that on the economic level. The traditional petty bourgeoisie is the class of self-employed simple commodity producers, formed within the SCP; the new petty bourgeoisie is the intermediate social class of wage earners which exercises powers in the name of the capitalist system, within the process of capitalist production (CMP) and social reproduction (capitalist superstructure); the middle bourgeoisie is the class of small self-employed entrepreneurs, formed within the HMP, who exploit a marginal number of salaried labor force. (See Table 1.)

585 According to our analysis, Poulantzas's theses on class determination lead to false conclusions. Mistakes in the definition of social classes on the economic level are due to false criteria of class determination. The result is a restricted definition of the working class and an inflated new petty bourgeoisie as well as identification of a nonexploiting with an exploiting social class (traditional petty bourgeoisie and middle bourgeoisie). Furthermore, Poulantzas misunderstands the potential political and ideological positions of the middle classes, being misled by his use of "pertinent effects."

600 Focusing on potential class positions of the middle classes, we conclude that every middle-class subcollectivity produces specific or different "pertinent effects." These effects correspond to the peculiarities of the structural class features of every middle-class collectivity.

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**Table 1** Class Places and Potential Class Positions of Middle Classes

	Middle bourgeoisie	Traditional petty bourgeoisie	New petty bourgeoisie
<b>A. Class Places</b>			
	HMP	SCP	Economic level (CMP) and non-economic level
Real ownership of the means of production (ownership plus possession)	yes	yes	no
Use of the means of production	Partial	yes	no
<b>B. Potential class positions</b>			
<b>I. Ideological-political positions</b>			
<b>“Anticapitalism”</b>			
● as opposition to large capitalist companies	yes	yes	no
● as opposition to the private ownership	no	no	possibly
● as redistribution of wealth	no	yes	yes
<b>Aspirations to upward social mobility</b>			
● through profit	possibly	no	no
● through progress in big companies and the state apparatuses	no	no	yes
<b>Relationship with the capitalist enterprise and the state</b>	external	external	internal
<b>Substantiveness of cohesion of family unit</b>	partial	yes	no
<b>II. Political polarization</b>			
<b>In favor of</b>			
● right-wing extremist movements	yes	yes	no
● reformist movements	no	possibly	yes
<b>III. Autonomous class strategy</b>			
	no	no	possibly

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