

## **CHAPTER 17**

### **THE "MIDDLE CLASS QUESTION"**

One motive for defining a technobureaucratic class within contemporary capitalist social formations is to present a coherent theoretical solution to the "question of the middle class" from a neo-Marxist position - the one that is being adopted in this book for the analysis of social classes and the state. This question has been characterized by the theoretical inability of conventional Marxist analysis to come up with a satisfactory explanation regarding for enormous increase of white collar workers this century. Office workers, salespeople, clerks, managers, technicians, a variety of consultants, military officials and administrators on all levels have multiplied at an astonishing pace in contemporary social formations. A "new middle class" has emerged in all the industrialized countries.

The importance of this "new middle class" is fundamental to contemporary technobureaucratic capitalism, so that it becomes extremely difficult to do any economic or political analysis without considering the role of this class. Its identification either with the bourgeoisie or with the proletariat is obviously unacceptable. Those who believe they have embraced the basic principles of Marx's class theory frequently use the term "middle class" to identify this great mass of technobureaucrats or white collar workers. They deny a new class is emerging, but when they speak of the "middle class" of the "new middle class", or of the "salaried middle class", they are actually acknowledging the emergence of a new class and of new relations of production.

Marx did, in fact, at times use the expression "middle class", but only to identify the petite bourgeoisie and sometimes parts the middle level of the bourgeoisie. This enormous number of managers, officials, consultants, and salespeople working in large public and private, civil and military organizations had not yet appeared. Bureaucrats did not constitute a class as yet; they were simply a status group. Consequently, there is no solution for the question of the middle class in Marx's class theory.

Calling this new, immense social grouping the "middle class" or "new middle class" is a solution which is incompatible with class theory that is based on the role social classes play in the relations of production. It's an adequate solution for functionalist sociologists whose aim is simply to identify and describe the various social strata in terms of power, prestige and income. We can use the term middle "class", although in this case it would be more appropriate to use middle strata or middle layer.

Many Marxists are aware of this, but the theoretical solutions to this problem are either very deceptive or unsatisfactory. We can identify three basic

solutions which in the final analysis only add up to one: incorporate the new class either within the bourgeoisie, or within the proletariat, or divide it in two, with the bottom half forming part of the proletariat, and the top half, of the bourgeoisie.<sup>73</sup>

This "theoretical solution" is implicit or explicit in all "orthodox" Marxist solutions to this question. The highest strata of the bourgeoisie are identified with the bourgeoisie and the rest of the new class, from engineers and middle management to office workers and clerks, is indiscriminately lumped together with the proletariat. As a consequence, the bourgeoisie, working class and technobureaucracy lose their specific character as classes. It is no longer possible to define them as a function of concrete relations of production. The bourgeoisie is no longer made up exclusively of those who own the means of production, since the top level of the technobureaucracy is included in their numbers. The working class is no longer characterized by manual or productive labor as it now includes an enormous mass of workers, from office workers to engineers. This identification of the technobureaucrats as working class is usually based on the fact that they are "wage workers". First of all, they are not exactly wage workers, since they receive salaries rather than wages. Second, if office workers are wage workers, so too are high-level technobureaucrats.

The fact is that this attempt at resolving the "question of the middle class" is untenable. It can be explained only as a poverty of theory or perhaps the desire of many intellectuals and politicians who belong to the technobureaucracy to identify themselves with the working class. In this sense, we can see the incorporation of low and middle-level technobureaucrats to the working class as a political strategy quite common to the left, which not only seeks to identify itself but also potential followers with the class which would hold power in the hold the future: the proletariat.

## **1. "Proletarianization" of the Middle Class**

Thus this poverty of theory is wedded to a strategy for class alliance, which is a mere possibility. The result is the expeditious incorporation of the bulk of the

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<sup>73</sup> As Anthony Giddens observes "Since the turn of the century, when the rate of relative increase in the white-collar sector first became apparent, the idea has been advanced - particularly, of course, by Marxist authors - that this 'new middle class' will become split into two: because it is not really a class at all, since its position, and the outlook and attitudes of its members, cannot be interpreted in terms of property relations." (1973: 192-193).

"new middle class" into the working class. In order to substantiate this position empirically, the constantly recurring though unfounded argument of the proletarianization of the middle class appears once more. Nevertheless, its inadequacy is apparent, a function of the very question that is under examination. If the "middle class question" exists at all, this is because this social group has increased rather than decreased and subsequently has become a fundamental social and political reality of our time, completely distinct from the question of the working class. Though theoretically imprecise, the expression "middle class" has become a tool of common usage for the social scientist or anyone else who wishes to analyze current society in terms of economics and politics. This has occurred precisely because this social group has become a true social class, a "new middle class" (which I prefer to call "technobureaucracy") rather than being proletarianized, or merged with the working class.

It is true that Marx spoke of the "proletarianization of the middle class", but he was referring to that process within the traditional middle class, more precisely the proletarianization of the petite bourgeoisie, characterized by small-scale mercantile production. This really occurred then and still occurs, though the petite bourgeoisie continues to survive as an auxiliary class to the bourgeoisie.<sup>74</sup> What Marx could not predict and therefore could not analyze was the appearance of a new class of technobureaucrats, since the indications of its emergence were only weak and imprecise in his time.

Given the inadequacy of the position on the proletarianization of the middle class, some authors have resorted to another kind of argument in order to incorporate the lower and middle levels of the technobureaucracy within the working class. This is the increasing mechanization of their work as well as their tendency to unionize.<sup>75</sup>

In fact, mechanization is taking place, in certain cases blurring the clear-cut distinction between office workers and production workers. The low-level technobureaucracy is also exploited within the framework of technobureaucratic capitalism and tends to organize itself into unions. Nevertheless there is no reason to believe that unions are the exclusive domain of the working class. In

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<sup>74</sup> According to the calculations made by the Le Capitalisme Monopoliste d'Etat group, the "non wage-earning middle strata", that is, the petty bourgeoisie, made up of small farmers, salesmen, craftsmen and other types of independent workers, has decreased sharply in France. They represented 34,3% of the active population in 1954, but only 21% in 1968. (Paul Boccara et al., 1971)

<sup>75</sup> For an analysis of the mechanization and fragmentation of office work, see Paul Boccara et al. (1971: 242-244).

fact, their unionization does not necessarily imply an increase in working class power. In referring to the unionization of white collar workers, Anthony Giddens observes:

"Where there are marked divergences and conflicts between manual and non-manual unions, these persist, or may even become accentuated; where there is a higher degree of mutual penetration, the rise in white-collar unionism does not significantly alter such situation". (1973: 193).

## 2. Office Workers and Production Workers

The fundamental difference between an office worker, that is, a low-level technobureaucrat, and a production worker, is the fact that the former performs coordinative labor while the latter performs productive or operative labor. Even though production workers often need greater technical knowledge than office workers, they work directly in production, whereas the office worker does paperwork. Such labor is not directly involved in production but rather an auxiliary function of coordination and control.

A further basic distinction is that the office worker follows a bureaucratic career, passing through various steps or positions, whereas the production worker's chances for promotion are quite limited. Production workers generally reach their high point in earnings before their thirtieth birthday. Prior to this they had time to develop the specialized skills necessary for the jobs, while still having their youthful vitality. The office workers, on the other hand, have a long wait until they reach the high point in terms of career and salary. We see this evidenced by the greater social mobility between generations among office employees, or in more general terms, among technobureaucrats, than among productive workers. This greater mobility derives precisely from the fact that career is specific to the technobureaucrat.<sup>76</sup>

Office workers tend to behave very differently from production workers. The reason for that may be either the distinct nature of the low-level technobureaucrat's work (coordinative labor) in relation to production work

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<sup>76</sup> Poulantzas empirically confirms the greater social mobility of the "new petty bourgeoisie", that is, the technobureaucracy. He states: "There are almost no manual workers at all who move up into the bourgeoisie in the course of their working lives, while this does occur for some 10 per cent of the male white collar 'employees' who change their position (becoming higher-level managers) and the proportion is still greater for the intermediate staff." (1974: 283). His data refers to France today.

(productive labor), or the existence of a career and social mobility for the former and not the latter. The key point is that by the nature of their labor, production workers are the object of capitalist exploitation, of the extraction of the surplus value that they produce. They feel this, or know this. On the other hand, though the office workers are also exploited, they perform coordinative labor and feel to some extent that they own a share, however small, of the bureaucratic organization. The relations of production are different, and so are the situations of these two classes. As Maurice Halbwachs notes:

"One of the chief determinants of their behavior (and here they differ radically from workers proper) seems to be their devotion to the business they work for. There are obvious reasons for this... Clerical workers, like civil servants, occupy a different position from workers. Clerical workers are morally concerned with the progress of their firm." (1955: 106-107)

Both conservative theories on the "increasingly bourgeois nature of the working class", and Marxist theories of the "proletarianization of the technobureaucrats", point to the similarity between office workers and production workers. However, Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhofer and Platt's critique of this view is based on extensive research on the British working class in the seventies. They note:

"The emphasis placed on the increasing comparability of standards of income and consumption and white-collar occupations had led to neglect of the fact that the two categories remain much more clearly differentiated when their members are considered as producers. Despite the possibly leveling effects of some forms of advanced technology and modern employment policies, the work situation of white-collar employees is still generally superior of that of manual wage earners in terms of working conditions and amenities, continuity of employment, fringe benefits, long term income projects and promotion chances." (1969: 24).

What differentiates the low-level technobureaucrats from the production workers is that the technobureaucrats consider themselves to be a part of the bureaucratic organization they work for and in which there is always the perspective of promotion. The technobureaucrats feel in some way to be partners in the organization because in some way they actually own a small part of the organization, whereas the production workers are absolutely denied ownership of any sort.

Actually, the "new working class" made up of technical workers and functionaries is much more a desire, an ideological vision held by certain representatives of the left, than a reality. This is not to say that there are no alliances between fractions of the lower and medium level technobureaucrats and production workers. Communist parties and parties of the left in general throughout the capitalist world are an example of this type of alliance. But it is a far cry from equating the technobureaucracy, and more specifically its lower layer, with the working class. This result can only be arrived at through considerable theoretical machinations.

### **3. Enlarging the concept of working class**

Another solution, similar to the incorporation of the lower and middle levels of the technobureaucracy into the working class, is to leave this question unresolved. This approach emphasizes the similarities of the two groups, emphasizing the need for and viability of their alliance. This concept is typified by the group linked to the French Communist Party who wrote *Le Capitalisme Monopoliste d'Etat* (Paul Boccard et al., 1971).

Instead of dividing society into three classes as a supposedly orthodox Marxist group would do (bourgeoisie, proletariat and petite bourgeoisie [vestiges of small mercantile production in the French social formation]), the CME group divides French society into the four large "classes" or "strata" we see in Table 4. They are the working class, the intermediate wage-earning strata, the non-salaried middle strata, and leaders of capitalist enterprises and consultants to the bourgeoisie.

One of the CME group's primary concerns is to show that the working class has grown not only in absolute terms but also in relative terms. This is evidently a response to the theory widely spread, especially by the North America functionalist sociologists, on the increasingly bourgeois nature of the working class as well as its relative decrease in size. While the CME group's ideological motivation is apparent, so is that of the conservative sociologists.

Who is right or wrong in this argument depends on the concept of working class we employ when examining the facts. If we use working class in a restricted sense, then there is a relative decrease; a broader sense of the term would imply an increase. In accordance with Marxist tradition, the working class is understood in a limited sense, made up of "productive" manual laborers, that is producers of material goods or, rather, producers of surplus value. Paradoxically, it is a limited concept of this sort that conservative sociologists use in concluding that the working class is shrinking in relative terms. Though the CME group claims to be loyal to Marx, it seeks to enlarge the concept of working class as well as of productive labor so that this contingent is not decreased.

The fundamental problem is the inclusion of manual service workers (non-material production) within the working class. There has been an extraordinary growth in their numbers, but if we stick to a strictly Marxist concept of productive labor, service workers would have to be excluded. Marx considered productive labor to be not that which produced only surplus value but also material goods. In fact, the production of surplus value can only be realized through the production of material goods which Marx equated with

wealth, following the tradition of Adam Smith. In principle, services are part of the circulation rather than the production of surplus value.

However it is clear that this kind of analysis becomes less meaningful, both in political and economic terms, in a world in which the service sector submits to the logic of capitalist accumulation. In defining productive labor and limiting his concept of the working class, Marx was much more concerned with defining historical categories which would allow him to evaluate the advance of the capitalist mode of production, and consequently of the industrialization process, than in defining logical abstract categories. At this time trade was still submitted to the principles of speculative mercantile capitalism, and services in general were of a personal nature, located outside of capitalism. Thus it was natural for Marx to exclude workers involved in these activities from his concept of productive labor, even when this involved manual labor.

On this basis it is correct for the CME group to broaden the concept of the working class to include those services which are integrated within capitalism. In their words:

"Not only new layers of workers are integrated into the working class, but certain activities that were not part of the material production sector now assume a productive character: they become producers of surplus value. This is the case of certain household functions (urban heating, collective food services, automatic laundry services, household maintenance), of certain public services (garbage collection, public lightening)." (Paul Boccara et al., 1971: 220).

But what is not correct or reasonable is to make a new interpretation of Marx's concept of the productive labor, just because one correctly wants to broaden the concept of working class. It is more reasonable to abandon this concept when we must analyze contemporary society - a society where the transition to capitalism has already been achieved. The concept of productive work was important to Adam Smith and to Marx for explaining the transition to capitalism. It is a rather poor concept to be utilized in technobureaucratic capitalism.

#### **4. The theoretical failure of the CME group**

The great political-theoretical question the CME group had to face when they looked at the question of class in technobureaucratic capitalism was that of the new middle strata, or according to their terminology, of the "intermediate wage-earning strata". Its astonishing growth is illustrated in Table 4, where we see its relative participation in the work force move from 21% to 34.3% of the employed French population in the short space of fourteen years, from 1954 to

1968. In absolute terms, this period showed an increase from 4,400,000 middle-level wage earners to 6,375,000 in 1968.

In the first place this growth took place at the expense of the petite bourgeoisie, working in small-scale agricultural, commercial and industrial units as well as independent professions. The concentration and centralization of capital liquidated many small-scale commercial and productive enterprises. Increased agricultural productivity prompted a rural exodus and a decrease of the peasant population in both relative and absolute terms. Lawyers and doctors who previously were independent professionals become salaried workers as capital became concentrated and also as certain new activities tied to the service sector submitted to the logic of capital and bureaucratic organization.

As a second correlated factor, there is the concentration of capital and the creation of large bureaucratic organizations that increasingly absorb a large part of the population into new professions. Engineers, technical experts, managers, consultants and researchers enter the economy with the expectation of earning salaries.

Finally, as the CME group observes, the massive increase in wage workers, particularly service employees, is principally a consequence of the expansion of commercial and financial activities undertaken by capitalist business enterprises. The increase in these activities, in turn, is explained by the growing complexity of sales and distribution systems in advanced capitalist societies, as well as by the need for sophisticated commercial and communications services in order to avoid market crisis.

In light of this enormous growth of the middle strata, the members of the CME group saw themselves faced with a problem. Their desire was just to integrate it into the working class. And at certain points this is almost what they did. In this way the alliance they proposed between these strata and blue collar workers would be automatically achieved, at least theoretically, since the working class and the middle strata would belong to the same class. However, this theoretical leap did not even have a minimum of support in class theory (a much larger theoretical leap would be necessary than that which included service workers among the working class). The group reconsidered and left the question unresolved. Instead of recognizing the existence of a new class - the technobureaucracy, or any other name they prefer - they chose to leave the theoretical question hanging, while at the same time continuing to emphasize the proximity or affinity between the technobureaucracy (excluding the upper strata) and the working class, insisting on the viability of a political alliance between the two groups. According to the CME group:

"under the standpoint of class analysis, office employees, technical experts, engineers, researchers are located in an intermediary position that makes them each time nearer the working class, but they cannot be mixed with it." (Paul Boccara et al., 1971: 238-239).

Thus engineers, technical experts, middle managers and office employees are excluded from the capitalist class's decision-making process in the CME group's view. But as their "wages" (actually their salaries) are becoming closer and closer to those of production workers, they are as exploited as production workers are. Their place in the hierarchy diminishes with each passing day. Some might even be considered to be production workers in certain situations, such as some engineers and technical workers. But the majority of them are collectors of surplus value, which makes it impossible to include them among the working class:

"Even if their activity is not directly productive, they are all waged workers, individually and collectively exploited... The conditions for a standing alliance (with workers), opening opportunities for common struggles for democracy and socialism, are now present." (Paul Boccara et al., 1971: 239).

Independent of the existence of political conditions for this alliance, it is obvious that the "theoretical solution" of leaving the question of the middle strata open in regard to social class is of a Franciscan poverty. In summary, the CME group is unable to define the question of the middle class beyond such banal statements as:

"The class position of the middle strata is complex. Only part of their members can be located in the working class; in their totality they cannot be located in the non waged middle strata." (Boccara et al., 1971: 239).

Table 4 - Social Structure of French Employed Population

	1954	1962	1968
Working Class	40.3	43.0	44.5
Intermediate Wage Earning Strata	20.4	25.6	30.5
Non-Salaried Middle Strata	34.3	26.9	21.0
Leaders of Capitalist Enterprises and Consultants to the Bourgeoisie	5.0	4.5	4.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Paul Boccara et al. (1971: 253), based on data from the I.N.S.E.E.