

**RETHINKING "THE MIDDLE CLASS":  
IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTIONS AND  
CONTRADICTIONAL STRUCTURAL LOCATIONS**

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Some years ago, Anthony Giddens (1981, 16), as part of his campaign against functionalism within sociology, proposed that the term "function" be expunged from the technical lexicon of the social sciences. This was evidently a tongue-in-cheek proposal, but it made a point: the term "function" frequently obscures as much as it illuminates in social-scientific analysis and discourse. In this paper, I argue that the obscurantist character of the term "the middle class" is such as to disqualify it as a legitimate and useful scientific concept. Indeed, the case for an outright ban on its use strikes me as a compelling one, not only because the term "the middle class" conceals far more than it reveals about contemporary social reality; but also because there is much to indicate that it has been *ideologically constructed* to do so.

The evidence for this proposition begins with the common-place observation that appeals to "the middle class" are a staple of conventional political discourse, that is, of discourse that accepts the framework of liberal-democratic capitalism. The invocation and sanctification of "middle-class interests," "middle-class values," or "middle-class aspirations" have long been part of the elementary algebra of liberal-democratic politics within developed capitalist societies. Indeed, the middle class may be seen as an "x" whose content -- or value -- is both ineffable and infinitely redefinable at the level of individual subjectivity. Winning political formulas, understood both in electoral and ideological terms, depend critically on successful conjunctural "definitions" of the aspirations, values and subjectively-perceived interests of those within society who, at any particular time, identify themselves as constituents of the middle class.

Conventional politicians accept and abet the image of a preponderantly "middle-class society" both because such imagery is crucial to liberal-democratic ideological hegemony (and therewith the political stability of capitalist society) and because winning electoral formulas are generally predicated on the unchallengability of this imagery. Even so, this ideological imagery should by no means be seen as simply an "illusion" consciously perpetrated by political, economic, or media elites in an effort to dupe the masses. For this imagery has a real and substantial social-psychological foundation in the lived experiences of most members of liberal-democratic societies. It is no less an "ideological construction" on this account, however, if by ideology we understand a way of thinking and of seeing things that reduces the social to the natural, that is partial and one-sided, and that serves dominant class interests.

***The Middle Class and Contradictional Structural Locations***

The widespread use of the term "the middle-class," when conjoined to the concept of a "middle-class majority," serves a preponderantly *ideological* function in that it is a crucial element of an image of society that conceals fundamental aspects of capitalist social reality and its attendant class structure. It is disturbing, therefore, when otherwise critical sociologists become complicit

in the legitimation of the notion of the "middle class" in its most vulgar and taken-for-granted, conventional usages. A case in point is Dennis Forcese in his book *The Canadian Class Structure*. Forcese is here criticizing the wide-spread notion that Canadian society is a largely "classless" one:

What classlessness has meant is peculiar to the middle class. Middle-class Canadians tell researchers that they perceive themselves as living in a homogeneous middle-class society. We are taught to think in such a fashion by our parents, peers, the media, and the schools.... The myth of a middleclass society of equal opportunity is thereby perpetuated. As one author sums it up, 'Canadians see their society as "classless" because the vast majority of persons with whom they interact are, just as they themselves are, members of the middle class. It is precisely because we perceive our structure in this way that we ignore both the extremes, that is, the poor and the rich. The larger the middle class, the less visible the extremes' (John Hofley, 1971). (Forcese 1986, 24)

Despite their evident and welcome concern with establishing the social-scientific salience of poverty and concentrated wealth in Canadian society, Forcese and Hofley here verge on displacing the myth of "classlessness" with the similar, and equally pernicious, myth of a preponderantly "middle-class society." Furthermore, neither Forcese nor Hofley appears to recognize that it is essentially arbitrary to define the extremes of society as the rich and the poor; that this is a purely distributional and impressionistic notion of what constitutes the poles of the capitalist class structure; and that such a conceptualization obscures the decisively important capital/labour antagonism that is at the heart of the dynamic and developmental tendencies of a capitalist class society.

Writing from a Marxist perspective, Bill Livant has deplored the consequences of beginning the analysis of class structure with the assumption that the middle class is the defining reality of contemporary capitalist society. "We know," Livant writes, "that the middle cannot be found in itself. We know that the middle is a contradiction; if we start with the middle as the basis of our description we won't be able to see it. In short, we won't have any idea what 'the middle' is in the middle of" (1979, 287). Livant makes the important point that, when we speak of extremes in relation to which a "middle" is defined, we need to refer to those extremes having the greatest significance, the greatest practical salience. Livant defines these as "the many" and "the few." But a more precise Marxist specification, for a capitalist class society, would be "those who must sell their labour-power for a wage" (wage-labourers/proletariat) and "those who appropriate the labour of others by virtue of their ownership of means of production" (capitalists/ bourgeoisie). In relation to these (objectively definable) extremes, a "middle" can be conceptualized which combines, in contradictory ways and in varying permutations, certain aspects or elements of each.

The strength of Marxist class theory is its commitment to a conception of class that is relational but based also on *objective criteria* (pre-eminently structural locations with respect to the means of production) rather than on subjective and arbitrary notions. But Marxist class theory is by no means homogeneous. Significant differences exist between such theorists as E. O. Wright,

Guglielmo Carchedi and Robert Weil. Wright (1978) dispenses with the concept of the middle class entirely, preferring to deploy the category of the petty-bourgeoisie as a survival of (non-capitalist) independent (or simple) commodity production: a "pure" class unto itself whose members are characterized by ownership of means of production, self-employment and non-exploitation of wage-labour. For Wright, objectively "contradictory class locations" exist between this traditional petty-bourgeoisie and the capitalist class (small employers who command the labour of others); between this petty-bourgeoisie and the working class (salaried employees who direct their own labour, but not the labour of others); and between the bourgeoisie and the working class (managers, supervisors and foremen, who embody some of the characteristics of both capital and labour). Taken together, these contradictory class locations encompass most of the elements that Carchedi (1977) refers to as "the new middle class" -- a class whose "structural interests are contradictory since this class partly performs the function of labor (i.e., it carries out the labor process) and partly performs the function of capital (i.e., it carries out the work of control and surveillance within the production process)" (Carchedi 1987, 119).

Weil (1995) provides a compelling argument for the proposition that the traditional petty-bourgeoisie, together with Wright's "contradictory class locations," should be conceptualized as elements straddling the capital-labour divide, and that the petty-bourgeoisie is thus itself in a contradictory structural location. On this conceptualization, the petty-bourgeoisie is not a survival of some mythic self-sustaining mode of production known as "independent commodity production" but an integral component of the capitalist mode of production. The petty bourgeoisie, although it has roots in pre-capitalist forms of production, has long been and is today "capitalistic" in character. It encompasses within itself the role of capital (ownership of means of production/the imperative to exploit labour) and the role of wage-labour (the imperative to work for a living). As Weil suggests, "for Marx the idea of 'self-employment' involves both being a 'wage-earner' for oneself and gaining a 'rentier' profit from capital as well. It arises precisely because even 'self-employed' small owners, the 'pure' petty-bourgeoisie, are capitalistic" (1995, 13).

Weil makes the important point that what is fundamental to an authentically Marxist understanding of "class" in general, and the capitalist "middle class" in particular, is Marx's law of labour-value, which states that the sole source of all new value, including the surplus-value realized as profit, is living labour (see also Smith 1994). Weil states:

For [Marx], commodity and labor value are both aspects of a single "unity," bearing the nature of each other even when 'formally' apart. It was this that enabled him to see that even the "pure" petty bourgeoisie simultaneously realize the full value of their labor and at the same time treat it capitalistically as wages and profit....(1995, 15)

Weil observes that Wright regards the traditional, self-employed petty-bourgeoisie as "neither exploiter nor exploited," but this is clearly at odds with Marx's dialectical insight that the petty-bourgeoisie is "neither exploiter nor exploited" *and* "both exploiter and exploited." The "pure" petty-bourgeois, no less than the capitalist, is obliged to appropriate surplus-labor under capitalist conditions; and where the petty-bourgeois producer is not in a position to appropriate the surplus labour of others, he is obliged to appropriate his own surplus labour. Petty bourgeois owners

treat their income as divided into "wages" and "profit," and the combined sum of the two is the total value yielded by their own labour (Weil 1995, 11). In a remarkable passage cited by Weil, Marx states:

...the producer in fact creates his own surplus-value [on the assumption that he sells his commodity at its value], in other words, only his own labour is materialized in the whole product. But that he is able to appropriate *for himself* the whole product of his own labour, and that the excess of the value of his product over the average price for instance of his day's labour is not appropriated by a third person, a *master*, he owes not to his labour -- which does not distinguish him from other labourers -- but to his ownership of the means of production. It is therefore only through his ownership of these that he takes possession of his own surplus-labour, and thus bears to himself as wage-labourer the relation of being his own capitalist. (Marx 1963, 408-409)

By combining Marx's insight concerning the contradictory character of the petty-bourgeoisie and Carchedi's insight into the contradictory functions of the many waged or salaried employees that he subsumes under the rubric of "the new middle class," we have the basis for defining an authentic, albeit relatively small "intermediate" class that is situated, in contradictory fashion, between capital and wage-labour. Some elements of this (highly heterogeneous) class are objectively very close to a working-class structural location, while others stand closer to a capitalist class location.

The existence of such an intermediate class (or classes) is not in dispute, nor is the scientific value of its analysis. But the *discursive association* of this class (which constitutes a distinct minority within contemporary capitalism) with popular representations of where "the majority" is located within the class structure represents an illegitimate adaptation to the ideological structures embedded in popular discourse on class. The persistence of this association within social-scientific literature constitutes the most compelling reason for insisting that the term "the middle class" is *inherently obscurantist* and that it therefore ought to be banned from any discourse on class that aspires to scientific rigour.

### ***The Social Psychology of Subjective Perceptions of the 'Middle Class'***

The social-scientific analysis of class must, of course, have as *one* of its concerns the source of the popular notion that "the middle class is the majority." The habitual practice of identifying the middle class with middle income groups comprising the majority of the population is one that has many sponsors, including those same agencies of socialization that Forcese cites as perpetrators of the myths of classlessness and equal opportunity: families, schools, churches, political parties, governments and mass media that faithfully disseminate ideas and images of society that emphasize social harmony, a symmetry of merit and reward, and the naturalness of "class peace."

In addition to these transmission belts of the dominant ideology, however, it is necessary to give due weight to certain social-psychological factors rooted in "reference group" dynamics. In a recent article, Kelley and Evans (1995:157) point out that:

People's subjective images of class and class conflict reflect a mixture of both materialist forces and the vivid subjective images of equality and consensus among family, friends, and coworkers. These reference group processes distort perceptions of class: They make most people think they are middle class, thereby weakening the link between objective class and subjective perceptions of class and class conflict, fostering consensual rather than conflictual views of class relations, and attenuating the links between class and politics....

By materialist forces, Kelley and Evans understand those objective aspects of class position defined by ownership and control of the means of production (traditional Marxist criteria) as well as educational attainment, occupational status, and income level (criteria associated with the "socio-economic status" approach of sociological functionalism). While it is problematic to treat occupational status as an objective or materialist indicator of class, and simply wrong of them to attribute to Marx "the materialist thesis that politics reflects people's objective class positions" (ibid, 157), Kelley and Evans argue, with some justification, that reference group dynamics can have a more powerful effect on people's perceptions of their class position than "materialist forces." One might quibble with the assumption that reference group processes are not themselves "materialist forces," but, leaving that question aside, Kelley and Evans are right to observe that people often "perceive the world as an enlarged version of their reference group" (ibid, 158). For this reason:

[People] assess their class locations in light of the educational levels, occupations, and incomes of the people around them. Because family, friends and coworkers are usually similar...most people see themselves as average and unexceptional. Moreover, even very high-status people place many others above themselves, and very low-status people see others even lower....Hence, most people locate themselves near the middle of the class hierarchy. (ibid)

Surveys of popular perceptions of class in six western countries confirm that subjective class identification is overwhelmingly with the "middle classes" in a standardized ten-class schema. In Australia, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, the United States and Great Britain, "the modal class position is near the middle of the 10-class scheme, with a majority perceiving themselves to be in class 4,5, or 6" (ibid, 166). This leads Kelley and Evans to conclude that: "There is no evidence of a numerically dominant lower class, as traditional materialist theories posit. Instead, reference group forces restrict the subjective arena to a narrow range in the middle of the class hierarchy" (ibid).

Kelley and Evans are undoubtedly correct to adduce reference group dynamics as a powerful factor inhibiting the development of the working class as a "class for itself" and fostering the notion amongst working-class people that they are rather typical members of a middle-class society. But the existence of powerful forces deflecting the development of proletarian class consciousness would hardly be a revelation to Karl Marx and his successors. Indeed, "there is no evidence" that the Marxist tradition of class theory has ever maintained that "the lower class" is "numerically dominant" -- either in "objective" or "subjective" terms. Rather, Marx's view was that the development of capitalist society would bring about the inexorable *proletarianization* of the majority of its population. It was a *working class majority* that Marx anticipated, not a "lower

class majority." Moreover, the key political and pedagogical task from Marx's perspective was hardly to combat workers' conceptions of themselves as average members of the "middle strata" of society, still less to convince the working-class majority that they belong to "the lower class," but to impart to them an understanding that (a) capitalism operates primarily in the interests of the capitalist class and at the expense of those who must work for a living, and (b) capitalism can and should be replaced by a new socialist order that can serve the interests of the vast majority. Such an understanding is the essence of Marx's concept of proletarian class consciousness. Contrary to Kelley and Evans' implication, Marx never held that such a political class consciousness could arise *spontaneously* under the impact of "materialist forces." If it could, there would be no need for political organization, agitation and education to help the working class to overcome all those formidable subjective factors and ideological notions that impede an objective and scientific understanding of capitalist social reality – obstacles to class consciousness that have engaged the theoretical and practical interest of Marxists as diverse as Kautsky and Lenin, Gramsci and Trotsky.

To be sure, capitalist development since Marx's day has produced a bewilderingly complex occupational structure that *appears* to contradict Marx's prediction of an inexorable process of proletarianization and simple class polarization. The rapid growth of the industrial proletariat during the era of capitalist industrialization was succeeded in the cradles of Western capitalism by the decline of the "blue-collar" industrial workforce. Until recently, the twentieth century saw a proliferation of white-collar employments, many of them "bureaucratic positions" predicated on the separation of head and hand. More and more wage-labourers, in the developed capitalist countries, began to perform what Marx would have called *unproductive labour*, that is, labour that may be "socially necessary" to the reproduction of the capitalist system, but which is not directly implicated in the production of goods and services *in the commodity form* (the form of the product of labour that yields a profit to capital). The secular expansion of the state in most capitalist countries has also produced a growing number of (unproductive) wage-labourers who are not in the employ of private capital, but who nevertheless serve the *social capital* by reproducing the institutional conditions and attenuating the systemic contradictions of the capitalist order (Smith 1994).

None of these trends, however, refutes Marx's fundamental prognostications regarding the developmental tendencies of the capitalist class structure. Indeed, one can argue that Marx's theoretical framework remains indispensable to *explaining* the proliferation of socially necessary unproductive labour, the bureaucratization of industry and the state, and the decline of the blue-collar industrial workforce. For what is critical to the explication of these trends is an adequate analysis of the laws of capital accumulation, the real subordination of labour by capital, the crisis tendencies of advanced capitalism, and the processes of objective socialization that prefigure, albeit in a distorted form, some of the contours of the future socialist society -- an analysis vigorously pursued by Marx in the three volumes of *Capital*.

Notwithstanding Kelley and Evans' off-hand and unsubstantiated assertion of a "numerical decline of the working class" (1995, 175), Marx's main predictions about the evolution of the capitalist class structure would seem to have been strikingly confirmed. Marx was quite right to foresee an increasing tendency for the direct producers to be separated (alienated) from their means of production and to be transformed into wage labourers. In a related vein, he was correct

to forecast the gradual disappearance of independent commodity producers -- the traditional petty-bourgeoisie of small farmers, fishermen, artisans, etc. -- as well as small shopkeepers in the sphere of circulation. Moreover, he was able to foresee accurately -- and to specify the "law of motion" of the capitalist economy that promotes -- the process of concentration and centralization of capital that permits the greater part of the productive resources of society to come under the control of a relatively small number of capitalist enterprises (what nowadays are called transnational corporations and conglomerates). In all of these forecasts Marx has been proven remarkably prescient -- indeed, far more prescient than most of his contemporaries. In particular, his prediction of a fundamental division of society between capitalist employers and those who must sell their labour-power (intellectual or manual, skilled or unskilled) in order to live has been completely borne out.

What is questionable, however, for Marxist and non-Marxist theorists alike, is the notion that the obligation to sell one's labour-power can be seen as a *sufficient* criterion for a working-class location on the class map. If it is, then clearly the great mass of people in advanced capitalist societies (upwards of 90% in Canada) have already been inducted into the ranks of the working class, even though many of them may fail to realize it. From a Marxist perspective, there is an attractive simplicity to such an image of modern capitalist societies; but there are also major problems with it. To cite an extreme example: how meaningful is it to include within the same class category an assembly line worker at an auto plant and a police officer whose job may be to escort scabs across the auto workers' picket lines in the midst of a strike? Members of the police force may be wage-labourers, but they are also "hired guns" on behalf of bourgeois property: the enforcers of laws that preeminently serve the interests of capital. Within the production process, some wage-labourers may carry out supervisory functions that are of crucial significance to maintaining capitalist domination over the labour process. Such wage-labourers (call them scientific managers) may carry out a range of work tasks that are technically necessary to production; but their supervisory tasks define them also as "hired guns" of capital, at least to a certain degree. The point is simple: the obligation to sell one's labour-power to make a living may be a *necessary* condition for a working-class designation; but *the nature of their work* will serve to situate many wage-labourers in ambiguous categories somewhere "between" the working class and the capitalist class. Moreover, there is no denying the fact that such categories constitute a significant buffer between the two principal classes of advanced capitalist society.

But how large is that buffer, how independent can it become from capitalist control, and how significant an obstacle is it to the development of the class struggle that Marx saw as crucial to the transition to socialism? These are the questions that ultimately shape the most important debates among social theorists regarding "the middle class." As in all such debates, we are obliged to sort out its ideological from its scientific determinants.

### *Ideological Constructions of the Middle Class*

I have already indicated that there are powerful forces at work promoting the notion of the centrality or over-arching significance of the middle class in advanced capitalist societies. I want now to indicate the senses in which the conventional (popular and often scholarly) notion of "the middle class" is an ideological construction, and I want to do this in connection with two fundamental propositions.

**Proposition One.** *Within non-Marxist social theory, the notion of a preponderantly middle-class society functions to discourage a focus on the class struggle and the structural antagonism between labour and capital.*

The ideological strength of non-Marxist approaches to class analysis lies in their *flexibility* in the service of the notion of the "middle-class society." If the conventionally-understood "middle class" begins to disappear according to one set of definitional criteria, it can be readily reconstituted on a new set of criteria. For functionalists, this is easily done by changing the relevant distributional criteria (income levels, socio-economic status indices, etc.) defining "upper," "middle" and "lower" classes. For those following in the tradition of Max Weber, classical sociology's greatest anti-Marx, the problem is one of redefining the unique "market capacities" that are designated to conceptualize the middle class: levels of authority or control on the job; relative positions within a bureaucratic hierarchy; skills and educational credentials (Weber 1978; Giddens 1973). The essential *arbitrariness* of both functionalist and Weberian approaches to defining class boundaries appears well-suited to the ideological imperative to give pride of place to *subjective* considerations in the conceptualization of class. In this way, non-Marxist social theory adapts to and encourages those ideological and social-psychological forces that dominate popular discourse on class and that encourage the notion of "the middle class society," *regardless of objective trends with respect to income inequality and regardless of the persistent realities of structured social inequality under capitalism.*

From the end of the Second World War up to the 1970s, most advanced capitalist societies saw a small but real attenuation of income inequalities that conferred some credence on the notion that "the middle class" was both expanding and becoming more prosperous. If the middle class is defined simply as an ensemble of *middle-income categories*, as it often is in popular discourse, then socio-economic trends for some three decades lent powerful support to the notion of an emergent "middle-class society." Even today, income distribution graphs for most Western countries still appear as bell-shaped curves. However, humps have been growing at the extremes of the income scales of many of these countries at a rapid rate over the past twenty years. In the United States in particular, the statistical evidence for the decline of the "middle-income" middle class is considerable. The majority of the population may still be clustered around the median income, but that is cold comfort for the 80% of the workforce whose real wages are at least 18% lower today than they were in the early 1970s (Head 1996).

Non-Marxist class theory is not entirely subjectivist in orientation, however. Within the context of a dualistic and non-dialectical social ontology (Smith 1994, Ch.11), equal weight can be given to material factors that are deemed to have a "natural" basis. Hence, the *technological determinism* that informs both functionalist and Weberian class theory encourages the notion that class is largely an epiphenomenon -- a mere "effect" -- of the technical division of labour, which itself is influenced by the changing structures of "the market" (cf. Campbell 1977). In contrast to Marxist theory, class relations are not seen as *fundamental*, as a central determinant of changes in the technical division of labour (e.g., the transition to flexible, "just in time" production) or in market structures (e.g., the expansion of the reserve army of the unemployed). Accordingly, the forces that are reshaping and restructuring the world economy in this era of globalization are not conceived to be essentially class-based, and their effects on the class structure (whether this is

defined in "occupational" or "market capacity" terms) are conceived as givens that flow inexorably from the march of science/technology and the disciplining rigours of the "free market."

The upshot is that the articulation of subjectivist and technological-determinist perspectives on class permit non-Marxist theorists to define the middle class in such a way that it continues to encompass the majority, even when this "middle-class majority" is suffering declining living standards (owing to factors that are supposedly *independent* of the existence of structural antagonisms between capital and labour).

**Proposition Two.** *Ideological constructions of the middle class are not unique to apologists for capitalism or theoretical antagonists of Marxism. Many Marxists also abuse the term, and they frequently do so for reasons having less to do with "science" than with justifying a particular political strategy or programmatic orientation.*

The history of political parties and social movements identifying in some measure with Marxian socialism is replete with efforts to deny the "necessity" or the "practicality" of Marx's own strategic and programmatic vision of workers' revolution. The impulse toward the adoption of a *reformist* orientation has been a powerful one, in the first place among Social Democrats but also among Communists (read, Stalinists) following the lead of ostensibly Marxist states wishing to appease powerful capitalist enemies. The German Social Democrat Eduard Bernstein sought to justify his "revisionist" doctrine of evolutionary socialism, in part, by documenting empirically the growth of the German petty bourgeoisie in the last years of the 19th century and therewith the predictive failure of Marx's analysis. Stalin's Communist International proclaimed the need for the class-collaborationist policy known as the Popular Front in the 1930s, supposedly as the best means of drawing "the middle classes" into the struggle against fascism. The shift from an ultra-left sectarian policy (which in Germany had precluded even a "united front in action" with Social Democratic workers against the Nazis) to a policy of government coalitionism with openly pro-capitalist forces (however insignificant, as in Spain) was justified by Stalin and his theoretician, Georgi Dimitroff, with the claim that the "middle class" was too significant a social force -- and potential ally in the struggle against fascism -- to be ignored. In the end, the policy of the popular front was no less a failure than that which had paved the way for Hitler's victory in Germany. In France, the left-leaning Blum popular front was succeeded by the right-leaning Daladier popular front, which in turn gave way to the fascist Vichy regime. In Spain, the policy of collaborating with what Trotsky aptly called the "shadow of the bourgeoisie" (a few lawyers) resulted in the disarming and the demoralization of the Spanish workers, who had sought to extend the struggle against Franco into a struggle against capitalism (Trotsky 1973; Morrow 1963). In the end, the Stalinists' accommodation of capitalist interests, including opposition to independence for Spanish Morocco, failed to prevent the military victory of Franco's armies, which just happened to include a large number of Moroccan conscripts (Broué and Témime 1972, 266-267).

Ellen Wood (1986) has documented the politico-ideological determinants of more recent trends in ostensibly Marxist class theory. The influential works of Nicos Poulantzas are a case in point. Wood argues that Poulantzas's excessively narrow definition of the working class (which excludes unproductive wage-labourers as well as all wage-labourers with any degree of control

over the labour of others or with any role in the dissemination of bourgeois ideology) and his concomitant view that the "new petty bourgeoisie" is the most rapidly growing class within contemporary advanced capitalist societies must be seen, above all, as a theoretical justification for a long-standing class-collaborationist politics that culminated in his support for the Eurocommunist project of the mass Communist parties of the 1970s. Italian CP leader Enrico Berlinguer's call for an "historic compromise" between the working class and the bourgeoisie was a far cry from Marx's "workers of the world unite" -- but it was given the mantle of realism by Poulantzas' treatises proving, through definitional sleights-of-hand, the ineluctable numerical decline and decomposition of the working class.

### ***The Concept of Ideology***

To support the above propositions regarding the ideological construction of "the middle class" I want now to indicate the senses that I bring to the concept of ideology.

**Sense One.** *Forms of consciousness, and structures of knowledge and belief, are socially constructed.* Jorge Larrain (1979) refers to this as the *positive* conception of ideology. The emphasis in such a conception is on how the *lived experiences* of people shape their consciousness, and limit it as well. With respect to the popular ideological construction of the middle class, the impact of reference-group processes is an excellent example of such lived experiences. So is the psychological propensity of many working people to believe that the next best thing to *being* a bourgeois is to *think* like one (a credo that finds striking expression in the ethos of professional sports that captivates so many working class people, particularly males). A key point to be made in this connection is that the "social being" that Marx says "determines consciousness" includes much more than objective class relations, as Marx himself surely realized. It includes a myriad of structures and processes (from commodity fetishism to intimate personal relationships) that influence people to adopt forms of consciousness that may be inimical to their interests. Ideology is, in this limited sense, a "false" consciousness; but it is also "true" inasmuch as it is rooted in the realities of a determinate form of society and reflects its contradictions. As Sean Sayers aptly puts the matter:

*Where do incorrect ideas come from? They come from reality -- like all ideas. In particular, ideological representations derive from and reflect reality. They take idealized and distorted forms, moreover, because of the contradictions and conflicts which are part and parcel of real life. Their power is the power of reality.* (1985, 106; emphasis in original)

Closely related to this is a concept of ideology as the "common sense" view – the "practical wisdom" and "common knowledge" of everyday life (Althusser 1971). An ideological construct in this sense is one that is based on an uncritical acceptance of what seems practically necessary from the standpoint of the prevailing social relations (for example, the imperative of cutting social programs in order to pay down the national debt, with nary a thought being given to the possibility of simply *cancelling* the national debt through the socialization of the means of production, distribution and exchange).

The notions of a "middle-class society" or of an "ascendant middle class" are ideological constructs in the sense that they focus attention on the experiences of class that are most visible and immediately available to the great majority of people, as well as on the means available to them *as individuals* to achieve some measure of personal success and upward social mobility within actually existing capitalist society. Furthermore, these notions reinforce powerfully the view that it is "education" -- or more precisely, the acquisition of educational credentials -- that is most likely to make a difference to people's "life-chances." While there is some limited truth to this, such a view also involves a good deal of exaggeration, deception and simple wishful-thinking.

**Sense Two.** What Larrain calls *the negative conception of ideology* adds to what has already been said the idea that *ideology always works to favor the interests of some, while disadvantaging others*. On this conception, ideology facilitates the *domination* and/or *exploitation* of some groups over/by others. This is close to Joseph McCarney's (1980) interpretation of Marx's concept of ideology as thought that serves class interests, as well as Terry Eagleton's (1991, 202) definition of ideology as "processes whereby interests of a certain kind become masked, rationalized, naturalized, universalized, legitimated in the name of certain forms of political power."

The notions of a "middle-class society" or of an "ascendant middle class" are ideological in this sense because they serve to conceal the social antagonisms at the basis of capitalist society, while representing the structured social inequality of capitalism as "natural" – the product of a fixed human nature on the one hand and the imperatives of technological development and market forces on the other. Again, by emphasizing the importance of educational credentialism to personal success, such a conception directs attention to the occupational structure as the locus, or source, of class differentiation (thereby also deflecting attention from those within the class structure whose class position is defined not by occupation but by *ownership*, i.e., the capitalist class).

In a similar vein, the image of an expansive middle-class society buttresses a whole range of ideological notions that are crucial to legitimating the forms of political power associated with contemporary liberal democracy. These notions include the priority of "citizenship" in the construction of political identities and the illusion that being "taxpayers" confers real political power on the "middle class majority" -- who are also rather dubiously said to be the main source of tax revenues (cf. Smith 1994).

**Sense Three.** *Ideology exists in a contradictory relationship to a scientific approach to the understanding of social reality*. At a minimum, "science" involves a commitment to disclosing the "non-obvious," non-"commonsensical" dimensions of reality, and to analyzing empirical data in a way that is informed by theoretical perspectives that can account for such hidden, but nevertheless very real and determinative, aspects of social being (Johnson, Dandeker and Ashworth 1984). Conventional conceptions of the middle class – whether embedded in popular or in ostensibly social-scientific discourse -- fall well short of these minimal criteria for a scientific approach by, among other things, privileging consciousness over being, while simultaneously underestimating the degree to which consciousness can be deflected from truth

by misleading appearances, and by reducing historically-determinate social relations of production (class relations, market value, etc.) to the status of "natural laws."

A satisfactory approach to the scientific conceptualization of class must take account of both objective and subjective factors in class formation, while insisting upon the "internal" relationship of these factors (Ollman 1993). Furthermore, it must impose a theoretical order on raw empirical facts by identifying those empirical features that are most decisive to the development of classes as entities that "make a difference" (in Livant's sense) -- entities that are capable of defining and/or altering the course of social development in significant ways.

### ***The Collapse of "Post-Capitalism" and the Future of the Professional-Managerial Middle Class***

In light of these last considerations, I would suggest that the concept of an ascendant and increasingly independent middle class (so integral to conventional, liberal-democratic images of modern capitalism) is on particularly shaky ground. In popular liberal-democratic discourse, the middle class is seen as a class that owes its pre-eminence not only to its (expanding) numerical weight, but also to the power conferred upon it by its privileged role in social reproduction. Ultimately, the "middle class" can be seen as the defining reality of contemporary society only to the extent that it sheds its "contradictions" -- its role in *mediating* between capital and labour -- and asserts itself as a hegemonic class force; that is, to the degree that it succeeds in *transforming* capitalist society into a "post-capitalist" society founded upon the traditional petty-bourgeois values of "classlessness" (or class harmony), meritocracy, and what Marx called "bourgeois right" ("from each according to his ability, to each according to his contribution") (Marx 1970, 18-19).

Since the Second World War, there has been no lack of attempts in the social-scientific literature to establish the centrality of the "middle class" to "post-capitalist" or "postindustrial" or "post-modern" society. In the early post-war period, middle-class dominance was celebrated as a triumph of technocratic and meritocratic principles over the inherited privileges of private property ownership. A "managerial revolution" and "new industrial state" were supposedly allaying the specter of class struggle between socially-irresponsible capitalists and socialist-minded workers (Berle and Means 1932, Parsons 1953, Galbraith 1968).

New times, however, bring new ideas -- and new twists on old ideological themes. Since the early 1980s, neoconservatives have revisited and popularized a new take on the thesis of "managerial" or "technocratic" revolution -- by *deploring* the usurpation of power by a "liberal elite" and blaming "bureaucrats" and "technocrats" for the malaise of contemporary capitalist society (cf. Ehrenreich 1989). If the idea of a managerial revolution was once deployed to support the notion of a convergence between capitalist and socialist "industrial systems" (Mayer 1970), the collapse of "actually existing socialism" has lessened the appeal of this idea substantially. The very partial "decommodification" of social relations that was imposed on Western capitalism by the post-war strength of national labour movements and the "threat" of Soviet-style "real socialism" is now regarded as a tumour on the underbelly of a crisis-ridden capitalism. In this context, as Teeple (1995, 53) notes, "contradictory class locations" have begun to disappear for increasing numbers of workers, both in the private and public sectors. It is an old

fashioned capitalism that seems once again to be on the rise, and the champions of this capitalism believe fervently that it can -- and must -- manage with a substantially smaller buffer between capital and labour than it did during the more economically prosperous, but also more politically perilous, days of the Cold War. Far from being an ascendant class, what Barbara and John Ehrenreich (1978) once called "the professional-managerial class" appears to be falling victim to the sharpening contradictions of a capitalist order in crisis (Smith and Taylor 1996) as well as the ideological triumphalism of a bourgeoisie now convinced that it has finally exorcised "the specter of communism."

It is worthwhile noting that the provenance of many of the theoretical perspectives that have supported the notion of an "invading middle-class, post-capitalist society" were theses originally developed by erstwhile followers of Leon Trotsky who were seeking to justify their rejection of Trotsky's Marxist analysis of Stalinist bureaucratism in the Soviet Union. Bruno Rizzi initiated the theoretical trend with his book *The Bureaucratization of the World* (1939), which argued against Trotsky that the Stalinist bureaucratic oligarchy was not simply a "parasite" or "tumour" on the Soviet workers' state, but a new ruling class presiding over a veritable new mode of production: bureaucratic collectivism. Stalinist Russia was simply the most advanced expression of a global bureaucratization process that was also finding expression in Nazi Germany and in Roosevelt's New Deal America. The grandfather of American neo-conservatism, James Burnham (erstwhile Trotskyist theoretician and long-time *National Review* editor), developed some of Rizzi's themes in his highly influential war-time book *The Managerial Revolution* (1943). Burnham argued that a rising managerial middle class would inherit the post-war world, and that Soviet bureaucratism was simply an extreme prefiguration of this trend. Neither Rizzi nor Burnham remained for long in the orbit of ostensibly socialist politics after rejecting Trotsky's analysis and programmatic perspective. Others did, and for a time gave a more "progressive" spin to the theory of bureaucratic collectivism (and, hence, of a rising bureaucratic class).

Max Shachtman led a split from American Trotskyism that for many years continued to identify with revolutionary socialism (and even Trotskyism), while refusing to accept the orthodox Trotskyist position of "unconditional defense of the Soviet degenerated workers state." Adopting a "third camp" stance, the Shachtmanites denounced Soviet bureaucratic collectivism as a new form of class society and eventually evolved toward a "State Department socialism," supporting "American democracy" against "Soviet totalitarianism." Many intellectuals in the orbit of Shachtmanism went on to have a strong influence in wider circles of American academic life (for example, the social democrat Irving Howe and the neoconservative Irving Kristol). In France, former Trotskyists, regrouped for a time around the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, also insisted that the Soviet bureaucracy was a new ruling class. It was from this milieu that Jean-Francois Lyotard, a leading light of postmodernist theory, emerged.

As already noted, the events of the last decade have not been kind to the theses of "managerial revolution," "bureaucratic collectivism," or of an ascendant professional-managerial middle class -- all of which have some roots in the *rejection* of Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism. Yet it can be argued that Trotsky's analysis, grounded in the theoretical categories of classical Marxism, has proven to be remarkably resilient in the face of the collapse of Stalinist "real socialism" (1933/1970; 1937/1970; 1939-40/1970). To be sure, Trotsky's "optimistic" scenario of working class political revolution against the Stalinist oligarchy was not realized in the Soviet Union

(although it showed some promise of occurring in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968). But his thesis that this oligarchy was not in fact a new "ruling class" but a heterogeneous parasitic layer, destined to fragmentation and vulnerable to the siren calls of capitalist restoration, now seems vindicated. This is not the place for a rehearsal of Trotsky's analysis or of the critiques that it occasioned from some of his followers. But if the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fragmentation of the former *nomenclatura* prove anything, it is surely that many of Trotsky's critics were wrong in forecasting the consolidation of the Soviet bureaucracy as a stable ruling class riding the crest of a post-capitalist, managerial revolution that was supposedly invading East and West alike.

### ***Conclusion***

If the "middle class" cannot credibly be seen as an *ascendant* professional-managerial class, poised to restructure fundamentally the social relations of modern (or postmodern) societies; and if it likewise cannot be conceived as a "majority class" that combines within itself the contradictory functions of capital and labour, then "the middle class" must be regarded as a purely obscurantist and ideological category. The term "the middle class" almost inevitably invites a conceptualization of class structure consisting of "upper," "middle" and "lower" categories -- categories that lend themselves to arbitrary definition and profound ideological mystification. To be sure, intermediate classes or "class locations" situated between capital and labour do exist, and these include professional-managerial elements as well as the traditional, self-employed petty-bourgeoisie (from farmers to accountants). But the discursive confusion and conflation of these "in between" or "buffer" elements with the middle class of popular imagination -- a confusion that seems unavoidable -- should oblige social theorists to end their habit of referring to these contradictory class locations as "the middle class," "new" or otherwise. To continue the habit is to invite the cuckoo of ideology to remain safely ensconced in the nest of science.

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