

Erik Olin Wright, *Classes* (London, Verso, 1985), pp. 37-42

The Biography of a Concept: Contradictory Class Locations 37

sically generate opposing interests, in the sense that the realization of the interests of one class necessarily implies the struggle against the realization of the interests of another class. This does not imply that a 'compromise' between antagonistic interests is never possible, but simply that such compromises must entail realizing some interests *against* the interests of another class. What is impossible is not compromise, but harmony.

CONCEPTUAL CONSTRAINT 5: *The objective basis of these antagonistic interests is exploitation.* While Marx (and certainly many Marxists) sometimes describe class relations in terms of domination or oppression, the most basic determinant of class antagonism is exploitation. Exploitation must be distinguished from simple inequality. To say that feudal lords exploit serfs is to say more than they are rich and serfs are poor; it is to make the claim that there is a causal relationship between the affluence of the lord and the poverty of the serf. The lord is rich because lords are able, by virtue of their class relation to serfs, to appropriate a surplus produced by the serfs.²² Because of this causal link between the wellbeing of one class and the deprivation of another, the antagonism between classes defined by these relations has an 'objective' character.

This is not the place to discuss the knotty philosophical problems with the concept of 'objective interests'. Marx certainly regarded class interests as having an objective status, and the issue here is what it is about those relations that might justify such a claim. The assumption is that people always have an objective interest in their material welfare, where this is defined as the combination of how much they consume and how hard they have to work to get that consumption. There is therefore no assumption that people universally have an objective interest in *increasing* their consumption, but they do have an interest in reducing the toil necessary to obtain whatever level of consumption they desire. An exploitative relation necessarily implies either that some people must toil more so that others can toil less, or that they must consume less at a given level of toil so that others can consume more, or both. In either case people universally have an objective interest in not being exploited materially, since in the absence of exploitation they would toil less and/or consume more.²³ It is because the interests structured by exploitation are objective that we can describe the antagonisms between classes as intrinsic rather than contingent.

CONCEPTUAL CONSTRAINT 6: *The fundamental basis of exploitation is to be found in the social relations of production.* While all Marxists see exploitation as rooted in the social organization of production, there is no agreement among them as to how the 'social relations of production' should be defined, or about what aspects of those relations are most essential for defining classes. Much of the recent Marxist debate over the concept of class can be interpreted as a debate over how classes should be specified within the general notion of production relations. Poulantzas, for example, has emphasized the importance of the political and ideological dimensions of production relations in the definition of classes; Roemer has argued that classes should be defined strictly in terms of the property relations aspects of production relations; I have argued that classes are defined by various relations of control within the process of production. In all of these cases, however, class is defined as a production-centred relational concept.

These six constraints imposed by the general Marxist theory of class constitute the conceptual framework within which the attempt at transforming the ideological concept 'middle class' into a theoretical concept will occur. This attempt may fail, in which case the more complex problem of rethinking or transforming some of these basic presuppositions may be necessary. But to begin with, I will take these elements as fixed and use them to try to produce the needed concept.

Alternative Solutions

The gap between the simple class map of capitalism consisting solely of a bourgeoisie and a proletariat and the concrete empirical observations of actual capitalist societies has been apparent to Marxists for a long time. As a result, considerable attention has been paid in recent years to the problem of theorizing the class character of the 'middle class'. The motivation for these analyses has generally been a realization that a conceptual clarification of the 'middle class' was needed in order properly to specify the working class. Such a clarification involves two essential tasks: first, establishing the conceptual criteria by which the working class is distinguished from non-working class wage earners, and second, establishing the conceptual status of those wage-earner

locations that are excluded from the working class on these criteria.

Four alternative types of solutions to the problem dominated most discussions at the time I began work on the concept of class: (1) The gap between the polarized concept and reality is only apparent. Capitalist societies really are polarized. (2) Non-proletarian, non-bourgeois positions constitute part of the petty bourgeoisie, generally referred to as the 'new' petty bourgeoisie (and sometimes less rigorously as the 'new middle class'). (3) Non-proletarian, non-bourgeois locations constitute a historically new class sometimes referred to as the 'professional-managerial class' and sometimes simply as the 'new class'.²⁴ (4) Non-proletarian, non-bourgeois positions should be referred to simply as 'middle strata', social positions that are not really 'in' any class. Since I have discussed these alternatives thoroughly elsewhere, I will not provide an extended exegesis here.²⁵ What I will try to do is to explain briefly the central logic of each position and indicate some of the problems with respect to the constraints in the general concept of class.

SIMPLE POLARIZATION

The simplest response to the emergence of social positions in capitalist societies which appear to fall neither into the working class nor the capitalist class is to argue that this is simply 'appearance'; that the 'essence' is that nearly all of these new positions are really part of the working class. At most, professional and managerial wage-earners constitute a privileged stratum of the proletariat, but their existence or expansion does not require any modification of the basic class map of capitalism.²⁶

The rationale behind this claim is that managers and professional employees, like all other workers, do not own their means of production and must therefore sell their labour power in order to live. This, it is argued, is sufficient to demonstrate that they are capitalistically exploited, and that in turn is sufficient to define them as workers. Except for top executives in corporations who actually become part owners through stock options and the like, all wage-earners are therefore part of the working class.

A simple wage-labour criterion for the working class does conform to some of the theoretical criteria laid out above. It is consistent with a general historical typology of class structures distinguishing capitalism from pre-capitalist societies (constraint 2), it is a

relational concept (constraint 3), the relations do have an antagonistic character to them (constraint 4), nearly all wage-earners probably suffer some exploitation (constraint 5) and the basis for the exploitation under question is defined within the social organization of production, although perhaps in a fairly impoverished way (constraint 6). Where this view of the 'middle class' fails dismally is in satisfying the first theoretical constraint. It is hard to see how a definition of the working class as all wage-earners could provide a satisfactory structural basis for explaining class formation, class consciousness and class struggle. It is certainly not the case that 'all things being equal' top managers are generally more likely to side with industrial workers than with the bourgeoisie in class struggles. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any conceivable circumstances when this would be the case. Drawing the boundary criteria for the working class at wage-earners, therefore, does not create a category which is in any meaningful sense homogeneous with respect to its effects.

The alternatives to simple polarization concepts of class structures usually begin by arguing that the social relations of production cannot be satisfactorily characterized exclusively in terms of the buying and selling of labour power. While the wage-labour exchange is important, various other dimensions of production relations bear on the determination of class relations. Sometimes the political aspect of those relations are emphasized (domination), sometimes the ideological, sometimes both. In any case, once production relations are understood in this way, new solutions to the problem of the 'middle class' are opened up.

THE NEW PETTY BOURGEOISIE

The first systematic solution proposed by Marxists in the recent debates over the conceptual problem at hand is to classify the 'middle class' as part of the petty bourgeoisie. Sometimes the rationale for this placement is that such positions involve 'ownership' of skills or 'human capital', and this places them in a social relation with capital akin to that of the traditional petty bourgeoisie (owners of individual physical means of production). A more common rationale for this solution revolves around the category 'unproductive labour', i.e. wage-labour which does not produce surplus-value (eg. clerks in banks). Such wage-earners, it is argued, in a sense 'live off' the surplus-value produced by productive workers and thus occupy a different position from workers

within the relations of exploitation. Some theorists, most notably Nicos Poulantzas, add various political and ideological criteria to this analysis of unproductive labour, arguing that supervisory labour and 'mental' labor, even when they are productive, are outside of the working class.²⁷ Yet such non-working-class wage-earners are clearly not part of the bourgeoisie because they do not own or even really control the means of production. Poulantzas insists that these positions should be placed in the petty bourgeoisie for two reasons: first, because their ideological predispositions are essentially like those of the petty bourgeoisie (individualism, hostility to the working class, etc.) and secondly, because, like the traditional petty bourgeoisie, the new petty bourgeoisie is caught between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in class conflicts.

The concept of the 'new petty bourgeoisie' suffers from some of the same problems as the simple polarization stance. It is very hard to see how the diverse categories of unproductive and/or supervisory and mental wage-earners (secretaries, professionals, managers, unproductive manual workers in the state, salespersons, etc.) are in any sense homogeneous with respect to the problem of class formation, class consciousness and class struggle. It is therefore difficult to understand why they should be seen as members of a common class. In many cases unproductive wage-earners have interests which are indistinguishable from industrial workers, or which are at least much closer to the interests of industrial workers than they are to other 'members' of the 'new petty bourgeoisie'.

Furthermore, even if we were to grant that unproductive employees were outside of the working class, their ascription to the petty bourgeoisie violates the sixth criterion of the general concept of class. By no stretch of the concept of social relations of production, can an unproductive employee in a bank and a self-employed baker be seen as occupying the same position within the social relations of production. The concept of the new petty bourgeoisie is therefore unsatisfactory because it both employs a criterion for a class boundary which does not easily conform to the requirements of the first constraint, and because the positions defined by this criterion share none of the salient relational properties of the petty bourgeoisie, thus violating the sixth constraint.

THE NEW CLASS

Dissatisfaction with both the simple polarization and new petty bourgeoisie solutions to the problem of the 'middle class' has led

The Biography of a Concept: Contradictory Class Locations 4

some Marxists to suggest that these various non-proletarian, non-bourgeois positions constitute a new class in its own right. This new class has been defined in various different ways. Gouldner defines it primarily in terms of its control of 'cultural capital'. Szelenyi and Konrad emphasize the 'teleological' function of intellectuals as the key to their potential class power; Barbara and John Ehrenreich argue that the new class—the 'professional-managerial class' in their analysis—is defined by common positions within the social relations of reproduction of capitalist class relations. The various advocates of this view also differ in the extent to which they view this new class as essentially an emergent tendency within capitalism (Szelenyi), a rival to the bourgeoisie itself for class dominance (Gouldner), or simply a new kind of subordinate class within capitalism (Ehrenreichs). All of these views have one critical feature in common: they solve the problem of the 'middle class' by redefining such positions in terms of their relationship to cultural production in one way or another.

This solution to the problem of producing a theoretical outline of the category 'middle class' avoids some of the problems of the other solutions. At least some of the categories included in the 'new class' clearly do have the potential to form organizations for collective action, distinct from both the bourgeoisie and the working class. And a good case can be made that 'new class' positions generate distinctive forms of consciousness. The concept therefore does not seem necessarily at odds with the first criterion of the general concept of class. Furthermore, Gouldner and Szelenyi make the case that the 'new class' is in some way implicated in the distinction between capitalism and 'actually existing socialism'. The concept may therefore conform to the second criterion of the abstract theory of class.

What is much less evident is whether or not the concept is consistent with the fifth and sixth criteria. It is not usually clear how the diverse categories of 'intellectuals' subsumed under the 'new class' rubric share common interests based on exploitation or occupy a common position within the social relations of production. Some of them occupy managerial positions within capitalist firms, directly dominating workers and perhaps even participating in the control of investments. Others are employees in the state and may exercise no control whatsoever over other employees (eg. teachers, nurses). Others may be technical employees within capitalist firms, outside the managerial hierarchy and working on specific problems assigned to them by their superiors. While such diverse positions may have some cultural features in common by

virtue of education or expertise, it is difficult to see them as occupying a common position within production relations, sharing common exploitation interests, and thus constituting a single class by the criteria laid out in the general concept of class.²⁸

MIDDLE STRATA

The final alternative solution is undoubtedly the most popular. Rather than transform any of the specific class concepts, positions which do not seem to fit into the bourgeois-proletarian dichotomy are simply labelled 'middle strata'. This kind of formulation is encountered frequently in Marxist historiography and in some sociological works as well. At times this solution represents either an agnostic position on where such positions belong in the class structure or a retreat from theoretical precision. But in some cases this formulation is itself a theoretical stance: some positions in the social structure, it is argued, simply do not fall into any class locations at all. Calling them 'middle strata' reflects the peculiarities of their social location: they are middle *strata* rather than middle *classes* because they are outside of the basic class relation; they are *middle strata*, rather than some other kind of social category, because in the class struggle they are forced to take sides with either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. They are in a sense 'caught in the middle'.

As an interim solution to a conceptual weakness, the use of the term 'middle strata' is undoubtedly preferable to some of the problematic solutions we have already discussed. Yet, it is itself misleading in certain important ways. Above all, the view that the categories identified as 'middle strata' are generally 'outside' of the basic classes of capitalist society is not satisfactory. Many of these positions are directly involved in production, they are directly structured by the relations of domination and exploitation within the production system. Even if the positions do not constitute classes as such, they do have a class character and this is lost by the designation 'strata'.

Building a New Concept

None of the available alternatives, therefore, seemed adequate. In one way or another they were inconsistent with at least some of the theoretical constraints of the general theory of class. I therefore

The Biography of a Concept: Contradictory Class Locations 4.

attempted yet another strategy for transforming the 'middle class' into a coherent class concept.

The starting point for the formation of a new concept for mapping the 'middle class' was the observation that all of the other alternatives implicitly share a common thesis, namely, that every position within a class structure falls within one and only one class. It was assumed that there is an isomorphic relationship between the categories of the class structure and the actual locations filled by individuals. Rarely is this assumption made explicit, but it does operate in each of the cases we have examined. In the first solution, all positions are either in the working class, the capitalist class or the traditional petty bourgeoisie; in the second solution, the only change is that the petty bourgeoisie has two segments, old and new; in the third alternative every position not in the traditional classes of capitalism falls into a 'new class'; and in the final alternative, positions which are not part of the traditional classes are treated as non-class positions—middle strata.

If we drop this assumption, an entirely new kind of solution to the problem of conceptually mapping the 'middle class' becomes possible. Instead of regarding all positions as located uniquely within particular classes and thus as having a coherent class character in their own right, we should see some positions as possibly having a multiple class character; they may be in more than one class simultaneously. The class nature of such positions is a derivative one, based as it is on the fundamental classes to which they are attached. Such positions are what I have termed 'contradictory locations within class relations'.²⁹

A brief note on terminology is needed, since this expression may be confusing. As a number of critics have pointed out, the basic class relation of capitalism is itself 'contradictory'. Workers in their relationship to capitalists, therefore, should be considered the most 'contradictory location'. In the original exposition of the concept I stated that the full expression should be something like: 'contradictory locations within contradictory class relations', but that the simpler expression 'contradictory locations' would be used for convenience. But why should positions which are simultaneously bourgeois and proletarian be viewed as 'contradictory' in any sense? The rationale is that the basic class relation of capitalism generates objectively contradictory *interests* for workers and capitalists, interests which are intrinsically (rather than just contingently) opposed to each other. Contradictory locations are contradictory precisely in the sense that they partake of both sides of