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# **Notes on the Lower Middle Class and the Semi-proletariat in Britain**

by

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In recent years, the Communist Party of Great Britain has virtually abandoned in its publications and propaganda any attempt to analyse British society. We can agree that it is absurd and erroneous for bourgeois commentators to maintain that we are all middle-class now, or are rapidly becoming so; but it is equally absurd and erroneous to argue that we are all, or nearly all, working-class now. For both statements include the same false idea; that there are no longer important class distinctions among the people.

"The people versus the Establishment," argue those middle-class radicals who seek to reform the capitalist system rather than to end it; and they push their analysis of our society no deeper. "The people versus the Monopolies," argues the C.P.G.B. And, as far as it goes, this slogan is correct. But the analysis is pushed no deeper. For both slogans refer to the same contradiction in our society, but this contradiction is not the only one, *nor indeed is it the main contradiction in capitalist society*. "The essence of capitalist society," as James Klugmann of the C.P.G.B. has written, "is the contradiction of two decisive classes—the capitalist class and the working class." Yes, and therefore the monopoly capitalists are only a section of the capitalist class, although the decisive section, the working class are only a section of the people, although the decisive section.

Lenin wrote, in *Imperialism, the highest state of capitalism*: "Monopoly . . . has grown out of capitalism, and exists in the general environment of capitalism, and remains in permanent and insoluble contradiction to that general environment." If we were able to achieve the impossible, and resolve the contradiction between the people and the monopolies while the basic contradiction in our society, between the working class and the capitalist class, remained, this would *not* bring Socialism, but only a return to pre-monopoly capitalism. Our capitalist society will only be replaced by a socialist society when this basic contradiction is resolved in favour of the working class, with a Socialist revolution, and the establishment of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

### Analyse "the people"

A Communist Party, which exists in order to achieve this dictatorship over the capitalists, needs to make a most careful analysis of "the people," in order to determine how strong are the links which bind each section of the people to capitalism, and, equally, which section of the people are most oppressed by capitalism, have the weakest links with the system. Why? Because we analyse society *in order to change it*. The weaker the links with capital, the stronger the determination to struggle against it, and vice-versa.

This tendency to oversimplify the structure of our society is apparent in Andrew Grant's *Socialism and the Middle Classes* (1958). In this Standard C.P.G.B. work, he states:

"It was only after a hard struggle that the use of the terms 'middle class' or 'middle classes' as though they were accurate expressions was firmly rejected. Both terms have suffered badly



from being so widely and so loosely used that their meaning is more often than not misinterpreted. They are indeed terms which one finds in common usage, but are not more accurate because of this. *Their use implies that there is in fact in Britain at this moment a third class or more than three classes. It is the thesis of this book that an examination of the facts does not lend positive support to either of these contentions*—(my italics, M.McC). So where these terms have been used, they have been placed within quotation marks to indicate that they are used colloquially and not as precise expressions. The terms *middle sections* or *middle strata* have therefore replaced them here, even though they may come more awkwardly to the tongue, because they more accurately express the existing position as far as Britain today is concerned."

And later, in praising G. D. H. Cole's *Studies in Class Structure* (1955), he writes:

"Cole is arguing here that the changing position of sections of the former 'middle class' is resulting in a larger working class, which certainly does not square with his other and older concept of an expanding middle class (*sic*). An expanding working class must be at the expense of the 'middle class,' and in fact Cole produced plenty of evidence of this process taking place.

"His disagreement with Marx therefore resolves itself, as he points out himself, into whether or not the fusion is taking place as a result of levelling up or levelling down. There is still plenty of room for argument between Cole and the present-day Marxists as to what has actually been taking place in the class structure of Britain. More important, however, is the growing measure of agreement that the scope of the working class today must be regarded as not only the manual or wage worker but also the majority of salaried workers as well. Most Marxists will argue that the salaried worker has been part of the working class all along, and that his position in society depends on his similar relationship to the means of production as the wage worker, even though he may not always have been conscious of his position or have 'felt' himself a part of the working class.

"Both views are tending towards the same vitally important conclusions—that large sections of those formerly regarded by themselves and others as 'middle class' cannot be any longer so regarded; they are tending to merge into the working class, and this has political implications of great significance"—(my italics, M.McC).

## Revisionism

But why this determination to deny that there are classes in our society other than the capitalist class and the working class? The fact that the contradiction between these two is the main contradiction, determining the character of the society, in no way rules out the existence of other classes. They *do* exist!

It is, incidentally, quite unsatisfactory to replace the word 'class' by the word 'strata.' Marxists have always analysed society in terms of certain board class divisions, and then further sub-divided these classes into various strata. To say that there are various "intermediate strata" which do not belong to any class is really only to play with words in order to avoid recognition of classes other than the two decisive classes.

Let us look for a moment at this term, "middle class." It is not really confusing. Marxists have always used the term, and been clear as to its meaning. Marx and Engels wrote, in *The Communist Manifesto*, of "the bourgeois, the middle class owners of property," and they also distinguished "the lower strata of the middle class—the small trades people, shopkeepers, and retired trades people generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants . . ." Mao-Tse-Tung adopts the same terminology in *An analysis of the classes in Chinese Society*, when he writes, "The Middle class. This class represents China's capitalist relations in town and country."

In 1917, in *Constitutional Illusions*, Lenin wrote:

"The Social-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks . . . are afraid to admit the truth that *every capitalist country is fundamentally divided into three main forces, the bourgeoisie, the petty-bourgeoisie, and the proletariat*"—(my italics, M.McC).

Why are they afraid to admit the truth? Because they were up to the same old game for which Marx had castigated the Democrats. In fact since the foundations of the modern working-class movement on the basis of scientific socialism, with the publication in 1848 of the *Communist Manifesto*, Marxists have consistently and repeatedly stressed the importance of recognising the key role played by the petty-bourgeoisie, without whose support the capitalist class is unable to maintain its rule, who generate utopian socialist ideas of class compromise which constantly penetrate the ranks of the working-class movement in the guise of "revising" basic Marxist principles so as to bring them "up to date." In that important, and often neglected, section of the *Communist Manifesto* in which Marx and Engels related various brands of utopian socialism to their class origin, under the heading *petty-bourgeois socialism* there is this passage:

"In countries where modern civilisation has become fully developed, a new class of petty-bourgeois has been formed, fluctuating between proletariat and bourgeoisie *and ever-renewing itself* (my italics M.McC) as a supplementary part of bourgeois society. The *individual* (my italics M.McC) members of this class however, are being constantly hurled down into the proletariat by the action of competition, and as modern industry develops, they even see the moment approaching when they will completely disappear as an independent section of modern society, to be replaced in manufactures, agriculture and commerce, by onlookers, bailiffs and shopmen."



In other words, the petty-bourgeoisie is always present in capitalist society, although as modern industry develops new strata of this class emerge and old strata decay. Lenin develops this analysis in *Marxism and Revisionism*.

"The inevitability of revisionism is determined by its class roots in modern society . . . Wherein lies its inevitability in capitalist society? Why is it more profound than the differences on national peculiarities and degrees of capitalist development? Because in every capitalist country, side by side with the proletariat, there are always broad strata of the petty bourgeoisie, small masters. Capitalism arose and is constantly arising out of small production. A number of new "middle strata" is inevitably created by capitalism (appendages to the factory, home-work and small work-shops scattered all over the country in view of the requirements of big industries, such as the bicycle and automobile industries etc.) These new small producers are just as inevitably being cast into the ranks of the proletariat. It is quite natural that the petty-bourgeois world conception should again and again crop up in the ranks of the broad worker's parties." For, as he points out elsewhere, "the proletariat is inevitably linked with the petty-bourgeoisie by a thousand transitional connections."

#### **The lower middle class in Britain**

In Britain today the small producers and traders, the "small masters" remain the hard core of the petty-bourgeoisie. And they are more numerous than many suppose. In a contribution from *Marxism Today* to *World Marxist Review* of May 1960 an attempt was made to estimate their number.

"There are in the U.K. large numbers of individual traders and small partnerships (i.e. two or three joint traders) and even small companies. (There are many man and wife companies formed into this sort of unit for financial reasons). In many cases, particularly in building and clothing and small sub-contracting firms in engineering, they pass in and out of employed jobs. Those individuals or partners of companies which make under £1,000 a year can be regarded as small. Out of a total of 1,904,700 units recorded for profit assessment in 1956-57 there were 1,506,000 in this group. *This must account for some 2 million individual persons—(my italics M.McC.)*"

A class of this size is, in itself, sufficient to generate ideas of class compromise in Britain, which constantly re-emerge within the working class movement. But in addition to these small masters, or petty producers and traders, there are several other strata of society whose economic status placed them in the same ambivalent position. Lenin wrote in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*:

"Further, if we are not to replace the complete economic picture by petty details we should include among the well-to-do

small proprietors a considerable section of the commercial and industrial management personnel, clerks, bourgeois intellectuals, government officials, and so on."

And Mao-Tse-Tung wrote, in *An analysis of the classes in Chinese Society*:

"The petty-bourgeoisie; owner-peasants, master-handicraftsmen, and the petty intellectuals—students, primary and middle school teachers, lower government functionaries, office clerks, small lawyers and petty traders—all belong to this category." Let us look first at the "commercial and industrial management personnel." Why do we include them within the ranks of the petty-bourgeoisie? Marx explained this most clearly in Volume III of *Capital*:

"The labour of superintendence and management will naturally be required whenever the direct process of production assumes the form of a combined social process, and does not rest on the isolated labour of independent producers. It has, however, a double nature.

On the one side all labours, in which many individuals co-operate, necessarily require for the connection and unity of the process one commanding will and this performs a function, which does not refer to fragmentary operations, but to the combined labour of the workshop, in the same way as does that of a director of an orchestra. This is a kind of productive labour, which must be performed in every mode of production requiring a combination of labours.

On the other side, quite apart from any commercial department, this labour of superintendence necessarily arises in all modes of production, which are based on the antagonism between the labourer as a direct producer and the owner of the means of production. To the extent that this antagonism becomes pronounced the role played by superintendence increases in importance. Hence it reaches its maximum in the slave system. But it is indispensable also under the capitalist mode of production, since the process of production is at the same time the process by which the capitalist consumes the labour power of the labourer."

In other words all those engaged in "the labour of superintendence and management" have an economic status which ties them to capital *and* ties them to the workers. In them "the interests of two classes are simultaneously blunted."

The 1951 Census (unfortunately the full 1961 census is not yet published) enables us to distinguish between those engaged in "the labour of superintendence" and those engaged in the "labour of management." There were about 320,000 foremen, overlookers, inspectors and gangers in the mining, manufacturing, building and transport industries in that year. In general they are suitably



rewarded, as the N.C.O's of the capitalists. In the same industries there were about 290,000 managers (colliery managers, works managers, labour managers, etc., etc.) Some of these managers should be included within the ranks of the capitalists, but a good proportion certainly fall within the ranks of the petty-bourgeoisie. They perform a necessary role in the army of productive workers, but also act on behalf of the capitalist class, and obtain financial and other rewards for their services. A good proportion of the 126,000 architects, surveyors and engineers, also combine this dual role of productive worker and agent of capital, and for the same reason must be classified as petty-bourgeois.

In the fields of commerce, finance and insurance, there are many more petty-bourgeois occupations. Most managers here again qualify as petty-bourgeois (in Great Britain as a whole there were 748,000 managers in 1951) and a rather lower stratum, over 200,000 commercial travellers, canvassers and insurance agents. (The number of these must have expanded considerably over the last 10 years).

Several hundred thousand of those who work directly for the capitalist state are petty-bourgeois in their world outlook. They include some of the 50,000 military and police officers, and most of the 100,000 executive and higher clerical and administrative grades of the local authorities and the civil service. With the great expansion of social services and education during this century the number employed by the state in these fields is now considerable. Most medical, medical auxiliary, and social welfare workers, totalling about 140,000, and primary and secondary school teachers (about 300,000) must also be included. These salaried employees receive in the main more than the average labourer, and their conditions of life are easier; they play their part in maintaining the capitalist system.

These members of the lower middle class can not be won for lasting alliance against capitalism. On *particular* issues, and for *certain periods* they will unite with the industrial workers, but their position in society always leads them to veer away from permanent alliance. We must influence them, weaken their ties with capitalism and win them during the decisive struggle for power, for without their support, capitalism cannot survive.

### **The semi-proletariat**

Between the proletariat proper, the productive workers, and the petty-bourgeoisie, there are several strata of working people that jointly constitute the semi-proletariat. For example many of the 235,000 hospital nurses, whose conditions have worsened substantially in recent years, fall into this category. So do a large proportion of the 2,300,000 clerical workers. It is true that both Lenin and Mao-Tse-Tung placed the clerical worker within the ranks of the petty-bourgeoisie, but the status of most of these workers has substantially worsened in modern industrial society. The work has been mechanised, women have replaced men in



the main, and relative to the industrial worker, rates of pay have fallen. All this was foreshadowed by Marx, who wrote in Volume III of Capital:

"It is clear that commercial operations increase to the extent that the scale of production is enlarged. There are operations which must be continually performed for the circulation of the industrial capital, in order to sell the product existing in the shape of commodities, and to keep account of the whole. The calculation of prices, book-keeping, managing funds, carrying on the correspondence, all these belong under this head. The more developed the scale of production is the greater, if not in proportion, will be the commercial operations of industrial capital, and consequently the labour and other costs of circulation for the realisation of value and surplus value. This necessitates the employment of commercial wage-workers, who form the office staff . . . The commercial labourer does not produce any surplus value directly. But the value of his labour is determined by the value of his labour-power, that is, of its costs of production, while the application of this labour power, its exertion, expression and consumption, the same as in the case of every other wage labourer, is by no means limited by the value of his labour-power. His wages are therefore not necessarily in proportion to the mass of profits, which he helps the capitalist to realise. What he costs the capitalist and what he makes for him are two different things. He adds to the income of the capitalist, not by creating any direct surplus value, but by helping him to realise the costs of the realisation of surplus value. In doing so he performs partly unpaid labour. The commercial labourer, in the strict meaning of the term, belongs to the better paid classes of wage-workers, he belongs to the class of skilled labourers, which is above the average. However, wages have a tendency to fall, *even in proportion to the average labourer*—(my italics M.McC) with the advance of the capitalist mode of production. This is due to the fact that, in the first phase, division of labour in the office is introduced . . . In the second place, the necessary preparation, such as the learning of commercial details, languages etc. is more and more rapidly, easily, generally cheaply reproduced with the progress of science and popular education . . . The generalisation of public education makes it possible to recruit this line of labourers from classes that had formerly no access to such education, and that were accustomed to a lower standard of living. At the same time this generalisation of education increases the supply and thus competition. *With a few exceptions, the labour-power of this line of labourers is therefore depreciated with the progress of capitalist development. Their wages fall, while their ability increases*"—(my italics M.McC).

Another important section of the semi-proletariat are the majority of the 900,000 salesmen and shop-assistants. They are still closer to the proletariat than the clerical workers, for they play a necessary

part in distributing the goods for use by the customer, and to that extent actually add to the value of the goods they handle. But at the same time they also collect the money, upon sale, for the capitalist. They play a necessary part in realising the value of the goods produced. Their conditions of work are that much easier than the factory worker. They are oppressed, but less sharply, than the factory workers.

The semi-proletariat can be won to accept the leadership of the industrial working class in the struggle against capitalism. They can be won for firm alliance.





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