

What is the middle class?

Albert Meltzer

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Prime Minister John Major referred to Tories achieving a “classless society”. He was referring to the gradual move from the English class system to the American. In England the survival of the old upper class is ensured by the constitutional monarchy, against which the middle class is beginning to rebel, or at least not respect so much.

The old upper class has managed to retain influence (where once it had supreme power) by social snobbery. The upper class classically certain areas within themselves, such as the leadership of the Church and Army, the judges, the Foreign Office and the upper reaches of the Civil Service. But now the bourgeoisie is moving in. Power in the Tory Party has shifted from the patricians to those whose only God is Money and of whom Baroness Thatcher is still the prophet.

The idea that a multi-millionaire could be excluded from an Establishment of which slobes like the Marquesses of Blandford and Bristol, the late Lord Moynihan or Lord Lucan are members by birth has lingered on in Britain. It is now moving to the American conception of class. The middle class, now on top, has finally won its revolution and creates its own myth, not one of Birth and Breeding, but that anyone with ability can rise to any position regardless of birth. It is equally false.

Many Russians have fallen for the notion that the end of State communism would bring the American dream and they would be driving their Cadillacs at week-ends to country cottages complete with swimming pools. The favoured few had this under Stalinism. What was in power, generating wealth for itself, was the Civil Service and the politicians. It was as hereditary as the middle class system, since wealth begets education and opportunity, though not based solely on birth as is the aristocratic system. Trotskyists demur at the term ‘ruling class’ to describe this class, but what else were they? Whatever they should be termed, they are now determined to retain their status in a ruling class capacity.

The myth of Marxist-Leninism was that all in Russia were working-class, including the favoured few with wealth and power. It was supposed to be a workers’ state. The parallel myth of Western capitalism is that all are (or could be) middle class, which becomes the middle of nothing!

What they mean is everyone functions in some way — even the Queen opens bazaars. But a once productive class is being pushed into dead end occupations servicing the rich. Production is being switched to Third World countries so that it can be done as cheaply and shoddily as possible, and the pretence of generosity by aid programmes maintained. On the other end of the scale, the interesting and glamorous jobs that were once entirely working class are becoming available almost exclusively to the gilded young of the middle class, occasionally the formerly upper class too. The theatrical profession is a typical example, where the ‘rogues and vagabonds’ of Elizabethan times became the trod-upon outcasts of the eighteenth century and the working stiff of the 19th, but by the second half of the 20th century, pampered darlings, almost exclusively middle class. Journalism, and by extension the media, is another instance. Sub-editors, and even editors, once came from the same class as printers. Now all but a very few specialists come from the posh universities and are in a position to ascertain that authors will be of the same social class.

The Mandarins

There is in any case another class, thought of as middle class but depending for its status on power, not profit. Like Stalin's bureaucracy, it is a ruling class though it is dependent on the politicians. It may make a profit or not, it may run a quango or a monopoly, a multi-national or a university, a public company or a State industry or its individual members can pass from one to the other. These are the new lords and occasionally ladies of creation, whether one thinks of them as Soviet commissars, company directors or old-style Chinese mandarins. They call themselves the meritocracy. They are becoming the most powerful in the dominant middle class, the most likely to aspire to becoming a new aristocracy.

The hangers-on

Marxist-Leninism claimed in Russia everyone was working class, whether proletarian, commissar or gulag slave, while the former aristocracy, hiding out or in exile, were reckoned as scapegoat ruling class to be blamed for all the ills of the system. American capitalism claims all are middle class and there is no class division. British capitalism adds a few more illusions to this by way of educational snobbery or the honours system. The lies put over by the Hollywood Dream Factory or the Lie Factories of Britain's press lead many to suppose that they are not working class when they patently are, or even that the working class has ceased to exist.

The middle, now dominant, class embraces the very rich, the parasites on business, the business careerist, the upper ranks of the civil service, and the hangers-on to certain social values. It does not include those who acquire property instead of spending their wages on booze and fags, or have a mortgage or a car bought by their own work. The working class in good times can prosper, but remain under capitalism. If active in economic struggle they can, when labour is scarce, earn the same as, or more than, the lower middle class. It is a fallacy to suppose that prosperity changes their status.

Those with specialist skills sometimes fool themselves, invariably to their own detriment, that they have different class interests, and identify with the ruling class. Nationalism and patriotism are used for the same purpose: to identify with the State and so with one's own exploitation. This obscures the issue, but does not change it.

We do not have to accept being ground down by parasites upon society. The destruction of heavy industry does not necessarily mean the destruction of the productive class itself but of its organisations within heavy industry. The alternative to heavy industry need not be pauperism, which is being accepted today as if it were a natural catastrophe, but co-operation based on self-employment. Self-employed, small local collectives and a new kind of co-operative movement can link up with other forms of industrial organisation. University-processed Marxism sneers at the independent worker as "petty bourgeois". But the value of artisan organisation as part of the working class struggle has been proven time and again in industrial disputes and in revolutions. Today the capitalist not only does not give work but actively takes it away. To be strong enough to fight back we need to set our own work agenda. In fighting back it is not enough to make reforms, to curtail profits or to circumvent the effects of wage slavery. These are desirable but leaves the dangerous capitalist beast of prey wounded but all the more dangerous. The class system has to be wiped out.

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