

Capitalism, Socialism and the Middle Classes

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(The author of this article has written a book called "Socialism and the Middle Classes", which will be published shortly by Lawrence and Wishart, price 15s.)

ONE of the principal features of Marxism, in contrast to many other socialist outlooks, is the analysis it makes of classes and the care with which it seeks to develop, in each country in accordance with the actual circumstances, an alliance of classes and strata, led by the working class, as a means of overcoming capitalism and commencing to build a socialist society.

This article is written with the purpose in mind of throwing more light on questions of classes in Britain in order that a beginning can be made in formulating more distinctly the possible character of any alliance of classes and strata of the British people in their move forward towards socialism.

In any country the question of allies for the working class is fundamental for charting the road to socialism. In most of the countries where a peasantry form a large proportion of the population it is the key issue. A special contribution of the Russian Marxists was that they solved this problem of class alliance theoretically, in terms of Russian conditions, early in the 1900s and were then able to carry through in practice the alliance between proletariat and peasantry without which the Russian Revolution could not have been carried through in 1917. In doing so, of course, they developed a very rough pattern of class alliance for any country with a comparable class structure. There seems little doubt, however, that before the Second World War and even since many Marxist Parties have been too rigid in their interpretation of Russian experience, insufficiently taking into account vital economic, social and political differences.

Undoubtedly the progress towards socialism has been held back in the capitalist countries which became imperialist powers. In particular, the working class movements became tainted with imperialist ideas and embraced theories of gradual development to socialism through accumulated reform within the framework of a

capitalist system. It was exactly a hundred years ago that Engels wrote to Marx from Manchester:

"... the English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming ultimately at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat *as well as* a bourgeoisie. For a nation which exploits the whole world this is of course to a certain extent justifiable." (*Marx and Engels on Britain*, October 7th, 1858.)

Reformist Theories

This phase of the domination of Labour movements by reformism has occurred in varying degrees in every Western European country and is still dominant in many of them. It has led to many erroneous ideas being propagated about class structures and their future trends. There has been a sustained attack by reformist theoreticians against Marx's main contentions about classes under capitalism. Claims have been made that these conclusions are now outdated, that things are different now, classes are disappearing and the capitalist and working classes are now a myth; we are now all in one great "middle class" . . . and so on and so forth. As it has been put by one of the principal theoreticians of the right in the Labour movement in Britain, C. A. R. Crosland:

"the last century has witnessed a rapid growth of service occupations (professions, administration, entertainment, and so on) which have no contact at all with the physical means of production. Even within manufacturing industry, the growth of scale and the increasing technical complexity of production has enormously multiplied the number of (especially managerial and technical) skills, so that the labour force no longer constitutes a clear-cut proletarian class. (Automation of course will reinforce this trend.) Thus so far from polarisation having occurred, we see a growing proliferation of middle, neither proletarian nor capitalist, classes; . . ." (*The Future of Socialism*, 1956.)

Because of the confusion sown in the Labour movement by C. A. R. Crosland and others it is worth while restating, albeit in the briefest form, the scientific socialist position in relation to classes under capitalism.

Classes are real and exist in fact even though they are by their very nature intangible and generalised. No one has ever "seen" or "felt" a class although the manifestations of class relationships can be seen or felt.

Marxist Conception

Classes are based on the economic relations between men and the means of production. There are many manifestations of class—class consciousness, social snobbery, accents, clothes, incomes and attitudes. All of them are secondary and derivative from the fact that classes actually exist.

In modern capitalist society there is still in operation a tendency inherent within capitalism throughout its entire existence to crystallisation into only two classes—those that own the means of production and those that rely for their livelihood on selling their working power to an employer. Far from diminishing in the last thirty years, this tendency has been intensified so that in Britain today, the overwhelming majority of the occupied population are employees, whether they are paid wages or salaries.

However, despite the process of polarisation into two classes, nowhere in the capitalist world so far has this produced a "pure" condition. A number of middle groups remain especially in those countries where agriculture is the livelihood of a large proportion of the working population.

In Britain the virtual absence of peasant agriculture together with the highly concentrated form of industry have produced a relatively simplified class structure. Nevertheless a considerable middle strata remains, and its size, the groupings within it and the issues facing it must be clearly understood so that the Labour movement can take the necessary steps to bring this all-important alliance between working class and middle strata into being.

Groupings within the Middle Strata

This middle strata is not one tight, homogeneous class but contains within it a number of groupings that differ widely in many respects from each other. These groupings might conveniently be assembled to fall within three main categories: the black-coated workers in offices and shops who are really an integral part of the working class but will not as yet accept the fact; the small producing and trading sections, including working farmers, shopkeepers, the self-employed, the

smaller factory owners, small businessmen and most managers; the professions—the so-called "higher" professions which are mainly the older professions and the "lower" professions like teaching, science, engineering and the rapidly expanding body of technicians of all sorts.

Blackcoated Workers

Taking clerks and shop assistants first, these callings were in the middle of the 19th century considered infinitely superior to manual work in industry. A clerk was a man of letters while a shop assistant was almost a gentleman who went about his work in a high stiff white collar and pin-striped trousers. The twentieth century saw a rapid change in status of these two sections. Mechanisation has now taken a firm grip in offices although this process started a long time ago with the introduction of the typewriter and the introduction of women on a large scale into office work. Similarly the daily routine of most shop assistants now consists of dispensing pre-packaged goods over the counter. With the comparatively recent development of various forms of *self-service* which have spread rapidly into most spheres of retail distribution, the work of the shop assistant consists more and more of stocking shelves or counters and taking cash. Today the majority of clerks and the majority of shop assistants are women. The census statistics show that men ceased to have a majority among clerks at some time between 1931 and 1951. Moreover, despite the very big increase in the proportion of occupied population engaging in clerical occupation—which is often used as an argument to show how the "middle class" is expanding—the number of male clerks has been *declining* as a proportion of the occupied population during the last twenty-five years. In relation to the average industrial wage the earnings of clerks and shop assistants have been going down for a long time, particularly as the industrial worker, being more highly organised in trade unions, is able more successfully to push his wages up to try and catch the rising cost of living. So that clerks and shop assistants cannot be regarded as "middle class" even though many of them may not as yet accept their working class status.

Small Producers and Traders

The small producing and small trading petit-bourgeoisie is in a different position altogether. Attempts have been made almost without number to attribute to Marx the view that the concentration of capital into fewer and fewer hands would mean the disappearance of the petit-bourgeoisie; Marx thus, it is said, was wrong about the petit-

bourgeoisie and, therefore, could have had no idea what to do if confronted with our modern, vastly expanded "middle class". Marx certainly did foresee that the tendency inherent in modern capitalism was to concentrate wealth and power into fewer and fewer hands and that this would be done at the expense of many in the former petit-bourgeoisie, but he also saw that capitalist development was never likely to be 100 per cent pure in form and that new petit-bourgeois sections would take the place of the old:

"In England, modern society is indisputably developed most highly and classically in its economic structure. Nevertheless the stratification of classes does not appear in its pure form even there. Middle and transitional stages obliterate even here all definite boundaries, although much less in the rural districts than in the cities." (*Capital*, Volume III.)

"In countries where modern civilisation has become fully developed, a new class of petit-bourgeoisie has been formed, fluctuating between proletariat and bourgeoisie, and ever renewing itself as a supplementary part of bourgeois society." (*Communist Manifesto*, Part III.)

Numerically, the small producing and small trading section have been declining in Britain as a proportion of the occupied population for many years. The late Dr. Klingender, a sociologist of some repute at Hull University, in his book *Conditions of Clerical Labour in Britain*, made some calculations of the proportions of the occupied population in various middle strata categories from the 1851 Census. Comparing his estimates with the approximate position today as shown by the last Census in 1951 we get the following picture in Britain:

	1851	1951
	percentage	
Employers	8.1	2.0
Managers	1.0	3.3
Higher officials		0.7
Self-employed ..	4.5	5.0
Professions	2.6	5.9
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Total % of Occupied Population	16.2	16.9

The proportion of employers has of course gone down with the increased concentration of industry and commerce. Of the managers, nearly all of whom will be salaried, a small proportion will also be directors and employers as well. The majority will be managers of branches of firms, works managers, office managers etc. This can be seen from the breakdown given in the 1951 Census, 1 per cent Sampling, of the 748,200 managers in Britain into 185,000 "General Managers, Directors, etc." and 562,800 managers

of "branch, office, primary and subsidiary departments".

The above comparison shows quite clearly that taking the capitalist class and the middle sections together there is in fact very little change in their proportion of the occupied population in the course of the last hundred years so that the claim for a vast expansion of the middle strata has no basis in fact. However, although the total proportion remains roughly the same there has been a decisive shift away from employers towards the professions and managers. This is of great importance because it has created a position where a large proportion of the sections intermediate between capitalist and working classes consist of people who never hope or even consider a future of earning their living through ownership and "building a business". This is particularly true in the professions today, now the largest and most influential grouping among the middle strata, who are overwhelmingly salaried employees. While many in the professions may still look with nostalgia at the "good old days" when large numbers of professional people were part of the petit-bourgeoisie, receiving fees for their particular skill, most of them are beginning to realise that those days are gone and will never return.

It will of course be the petit-bourgeoisie who will be the most difficult grouping to detach from their traditional support of capitalism. Nevertheless, the experiences in China show that it is fully possible to win support of substantial numbers of them for socialism, but only on the basis of providing them with reasonable economic alternatives and ensuring a gradual and voluntary integration of small production and small business into a socialist-type economy.

The Professions

It is the professions that are the most rapidly expanding section of the middle strata in Britain, ranging from those established hundreds of years ago—the Church, law and medicine—to a vast range of new technological professions established during this century. During the thirty years between 1921 and 1951 the numbers in the professions increased by about 84 per cent while the increase in the occupied population was only in the region of 19 per cent. The expansion did not take place in the older professions, but in the newer and mainly the more technical professions. Comparing the Census returns of 1921 with 1951 for England and Wales we find that the numbers in the scientific professions have increased from 17,100 to 109,500, an increase of 640 per cent: engineering, surveying and architectural professions have increased from 31,500 to 126,000, an

increase of 400 per cent, and now number approximately the same as those of the Church, law and medicine added together.

There were in 1951 about 1,400,000 in the professions in Britain, of whom 87.7 per cent were employees, 6.3 per cent self-employed, 3 per cent managers and 3 per cent employers; only in the legal profession were the employees a minority—42 per cent, while in medicine it was 50 per cent employees and 50 per cent self-employed or employers. Today, therefore, nearly 90 per cent of those in the professions are salaried employees with little thought of running their own businesses. They are rapidly becoming more aware of the need to organise into trade unions or in organisations that tend to combine the functions of a trade union and a professional organisation into one (the National Union of Teachers, Equity and the National Union of Journalists are examples of this type).

Therefore, when we exclude the relatively small capitalist class, we have a middle strata in Britain which consists very roughly of about 300,000 small employers, 650,000 managers, 1,124,000 self-employed and 1,400,000 in the professions—a total of about 3,500,000 out of an occupied population in 1951 of about 22,500,000 or about 16 per cent of the total. Apart from a small capitalist class—about 1-2 per cent of the occupied population—the remainder are the working class with a large and highly organised trade union movement catering for about half of them but still with many millions as yet unorganised.

Socialist Policy can win their Support

The middle strata is thus nowhere near as large as some people would have us believe nor is it expanding as a proportion of the population at the expense of the proportion making up the working class. The entire character of the middle strata in Britain is in process of very rapid change and whole sections of it—in the professions in particular—are being brought closer to the working class. Not only are they becoming more highly organised but beginning to consider more militant forms of action which have hitherto been regarded as forms confined to the working class alone. The token strikes and demonstrations of teachers over salaries and conditions and the threats of sanctions by doctors if higher salaries are not forthcoming are not isolated examples of this tendency.

What is to be the attitude of the Labour movement to the middle strata? Is it to remain as before with pious talk of sacrifices coupled with crudities about those not in the working

class not being worth “a tinker’s cuss”? Or is the Labour movement going to take seriously its task of winning the middle strata as allies for the working class?

What is the present political position of the middle strata? There can be little doubt that, taking the middle strata as a whole the majority can be considered as supporting the right. The most detailed information available is contained in a study of how the “middle class” vote by Dr. John Bonham which contains a detailed analysis of public opinion polls at the 1945, 1950 and 1951 General Elections based on occupations. Dr. Bonham¹ estimated that the Labour voters at the 1951 General Election among all *business and managerial sections* was 560,000 compared with 3,090,000 for the Conservative Party; among all the *professional and higher office sections* he estimated the Labour vote in 1951 as 540,000 compared with 1,630,000 for the Conservative Party. Moreover, if Dr. Bonham’s estimates are anywhere near the mark, Labour’s proportion of this “middle class vote” fell considerably from its peak in 1945: *Business and managerial*: Labour 750,000, Conservative 2,370,000; *Professional and higher office sections*: Labour 670,000 and Conservative 1,630,000.

Labour’s Approach

There is little doubt that the efforts made by the Conservative Party both in the field of propaganda and in the form of various economic incentives offered by Conservative governments when “middle class” support wavers have played a big part in retaining the support of the majority of the middle sections for the right. But years of neglect by the left, frequent outbursts of syndicalist crudities by some leaders of the Labour movement as well as pompous and platitudinous appeals by others, have all been factors which have made it a great deal easier for the Conservative Party to retain the majority support of the middle strata.

The fact that the majority of the middle strata are not yet convinced supporters of socialism does not mean that their support cannot be won in the future. On the contrary, given a more correct and sympathetic approach by the Labour movement their support in far larger numbers is assured; for the concentration of private industry and agriculture into fewer and fewer hands continues and widens the gulf between employers and employed while at the same time the small employers find themselves face to face with monopoly capitalism which they increasingly are coming to recognise as their main enemy.

¹ *The Middle Class Vote*. Dr. John Bonham, 1954.

The cornerstone of socialism remains the transference of ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange from the capitalist class to the people—the working class and the middle strata. The carrying through of such a policy of social ownership in a country like Britain would demand a tremendous amount of flexibility, patience and understanding in relation to the small trading, small manufacturing and farming sections. The most important thing is that such a policy of social ownership could be an immense liberating force for the middle strata. The tolerance and patience which a socialist government could afford to show would enable many small businesses to flourish as never before, freed from the shackling effect of big business with its control of supplies and of profit margins, its advertising and coupon “wars”, its price rings and restrictive practices.

For the salaried professional, technical and clerical groups, socialism offers scope for initiative and ability which, although so often on the lips of the spokesmen of capitalist industry and commerce, seems, for the aspiring technical or professional person, to be always “round the corner”.

Socialism and the Middle Classes

Unfortunately there is a widespread conception among the middle strata that socialism would mean for them less freedom and loss of individuality, as well as subjection to a vast civil service bureaucracy and state interference on a grand scale. This has always been the main line of propaganda directed towards the middle sections by the capitalist class. Yet in Britain under capitalism the degree of bureaucracy is so considerable as to be generally accepted as a normal part of life. It is necessary for the socialist movement to declare itself in no uncertain terms in favour of waging war against bureaucracy and the excesses of officialdom not only in the field of the civil service and local government but also in the whole wider commercial and industrial field. Socialism should mean the working people fully governing themselves for the first time, and only under such conditions is there any possibility of getting rid of bureaucracy which thrives in a capitalist society.

The danger undoubtedly exists that a socialist society will not easily rid itself of the bureaucratic practices it inherits from capitalism. Recent events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have shown that the continuance of such practices, besides being morally indefensible, can have very serious consequences and retard the development of socialism. However, the essential point to be seen is that despite the mistakes made it

should be possible for bureaucracy, a product of their capitalist past, to be overcome in time in these countries because the will is there to overcome it. In capitalist society, on the other hand, bureaucracy is the natural manifestation of the rule of monopoly capitalism over the rest of the people, so that no serious attempt is ever made to end it; even though some of the worst cases become public scandals, the bureaucracy at the root of them remains.

On many of the broad political and ideological issues which should form part of socialist policy in Britain today there is already among the middle strata a fund of support. Many in these sections feel strongly on the questions of peace, banning weapons of mass destruction and stopping the use of Britain as a rocket base; others feel strongly that civil liberties must be defended against the growing powers of the police, judiciary and M.I.5; the vast extension of monopoly in the dissemination of information by press, radio and television is also seen among many in the middle sections as leading to a docile and drugged electorate; there is also a broad measure of agreement on the need to abolish all forms of racial discrimination and colour-bar and to reform our penal system, including the abolition of capital punishment. Colonialism arouses widespread condemnation among many in the middle sections and there is also concern, particularly among those in the professions, at the degradation of British culture and the rule of commercialism in so many of the cultural fields; there is a considerable body of support for the expansion of the social services and opposition to Government cuts; there is also strong support for the raising of the general educational level of the whole population and for a vast expansion of scientific and technological education.

All these issues, of course, do not strike all within the middle strata with equal force. Some of these issues, for example the degradation of the British cultural heritage, arouse much stronger feelings among those in the professions than in the trading and producing sections. It is those in the professions who are most concerned about the ideological issues, but such questions also cause concern among many of those in other sections because of the relatively higher educational level which tends to prevail among them.

At the same time nearly all sections of the middle strata can have an economic incentive for the ending of capitalism and the establishment of a planned society in which production could be enormously increased and living standards raised. It must become part and parcel of the policy of the Labour movement that socialism means, using the phrase of Marx: “from each according

to his ability, to each according to his work." Socialism does not mean everybody should become equal except in the sense of equality of opportunity; the equalitarianism which has crept back more strongly into the Labour movement of late belongs more properly to the utopian concepts of socialism which abounded in the nineteenth century as visions to spur men on before it was on the agenda as an immediate objective. Even if it was ideally desirable to equalise incomes for all types of work in a socialist society it would not be practical politics. The Labour movement must help the middle sections to achieve higher living standards as well as the working class; this is the only really solid basis for winning the middle strata as allies of the working class. More than at any time in the past these sections have, since the Second World War, become almost universally concerned about economic issues as well as the political and ideological ones, and as a result, are more ready to come closer to the Labour movement.

Building the Alliance

A new orientation is badly needed among the progressives in the middle strata who could be making much greater and more confident efforts to gain the support of their colleagues for socialist ideas. For a long time now, there have been strong trends among those in these sections of left-wing views to abandon the middle strata and seek to merge themselves in the working class movement. This point of view is expressed by one of the principal "Angry Young Men", Kingsley Amis, in a pamphlet he wrote for the Fabian Society. He is speaking of "intellectuals" who he defines very broadly to include most of those in the professions.

"But I do sometimes feel that if, as the evidence seems to show, many of them have moved over to the right, or at least away from the left, then this is not necessarily unmixed loss to the left. These fellows represent after all a tiny fraction of the voting strength and we can well afford to do without a great deal of their conversation." (*Socialism and the Intellectuals*, 1957.)

This kind of approach is unfortunately not unique. There is a considerable underestimation in the Labour movement of the vital importance for British socialism of gaining ground among the intellectual sections as well as among the entire

middle strata. Sound analysis of the actual political and economic position of these sections is needed with both the positive and negative factors being taken fully into account. On this basis the Labour movement can then take determined action to end the divorcement of the middle strata from the working class which is fraught with such dangers for socialism in a country like Britain.

Many writers, journalists, artists and other professional and business people do work both of a specialist and a non-specialist character which assists the Labour movement enormously. But in the main they still continue to neglect their own sections of the middle strata, playing a relatively small part if at all in professional or trade organisations and being content to categorise their colleagues as "reactionary" or even "bourgeois". This applies particularly of course to the small-producing, trading and business sections where the going is likely to be hardest of all. But to win the middle strata for socialism on any appreciable scale requires that the left among them must devote much of their political activity to this task. Greater help and encouragement to do so from the Labour movement would be a powerful stimulant, but only those that are themselves a part of the middle strata can make the intimate contact with their colleagues and business associates that will be needed. This means in particular that the organisations of the middle sections, including the professional institutes, trade associations and even the Rotary Clubs and Chambers of Commerce have to be seen in a different light; for these together with the growing trade union forms of organisation are the mass organisation of the middle strata. Gradually it could be possible to reduce the existing propensity of such organisations for supporting the right and in many ways to ensure that they exert a progressive influence. In this way the whole political climate among these sections could gradually undergo a change and socialist ideas would be able to forge to the front. This could turn out to be nowhere near the formidable task it might appear at first sight. There can be no involvement of the middle sections on a large-scale without this process being started in a determined way by the left among the middle strata, helped and encouraged constantly by the Labour movement.