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The Middle Class in Politics

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Citation

Lock, G. (1979). The Middle Class in Politics. *Acta Politica*, 14: 1979(4), 548-551. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3451999>

Version: Publisher's Version
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

lisatie een keerzijde heeft. Nergens ter wereld laat men het eigenbelang wijken voor het algemeen belang, ook niet in een systeem van zelfbestuur. Zo is er – ook door de vakbonden in Joego-Slavië – herhaaldelijk op gewezen dat de persoonlijke inkomens van arbeiders in Joego-Slavië van bedrijfstak tot bedrijfstak en van bedrijf tot bedrijf enorm kunnen verschillen omdat in een systeem van zelfbestuur een arbeidsmarkt ontbreekt. Die verschillen hebben dan vaak niets te maken met de arbeidsprestaties maar hangen af van de toevallige monopolistische positie van een bedrijf, de toevallige kapitaalintensiviteit of de toevallige ligging. Tot de meer recente ontwikkelingen horen dat ook de zogenaamde 'zelfbesturende afspraken' tussen diverse bedrijven die aan dit euvel tegemoet zouden moeten komen. Aan deze zelfbesturende afspraken wijdt Boonzajer een apart hoofdstuk, dat de indruk achterlaat van een erg ondoorzichtige situatie, mede door de grote verschillen tussen de afzonderlijke republieken.

Wij kunnen ons nauwelijks voorstellen dat werkelijk zelfbesturende organisaties, met een, door wat voor reden dan ook, hoog gemiddeld persoonlijk inkomen, dat hoge inkomen zouden laten wèg harmoniseren door middel van zelfbesturende overeenkomsten met anderen (tenzij bedrijfselite dat bekookstoofd maar dan is het zelfbestuur ver te zoeken). Evenmin lijkt de situatie erg doorzichtig wat betreft de recente opkomst van een nieuw orgaan in de bedrijfsorganisatie, het zogenaamde orgaan van zelfbesturende arbeiderscontrole. Dat is dus een derde nieuwigheid in de ontwikkeling van de bedrijfsorganisatie in Zuid-Slavië. Dit orgaan zou de controle moeten uitvoeren ten aanzien van de doorvoering van beslissingen van arbeiders, bestuursorganen e.d. Hoewel Boonzajer wijst op het tot nu toe wispelturige gedrag van deze organen, ziet hij er toch voor de toekomst positieve elementen in. Wij vragen ons af of deze organen niet de bron van een energie verslindende competentie en machtsstrijd met directie en management zullen vormen.

Het boek van Boonzajer is geen geleerd boek en nog minder een dor boek. Het is in een zo plezierige stijl geschreven, dat wij het als een roman (vol familie-intriges) hebben gelezen.

J. Wemelsfelder

John Gerrard e.a., *The Middle Class in Politics*. Farnborough (Saxon House), 1978, \$ 21.

This book, it must be said at the outset, deals only with the British middle class, and in its first hundred pages or so treats primarily the latter's situation, organization and leadership in the nineteenth century, the rest of the book being devoted to an analysis of the contemporary state of affairs.

It originates, as the editors point out, in an interdisciplinary conference on 'The Middle Class in Politics' held at Salford University in 1977, in which the participants were drawn from the fields of history, political science and sociology. The problem with any such interdisciplinary work is that it may tend towards eclecticism, especially when – as in the present case – it consists in no more than the simple collection of (revised) papers presented at a conference. The editors attempt to confront this difficulty by sketching out, in an Introduction, what they consider the main themes running through the papers: diversity and fragmentation within the middle class, 'new' movements within the same class, and conceptions of class itself in relation to the theme of the work. In this last connexion they remark, in

order perhaps to save the situation, that 'arguably, we learn from the competition of theories and perspectives, rather than from the acceptance of any one theory or framework' (p. 9).

In fact the papers included hardly confront one another, even if certain of the authors (David Jary, Colin Rallings) themselves present and attempt to evaluate alternatives hypotheses or theories concerning the analysis of the middle class, and in particular of its political orientations.

Keith Robbins opens the book with a descriptive and psychologistic account of the nineteenth-century Quaker Member of Parliament and leader of what were then known as the 'middling classes', John Bright. John Garrard follows with a contribution which contrasts the relative lack of interest and influence of the middle class of the same period in national as compared with local politics, drawing attention to the fact that municipal government was, a century ago, much more independent of the central authority than it is today.

Tom Nossiter refers to his own previously published work on the politics of the British North East, and in particular to the rise and role of the 'shopocracy' in propagating the politics of individualism between 1932 and the Crimean War. Nossiter, let it be said in passing, is at least aware of the enormous theoretical problems which any study of whatever 'class' brings with it, remarking with respect to the work of one of his colleagues that it may cause 'logicians [to] scent a fallacy, sociologists [to] discern confusion, and historians probably [to] throw up their hands in despair' (p. 68).

Derek Fraser, defening his own views already available in book form, continues to question 'what we might call a crude Marxian picture about the nature of cities in the nineteenth century' (p. 85). What remains obscure is why anyone should wish thus to choose the easiest target within the field: when the crude picture has been knocked down, the sophisticated varieties presumably still remain upright, and we are little further forward. Besides which, Fraser's argument consists primarily in emphasizing the 'infinite gradations' of the social structure of the nineteenth-century city, rendering it impossible in his view for any form of social analysis to categorize its population into simple class terms. But whoever wanted to do such a thing, other than the most uninteresting propagandists?

Brian Elliott, David McCrone and Valerie Skelton try to establish a (declining) correlation between landlord property ownership and local government power in Edinburgh from 1875-1975, against the background of growing State intervention in the housing sphere; they too challenge the 'Marxist' thesis which neglects the role of the petty bourgeoisie to the benefit of analyses of 'large international financial groups', etc. (p. 125).

David Jary's paper has two objectives: to set out a number of competing hypotheses concerning the contemporary middle class left, and to outline the limitations or 'epistemological inconclusiveness' of arguments dealing with this phenomenon. Jary's contribution is one of the most interesting, since it at least raises – whether or not the author is conscious of the fact – certain key questions of political theory in the domain of class analysis. For example: is what is normally referred to in Britain as a strong form of *class* division really such, or rather a class system reinforced, masked and distorted by *caste* distinctions? Is there any truth in the thesis of the 'proletarianization' of the middle class? However, many of the most interesting works dealing with such topics are ignored: in the latter case, for example, Harry Braverman's *Labour and Monopoly Capital* or C. Baudelot, R. Establet and J.

Malemort's *La Petite bourgeoisie en France*.¹

Certain of Jary's points are nevertheless thought-provoking: one wonders for instance whether his argument that the middle class left considers the State machine 'too "valuable" to simply "smash"' has any relevance to the recent political and sociological development of the Euro-Communist Parties, and in particular to their abandonment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Such points are however never explicitly drawn: it is left to the reader to use his imagination. Nor, in his discussion of 'Marxian hypotheses' does the author discuss works like that of E. Balibar (*On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*)² which strongly defends the standpoint that 'the "petty bourgeoisie" does not exist as a class. What is normally referred to under this umbrella term is [...] the *internal contradictions* of the process of proletarianization', that 'what is normally called by the name "petty bourgeoisie" is in fact the *internal division of the proletariat* and the *internal division of the bourgeoisie*, leading to the fact that they never constitute two absolutely distinct sociological groups [...] and that they *seem* to give birth to an intermediate "third class" [...] more or less comfortably suspended "between" proletarianization and capitalist bourgeoisification'.³ I quote at length from Balibar above all to draw attention to the fact that the book presently under review tends to *repress* just those questions which *might cause its own subject-matter to 'disappear'*.

Colin Rallings' paper also stands out above the general level of discussion. He too presents a number of conflicting lines of argument concerning the political behaviour of (in this case) the 'lower middle class'. He does question the existence of a white collar 'group' as such, but in favour of redefining it as a simple 'amalgam of individuals' (p. 187). His conclusion – based on detailed sociological data – is that the basic cleavage in British society is still that between the manual and non-manual strata, and that 'there is no real sign of a significant shift in the overall pattern of lower middle class [political] response' (p. 204).

The interest of Rallings' paper lies not so much in its conclusion as in the problems posed by various comments, such as his remark that the 'growth in non-manual employment seems also to have been accompanied by a relative erosion of the income and status differentials previously enjoyed by the white-collar employee compared with his manual worker colleague. Equally the tasks he carries out have been devalued to the extent that routinisation and mechanization at work have increased, whilst autonomy and the opportunity for promotion have been reduced' (p. 184). This question has however been analyzed in great detail in works not cited by the author: for example in the above-mentioned essay of Baudelot, Establet and Malemort. They show that the notion of the gradual disappearance of the proletariat is a myth; that neither the growth of the 'service sector' nor the so-called 'scientific and technological revolution' is producing such an effect; that on the contrary, a new kind of 'middle class proletariat' is arising and developing fast. Two thirds of the service sector workers in France, for example, have no qualifications whatsoever beyond a middle school certificate; and as for the impact of 'high technology', while it does produce groups of extremely competent and specialized experts, it only does so by simultaneously creating an enormous mass of 'non-manual' labour which is often of *slighter content* in terms of skill than the labour of the factory worker of earlier days. In the field of computer operation, for instance, nearly 60% of the employed personnel are made up of punch-card operators and other semi-skilled workers carrying out the most tedious and stultifying tasks.⁴ Rallings' comment, cited above, concerning the continuing dominance of the

manual/non-manual cleavage in British society thus comes to stand in a different light, as – even if true – a political and ideological *problem* to be explained.

Noel Parry, for his part, argues that Marxian and non-Marxian sociologists have blinded themselves, on account of their image of middle-class individualism, to the existence of collective action among key groups in this class, though Frank Bechhofer and Brian Elliott throw some doubt on this argument, precisely stressing the lack of such collective solidarity and the passivity of the British middle class even in the face of the threat from the socialist movement: the shopocracy in particular consists of an aggregate of 'reluctant Tories' rather than an autonomous political pressure group. This conclusion tends to be supported by Roger King and Neill Nugent's study of the ineffectiveness of Ratepayers associations in Newcastle and Wakefield, and by George Moyser's paper on the middle class and the Church of England: 'Just as the trade unions probably are not listened to much on divorce, so the Church is probably not listened to on economic matters. The result [...] is that the Church's role as a representative of middle class interests thereby loses much of its substance' (p. 287). The book is rounded off with a substantial bibliography produced by John Percy.

The whole work contains, in my opinion, practically nothing in terms of theoretical innovation; rather, it consists in a sometimes heavy-handed application of received sociological, political scientific and historical methods to its specific object, whose very existence – or mode of existence – is, as I tried to argue, the really important point at issue. The book is too specialized for the student who knows little in advance about the British middle class, and unsatisfying for the specialist, at least if he has any feel for intellectual problems. But this is probably the consequence of the origins and form of the volume. No doubt a talk with some of its authors would make a fascinating evening.

Graham Lock

1 Respectively: New York and London (Monthly Review Press), 1974; Paris (Maspro), 1974.

2 London (New Left Books), 1976.

3 *Op. cit.*, pp. 228-9. This is not the 'orthodox' Marxist thesis; the latter can be found for example in the Rules of the board game *Class Struggle* (distributed by Class Struggle Inc., 487 Broadway, New York), Rule 3: 'Only Workers and the Capitalists can win or lose in "Class Struggle". The Minor Classes [Farmers, Small Businessmen, Professionals and Students] can only participate in winning or losing through their alliances with one of the Major Classes'. Compare Balibar, p. 229: 'To admit the existence of an intermediate *class* [...] is to open the way to a conception of class alliances in terms of *compromises*, or even in terms of an "historic" *contract*, i.e. finally, in *legal* terms [...] To reject the myth of the petty bourgeoisie as a third, independent class is therefore to reject the legal form which this argument about class alliances implicitly or explicitly takes'.

4 Baudelot, etc., p. 81.

J. R. Abbing, *Economie en cultuur; de subsidieproblematiek in de economische theorie alsmede aanzetten tot een economie van de kunsten*, Ministerie van C.R.M.-Staatsuitgeverij - 1978.

Dit boek is geschreven voor een nogal breed samengestelde lezersgroep van ambte-