

//Enfoques//

The Lower Middle Class as a sociological problem in Marx's XVIII Brumaire

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From the pages of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* by Marx and understanding the political and social events in France between 1848 and 1852, several interpretations have been made, by Marxist and non-Marxist authors alike, regarding the role played by the lower middle class in moments of crisis. Particularly, after the advent of fascism in 20th century Europe, many voices have risen to signal the *XVIII Brumaire* as Marx's call of attention on the dangers set by the lower middle class's counterrevolutionary and reactionary spirit. Even more, some think of the *XVIII Brumaire*, and Marx's take on Bonapartism as the first, and extremely prophetic, definition and description of a modern fascist regime.

The purposes of this essay are to: first, define and describe the lower middle class and its social and political consequences according to Marx; and, second, to explore how the lower middle class has been analyzed by a selection of Marxist and non-Marxist authors as a crucial sociological and historical problem. The latter has been taken to the extent of even comparing the political phenomenon of Bonapartism to Fascism and the lower middle class historical relationship in both of them. Bonapartism and Fascism are very distinct types of political regimes, even if they share some similarities. Nevertheless, it would be ahistorical to describe Louis Bonaparte's regime as fascist. Even so, Marx's typically coined *reactionary or counter-revolutionary role* played by the lower middle class in both cases was similar. (1)

Several designations have been used to differentiate the lower middle class from the higher middle class or big bourgeoisie: *petite bourgeoisie*, *Kleinburgertum*, the unpleasant, *lumpen-bourgeoisie*. It is impossible to assign fixed meanings in distinct times and places to those concepts. What they mean, and enfold, in different historical moments is determined by historically concrete political, social and economic structures and conditions. A social lower middle stratum was economically, but not so much politically, active during the preindustrial era. Its internal structure, predominantly formed by independent peasants, corporate-guild artisans and shopkeepers, and the nature of its relationship to the rest of society was particularly different from the economically, socially and more politically active, lower middle class of primarily dependent clerks, independent peasants, technicians, professionals and small shop owners of capitalist society (2).

From Marx to the present there have been few attempts to define the lower middle class because the main issue was not the *Kleinburgertum's* own historical, social and political particularities; but, the fact that the

petite bourgeoisie conformed a “classes class”. In Marxist terms, the lower middle class was a class *in* but not *for* itself.

This meant that the petty bourgeoisie was dependent on its own fate but not on its own existence. The lower middle class was torn, and it still may be today, between two possible outcomes: *proletarianization* or *embourgeoisement* (3). In the first one, the petite bourgeoisie is condemned to being proletarianized. In fact, during the early industrialization period of England the small artisans and some specialized technicians were dissolved or forced into the industrial working class (4). In the second scenario, they would integrate with the big bourgeoisie finally accomplishing a long social aspiration. It would, certainly, diminish the fears and concerns of being proletarianized and, lastly and possibly, would allow clerks and professionals to be the frontrunners of a classless postindustrial society (5). Accordingly, as Marx said in the XVIII Brumaire, the lower middle class should be viewed as a *transitional class* whose members would finally end up being part of the proletarians or the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, the lower middle class has had a pivotal role in certain historically crucial events: revolutions and counterrevolutions. Marx attributed no apparent class-consciousness to the petite bourgeoisie, except in times of severe crisis. The lower middle class, following Marx, lacked its own class-consciousness because it was afraid to become proletarian and aspired to attain the bourgeoisie’s style of living and class standing in society even though it also despised the big bourgeoisie’s productive means and way of life. Marx, in a prophetic Freudian style analysis, would ascribe this apparent contradiction to the lower middle class own self-hate. Nevertheless, lacking its own class-consciousness did not mean that the petite bourgeoisie was not capable of generating its own separate culture, life-style and *Weltanschauung*. The problem was that it engendered its own *ethos* in direct opposition to the proletarian and bourgeoisie ones; affecting, then, its own cultural authenticity. All this said, the lower middle class may not have been self-conscious but it certainly was self-aware. It had distinctive class awareness (6).

The interest of Karl Marx in the lower middle class was provoked by the role the author gave to it during the events that unfolded in France between February 1848 and December 1852, particularly the role played by the petite bourgeoisie in the ascendance to power of Louis Bonaparte in the coup d’état of December 1852. First of all, it is imperative to define how Marx understood the social composition of the lower middle class in mid-nineteen century France. Small independent peasants, clerks and small artisans and shopkeepers were Marx’s main petty bourgeoisie members. All of them were part of this classless class because they lacked the property of the main means of capitalist production, that in mid-nineteen century France Marx attributed to the industrial, large-retail and financial sectors; and, because they were not even proletarians either because they were small owners (particularly small peasants and shopkeepers) or because their work did not constitute an intensive manual waged labor (artisans and specially State’s clerks). Marx did not see in them any economic conditions of existence, under which they lived,

that could separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of other classes. Given this situation, the small peasants, clerks and shopkeepers were not in any hostile opposition (as a clearly defined class with its own interests, culture and mode of life) to the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. Marx did not witness any sense of class-consciousness in them. He only viewed a local interconnection among small peasants, shopkeepers and clerks; but there was no sense of identification of interests between all of them that could beget unity and political organization.

But even if they did not conform a class on itself, they were aware of their own uncertain socio-economic circumstances: at any given moment the big bourgeoisie, either by the action of retail competition or that of bank executions of failed mortgage payments, could toss them into the proletarian class. This socio-economic fear of becoming part of a *propertyless* class put them in direct opposition with the working class and drove them into the arms of the big bourgeoisie in moments of severe political crisis. Only here did Marx perceive the existence of class-consciousness in the petty bourgeoisie. In the XVIII Brumaire Marx distinguishes three moments where the lower middle class acted as a class in itself: in the February Revolution of 1848 when they rebelled, alongside sectors of the big bourgeoisie and the proletarians, against the Orleanist monarchy; in June 1848 when they actively collaborated with the big bourgeoisie in crushing the proletarian rebellion; and finally, in December 1852 when they endorsed Louis Bonaparte's coup d'état against the bourgeoisie republic. In the first episode, Marx observes a revolutionary role embedded in the lower middle class. He recognizes a class-consciousness in them; a strive to enact political and social change in the wellbeing of their own interests. In June 1848, Marx assigns them a counter-revolutionary role. They react out of fear and misguided by the bourgeoisie. They are afraid that a proletarian revolution would forever kill their socio-economic aspiration to become part of the bourgeoisie. According to Marx they are right to be fearful. A proletarian revolution would lead to a dictatorship of the proletariat and to the end of all classes. Alas, their desire of a bourgeoisie life-style as a "heaven on earth" would be tromped. A classless society would take away from them what distinguished them from the proletariat and what would, eventually, provided them upwards-social mobility: small private property and better paid and socially-respected professional labor. It has to be added that Marx also makes the bourgeoisie responsible for the lower middle class actions in the June rebellion. The former convinced the latter not to support and even to fight the proletarians by guaranteeing them access to better social standing, better financial and trade benefits and inclusion into the higher middle class. These were all false promises, which lack of satisfaction led to the events of December 1852. The lower middle class, betrayed by the bourgeoisie and immersed in deeply economic despair (which they made the big bourgeoisie responsible for) decided to fully endorse Louis Bonaparte's coup d'état. Again, and maybe more than ever if Marx's argument is to be followed, the lower middle class acted as a fully conscious class and had a counter-revolutionary and, even more, a reactionary role against the French bourgeoisie republic.

Why did the lower middle class support Bonapartism? According to Marx, Napoleon III was the only one that could represent the petty bourgeoisie's interests. They did not have any sense of class-consciousness, which meant that they were unable to express their interests in a collective way. Meaning, that they were, like Marx says, incapable of enforcing their class interests in their own name through a parliament or any other democratic convention or institution. The lower middle class needed, and were also longing for, a paternalistic, authoritarian and charismatic figure that would represent their interest and implement policies accordingly. Louis Bonaparte mirrored everything the lower middle class was pursuing: the protection of their interests by identifying them with France's interests; the understanding of France as an economically based petite bourgeoisie country in opposition to big bourgeoisie enterprises (banks and big retails companies); and, the conversion of the lower middle class's aspiration for *grandeur* through the Second French Empire's expansionist foreign policy (7).

Bonapartism protected them from the rapacious big bourgeoisie, assured their vital place in society as France's economic engine protecting small private property from socialist distribution of wealth drives coming from the working class and satisfied their sumptuousness desires by establishing a lower middle class based Empire as Europe's major power.

Marx's perceptions and warnings on the lower middle class counter-revolutionary and reactionary roles in periods of political and economic crisis has been regarded, by Marxist and non-Marxist authors alike, as an indication for future revolutionary moments and as a prophetic alert on future authoritarian regimes like fascism. Lenin himself defined the petite bourgeoisie as a "half-class" or "quasi-workers" or "quasi-bourgeois" class that would be more difficult to eradicate than the big bourgeoisie and that would be politically unreliable (8). The lower middle class unpredictable behavior and dislike for radical policies could produce a reactionary backlash that could only be prevented by a rapid proletarianization of all society. Nevertheless, even if Lenin was afraid of the possibility of an authoritarian government led by Kornilov and backed by the petty bourgeoisie (9); he later acknowledged, particularly by implementing the New Economic Policy, the lower middle class economic importance and envisaged them as a transitory class towards a proletarian society (10).

Lastly, several authors have taken the XVIII Brumaire in order to compare Bonapartism to fascism, even affirming that Napoleon's III rule was the first fascist regime in history, or to seek the social origins of both kinds of regimes in the lower middle classes. Jacob Schapiro not only sees the origins of 20th century fascism in 19th century Bonapartist France, he even defines Bonapartism as a type of fascism based on Marx's description of the regime in the XVIII Brumaire (11). Jost Dulffer analyses such comparison and, even if similarities are found, completely rejects its. He actually trends the historical origins of such comparisons to

Trotsky's and August Thalheimer's writings on Nazism during the 1920s and 30s (12).

Finally, Seymour Martin Lipset popularized the notion that fascism, just like Bonapartism, was an expression of the lower middle class resentments. According to Lipset, fascism was politically transformed rage of independent artisans, shopkeepers, small peasants and clerks that found themselves squeezed between better organized industrial workers and big businessmen and were "missing the boat" within the rapid social and economic changes of modern society (13).

However, Ian Kershaw, Robert Paxton and Thomas Childers empirically confirm that fascism was not only a lower middle class phenomenon and that without the acquiescence of the conservative elites and sectors of the big bourgeoisie it would never have come to power (14).

Even if the comparisons between Bonapartism and fascism are historically pointless it is worth noticing, like Arno Meyer did, that Karl Marx was the first one to tackle the problem of the lower middle class lack of class-consciousness (15). Marx is correct in pointing out the lower middle class's awareness of itself and its dysfunctional and contradictory relationship vis-à-vis the big bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Even more so, Marx accurately identifies the social, political and historical role of the petty bourgeoisie: to gain consciousness in moments of crisis and pivotally function either as a revolutionary actor, alongside the bourgeoisie and the working class, or as a counter-revolutionary one, against the proletariat, or as reactionary one against the big bourgeoisie. This is, maybe, Marx's most important and timeless legacy from *The Eighteen Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

(1) Crossick, Geoffrey and Haupt, Heinz-Gerhard, *The Petite Bourgeoisie in Europe 1780-1914*, Rutledge, New York, 1998, pp. 16-38.

(2) Mayer, Arno J., "The Lower Middle Class as Historical Problem", *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 47, No.3, Sep. 1975, pp. 409-436.

(3) See Thompson, Edward, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Random House, New York, 1963.

(4) See Bell, Daniel, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*, Basic Books, New York, 1999.

(5) See Giddens, Anthony, *The Class Structure of Advanced Societies*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1989.

(6) See, Zeldin, Theodore, *The Political System of Napoleon III*, Macmillan, London, 1958.

(7) Lenin, V. I., "Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder: A Popular Essay in Marxian Strategy and Tactics, University of the Pacific

Press, San Francisco, 2001, pp. 9-52.

(8) Fitzpatrick, Sheila, *The Russian Revolution*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, pp. 60.

(9) Ibid, pp. 93-149.

(10) Schapiro, Jacob S., *Liberalism and the Challenge to Fascism*, McGraw Hill, New York, 1949, pp. 308-31.

(11) Dulffer, Jost, "Bonapartism, Fascism and National Socialism", Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 11, No.4, 1976, pp. 109-128.

(12) Lipset Seymour M., *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1981, pp. 127-182.

(13) See, Childers, Thomas, "The Social Bases of the National Socialist Vote", Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 11, No.4, 1976, pp. 17-42; Kershaw, Ian, "*The Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich*", Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001; Kershaw, Ian, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000; and, Paxton, Robert, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, Random House, New York, 2004.

(14) Mayer, Arno J., "The Lower Middle Class as Historical Problem", The Journal of Modern History, Vol. 47, No.3, Sep. 1975, pp. 409-436.

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