

## **CHAPTER 18**

### **THE SEARCH FOR A THEORETICAL SOLUTION**

Among Marxist social scientists, it was probably Nicos Poulantzas who came closest to a theoretical solution for the question of the middle class in technobureaucratic capitalism. Nevertheless, his attempt fell short of success. His concern with Marxist orthodoxy led him to a solution which looks to the past rather than analyzing the direction history has taken based on the development of the productive forces as well as the emergence of a new mode of production. Nonetheless, the strength of his theoretical work and his prestige have influenced an increasing number of neo-Marxists to accept the idea of a new emerging class.

Poulantzas was one of the most notable Marxist political scientists of his period. Possessing a remarkable capacity for abstract reasoning, he showed imagination, courage to think freely, and scientific rigor in his contributions to the questions of class and the state. It was this scientific rigor which would not allow him to leave the question of the middle strata unresolved. He saw that their integration into either the bourgeoisie or the working class, as well as their designation as an "intermediate wage-earning strata" or "new middle class" was entirely unsatisfactory from a Marxist point of view. On the other hand, Poulantzas clearly perceived that a new social class existed, and that it was formed of a multitude of bureaucrats or white collar employees (technical experts, engineers, managers, salespeople, and office workers). Although other Marxists had acknowledged this fact prior to Poulantzas, starting with the first contributions of Bruno Rizzi (1939), they were referring to bureaucracies in countries that were already dominantly state-controlled. Poulantzas was in all probability the first Marxist of intellectual prestige to acknowledge the existence of the new class in capitalist countries and to examine it in adequate academic terms. Considering the numbers and social and political presence of the new bureaucrats, it would be useless to deny their class nature. Thus he decided, in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, to acknowledge this fact, attributing this group the status of social class and calling it the "new petty bourgeoisie" (1974: 195-347).

#### **1. The New Petty Bourgeoisie**

To call this new class the "new petty bourgeoisie" may be proof of imaginative thinking, but it is an unacceptable solution. Certainly there are other names besides technobureaucracy that are adequate for the new class appearing in the contemporary capitalism. Since it is a new phenomenon, we may call it whatever

we wish. What is important, however, is to give it an adequate theoretical framework. Poulantzas was unable to do this with the term new petty bourgeoisie. He explained the new class in terms of the past, failing to see new relations of production relative to a new mode of production. Nor did he provide a coherent and integrated solution to explain Soviet-type social formations.

Poulantzas divides the petty bourgeoisie into two classes: traditional petty bourgeoisie and new petty bourgeoisie. However the link he makes between the two classes is a negative one:

"the traditional petty bourgeoisie (small-scale production and ownership) and the new petty bourgeoisie (non-productive wage earners) both have in common the fact that they neither belong to the bourgeoisie nor the working class." (1974: 206).

Yet manifesting his permanent tendency to favor political factors to the detriment of economic ones, Poulantzas states that this criterion "only appears" to be negative. This is because, given the polarization between the bourgeoisie and the working class and the exclusion of the two petty bourgeoisies, "it actually produces economic 'similarities' which have common political and ideological effects" (1974: 206). In this way, the basic concepts of historical materialism are inverted. The class conflict rather than the relations of production will determine the class structure of society. There is no doubt that economicism is an untenable position. It loses sight of the dialectical nature of the relations between the productive forces and relations of production, as well as of the relations of production with the ideological superstructure. Yet so is Poulantzas' 180-degree turn in the direction of politicism. In doing so he implicitly abandons the basic postulates of historical materialism and Marxist class theory.

Poulantzas never clarifies the economic similarities between crafts people, small-scale agricultural producers and those involved in small-scale commerce, who perform labor directly while at the same time own capital and employ labor - i.e., the petty bourgeoisie - and the technobureaucrats who work in large bureaucratic organizations. Actually they are so different in both economic and professional terms, and the relations of production involved are so dissimilar, that there is no way to find common economic ground between the two groups. Poulantzas soon forsakes the search for economic similarities, but insists on finding points in common on the political level. He states:

"The latter (the traditional petty bourgeoisie) although it occupies in economic relations a place different from that of the new petty bourgeoisie, is nevertheless characterized at the ideological level by certain analogous features, though there are also still some differences." (1974: 294).

The "analogous features" Poulantzas finds common to both classes are in fact rather obvious. They are the political attitudes typically expressed by the

social strata located between the dominant and the dominated class, such as "fear of proletarianization" or a critical altitude toward "large fortunes."

It is possible to understand why a noted political scientist like Poulantzas would espouse such an odd thesis - that of bringing together the technobureaucracy, a new emerging class, with the petty bourgeoisie, and old class constantly threatened with extinction. He was clear about the existence of a new social class and he needed to give it a name. "New petty bourgeoisie" was convenient, since like the traditional petty bourgeoisie, the new class was a middle stratum. Secondly, it permitted him to subordinate class theory to the political factor, to class struggle, a dominant tendency in his thinking. It's strange to think that class struggle can determine class position, but that is what Poulantzas declares in this passage:

"If the traditional and the new petty bourgeoisie can be considered as belonging to the same class, this is because social classes are only determined in the class struggle, and because these groupings are precisely both polarized in relation to the bourgeoisie and the proletariat." (1974: 294).

But Poulantzas had a third decisive reason for equating or bringing together what we call the technobureaucracy with the traditional petty bourgeoisie. He admitted that a new class existed, but did not want to admit the historical and ideological consequences of this fact. In this way he is led contradictorily to deny autonomous and long term ideological and political viewpoints to the new class. He states:

"The petty bourgeoisie actually has, in long run, no autonomous class political position of its own. This simply means that, in a capitalist social formation, there is only the bourgeois way and the proletarian way (the socialist way): there is no such thing as the 'third way', which various theories of the 'middle class' insist on. The two basic classes are the bourgeoisie and the working class; there is no such thing as a 'petty bourgeois mode of production.'" (1974: 297)

In fact, it is impossible to speak of a petty bourgeois mode of production. It did not exist in the past, as the petty bourgeoisie never became the dominant class, nor even a fundamental class in a given social formation. It could not exist today. The petty bourgeoisie and its respective relations of production have always existed secondarily in capitalist formations. But while the petty bourgeois mode of production has never occurred in history in a dominant way, and the petty bourgeoisie has never been the dominant class, we cannot say the same of the technobureaucracy. It has attained the dominant position in all the "communist" or state-controlled countries and is present - although in a subordinate and very contradictory way - in capitalist countries. Unlike the petty bourgeoisie, the technobureaucracy is a class with a clearly defined vocation for power. This vocation is expressed through attempts to administer the entire social production in rational terms. Poulantzas came close to this fact with his

concept of the new petty bourgeoisie, recognizing the class nature of this new group. But he was unable to take the theoretical step necessary to reach a more general and effectively historical vision of this class in contemporary society.

## **2. The Acknowledgement of the New Class**

Nevertheless, Poulantzas' analysis represents a significant advance in the study of the new class - an analysis that began with Rizzi (1939), Burnham (1941), Castoriadis (1949) and Wright Mills (1951). Another contribution came from Paul Sweezy. He was one of the first to denounce "the illusion of the managerial revolution" (1942), but in *The Post-Revolutionary Society* he adopted a more realistic position. In this book, where he acknowledges the existence of a new dominant class in the Soviet Union, based on control of the state organization (1980: 147), Sweezy does not make the theoretical link to a corresponding new technobureaucratic middle class in the capitalist countries. Yet it is obvious that once the emergence of a new class is recognized in keeping with of its control of public organization in state societies, there is no reason to deny the existence of a new technobureaucratic middle class in capitalist societies, partially controlling public and private bureaucratic organizations.

In reality, the standard Marxist position which ignores indications of the emergence of the technobureaucratic class seems to be nearing its end. The weight of the evidence finally seems to be prevailing over the orthodox belief that the alternative to the bourgeoisie is the proletariat. An expression of this fact is Val Burris' article "Capital Accumulation and the Rise of the New Middle Class" (1980). He begins his analysis with an implicit critique of Poulantzas, stating that:

"unlike intermediate groups, such as the petty bourgeoisie, this new middle class does not exist as the receding periphery of capitalist production, but emerges within the very center of capitalist economic relations" (1980: 18).

Given that Val Burris recognizes the existence of a new middle class, to be consistent he should also admit the emergence of new relations of production and consequently a new mode of production. He does observe that the relations of production are different. Taking the same direction indicated by Poulantzas (1974) and Erick Olin Wright (1978), he affirms that the new middle class does not have economically own but rather possesses the means of production, thus occupying a "contradictory location within class relations" (Burris, 1980: 19).

Along these same lines, Harry Braverman, who studied with Baran and Sweezy, has explicitly acknowledged the existence of the new middle class

which occupies an intermediary position between the bourgeoisie and the workers in the process of capital accumulation:

"This 'new middle class' occupies its intermediate position not because it is outside the process of increasing capital, but because, as a part of this process, it takes its characteristics from both sides." (1974: 407).

Donald Stabile is another Marxist who has already accepted the new middle class that we are calling the technobureaucracy to be a fact. For him:

"members of the New Class are viewed as sharing a common relationship to the means of production - lack of ownership - with the result that they can be exploited. But members of the New Class have widely differing amounts of control over production." (1983: 69).

Through a process of negation, Stabile, like Val Burris, comes close to defining new relations of production. However his major concern is to show that though this new class shares a common ideology - "scientific professionalism, the promotion of efficiency", it tends to be divided politically, based on an internal split between technocrats and intellectuals.