

Comments on the Term ‘Petty Bourgeoisie’

(S.H. — 4/28/19)

Introduction

First, I apologize for the length of this essay; as I got into the issue I kept thinking of additional aspects and related topics that should be mentioned. (Of course there are no doubt many more aspects *not* mentioned here!) And of necessity a discussion about how the petty bourgeoisie is defined must also discuss just how the proletariat and the bourgeoisie should be defined. These are not totally separate issues.

Second, in this discussion I am not going to make any distinction between the various English and French spellings: I am taking the most common English term, ‘petty bourgeoisie’ to be the same thing as the ‘petit bourgeoisie’ and the ‘petite bourgeoisie’.

Third, it is certainly true that the term ‘petty bourgeoisie’ is used in different ways by different people; i.e., it means different things to different people. Although some other conceptions will be mentioned, I am not setting out to catalog all the many different conceptions and to treat them all with equal validity, as a general lexicographical study would do in creating entries in a standard (bourgeois!) general-purpose dictionary. Instead, I am setting out to say 1) how I think the term has been used within Marxist-Leninist-Maoist theory, and 2) how I think *it should be used* within that theory in the U.S. today. In other words, I am setting out to define a [technical term](#) within MLM theory, but to also talk about a number of additional issues that come up in this regard.

Let’s start with a definition that I don’t think is completely correct from the standpoint of MLM theory, but which does have some considerable currency on the “Left”. Here is the entry on “Petty-bourgeois” from the “Encyclopedia of Marxism: Glossary of Terms” online at: <https://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/p/e.htm#petite-bourgeoisie> (accessed 4/22/19). This dictionary is on the Marxist Internet Archive website run and controlled by Trotskyites, and thus generally defines terms in the way in which that milieu uses them. (Typos in the original.)

Petty-bourgeois

1) The class of small proprietors (for example, owners of small stores), and general handicrafts people of various types.

This group has been disappearing since the industrial revolution, as large factories or retail outlets can produce and distribute commodities faster, better, and for a cheaper price than the small proprietors. While this class is most abundant in the least industrialized regions of the world, only dwindling remnants remain in more industrialized areas.

These people are the foundation of the capitalist dream (aka “the American dream”): to start a small business and expand it into an empire. Much of capitalist growth and development comes from these people, while at the same time capitalism stamps out these people more and more with bigger and better industries than no small proprietor

can compete against. Thus for the past few decades in the U.S., petty-bourgeois are given an enormous variety of incentives, tax breaks, grants, loans, and ways to escape unscathed from a failed business.

2) Also refers to the growing group of workers whose function is management of the bourgeois apparatus. These workers do not produce commodities, but instead manage the production, distribution, and/or exchange of commodities and/or services owned by their bourgeois employers.

While these workers are a part of the working class because they receive a wage and their livelihood is dependent on that wage, they are separated from working class consciousness because they have day-to-day control, but not ownership, over the means of production, distribution, and exchange.

Definition 1) above is at least on the right track, I would say. But note that in the second definition, the petty bourgeoisie is said to include “the growing group of workers whose function is management of the bourgeois apparatus”. It says that these people are nevertheless “part of the working class because they receive a wage and their livelihood is dependent on that wage”. So, very curiously, they claim that *some workers* are also part of the petty bourgeoisie! Instead of being a *separate social class* from the working class, at least part of the petty bourgeoisie is (on this conception) also a part of the working class! Another incorrect aspect of definition 2) here is that there is blatant confusion between the petty bourgeois *ideology* of one section of the working class with what actual social class they should be considered to be objectively a part of. (I’ll talk about that issue some more later on.)

All this just won’t do. The MLM goal, at least, is to define social classes on the basis of *the different and distinct relationships that specific groups of people have to the means of production*. Thus as the proletariat (working class), bourgeoisie (capitalist class), and petty bourgeoisie (sometimes incorrectly identified with what is currently known as the “middle class”) should be properly defined, each is quite distinct and separate from the others. Yes, *individuals* may be part of one of these classes in some respects and part of another in other respects. (A worker may own some small number of shares of stock, for example.) But the *classes themselves* must be different and distinct and their definitions must *not* overlap. And specifically, those in each class should share a common relationship to the means of production that is not included in the definitions of other classes. If this condition is abandoned, social classes lose most of their analytical usefulness, as indeed has happened to the quintessential bourgeois term ‘middle class’.

The very first section of the *Communist Manifesto*, for example, is devoted to drawing the analytical distinction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. If that cannot be clearly and definitively done then Marxism makes no sense at all.

In an 1888 footnote to a new edition of the *Manifesto*, Engels explicitly defines these two central terms this way: “By bourgeoisie is meant the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labor. By proletariat, the class of modern wage laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labor power in order to live.”

Note what is central, what is key in these definitions: the different and entirely distinct relationship of members of one class to the means of production, in contrast to that of the other class. Certainly,

there are many other differences between the two classes, such as that the capitalists are almost all rich while the workers are generally quite poor (at least relatively speaking). The capitalists are in general far better educated, far more politically influential, travel and vacation more, and so forth. But these are all very secondary considerations which mostly flow from the central and essential point which is specified in these definitions, and which concerns the very different basic relationships of the members of these two social classes to the means of production. One class owns these means of production, the other doesn't and therefore has no way of surviving except to sell their ability to work to the capitalists.

A Marxist Definition of the Petty Bourgeoisie

So what then is the petty bourgeoisie? Roughly speaking it is the class in between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. (And Marx himself even occasionally used the term 'Mittelklasse' to mean what we would now call the petty bourgeoisie. This, of course, was long before the term 'middle class' was corrupted by bourgeois ideologists as it is today.)

In the *Communist Manifesto*, and elsewhere, Marx & Engels also refer to the "lower middle class" in several places, which they say means "the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant", etc., and which we would now refer to as the petty bourgeoisie.

So here is a formal definition: **The petty bourgeoisie is that class which survives primarily by their own labor using their own small means of production. They do not sell their labor power to the capitalists, but neither do they (at least for the most part) exist by hiring wage labor.**

This definition is easiest to understand by pointing to clear examples: Small shop owners (whose labor comes either entirely or at least mostly from themselves and their families); Professional people who "hang out their own shingle" (i.e., who are in business for themselves and do not work for a corporation); Independent tradesmen (handicrafts people and the like); Self-employed people of various kinds (though in present society many nominally "independent contractors" are actually proletarians); Those operating small peasant holdings or family farms who do not hire much (if any) outside labor; and so forth. The petty bourgeoisie is the class of small producers who, mostly anyway, rely on their own labor, rather than the labor of others, and who do not themselves sell their own labor power to anyone.

In defining the petty bourgeoisie in this way we follow and continue the manner in which the bourgeoisie and proletariat are defined—by the relationship of the members of these classes to the means of production and whether or not they exist by hiring and exploiting labor or through the sale of their own labor power. That is why this is the Marxist (MLM) way of defining the term. And why I think we should stick with it! And note well that we totally avoid having to consider some types of workers (according to the basic definition of 'proletariat') as *also* being members of the petty bourgeoisie.

You will have noticed that we've had to quibble just a bit about whether the petty bourgeoisie hire any workers at all. For example, it is very common indeed for small store owners to hire one or two people to work for them, often part time. If we exclude from the petty bourgeoisie anybody who exploits hired labor *at all*, then this class would be very small indeed. Even independent doctors and

lawyers will generally hire a clerk or other type of help. During planting or at harvest time a small family farmer may need to hire some temporary workers. Etc. Moreover, it is also fairly common for petty bourgeois individuals to take on occasional short term working class jobs themselves, especially if their independent businesses are not doing so well.

But the mode of existence, and the mode of the relationship of members of the petty bourgeoisie to the means of production, is still overall quite distinctive from either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. *For the most part* they are not living by exploiting the labor of others, nor are they living *for the most part* by selling their own labor power. This is **why** they are “in between” the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

How has the term ‘petty bourgeoisie’ been used by Marxists in the past?

As mentioned earlier, Marx & Engels sometimes referred to what we would call the “petty bourgeoisie” as the “lower middle class”, and it is not always total certain what they precisely meant by the term “petty bourgeois” when they did use it. They generally used it as simply an assumed widely understood term.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks also used language at times which might suggest a slightly broader conception of the term ‘petty bourgeoisie’ than I have been arguing for in today’s America. One of the reasons for this was that they also narrowed down the category ‘worker’ from the way we would now use it. For example, in Tsarist Russia (and perhaps the immediate period after the Bolshevik Revolution) it was common to refer to “the workers and the intelligentsia”. The intelligentsia itself, however, was often divided into two categories—the “big (or great) intelligentsia” and the “small (or lesser) intelligentsia”. The “big intelligentsia” were pretty much the same as what we would call the petty bourgeoisie, except that this category did *not* include any part of the peasantry. Thus it included lawyers, doctors, important professors and government officials, and the like. However, the “small intelligentsia” referred mostly to clerical workers—who were considered quite special at the time *because they could read and write!* So when the phrase “workers and the intelligentsia” was used, it seems that some of whom we would certainly consider to be workers today may have instead been viewed as petty bourgeois rather than workers.

But a central theme I would like to emphasize in regard to how the term petty bourgeoisie might have been used in the past in comparison with how we should use it today, is just this: That was then, and this is now! We live in different times and places and our analysis of social classes in the U.S. today cannot be exactly that of much earlier times and very different places. In America today there is virtually nothing that could count as a peasantry, for example, so our definition of the petty bourgeoisie here today *must* differ from that of Marx and Engels in this regard. And in the U.S. today almost all workers can read and write, and having such an ability cannot possibly be rationally considered to separate any “lesser intelligentsia” from the central body of the working class (as may have been the case in Lenin’s day).

But what about Mao? Didn’t he use the term ‘petty bourgeoisie’ in a somewhat different way too? Perhaps he did, at least in his early work “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society” (March 1926) [footnotes in the original not included here, though the links to the original document may still work]:

The petty bourgeoisie. Included in this category are the owner-peasants, [7] the master handicraftsmen, the lower levels of the intellectuals—students, primary and secondary school teachers, lower government functionaries, office clerks, small lawyers—and the small traders. Both because of its size and class character, this class deserves very close attention. The owner-peasants and the master handicraftsmen are both engaged in small-scale production. Although all strata of this class have the same petty-bourgeois economic status, they fall into three different sections. The first section consists of those who have some surplus money or grain, that is, those who, by manual or mental labour, earn more each year than they consume for their own support. Such people very much want to get rich and are devout worshipers of Marshal Chao; [8] while they have no illusions about amassing great fortunes, they invariably desire to climb up into the middle bourgeoisie. Their mouths water copiously when they see the respect in which those small moneybags are held. People of this sort are timid, afraid of government officials, and also a little afraid of the revolution. Since they are quite close to the middle bourgeoisie in economic status, they have a lot of faith in its propaganda and are suspicious of the revolution. This section is a minority among the petty bourgeoisie and constitutes its right-wing. The second section consists of those who in the main are economically self-supporting. They are quite different from the people in the first section; they also want to get rich, but Marshal Chao never lets them. In recent years, moreover, suffering from the oppression and exploitation of the imperialists, the warlords, the feudal landlords and the big comprador-bourgeoisie, they have become aware that the world is no longer what it was. They feel they cannot earn enough to live on by just putting in as much work as before. To make both ends meet they have to work longer hours, get up earlier, leave off later, and be doubly careful at their work. They become rather abusive, denouncing the foreigners as "foreign devils", the warlords as "robber generals" and the local tyrants and evil gentry as "the heartless rich". As for the movement against the imperialists and the warlords, they merely doubt whether it can succeed (on the ground that the foreigners and the warlords seem so powerful), hesitate to join it and prefer to be neutral, but they never oppose the revolution. This section is very numerous, making up about one-half of the petty bourgeoisie.

The third section consists of those whose standard of living is falling. Many in this section, who originally belonged to better-off families, are undergoing a gradual change from a position of being barely able to manage to one of living in more and more reduced circumstances. When they come to settle their accounts at the end of each year, they are shocked, exclaiming, "What? Another deficit!" As such people have seen better days and are now going downhill with every passing year, their debts mounting and their life becoming more and more miserable, they "shudder at the thought of the future". They are in great mental distress because there is such a contrast between their past and their present. Such people are quite important for the revolutionary movement; they form a mass of no small proportions and are the left-wing of the petty bourgeoisie. In normal times these three sections of the petty bourgeoisie differ in their attitude to the revolution. But in times of war, that is, when the tide of the revolution runs high and the dawn of victory is in sight, not only will the left-wing of the petty bourgeoisie join the revolution, but the middle section too may join, and even right-wingers, swept forward by the great revolutionary tide of the proletariat and of the left-wing of the petty bourgeoisie, will have to go along with

the revolution. [Note: There is a typo in the version online on the Marxist Internet Archive; it says “evolution” here although Mao actually wrote “revolution”.] We can see from the experience of the May 30th Movement [9] of 1925 and the peasant movement in various places that this conclusion is correct. [Mao, *Selected Works*, Vol. 1, (Peking: 1965), pp. 15-16.]

Note that Mao included in his definition of the petty bourgeoisie all those we would still include (handicraftsmen, the small traders, shop owners, most lawyers, etc. But, given that this was a country which also had a huge peasantry he also included a large section of them. And, following closely on situation in Russia in the decades up to that time, Mao also included “the lower levels of the intellectuals—students, primary and secondary school teachers, lower government functionaries, office clerks, and small lawyers” in the petty bourgeoisie. *This may well have been entirely appropriate in China in 1926!* But, for most of such people in the U.S. today it is simply not appropriate at all.

In China in 1926 teachers and students (beyond the most elementary level) were, with extremely few exceptions, not *from* the working class at all. Today in America they definitely are. So if we are at all *sensible* in our class analysis today we *must* take this essential difference into account.

Speaking of just *students* today, for the moment, what social class are they really in? Well, since they (for the most part) are neither workers nor capitalists nor self-employed or anything like that, they do *not yet* have **any** direct personal relationship to the means of production! (And even if they do have part time jobs, they are usually not obtaining the major part of their own economic existence from those jobs.) In short, young people (actually whether they are still students or not), who are not yet a part of the social economic structure themselves, *must generally be viewed as being part of the same social class as their parents.* (This is also why students in China in 1926 could not be considered part of the working class; their parents were, with extremely rare exceptions, not workers.)

In America today this means that the vast bulk of students are working class, because their parents are part of the working class. (I know! The last part of the claim here may still be in dispute. I’ll try to get back to that later.)

The general point, once again, is that we must make a class analysis of *our own society*, and not base our categories on the situations at other times and in very different places. And no class analysis is worth a damn if the classes are not clearly and definitely defined in terms of the common relationships of groups of people to the means of production.

But isn’t reality a lot more “blurred” than you are demanding? Don’t we therefore need broader class definitions than you are saying, at least with respect to the petty bourgeoisie?

Social reality is indeed complex and messy in the extreme. There was a time, a few decades ago, when it was probably fair to say that a *majority* of the workers in the U.S. also received a small (usually *very, very* small) part of their income from the exploitation of other workers! And this is still the case for a great many workers, if perhaps no longer a majority. Why do I say this?

Think about where the interest in even a small savings account comes from, or how retirement savings (IRAs, 401-K plans, company pension funds, etc.) slowly grow (in nominal terms at least) due to the accumulation of interest. Where does this interest come from? The banks and retirement funds loan their money to capitalist enterprises, and are paid back from a portion of the surplus value created by the workers in those enterprises. And a small amount of what the banks receive ends up going to depositors. Even if a worker only has \$100 in a savings account and only earns \$2 a year interest on it, they are in effect also an (extremely!) small financial capitalist! And if it is objected that inflation will almost certainly wipe out that \$2 and probably a lot more, I will grant that, but the worker is *still* slightly better off than they otherwise would have been if they not received that tiny boost from some other worker's labor.

When my wife worked for Pacific Telephone company (now part of AT&T again), the company had a "stock sharing plan" in which every employee was periodically granted some tiny number (or just a fraction of) shares of company stock. Sara tried to refuse to accept this stock (because she understood that it represented the exploitation of all the PT workers)! But they wouldn't let her refuse to accept it! (This was part of an indoctrination scheme to get all the workers to promote increased profits for the company.) And as soon as she was allowed to sell her tiny amount of stock she did.

The point is that at one time—though probably less widespread now—a large part of American workers were also capitalists, though mostly to a negligible degree. They were still basically workers since the great preponderance of their income came from selling their labor power to the corporations. And their role as "capitalists" was in fact pretty much a ridiculous joke! But still, this does show that the reality in modern American capitalist society is often theoretically different than the pure categories we use to *analyze the overall situation*. But this is just the point here: We would not even be in a position to correctly analyze this confused and complex situation if we did not have the clear economic class terms of proletarian and capitalist.

This is also why it really does not matter much if some small neighborhood convenience store hires a part time clerk or two to help them run their shop. The owners are still basically petty bourgeois and not capitalists, since *most* of their income comes from their own labor and that of their family.

We use our "pure categories", or distinct and totally separate and independent class categories, to analyze what is actually a somewhat more complicated situation. We *need them* to be clear and distinct in order to properly do this.

The Confusion of People's Ideology with their Objective Class Situation

In the second definition of 'petty bourgeois' on the Marxist Internet Archive (quoted early on in this essay) the author(s) say that workers who "manage the production, distribution, and/or exchange of commodities and/or services owned by their bourgeois employers" are nevertheless "separated from working class consciousness" because they have day-to-day control (though not actual ownership) over the means of production, distribution, and exchange. Thus the implicit argument seems to be that these workers are actually (or are *also*?) part of the petty bourgeoisie because of their ideological agreement with the bourgeoisie, due in part (perhaps) to their extremely slight difference in their relationship to

the means of production (partial “control” but not ownership). It is not clear why this shouldn’t instead make them part of the *bourgeoisie* and not the petty bourgeoisie!

But this is nonsense. In American society today, *almost all workers* are infected with massive aspects of both bourgeois and petty bourgeois ideology. This is hardly surprising. It is a fundamental principle of [historical materialism](#) that (normally!) the dominant ideas in any society are mostly those of the ruling class, which in this society of course mostly means the ideas and outlook of the capitalists themselves. (And even among those workers who now say they favor “socialism” this really doesn’t yet show any deep break from bourgeois ideology, since Bernie Sanders type “socialism” really just means a slightly reformed and “regulated” version of capitalism.)

Workers are workers *not because of what they believe* or are inclined to believe but because of their objective relationship to the means of production and the concomitant fact that they (primarily) exist by selling their labor power to the capitalists.

Are journalists who work for bourgeois newspapers or TV stations not actually workers when they agree with the bourgeois ideology these sources spew out? No, they are still workers. Deluded, yes. But still workers *because they are selling their labor power* to the capitalists. *That* is the definition of a worker in Marxist theory.

It is actually a form of [idealist philosophy](#) to categorize people’s social classes based on their ideas and worldviews *rather than* on their objective relationships to the means of production.

It is true, of course, that some groups of workers, some strata or sub-categories are much more inclined to agree with bourgeois (or petty bourgeois) ideas and viewpoints than others. Especially in areas like journalism, for example, their bourgeois ideology is very likely to be much more solidified and unshakable than among McDonald’s employees or auto assembly line workers. And this does in fact have strong implications for which strata and sections of the working class which we revolutionaries need to focus our political work in.

We do need to have a careful and well-investigated class analysis of our society for a variety of reasons, and especially so that we focus our political work in the most promising places. And it is for that reason that we do need to investigate and understand things far more thoroughly than simply deciding if someone is a worker or not. We need to dig much deeper than that, and understand all the most important strata and sections of the working class, down to very specific industries, and very specific types of work, and all the various sorts of powerful influences on individual sectors and segments.

But this does not mean that we should forget the basic definition of what a worker is according to Marxist political economy! This is in fact one of the major problems here: some people are so lazy in their class analyses that they just want to say that “workers are good” and “everybody else is bad”. This then leads them to say that those workers who are obviously “not good”, who are for example more deeply indoctrinated by bourgeois (or petty bourgeois) ideas, “are not really workers at all!”. This approach is just too simple-minded to take seriously.

The argument that workers who make more than what is just barely necessary to survive and bring up the next generation “are not really workers” but are in fact “petty bourgeois”

In a number of places Marx and Engels suggest that the value (or price) of labor power should be considered to be essentially the bare minimum necessary to keep the workers alive and allow them to reproduce and bring up the next generation of workers. This has led many people to think that if a person’s wages are substantially greater than this bare minimum, then that person *is not really a worker at all*, but rather petty bourgeois! This is a totally fallacious conclusion.

In fact, the definition of a worker (proletarian) is someone who does not themselves own the means of production and who therefore sells their labor power to the capitalists in order to survive. This is still completely valid and applicable *even if* the wages the worker receives are substantially *above* the minimum necessary to survive and reproduce!

True, if considerably higher wages *do actually result* in a worker accumulating enough money *and then actually proceeding to acquire* their own means of production (if only a very small business), *then* they will no longer be a worker because their income will no longer come from the sale of their own labor power. But until that actually happens, they are still a worker. If a worker simply spends his higher wages on a car, a TV, a house, better clothes, and such like, then he is still a worker, because he still needs to keep selling his labor power to continue his existence *at that somewhat improved level*.

Marx was quite aware of the fact that wages could often be well above the bare minimum to survive and reproduce (and also that wages can sometimes even be *below that level* in specific cases!). For example, he of course knew that skilled labor earned higher wages, and that the average socially necessary abstract labor time necessary which determines the *value* of commodities produced by *complex* (or highly skilled) labor had to be viewed as some multiple of the labor time of unskilled labor. (And although the higher wages of skilled labor can be partially explained as compensation for the time and effort necessary for the skilled worker to acquire those skills, as everybody knows, once one acquires such skills those increased wages can continue long after the time spent in learning them has been compensated for.)

Although Marx does say in *some places* that the value of labor power should be considered to be essentially the bare minimum necessary to keep the workers alive and allow them to reproduce and bring up the next generation of workers, in other places he says something different and more complicated:

The value of the labouring power is formed by two elements—the one merely physical, the other historical or social. Its *ultimate limit* is determined by the *physical* element, that is to say, to maintain and reproduce itself, to perpetuate its physical existence, the working class must receive the necessaries absolutely indispensable for living and multiplying. The *value* of those indispensable necessaries forms, therefore, the ultimate [lower] limit of the *value of labour* [power]...

Besides this mere physical element, the value of labour [power] is in every country determined by a *traditional standard of life*. It is not mere physical life, but it is the satisfaction of certain wants springing from the social conditions in which people are placed and reared up....

This historical or social element, entering into the value of labour [power], may be expanded, or contracted, or altogether extinguished, so that nothing remains but the *physical limit*.

—Marx, “Wages, Price and Profit” [also known in other editions as “Value, Price and Profit”], two speeches to workers from 1865, (Peking: 1965), pp. 72-73.

A few further comments here: First, this “historical or social” adjustment to the prevailing value of labor power (and hence wage levels) may also come to vary not just from country to country, but also in different strata of the working class within a single country, in different regions within a country, even in different types of work and trades, and so forth. This has in fact happened very generally as capitalism as developed, especially in the imperialist era. Secondly, the class struggle and the growth of labor movements in many areas has given considerable impetus to the increase in wages in many countries, and has raised the prevailing wages of a large part of the working class well above the “lower physical limit” which Marx referred to. And by changing the prevailing “social or historical” component of wages for union members, it has also indirectly led to wage increases for workers who are *not* union members. Third, the transformation of capitalism into the new stage of imperialism after Marx’s time has especially allowed this increase in wages to well beyond a mere subsistence level in the imperialist countries in particular. Fourth, this was especially possible during the post-World War II world capitalist boom, though since that boom ended (around 1973), the trend is once again for real wages to gradually fall in the U.S. and many other countries. Even so, the average wages of workers in the U.S. today are still much larger than the physical subsistence lower limit. And this does *not*, **does not!**, mean that these relatively high paid workers are not actually workers! (Remember once again Engels’s *definition* of the proletariat!)

It is in fact still largely true, on a world scale, and over the whole historical period of capitalism, that real wages at most times and places have not increased all that much beyond the bare physical level necessary to keep the working class alive, productive, and allow it to reproduce itself. It was not wrong for Marx to make the issue of this lower limit that he did. Nevertheless, especially in an imperialist country like the United States, a very large part of the working class has been able through past class struggle (and because the U.S. imperialists wanted to keep peace at home while they plundered the world) to raise their wages well above the bare subsistence level.

We should also refer in this section to a comment by Mao in 1926 quoted earlier. He said that what he called the first section of the petty bourgeoisie consisted of “those who have some surplus money or grain, that is, those who, by manual or mental labour, earn more each year than they consume for their own support”. If Mao was saying here that any *worker* whose wages exceed those necessary to barely keep himself and his family alive is therefore petty bourgeois, he would have been wrong. (Even great individuals like Mao can be wrong!) But it seems pretty clear here to me that Mao was referring to those already in the petty bourgeoisie (such as owner-peasants) who were saving up to solidify their presence in the petty bourgeoisie, and advance themselves economically further within that class. If he was also referring to workers with this attitude, then they would only actually become members of the petty bourgeoisie to the extent that they were able to escape the working class and buy land or otherwise go into business for themselves. Again, it is not any “excess” wages themselves which make a worker petty bourgeois, but only the saving up and the actual *use* of those savings to really become small time independent producers themselves that requires us to then categorize them as new members of the petty bourgeoisie.

The “aristocracy of labor” in the capitalist-imperialist era

It is really strange that these perplexities about how it is possible for some workers to be relatively *well paid* and still be workers, and/or to have consolidated bourgeois or petty bourgeois *ideas* and still be workers, can arise in the capitalist-imperialist era. It is like Lenin and his analysis of imperialism never existed.

In fact, elements of this analysis go back long before Lenin. In a letter to Marx, Engels characterized what was happening to the English working class this way as far back as 1858:

“... the English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that the ultimate aim of this most bourgeois of all nations would appear to be the possession, *alongside* the bourgeoisie, of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat. In the case of a nation which exploits the entire world this is, of course, justified to some extent.” —Engels, Letter to Marx, Oct. 7, 1858, MECW 40:343, online at:

http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1858/letters/58_10_07.htm

Was Engels saying here that there was now only one single class in England, the bourgeoisie? Not at all. There was still the proletariat and the remnants of the aristocracy, but both of these still definitely existing classes now were coming to share not only the *ideology* characteristic of the bourgeoisie, but perhaps also to share to some partial degree in the wealth and income from the British capitalist exploitation of the rest of the world.

In early 1915 during World War I Lenin talked about the opportunism of the Second International and how it had collapsed during the war:

“Certain strata of the working class (the bureaucracy of the labor movement and the labor aristocracy, who get a fraction of the profits from the exploitation of the colonies and from the privileged position of their ‘fatherlands’ in the world market), as well as petty-bourgeois sympathizers within the socialist parties, have proved the social mainstay of these [opportunist] tendencies, and channels of bourgeois influence over the proletariat.” —Lenin, “The Conference of the R.S.D.L.P. Groups Abroad”, LCW 21:161.

As I’ll discuss briefly in a moment, it might well be disputed whether the labor aristocracy actually *shares* in the spoils of imperialist foreign exploitation, though indirectly, at least, it does definitely benefit from it. But note well here that Lenin does refer to the labor aristocracy *as workers*, as proletarians, and only says that they are supported by “petty-bourgeois sympathizers” in the opportunist social-democratic parties. Lenin does *not say* that the labor aristocracy itself is part of the petty bourgeoisie (as Trotsky and his followers claimed later).

In the Preface to the French and German editions of “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism”, Lenin remarks:

“Obviously, out of such enormous *superprofits* (since they are obtained over and above the profits which capitalists squeeze out of the workers of their ‘own’ country) it is *possible to bribe* the labor leaders and the upper stratum of the labor aristocracy. And the capitalists of the

‘advanced’ countries are bribing them; they bribe them in a thousand different ways, direct and indirect, overt and covert.” (July 6, 1920)

Is the president of the Teamster’s Union a worker? Of course not, even if he might have started off his life as a worker. As president of the Teamsters he is in effect the CEO of a capitalist corporation, one which is in the business of the wholesale marketing of the labor power of thousands of actual workers.

And as Lenin hinted, even some of the “upper stratum” of the labor aristocracy themselves may already have at least one foot out the door of the working class. (Those who are starting to accumulate stocks or other sources of income besides selling their own labor power.)

However, the vast bulk even of the large (though now declining) “labor aristocracy” in the U.S. are still basically workers, even if they have high enough incomes from their wages to live a pretty comfortable life (at least in comparison with lower levels of the working class). It is probably also quite true that most workers in the labor aristocracy (skilled machinists, many tech workers, etc.) also receive part of their income from stocks, savings accounts, other investments, etc. But as long as the bulk of their income still comes from the sale of their labor power they are still basically workers. (*By definition!*)

Lenin was correct to say that the top labor union leaders, and also *the upper stratum* of the labor aristocracy itself, in effect receive bribes from the ruling class, and therefore shared in the superprofits the capitalist-imperialists loot from the rest of the world. However, this is not really the situation for the vast bulk of those workers even in the labor aristocracy, let alone for all the multiple millions of other American workers whose wages are notably larger than those of workers in countries oppressed and exploited by imperialism.

The more accurate and truthful thing in the capitalist-imperialist era is that (certainly for the most part) the imperialist ruling class does not really “share” the wealth it extracts from around the world even with its own proletariat. However, the continued extraction of that wealth requires perpetual imperialist wars in the colonies or neo-colonies, and to keep the peace and “middle class” support for the ruling class at home during these constant wars, the ruling class has to ease up a bit on the degree of vicious exploitation of its own workers. It does not willingly do even this! But by reluctantly allowing trade unions to come into existence and wage levels to rise (at least in “good times”) the imperialist bourgeoisie does allow its own working class to receive wages which on average are quite a bit above the subsistence level.

Contrary to the claims of the “Third World Marxist” trend, the vast bulk of American workers *are not sharing in the wealth the imperialists steal from other countries*. But indirectly a great many of them are nevertheless better off simply because they live and work in the home imperialist country where they are (in many cases) not exploited to the same intense degree as occurs in the colonies or neo-colonies. But perhaps this distinction is too subtle for the “TWM” enthusiasts to grasp.

The fact is that the American working class, and even most of the labor aristocracy in the U.S., is still also exploited (in the Marxist sense) by the bourgeoisie at home. That is, surplus value continues to be extracted from their labor.

And, even the labor aristocracy are still objectively workers and not members of the petty bourgeoisie. Sure, *ideologically* they are petty bourgeois, if not outright bourgeois. But that is a different thing.

Is there a “new” petty bourgeoisie distinct from, and in addition to, the “old” one?

A number of academic “Marxists”, especially those in the Trotskyist milieu, have argued that while, yes, there is still a petty bourgeoisie as traditionally understood, which consists of shop keepers, independent artisans and handicrafts workers, independent professional people—and where the peasantry still exists, at least part of them—there is now also a “new” petty bourgeoisie as well. The second definition I quoted earlier from the “Encyclopedia of Marxism: Glossary of Terms” reflects this perspective.

Sometimes, as in the academic work, *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (2nd ed.), ed. by Tom Bottomore, et al., this is instead termed a “‘new middle class’ of clerical, supervisory, and technical workers, teachers, government officials, etc.” rather than as a “new petty bourgeoisie”. Either way, this is essentially an attempt to *change* the meaning of ‘petty bourgeoisie’ by extending it to certain kinds of *workers*.

One of the earliest efforts to do this was by Trotsky himself in his 1932 article, “Bourgeoisie, Petty Bourgeoisie and Proletariat” (online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/08/onlyroad2.htm>), where he refers to “the new petty bourgeoisie—the labor aristocracy”. Recall that this was not Lenin’s analysis of the labor aristocracy. So from quite some time ago we see this overwhelming compulsion in some quarters to either deny that well-paid and privileged workers are really “workers” at all, or else to claim that they are *both* workers and *also* petty bourgeois.

In his work “Class Struggle and Women’s Liberation” (1984), the prominent Trotskyist writer Tony Cliff puts it this way:

The old petty bourgeois individualism was rooted in the aspiration to continue to be one’s own boss; that of the new petty bourgeoisie is rooted in careerism. When there is the possibility of upward mobility, the hopes of the underprivileged focus on individual advancement rather than collective action. Hence in the new middle class the dominant idea is that an individual’s achievement depends on education, will and effort. (Online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1984/women/12-clasroot.htm>)

It is not that what is said about this strata of the working class is necessarily incorrect; but it is *incorrect* to deny that this strata is part of the working class, or to call it part of the petty bourgeoisie.

Another academic Trotskyist writer, Alex Callinicos, in discussing the widespread confusion about “productive labor” (in Marx’s sense), commented in 1983:

If we accept productive labour thus conceived as defining the working class, then only wage-labourers in extractive, manufacturing, and freight industries would form the proletariat. On

such a view, the working class would apparently be narrowed down to its nineteenth-century stereotype of male manual workers.

That, at any rate, is the conclusion drawn by the late Nicos Poulantzas, who argued that all white-collar employees, and all non-productive manual workers (for example dustmen [garbage haulers] and hospital porters) are part, not of the working class, but of the ‘new petty bourgeoisie’. [19] On such a view, the proletariat in the United States forms less than 20 per cent of the workforce, the ‘new petty bourgeoisie’ some 70 per cent! [20]

This approach contradicts that pursued by Marx in *Capital*. Marx himself insisted that many white-collar workers were themselves productive labourers.

(Online at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/callinicos/1983/xx/newmc.html>)

I won't get into the issue of what “productive labor” is here. But let's at least agree that all these widespread efforts to restrict the size the modern proletariat, and instead view more and more workers as actually not being workers at all, but rather part of the petty bourgeoisie, are really way, way off base!

A few of the more contentious cases to consider

Reference info: Bureau of Labor Statistics median weekly wages of U.S. full-time wage & salary workers as of the 4th quarter of 2018: \$900/week, or \$46,800/year. [Of course not *all* of these 115.9 million people are workers (especially those at the very top), but most are.]

Teachers: Not only are grade school and high school teachers workers, but so are college instructors and professors, at least for the most part. True, a professor who makes the bulk of his income from lecturing, writing textbooks, consulting, and the like, has become a member of the petty bourgeoisie. In some few cases professors have even become multi-millionaire members of the bourgeoisie, such as those who have founded companies in the computer, genetics and medical fields. But for every one of those there are hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of [adjunct college teachers](#) barely making a living—and what living they do make is coming almost entirely from their wages, except maybe for those also on welfare. A 2013 article quoted at the above link says that as of that date 76% of college faculty were adjunct professors. (We shouldn't generalize too much from very atypical top-of-the-line universities like Harvard and MIT!)

Government employees: Except at the very top of the heap, the vast majority of government employees, local, state, and federal, are workers according to the Marxist definition. We are not talking about the Secretary of Defense here, of course. Most government employees do the same sort of clerical or other types of work that if done in private industry would certainly be viewed as placing them solidly in the working class. There is no good reason in the U.S. today to view them as part of the petty bourgeoisie, no matter what the situation may have been in Tsarist Russia or pre-revolutionary China.

Programmers and Tech Workers: Programming is one of the higher paid lines of work. According the Bureau of Labor Statistics (<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/computer-and-information-technology/mobile/computer-programmers.htm>) the median annual wage for U.S. programmers in

2018 was \$84,280 (which translates to \$40.52/hour for a 40-hour week, although many programmers and tech people work much longer hours which means their hourly pay may be quite a bit less than that). Of course, as we've been saying, it is not the *size* of the wage which determines whether a person is really a worker or not. It is probably true that many or most programmers have some retirement plan (IRA, 401-K, etc.) and some may even have stock-sharing plans and other special benefits. Most of them also have bank accounts of some type, though a great many of them also have large accumulated student debt and other debts. I don't have ready access to all these figures. But until someone shows me evidence to the contrary I'm going to continue to think that the income for the vast majority of programmers comes mostly from their wages, and that they are therefore workers as Marx defines the term. (And despite their strong petty bourgeois *ideological* inclinations.)

Doctors and nurses: Nursing is also a fairly high-paid profession, though nurses are almost all clearly workers. It is true that some of them may escape the working class, as one of my own sisters did, by becoming a high ranking health & safety manager at a large corporation (and by also marrying a pharmacist who came to own part of several drug stores and other properties). But until something like that happens, nurses are still part of the working class.

Doctors, of course, are much higher paid. According to a 2018 Medscape report (at <https://medium.com/nomad-health/complete-list-of-average-doctor-salaries-by-specialty-e2bbbc0a6186>) the average salary for doctors in the U.S. is \$214,000, though this varies widely with the specialty. The information in that report does not make it clear "who pays" those salaries. If for example the salaries are paid by a corporation which the doctor co-owns, then this is not really wage labor in the Marxist sense, and such a doctor is *not* a worker (proletarian).

But what about the wages (or salaries) that doctors working for HMOs such as Kaiser Permanente are concerned? A Kaiser doctor makes an average of \$260,814 (as of April 2019). [See: https://www.glassdoor.com/Salary/Kaiser-Permanente-Physician-Salaries-E19466_D_KO18,27.htm] Note that this is actually above the average salary for doctors in the country as a whole (though the California and Pacific Coast region, where Kaiser operates, is an expensive area to live in which results in higher salaries and wages in most professions).

Does this make such doctors "workers"? In fact it does, at least technically speaking, as long as this is the source of the preponderance of their income! Are such doctors actually exploited by their HMOs or hospitals? Is surplus value actually extracted from them? Yes it is! (Even if Kaiser or the hospital is nominally "non-profit", most such enterprises extract and distribute surplus value in the form of exorbitant salaries for their top managers, and in related ways.) Medical facilities like Kaiser sell a service commodity (health maintenance) to the public, and generate (often hidden) profits in the process.

Of course high-paid doctors, lawyers, tech people, and such, are extremely *atypical* workers (even when they are technically workers), which is why it seems so jarring to call them workers at all! And for all these sorts of people there may in fact be easy ways to accumulate wealth, invest it, and thus escape the working class entirely. But until they actually do so, they are still basically workers, albeit very exceptionally highly paid and privileged ones.

In some other countries doctors are not paid nearly so much. In Russia today, for example, where a much larger part of the medical profession consists of women, average salaries are very much lower.

(The difference reflects the fact that in most countries women are exploited to a greater degree than are men.)

By the way, we should also keep in mind that there are also a very few quite poorly paid doctors even in the United States. Back in the 1970s I knew one such doctor who worked close to full time at a “free clinic” in San Francisco. He may or may not have also had a part-time private practice, so I don’t know for sure if he was technically a worker or a member of the petty bourgeoisie. But he almost certainly made less than I did as a bus driver. And he was also a revolutionary and devoted to serving the people. He was even willing to risk losing his medical license in support of the people and their revolutionary struggle. A great guy! We sometimes find people like Dr. Norman Bethune and Dr. Joshua Horn even in our own close ranks!

Supervisors and low level managers at corporations: This may be the most contentious category of all. But yes, most of these people should be viewed as members of the working class, no matter how bourgeois they are in their worldview, and no matter how hard they work to intensify the exploitation of ordinary workers. They are still selling their labor power to the capitalists, and the actual labor they perform is focused on extracting more surplus value from those they supervise or manage.

We simply have to recognize that *everyone* working for a capitalist enterprise is carrying out the wishes and advancing the interests of the capitalists who own it, to one degree or another. If the capitalists (or their hired supervisors and managers) thought otherwise, that individual would simply be fired. It is the plight of the working class that they have no alternative. And it is the secondary disgusting plight of *some* of these workers they they come to willingly promote the more intense exploitation of other workers.

Naturally we are not talking about CEOs and senior vice presidents here. Those high-level managers are already making most of their income by sharing in the surplus value extracted from their workers, and are in a position to extract a great deal more.

And by the way, it is especially ridiculous to call supervisors and low-level managers “petty bourgeois”. They are no such thing. Either they are members of the proletariat or they are members of the bourgeoisie. If they were truly petty bourgeois, they would quit the corporation and start their own small business.

Conclusion

What are we to make of this overpowering desire by many people to call part of the working class (as defined as those selling their labor power to exist) as actually being part of the petty bourgeoisie, either *instead of* being workers or *in addition to* being workers? Just why are so many people so insistent on doing this?

The primary explanation, it seems to me, is that it is apparently very difficult to concentrate on objective class position and class interests *rather than* exclusively focusing on people’s current thinking and ideology. Of course we do need to accurately understand the ideas of individuals and of those attitudes typical of various segments of the working class and larger population, and to be able to

focus on ways to change those ideas. But we also need to understand just how large and powerful the working class potentially is. By the definition of Marx and Engels, the U.S. working class is larger than it has ever before been in history.

Our Marxist scientific analysis of the capitalist-imperialist system requires us to think in class terms as defined by the relationship of different groups of people to the means of production. If we are to understand the social world and be in a position to change it, this must be our starting place.

We also need to think of the *characteristics and attributes* of the working class and other social classes, and of their various strata and subsections, not in a static (or metaphysical) way, but rather in a diachronic way, as they change and develop over time. It is in fact the case that the working class in capitalist society is itself generally dominated by bourgeois and petty bourgeois ideas. But the extent of this alien ideological class influence varies in different strata, and also changes in all these strata, depending on the state of the economy and sometimes also for other more subjective reasons.

Speaking just of the period since World War II, the quarter-century post-war boom (circa 1948-1973) led to considerably improved wages and working conditions for a large section of the American working class. This in turn led to a qualitative weakening in (already quite weak) proletarian class consciousness in this country. In effect there was a powerful [embourgeoisment](#) of the U.S. working class that occurred during this period. And an aspect of this general embourgeoisment was also the growth and intensification of petty bourgeois ideas, and even *possibilities*, among American workers.

A new counter trend began with the period of the [Long Slowdown](#) starting in the early 1970s, when GDP growth rates in the U.S. and the rest of the capitalist world were suddenly cut in half. At first this just meant that the period of *further* embourgeoisment of the American working class was over, but it has gradually turned into a more and more insistent re-proletarianization of the working class. That is to say, the working class as a whole, including large sections of the labor aristocracy and the “middle class”, are now being gradually driven down. The labor aristocracy and the middle class are now both shrinking rapidly. The petty bourgeoisie, as properly defined, is also now shrinking quite rapidly.

The [Great Recession](#) of 2008-9 was an especially hard blow for many, with millions becoming unemployed, losing their homes, and when new jobs were found they were most often at lower wages and with many fewer benefits (if any). Many workers became part of the growing reserve army of the unemployed, or in some cases were even knocked out of the working class entirely and permanently. And the petty bourgeoisie suffered too: 2.5 million small businesses were closed down during the Great Recession. All this has led to continuing, though ill-focused, anger and hostility towards some as yet extremely vague enemy force on the part of the working class and the broader masses. They have begun to understand that they are under attack, though they don't really understand yet by whom and why.

Because of the continuing development of the major capitalist overproduction crisis underway, which has been slowly building up since 1973, there will be plenty of new severe blows ahead for both the working class and the petty bourgeoisie. More people will be driven down, lose their jobs or their businesses, lose their homes, and in many cases become destitute. This means that many remaining bourgeois and petty bourgeois illusions within the petty bourgeoisie itself, and also within the working class, will be shattered in coming years.

This doesn't mean the road ahead will be a smooth one to revolution, by any means. Personally I expect periods of more outright fascism in the country before we ever get to a real revolutionary situation. (But of course a lot also depends on what happens elsewhere in the world, and if revolutionary breakthroughs can be made in other countries, which can then rapidly spread like the effects from a "single spark".)

But those who focus on the petty bourgeois conceptions within the American working class today, and who don't see the possibilities for the workers to disown and reject those false "remedies" during a growing economic crisis, are sort of like the deer hypnotized by automobile headlights. Even once relatively well-paid and privileged workers can quickly change their political ideas when they start to lose their jobs, their homes, and their whole faith in the capitalist system, and we must be alert to that fact.

Let's not be so blindly focused on the still existing backward thinking of large sections of the working class today that we discount much of the working class entirely, and thus become unable to play a serious role in transforming their present consciousness in a revolutionary direction. As the objective conditions rapidly change in a way that makes that ever more possible, we will have to work with ever larger sections of the working class, including many who are at the present time very backward in their thinking. Times can change. And people can change with them!

[End]