

## **Middle Class or in the middle of a Class?**

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### **Abstract**

The widely held claim that a so-called middle class is the most representative group in the US as well as in most EU societies has to be challenged. In particular it is crucial to develop a deeper theoretical understanding of the characteristics, which distinguish workers from members of a presumed new middle class.

Therefore, this paper will offer a proposal for operationalizing the concept of middle class in terms of status in the work process, income, education, and consumption behaviour; the latter will be related to the work of Thorstein Veblen. An adequate treatment of the political construction of the middle class idea necessitates also pointing to the important distinction between actual class status according the role in (global) production and consciousness of an individual agent of this role. This allows integrating a fuller picture of the historically grown social structures and social hierarchies.

### **Introduction**

“We all are middle class!” is a slogan used in particular in the last years to introduce a superficial devaluation of the working class by postulating the end of this social group. At the same time the working class is demonized and negatively assessed. Owen Jones (2011) has unmasked the ideological intention of systematic demonization of cultural fashions of working people in the UK, an intention directed at the destruction of the emergence of class consciousness. But this trend is not only typical for the UK, it can be observed all over Europe (and also in the US): Talk shows, reports on the lifestyles of working people – such as teeny moms, Saturday nights of youngsters and the like – and “comedies” (e.g. Little Britain) are used to expose working class people to public ridicule. Consequently “working class” is equalized to underdogs, outlaws and dregs. “Chavs”, and similar to that the German word “Prolos”, are just two examples of labelling working people as less educated, violent, drug addicted and simple-minded. Such TV-shows are not at all signalling respect or politeness towards working class people – so it is clear that they can never serve as role models but rather as deterrents.

“Middle class” as a class-related term used with respect to the social composition of people emerged for the first time in 1976 in the book of Burton Bledstein in which he purported that there is an emerging new social group in the US with its own consciousness and forms of expression. The following publications on the role and self-understanding dealt a lot with the topic of consciousness and inner cohesion of the “middle class” (see Blumin 1985). Walkowitz (2012, p.121) highlights the fact that “in the US the middle class as a 20<sup>th</sup> and 21st century social identity is usually part of a narrative of social mobility, a stage in a vertical hierarchy from a lower and presumably lesser social position.” And indeed, in the US social mobility – understood as the ability to move up the social ladder by the willingness to work hard – is a specific cultural context one has to keep in mind when talking about the concept of middle class.

Scholars working on class phenomena often do face a difficulty to define class and in particular “middle class” (see e.g. Stearns 1979). In a rather simple way, middle class sometimes is defined as income category: By defining a media income - and an acceptable distance below and above it – a range can be distinguished which characterizes those being near the median, the middle class. In other cases educational levels are added – often in terms of formal qualification levels. Education is a source as well as a result of class status and its dynamics characterizing class relationships, and income, i.e. an index of ppp-adjusted real wage, certainly has to be amended by many other non-monetary rewards negotiated by societal stake-holders. In classical political economy class is defined by a group’s relation to the means of production, distinguishing different modes of production, i.e. slavery societies, feudalism, and capitalism, different sets of classes and class relationships can be observed. All these attempts of defining class so far remain unsatisfactory and do not provide an updated class concept including class consciousness, which could inform political practice. In particular in times of devaluation of working class people as role models (in terms of consciousness) the announcement “We all are middle class” as a consequence seems to allow for an alternative consciousness – it points at an escape from the sinister fate as underdog by propagating the label of a new social group without reference to inner distinction or determination of this group.

But as the over boarding debate on middle class in *several disciplines of the social sciences* shows<sup>1</sup>, the use as an ideological buzz word should not lead to the conclusion that a thorough discussion of the concept is of no scientific value. The truth is that it is precisely the success of the use of the word which indicates that there is the need to uncover a newly emerging social phenomenon. Opening the concert of contributions from different social disciplines an immediate question could ask how new the concept actually is. As with many important concepts some early forms can be found already in the works of Aristotle, but the

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<sup>1</sup> An interesting collection of possible approaches in sociology was provided by Eric Olin Wright (2005). In chapter 2 and 5 of this book the conceptual link to work in political economy is made explicit: exploitation! ‘At the highest level of theoretical ambition, we have the Marxist class concept, which provides a structural theory of inequality ... . The core process defining class relation, in Marx’s class concept, is exploitation; that is, the process by which one class obtains an economic advantage at the expense of another class.’ (Wright (ed.), 2005, chapter 5).

most important theoretical impact for a contemporary discussion came from Karl Marx, who conceptualized the progress of history as being driven by the dynamics of class struggles. It is this type of class definition of classical *political economy* which will be the focus of the next chapter. The general concept of a class emerged with reference to a very specific class in history, namely the British working class. Its historic counterpart, the capitalist class, is a much less clear-cut construction. As Marx himself writes in the second preface to 'Das Kapital' his book is about a 'Charaktermaske', an abstract algorithm dominating society as a mode of production – and not about a group of sinister individuals called capitalists. As a consequence this first chapter to some extent has to follow the path of history to reconstruct the understanding and the evolution of the class concept. Only then, following the tracks of political economy along its historical evolution, the question of the meaning of a new middle class can be formulated.

Chapter 2 then turns to the question of how class consciousness as a pivotal element of the dynamics of political economy can – in a disguised form – reappear in contemporary societies to fuel progress. A few guidelines for a future revolutionary class are provided.

Finally the concluding chapter takes sides with respect to the title of this paper: There is no new middle class in the proper sense of political economy, there are just two sides separated by the demarcation line between being exploited or belonging to those who exploit; is the social value delivered to the global society larger or smaller than the social value received from it. To proclaim that in between exploiting and being exploited a new class has emerged either is an ideological manoeuvre, or introduces a new class concept, which is unrelated to political economy or both. Opposing this view and updating the classical concept might help as catalytic converter for class consciousness of a new revolutionary class.

## **1 - The traditional working class**

The emergence of the working class in Britain has been the topic of many prominent scholars of the labour movement, e.g. (Engels, 1845), (Thompson, 1963). As the historical record of this unique process shows the origins were directly coercive changes, well beyond of what usually is considered as economic interaction. The loss of their small pieces of land lead to a landless population, freed from all means of production. Free to be bought as labour time input on labour markets. On the other side of these markets larger owners of such means of production were developing, often again by directly coercive 'original accumulation' – policed action on both sides of the existing law system. Till the fifties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain experienced a rather untamed clash of the forces unleashed on both sides of the labour market: Wages were driven down to subsistence levels as permanent high unemployment enabled land- and factory-owners to hire only the cheapest workers. Since ownership of the means of production was not necessarily linked to a noble lineage any more, the former feudal class lost part of its monopoly of social power. The internal class struggle between the old (feudal) and the new (bourgeois) ruling class not only produced a heroic bourgeois liberalism, which finally defeated feudal state power. It also freed the class behaviour of the ruling class from all links to the innate characteristics of a

human individual. Performing capitalist behaviour became a 'character mask', a rule set completely independent from its individual human carrier. Still some predispositions to carry out capital accumulation did help the early members of the new ruling class:

- A certain minimum of education was needed, which in turn hints at a family background which allowed for it. This necessary minimum wealth could either stem from some diverted feudal sources, or could come from one of the newly emerging pools of bourgeois merchant capital.
- At the same time a minimum of emotional revolt against the bonds of the old feudal regime was conducive for what was called the 'animal spirit of entrepreneurs' by Joseph Schumpeter<sup>2</sup>.

Besides these two elements some random element concerning time, geographical location, and location in existing social networks certainly played an important role<sup>3</sup>.

Why is a characteristic of classic entrepreneurs important for an understanding of the emergence of class consciousness of the working class? The reason is simple. As Karl Marx has aptly formulated, the 'ruling consciousness is the consciousness of the ruling class'. To see how a certain consciousness rules, it is absolutely necessary to study the consciousness of the ruling class. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century pre-existing working class consciousness was first hardly visible - the gap was filled by dull versions of religious ideology, the promise of a balancing force after death regulating earthly pain and submission (*ore et labore*). Till the mid of 19<sup>th</sup> century filling this gap could be identified as part of the larger project of enlightenment. To turn the back to obscure types of superstition seemed to be a sufficient condition for social progress supporting ideological evolution. When the first labour movement scholars discussed this topic they indeed counted on the coincidence of scientific search for truth and the emergence of social consciousness, the consciousness to be an essential part of the political economy.

This belief proved to be naïve. While Marx' pamphlets and newspaper articles reached at least some benevolent descendants of early humanist thought, his books remained practically completely unknown to the working class of his time<sup>4</sup>. Complicated concepts, like alienation, cannot be expected to be understood by an alienated mind too busy to earn its daily bread to spend time in reading; if literacy existed at all. Spontaneously emerging consciousness that as an individual one belonged to a larger political group had to wait for commonly experienced trigger events<sup>5</sup>. And when in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century these events, stimulated by labour movement organisations, finally occurred they were centred on issues

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<sup>2</sup> Schumpeter's own life, his 'scientific entrepreneurship', mirrors these two conditions: He has been only the second non-noble pupil (after Böhm-Bawerk) to be allowed to be educated in old Vienna's elite gymnasium Theresianum. His experiences there left a life-long silent admiration for feudal culture paired with cynic bourgeois ambition. The entrepreneurial hero in Schumpeter's work in the interwar period, the 'Wirtschaftsführer', is modelled mostly on the characters of British entrepreneurs living hundred years earlier.

<sup>3</sup> Note that talent for entrepreneurship as an innate property of human individuals is not mentioned, its propagation falls under the category of ideological stabilization policy.

<sup>4</sup> Elleinstein (1975) has estimated that at the time of the Russian revolution only 1,7 % of the Russian population were proletarians, and almost none of them had ever read Marx.

<sup>5</sup> The history of the saboteur movement, of Blanqui's anarchism, and many other colourful examples show how arbitrary trigger events in this early stage did breed arbitrary consciousness.

directly related to position of workers in the work process: wages and working conditions. Given this experience – the swelling of union membership in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was indeed impressive – it is clear that the leaders of the labour movement at the time were convinced that the nexus between class consciousness and the status of being exploited on the factory level comes about automatically. The following century showed that this again was a premature assumption. But in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the clear-cut concepts were intact: Members of the working class could be defined by their position in the production process, their exploitation status. If the social value<sup>6</sup> they contributed to overall production (both per time unit) was larger than the social value they received from the owners of the means of production, then they were exploited and therefore members of the working class. As long as consciousness was activated in national class struggles on working conditions and wages consistent trajectories class status and class consciousness could be expected. But with the dawn of World War 1 it turned out that this had only been a transitory historic coincidence, not a necessity.

In a sense, nationalism as an ideological instrument of ruling classes was emerging parallel to the class struggles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For feudal empires based to a large extent on agricultural production territorial gain was equivalent to a gain of power and richness, and it always was accompanied by cultural oppression of the newly gained area. This procedure was a prelude to nationalistic behaviour. In some more advanced, semi-bourgeois societies of merchant capitalism in the age of explorers territorial gain became a global game. And it started to fuel not only the power of the nobility of an empire but also filled the pockets merchants. Again the procedure is a forerunner to full-scaled nationalism. Finally in some single cases like Garibaldi's Italy an early type of nationalism could even be put to work to unite dispersed progressive forces fighting against the old feudal system. In these historical examples the openness of the early forms of the ideological instrument can be seen<sup>7</sup>.

Despite these different roots the historically decisive experience was the long-lasting rivalry between France and Germany, reaching back in principle to Charlemagne. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century this ages-old conflict heated up again and its sleeping memory was re-activated by nationalist propaganda stirred up by the elites in both empires. What later became a standard manoeuvre of politicians - namely to tranquilize internal class struggle by producing the image of an external danger - worked excellent with French and German workers. Instead of being united in an international (conscious) working class they could be sent to fight each other as self-conscious Germans and Frenchmen in World War 1. The communist international had failed, and first of all this had been a defeat at the battleground of ideology.

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<sup>6</sup> In this paper we circumvent the problem of how to calculate social value, the transformation problem. The reason is that even the newly ruling class of capitalists usually is not able to follow the intricate implications of production price systems, not to speak of dynamic labor value systems to be somehow perceived by workers. Since perception is a substantial part of consciousness the transformation problem is neglected here; for a more detailed treatment compare (Hanappi, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> There certainly are lessons to be learned for the use of nationalism in contemporary post-colonial states trying to implement a progressive social system.

As a matter of fact the entire history of class struggles in the 20<sup>th</sup> century just shows that there is a severe deficiency in the understanding of the working of the emergence of class consciousness. How the emergence of fascism, of anti-Semitism, and of Stalinism could be explained without giving up the idea of a **direct** coupling between class consciousness and position in the production process? There had to be something special, a more sophisticated theoretical and practical clutch, which links actual class position to the self-perceived position in society. Of course, this problem did not go unnoticed with more thoughtful philosophers of communism. The solution they introduced is well-known: The missing link is the communist party, a connector, which provides consciousness for the masses in one direction, and collects, organizes and focusses the singular actions of class members in the other direction. At face value this description could be interpreted as a description of an institutional mechanism designed to enable a form of true democracy, but after 70 years of experience with Stalinist regimes (its actual workings as well as the partly distorted images communicated in the Western hemisphere) there is little reason to refer to a Leninist party as a possible design.

Evidently party design was not a monopoly of the 3<sup>rd</sup> International in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was omnipresent, transforming governance of advanced states into the art of riding on a wave of parties' aspirations, each of them collecting partially diverging wishes of different groups in society. So far at least the euphoric picture divulged by contemporary party representatives. After World War 2 this idea of party managed interests instead of class struggle was made popular by ruling classes in the western hemisphere for the first time. It should contrast the one party states of Stalinism, and at the same time get rid of class oriented theoretical analysis (and correlated organisation) in Western countries. Interest is not interest linked to a class position anymore but could be just anything. Classes are dissolved into the individuals who used to be their members, and these individuals spread their personal interests across the different parties at offer. Each individual acts like a freewheeling broker spreading her voting power over a set of competing, promising lobbyists, hoping that the bets will lead to some favourable impact on government decisions. For those European citizens who still remember class politics there is the explanation that contrary to the bad old times class struggle now has been taken to a higher, more civilized level. It is said to take place in a most subtle form in the bargaining processes of the parties sharing governmental power.

At least in Europe the state, still a nation state though, as an arbitrageur of party interests has assumed a central role in the political process. Of course, secured by a set of more fundamental rules collected in a so-called constitution, it still secures a capitalist setting for domestic capital; but it allows for some modifications brought forward by parties organizing individual interests. Behind the veil of declared openness to organized party intervention there has developed a large group of bureaucratic gatekeepers. This group not only consists of public employees but includes lawyers, journalists and the like. The remaining parts of the population of EU member states can roughly be divided in three groups: pre-work, working age, and retired. People in working age (usually measured by age 15 to 65) divide into unemployed, employed, and self-employed (a mixed group comprising firm owners as well

as self-declared one-man firms, mostly desperate to escape unemployment). At first sight it is hard to see how the respective position within the global production system (the exploitation status) of each of these groups via triggering events could lead to the emergence of class consciousness. The simple procedure to determine class status, which at least *seemed* to work in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, is not feasible anymore. Moreover information industry today influences internal model-building processes of individuals in a much more sophisticated way than the church ever could in previous centuries<sup>8</sup>. And these circumstances are not limited to European countries, with small deviations they occur all around the globe. So when Toni Blair propagated the 'middle class' it was a well-founded ideological move, the surprising part rather is that he uses the word 'class' at all. Probably this fact has to be attributed to the long-standing, well-established use of that word in England.

## 2 - The future "revolutionary class"

In a famous slogan Karl Marx once stated that the 'Sein' (being) determines the 'Bewusstsein' (consciousness). Given the remarks on classical working class consciousness made in the first part of this paper, and the difficulties this concept encountered in the following century it becomes clear that the problem is a naïve understanding of what 'being' ('Sein') really means. In a typical neo-Ricardian interpretation of Marx' labour theory of value each worker is just the labour time input she or he provides as input to an interwoven production system, and given a subsistence bundle of commodities the respective rate of surplus, i.e. exploitation, can be determined. This is sufficient to determine class status<sup>9</sup>; and it remains completely under the spell of classical British political economy since not a grain of Hegelian influence on Marx thought is preserved. Though the types of accumulation models using equilibrium growth paths of interwoven production processes, and sometimes even heterogeneous talent and preferences of workers are interesting in their own right, they nevertheless lose sight of Marx original intention, i.e. disequilibrium dynamics. Moreover their complicated structure forbids any assumption about a trigger event, which could make this structure appear in the mind of a worker, initiating class consciousness.

The being ('das Sein') thus is what the individual *perceives* as being. If alienation (a Marxian concept not grasped by the neo-Ricardian interpretation) has advanced far enough, global division of labour and informational pollution of the workers environment helping to speed up this trend, then individuals during their daily activities will have no chance, and even no

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<sup>8</sup> This fact has challenged authors from a broad spectrum of economic schools. An interesting attempt to operationalize these dynamics by a more formal definition of culture has been presented by Alberto Bisin and Thierry Verdier (2001).

<sup>9</sup> One of the formally most advanced treatments of this line of interpretation came from John Roemer (Roemer, 1982). He formulates and proves a so-called 'Class Exploitation Correspondence Principle', which links exploitation status and class status. To do so he 'introduced a definition of exploitation for the accumulation economy which captures the notion that a producer is exploited if he cannot buy goods embodying as much labor as he contributed to the production process.' (Roemer, 1982, p.134).

incentive to check their global exploitation status directly. They are left in a room full of mirrors, a room produced by mass media and local social networks (family and friends). This is exactly the starting point that enabled phenomena like fascism, neo-fundamentalist religious movements, and – as a much more civilian example – euphoric technophile consumer hypes (for further discussion see also Hanappi and Hanappi-Egger 2011). Being a member of a class is not really fashionable nowadays - there are (i.e. 'have been produced') more attractive role models around.

If 'being' *appears* to be footloose, this nevertheless might not be the whole truth. Getting unemployed, being drafted to military service, or simply being unlucky enough to be forced to work in one of the sweatshops around the globe quickly shrinks the choice of role model to a no-choice situation. Is the conclusion suggested by this argument that today class has become a useless concept? No, certainly not, since despite its complicated structure in the actually processing economic processes exploitation status exists. It is just its discovery by human individuals, which has become increasingly intractable by the singular individual<sup>10</sup>.

The usual approach to approximate solutions of problems which in principle could be solved, but which surpass perceptive and combinatorial capacities is to work with sets of easily measurable indices<sup>11</sup>. Treating the correct model as hidden in a black box, in the course of time this box produces visible surface phenomena which can be systematically collected and can serve as a preliminary substitute for the a correct knowledge about the working of the black box. To be a member of the exploited class therefore in first approximation is linked to the following five different indices:

1. Power

Any measurable power index of an individual needs an environment, a context, within which the individual can exert, and be subjected to power. One possibility is to exert power by constraining the set of actions of other individuals living in the same environment. This view immediately lends itself to a description of direct individual power, but in a more sophisticated form also can support the description of structural power<sup>12</sup>. Quantification then essentially has to work with the number of possible actions, the number of actions *perceived* as possible, the number of actions possibly be eliminated, and the number of actions *perceived* to be possibly eliminated. As any individual is just an element in a network of power relations,

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<sup>10</sup> Hanappi-Egger (2011; 2012) e.g. highlights the contribution of "diversity studies" to the exploitative ideology of capitalism from a feminist perspective.

<sup>11</sup> An example of this methodology comes from weather forecasts. Of course, theoretical physics has provided the tools for exact forecasting. But with the incredible amount of observation needed for starting conditions plus the disastrous dynamic errors, which little mistakes can produce if a system is of the chaotic variety, we got used to the fact that a more precise weather forecast needs more time than the weather it intends to forecast.

<sup>12</sup> A simple example would be a prisoners' dilemma payoff structure of two individuals with a third party taking a share from the sum total payoff that in turn enforces the Pareto-optimal outcome. In this situation, while for the third agent direct (but possibly incentive compatible) power is present, the two original individuals experience the restriction by the new incentive structure as structural power. Similarly the advantages of a society with enhanced division of labour – forbidding a return of an individual to 'simple self-sustaining life' – exert structural power by eliminating certain escapes.

exerting power as well as being subordinated to power exerted by others, it is the **net power status** which is to be considered. A typical husband might exert power over wife and children while he himself being restricted by power exerted by his boss at the workplace plus the structural power of the society he lives in. As is immediately clear an isolated power index of this kind is only of very limited use – it needs complementary indices<sup>13</sup>.

## 2. Wealth and income

The stock as well as the flow variable measuring what social value is possessed by an individual and how much is added to this stock during every time unit (e.g. every month) are the most important component of the exploitation index. In a first approximation it is evident that a fall in the stock of social value possessed by an individual parallel to an increase of the stock of another individual with which it is in direct relation in the same production process is good indication for exploitation<sup>14</sup>. Since on the contemporary global scale there just is one big and complicated production process this index component takes also care of exploitation via exchange rate developments.

## 3. Consumption

The way income and wealth is turned into the specific consumption bundle of an individual has always been considered as indicative for its exploitation status. Subsistence consumption was the threshold which indicated worker status in classic political economy, i.e. a consumption bundle which allowed an individual continued physical existence<sup>15</sup>. Today in the US even cars of workers needed to get to work might be part of the subsistence bundle. It is interesting to see that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century authors celebrating capitalism in its progressive stage overcoming feudalism emphasized consumption behaviour as a defining characteristic for progressive capitalists: While feudal exploiters consume the surplus they extract, capitalists are sketched as accumulation machines, keeping consumption at a minimum and investing profits<sup>16</sup>. Today consumption bundles containing goods and services surmounting reproductive needs<sup>17</sup> might again be considered as counter indication of being exploited. Moreover the marked shift towards information good consumption

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<sup>13</sup> Consider an unemployed person, somebody who does not have access to means of production allowing him or her to spend labour time in exchange for money (exchangeable social value). Not being able to take this choice also restricts the remaining choice space for consumption – but on the other hand the dramatically increased amount of leisure time eventually opens up new choices. If the person is a wealthy broker it would need the second index (wealth and income) to distinguish his or her exploitation status from the status of a fired blue collar worker?

<sup>14</sup> This also covers processes of fraud and robbery coinciding with similar indications via the power index component.

<sup>15</sup> Thorstein Veblen gave ‘conspicuous consumption’ a prominent place in his ‘Theory of the Leisure Class’. According to him exploitative classes in history are usually easy to determine by their consumption pattern, which exceeds subsistence consumption (Veblen, 1899).

<sup>16</sup> This assumption survived in the mainstream growth models of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is reflected even in Keynes’ aspiration of the ‘euthanasia of the rentier’.

<sup>17</sup> Already in the classical conception reproduction is meant to include the raising of children to keep the working population at a constant level.

in OECD countries in recent decades, basic primary needs seen as being almost automatically taken care of, poses new theoretical difficulties. To consume certain soap operas (including their hidden ideological content) surely helps reproducing the dominating class constellation, but it hardly can be considered as an active element of exploitation. An isolated use of consumption patterns as an index for exploitation thus is inappropriate.

#### 4. Education

One type of service consumption promises to be directly linked to the possibility to change class: education. As a consequence a systematic lack of education for certain groups in a society can signal its status of being exploited, of being kept unfit for ascending to a higher class. Education is both, a process and a certain structure reflecting the results of this process at a given point in time. Both faces of education, access to the process as well as the profile of formal education of a given society at a certain moment, can be measured. As argued in chapter 1 of this paper the ever more complicated global production process has forced the more advanced national elites to educate more engineers and technicians as well as more managers to administer production. They form a large part of the group that from the perspective of empirical social research<sup>18</sup> often is dubbed the 'new middle class'. Using only education as an index for exploitation would nevertheless fail to reveal the actual class status of this group from the perspective of political economy: the highly educated teacher often has little income and wealth and consumption patterns similar the average employee.

#### 5. Leisure time

Consumption takes time<sup>19</sup>, and since part of each day has to be devoted to production there only remains a limited amount of time for consumption and idle recreation. This is leisure time. It has again been Thorstein Veblen (Veblen, 1899, pp. 35-67) who noted that classes of exploiters in history typically first of all increased their leisure time, transferring all troublesome productive activities to their servants. The amount of leisure time per day thus might well add another component to an overall index of exploitation<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> This is just one of the many problems which Peter Stearns (1979) describes as puzzling for a sociological approach to define the 'middle class'. His contribution provides an interesting, though somewhat frustrating summary of the work of historians and sociologists trying to get hold of a persistent empirically observable class that could be named 'middle class'. It is frustrating since despite the repeated claim that the concept is of eminent importance, the paper only points at the dead ends of the different approaches. It is remarkable though that no contribution from a political economy perspective is cited – perhaps more structure and clarity would have been possible with less ignorance in that respect.

<sup>19</sup> See (Steedman, 2001) for an interesting evolutionary perspective of this issue. He tries to extend the commodity-bundle centred standard view of economic theory to be included in a time-use centred activity analysis. As time is the ultimate scarce resource – finite every day – leisure time is a strict mirror image of such a view.

<sup>20</sup> Note that from Marx' time till today's struggle for a shorter working day and against a longer work life, the conflict nicely is mirrored by this index as a battle for less exploitation. As a stand-alone component it again loses its force: each additional unemployed individual - despite its explosion in leisure time - is rather a sign of increasing overall exploitation in a society.

These indices are results of the same global process, and therefore interdependent. Once arranged in a consistent way<sup>21</sup> this combined 'exploitation-index' can serve as a didactic instrument helping to promote global class consciousness. Promotion needs an organized agent, what in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century used to be called a *revolutionary party*<sup>22</sup>.

The old type of party organization could rather easily point at the position at the working place to show (literally) that a person is exploited, and thus belongs to the working class. Moreover early Leninist organization forms had to survive under extremely oppressive feudalist regimes, which made strict discipline and commitment a question of physical survival – and that pressure in turn increased the consciousness to belong to the party. But even in this setting Lenin's art, which to a large extent explains his success, was to form **coalitions** with non-proletarian farmers.

Today the organization of the working class by producing a common consciousness will not be in a position to consider coalition building a necessary side issue only<sup>23</sup>. With direct enlightenment techniques fading away coalition-building is not a secondary - though necessary - side-issue for revolutionary organization; now the common denominator of the new revolutionary coalition is the centrepiece of its emerging class consciousness! It is in this perspective that the title of this paper has to be interpreted: The consciousness of the global working class becomes visible 'in the middle' of this class, i.e. the working class exists, but due to the intricateness of the world economy *its consciousness* is bound to emerge as a coalition of seemingly less related groups related at first only by an approximate exploitation-index. The organisation of such a revolutionary coalition therefore coincides with the organization of a new revolutionary class<sup>24</sup>.

## Conclusion

As the last part just concluded with an explanation of what can be understood by '... in the middle of a class ...' it now is also much easier to see what the conservative, ideological project of a new middle class aims at. As any forceful ideology it has to contain a grain of truth, which it then displays upside down to confuse its audience<sup>25</sup>. The truth in this case is

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<sup>21</sup> To produce a theoretically sound combined index that can be computed with empirically observed data is not a trivial problem and goes beyond the scope of this paper. Here the focus is on the more modest task to describe its overall embedding in a political economy perspective on the emergence of class consciousness.

<sup>22</sup> For a recent support of this view compare (Jakopovich, 2011, p. 76).

<sup>23</sup> Contemporary refinements of strategic party politics combining diverging goals have been extensively studied by theoretical politics, see e.g. Fujimura (2012).

<sup>24</sup> Revolutionary organization, i.e. political practice, thus is to be distinguished from theoretical work trying to learn more about what is going on in the black box. Though both tasks should be mutually stimulating, it would be extremely naive to expect that modern progressive action can avoid division of labour.

<sup>25</sup> When Marx wrote that 'religion is the opium of the masses' he did hide the grain of truth – namely that in the perception of the poor usually an element explaining their misery is missing, and they long for it – in his use of the drug opium. As an adept you indeed long for it, but all the drug does is to produce cheap dreams and prolonged unfulfilled desires.

the difficulty to look into the black box mentioned above. The distortion comes with the assumption that there now exists indeed a *new class in the sense of political economy*, which is above – and in all practically relevant questions even *opposed* – to the traditional working class. With this illusion the management of capitalist ideology (e.g. via the mass media) tries to split the emerging class consciousness of coalitions ‘in the middle of the class’ into different groups, which then can eventually be manipulated to fight each other<sup>26</sup>. This, of course, is by no means a new strategy of ruling classes: Split and conquer has been the motto of many a feudal ruler. Even the selection process of particularly apt leaders for the splitting process, e.g. Toni Blair, has its historical antecedences.

Nevertheless, as the transition from feudalism to capitalism has shown, the existence of unequal development, which via the different forms that class struggles assumed produced different variants of capitalism<sup>27</sup>, also in the contemporary break-away from (finance) capitalism the emergence of a common focus of a diverse revolutionary class is possible. It is predictable that this will be the upcoming next fight on battlefield of ideologies<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Market forces – propagated as ultimate drivers of social organization everywhere else – are not so prominent in this ideological arena, perhaps too many references to economics could be dangerous. For three alternative mechanisms of social organization compare Postlewaite (2001).

<sup>27</sup> A most interesting paper making this point comes from Raju J. Das (2012).

<sup>28</sup> A preview including a progressive political program can be found in Hanappi (2012).

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