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Some Problems in the Analysis of Urban
Proletarian Politics in the Third World

by

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ABSTRACT

Some Problems in the Analysis of Urban
Proletarian Politics in the Third World*

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This paper assesses the link hypothesized by Marx and his followers between capitalist economic development and the emergence of a sizable and politically progressive urban proletariat capable of mobilization for revolutionary change. It gives special attention to issues of definition (who is the proletariat?) and to explication of the mechanisms linking economic development, industrialization, and radicalization of the proletariat, discussing the extent to which these mechanisms are operative in mature capitalist societies and Third World countries today.

*This paper is a development of remarks made at a panel discussion of urban proletarian politics during the 1972 meetings of the American Political Science Association. It will be published in a forthcoming issue of Comparative Urban Research.

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Cette étude considère le lien, posé comme hypothèse par Marx et ses successeurs, entre le développement économique capitaliste et l'émergence d'un prolétariat urbain d'une certaine importance et politiquement progressif capable de mobilisation en vue d'un changement révolutionnaire. Elle apporte une attention spéciale aux questions de définition (qu'est-ce que le prolétariat?) et à l'explication des mécanismes liant le développement économique, l'industrialisation, et la radicalisation du prolétariat, en discutant dans quelle mesure ces mécanismes sont opératifs de nos jours dans les sociétés capitalistes établies et dans les pays du Tiers Monde.

*Cette étude est le développement de remarques faites lors d'une discussion menée par un groupe d'orateurs, sur la politique prolétarienne urbaine, lors des réunions de l'American Political Science Association en 1972. Elle sera publiée dans le prochain numéro de Comparative Urban Research.

Economic development under a capitalist regime is thought to bring with it the emergence of a proletariat and more specifically, an urban proletariat of progressive outlook, capable of playing a revolutionary role in effecting social change, according to the Marxist vision of things.

To the extent, therefore, that economic development has been taking place on a significant scale in the less developed countries today, an urban proletariat of sizable dimensions and suitably progressive temperament should be emerging in most Third World countries.

But close examination of contemporary developments in Third World countries suggests that in many if not most countries this is far from being the case and is not likely to be so in the foreseeable future, if ever. Moreover, efforts to analyze the composition and social role of emerging Third World proletariats raise basic issues of definition and explication. These issues will constitute the focus of this paper.

Two fundamental questions have to be answered. The first has to do with the question of definition: Who is the Third World proletariat, the social class(es) or group(s) which is (are) at the center of analysis here? There does not seem to be a simple answer to this question. The analysis of the main theoreticians in these matters, especially Marx, is quite sketchy, and there is considerable ambiguity in later writing.

The second question concerns social roles: What role does the proletariat or its various components play in social change? Does the proletariat necessarily make up a vanguard class, more "progressive" in outlook, more revolutionary in disposition, more prone to social mobilization than other groups? If this is so, or is argued to be so, how can it be explained? And is it really so?

These are obviously questions of great complexity, surrounding which there is a large and dispersed literature. I can't claim to have more than sampled this literature, which is not only abundant, but frequently obscure and very often contentious. Nevertheless, even a relatively casual exploration of these questions of class definition and roles, looked at in the light of Third World conditions, raises basic analytic problems which will form the focus of this paper.

Who Is the Proletariat?

All analysts of urban politics, or urban anything else, in the less developed countries (LDCs) have to face the fact of urban social diversity; without a workable set of definitions of social groups, categories, strata or classes it is hard to see how meaningful political or social analysis is possible. Social stratification patterns differ a good deal within the LDCs, and any attempt to set out a simplified schema necessarily has an element of arbitrariness.¹ Nonetheless, in many Third World cities five major groups can usually be distinguished: (1) a professional, technical, bureaucratic and managerial group, consisting of high-level employees in public and private sectors; (2) a commercial and industrial employer group, composed of owners of enterprises which employ non-family labor; (3) non-managerial employees in the "modern sector", which consists of enterprises of a certain size (more than ten workers for example), with a well-defined organizational structure and using modern technology; (4) paid employees and the self-employed in the "unorganized" or "informal" sector--workers in small craft and repair shops, petty traders and hawkers, pedicab drivers, etc.; (5) the unemployed, frequently indistinguishable from those in group (4).

This refers to "urban" groups. At least four other non-urban strata usually can be distinguished, and these are also relevant for urban politics, if only indirectly. These are: (1) landless laborers; (2) non-agricultural employees in rural towns; (3) small peasants; (4) big landlords. In most places small peasants are the overwhelming majority; the landless, or rural proletariat, are normally a small section of the rural population, though there are exceptions to this--e.g., in the Caribbean. In most places the lines between these groups are imprecise; many small farmers, for example, work for wages part of the year, either in towns or on other farms.

No claims of unerring accuracy or universal validity are made for this sketch of LDC social stratification. It merely serves to illustrate the general character of social differentiation in the LDCs and to set the framework for the question at hand: Which of these groups are to be considered part of "the proletariat"? This potentially trivial question opens up large issues of doctrine and analysis.

¹Cf. L. Plotnicov and A. Tuden (eds.), Essays in Comparative Social Stratification (Pittsburgh, 1970).

It is essential first of all to see whether Marx is of any help. He invented the concept after all. And it is Marxism which is most preoccupied with the proletariat as a social group and as an agent of historical change.

The notion of the proletariat holds so central a place in Marxist thought, and figures so prominently in vulgar Marxism, that the naive observer might expect it to be defined carefully and at length somewhere in the classic texts. This turns out not to be the case, however. Marx in fact gave extraordinarily little analytic attention to these matters. Aside from a simplified analysis in the Communist Manifesto, there is only a fragmentary discussion, a beginning of an exposition on social class, in Vol. III of Capital.²

In the Manifesto, Marx and Engels define the proletariat as "...the people in 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."³ Alongside the proletariat there is, in capitalist society, the bourgeoisie and no other classes--except as minor and transitional groups. In classical and feudal times, Marx and Engels say, social stratification was more complicated. But not any more: "Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, shows this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonism. Society as a whole is more and more splitting into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat."⁴

The characteristics of the proletariat are outlined in the Manifesto. It is the majority of the population or labor force--the "immense majority," Marx and Engels say. The proletariat consists of paid employees--wage earners; they are not self-employed, or unemployed, or the underclass ("lumpenproletariat") of the unemployable and the criminal. The members of the proletariat are manual workers, typically unskilled or semi-skilled machine operators employed in large scale establishments in urban areas. They are low-wage employees; wages tend toward the level necessary only to reproduce a skill-less workman, one possessing no human capital, which is the physical subsistence level.

This approach to the problem of class and social stratification is not

²One recent commentator observes: "The role of the class concept in Marxian doctrine is so immense that it is astonishing not to find a definition of this concept, which they use so constantly, anywhere in the works of either Marx or Engels." Stanislas Ossowski, Class Structure in the Social Consciousness (London, 1963), p. 71.

³The Communist Manifesto, ed. by J. Katz, Washington Sq. Press edition, 1964, p. 57.

⁴Manifesto, pp. 58-9.

very helpful in understanding urban political dynamics in the Third World. The definition of the proletariat in terms of property ownership is analytically uninteresting. It groups together members of a sharply differentiated set of social strata--the permanent secretary in a government ministry and the indigenous manager of a large corporation with the unskilled laborers in textile mills, highly-paid miners with migrant "apprentices" in "informal" sector repair shops. The diversity of conditions and economic interests of these groups are such as to make their differences and conflicts more interesting and significant than their common lack of physical property.

Moreover, the polarization into two classes, on which the argument in the Manifesto relies so heavily, never occurs. In more mature capitalist societies, as in the early capitalism of most LDCs, the proletariat as characterized by Marx remains a small proportion of the labor force, and the numerous intermediate classes survive and thrive, though with industrialization there come changes in composition--mainly the replacement of small independent farmers by white collar workers. Understanding the social role and political behavior of these intermediate classes, the most numerous elements in the social structure, becomes a matter of some importance. But this is ignored in the mainstream of Marx's theoretical writing.

Finally, the inadequacies of the definition of the proletariat weaken Marx's argument on the dynamics of radicalization and the assertion of vanguard status for this group. The "proletariat" or "working class" is composed of very diverse strata, each of which may have different experiences and circumstances. If the argument for radicalization rests on economic immiserization, for example, then it is important to be clear about exactly who is becoming economically miserable and who isn't, for the experience in the industrialized countries as in the LDCs indicates highly differential sharing of benefits of growth among the different components of "the working class". In the Russian case discussed by Phillips, for example, the factory workers who "came in" were much worse off than the "peasants" from the neighborhood of the factories, since the latter kept their rural connections and their rural incomes while employed as industrial workers. In the case of Shanghai discussed by White, the "contract proletariat" clearly enjoys far less money in benefits and opportunity than the permanently employed work force. In the course of British industrialization it was the skilled workers, over much of the 19th century.

who benefitted most. And in the LDCs today those employed in the modern industrial sector are almost invariably much better rewarded than those in the informal sector or in agriculture.

Similarly, if one makes psychological alienation the engine of radicalization, it is important to specify who--which elements of the work force--are being alienated, and how. In the Manifesto, for example, Marx seems to stress assembly-line alienation. But then the argument would apply only to that section of the work force which has its pace and intensity of work determined by the assembly line. This would not be all industrial workers even if everybody engaged on machine-paced work were included, not just assembly line workers. In any event it would be a small proportion of the labor force, and in mature industrial capitalism, a rapidly declining section, both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of all workers. As is well known, in modern capitalism production of services comes to occupy a larger share of the work force than does production of commodities.

To see how thin an insight into LDC issues the "classic" Marxist analysis provides it is only necessary to list some typical structural features of Third World countries. Most of the following generalizations would fit the LDCs except for the bigger and more developed Latin American countries. (a) Urban populations, even generously defined, are less than 30% of the total. (b) Some 70-90% of the labor force works mainly in agriculture. (c) Workers in the "modern" or "organized" or "formal" sector comprise only a small proportion of total urban employment--rarely more than one-third. (d) A big proportion of "modern sector" employees--typically 30-50%--work for the public sector. (e) Employment in modern manufacturing establishments rarely accounts for more than 15% of total modern sector employment, and manual or blue collar jobs perhaps 30-40%.

In addition, there are complicating factors arising from the recency and uneven spread of economic development: the fact that highly-educated workers have been trained in the metropolises or in foreign-oriented educational systems at home and hence have close psychological connections with foreign cultures; that unskilled wage earners are recent migrants to paid employment, many of whom retain close ties to their villages and some of whom are not fully committed

⁵Cf. E.J. Hobsbawm, "The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth Century Britain", in Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour (London, 1964), pp. 272-315.

to wage work; that economic-based social distinctions exist amidst a large array of other social divisions--those based on ethnic origin, race, religion, caste, regional factors, language, etc.

These conditions help explain why later and especially contemporary writers--Marxist and non-Marxist--hesitate to talk of "the proletariat" in Asian and African conditions. The question of precise definitions tends to be ignored. There is instead much reference to "semi-proletarians", and to very broad and shadowy groupings such as "the working class", and wide recognition of the need to do more finely tuned analysis of classes and class relationships.⁶

Marx himself recognized the deficiencies of the simplified two class analysis of the Manifesto, which is also found in Capital. When he wrote of the problems of his time he dropped the sharp division into proletarians and bourgeoisie and took account of the more diverse strata in the real world. As a recent Marxist writer puts it: "Marx the revolutionary and Marx the dramatist of history developed a dichotomic conception of a class society. Marx the sociologist was compelled...to introduce intermediate classes. He could not overlook 'the mass of the nation standing between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie'."⁷

Refinements in the analysis of social stratification did not preoccupy the great theoreticians who followed Marx. Lenin did make a stab at a definition, but it was too obscure, brief and contradictory to be of much doctrinal interest.⁸ Lenin's writing in this area is in any event not concerned with broad theoretical generalizations so much as with questions of strategy and tactics. This is evident in What Is to be Done, where he considers the revolutionary potential of the working class in Russia. This pragmatic approach can be seen even more clearly in the writing of Mao Tse-Tung. In 1926 Mao wrote

⁶ Cf. Michael Kalecki, Selected Essays on the Economic Growth of the Socialist and the Mixed Economy (Cambridge, 1972), where Kalecki discusses "intermediate regimes" in which power is exercised by lower middle class groups, including rich peasants. See also, K.N. Raj, "The Politics and Economics of Intermediate Regimes", R.R. Kale Memorial Lecture, 1973, Ghokale Institute of Politics and Economics, Poona, 1974. See also T. dos Santos, "The Concept of Social Classes", in Science and Society, Summer 1970, pp. 166-193; M. Nicolaus, "Proletariat and Middle Class in Marx", in Studies on the Left, Jan.-Feb. 1967, pp. 22-49; N. Poulantzas, "On Social Classes", New Left Review, March-April, 1973, pp. 27-55; and Ian Gough, "Marx's Theory of Productive and Unproductive Labour", New Left Review, Nov.-Dec. 1972, pp. 47-72.

⁷ Stanislas Ossowski, op. cit., p. 75. The citation is from Marx's The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850. Another Marxist commentator distinguishes a two-class analysis in the Manifesto and Capital from a six-class scheme implicit or explicit in Marx's sociological writing. [Z.A. Jordan, ed., Karl Marx: Economy Class and Social Revolution (London, 1971), p. 23.]

⁸ Cf. Ossowski, op. cit., p. 77.

an article called "Analysis of Classes in Chinese Society."⁹ He begins the article bluntly and straightforwardly with the strategic question: "Who are our enemies and who are our friends?" Class analysis for Mao was thus the sorting out of the various socio-economic groups in China in order to see what forces were at work which made them favorable or unfavorable to revolution in China.

Mao distinguishes six classes, with numerous sub-classes: (1) the landlord and comprador class; (2) the middle class, mainly comprised of the national bourgeoisie; (3) the petty bourgeoisie ("...owner-peasants, master handicraftsmen and the petty intellectuals--students, primary and middle school teachers, lower government functionaries, office clerks, small lawyers and petty traders..."); (4) the semi-proletariat, which he subdivides into five categories: semi-tenant peasants, poor peasants, handicraftsmen, clerical workers and peddlers; (5) the proletariat, consisting of the "modern industrial proletariat" of some two million workers in the mid-twenties, and a rural proletariat which, since there was so little modern capitalist farming in China, consisted mainly of landless laborers "who hire themselves out for the year, month, or day"; (6) the "lumpenproletariat", consisting of landless, unemployed people who have become unemployable.

Mao, like Marx in his writing about contemporary developments in Europe, thus ignores the two-class analysis in favor of a broad-ranging discussion of the diverse social groups in China. The criterion of property ownership as determinant of class, or even the more sophisticated notion of dominant and subordinate classes, becomes much more nuanced. It is basically economic status, income and prospects for improvement, by which Mao distinguishes the socio-economic groups and assesses their posture with respect to the revolutionary forces in China. It is also clear that for Mao in the 1920s the proletariat is more or less the same group envisioned by Marx in the Manifesto and Capital: industrial wage earners, mainly factory workers in manufacturing, but also miners, railwaymen and similar elements.

A Proletarian Vanguard?

Ever since Marx there has existed a broad stream of opinion which regards "the proletariat", however finely defined, as a particularly strategic and leading social class. There are three main elements in this view: the proletariat

⁹ Reprinted in Anne Freemantle, editor, Mao Tse-Tung: An Anthology of His Writings (Mentor Books, 1962), pp. 51-59.

is by its nature a "progressive" or revolutionary class, since it is the class of the future; it is highly mobilizable for political and revolutionary action; its organizations are powerful, effective agents for revolutionary change.

For Marx (and most Marxists) the proletariat is a vanguard class for reasons sketched out most explicitly in the Manifesto. The proletariat is propertyless, so they have nothing to lose by change. They are impoverished in material terms, insecure as a result of recurring capitalist crises. Their conditions on the job are intolerable. They are organized "like soldiers", exposed on the job to a "hateful...petty...(and) embittering despotism..." of foremen and employers. Because of the division of labor and mechanization, the work of the proletariat has "lost all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage to the machine", caught up in monotonous, simple-minded work. Driven by their search for surplus value, employers extend the work day where they can, and speed up the lines, making the life of the worker increasingly oppressive. At the same time, the proletariat is becoming more "rational" than the other segments of society. Its members begin to perceive that such phenomena as patriotism, private property, law, morality, religion are "...so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk...just as many bourgeois interests..."

Thus, in the Marxian framework, it is material deprivation and psychological alienation which radicalize the proletariat. The industrial worker revolts because he is caught up in poverty and in joyless, meaningless work.

Over the course of capitalist development the proletariat takes on increasing revolutionary consciousness. In the beginning, workers engage in individual protest, in backward-looking guerilla warfare, such as Luddite machine-breaking. As industrialization proceeds (and presumably also as cities and factories grow in size and number) the proletariat gets larger and also "concentrated in greater masses." Its members form trade unions. They strike. Sometimes they win, but these are transient victories whose main result is greater unity and class consciousness. This developing sense of class awareness is hurried along by the actions of the bourgeoisie, which seeks alliances with the proletariat in its own struggles with dying feudal elements and in its internal struggles, as well as the occasional struggles against the foreign bourgeoisie. Finally, the proletariat reaches full revolutionary consciousness and is ready to overturn bourgeois society.

For Mao also, at least in the mid-1920s, the proletariat is clearly the

vanguard class. It is worth citing at length from his 1926 article on Chinese classes:¹⁰

As China is economically backward the number of her industrial proletariat is not large. The majority of the approximately two million industrial workers are engaged in five industries--railways, mining, maritime transport, textiles and shipbuilding--and are enslaved in large numbers in enterprises owned by foreign capital. The industrial proletariat, though small in number, is nevertheless the representative of China's new productive forces and the most progressive force in modern China, and has become the leading force in the revolutionary movement. If we look at the strength it showed in the strike movements of the last four years...we can immediately realize the importance of the position of the industrial proletariat in the Chinese revolution. The first reason why the industrial workers can hold such a position is their concentration. No other section of the people is so concentrated. The second reason is their low economic status. They are particularly able to fight because, deprived of all means of production, and left with nothing but their hands, they have despaired of ever becoming rich, and are subjected to the most ruthless treatment by the imperialists, the warlords and the bourgeoisie....

The influential Marxist, Georg Lukacs, put the argument more generally.¹¹

Bourgeoisie and proletariat are the only pure classes in bourgeois society. They are the only classes whose existence and development are entirely dependent on the course taken by the modern evolution of production and only from the vantage point of these classes can a plan for the total organization of society even be imagined. The outlook of the other classes (petty bourgeois or peasants) is ambiguous or sterile because their existence is not based exclusively on their role in the capitalist system of production but is indissolubly linked with the vestiges of feudal society. Their aim, therefore, is not to advance capitalism or to transcend it, but to reverse its action or at least to prevent it from developing fully. Their class interest concentrates on symptoms of development itself, and on elements of society rather than on the construction of society as a whole....

This attribution of inherent vanguard status to the proletariat is vulnerable to a wide range of criticisms, most of them well-known.

(1) There is no a priori reason why the proletariat defined as industrial wage earners should suffer particularly acute "alienation" as compared with other strata or classes. If the definition of the proletariat is restricted to unskilled manual workers in large-scale assembly-line dominated factories, it might be argued that assembly-line dehumanization is uniquely severe, as compared to other forms of real or putative dehumanization in capitalist society. But this would be to restrict the boundaries of proletarian status

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

¹¹ Georg Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness (London, 1971), p. 79.

to a tiny majority of the work force and a declining proportion of the work force. It would also be difficult to establish such a proposition empirically. And in any case it is too narrow an approach to the concept of "alienation" as that concept is discussed in the Marxian literature at least.¹²

In this matter of alienation it is instructive to consider the similar argument of Thorstein Veblen (in The Engineers and the Price System) who saw the "engineers" (which can be read as meaning industrial workers generally) as the vanguard class because of the psychological transformation they undergo by virtue of their work. The "engineers" are every day exposed to the matter-of-fact rules of modern science, of cause and effect, which characterize the machine process. They thus become more generally skeptical and matter-of-fact (i.e., scientific) in all their attitudes. In particular they come to see through the phoniness and fraud which characterize business-dominated society, and the restrictions that business puts on industrial expansion. They thus become prone to revolutionary change. The Veblenian analysis, whatever its other faults, has the virtue of specifying a mechanism or link by which the specific relations of production lead to psychological transformation.¹³ Marx does not seem to have such a mechanism.

(2) Even if workers in capitalist societies did and do suffer generalized alienation, the result need not be class awareness and organized political action. Apathy and withdrawal are equally likely responses.

(3) There is no a priori reason to believe that industrial wage earners are less well remunerated than other groups in capitalist society, or that their incomes and opportunities either decline over time or grow at a slower rate than those of other groups. Analytically, in fact, there are rather good reasons to believe the contrary, as will be shown later.

(4) Even if alienation and poverty led to worker organization and political

¹²Cf. I. Meszaros, Marx's Theory of Alienation (London, 1970).

¹³Similar links can be found in the literature. For example, a study of the determinants of revolutionary attitudes among Cuban workers suggests that worker radicalism is a function mainly of the degree of contact between labor and management. (Maurice Zeitlin, Revolutionary Politics and the Cuban Working Class (Princeton, 1967), Ch. 6. In the industrial relations literature there are other hypotheses put forward which are of possible relevance. For example, the higher strike propensity of some industrial groups (miners for example) is explained by their close physical proximity and their common isolation from the mainstream of society. (C. Kerr and A. Siegel, "The Inter-Industry Propensity to Strike: An International Comparison", in Arthur Kornhauser, Robert Dubin and Arthur Ross, eds., Industrial Conflict (New York, 1954).

action, it need not be revolutionary, or even necessarily "progressive."

(5) If the proletariat opts for radical or revolutionary change they may nonetheless have little political impact because of their small size and organizational ineffectiveness.

All of these relate to the inner logic, as it were, of the argument that alienation and immiserization make the proletariat the vanguard of revolution. There is a more fundamental and general analytic weakness in the argument. This relates to the view that the proletariat is the wave of the future, the only major "pure class" as Lukacs put it, the class which is made dominant by capitalism and yet has an interest in transcending it. C. Wright Mills has summarized this point well.¹⁴

[There is an]...unstated premise of Marx,...the underlying assumption... of the Marxist theory of power. [It is as follows] ... The functional indispensability of a class in the economic system leads to its political supremacy in the society as a whole....On this premise the capitalists have replaced the nobles, and capitalism has succeeded feudalism. In a similar manner, reasoned Marx, the proletariat will replace the bourgeoisie, and socialism replace capitalism. Old rulers who were once functionally indispensable are so no longer. In the course of capitalist development the bourgeoisie, like the feudal nobles before them, have become parasitical. They cannot help this. It is their destiny. And so they are doomed.

There are many difficulties with this crucial assumption. It is first of all hard to see the sense in which the proletariat is the "economically indispensable" class in capitalist society. As already noted, it never becomes "the immense majority" that Marx foresaw; it indeed begins to decline in both absolute number and as a proportion of the work force in mature capitalism. On the surface, the propertyless intermediate classes would seem to have a more critical role--the technicians, scientists, managers, white collar workers at all levels. In the LDCs this is the case even more strikingly. The industrial proletariat is a small minority and it so remains over most of the course of early development. At likely rates of growth of output, population and industrial employment, the labor force in a 70% agricultural country remains mainly agricultural for a half-century or more. Without agricultural expansion most LDCs cannot develop very far. In this sense the peasantry is the "indispensable" economic class in the coming historical period, and unless it has its day there can be no substantial rise of the proletariat in the future.

¹⁴C. Wright Mills, The Marxists (New York, 1962), pp. 88-89.

As this suggests, "indispensability" does not mean automatic power. Nor is there any necessary reason for economic parasites to disappear.¹⁵ And there is an empirical question: The argument that the proletariat must replace the bourgeoisie seems to be based on excessive generalization from the case of the bourgeoisie itself. But there are no comparable cases historically. As one historian noted: "History does not demonstrate that the exploited class of one society is the architect of the next social organization."¹⁶

All of this is to throw into question the argument that there is an inherently strategic role for the proletariat, some inner necessity that it be the leading edge of revolution in the Third World or elsewhere. Just what role it plays is an empirical matter, and for the Third World the evidence is still coming in. Although sparse and uncertain, it does not appear to lend much support to the vanguard proposition. There is little consistent evidence to bear out the view that the industrial workers are more "dissatisfied" than other socio-economic groups, and the most common response to alienation where it occurs seems to be withdrawal, apathy, a sense of powerlessness. Industrial wage earners in the LDCs are almost invariably better paid and with better access to public services than is the mass of the population in rural areas and the unemployed or those employed in the informal sector in towns. In the cities of the Third World, migrants--everywhere very numerous--normally register satisfaction with the improvement in their conditions, and tend to show relatively few symptoms of alienation.¹⁷

Experience in both industrialized and less developed capitalist countries does indicate that urban wage earners and the organizations that they create have tended to play "progressive" political roles. They have fought for wider democratization of political and industrial life, better (more equitable) distribution of income, more humane social legislation. It is probably also true that industrial workers have exhibited more class cohesion than other socio-economic strata, as evidenced by the emergence of labor parties in most of the

¹⁵ C. Wright Mills, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-117.

¹⁶ M.M. Bober, *Karl Marx's Interpretation of History*, revised edition (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), p. 340.

¹⁷ Cf. Joan Nelson, "The Urban Poor: Disruption or Political Integration in Third World Cities", in *World Politics*, 1970, pp. 393-414; and Wayne Cornelius, "Urbanization as an Agent in Latin American Political Instability, The Case of Mexico", in *American Political Science Review*, 1967, pp. 833-857.

industrialized world.¹⁸ But they have rarely been "revolutionary" in the usual sense. They have tended almost invariably to become integrated into the capitalist system. And in many countries at various times they have adopted policies and practices which reflect the less benign forces at work in the society around us--for example, with respect to issues of war, international detente, racial discrimination.

The evidence from the less developed countries, finally, gives little support to the view that the industrial proletariat is uniquely mobilizable because of its unique combination of discontent and physical concentration, which is presumed to make it organizationally effective and politically influential. In fact, worker organizations in the Third World more often than not are weak and divided, the prey of politicians, or controlled by the state or party in single party situations. They everywhere suffer from lack of worker commitment, from strong ethnic, racial, linguistic and other divisions in the labor force, from lack of leadership cadres and the existence of competing organizations serving worker needs and interests (the state itself, welfare-minded employers, tribal unions, etc.) and from the fact that the most stable, competent and dynamic elements of the labor force, the educated and skilled workers including civil servants, are those with the deepest stake in the existing system.

The Proletariat as Inherently Reformist and Conservative

These and other kinds of considerations have led many observers--Marxist, neo-Marxist and non-Marxist--to depart from the notion of a proletariat which is a progressive and "spontaneously" revolutionary class. This was the message of the "reformist" elements in the Marxist tradition, such as Bernstein. But it is also the view of Lenin, who saw the "working class" not as spontaneously revolutionary, but to the contrary as spontaneously reformist. "Left to themselves", he noted in What Is to Be Done?, "economism (reformism, or narrow concern with improvements in wages and job conditions) is the natural proclivity of workers and their organizations." A similar view is expressed in a different context in a famous piece of bourgeois theorizing about labor movements and their evolution--Selig Perlman's Theory of the Labor Movement, written in the mid-twenties. Perlman observed that capitalist labor organizations tend to focus on the job-oriented concerns of their members. Manual workers in capitalist society, he believed,

¹⁸E.J. Hobsbawm, "Class Consciousness in History", in I. Meszaros (ed.), Aspects of History and Class Consciousness (London, 1971), p. 10.

are plagued by a sense of scarcity of opportunity. They are thus mainly concerned with enlarging and protecting their job rights and their wage incomes.

A number of writers preoccupied with Third World questions have set out related but somewhat different arguments, stressing the corrupted or conservative character of the proletariat in the poor countries today. The best known example is Franz Fanon, who argued that urban workers are a privileged class in the post-colonial state. They are a psychologically unreliable and conservative class, since they retain strong ties to the European colonizers' culture, and have little affection for or knowledge of their own peasantry. In Fanon's scheme of things it is an aroused and organized peasantry, which is presently a kind of "lumpenproletariat," which will make the revolution.¹⁹

Variants of this theme run through much contemporary writing on class and politics in the Third World. One strand of thought emphasizes the position of the industrial workers as members of a "labor aristocracy"; others treat the urban wage earners as in or near the newly-created "elites" of the LDCs.²⁰

Given the typical structural characteristics of economies in early stages of development, there are in fact reasons to expect certain basic conflicts or "contradictions" between the LDC proletariat and the surrounding society. In the discussion that follows it is worth stressing that the generalizations are less applicable to Latin America than to African and Asian countries, because of important differences in degrees of urbanization and industrialization.

(1) The modern industrial sector is capital-intensive, uses relatively advanced technology and/or is resource-intensive (mining, notably). Output per worker (productivity) is much higher in this sector than in the rest of the economy. For various reasons, employers in this sector are willing and able to pay higher than prevailing wages: these are profitable firms, labor costs are small proportions of total costs, marginal tax rates are high so the cost of higher wages is partially passed on to the central government budget; it is good public relations to pay high rates; it allows recruitment of the best workers.

(2) Government is a major employer of labor in these economies. It is rare to have less than a quarter of the modern sector labor force in public employment,

¹⁹ Cf. Franz Fanon, Les Damnés de la Terre, Ch. 4; and B. Marie Perinham, "Fanon and the Revolutionary Peasantry--The Algerian Case", in Journal of Modern African Studies, September 1973, pp. 405-426.

²⁰ Cf. Giovanni Arrighi, "International Corporations, Labor Aristocracies and Economic Development in Tropical Africa", in R. Rhodes (ed.), Imperialism and Underdevelopment (New York, 1971), and P.C. Lloyd, Africa in Social Change, Penguin African Library, London, 1967, esp. Chs. 4, 5.

and 40% is not uncommon. Government is also a major provider of capital for growth; between a third and a half of gross fixed capital formation in many LDCs is public sector investment.

(3) The relatively large gap in incomes, services and amenities between modern sector workers and others, incites many villagers to seek wage employment in the modern sector even at the price of a long period of unemployment or low-paid employment in the "informal" sector.

(4) Wage incomes are relatively high in local terms; average modern sector earnings, for example, may be three times the average per capita GNP, a school teacher can earn eight times the average GNP and a high level civil servant twenty-five times. But these "privileged" people are hardly affluent by any absolute standard, nor do they feel well-paid. They suffer from the sociological dualism that is widely prevalent in almost all countries where rapid change is recent. They try to meet both old commitments and new strivings--school fees for children from the immediate nuclear family as well as for kinsmen from the village, remittances for village needs as well as white shirts and bus fares. Subject to these pressures, they are anxious to increase their money incomes.

A variety of conflicts or contradictions emerge from these circumstances.

(a) Modern sector wage earners exert continuous upward pressure on wage rates, while some modern sector employers, those in the modern industrial sector, are willing to grant higher rates. It is only if some incomes policy is imposed externally (by unions, government or political parties) that wages will not continue to rise, or at least to fall less than other incomes.

(b) By exerting upward pressure on wage rates, industrial workers discourage use of more labor-intensive methods in the modern sector, probably slow the rate of expansion of industrial output, probably reduce incomes in the "unorganized" or "informal" sector by reducing the rate of growth of employment in modern sector industry and by stimulating the inflow of rural migrants.

(c) While symbiotic relationships exist between formal and informal sectors, conflicts appear to predominate. As modern sector production expands, informal sector output of competing products is threatened. Modern sector workers have an interest in retention and expansion of the highly protected and subsidized manufacturing typical in LDC economies, and they have a stake in preventing reform of tariff and other elements of commercial policy in equitable and efficient directions.

(d) Modern sector workers are better off if increases in productivity are passed on to them in the form of higher wages or better conditions. But growth and equity may demand that these resources go to consumers generally (in the form of lower prices), to the unemployed or underemployed (via higher employment), or to the community as a whole (in the form of increased taxes and hence possible increases in development expenditure).

(e) The employed have a critical interest in job security, given their advantageous position of job-holders in a sea of unemployment and underemployment. Similarly, they are interested in obtaining higher income for those already employed rather than expanding the numbers employed as output rises. They are thus strong proponents of bargained or statutory job security regulations, natural supporters of anti-discharge, job severance and other rules whose existence discourages managers from new hiring when the demand for labor rises.

(f) As job-holders in a job-scarce environment, and because they wish to reduce competition for promotions or other opportunities, the employed have interests opposed to those in favor of immigration and free-entry labor markets. In localities where one ethnic group tends to dominate the labor market, this can be an important influence. Thus in many countries urban workers have participated in anti-foreign and anti-immigrant violence, and their organizations have favored restrictions on free entry into the job market.

(g) Workers in the modern sector have interests at variance with those of the peasant mass in several specific and quite obvious ways: they are beneficiaries of protection and subsidization of inefficient manufacturing enterprises, which produce relatively high-priced farm inputs or farmer-consumer consumer goods. And they are a major factor in government decisions which keep prices of staple foodstuffs low in order to reduce worker or urban discontent. Whatever it does to urban protest, it certainly reduces agricultural incomes and incentives.

It can be argued that these conflicts are not real "contradictions" in Marxist language, but rather "secondary" or "non-antagonistic" differences of interest between socio-economic strata or sub-strata. It is of course true that with respect to some very general social objectives all groups share common interests--in more output with the same inputs for example, or in a more just society, or reduced dependence on external forces. There may also exist policies or objectives which make everybody better off and nobody worse off;

in these there is obviously a common interest. It is possible, moreover, to reconcile virtually any potential conflict by distinguishing between short and long term interests; what is a clash of sectional interests in the short run can be dissolved if one takes a longer view. Finally, many of the kinds of economic conflicts sketched above are in principle reconcilable by judicious division of benefits and costs between claimant groups. Thus higher productivity can theoretically be distributed partly in higher wages, partly in greater profits and taxes, partly in lower output prices and increased employment.

What this in effect means is that just as there is no "inherent" or universal reason why "the proletariat" should play a progressive social role, neither is there any reason why it should necessarily be socially retrograde, conservative or anti-developmental. But the point being made here is that such a socio-political role is more likely than any other, because of the substantial sources of conflict which exist in the economic structures of societies in early stages of development. The proletariat is in basic confrontation with the other sections of Third World society on fundamental matters: the rate of investment; the allocation of employment between the already employed and the unemployed, the development of agriculture; the distribution of income between workers and peasants; the distribution of output between formal and informal sectors; the quantity of public services available to consumers. In these instances the immediate economic interests of the proletariat and those of the majority of the population are in direct opposition.

In certain historical circumstances--for example, under colonial conditions, or, as Petras suggests in the Chilean case, in a revolutionary showdown, an ultimate shootout between broad social groups--the "working class" may submerge its sectional or "narrow" interests in pursuit of the larger and longer term social good. But these are transient circumstances, and we should expect the powerful sectional interests to reassert themselves once colonial rule ends or the revolutionary forces come to power.