

The Bourgeois(ie) as Concept and Reality

Définir le bourgeois? Nous ne serions pas d'accord.

Ernest Labrousse (1955)

In the mythology of the modern world, the quintessential protagonist is the bourgeois.* Hero for some, villain for others, the inspiration or lure for most, he has been the shaper of the present and the destroyer of the past. In English, we tend to avoid the term 'bourgeois', preferring in general the locution 'middle class' (or classes). It is a small irony that despite the vaunted individualism of Anglo-Saxon thought, there is no convenient singular form for 'middle class(es)'. We are told by the linguists that the term appeared for the first time in Latin form, *burgensis*, in 1007 and is recorded in French as *burgeois* as of 1100. It originally designated the inhabitant of a *bourg*, an urban area, but an inhabitant who was 'free'.¹ Free, however, from what? Free from the obligations that were the social cement and the economic nexus of a feudal system. The bourgeois was *not* a peasant or serf, but he was also *not* a noble.

Thus, from the start there was both an anomaly and an ambiguity. The anomaly was that there was no logical place for the bourgeois in the hierarchical structure and value-system of feudalism with its classical three orders, themselves only becoming crystallized at the very moment that the concept of 'bourgeois' was being born.² And the ambiguity was that bourgeois was then (as it remains today) both a term of honour and a term of scorn, a compliment and a reproach. Louis XI, it is said, took pride in the honorific 'bourgeois of Berne'.³ But Molière wrote his scathing satire on 'le bourgeois gentilhomme', and Flaubert said: 'J'appelle bourgeois quiconque pense basement.'

Because this medieval bourgeois was neither lord nor peasant, he came eventually to be thought of as a member of an intermediary class, that is, a middle class. And thereby commenced another ambiguity. Were all urban-dwellers bourgeois, or only some? Was the artisan a bourgeois, or only a petty bourgeois, or not a bourgeois at all? As the term came to be used, it was in practice identified with a certain level of income—that of being well off—which implied both the possibilities of consumption (style of life) and the possibilities of investment (capital).

It is along these two axes—consumption and capital—that the usage developed. On the one hand, the style of life of a bourgeois could be contrasted with that of either the noble or the peasant/artisan. *Vis-à-vis* the peasant/artisan, a bourgeois style of life implied comfort, manners, cleanliness. But *vis-à-vis* the noble, it implied a certain absence of true luxury and a certain awkwardness of social behaviour (*viz.* the idea of the *nouveau riche*). Much later, when urban life became richer and more complex, the style of life of a bourgeois could also be set against that of an artist or an intellectual, representing order, social convention, sobriety and dullness in contrast to all that was seen as spontaneous, freer, gayer, more intelligent, eventually what we today call 'counter-cultural'. Finally, capitalist development made possible the adoption of a pseudo-bourgeois style of life by a proletarian, without the latter simultaneously adopting the economic role as capitalist, and it is to this that we have given the label 'embourgeoisement'.

But if the bourgeois as Babbitt has been the centrepiece of modern cultural discourse, it is the bourgeois as capitalist that has been the centrepiece of modern politico-economic discourse. The bourgeois has meant the one who has capitalized means of production, hiring workers for wages who in turn have made things to be sold on a market. To the extent that the revenue from sales is greater than costs of production including wages, we speak of there being profit, presumably the objective of the bourgeois capitalist. There have been those who have celebrated the virtues of this social role—the bourgeois as creative entrepreneur. And there have been those who have denounced the vices of this social role—the bourgeois as parasitical exploiter. But admirers

* This article was originally given as the Byrn History Lecture, Vanderbilt University, 23 March 1987.

¹ G. Matoré, *Le vocabulaire et la société médiévale*, Paris 1985, p. 292.

² G. Duby, *Les trois ordres ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme*, Paris 1978.

³ M. Canard, 'Essai de sémantique: Le mot "bourgeois"', *Revue de philosophie française et de littérature*, XXVII, p. 33.

and critics have generally combined to agree that the bourgeois, this bourgeois the capitalist, has been the central dynamic force of modern economic life, for all since the nineteenth century, for many since the sixteenth century, for a few even longer than that.

Nineteenth-Century Definitions

Just as the concept 'bourgeois' has meant an intermediate stratum between noble/landowner and peasant/artisan, so the bourgeois era, or bourgeois society, came to be defined in two directions, backwards in time as progress over feudalism, and forwards in time vis-à-vis the promise (or threat) of socialism. This definition was itself a phenomenon of the nineteenth century, which thought of itself and has been thought of ever since by most people as the century of bourgeois triumph, the quintessential historical moment for the bourgeois—as concept, and as reality. What represents bourgeois civilization more in our collective consciousness than Victorian Britain, workshop of the world, heartland of the white man's burden, on which the sun never set—responsible, scientific, civilized?

Bourgeois reality—both its cultural and its politico-economic reality—has thus been something we have all known intimately and which has been described in remarkably similar ways by the three great ideological currents of the nineteenth century—conservatism, liberalism, and Marxism. In their conceptions of the bourgeois, all three have tended to agree upon his occupational function (in earlier times usually a merchant, but later an employer of wage labour and owner of the means of production, primarily one whose workers were producers of goods), his economic motor (the profit motive, the desire to accumulate capital), and his cultural profile (non-reckless, rational, pursuing his own interests). One would have thought that with such unanimity emerging in the nineteenth century around a central concept, we would all have proceeded to use it without hesitation and with little debate. Yet Labrousse tells us that we will not agree on a definition, and he therefore exhorts us to look closely at empirical reality, casting as wide a net as possible. Furthermore, although Labrousse made his exhortation in 1955, I do not have the impression that the world scholarly community took up his challenge. Why should this be? Let us look at five contexts in which, in the work of historians and other social scientists, the concept of bourgeois(ie) has been used in ways that result in discomfort—if not theirs, then that of many of their readers. Perhaps by analysing the discomforts, we will find clues for a better fit between concept and reality.

1. Historians frequently describe a phenomenon designated as the 'aristocratization of the bourgeoisie'. Some have argued, for example, that this occurred in the United Provinces in the seventeenth century.⁴ The system in *Ancien Régime* France of a '*noblesse de robe*' created by the venality of office was virtually an institutionalization of this concept. It

⁴ D. J. Roorda, 'The Ruling Classes in Holland in the Seventeenth Century', in J. S. Bromley and E. H. Kossman, eds., *Britain and the Netherlands*, II, Gröningen 1964, p. 119; and idem, 'Party and Faction', *Acta Historiae Nederlandica*, II, 1967, pp. 196–97.

is, of course, what Thomas Mann described in *Buddenbrooks*—the typical path of transformation in the social patterns of a wealthy family dynasty, from great entrepreneur to economic consolidator to patron of the arts, and eventually these days to either decadent roué or hedonistic–idealistic dropout.

What is it we are supposed to be noticing? That, for some reason and at a certain biographical moment, a bourgeois seems to renounce both his cultural style and his politico–economic role in favour of an ‘aristocratic’ role, which since the nineteenth century has not necessarily been that of titled nobility but simply that of old wealth. The traditional formal symbol of this phenomenon has been the acquisition of the landed estate, marking the shift from bourgeois–factory owner–urban resident to noble–landowner–rural resident.

Why should a bourgeois do this? The answer is obvious. In terms of social status, in terms of the cultural discourse of the modern world, it has always been true—from the eleventh century to today—that it is somehow ‘better’ or more desirable to be an aristocrat than a bourgeois. Now, this is remarkable on the face of it, for two reasons. One, we are constantly told by everyone that the dynamic figure in our politico–economic process is and has been—since the nineteenth century, since the sixteenth century, since perhaps even longer—the bourgeois. Why would one want to give up being centre-stage in order to occupy an ever more archaic corner of the social scene? Secondly, while what we call feudalism or the feudal order celebrated nobility in its ideological presentations, capitalism gave birth to another ideology which celebrated precisely the bourgeois. This new ideology has been dominant, at least in the centre of the capitalist world–economy, for at least 150–200 years. Yet the *Buddenbrooks* phenomenon goes on apace. And in Britain, even today, a life peerage is taken to be an honour.

2. An important polemical concept in contemporary thought—familiar in, but by no means limited to, Marxist writings—is that of the ‘betrayal by the bourgeoisie’ of its historical role. In fact, this concept refers to the fact that, in certain countries, those that are less ‘developed’, the local (national) bourgeoisie has turned away from its ‘normal’ or expected economic role in order to become landowners or rentiers, that is ‘aristocrats’. But it is more than their aristocratization in terms of personal biography; it is their collective aristocratization in terms of collective biography. That is to say, it is a question of the timing of this shift in terms of a sort of national calendar. Given an implicit theory of stages of development, at a certain point the bourgeoisie should take over the state apparatus, create a so-called ‘bourgeois state’, industrialize the country, and thereby collectively accumulate significant amounts of capital—in short, follow the presumed historical path of Britain. After that moment, perhaps it would be less important if individual bourgeois ‘aristocratized’ themselves. But before that moment, such individual shifts render more difficult (even make impossible) the national collective transformation. In the twentieth century, this kind of analysis has been the underpinning of a major political strategy. It has been used as the justification, in Third International parties and their successors, of the so-called ‘two-stage theory of national

revolution', wherein socialist parties have the responsibility not only to carry out the proletarian (or second-stage) revolution but also to play a very large role in carrying out the bourgeois (or first-stage) revolution. The argument is that the first stage is historically 'necessary' and that, since the national bourgeoisie in question has 'betrayed' its historic role, it becomes incumbent on the proletariat to play this role for it.

Now, the whole concept is doubly curious. It is curious that one thinks that one social class, the proletariat, has both the obligation and the social possibility of performing the historical tasks (whatever that means) of another social class, the bourgeoisie. (I note in passing that, although the strategy was in fact launched by Lenin or at least with his benediction, it smacks very much of the moralism for which Marx and Engels denounced the Utopian Socialists.) But the idea of 'betrayal' is even more curious when looked at from the angle of the bourgeoisie itself. Why should a national bourgeoisie 'betray' its historic role? Presumably, it has everything to gain from performing this role. And since everyone—conservatives, liberals, Marxists—agree that bourgeois capitalists always pursue their own interests, how is it that in this instance they appear not to have seen their own interests? It seems more than a conundrum; it seems to be a self-contradicting assertion. The strangeness of the very idea is accentuated by the fact that quantitatively the number of national bourgeoisies that are said to have 'betrayed' their historic roles turns out not to be small but very large—indeed, the vast majority.

Ownership and Control

3. The language of 'aristocratization of the bourgeoisie' has tended to be applied to situations in European countries primarily in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, and the language of 'betrayal of the bourgeoisie' has tended to be applied to situations in non-European zones in the twentieth century. There is a third language, however, which has been applied primarily to situations in North America and Western Europe in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1932, Berle and Means wrote a famous book in which they pointed out a trend in the structural history of the modern business enterprise, a trend they called the 'separation of ownership and control'.⁵ By this they meant the shift from a situation in which the legal owner of a business was also its manager to one (i.e., the modern corporation) in which the legal owners were many, dispersed and virtually reduced to being merely investors of money capital, while the managers, with all the real economic decision-making power, were not necessarily even partial owners and were in formal terms salaried employees. As everyone now recognizes, this twentieth-century reality does not match the nineteenth-century description, by either liberals or Marxists, of the economic role of the bourgeois.

The rise of this corporate form of enterprise did more than change the structures at the top of the enterprises. It also begat a whole new social stratum. In the nineteenth century, Marx had forecast that, as capital

⁵ A. Berle and G. Means, *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*, New York 1932.

centralized, there would over time occur a growing polarization of classes, such that eventually only a bourgeoisie (very tiny) and a proletariat (very numerous) would remain. By that he meant in practice that, in the course of capitalist development, two large social groupings, the independent small agricultural producers and the independent small urban artisans, would disappear via a double process: a few would become large-scale entrepreneurs (that is, bourgeois), and most would become wage-workers (that is, proletarians). While liberals were not making for the most part parallel predictions, nothing in Marx's own prediction insofar as it was merely a social description was incompatible with liberal theses. Conservatives, such as Carlyle, thought the Marxist prediction essentially correct, and they shivered at the thought.

In fact, Marx was right, and the membership of these two social categories has indeed diminished dramatically worldwide in the last hundred and fifty years. But in the period since the Second World War, sociologists have been noticing, until it has become a veritable commonplace, that the disappearance of these two strata has gone hand in hand with the emergence of new strata. The language that began to be used was that as the 'old middle class' was disappearing, a 'new middle class' was coming into existence.⁶ By the new middle class was meant the growing stratum of largely salaried professionals who occupied managerial or quasi-managerial positions in corporate structures in virtue of the skills in which they had been trained at universities—originally, primarily the 'engineers', then later the legal and health professionals, the specialists in marketing, the computer analysts, and so on.

Two things should be noted here. First of all, a linguistic confusion. These 'new middle classes' are presumed to be an 'intermediate stratum' (as in the eleventh century), but now one located between the 'bourgeoisie' or the 'capitalists' or 'top management' and the 'proletariat' or the 'workers'. The bourgeoisie of the eleventh century was the *middle* stratum, but in the terminology of the twentieth century, the term is used to describe the top stratum, in a situation in which many still refer to three identifiable strata. This confusion was compounded in the 1960s by attempts to rebaptise the 'new middle classes' as the 'new working classes', thereby seeking to reduce three strata to two.⁷ This change in name was fostered largely for its political implications, but it did point to another changing reality: the differences in style of life and income level between skilled workers and these salaried professionals were narrowing.

Secondly, these 'new middle classes' were very difficult to describe in the nineteenth-century categories of analysis. They met some of the criteria of being 'bourgeois'. They were 'well-to-do'; they had some money to invest (but not too much, and that mainly in stocks and bonds); they certainly pursued their own interests, economically and politically. But they tended to be comparable to wage-workers, insofar as they lived primarily on current payments for work (rather than on

⁶ See, for a notable example, C. Wright Mills, *White Collar*, New York 1951.

⁷ See, for example, A. Gorz, *Stratégie ouvrière et néo-capitalisme*, Paris 1964.

returns from property); to that extent, they were 'proletarian'. And their often quite hedonistic style of life de-emphasized the puritanical strain associated with bourgeois culture; to that extent they were 'aristocratic'.

4. There was a Third World analogue to the 'new middle classes'. As one country after another became independent after the Second World War, analysts began to take note of the rise of a very significant stratum—educated cadres employed by the government, whose income levels made them quite well-to-do in comparison with most of their compatriots. In Africa, where those cadres stood out most sharply in the virtual absence of other varieties of 'well-to-do' people, a new concept was created to designate them, the 'administrative bourgeoisie'. The administrative bourgeoisie was quite traditionally 'bourgeois' in style of life and social values. It represented the social underpinning of most regimes, to the point that Fanon argued that African one-party states were 'dictatorships of the bourgeoisie', of precisely this bourgeoisie.⁸ And yet of course these civil servants were not bourgeois at all in the sense of playing any of the traditional economic roles of the bourgeois as entrepreneur, employer of wage labour, innovator, risk-taker, profit maximizer. Well, that is not quite correct. Administrative bourgeois often played these classic economic roles, but when they did, they were not celebrated for it, but rather denounced for 'corruption'.

5. There is a fifth arena in which the concept of the bourgeoisie and/or the middle classes has come to play a confusing but central role—namely, in the analysis of the structure of the state in the modern world. Once again, whether we look at conservative, liberal or Marxist doctrine, the advent of capitalism was presumed to be in some way correlated and closely linked with political control of the state machinery. Marxists said that a capitalist economy implied a bourgeois state, a view most succinctly summarized in the aphorism that 'the state is the executive committee of the ruling class'.⁹ The heart of the Whig interpretation of history was that the drive towards human freedom proceeded in parallel fashion in the economic and political arenas. Laissez-faire implied representative democracy or at least parliamentary rule. And what were conservatives complaining about, if not the profound link between the cash nexus and the decline of traditional institutions (first of all, at the level of the state structures)? When conservatives talked of Restoration, it was the monarchy and aristocratic privilege they were intent on restoring.

And yet note some persistently dissenting voices. In that heartland of bourgeois triumph, Victorian Britain, at the very moment of the triumph, Walter Bagehot examined the continuing essential role of the monarchy in maintaining the conditions which permit a modern state, a capitalist system, to survive and to thrive.¹⁰ Max Weber insisted that the bureaucratization of the world, his choice of the key process of capitalist civilization, would never be feasible at the very top of the

⁸ F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York 1964, pp. 121–63.

⁹ K. Marx, F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [1848], New York 1948.

¹⁰ W. Bagehot, *The English Constitution* [1867], London 1964.

political system.¹¹ And Joseph Schumpeter asserted that, since in effect the bourgeoisie was incapable of heeding the warnings of Bagehot, the edifice of rule must inevitably crumble. The bourgeoisie, by insisting on ruling, would bring about its own demise.¹² All three were arguing that the equation of bourgeois economy and bourgeois state was not as simple as it looked.

In the corner of the Marxists, the theory of the state, of the class basis of the (bourgeois) state, has been one of the most thorny issues of the last thirty years, most notably in the debates between Nicos Poulantzas and Ralph Miliband.¹³ The phrase, the ‘relative autonomy of the state’, has become a cliché enjoying wide nominal support. What does it refer to, if not the fact that there now are acknowledged to be so many versions of ‘bourgeoisie’ or ‘middle classes’ that it is hard to argue that any one of them actually controls the state in the direct mode of the Marxist aphorism? Nor does the combination of them seem to add up to a single class or group.

The Concept Reconsidered

Thus the concept, bourgeois, as it has come down to us from its medieval beginnings through its avatars in the Europe of the *Ancien Régime* and then of nineteenth-century industrialism, seems to be difficult to use with clarity when talking about the twentieth-century world. It seems even harder to use it as an Ariadne’s thread to interpret the historical development of the modern world. Yet no one seems ready to discard the concept entirely. I know of no serious historical interpretation of this modern world of ours in which the concept of the bourgeoisie, or alternatively of the middle classes, is absent. And for good reason. It is hard to tell a story without its main protagonist. Still, when a concept shows a persistent ill fit with reality—and in all the major competing ideological interpretations of this reality—it is perhaps time to review the concept and reassess what really are its essential features.

Let me begin by noting another curious piece of intellectual history. We are all very conscious that the proletariat, or if you will, waged workers, have not simply been historically there, that they have in fact been created over time. Once upon a time, most of the world’s labour were rural agricultural producers, receiving income in many different forms but rarely in the form of wages. Today, a large (and ever larger) part of the world’s workforce is urban and much of it receives income in the form of wages. This shift is called by some ‘proletarianization’, by others the ‘making of the working class’.¹⁴ There are many theories about this process; it is the subject of much study.

We are also aware, but it is less salient to most of us, that the percentage

¹¹ M. Weber, *Economy and Society* [1922], III, New York 1968, e.g. pp. 1403–05.

¹² J. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, New York 1942, Chapter 12.

¹³ R. Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, London 1969; N. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* [1968], NLB, London 1973; and see the debate in *New Left Review* 58, 59, 82 and 95.

¹⁴ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, revised edition, London 1968.

of persons who might be called bourgeois (in one definition or another) is far greater today than previously, and has no doubt augmented steadily since perhaps the eleventh century, and certainly since the sixteenth. And yet, to my knowledge, virtually no one speaks of 'bourgeoisification' as a parallel process to 'proletarianization'. Nor does anyone write a book on the making of the bourgeoisie; rather they write books on '*les bourgeois conquérants*'.¹⁵ It is as though the bourgeoisie were a given, and therefore acted upon others: upon the aristocracy, upon the state, upon the workers. It seems not to have origins, but to emerge full-grown out of the head of Zeus.

Our nostrils should flair at such an obvious *deus ex machina*—and a veritable *deus ex machina* it has been. For the single most important use of the concept, the bourgeoisie/the middle classes, has been in explaining the origins of the modern world. Once upon a time, so the myth is recited, there was feudalism, or a non-commercial, non-specialized economy. There were lords and there were peasants. There were also (but was it by chance alone?) a few urban burghers who produced and traded through the market. The middle classes rose, expanded the realm of monetary transaction, and unleashed thereby the wonders of the modern world. Or, with slightly different wording but essentially the same idea, the bourgeoisie did not only rise (in the economic arena) but subsequently rose up (in the political arena) to overthrow the formerly dominant aristocracy. In this myth, the bourgeoisie/middle classes must be a given in order for the myth to make sense. An analysis of the historical formation of this bourgeoisie would inevitably place in doubt the explanatory coherence of the myth. And so it has not been done, or not been done very much.

The reification of an existential actor, the urban burgher of the late Middle Ages, into an unexamined essence, the bourgeois—that bourgeois who conquers the modern world—goes hand in hand with a mystification about his psychology or his ideology. This bourgeois is supposed to be an 'individualist'. Once again, notice the concordance of conservatives, liberals and Marxists. All three schools of thought have asserted that, unlike in past epochs (and, for Marxists in particular, unlike in future ones), there exists a major social actor, the bourgeois entrepreneur, who looks out for himself and himself alone. He feels no social commitment, knows no (or few) social constraints, is always pursuing a Benthamite calculus of pleasure and pain. The nineteenth-century liberals defined this as the exercise of freedom and argued that, a little mysteriously, if everyone did this with full heart, it would work out to everyone's advantage. No losers, only gainers. The nineteenth-century conservatives and the Marxists joined together in being morally appalled at and sociologically sceptical of this liberal insouciance. What for liberals was the exercise of 'freedom' and the source of human progress was seen by them as leading to a state of 'anarchy', immediately undesirable in itself and tending in the long run to dissolve the social bonds that held society together.

I am not about to deny that there has been a strong 'individualist' strain

¹⁵ C. Morazé, *Les bourgeois conquérants*, Paris 1957.

in modern thought reaching its acme of influence in the nineteenth century, nor that this strain of thought was reflected—as cause and consequence—in significant kinds of social behaviour by important social actors in the modern world. What I wish to caution against is the logical leap that has been made: from viewing individualism as *one* important social reality, to viewing it as *the* important social reality of the modern world, of bourgeois civilization, of the capitalist world-economy. It has simply not been so.

The basic problem resides in our imagery about how capitalism works. Because capitalism requires the free flow of the factors of production—of labour, capital and commodities—we assume that it requires, or at least that capitalists desire, a *completely* free flow, whereas in fact it requires and capitalists desire a *partially* free flow. Because capitalism operates via market mechanisms, based on the ‘law’ of supply and demand, we assume that it requires, or capitalists desire, a perfectly competitive market, whereas it requires and capitalists desire markets that can be both utilized and circumvented at the same time, an economy that places competition and monopoly side by side in an appropriate mix. Because capitalism is a system that rewards individualist behaviour, we assume that it requires, or capitalists desire, that everyone act on individualist motivations, whereas in fact it requires and capitalists desire that both bourgeois and proletarians incorporate a heavy dosage of anti-individualist social orientation into their mentalities. Because capitalism is a system which has been built on the juridical foundation of property rights, we assume that it requires and capitalists desire that property be sacrosanct and that private property rights extend into ever more realms of social interaction, whereas in reality the whole history of capitalism has been one of a steady decline, not an extension, of property rights. Because capitalism is a system in which capitalists have always argued for the right to make economic decisions on purely economic grounds, we assume that this means they are in fact allergic to political interference in their decisions, whereas they have always and consistently sought to utilize the state machineries and welcomed the concept of political primacy.

Endless Accumulation

In short, what has been wrong with our concept of the bourgeois is our inverted (if not perverse) reading of the historical reality of capitalism. If capitalism is anything, it is a system based on the logic of the *endless* accumulation of capital. It is this endlessness that has been celebrated or chastised as its Promethean spirit.¹⁶ It is this endlessness which, for Emile Durkheim, had anomie as its enduring counterpart.¹⁷ It is from this endlessness that Erich Fromm insisted we all seek to escape.¹⁸

When Max Weber sought to analyse the necessary link between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, he described the social

¹⁶ D. Landes, *Prometheus Unbound*, Cambridge 1969.

¹⁷ E. Durkheim, *Suicide* [1897], Glencoe 1951.

¹⁸ E. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, New York 1941.

implications of the Calvinist theology of predestination.¹⁹ If God were omnipotent, and if only a minority could be saved, human beings could do nothing to ensure that they would be among this minority, since if they could, they would thereby determine God's will and He would not then be omnipotent. Weber pointed out, however, that this was all very well logically, but it was impossible psycho-logically. Psychologically, one might deduce from this logic that any behaviour is permissible, since it is all predestined. Or one might become totally depressed and hence inactive, since all behaviour is futile in terms of the only legitimate objective, salvation. Weber argued that a logic that is in conflict with a psycho-logic cannot survive, and must be bent. Thus it was with Calvinism. To the principle of predestination the Calvinists added the possibility of foreknowledge, or at least of negative foreknowledge. While we could not influence God's behaviour by our deeds, certain kinds of negative or sinful behaviour served as signs of the absence of grace. Psychologically, now all was well. We were urged to behave in a proper manner since, if we did not, that was a sure sign that God had forsaken us.

I should like to make an analysis parallel to that of Weber, distinguishing between the logic and psycho-logic of the capitalist ethos. If the object of the exercise is the endless accumulation of capital, eternal hard work and self-denial are always logically *de rigueur*. There is an iron law of profits as well as an iron law of wages. A penny spent on self-indulgence is a penny removed from the process of investment and therefore of the further accumulation of capital. But although the iron law of profits is logically tight, it is psycho-logically impossible. What is the point of being a capitalist, an entrepreneur, a bourgeois if there is no personal reward whatsoever? Obviously, there would be no point, and no one would do it. Still, logically, this is what is demanded. Well, of course, then the logic has to be bent, or the system would never work. And it has clearly been working for some time now.

Just as the combination omnipotence–predestination was modified (and ultimately undermined) by foreknowledge, so the combination accumulation–savings was modified (and ultimately undermined) by rent. Rent, as we know, was presented by the classical economists (including by Marx, the last of the classical economists) as the veritable antithesis of profit. It is no such thing; it is its avatar. The classical economists saw an historical evolution from rent towards profit, which translated into our historical myth that the bourgeoisie overthrew the aristocracy. In fact, however, this is wrong in two ways. The temporal sequence is short-run and not long-run, and it runs in the other direction. Every capitalist seeks to transform profit into rent. This translates into the following statement: the primary objective of every 'bourgeois' is to become an 'aristocrat'. This is a short-run sequence, not a statement about the *longue durée*.

What is 'rent'? In narrowly economic terms, rent is the income that derives from control of some concrete spatio-temporal reality which cannot be said to have been in some sense the creation of the owner or

¹⁹ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [1904–05], London 1930.

the result of his own work (even his work as an entrepreneur). If I am lucky enough to own land near a fording point in a river and I charge a toll to pass through my land, I am receiving a rent. If I allow others to work on my land for their own account or to live in my building, and I receive from them a payment, I am called a rentier. Indeed in eighteenth-century France, rentiers were defined in documents as 'bourgeois living nobly on their revenues', that is, avoiding business or the professions.²⁰

Now, in each of these cases it is not quite true that I have done nothing to acquire the advantage that has led to the rent. I have had the foresight, or the luck, to have acquired property rights of some kind which is what permits me legally to obtain the rent. The 'work' that underlay the acquisition of these property rights has two features. It was done in the past, not the present. (Indeed it was often done in the distant past, that is, by an ancestor.) And it required the sanctification by political authority, in the absence of which it could earn no money in the present. Thus rent = the past, and rent = political power.

Rent serves the existing property-owner. It does not serve the one who seeks, by dint of current work, to acquire property. Hence rent is always under challenge. And since rent is guaranteed politically, it is always under political challenge. The successful challenger, however, will as a consequence acquire property. As soon as he does, his interest dictates a defence of the legitimacy of rent.

Rent is a mechanism of increasing the rate of profit over the rate that one would obtain in a truly competitive market. Let us return to the example of the river crossing. Suppose we have a river such that there is only a single point narrow enough to permit the building of a bridge. There are various alternatives. The state could proclaim that all land is potentially private land and that the person who happens to own the two facing lots on the opposing shores at the narrowest point can build a private bridge and charge a private toll for crossing it. Given my premise that there is only one feasible point of crossing, this person would have a monopoly and could charge a heavy toll as a way of extracting a considerable portion of the surplus-value from all the commodity chains whose itinerary involved crossing the river. Alternatively, the state could proclaim the opposing shores public land, in which case one of two further ideal-typical possibilities present themselves. One, the state builds a bridge with public funds, charging no toll or a cost-liquidating toll, in which case no surplus-value would have been extracted from those commodity chains. Or two, the state announces that, the shores being public, they can be used by competing small boat-owners to transport goods across the river. In this case, the acute competition would reduce the price of such services to one yielding a

²⁰ G. V. Taylor, 'The Paris Bourse on the Eve of the Revolution', *American Historical Review*, LXVII, 4, July 1961, p. 954. See also M. Vovelle and D. Roche, 'Bourgeois, Rentiers and Property Owners: Elements for Defining a Social Category at the End of the Eighteenth Century', in J. Kaplow, ed., *New Perspectives and the French Revolution: Readings in Historical Sociology*, New York 1965; and R. Forster, 'The Middle Class in Western Europe: An Essay', in J. Schneider, ed., *Wirtschaftskräften und Wirtschaftswege: Beiträge zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 1978.

very low rate of profit to the boat-owners, thus allowing a minimal extraction of surplus by them from the commodity chains traversing the river.

Rent and Monopoly

Note how, in this example, rent seems to be the same thing, or nearly the same thing, as monopoly profit. A monopoly, as we know, means a situation in which, because of the absence of competition, the transactor can obtain a high profit, or one could say a high proportion of the surplus-value generated in the entire commodity chain of which the monopolized segment is a part. It is quite clear, in fact self-evident, that the nearer an enterprise is to monopolizing a spatio-temporally specific type of economic transaction, the higher the rate of profit. And the more truly competitive the market situation, the lower the rate of profit. Indeed this link between true competitiveness and low rates of profit is itself one of the historic ideological justifications for a system of free enterprise. It is a pity capitalism has never known widespread free enterprise. And it has never known widespread free enterprise precisely because capitalists seek profits, maximal profits, in order to accumulate capital, as much capital as possible. They are thereby not merely motivated but structurally forced to seek monopoly positions, something which pushes them to seek profit-maximization via the principal agency that can make it enduringly possible, the state.

So, you see, the world I am presenting is topsy-turvy. Capitalists do not want competition, but monopoly. They seek to accumulate capital not via profit but via rent. They want not to be bourgeois but to be aristocrats. And since historically—that is, from the sixteenth century to the present—we have had a deepening and a widening of the capitalist logic in the capitalist world-economy, there is more not less monopoly, there is more rent and less profit, there is more aristocracy and less bourgeoisie.

Ah, you will say, too much! Too clever by half! It does not seem to be a recognizable picture of the world we know nor a plausible interpretation of the historical past we have studied. And you will be right, because I have left out half the story. Capitalism is not a stasis; it is a historical system. It has developed by its inner logic and its inner contradictions. In another language, it has secular trends as well as cyclical rhythms. Let us therefore look at these secular trends, particularly with respect to our subject of enquiry, the bourgeois; or rather let us look at the secular process to which we have given the label of bourgeoisification. The process, I believe, works something like this.

The logic of capitalism calls for the abstemious puritan, the Scrooge who begrudges even Christmas. The psycho-logic of capitalism, where money is the measure of grace more even than of power, calls for the display of wealth and thus for 'conspicuous consumption'. The way the system operates to contain this contradiction is to translate the two thrusts into a generational sequence, the *Buddenbrooks* phenomenon. Wherever we have a concentration of successful entrepreneurs we have a concentration of *Buddenbrooks*-types. Ergo, the aristocratization of the

bourgeoisie in late seventeenth-century Holland, for example. When this is repeated as farce, we call it the betrayal of the historic role of the bourgeoisie—in twentieth-century Egypt, for example.

Nor has this only been a question of the bourgeois as consumer. His penchant for the aristocratic style can also be found in his original mode of operation as an entrepreneur. Until well into the nineteenth century (with lingering survivals today), the capitalist enterprise was constructed, in terms of labour relations, on the model of the medieval manor. The owner presented himself as a paternal figure, caring for his employees, housing them, offering them a sort of social security programme, and concerning himself not merely with their work behaviour but with their total moral behaviour. Over time, however, capital has tended to concentrate. This is the consequence of the search for monopoly, the elimination of one's competitors. It is a slow process because of all the counter-currents which are constantly destroying quasi-monopolies. Yet enterprise structures have gradually become larger and involved the separation of ownership and control—the end of paternalism, the rise of the corporation, and the emergence therefore of new middle classes. Where the 'enterprises' are in fact state-owned rather than nominally private, as tends to be the case in weaker states in peripheral and especially semi-peripheral zones, the new middle classes take the form, in large part, of an administrative bourgeoisie. As this process goes on, the role of the legal owner becomes less and less central, eventually vestigial.

How should we conceptualize these new middle classes, the salaried bourgeoisies? They are clearly bourgeois along the axis of life-style or consumption, or (if you will) the fact of being the receivers of surplus-value. They are not bourgeois, or much less so, along the axis of capital, or property rights. That is to say, they are much less able than the 'classic' bourgeoisie to turn profit into rent, to aristocratize themselves. They live off their advantages attained in the present, and not off privileges they have inherited from the past. Furthermore, they cannot translate present income (profit) into future income (rent). That is to say, they cannot one day represent the past off which their children will live. Not only do they live in the present, but so must their children and their children's children. This is what bourgeoisification is all about—the end of the possibility of aristocratization (that fondest dream of every classical propertied bourgeois), the end of constructing a past for the future, a condemnation to living in the present.

Reflect upon how extraordinarily parallel this is to what we have traditionally meant by proletarianization—parallel, not identical. A proletarian by common convention is a worker who is no longer either a peasant (that is, a petty land-controller) or an artisan (that is, a petty machine-controller). A proletarian is someone who has only his labour-power to offer in the market, and no resources (that is, no past) on which to fall back. He lives off what he earns in the present. The bourgeois I am describing also no longer controls capital (has therefore no past) and lives off what he earns in the present. There is, however, one striking difference with the proletarian. He lives much, much better. The difference seems to have nothing, or very little, to do any longer

with control of the means of production. Yet somehow this bourgeois, product of bourgeoisification, obtains the surplus-value created by that proletarian, product of proletarianization. So if it is not control of the means of production, there must still be something this bourgeois controls which that proletarian does not.

'Human Capital'

Let us at this point note the recent emergence of another quasi-concept, that of human capital. Human capital is what these new-style bourgeois have in abundance, whereas our proletarian does not. And where do they acquire the human capital? The answer is well-known: in the educational systems, whose primary and self-proclaimed function is to train people to become members of the new middle classes, that is, to be the professionals, the technicians, the administrators of the private and public enterprises which are the functional economic building-pieces of our system.

Do the educational systems of the world actually create human capital, that is, train persons in specific difficult skills which merit economically some higher reward? One might perhaps make a case that the highest parts of our educational systems do something along this line (and even then only in part), but most of our educational system serves rather the function of socialization, of babysitting, and of filtering who will emerge as the new middle classes. How do they filter? Here as well we know the answer. Obviously, they filter by merit, in that no total idiot ever gets, say, the Ph.D. (or at least it is said to be rare). But since too many (not too few) people have merit (at least enough merit to be a member of the new middle classes), the triage has to be, when all is said and done, a bit arbitrary.

No one likes the luck of the draw. It is far too chancy. Most people will do anything they can to avoid arbitrary triage. They will use their influence, such as they have, to ensure winning the draw, that is, to ensure access to privilege. And those who have more current advantage have more influence. The one thing the new middle classes can offer their children, now that they can no longer bequeath a past (or at least are finding it increasingly difficult to do so), is privileged access to the 'better' educational institutions.

It should come as no surprise that a key locus of political struggle is the rules of the educational game, defined in its broadest sense. For now we come back to the state. While it is true that the state is increasingly barred from awarding pastness, encrusting privilege and legitimating rent—that is, that property is becoming ever less important as capitalism proceeds on its historical trajectory—the state is by no means out of the picture. Instead of awarding pastness through honors, the state can award presentness through meritocracy. Finally, in our professional, salaried, non-propertied bourgeoisies we can have 'careers open to talent', providing we remember that, since there is too much talent around, someone must decide who is talented and who is not. And this decision, when it is made among narrow ranges of difference, is a political decision.

We can summarize thus our picture. Over time, there has indeed been the development of a bourgeoisie within the framework of capitalism. The current version, however, bears little resemblance to the medieval merchant whose description gave rise to the name, and little resemblance either to the nineteenth-century capitalist industrialist whose description gave rise to the concept as it is generally defined today by the historical social sciences. We have been bemused by the accidental and deliberately distracted by the ideologies in play. It is nonetheless true that the bourgeois as receiver of surplus-value is the central actor of the capitalist drama. He has, however, been always as much a political as an economic actor. That is to say, the argument that capitalism is a unique kind of historical system in that it alone has kept the economic realm autonomous from the political seems to me a gigantic misstatement of reality, albeit a highly protective one.

This brings me to my last point, about the twenty-first century. The problem with this final avatar of bourgeois privilege, the meritocratic system—the problem, that is, from the point of view of the bourgeoisie—is that it is the least (not the most) defensible, because its basis is the thinnest. The oppressed may swallow being ruled by and giving reward to those who are to the manner born. But being ruled by and giving reward to people whose only asserted claim (and that a dubious one) is that they are smarter, that is too much to swallow. The veil can more readily be pierced; the exploitation becomes more transparent. The workers, having neither tsar nor paternal industrialist to calm their angers, are more ready to elaborate on a narrowly interest-based explanation of their exploitation and such misfortunes as befall them. This is what Bagehot and Schumpeter were talking about. Bagehot still hoped that Queen Victoria would do the trick. Schumpeter, coming later, from Vienna and not from London, teaching at Harvard and thus having seen it all, was far more pessimistic. He knew it could not last too long, once it was no longer possible for bourgeois to become aristocrats.