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The short happy life of the affluent working class: Consumption, debt and *Embourgeoisement* in the Age of Credit

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Abstract

This article reconsiders the debate over the alleged embourgeoisement of the British working classes after Second World War. 'Bourgeois affluence and proletarian apathy' examines why members of the New Left concluded that a 'bourgeois' proletariat was incapable of revolutionary activity. 'Washing machines and proletarian persistence' takes up the midcentury social scientific literature with an eye for the ways in which empirical research falsified key elements of that thesis. 'Visible consumption and invisible debt' draws attention to the ways in which both liberal advocates for and Marxist critics of embourgeoisement overemphasized spending and underemphasized debt. Finally, I close by calling attention to some of the anecdotal and empirical evidence that suggests household indebtedness perpetuates working-class dependence upon capital.

Keywords

credit, debt, embourgeoisement, ideology, materialism, New Left

From the perspective of mainstream macroeconomic theory, the Great Recession fell out of a clear blue sky. For example, Hites Ahir and Prakash Loungani (2014) have documented that forecasters failed to predict *any* of the 62 national recessions that began in 2008–2009 (Ahir & Loungani 2014; cf. Hindmoor & McConnell 2015). There is a growing consensus that this myopia can be explained, at least in part, by the

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fact that economists have typically discounted the long-term significance of private household debt.

The reasons for this attitude are many and varied, of course; but one of the most important is that standard models treat consumer credit as an irrational, or at least *inconsequential*, element of modern economic life. The textbook story is that credit flows out of household savings and toward firms, thereby underwriting productive innovation and expansion. Since real savings in one sector are transferred to become purchasing power in another, credit should only move in one direction (cf. Bertola et al. 2006). However, a gap between economic theory and economic practice appeared shortly after Second World War and has been expanding ever since. That is to say, it has been decades since credit was tightly constrained by the volume of savings. 'Our ancestors lived in an Age of Money, where aggregate credit was closely tied to aggregate money, and formal analysis could use the latter as a reliable proxy for the former', Moritz Schularick and Alan Taylor (2009) observe:

> Today, we live in a different world, an Age of Credit, where financial innovation and regulatory ease has permitted the credit system to increasingly delink from monetary aggregates, setting in train an unprecedented expansion in the role of credit in the macroeconomy. (p. 28)

Considered in this light, macroeconomic theory in the second half of the 20th century was an exercise in misrecognizing the place and importance of household leverage. More than the proverbial elephant in the room that no one wanted to acknowledge, private household debt was the elephant in the room that most theorists never even noticed.

In what follows I want to reconsider a chapter in this history of misrecognition: the debate from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s over the alleged *embourgeoisement* of the British working classes.[1] Painted in broad strokes, the perception was that laborers and their families were leading increasingly 'bourgeois' lives by adopting a constellation of aspirational, middle-class attitudes and practices. Liberal theorists championed this development as a measure of managerial capitalism's virtues. 'Yesterday the man with a minimal but increasing real income was reaping the satisfactions which came from a decent diet and a roof that no longer leaked water on his face', John Kenneth Galbraith (1998 [1958]) noticed:

> Today, after a large increase in his income, he has extended his consumption to include cable television and eccentric loafers. But to say that his satisfactions from these latter amenities and recreations are less than from the additional calories and the freedom from rain is wholly improper. Things have changed; he is a different man. (p. 121)

Revolutionary politics were obsolete in the midst of capitalist affluence. With their bellies full and their bottoms dry, the working classes were now able to address the 'spiritual' side of life.

Midcentury Marxists looked out at the same landscape and were filled with despair. Revolutionary political ambition was impossible if the working classes thought of themselves as *satisfied consumers* rather than *exploited producers*. 'The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment', Herbert Marcuse (1964) moaned: 'The very mechanism which ties the

individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced' (p. 9). The end of capitalism was a literally unimaginable event for libidinous consumers whose every desire was slaked by the commercial order.

I believe the embourgeoisement debate is worth reexamining from a contemporary Marxist perspective because this understanding of capitalist culture's 'hegemonic' power is one of the few things on which the balkanized Left still agrees. Scratch the surface of existing 'critical theory' and you will find some version of this thesis regarding the link between cultural consumption and capitalist domination. While speaking to the improvised Occupy Wall Street community in Zuccotti Park, for example, Slavoj Žižek observed that

> the ruling system has even oppressed our capacity to dream. Look at the movies that we see all the time. It's easy to imagine the end of the world. An asteroid destroying all life and so on. But you cannot imagine the end of capitalism. (Žižek 2013)

This line of analysis may be par for the course these days, but it should also be a cause for concern.

On the one hand, the move to treat most human beings as 'dupes or dopes' incapable of abstract thought is beyond suspect (Robin 2016). Ethnographically speaking, it is well-documented that – regardless of time or place – exploited communities always seem capable of reversing, negating, or ridiculing what elites want them to believe (e.g. Joyce et al. 2001). 'Other things equal, it is therefore more accurate to consider subordinate classes *less* constrained at the level of thought and ideology', James Scott (1990) advises, 'and *more* constrained at the level of political action and struggle, where the daily exercise of power sharply limits the options available to them' (p. 91). The human imagination is, thankfully, a hard thing to snuff out.

On the other hand, even though the 'dominant ideology thesis' draws inspiration from Marx and Engels, the neo-Gramscian, Althusserian, and Frankfurt School accounts of 'hegemonic' bourgeois culture sound oddly *nonmaterialist* coming out of a Marxist's mouth (cf. Abercrombie & Turner 1978; Chibber 2016). Let's assume – as I think we should – that human beings can always think creatively about alternative social worlds, even in the most inhumane conditions. For a Marxist, what should follow from this is a search for the *material* constraints that restrict the practical, existential options of those communities who find themselves under the thumb of capital. Simply put, I believe that 21st-century Marxists should be *far less* concerned with ideology and *much more* attuned to what Marx described as 'the dull compulsion of economic relations' (Marx 2004 [1975]): 726). More to the point, I think we need to spend more time drawing attention to debt.[2]

To help orient readers, here is a quick roadmap of what is to come. 'Bourgeois affluence and proletarian apathy' explores how members of the New Left advanced a version of the embourgeoisement thesis to explain why the postwar British working classes preferred piecemeal social democratic reforms to an anticapitalist revolution. 'Washing machines and proletarian persistence' takes up the social scientific literature with an eye for the ways in which empirical research falsified key elements of that thesis. 'Visible consumption and invisible debt' harnesses the mechanical advantage

that historical distance provides to highlight how liberal and Marxist theorists both overemphasized spending and underemphasized debt. Finally, I conclude by calling attention to some of the anecdotal and empirical evidence that suggests household indebtedness perpetuates working class dependence upon capital.

Bourgeois affluence and proletarian apathy

'Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class', Marx and Engels (2004 [1975]) announced in *The Manifesto*: 'The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product' (p. 494). As capitalism's unique and monstrous creation, the proletariat was destined to become its gravedigger. Yet the long-anticipated and often-predicted waves of proletarian revolution never arrived. Time and again the actual revolutionary forces of the 20th century were rural peasants and subsistence farmers rather than urban industrial laborers (cf. Kingston-Mann 1983; Scott 1977).

The result was what might be described as a Marxist *aporia*. Orthodox Marxists were no more capable of accepting the actually existing but *nonrevolutionary* working classes than they were of forsaking the proletariat's *merely abstract* presence as the revolutionary agent of a postcapitalist future. To embrace either option was to adopt a 'counter-revolutionary' stance. 'Anyone who doubts the inevitability of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as a necessary stage of its victory over the bourgeoisie, facilitates the conditions for the victory of the latter', Lev Kamenev (1920) once insisted, anyone who doubts or renounces the political party of the proletariat, is helping to weaken and disorganize the working class' (p. 14). The end result of this impasse was that, up and down the length of the 20th century, Marxists searched for the historical impediments that prevented the de facto proletariat from achieving its de jure form. It was, Žižek (2009) concludes, 'the great defining problem of Western Marxism' (p. 88).

The assignment became rather more complicated when European Marxists began distancing themselves from the Soviet Union's brand of actually existing communism. One of the precipitating events for this project was Khrushchev's decision to invade Hungary in November 1956. 'No chapter would be more tragic in international socialist history', E.P. Thompson (2014) judged, 'if the Hungarian people, who once before lost their revolution to armed reaction, were driven into the arms of the capitalist powers by the crimes of a Communist government and the uncomprehending violence of Soviet armies' (p. 37). Thompson's disgust was so acute that he left the Communist Party of Great Britain, resigned from the Communist Party Historians Group, and began gathering like-minded English academics and activists into a coherent 'New Left' movement.[3]

The heart of the New Left enterprise was a stance that was equal parts anticapitalist and anti-Stalinist. Where social democrats like Anthony Crosland were convinced that a just society was achievable within the framework of managerial capitalism, members of the New Left were not. They maintained that class-based forms of injustice and inequality were constitutive features of capitalism as such. The only way to eliminate the asymmetrical distributions of leisure and labor, or to make human flourishing rather than

surplus value the point of economic life, was through a revolutionary transformation. In Alasdair MacIntyre's (2008) estimation,

> Reformist theories both express and reinforce an abandonment of revolutionary aims. They provide the justification for an adjustment to trade union goals and to bourgeois party politics. The outcome is necessarily a disintegration of the working-class movement in two directions. The leadership becomes assimilated to the parliamentary and administrative structure of the bourgeois state. The mass membership becomes sectionalized, acquires the aspirations of bourgeois society, disintegrates as a movement. The institutions of the labor movement partly become institutions of bourgeois society and partly become part of private rather than of public life. (p. 191)

On this fundamental point, members of the New Left agreed: Marx was right about the nature of capitalism and the categorical imperative to overcome it. This is where their resolute anti-Stalinism entered the picture.

The New Left was unwilling to merely condemn Stalin as a mass murderer or a deranged sociopath – a strategy they regarded as vapid bourgeois posturing. The staggering human costs of Stalin's reign were, they argued, the consequence of a mistakenly materialist fixation on socializing the means of production through rapid collectivization and industrialization (cf. Gregory 2004). In other words, the Soviet Marxists betrayed Marx by reducing Marxism to the Gradgrindian enterprise of producing so many cubic tons of pig iron, grain, and coal per year. Hyman Levy (1957), the distinguished mathematician at Imperial College, judged that only 'a mechanically-minded "marxist," a contradiction in terms, could ever believe that new economic structures would automatically generate new ideological superstructures' (p. 8). The collective New Left judgment was that going forward meant reaching back to the pre-Soviet era and reclaiming the 'real' Marx.

'For the Stalinist Marxism is in essence the thesis that a given level of technology and form of production as a basis produces a given form of social life and consciousness', MacIntyre (2008) observed: 'The predictability which Stalinism offered rested on its conception of a mechanical relation between basis and superstructure. But as Marx depicts it the relation between basis and superstructure is fundamentally not only not mechanical, it is not even causal' (p. 54). Considered in this light, the moral and conceptual error at the heart of Stalinism was replacing the fluidity of Marxist dialectics with a grim species of economic determinism (cf. Taylor 1957). The Stalinist preference for addressing apparatuses over aspirations was symptomatic of a brutal *antihumanism*. 'An idea is not a reflex of a gasometer', Thompson (2014) protested: 'This reduces human consciousness to a form of erratic, involuntary response to steel mills and brickyards, which are in a spontaneous process of looming and becoming' (p. 58). All the forced labor camps and show trials were so much deadly fruit from a poisoned tree.

The movement's programmatic solidarity was surprisingly short lived, however, as invidious distinctions between an *old* New Left and a *new* New Left soon appeared. One of the key points of internal dissention was whether the British proletariat was prepared to fulfill its revolutionary destiny. Thompson initially spoke for many when he appealed to the *longue durée* of English radicalism and maintained that the working classes remained as potent a force as ever. 'The working people of Britain could end capitalism

tomorrow, if they summoned up the courage and made up their minds to do it', he wrote confidently in 1957. The crucial obstacle to overcome was not working-class complacency but the fact that the Soviet experiment was a root-and-branch catastrophe. In his estimation,

> Working people in Britain still feel the social relations of capitalism to be oppressive; but not so oppressive that they are willing to risk giving allegiance to a 'Vanguard' which will establish as 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat'. They are better suited as they are; but remaining as they are leaves them as proletarians with bourgeois aspirations. (Thompson 2014: 85)

On this account, the sine qua non of a revolutionary working class was confidence that Stalinesque gulags would never scar the English countryside. Yet, Thompson's move to defend the British proletariat's revolutionary capacity only underscored how little apparent interest it had in taking up the cause. The nascent *new* New Left's response argued that a novel culture of capitalist consumption and mass entertainment was dissolving traditional patterns of English class consciousness: Revolution had become *unthinkable*.

The intuition itself was not particularly new. In 1867, E.L. Godkin explained the absence of working-class militancy in the United States by underscoring how there were 'few barriers of habit, manners or tradition between the artisan and those for whom he works' (as quoted in Foner 1984: 112). Werner Sombart memorably suggested that revolutionary apathy in America was best explained by the material satisfactions of 'roast beef and apple pie' (Sombart, 1976 [1906]). Karl Kautsky rejected Sombart's thesis but pointed to bourgeois ideology as the culprit. In his estimation, the American regime of unfettered accumulation encouraged capitalists to decadently expand their personal consumption to the point where their discretionary spending was enough to

> feed an army of unproductive workers, lackeys of all sorts, learned and unlearned, aesthetic and unaesthetic, ethical and cynical. These unproductive workers play a crucial role in the defence of exploitation, in which they have themselves an indirect interest. They diminish the number of productive, directly exploited workers, the fighters against exploitation. To them belongs also a great part of the intelligentsia, which influences the thoughts and feelings of the people through their speeches, writings, and works of art. (Kautsky 2003: 22)

The parasitic class of bourgeois apologists made a good living pulling the ideological wool over the proletariat's eyes. While capitalism may produce its own gravediggers, it also creates its own sentries.

For the *new* New Left, however, it was Richard Hoggart's (1957) *The Uses of Literacy* that spoke most directly to the crisis of British working-class politics. Hoggart's worry was not merely that 'thick', composite cultural traditions were being displaced by 'thin', simplistic entertainments. The motivating anxiety was that new forms of mass communication were manufacturing an artificially 'classless' or 'faceless' society. Television might be said to 'democratize' the British cultural landscape insofar as everyone could now, in principle, watch the same shows at the same time – but life beyond the screen remained just as exploitative as before. The working classes thus found themselves in a social order where cultural life was *nominally* 'classless' but the concrete economic and political consequences of class remained. This troubled Hoggart because it seemed that working-class

resistance became *unthinkable* when the pleasant Keynesian circle of increased wages and bolstered aggregate demand extended the comforts of bourgeois domesticity for all. Or, as Stuart Hall (1958) noted crisply in *Universities and Left Review*: 'One cannot organize militantly to keep up with the Joneses' (p. 31).

The suggestion that an embourgeoisfied British proletariat was incapable of revolutionary action had a nearly impeccable Marxist pedigree. In an 1858 letter to Marx, Engels reflected on the collapse of the Chartist movement. The English proletariat grows more and more bourgeois by the day, he judged, 'so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming ultimately at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat alongside the bourgeoisie' (Engels 2004b (1975): 344). The English working class was a proletariat in name only – a bit like goldfish can be generously described as a *pet*. 'You ask me what the English workers think about colonial policy', he later wrote to Karl Kautsky:

> Well, exactly the same as they think about politics in general. There is no workers' party here, there are only Conservatives and Liberal-Radicals, and the workers gaily share the feast of England's monopoly of the world market and the colonies. (Engels 2004a [1975]: 322)

Lenin would eventually pick up on this line of thought and anchor the English proletariat's revolutionary passivity in the conditions of colonial monopoly capitalism (cf. Hobsbawm 1973). Almost from the moment of its conception, it seemed, the English proletariat had proved itself to be the wrong sort of proletariat.

'The formation of the English working class was a major tragedy', Tom Nairn (1964) wrote in the 1960s: 'It was also one – and perhaps the greatest single – phase of *the* tragedy of modern times, the failure of the European working class to overthrow capital and fashion the new society that material conditions long ago made possible' (p. 52).[4] These Marxist critics accused the English working class of bartering away a bright revolutionary future for a few cheap trinkets. 'The flood of consumer durables is real', Harry Hanson (1960) commented in *New Left Review*, 'tending to produce an atomized society, peopled by competitively-acquisitive individuals who have ceased to feel a sense of communally-provided services. Hence, although they grumble freely about deficiencies of all kinds, they no longer think in terms of collective action' (p. 11). The intellectual foundations of working-class solidarity were gone.

Even those observers on the Left who embraced the British proletariat's revolutionary potential conceded that the lack of political urgency could be traced back to a universe of shiny gadgets and slick commercials. 'Capitalist production pushes you along the groove of work; capitalist consumption holds you in the advertisers' groove', MacIntyre (2008) remarked: 'The stick of work and the carrot of television, these mark out how so-called consumer capitalism has additional techniques for limiting and holding the worker down' (p. 130). From this vantage point, mass media and mass consumption made capitalist domination so pervasive that it was as invisible as the air we breathe. How could the working class experience the burdens of their exploitation in an era when, as Harold Macmillan notoriously observed, most of them never had it so good?

For his part, Thompson irritably dismissed much of this as rubbish (Thompson 1965: 332). 'When has the working class *not* been 'built into the market'?', he asked:

'Who on earth consumed the products of the early industrial revolution, if the working people had no serious share? When have commodities not had a social, as well as strictly utilitarian, value?' (Thompson 2014: 107). Thompson argued that a better grasp of history would provide his fellow travelers with a sense of proportion. So, he tried to muster the New Left troops around a gallant tradition of English common dissent. Much to his regret, he found himself vainly beating against a turning tide.

Once the high-table vocabularies of 'Western Marxism' became the lingua franca of the academic Left, it was taken for granted that the tantalizing paradise of stereos and televisions made the end of capitalism inconceivable for all but a select few. The pablum of modern consumer culture produced a stupefied mass audience. Marx wasn't wrong about the proletariat; rather, he had been wronged by it. The working classes simply weren't up to the task. They, along with just about everyone else, had been 'interpellated' as consumers from the start (Althusser 2000 [1971]). Or, as Marcuse (1964) made the point, capitalism managed to insulate itself from revolutionary threats by offering 'an ever-more-comfortable life for an ever-growing number of people who, in a strict sense, cannot imagine a qualitatively different universe of discourse and action' (p. 23). The failure of the revolutionary Left was a failure of the working-class imagination.

Washing machines and proletarian persistence

The quarter century or so that followed the end of the Second World War – that is to say, the era of the proletariat's alleged embourgeoisement – is now routinely described as the 'Golden Age of Capitalism' (cf. Brenner 2006). Unprecedented growth in productivity, returns on investment, and real wages 'guaranteed a roughly constant profit rate and roughly equal growth rates of consumption and production, thus perpetuating the initial rate of accumulation' (Glyn et al. 2000: 48). Something similar might be said for the era's social sciences as well. In Christian Fleck's estimation: 'The middle years of the short twentieth century were the Golden Age of the social sciences as they enjoyed unchallenged authority, which is also why they had the means needed to continue their activity virtually forced upon them' (Fleck 2011: 306–307). Well-organized and well-funded, the social sciences were also well-positioned for addressing the new context of postwar collective life. Henceforth, democratic ends would be achieved through well-managed bureaucratic institutions and technocratic knowledge rather than laissez-faire luck.

Right from the start, class and stratification had been core subjects for the social sciences – but the study of collective strategies for sorting and ranking individuals acquired new significance in the postwar context. One reason was that throughout the first half of the 20th century, social theorists had adopted a more or less explicit functionalism with regard to asymmetrical social status. That is to say, the scholarly assumption was that the unequal distribution of prestige and wealth within a social order somehow preserved the totality's homeostatic equilibrium. On the stage of collective life everyone had a role to play, and some roles would always be better than others. For example, Kinsley Davis and Wilbert Moore made the case in their now-classic 1945 essay that stratification and inequality were constituent features of any imaginable division of labor. In the organo-mechanical idiom of the day, they theorized:

> If the rights and perquisites of different positions in a society must be unequal, then the society must be stratified, because that is precisely what stratification means. Social inequality is thus an unconsciously evolved device by which societies insure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons. Hence every society, no matter how simple or complex, must differentiate persons in terms of both prestige and esteem, and must therefore possess a certain amount of institutionalized inequality. (Davis & Moore 1945: 243)

The functional specialization of social roles and the asymmetrical distribution of social status were two sides of the same coin. The pushmi-pullyu virtues of modern society required some degree of inequality. It was a wrinkle in the social fabric that could never be ironed out.

This functionalist justification of social inequality was made politically untenable by the postwar settlement, however. 'The imagery of dismal hardship, mass unemployment, and hunger marches described an unacceptable history that could never be readmitted to the legitimate agenda', Geoff Eley (2012) points out: 'the egalitarianism and social solidarities needed for victory also made an irrefutable case for equitable social policies in the world to come' (p. 42). With the advent of the Cold War, we begin to find a growing recognition that inequality was a primary driver of social *instability* rather than the effective homeostatic device it was once imagined to be (cf. Van den Berg and Janoski 2005). Inequality was now perceived as a 'social problem' in need of a solution. Roughly speaking, this conceptual reorientation signaled the rise of *conflict theory* as the dominant framework for social scientific research. The move to view collective orders as a hodgepodge of factional struggles rather than cohesive organic wholes meant that Marxist theorizing about class warfare could no longer be shoved aside. If nothing else, Ralf Dahrendorf's (1959) *Class and Conflict in Industrial Society* convincingly demonstrated that even if one believed that Marx was wrong about class dynamics, the old man still had to be rebutted.

This was the context in which mainstream social scientists began critically examining the conditions of the British working class in the postwar 'affluent society'. In addition to the newly relevant Marxist analyses emerging out of the New Left, books like Galbraith's *Affluent Society* and Ferdynand Zweig's (1960) *The Worker in an Affluent Society* made the existence of a *bourgeois working class* a meaningful question. By Zweig's reckoning, it was difficult to grasp the scale of the postwar transformation that working-class people were experiencing. In fact, there was a sense in which the traditional English working class itself was disappearing. 'The change is very deep and far-reaching. Working-class life finds itself on the move towards new middle-class values and middle-class existence', Zweig wrote: 'the change can only be described as a deep transformation of values, as the development of new ways of thinking and feeling, a new ethos, new aspirations and cravings' (Zweig 1960: ix). Secure and steady employment, high wages, access to quality health care, and the availability of affordable consumer goods meant that Marx's dark prophecies regarding the proletariat could be put to rest. If working men and women knew anything at all about Marx, it was only that he was the 'bloke' who had 'something to do the Russian Revolution' (Zweig 1960: 90). 'Old slogans, old loyalties leave him cold', Zweig (1960) concluded:

> The class struggle interests him less and less. The idea of the working class as an oppressed or an exploited class or the romanticized idea of the working class as foremost in the struggle for progress and social justice, is fading from his mind and is more and more replaced by the idea of the working class as a class well-established and well-to-do in its own right. 'Working class but not poor' is his idea of himself. (p. 210)

Zweig did not mean to suggest that class distinctions were disappearing. They were thought to be losing their nasty edge, however. Rather than being locked in a vicious war to the death, capitalists and workers now recognized that their material and political interests converged.

For social scientists attuned to the persistence of factional conflict, however, this Panglossian portrait of postwar, egalitarian England was implausible. The issue was not whether the working class was benefiting from low unemployment and increasing per capita income. Virtually all of the era's macroeconomic indicators pointed in the same direction (cf. Office for National Statistics 2013). The issue was whether, given this generally favorable economic climate, the more extensive process of embourgeoisement was an empirical reality, a theoretical possibility, or a camouflaged moral judgment.

Throughout the 1960s, John Goldthorpe and David Lockwood (1962, 1963) led the effort to document the existence of an embourgeoisified British working class (cf. Goldthorpe, et al. 1967, 1968a, 1968b, 1969; Lockwood 1966). One of the great virtues of their project was that it introduced a much-needed degree of clarity to the discussion, splitting the hazy concept of embourgeoisement into relatively distinct and measurable variables. Thus, in addition to elementary categories like income distribution and working conditions, their team also collected data on consumer behavior, social networks, and political allegiances. After analyzing the hundreds of interviews they conducted, the results were clear. The embourgeoisement thesis was either barely defensible or just plain wrong.

They concluded that by the end of the 1950s working-class patterns of domestic consumption were indeed beginning to mirror redoubtably middle-class buying patterns. Among the newly affluent households, 85% had televisions; 44% had a washing machine; another 44% had a lawnmower; 32% had a car; and 16% owned their own house (Goldthorpe et al. 1969: 22). At the same time, however, data revealed a less idyllic picture if one looked a bit closer. For one thing, it appeared as though workers had to choose between pursuing satisfying work and accepting work that paid well. In other words, the affluent workers in the postwar economy '*were* affluent because they worked – and for long hours – in large-scale, capital-intensive, manufacturing establishments' (Goldthorpe et al. 1969: 65). Higher wages came at an existential cost.

There were also substantive differences between the workplace aspirations of managerial, 'white-collar' employees and their laboring, 'blue-collar' associates. Boiled down to the bare essentials, this meant that middle-class employees typically had *careers* while their working-class peers had *jobs*. Members of the first group anticipated promotions and larger annual salaries, while members of the second hoped for augmented hourly wages at the next round of contract negotiations. When these two trends were brought together, the conclusion was relatively obvious:

> To generalize from our findings, therefore, we would maintain that so far at least as the world of work is concerned, the thesis of working-class *embourgeoisement* can have little relevance to present day British society. Whatever changes may have been taking place in the sphere of consumption, in the sphere of production a fairly distinctive working class can still be readily identified, even when attention is concentrated on progressive industrial sectors and modern establishments. (Goldthorpe et al. 1969: 83)

The latter-day proletariat was no less of a proletariat than its forebears: It just happened to receive better pay and live a less desperate sort of life. The new working classes were *affluent* but not *bourgeois*.

Since the embourgeoisement theorists focused their attention on a spreading middle-class 'lifestyle', Goldthorpe and Lockwood's team ambitiously examined the comparative patterns of social interaction for signs of an increasingly bourgeois working class. For example, they scrutinized one of the most elemental bourgeois *rites de passage* – the intimate dinner party. Once again, the data were revealing.

Solidly middle-class couples averaged more than two engagements a month: either as hosts at their home or as guests at another's home, and most often with nonkin friends and acquaintances. In contrast, both traditional working-class and new 'affluent-worker' couples entertained at home – or were entertained at another's home – less than once a month and typically only with family. Indeed, among the blue-collar couples who did entertain – and it should be noted that a significant number did not – a full 42% indicated that they *only* invited family members, while another 33% reported occasionally inviting no more than one nonkin couple. 'Such a situation, then, can scarcely be taken as demonstrating the spread of typically middle-class friendship relations and modes of sociability', they advised: 'On the contrary, it would more obviously suggest the persistence of the long-established working-class belief that the home is a place reserved for kin and very "particular" friends alone' (Goldthorpe et al. 1969: 92). The highest-paid members of the working class may have been buying televisions and washing machines, but they weren't enjoying one of the bourgeoisie's most discrete charms.

Because of its theoretical and political significance, the 'affluent worker' project attracted a fair amount of critical attention. It passed through the gauntlet of academic reviews *relatively* intact (cf. Crewe 1973; Hart 1994; Kemeny 1972). To this day, it is still cited as a paradigmatic case of successful social scientific research. In George Marshall's (1990) judgment, for example,

> it has turned out to be probably the most widely discussed text in modern British sociology. Much of the subsequent discussion has, in fact, been generally favorable; understandably so, in my opinion, since it is difficult not to be impressed by the thoroughness of the research and the care in relating theory to data. (p. 112; cf. Savage 2010)

Yet, the postwar economic conditions that made the embourgeoisement thesis intuitively plausible in the mid-1950s and early 1960s soon gave way to another set of realities. Early signs of sluggish growth and declining rates of profitability in Britain were greatly magnified by heavy weather: the Bretton Woods system's collapse; the OPEC oil embargo followed by the energy crisis; a miners' strike and the move to a three-day work week;

bounding rates of inflation; creeping unemployment; climbing interest rates; and a vicious bear market that affected every major stock exchange around the world.

When the malaise-filled era of stagflation arrived, social scientific debates regarding the cultural consequences of affluence became irrelevant. The era of the affluent worker was dead. 'Above all, in its very underlying premises the perspective of the Affluent Worker was prospective rather than real', Otto Newman (1979) discerned:

> National prosperity has gone into reverse, confident presumption of ever increasing economic growth as a universal cure-all seems already a rapidly fading communal myth, divisive structural cleavage has reemerged, and the Affluent Worker – if ever reality is clearly, under such circumstances a markedly different social animal. (p. 39)

At least, this was how the landscape appeared during the Winter of Discontent's pallid gloom.

Visible consumption and invisible debt

Even if the past is never truly past, the socioeconomic history of postwar England is likely *past enough* for us to now see aspects of the affluent worker debate in a new light.[5] One of the most peculiar features of both the Marxist and the liberal portraits of proletarian embourgeoisement is the priority each camp assigned to what might be called the *capitalist mode of consumption*. As Goldthorpe and Lockwood pointed out at the time, it is unclear why anyone – much less theoretically sophisticated Marxists – would argue that understanding the *worker as consumer* is more fundamental than understanding the *worker as producer*. 'In the discussion of *embourgeoisement* so far', they noted early on: 'the predominant concern with the effects of affluence has directed attention towards income and consumption and away from the no less significant correlates of the individual's position and role in the division of labor' (Goldthorpe & Lockwood 1963: 137–138). After all, even a nonrevolutionary and aspirational working class is identified in part by its structural location within the capitalist mode of production.

Avner Offer (2008) has suggested that the debate's central focus on consumption begins to make sense when viewed in light of midcentury, neoclassical economic theory. He means that the conceptual priority given to the *worker as consumer* mirrors the mainstream theory of 'consumer sovereignty' whereby consumer preferences determine the scale, scope and profile of what firms produce (cf. Benton 1999; Payne 2014). From this perspective, the embourgeoisement debate was as much a symptom of a specific conceptual vocabulary as it was an analysis of a changing economic order.

Once the emphasis on consumption rather than production is connected to broader historical trends, another peculiarity of the embourgeoisement dispute comes into focus as well: Virtually no attention was given to how the allegedly 'bourgeois' working class was paying for its new, aspirational tastes. More often than not, the liberal advocates and Marxist critics of embourgeoisement were content to document the increase in working-class wages and consumption – as if both sides of the household balance sheet naturally arrived at a new, stable equilibrium. Neither camp paid much attention to how the liberalization of consumer credit was facilitating the purchase of durable goods and

reorganizing household economies in profound ways (e.g. Scott 2014; Vanek 1978). Unless the growing number of 'affluent' workers who now owned cars and houses and washing machines all paid in full and in cash, these alleged marks of embourgeoisement were also evidence of the expanding presence of consumer credit and household leverage. Yet one must search high and low for any sustained interest in the *worker as debtor*.

One could charitably explain this silence as a token of consumer debt's still modest role in midcentury capitalism. In retrospect, however, there were already clearly discernible hints of what was to come. When one 'affluent' factory worker was asked by the Goldthorpe and Lockwood team why he was voting for the Conservative Party, for example, his response was as follows:

> I couldn't care less about politics, except for one or two little things. I base all this on the fact that I've got a house while the Conservatives were in power, and found many things easier, money and hire purchase and that sort of thing. (Goldthorpe et al. 1968b: 20)

This comment is telling given that in 1955 total outstanding hire purchase debt was around £450 million. A mere five years later, the outstanding hire purchase debt more than doubled to approximately £935 million. By 1970, the outstanding balances for hire purchase and other types of installment credit approached £1.38 billion (Taylor 2002: 144; cf. O'Connell 2009).[6] More broadly, the aggregate data indicate that the ratio of household debt to disposable income in the UK increased year over year between 1958 and 1973 – growing from roughly 30% to more than 45%. The ratio of mortgage debt to household income traces a similar arc, growing from around 20% in 1958 to more than 45% in 1973 (*Federal Reserve Bank of New York Quarterly* 1987–1988).

While indifference to private debt may have been excusable in the midst of capitalism's 'Golden Age', it is no longer so. By the late 1970s, it was already apparent that transatlantic 'affluence' was an artifact of consumer credit. 'The affluent society is very much a credit society', David Caplovitz (1978: 127) noted at the time. The central role of credit throughout the global economy's 'long downturn' is now widely recognized (Brenner 2002; cf. Durkin et al. 2014; Montgomerie 2007). What is mentioned less often is that the rationales, sources, and forms of household indebtedness all have unmistakably class-dependent markers (e.g. LeBaron & Roberts 2012; Soederberg 2013). In an Age of Credit, debt loads and debt types are no less significant for the concrete meaning of class than whether one is a 'white-collar' professional or a 'blue-collar' laborer or a wine connoisseur or a beer drinker (cf. Bourdieu 1984). For example, a 2010 study published by Consumer Focus discovered that 70% of the British consumers who used 'payday loans' were employed, had an average household income of around £24,000 – well below the £47,000 average for middle-class families – and typically borrowed in order to pay routine domestic expenses like utility bills or the rent (Consumer Focus 2010). In the UK, the working classes *labored and borrowed* to secure the means of their subsistence.

The data indicate a similar pattern in the United States (Dymski 2012). For one thing, lower income households are statistically overrepresented within the pool of payday borrowers: 29% earned less than US$25,000 (in 2012, the federal poverty level for a family of four was US$23,050); 52% earned US$25,000–US$50,000. In terms of

income distribution, the bottom two quintiles accounted for roughly 80% of all payday loans. For another, close to 70% of payday borrowers took on this particular form of debt in order to cover monthly expenses, such as credit card payments, utilities, groceries, and rent (Pew Charitable Trusts 2012). Mainstream economists sometimes describe this use of credit as a form of 'consumption insurance' and praise the 'democratization of credit' that it represents (cf. Dobos 2012). However, from a Marxist perspective, the most appropriate lesson to draw is that the monetary value of a day's work is no longer adequate 'to produce the necessaries of life daily required on an average by the labourer' (Marx 2004 [1975]: 200). In the transatlantic world at least, the social reproduction of labor now crucially depends upon working-class indebtedness.

Working-class debt in the Age of Credit

I have reviewed the history of the embourgeoisement debate because I think it provides a case study for why Marxists should return to their *materialist* roots. By any reasonable standard, the assertion that the midcentury British working classes were so dominated by bourgeois culture that they were unable to imagine a revolutionary alternative was wrong. If Marxists wish to be more than culture critics, being wrong about how the world actually works should matter.

When we strip away the romanticism that sometimes creeps into Marxist portraits of the proletariat's historical mission, the fact remains that the working classes must play a central role in any progressive political movement for a pretty basic reason: Capital accumulation grinds to a halt when people stop showing up for work and doing what they're told. One way or another, capitalism depends upon various regimes of labor discipline to thrive (e.g. Figueroa 2011; Sperber 2014; Thompson 1967). Working-class debt deserves our critical attention because, as Genevieve LeBaron (2014) has argued, it represents a 'class-based form of power that disciplines all sectors of the labor market, albeit in variegated forms and degrees' (pp. 764–765). In some situations, debt coerces entry into the labor market and makes precarious and exploitative work fiscally necessary. In other situations, debt pressures workers to grit their teeth and remain in unfulfilling jobs because it pays the bills. In still others, debt compels workers to remain in the labor market years after they wished to retire (cf. Roberts 2013).

Along these same lines, I would like to conclude by suggesting that Marxists should begin examining household debt as a constraint on working-class political action. Schematically put, it isn't that television shows have produced working classes so ideologically dominated that they cannot recognize their own best interests; it is that the credit cards used to buy those televisions also pay for the groceries and the utilities. Household debt has far-reaching *material* consequences. In fact, one might appeal to the tectonic contradictions of capitalist accumulation and argue that while Hyman Minsky (1980) was right to identify debt as a source of *financial instability*, household debt is – at the very same time – a powerful source of *social stability*.

Here again, the intuition isn't all that novel. Engels was suspicious of any program that encouraged homeownership among the working classes. His hunch was that these plans were always grounded in the bourgeois hope that

> by a shift in their proletarian status, such as would be brought about by the acquisition of a house, the workers would also lose their proletarian character and become once again obedient toadies like their forefathers, who were also house-owners. (Engels 2004c [1975]: 346)

For Engels, an 'ownership society' was an impediment to revolutionary ambition (cf. Wray 2006).

One virtue of attending to the political economy of household debt is that, in addition to compelling statistical data, we can also draw upon and engage the hard-won, 'anecdotal' wisdom of working people. They are no longer reduced to being dupes or dopes. To cite just one example, a 1979 study asked interview subjects to agree or disagree with the following statement: *Home owners are more stable employees because they are responsible for their mortgages*. Some of the answers are revealing:

- Homeowners are pressured into being more conservative. The guys where I've worked who are home owners … they have an anchor on their left foot and a job on their back.
- Yes, to the extent that if a person was in a job he didn't like, he'd probably be less prepared to quit. You have more of a stake and don't want to lose it.
- Most of the yes-men at work own houses and they're afraid to lose them.
- At work, I see people over their heads with mortgages. They stay in a job when they could do better because they know that they can at least pay the mortgage at their present job.

These comments don't sound like the musings of an ideologically mystified or 'false' consciousness. From where I stand, they all seem on point – and offer compelling prima facie evidence for the socially stabilizing functions of debt inasmuch as it perpetuates working-class dependence upon capital.[7] One respondent even connects the reluctance to strike over working conditions with the existential burdens that mortgages introduce. 'The young ones with the big mortgages are the ones who are worried. Last year our contract was up for negotiation and it came up when there were rumours of a strike', we learn:

> And it was taken into account by the union leaders. There's no use going on strike if two weeks into it the members are mourning. You needs [sic] a good moral on the picket line so you have to take it into account.

Another respondent, who happened to be a union official, echoed this assessment. 'I don't know why it has an effect but it does', he sighed: 'The one's [sic] I've talked to, it's hard to convince them that the banks can't get you for a year' (as quoted in Pratt 1986: 390). Strike busters are unnecessary in a world where debt chips away at working-class solidarity before it can assert itself.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Georgi Plekhanov (1929) could unapologetically assert that *Marxism in a nutshell is contemporary materialism* (p. 1). That baseline commitment to materialist principles is often difficult to find today. My intuition is that

if Marxists wish to be more than mere academic 'theorists', we should stop worrying about ideological domination and spend more time addressing the material realities of the working classes – and one good place to start is debt.

Notes

1. For an overview of the parallel debate regarding the 'affluent' working class in the United States, see Mayer (1963), MacKenzie (1970), Apter (1971) and Massey (1975).
2. Much of the literature that does address issues of debt tends to emphasize the contemporary, 'neoliberal' context. In this essay, I avoid this sort of claim in part because of my misgivings about the category (cf. Dunn 2016).
3. It is beyond the boundaries of this study, but the British-manufactured Suez Crisis was another galvanizing event for the New Left's formation. Historical overviews can be found in Wigery (1976), Kaye (1995 [1984]), Davies (1991), Kenney (1995), Dworkin (1997), Hamilton (2011) and Matthews (2013).
4. On the English proletariat's historical 'failure', see also Anderson (1964), Wood (1991), Hickox (1995) and Davis (2003).
5. Recent efforts to revisit and reframe the affluent worker debates include Fielding (2001), Smith Wilson (2006), Davis (2012) and Middleton (2014).
6. One reason for this rapid increase in hire purchase debt is that the original 1938 Hire Purchase Act was amended in 1954 and again in 1964 to raise the legal debt ceiling.
7. It is worth briefly mentioning that, in the United States at least, *access* to mortgages has a tangled history that exploits and amplifies both class- and race-based forms of inequality (e.g. Harvey 2012; Rothstein 2017).

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