THE PROFESSIONAL/MANAGERIAL CLASS:

AN IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT

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[NOTE: underlining is represented with CAPS]

INTRODUCTION

The substance of my response to Barbara and John Ehrenreich's (1977) essay is clearly indicated in the title of this work. I will argue that the Professional/Managerial Class (PMC), defined as consisting of "salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labor...(is)...the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations" (Ehrenreich, 1977:11) is a concept alien to Marxism; it is a product of the spontaneous consciousness emergent in developed capitalist social formations rather than the result of rigorous Marxist theoretical analysis.

A good deal has been written around the issue of class. It would be unnecessary, however, to include a review of the literature in an essay of this nature, intended as a specific response to a specific statement. My remarks will therefore reflect my own approach to the question of class based upon my current understanding of historical materialism. THE

PROFESSIONAL/MANAGERIAL CLASS: A MARXIST CRITIQUE

The notion of the Professional/Managerial class as a "new class" generated by processes unique to the monopoly stage of capitalist development is both appealing and misleading.

It is appealing because of two important reasons: 1) it corresponds to the immediate consciousness of its members who, with few exceptions, are likely to perceive themselves as "middle class" or "upper middle class," rather than as working class; and 2) it corresponds to the immediate common sense perception of social reality dominant in contemporary capitalist social formations, where the differences between the PMC and the working class in terms of functions in the division of labor, income, education, "social status," "life style," etc. have acquired the obviousness of well-established "social facts."

It is, on the other hand, misleading because, as a concept, it is a hybrid bringing together sociological and Marxist theoretical insights corresponding to two levels of social reality: the level of the mode of production and the level of social formations.

At the LEVEL OF THE MODE OF PRODUCTION, classes are the relations among people mediated through their relation to the means of production; in the capitalist mode of production those are the relations between capitalists and workers. At the LEVEL OF CAPITALIST SOCIAL FORMATIONS, which are characterized by historically specific combinations of capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production, the class structure has greater complexity not only because of the presence of pre-capitalist classes(FN#1) but also because of the heterogeneity given to the capitalist and working classes by the social and technical division of labor which in turn reflects the stage of capitalist development and the overall strategies of capital accumulation characterizing a given social formation at a given time.(FN#2)

The processes of concentration and centralization of capital, the development of the productive forces, and the social and technical division of labor that follows have quantitative and qualitative effects upon the capitalist class which, however, do not change its basic place in the mode of production nor its identity at the level of social formations.

On the other hand, those processes have a different and more "visible" impact upon the working class which, at this level of analysis appears increasingly stratified. Capital accumulation, the outcome of political and economic processes, determines quantitative and qualitative changes in the demand for labor and, consequently, the level of employment, the size and composition of the reserve army, population composition in terms of occupation, education, and income: in other words, social stratification. It is at this level of analysis and in the context of the social stratification brought about by underlying capitalist political and economic processes that it is possible to identify the PMC or "middle layers of employment" (Braverman, 1974).

It should now be obvious to the reader that the PMC is defined both in terms of Marxist criteria for class membership (relation to the means of production) and sociological criteria for the construction of socioeconomic status categories (type of occupation or function in the division of labor, income, education, culture, life style, etc.). This lack of conceptual clarity is a consequence of the Ehrenreichs' empiricist reading of Marx which is clearly revealed in their distinction between the "abstract" and the "real" notions of class.(FN#3) They have reduced the relations of production, which are the foundations of capitalist social reality, to an "analytical abstraction" useful as a tool to "...order...a bewildering array of individual and group characteristics" (Ehrenreich, 1976:11) while defining the level of ideological relations (culture, life styles, family relations, consumption patterns, etc.) as the level of "real social existence."

Having adopted this empiricist standpoint which relegates the Marxist concept of class to the limbo of useful analytical abstractions, the Ehrenreichs could of class to the limbo of useful analytical abstractions, the Ehrenreichs could not solve the theoretical problem posed by the heterogeneity of classes at the level of social formations except through a taxonomic approach which resembles Weber's (1968 analysis of the social aspects of the division of labor:

> From a social point of view, the modes of the division of labor may be further classified according to the mode in which the economic advantages, which are regarded as returns for the different functions, are appropriated. Objects of appropriation may be: the opportunities of disposing of, and obtaining a return from human labor services; the material means of production; and the opportunities for profit from managerial functions" (Weber, 1968:125-126).

For Weber (as well as for Marx), the capitalist appropriation of the material means of production is "identical" to the appropriation of managerial functions by the owners of the means of production who can exercise those functions directly or by appointing others (Weber, 1968:136). In spite of their stress on the notion of class as a social relation and the development of the argument to show that the PMC's development cannot be understood in isolation from the rise and development of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Ehrenreich, 1976:9), the Ehrenreichs seem more Weberian than Weber in their stress on the appropriation of skills and managerial functions as a basis for defining class. It has been said that Weber intended "...to 'round out' Marx's economic materialism by a political and military materialism: (Gerth and Mills, 1966:47). Marx's discovery of the theoretical and political importance of the process of appropriation of the means of production is considered by Weber as an instance of similar processes of appropriation taking place in different areas of the social structure: e.g., appropriation of the means of administration, of the means of management, of the means of research, of the means of violence, etc. The notion of the PMC as a class certainly "rounds out" Weber's analysis of the general process of bureaucratization and rationalization without advancing our understanding of classes from the standpoint of historical materialism.

The identity between the ownership of the means of production and the appropriation of managerial functions in the broadest sense (which is neither lost for Marx nor Weber) is minimized by the Ehrenreichs who stress that the PMC owes its existence to "...the expropriation of the skills and culture once indigenous to the working class" (Ehrenreich, 1976:2, Part II). They thus emphasize the power of the PMC over the working class rather than the PMC's subordination to the capitalist class. This theoretical emphasis follows from their empiricist approach which leads them to overestimate the realities of social stratification and underestimate the value of the Marxist analysis of the processes determining the forms of social stratification. Hence their reliance on Braverman (1974) whose work provides the best empirical analysis of changes in the labor process and in the structure of the working class, and the notable absence of Marx from their sources.

Without denying the importance of Braverman's work, it must be acknowledged that, THEORETICALLY, it adds little to the analysis developed by Marx in CAPITAL, Vol. I, specially in the chapters on Cooperation, Division of Labor and Manufacture, and Machinery and Modern Industry. A reading of Braverman in isolation from historical materialism can lead, because of ambiguities inherent in his work, to a romantic critique of capitalism similar--in its search in the past for images of what the good society of the future should be like--to that of sociologists (who lament the loss of "community") and "critical theorists." While the latter mourn the loss of Culture and its replacement by mass consumer culture, the Ehrenreichs romanticize working class skills and culture which they see obliterated by the actions of the PMC inside and outside factories.(FN#4)

The notion of the PMC as a separate class is based precisely on the idealization of the working class and of the past, and on the empiricist focus on the obvious differences in "life style," ideologies, power, etc. which the social and technical division of labor have created among waged and salaried workers in the course of capitalist development. The Ehrenreichs' focus on the level of social stratification and their neglect of the mode of production and its effects upon the development and stability of existing patterns of social stratification leads them to minimize the dependence of the PMC on the capitalist class and the way in which changes in the relations between capital and labor could affect not only the composition but the very existence of the PMC. Furthermore, they endow the PMC with such self- understanding that turns it, rather than the capitalist class, into the major agent determining the processes affecting the working class. The "...reorganization of the productive process, the emergence of mass institutions of social control, and the commodity penetration of working class life" are viewed as results of the efforts of "more or less conscious agents": the PMC (Ehrenreich, 1976:18).

Two issues arise at this point. The first one centers around the question of the development of capitalist institutions and culture. Although they pay lip service to the progressive aspects of those processes, their analysis is basically a restatement of "the good old days were better" theme. It is not clear what the alternative could be for it is impossible to even imagine the development of any mode of production without revolutionizing, in time, its entire institutional framework. The way in which that is accomplished may vary in content and speed from one social formation to another but the theoretical principle is the same. Their romantic view of the past not only runs counter to what elementary sociology, let alone historical materialism, teaches us about social change but also overlooks the costs of the good old days for the working classes in terms of health, life expectancy, and opportunities for self-development.

The second issue has to do with the nature of the relationship between the PMC and the social process under consideration. For all practical purposes, the PMC is depicted as a "class for itself" and, as such, determining a variety of social changes: e.g., reorganization of productive processes, rise of mass institutions of social control, destruction of working class culture through commodity penetration, creation of mass culture, etc. On the other hand, causality is reversed and it is argued that the PMC emerged IN ORDER TO fulfill a series of requirements: "...the expropriation of productive skills REQUIRES the intervention of scientific management experts...the destruction of autonomous working class culture REQUIRES (and calls forth) the emergence of new culture producers" (Ehrenreich, 1976:18; emphasis added). A theoretical approach that minimizes the importance of the COMMON PROCESSES (political and economic) which produce on the one hand, changes in the productive process, institutions of social control, and culture--and, on the other hand, a growing and changing strata of professionals, managers, and other kinds of salaried mental workers is bound to end in a functional analysis upon which it becomes plausible to posit the PMC as a rising class rather than as a subordinate strata.

The definition of the PMC as a class is based, as it has been shown in the preceding discussion, on an uneasy mixture of Marxist, sociological, and Weberian elements: like the working class, the PMC does not own the means of production and is in a subordinate relation to the capitalist class; its claim to being a class different from the working class lies in its monopoly over the means of management, knowledge, and intellectual and cultural production. The Ehrenreichs do not conceptualize the PMC exactly in those terms, but that is the logical implication of their argument. In their view, that monopoly is the basis for the class position of the PMC as well as for its consciousness which is both hostile to the capitalist and the working class. According to their argument, the PMC is objectively interested in overthrowing the capitalist class but would keep the working class in its place. While that is probably a correct assessment of the dominant forms of technocratic consciousness in developed capitalist social formations, that is not an adequate basis for defining a class. As Marx pointed out,

> ...it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production...and the...ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out" (Marx, 1970b:21).

The problem with the Ehrenreichs' argument is that it is developed from within the dominant ideologies built around "class" (defined as socioeconomic status) differences and differences in "life styles" rather than on a thorough analysis of the "material transformation of economic conditions." The PMC is not a class but a strata within the working class. To argue that the function of a strata in the division of labor (technical and social) is an adequate ground for defining it as a class would imply that all the strata created by capitalist development at the level of social formations could also be considered as classes. Ethnic and racial minorities could argue that they too are in an "objectively antagonistic" relationship to whites, while women could put forth a similar argument vis-\205-vis men.

Looking at the issue from the standpoint of historical materialism, the main problem to be solved is that of the nature of the relationship between class structure, class struggles, and social stratification. Classes are not things, as everyone is quick to point out, but they are not simply relations either: classes are those relations which arise through relations to the means of production and have historically specific forms that vary from one mode of production to another. Within the structural limits created by class relations arise the complexity and heterogeneity of classes at the level of social formations. The crucial issue, at this level of analysis, is not that of identifying classes (for such question belongs to the level of the mode of production) but exploring a) the theoretical significance of qualitative changes in the composition of classes; and b) the political implications of those changes.

What is the nature of the process that gives rise to the "middle layers of employment"? It is a process through which

> The knowledge, the judgement, and the will, which, THOUGH IN EVER SO SMALL A DEGREE, are practiced by the independent peasant or handicraftsman...these faculties are now required only for the workshop as a whole. Intelligence in production expands in one direction, because it vanishes in many others. What is lost in the detail laborers, is concentrated in the capital that employs them.... This separation begins in simple cooperation, where the capitalist represents to the single workman, the oneness and the will of associated labor. It is developed in manufacture which cuts down the laborer into a detail laborer. It is completed in modern industry, which makes science a productive force distinct from labor and presses it into the service of capital (Marx, 1970a:361; emphasis added).

In the GRUNDRISSE (1971) Marx has analyzed this process in greater detail, thus providing insights which are crucial for developing a correct understanding of these processes under contemporary conditions which include automation as a fourth stage. Because of the constant development and revolutionizing of the forces of production, production acquires more and more a scientific character and, as this process goes on,

> ...direct labor and its quantity cease to be the determining element in production and thus in the creation of use value. It is reduced quantitatively to an indispensable but subordinate role as compared with scientific labor in general, the technological application of the natural sciences, and the general productive forces arising from the social organization of production (Marx, 1971:136).

As the forces of production develop and productivity increases, labor inputs tend to be reduced to a minimum. The relationship between labor time and value changes as well as the role of living labor in the production process:

> HE (THE WORKER) IS NO LONGER THE PRINCIPAL AGENT OF THE PRODUCTION PROCESS: he exists along side it. IN THIS TRANSFORMATION, WHAT APPEARS AS THE MAINSTAY OF PRODUCTION AND WEALTH IS neither the immediate labor performed by the worker, nor the time that he works-- but THE APPROPRIATION BY MAN OF HIS OWN GENERAL PRODUCTIVE FORCES, his understanding of nature and the mastery of it; in a word, THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIAL INDIVIDUAL (Marx, 1971:142; emphasis added).

In the course of this process of transformation capitalist contradictions assume new forms since, at the same time that the role of labor in the production of value changes, capital insists in maintaining it. Consequently,

> ...it diminishes labor time in its NECESSARY form, in order to increase its SUPERFLUOUS form; therefore it increasingly establishes superfluous labor time as a condition (a question of life and death) for necessary labor time. On the one had it calls into life all the forces of science and nature, as well as those of social co-operation and commerce, in order to create wealth which is relatively independent of the labor time utilized. On the other hand it attempts to measure, in terms of labor time, the vast social forces thus created and imprisons them within the narrow limits that are required in order to retain the value already created AS value. Productive forces and social relationships--the two different sides of the development of the social individual--appear to be, and are, only a MEANS for capital, to enable it to produce from its own cramped base. But in fact they are the material conditions that will shatter this foundation (Marx, 1971:143; emphasis in the text).

The efforts of the capitalist class to reduce necessary labor and its concomitant efforts to increase superfluous labor or, in other words, the structural effects of capitalist contradictions throughout the entire fabric of capitalist social formations results in the development of the "middle layers of employment" which are to be found in the sphere of production as well as in the context of social control institutions (e.g., army, police, corrections, mass media, academic and research establishments, etc.). Under capitalism, salaried mental workers -- whatever their rank, power, education, professionalization, etc. -- necessarily act in the service of capital and, in so doing, contribute (knowingly or unknowingly makes no difference) to the exploitation of less privileged workers. It would be, however, wrong to view such workers as a new class: with the exception of those few at the top of government and business bureaucracies who are eventually coopted into the capitalist class, the majority of this heterogeneous strata depends on their salaries for survival just as much as manual workers depend on their wages.

Marx’s analysis in the GRUNDRISSE suggests that, as capitalism develops, the role of living labor in production changes and this leads to qualitative changes in the working classes that are ultimately aimed at the development of the "social individual." This process which, under capitalism appears as the emergence of a new privileged class, is the beginning of drastic changes in the organization of production and social life which set the material conditions for the possibility of collective control in the future. The development of the forces of production which is nothing but the development of mankind’s mastery of its material and social conditions has thus negative and positive aspects. The current focus on the negative aspects is, in my view, partly a consequence of the appealing nature of current "anticapitalist" ideologies which are part and parcel of the dominant capitalist ideology that obscures the role of class relations and exploitation in creating the current state of affairs and views the development of science and technology as the evil that must be corrected. Hence the romantization of the good old days including the rejection of the more advanced forms of labor and the nostalgia for craftsmanship (which in the old days was the privilege of a few).

An interpretation of the growth of the "middle layers of employment in the light of the GRUNDRISSE would lead to the conclusion that their emergence signals the beginning of a process through which contradictions will become more acute as the socialization of production enters in greater contradiction with the relations of production. How long this process will take, it is not known. These are general tendencies of the capitalist mode of production which cannot be accurately investigated without taking into account their overdetermination in the context of specific social formations. Concretely, this means that it is misleading to draw conclusions about capitalist processes purely on the basis of the experience of a given social formation for capitalism has now become a world system and its operation must be investigated at that level.

Nicolaus (1973) in his essay "The Unknown Marx," suggests that the failure of revolution in the West might be due to prematurity: capitalism might still have a long time to go and in the meantime it is revolutionizing the production process and the agents of production in ways which do not fit with our pre- conceptions of what workers are supposed to be. In Nicolaus' view, the breakdown theory in the GRUNDRISSE would indicate that

> ...the capitalist order is not ripe for revolution until the working class--far from being reduced to the level of ragged miserable brutes--has expanded its consumption ABOVE the level of mere physical subsistence and includes the enjoyment of the fruits of surplus labor as a general necessity. Instead of the image of the starving proletarian slowly dying from an eighteen hour day in a mine or a sweatshop, Marx here presents the well-fed proletarian, scientifically competent, to whom an eight hour day would presumably appear as a waste of time (Nicolaus, 1973:329; my emphasis).

It follows that to define the middle layers of employment as a new class reifies a moment in a constant process of change involving both the capitalist and the working class: today the middle layers of employment are presenting, in the light of Nicolaus' analysis and albeit in a distorted form determined by capitalist contradictions, a glimpse into what labor will be like in the future.

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(FOOTNOTES)

FN#1) The relationship among pre-capitalist and capitalist classes vary from one social formation to another according to their position in the world-wide network of imperialist relations, their history, political, legal, ideological structures, etc. Those pre-capitalist classes (e.g., petty bourgeoisie, feudal and semifeudal relations of production) cannot be considered "residual" as the Ehrenreichs suggest, because their presence is the outcome of specific processes of capitalist development and has a concrete political and economic significance which can be established in each case.

FN#2) For a clarification of the concepts, "mode of production," "social formation," "relations of production," etc., the reader is advised to consult Marx, 1968; 1970a; 1970b; Engels, 1959:395-412; Althusser and Balibar, 1970; Althusser, 1970:89-129; and Luporini, et al., 1970.

FN#3) For an excellent discussion on empiricism and its pitfalls, see Althusser and Balibar, 1970; Althusser, 1970. Scientific concepts are not produced "...exactly as the general concept of fruit 'should be' produced by an abstraction acting on concrete fruits... the act of ABSTRACTION whereby the pure essence is extracted from concrete individuals is an IDEOLOGICAL MYTH" (Althusser, 1970:190-191).

FN#4) For a very interesting and thought-provoking discussion on these issues, see Al Szymanski, "Braverman as a Neo-Luddite? A Critique of the Uses of LABOR AND MONOPOLY CAPITAL" (1977, unpublished manuscript).