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Future of the Left

A brief history and theory of the Professional Managerial Class

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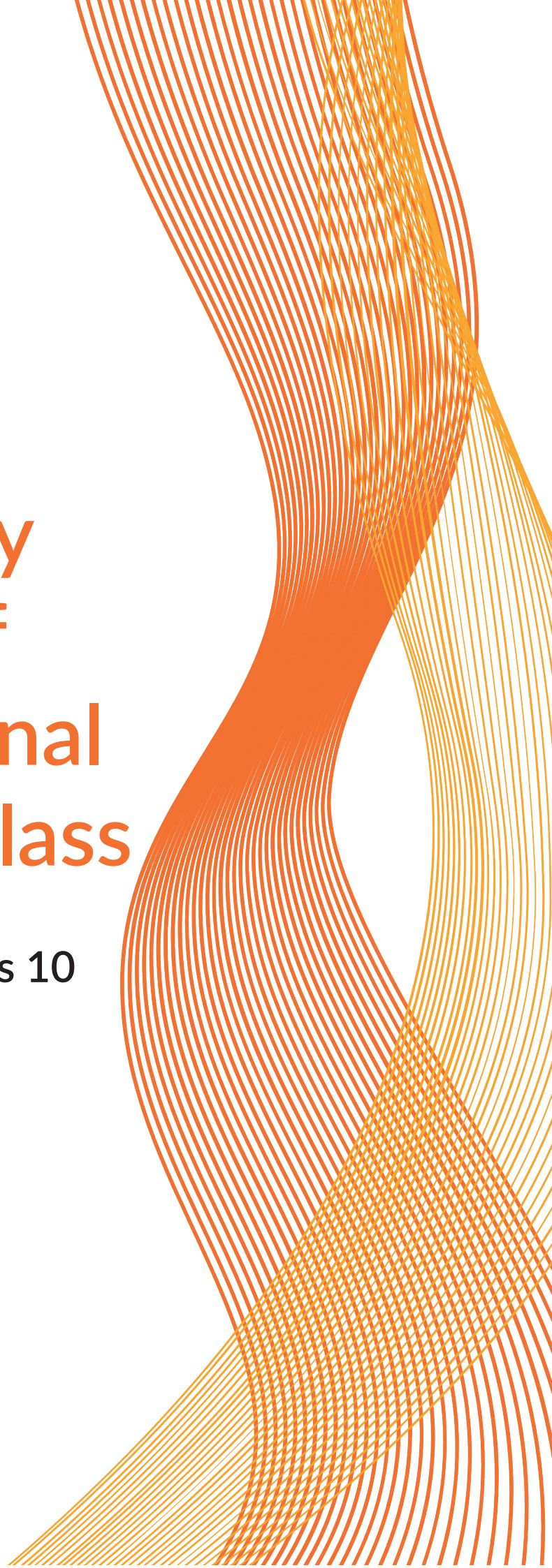

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Future of the Left at Policy Exchange

Britain finds itself outside the protective umbrella of Empire and EU and politically and militarily vulnerable. At home managerial and judicial forms of government, the steady attrition of the British state, high levels of immigration, and falling living standards, have led to widespread voter disaffection and a renewed and disruptive intensity of anti-elite, democratic politics.

There can be no durable national security, nor economic growth that rebuilds the national economy, without also reducing social disaffection, restoring popular trust in our democratic institutions, and winning much broader popular consent for a Labour government.

To achieve this means not simply devising good policy but confronting the existential collapse of the intellectual life of the left, its cultural impoverishment, and its detachment from large parts of the country.

The Future of the Left was set up in August 2024 at Policy Exchange to develop a politics capable of recognising and fully responding to the new political era in order to undertake the internal rebuilding of the nation.

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A brief history and theory of the Professional Managerial Class

To make sense of our political conjuncture and the fate of the Labour Party, we need to make sense of what became known as the Professional Managerial Class and its historical trajectory over the last 60 years.

The Sixties

In 1968 the literary critic Diana Trilling, reported from the frontline of America's culture war. Her husband, Lionel Trilling lectured at Columbia University in New York City which had become the epicentre of student protest. In April of that year, students, largely the sons and daughters of the ruling elite, had occupied the Low Library and two teaching buildings. An acting Dean and two college administrators were held hostage. Wives of the faculty stayed behind bolted doors. 'No-one could sleep', she wrote, for fear of the 'tramp or rush or scuffle of invasion.'[1]

Four months later Chicago's police force attacked tens of thousands of student radicals outside the Democratic National Convention which was being held in Chicago. Liberal opinion was outraged. Editors of all the major newspapers telegrammed a strong protest to Richard Daley, the Chicago mayor. But they had misread the mood in the country. Polling taken after the Convention showed 56 per cent of the public supported the police. Media leaders shifted their attention from militant minorities to the new unknown factor in US politics - the so-called silent majority.[2] The following year this silent majority, heavily populated by Blue Collar voters, elected Republican, Richard Nixon as President. He had previously lost to JF Kennedy in 1962.

Nixon set up a Commission on Campus Unrest and in 1970 it published its findings.[3] The 'first great issue' of the student protests was the position of Black people, which it recognised as the central social and political problem of American society (p57-58). But it did not believe that the causes of campus unrest were solely reducible to American racism or to the Vietnam War, which had begun in 1955. The Commission sought to understand the student protests in a wider sociological context. There were causes of the unrest that lay deep 'in the social and economic patterns that have been building in Western industrial society for a hundred years or more' (p87).

The Commission identified a new kind of culture whose principle was the liberation of the individual to express whatever 'his unique humanity prompted' (p62). It was a culture, the report stated, that

valued authenticity and rejected externally imposed discipline in favour of revelation, sensation and individual autonomy. Searching for antecedents, the Commission likened the student activists to the Bacchic culture of Ancient Greece and the Wandervoegel of turn of the century Germany. It saw in their intolerance, sanctimony and contempt of those who did not share their views, a similarity to historical movements of religious awakening.

The Emergence of a New Class?

Similar student unrest had taken place across the West, notably in France in 1968, and a number of sociologists were trying to make sense of this new period in history. In *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1974), Daniel Bell described how the change from a goods producing to a service economy involved the growing pre-eminence of a professional and technical class whose resources were theoretical knowledge and 'intellectual technology' (p14).[4] The old property bound social relations were eroding, and the power structures centred on narrow elites, weakened. The student revolt was a new adversary culture reacting against the old bourgeois culture of delayed gratification and emotional restraint (p37). Western society, wrote Bell, was in the midst of 'vast historical change'.

Alvin Gouldner, in *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (1979), similarly describes a new cultural bourgeois whose members share the same knowledge-based relationship to the means of production.[6] It is part of the ruling class formation, dominant over the working class, but subordinate to, what Gouldner calls, 'the old moneyed class'. Because this New Class is largely made up of the brothers, sisters, or children of the moneyed class, the student revolt appears to be a 'civil war within the upper classes' (p18).

In a later book, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1978), Bell, recognises the emergence of a new kind of bourgeois culture whose principle is the remaking of the self in pursuit of self-realisation. 'In its search' he writes, 'there is a denial of any limits or boundaries to experience' (p13-14). A counter-culture emerged that rejected the work ethic, bourgeois authority, formality and manners. The normative structure of the family was overturned in numerous experiments in living and child-raising. 'Turn On, Tune In, and Drop Out' was the advice to youth of the guru of psychedelia, Timothy Leary.

A cultural revolution was loosening the individual from the traditional restraints and ties of family and birth that were once central to capitalism and the production of commodities. What counted in terms of moral and cultural judgment were no longer objective standards of quality and value, but the individual's subjective judgment, feelings and sentiments. It was, wrote Bell, the end of the old bourgeois idea which has 'molded the modern era for the last 200 years' (p7).

A Brief History of an Idea

Following the French Revolution of 1789, the socialist Henri Saint-Simon predicted that authority in a future society would depend upon those who possessed expert skills based on 'positive' knowledge'. The Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin warned against what he called 'the New Class' of intellectuals, managers and bureaucrats who would replace the old ruling class.

Karl Marx dismissed such ideas, reducing capitalist development to a central conflict of capital and labour from which all other social categories are excluded. However in Capital Volume 1, he introduces the idea of the 'labour of superintendence'. To expand the scale of production, a capitalist must hand over the work of direct and constant supervision of workers to 'a special kind of wage-labourer' (p231-232). [4] In Volume 3, he recognises that capitalism is creating a separation of ownership from management in the structure of the corporation. The mode of production has reached a point where it is no longer necessary for the capitalist to perform the work of supervisor. The role is similar to an orchestra conductor who, 'need not own the instruments of his orchestra, nor does his function require him' to 'have anything to do with the "wages" of the other musicians' (p245).[5]

The rise of clerical and professional salaried employees was to be a central preoccupation of post-Marxist debate. In inter-war Germany, Marxists unwilling to give up the binary struggle of capital and labour argued they were a 'white-collar proletariat' that would lead the new middle classes to adopt working class attitudes. The sociologist Max Weber dismissed this reductive view. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-05 and English translation in 1930) he predicts the rise of bureaucracy, a rationalised form of administration by trained professionals which would turn society into 'an iron cage' of 'specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart'. (p182). He was more astute than the Marxists. When the centre and liberal parties collapsed in 1933 and with them the Weimar Republic, the disparate groups of the new middle class went across to the Nazis.

James Burnham, the American political theorist echoed Weber in *The Managerial Revolution What is Happening in the World* (1941). He foresaw a future in which those who control the means of production– business executives, technicians, bureaucrats and soldiers - will be the rulers of society. 'Ownership means control', he wrote, and the managerial revolution is the long process whereby managerial control effectively becomes ownership. The old monied class would be eliminated, the working class crushed and power and economic privilege would be concentrated in a small elite.

The English version of this class was described by George Orwell in his review of Burnham's book. They were not managers in the narrow sense, but scientists, teachers, journalists, broadcasters, bureaucrats and professional politicians, cramped by a still partly aristocratic system and hungry for more power and prestige (p389-90).[6] Much later, the

German-British sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf described 'the service class' of a 'post-capitalist society'.[7] Sociologist, C.Wright Mills reflected the earlier debates in Germany, with his idea of 'white-collar workers' who, 'can only derive their strength from 'business' or from 'labor''.[8]

The debate was given impetus by the student revolts and the rise of a New Left in the Sixties. Daniel Bell rejected Burnham's analysis. Societies were not organised, nor could they be analysed, as a single coherent system (p112, 1974). What Burnham identified as a transition from bourgeois capitalism to managerialism, Bell argued, was a contradiction between the culture becoming increasingly anti-institutional and antinomian and the social structure being increasingly governed by functional rationality and meritocracy (p114-115). The central axial institution of private property was being replaced by theoretical knowledge (p115). Culture not technology had become a source of change in society.

A Theory of the New Class

But what defines the New Class? In his book, Gouldner outlines a theoretical approach. Its privileges and powers are grounded in 'special cultures, languages, techniques, and the skills resulting from these' (p19). Its control is articulated through a 'distinctive language behaviour'(p5). Gouldner calls for a new political economy of culture (p21) and describes what he calls, a 'culture of critical discourse' (CCD). Secondly, but with less resolve and more vaguely, he argues for a general theory of capital within which the 'human capital' of the new class or the old class's moneyed capital will be special cases' (p5).

The culture of critical discourse (CCD) is the distinguishing feature of the New Class and the means by which it asserts its class power (p28). Drawing on the work of the British sociologist, Basil Bernstein, Gouldner defines CCD as a form of 'reflexive speech' that uses 'elaborated linguistic codes'. Bernstein argues that this kind of speech is how the class system acts on the deep structure of communication which gives middle class children an advantage over their working class peers in the process of socialisation. [9]

He defines CCD as a relatively situation-free discourse which lends itself to a cosmopolitanism that distances persons from local cultures. It creates an alienation from all particularistic, history-bound places and from ordinary, everyday life. The relationship between those who speak CCD and others about whom they speak, is treated as a relationship between judges and judged (p.59). Its claim to universalism asserts 'the right to sit in judgment over the actions and claims of any social class and all power elites' (p59).

Even the most powerful group are to be judged no differently than the lowest and most illiterate. Traditional authority is stripped of its ability to define social reality and, with this, to authorise its own legitimacy. The old moneyed class is transformed into a privileged but functionless status group – pensioners living off their profits, rents and interest.

The New Class is paradoxical. It is 'both emancipatory and elitist. It subverts all establishments, social limits, and privileges, including its own'(p85). It revolts against tradition and established forms of domination, while also forming the elite of a new form of cultural capital which bears the seeds of a new domination (p83 & p85). It is willing to be egalitarian as far as the privileges of the old class are concerned, but it is anti-egalitarian on the basis of its own political powers and incomes derived from its cultural capital.

The Rise of Progressive Politics

In 1977, in two essays in consecutive issues of *Radical America*, Barbara and John Ehrenreich renamed the New Class the Professional Managerial Class. In the March-April issue, they drew on E.P.Thompson's understanding of class as an historical relationship, 'embodied in real people and in a real context'(p11). In this sense, they argued, the PMC constitutes a new class whose function 'is the reproduction of capitalist culture and class relations' (p13). While it is in service to the moneyed class, its relationship to the working class is antagonistic. The interests of the two classes are not merely different, they are mutually contradictory (p17). The relationship of 'teacher and student (or parents), manager and worker, social worker and client, are a mix of hostility and deference on the part of working-class people, contempt and paternalism on the part of the PMC (p18).[10]

The class interests of the PMC lie in the overthrow of the moneyed class, but not in the triumph of the working class. It is divided in itself by its own elitism and anti-capitalist militancy. This ambivalence goes to the heart of the New Left of the 1960s, which was both of the PMC and against it. It formed a counter elite. Torn by guilt and embarrassment at its privilege, it turned on the bourgeois culture it had inherited. The ambivalence was soon to find its way into mainstream politics to be consolidated in a ruling ideology.

In 1982, Randal Rothenberg, writing in *Esquire*, identified a group of young Democrats who described themselves as progressive liberals or "neo-liberals".[11] They included Gary Hart, Bill Clinton, Al Gore and Michael Dukakis, as well as thinkers such as Robert Reich. With their paradoxical 'Third Way' mix of free-market individualism, social liberalism and concern for social justice the 'New Democrats' would fundamentally alter the centre-left in America, Britain, and across the capitalist democracies. They took on domestic violence, homophobia, discrimination against the disabled, and sexual harassment. They jettisoned many racially and culturally authoritarian traditions. In a demonstration of the economic interests of their class, they also abandoned the 19th century progressive tradition of populist economic democracy. In doing so, Matt Stoller has argued, they 'cleared the way for the greatest concentration of power in a century'.[12]

The election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 followed by Ronald Reagan in 1980, inaugurated a new historic stage of capitalism,

establishing a new consensus around liberal market values and a free market economy. Thatcher unwittingly laid the foundation of the progressive future. By unleashing markets she shattered the social institutions, traditions, mores and values that had bound individuals into the kind of shared national culture and society she valued. She described her greatest achievement as Tony Blair and New Labour, because, 'we have forced our opponents to change their minds.' In fact the progressivism of New Labour proved to be the nemesis of the England she held dear.

The sociologist Anthony Giddens writing a decade later described Britain as experiencing an 'acceleration of modernity'. Everyday life was being continuously transformed into what he called a 'post-traditional order.' [13] The politics of gender, race and sexuality were displacing the politics of class. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck described a process of individualisation as the institutional, communal and economic relations that once held individuals in collective forms of identity broke down. A new kind of 'capitalism without class' was freeing individuals from the constraints of the old order.[14]

Philip Gould, an architect of New Labour, announced 'an age of permanent revolution.'[15] A generation of British Labour politicians led by Tony Blair were learning their craft from the progressive politics of the New Democrats. Over the following decades, the ideology of progressivism, a mixture of social liberalism, social justice and liberal economics would play a central role in the globalisation of the world economy and the transformation of the cultures and societies of the West. The industrial working class, dispossessed of its skilled work, lost its political power. The centre-left parties, over which its collectivist politics once held sway, increasingly adopted the progressive politics and priorities of the PMC.

In 1996 the social theorist, Christopher Lasch issued a prescient warning about this trend. The progressive politics of the new elite and its world of "limitless possibility" was threatening the social order and the civilising traditions of Western culture.[16]

The Hegemony of Progressive Politics

When New Labour won the 1997 General Election, the Professional Managerial Class came to political power. Its political economy was organised around its belief in an emerging knowledge economy which the new government believed would be the route to national success and prosperity. Education was to be turned into a services market in which the social provision of a public good would give way to a private transaction between customer and provider. Universities would be transformed by the market from unproductive consumers of public money into the hubs of economic competitiveness and regional development, generating clusters of new spin-offs. Globalisation would turn the most prestigious, efficient and productive into international learning businesses. What counted

was an individual's choice to invest in his/her own human capital of education and skills in order to maximise his/her utility. [17]

Two years later in his party conference speech, Tony Blair set a target of 50 per cent of young people going to university. New Labour's progressive belief in a knowledge revolution was captured in the 2000 Lisbon Treaty's strategic goal for Europe: 'to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world'. The expansion of Higher Education was central to a European future that belonged to an ever-expanding class of knowledge workers and 'symbolic analysts' whose economic asset was cultural meaning making and the 'life of the mind'.[18]

Under the New Labour government, the PMC consolidated its class power through the de-politicising of politics. Political conflict and controversies were being removed from democratic deliberation into the realm of administrative and judicial decision making. A managerial politics viewed reform as a technocratic exercise, the prerogative of state administration rather than collective human agency. The growth of an unaccountable system of quangos, and privatised government services and bodies compromised the ability of government to exercise decision-making and state action. Progressive values were embedded in the professions, in the Civil Service, in universities and cultural institutions and in the State Apparatus. The PMC secured its personal careers and ideological power in what Christopher Lasch called a 'circulating elite'.[19]

Over the following 25 years a bi-partisan consensus led by the 'Blairites' and 'Cameroons' governed the country, committed to the EU, valorising change, extending market forces into society, promoting large scale immigration, ceding power and authority to global corporations and supranational institutions, and reifying individualism, the mobile and those who uprooted themselves in the name of aspiration.

The End of the Progressive Era

In 2019, New Labour's target of 50 per cent of young people attending university was achieved. By this time, the vision of a knowledge economy serviced by an increasingly prosperous class of creative and symbolic workers had dissolved. Academic success did not automatically translate into opportunity and stable employment. A large number of graduates found themselves working in non-graduate jobs, renting insecure housing, and carrying the burden of an increasingly ageing, asset rich, older generation. For many, the financial premium of a university education had collapsed and their upward mobility into the PMC had been blocked. The writer Mark Fisher popularised the idea of 'hauntology' to describe the loss of the futures they had anticipated.[20]

The loss galvanised a younger generation into political activism, which in Britain found expression in support for Jeremy Corbyn and more recently the Green Party. The PMC had established its political hegemony through its command of language and culture and this activism was concentrated in the social and cultural spheres

of identity, language and symbolic meaning. The sense of a religious awakening identified by the Presidents Commission in1970, had re-emerged in the US around 2010 in the form of 'Woke', a kind of secular religion. The idea of progressive self-realisation is a derivative of Christian eschatology and has been central to all revolutionary elites from the Jacobins of the French Revolution, to the Russian nihilists and Bolsheviks of the 19th and 20th Centuries. It had appeared amongst the young revolutionaries of the student revolt in the Sixties and was now once again exported by the cultural imperialism of the United States to provincial Western elites, particularly in Britain.

The rise of identity politics in both the PMC and amongst young graduates blocked from joining it, coincided with the decline of class-based politics and the search for a new teleology that would re-invigorate progressive politics with radical meaning and purpose. An Americanised, absolutist politics of race with its emphasis on an ahistorical and universalist understanding of white supremacy replaced class as the historical determinant of social and historical relations. Populist moral energy and economic insecurity propelled Jeremy Corbyn into the leadership of the Labour Party in 2015, and it gave impetus to the PMCs support for Black Lives Matter and the anti-Zionist coalition with home-grown Islamism. It continues unabated in the faltering efforts to start up the new 'Your Party', and the growing popularity of the Green Party under its new leader Zack Polanski.

This is the politics of a counter-elite, aspirants to the PMC who are denied access to the increasingly limited amount of secure and stable work with its promise of a middle-class way of life. In common with the petit bourgeois, there is the fear of falling into the precarious life of the proletariat. Such a counter-elite creates social instability and an intra-elite competition. This has been the driving force behind the culture wars contesting interpretations of British history, national identity, biology, sexuality and racial injustice. The introduction of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in public sector organisations and businesses has helped to institutionalise this intra-elite competition for class power in the administrative apparatus.

The hegemony of the PMC, and so of the ruling establishment, had been severely dented by the 2008 financial crash and the punishing austerity which followed. The growing strength of national populism amongst the working and lower middle classes was the blowback from the progressive politics, values and policy choices of the PMC. While it retained its dominance in the cultural institutions, its defeat in the 2016 EU Referendum brought its political hegemony to an end.

The class prejudice and cosmopolitanism of the PMC, intensified by the moralising of woke, left it contemptuous and often hostile to those who had lost out from globalisation. Withdrawn into the political heartlands of the prosperous, globally connected cities and university towns, insulated from the lives of mainstream working-class voters, the PMC was indifferent to the vanishing of an old

country, and could not conceive that grief could be a collective experience of loss, dismissing it as backwardness and nostalgia.

Over a sixty-year period, the PMC has played a critical role in the unravelling of social norms, traditions and old ways of life. The England that it emerged into has irretrievably gone and it has evolved no alternative. As Marx described the 19th Century bourgeois, so too this cultural bourgeois, having emerged with such drama in the Sixties, has sought to revolutionise the whole relations of society, and sweep away all 'ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions'.[21] It has bequeathed to its younger generation a declining country, divided by deep class and regional inequalities and ethnic conflict, and a society fallen into a state of social anomie.

It is now the victim of its own revolutionary impulses as its functions within the capitalist economy begin to fall into redundancy. The advent of AI will only accelerate the trend. In 1978 Gouldner, in his Hegelian longing, had imagined the New Class to be a 'flawed but universal class'. He believed it would become, 'the centre of whatever human emancipation is possible in the foreseeable future'(p83). But it has proved itself neither universal, nor capable of incorporating the interests of other classes. Caught between capital and labour, in conflict with the economic elite but defending its own privileges, ambiguous about the working class as part ally and part object of subjugation, it has never resolved this historic ambivalence.

Aftermath

Julius Krein, the editor of *American Affairs*, summarised the predicament of the PMC. It 'has no self-imposed ideological limitations on its power. Its status as a class is untethered from any social contract except one: as long as the managerial elite is competent enough to increase material consumption, its legitimacy is secure.'[22] The Labour government has failed to secure this legitimacy. Unable to achieve popular consent to govern, it is exposed for what it has become, a progressive party of a faltering class power that has lost its political hegemony. The future of progressive ideology is only now through the political domination of a progressive alliance with the Green Party and Liberal Democrats. Such a government, ruling from the public sector economy and areas of prosperity, responding to the falling living standards of the PMC, will only deepen class division and lead to civil unrest and ungovernability.

What then comes next? The two legacy parties that dominated the politics of the 20th Century, intellectually threadbare and disorientated, cannot ask themselves this question. The Labour government solid in its majority, precarious in its hold on power, is a bystander of events that fling and batter it like a storm. Its leadership does not know what it is doing, and does not know what to do. Like the broader left, it does not know itself and cannot reflect on the part its progressive politics has played in the national malaise. Without this understanding, it cannot begin the nation building

politics required. Instead, faced with popular hostility, it wavers, ready to retreat into a more uncompromising progressivism.

Gouldner asks a pertinent question in his book. 'How did Marx and Engels account for themselves in their apparent capacity to break free of bourgeois ideology and so lead the class struggle of the revolutionary proletariat?' What privileged them with their omniscient view of social relations that they claimed as an objective truth? They could not ask themselves this question, because the answer would reveal them as cultural bourgeois of the incipient New Class. With this question Gouldner concludes: 'Marxism has here abruptly reached the limits of its self-understanding' (p58). So too has the Labour Party, the political establishment and the class that controls them.

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