Destroyed by the dialectic

Politics, the decline of Marxism, and the new middle strata in France

GEORGE ROSS
Department of Sociology, Brandeis University; Harvard University Center for European Studies

In the early twentieth-century new middle-class groups broke into the vision of social science wearing masks and costumes. Nearly a century later, ever more important in social processes, they are still largely inscrutable.¹ In the sociological literature these strata have been called everything and its opposite – professional and managerial revolutionaries, the core of the “technostructure,” new corporatistic egotists, a new class, labor aristocrats, new workers, new “petit bourgeois,” new bourgeois, denizens of “contradictory class locations,” parts of the collective laborer, non-productive workers, the social cement of democracy, basic threats to democracy ... and we could go on....² We suspect, in fact, that the variable geometry of the new middle classes in sociological discussion has as much to do with the desires of sociologists to act on the social world as to explain it.³

French analysts, when writing about new middle strata in recent times, have both responded to preexisting sociopolitical perceptions about such strata and, through their writings, tried to influence such perceptions. Such considerations may begin to account for the fact that passionate debate in France about the very same people changed in dramatic ways between the earlier 1970s and the contemporary period beginning in the later 1970s. In the earlier period, reviewed below, debate was dominated by a Marxist vocabulary positing underlying “objective” social boundaries flowing from fundamental economic structures. Dispute was about classifying new middle strata groups with reference to such objective factors and then delineating their behavioral characteristics. In the later period, examined in the second section below, Marxist vocabulary virtu-
ally disappeared. In its place emerged an approach that downplayed group derivation from "objective" social boundaries, to focus instead on the formation/definition of social collectivities through intergroup struggle. The last section proposes the beginning of an explanation, through the sociology of intellectuals, for these dramatic changes.

The new middle strata in modern France: the Marxist period

France was long known, for good cause, as a society where traditional middle strata were particularly important. Marx's stress on the centrality of small-holding peasants in the 18th Brumaire and persistent discussions of la boutique — France's large and long-lived commercial and artisanal petite bourgeoisie — attest to such notoriety. As industrialism progressed in the Third Republic, these two groups, with liberal professionals and state workers such as teachers, were essential constituencies. That the Third Republic was a "stalemate society" was due in large part to the effects of political alliances necessary for conciliating these groups. In many ways these various middle groups shaped French politics until the Great Depression, providing the coalitional glue for centrist Republicanism after the Dreyfus affair. Perpetuating this involved economic development that did not unduly threaten the positions of the old middle strata. Industrialization also had to be limited and structured to keep workers politically ghettoized.

Such prerequisites were extremely precarious. France could not hide forever behind empire and trade protection, with an inefficient petite bourgeoisie and peasantry, a bloated state apparatus and an isolated, socially unrecognized proletariat. The 1930s — the Great Depression, the Popular Front, and international tensions — began the undoing of the middle-class core of Third Republic politics. Traditional middle class groups felt the thrust of economic change in ways that pushed them Rightwards. Teachers and civil servants simultaneously began leaning more and more Leftwards.

The second installment of change came with post-1950 economic modernization. Some statistics are useful to appreciate the magnitude of what happened to French society in the great post-war boom. In 1946, one third of the French labor force was in agriculture, by 1975 only 9 percent was. During the same period the traditional petite bourgeoisie — the boutique of independent merchants — were reduced numerically by nearly 25 percent, artisans by nearly 33 percent. Even more signifi-