The Lumpenproletariat as the Criminal Class?¹

Probably the simplest way of producing a criminological theory from Marx’s writings is to take his account of the lumpenproletariat as, at least amongst other things, an account of a group of people in society many of whom are criminals. In this chapter I shall give a brief account of Marx’s theory of the lumpenproletariat, but will then argue that it fails to produce an account of a coherent social group. I shall then argue that Marx uses the concept as a way of vilifying the part of the proletariat which supported Louis Napoleon Bonaparte on the one hand and vilifying and trivializing Bonaparte himself on the other. Finally I shall point out that there is a considerable similarity in both definition and function between Marx’s view of the lumpenproletariat and Charles Murray’s contemporary theory of the underclass.

The account of the lumpenproletariat which follows is not original, but is needed to make subsequent discussion clear.² Although possibly presaged in Engels’s account of the Irish immigrants in The Condition of the Working Class in England, the lumpenproletariat make their initial appearance in the Communist Manifesto:

The ‘dangerous class’, the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.³

Mobile Guards, each a thousand strong, composed of young men from fifteen to twenty years old. They belonged for the most part to the lumpenproletariat, which in all big towns forms a mass sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat, a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds living on the crumbs of society,
people without a definite trade, vagabonds, *gens sans feu et sans aveu* [men without hearth or home], varying according to the degree of civilisation of the nation to which they belong, but never renouncing their lazzaroni character – at the youthful age at which the Provisional Government recruited them, thoroughly malleable, as capable of the most heroic deeds and the most exalted sacrifices as of the basest banditry and the foulest corruption.⁴

From the aristocracy there were bankrupted roués of doubtful means and dubious provenance, from the bourgeoisie there were degenerate wastrels on the take, vagabonds, demobbed soldiers, discharged convicts, runaway galley slaves, swindlers and cheats, thugs, pickpockets, conjurers, card-sharps, pimps, brothel-keepers, porters, day-labourers, organ grinders, scrap dealers, knife grinders, tinkers and beggars, in short the whole amorphous, jumbled mass of flotsam and jetsam that the French term bohemian...⁵

To summarize what emerges from these lively definitions, the lumpen-proletariat is (i) apparently, a tightened-up version of the common ideas of the time about the ‘dangerous classes’; although the proletariat itself tended to be identified in the terms reserved by Marx and Engels for the lumpenproletariat before socialists including Marx and Engels managed to revise common meanings;⁶ (ii) people drawn from both precapitalist and capitalist social formations but who had left or been evicted from their previous social class; (iii) people who do not accept the idea of making their living by regular work; (iv) a source of criminals; (v) importantly, for Marx, comprised of people who are liable to be tempted by illicit pickings into the service of the right, particularly of the finance aristocracy, who share the approach to life and morality of the lumpenproletariat.

Anyone not totally degenerate would hate to be identified as a lumpenproletarian, which leads on to the use Marx makes of the concept. One way the concept functions is to dissociate the proletariat from supporting the bourgeoisie or Bonaparte: the Mobile Guards are lumpenproletarians, not proletarians;⁷ proletarian support for the regime is actually lumpen elements; the members of the Society of 10 December are lumpenproletarians.⁸ The other is to use the disreputable lumpenproletariat to impugn first the finance aristocracy:

The finance aristocracy, in its mode of acquisition as well as in its pleasures, is nothing but the rebirth of the lumpenproletariat on the heights of bourgeois society... in 1847, on the most prominent stages