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Vampires, grave-diggers and the new petty bourgeoisie

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Margaret Thatcher regarded it as a 'communist concept' but class has returned to the public agenda with both media interest and academic inquiry. Evans brings a new take to an old debate about the boundary between the petty bourgeoisie and the working-class and its implications for theory and practice. This review examines his argument that the petty bourgeoisie is bigger and more important than generally understood and has a key role to play in the likelihood of radical social change.

Class; petty bourgeoisie; working-class; Marxism

Dan Evans *A Nation of Shopkeepers: The Unstoppable Rise of the Petty Bourgeoisie*, London: Repeater, 2023, 325 pp (without index): ISBN 9781913462697, UK £12.99, US\$16.95, CAN \$22.95

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Class still matters in Britain, despite decades of academics and politicians of various stripes insisting it is a fiction, an historical relic from the 'dark satanic mills' of the early Industrial Revolution or just increasingly irrelevant - see for example Giddens (1990, 1991) and most memorably Beck's declaration that class is a 'zombie category' (2004: 51-52). The latest British Social Attitudes Survey (Heath and Bennett 2023) shows little difference from 40 years ago in the propensity of British adults to identify as either middle or working-class. The BSAS also recorded a sharp increase in the proportion of people who perceive that there are class barriers to occupational mobility, with those identifying as working-class much more likely to say movement between classes is 'very difficult'. On the other hand, Keir Starmer, the leader of the UK Labour party, illustrated the problems that the political elite have with the concept in his bumbling and incoherent response to a request to define 'working-class' in a radio interview (LBC, 2023).

So Evans's book is not only timely but a refreshing take on the class structure of Britain. It is a very personal, passionate and provocative argument for the central importance of class and understanding the role of the 'intermediate' layers in society. This thought-provoking 'crossover' book is unusual in that it is aimed at a popular audience and treats its readers as intelligent people who can be trusted to understand and engage with sometimes complex ideas about social structure and change.

It is lively, interesting and well written. It raises more questions than answers but, in that, it fits well with Marx's favourite motto: *de omnibus dubitandum* (question everything). By placing class at the centre of his analysis, Evans points the way to understanding society as the first step to changing it.

The objective of the book is to 're-introduce the petty bourgeoisie into modern political discourse' and by doing so, show how class works in everyday life and help people understand the divide between the

Left and the working-class. Evans outlines, interrogates and critiques a range of concepts and ideas – some more successfully than others - in order to build his case.

He introduces some of the main concepts, reviewing some of the past contributions to the debate before sketching out a history of the petty bourgeoisie, its political volatility and its place in the development of capitalism to date. He then profiles the traditional petty bourgeoisie today and how, rather than having shrunk, it has grown. In perhaps the most important chapter, he sets out what he sees as the new petty bourgeoisie, explaining why it is not part of the working-class. He then relates how education has helped create the petty bourgeoisie and the role of housing and landlordism in sustaining it. The final chapter emphasises its political importance and why a class alliance between it and the working-class is essential for the radical transformation of society.

He begins by arguing that Marx and Engels got it wrong with their Communist Manifesto prediction that the petty bourgeoisie would gradually sink into the proletariat. Although Marx and Engels qualified this on many occasions - not least in the Manifesto itself with the observation that there was 'a new class of petty bourgeois... ever renewing itself as a supplementary part of bourgeois society' (1848/1977: 80), Evans uses this as a hook upon which to hang his critique of the simplicities of the 'We are the 99%' approach of the Occupy movement and others. It is a slightly odd hook to hang his argument on as, despite repeating his criticism of Marx several times, he later relates how 'Marx emphatically did not posit a dualist class structure polarized neatly between a working-class and the bourgeoisie.' This apparent contradiction between the Marx of 1848 and later - despite the caveats Marx made in the Manifesto - is explained by reference to Nicolaus's (1978) observation that there is a difference between the young Marx's political polemics when he was involved in revolutionary activity and the more reflective, economic writings of the older Marx. This is like a variation of the old jibe variously attributed to Clemenceau, Churchill and others that 'if you're not a socialist at twenty, you have no heart, and if you're not a conservative at forty, you have no brain.' Marx was an active revolutionary for all his adult life and during the period that he was writing *Capital* he was also the decisive figure in the International Working Men's Association (or First International) of socialists, anarchists and trade unionists which existed 1864-76 and for which Marx wrote all of the key documents.

Early on Evans knocks down the straw man of 'the working-class is everyone that works' and then attacks the related idea that class is 'narrowly oriented' to ownership of the means of production: class is more complex; not about how much you earn; not identity nor cultural preferences. Rather it is relational and an economic, social, political and cultural phenomenon.

In challenging the 'proletarianization thesis' (that is, the notion that the petty bourgeoisie would gradually be pushed into the proletariat by large capital squeezing out small capital), he argues that the importance, size and resilience of the petty bourgeoisie has been underestimated and that it constitutes about a third of the population.

The 'boundary debate' about where to draw the line between the working-class and the petty bourgeoisie is not new. What Lockwood (1995) identified as 'the problematic of the proletariat' has occupied many Marxist and non-Marxist analysts for decades. Burawoy (2020: 471) went so far as to argue that the rise of the 'middle classes' 'was the most common criticism sociology levelled against Marxism'.

In his engagement with the debate, Evans acknowledges his debt to two theoretical approaches developed in the 1970s – that of Poulantzas (1974) whose ideas about the new petty bourgeoisie were part of the debates within the French Communist Party and the Ehrenreichs (1977) on the professional-managerial class (PMC) in the US. He adopts and adapts Poulantzas's model of a petty bourgeoisie divided into two: a traditional petty bourgeoisie and the new. For Evans, the solo self-employed constitute the first category and he argues it has grown massively.

His position on the traditional petty bourgeoisie is relatively straightforward: the solo self-employed own their own means of production and this distinguishes them from the working-class. But maybe it's not quite so simple. Some would place small business owners (not just solo self-employed or family groups) in the petty bourgeoisie. After all there are considerable differences between this group and the bourgeoisie proper, and it's not clear where he places the self-employed who have employees. For another thing, the self-employed is an extremely heterogeneous group ranging from accountants to plumbers to domestic cleaners. He mentions construction as the field where solo self-employment is most prominent but treats it as an example of subcontracting from big capital to small capital. By contrast, Unite the union (2023) points out that construction is rife with bogus self-employment and that this is increasing and roughly measurable by the numbers of workers (over a million) paid under the Construction Industry Scheme in which workers are taxed at source. Unite claims that most of these workers should legally be directly employed. By defining these workers as self-employed, employers are not required to pay employers' national insurance contributions of 13.8% and the workers are not entitled to basic employment rights so that they can be summarily dismissed and do not qualify for holiday or sick pay. Obviously this has major advantages for construction employers. Unite point out that the numbers of self-employed in construction have increased without any increase in employment in the industry.

In addition, there is almost certainly a growing number of workers on bogus self-employment arrangements in a variety of other services like hairdressing in which they are effectively captive employees of one employer but without any of the rights or benefits of employees.

Evans argues that the petty bourgeoisie includes 1.1 million workers in the gig economy, with its widespread incidence of bogus self-employment as an employer ruse to avoid paying for various benefits such as annual leave, sick pay and pensions. He cites the successful union-led legal campaign of Uber drivers to be reclassified as workers (there was also a successful legal case taken by the small Independent Workers' union of Great Britain, IWGB, against City Sprint). He outlines some rather thin arguments that he says could be deployed to argue that gig workers are working-class – they are low paid and are in unions (most of them are not in unions anyway) – before rejecting them and concluding that gig workers operate in a grey area between the petty bourgeoisie and the working-class. He says that class is 'about your social relationship at work and ownership of the means of production' but his reasoning for placing gig workers in the petty bourgeoisie rests on an unconvincing mix of isolated work, individualism and competition. It's a novel idea that working on your own is a class distinction (rather than a barrier to organization) and neither individualism nor competition are absent from parts of the 'traditional' working-class. He then argues that it's a red herring to argue that gig workers are 'technically' working-class anyway, and takes the argument off to a different one about what the gig economy tells us about capitalism more generally.

He seems to undermine his own argument of the distinctiveness of the traditional petty bourgeoisie by conceding that the modern self-employed no longer control their own labour despite owning some

means of production and that changes have made it harder to speak of a distinct petty bourgeois habitus.

The new petty bourgeoisie is even more tricky. Like the working-class they are obliged to work to live, don't own the means of production and lack autonomy at work. Yet he follows Poulantzas in placing them outside the working-class based on social, cultural and ideological differences. These are primarily to do with ambitions of social mobility amid precarity.

Evans sees the new petty bourgeoisie as consisting of white-collar service workers. He traces their origins to the changing nature of British capitalism at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century – private capital's increasing requirement for white-collar workers and the expansion of the state with its need for various types of functionaries. What Charles Booth in the 1890s described as the 'close and personal' relationship between clerk and employer (cited in Lockwood, 1958: 20) went with close physical proximity and a view of themselves as different to the workers, identifying with the bourgeoisie and motivated by individualism – expressed in their hostility to unionisation.

He says that clerks were a new low paid strata that refused to organize in a period of intense union organizing setting themselves apart from the working-class. He concedes that although before the First World War clerks were loath to join unions, after it there was a 'huge surge in white-collar unionisation' and shedding of deference. And today millions of white-collar workers are unionised.

Part of the explanation for this is the expansion of white-collar work but also the changing nature of it. While Evans acknowledges the way capitalism, work and class formation has changed (it is after all, the basis of the book) he sometimes argues as though little has changed since the early days of industrialisation. For example, he draws parallels between the position of clerks in early industrial capitalism with clerical workers today, claiming that the physical proximity of the clerk to the boss, their identification with capital and distance from the workers is very common in modern workplaces.

But as Braverman (1974) pointed out, the 'clerk' of the mid nineteenth century performed duties that would probably be classified as 'managerial' now, and even earlier, the 'clerk' or 'chief clerk' was the senior manager. There is a relic of this in some local government units in Britain today with the most senior council official often called the 'Town Clerk'. In the early years of industrialisation the number of clerks was relatively small (in 1851 eight tenths of one per cent of all 'gainful workers' in the UK – 70-80,000 people). By 1961 there were 3 million clerks, about 13 per cent of the occupied population (Braverman, 1974: 295). The clerk in early industrial capitalism bears very little relation to the worker in today's clerical factories either in the private sector (like Admiral Insurance) or the public sector (like the UK government's driving licence agency, DVLA).

Evans accepts that - in terms of exploitation (the sale of their labour power to live), their non-ownership of the means of production and their lack of autonomy – these clerical workers appear to be 'technically', 'objectively', 'on paper' part of the working-class but he follows Poulantzas in placing them in the petty bourgeoisie because they 'direct' the labour process and 'dominate' the worker. But do they? For large numbers of them, the absence of any control over the labour process or any meaningful supervisory power over other workers whatsoever is part of their work experience.

He uses Poulantzas's concept of 'mental labour' as one of the ways to distinguish the new petty bourgeoisie from the working-class. He agrees that this is a 'somewhat nebulous' concept which he

defines in its narrow sense as 'habitus', while simultaneously granting that 'it is unclear what the habitus of the new petty bourgeoisie is, other than "not being like the working-class"'. His 'more expansive reading of the concept' is hardly much more helpful, resting on an 'unspoken and intangible line in society between the working-class ("them") and everyone else ("us")' based on the legitimacy and superiority of certain types of knowledge. So 'mental labour is what workers do not have', and this apparently rests on attitudes towards, and experience of, education.

He departs from Poulantzas's position of placing everyone from nurses to top professionals in the petty bourgeoisie and sees the Ehrenreichs' view of a professional-managerial class (PMC) as a better explanation of the upper part of the middle. However, he is unable to decide whether the PMC is a separate class existing between the petty bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie or merely a fraction of the bourgeoisie. Either way he argues that the upper boundary of the new petty bourgeoisie ('for example, teachers and proletarianized academics') shares a porous border with the PMC.

He rests a great deal of his analysis on the perceived importance of social mobility and its realisation (or not). By virtue of their position between the two 'fundamental classes' of bourgeoisie and proletariat, the petty bourgeois has the possibility of moving up or down. He argues that this creates a sense of precarity in this class. In fact 'its precarity is precisely what defines it' (nobody wants to be pushed down into the great unwashed) and this instability can cause what C. Wright Mills (1951) called 'status panic'. So by categorising a particular group of workers as petty bourgeois, by definition they become vulnerable to downward social mobility and hence precarious, but this is a circular argument. Define them as working-class and this particular interpretation of the risk of 'precarity' disappears. But as Bob Carter (1985/2015: 6) points out: 'Class is not simply a matter of definitions. Social groups do not move in and out of classes according to the reformulation of concepts but rather with their changing social relations with other groups.'

In any event, he appears to believe that the petty bourgeoisie are uniquely precarious. However, the general insecurity of workers' jobs has been a feature of capitalism throughout its history, subject to the ups and downs of the economic cycle and the development of labour-replacing technology. More specifically, today in hospitality or care or other areas with high turnover or common business failures, insecurity is alarmingly real for these workers.

Perspective is important here, as is the need to distinguish the generalised, long term nature of insecurity under capitalism from the day to day impact on working life for the majority. Insecurity has increased with the growth of zero hours contracts, agency work and continuation of traditional seasonal work, and disproportionately affects women, BME and disabled workers, but it is not all-pervasive. Evans refers to the 'collapse of secure work', that steady jobs 'are no more' and 'no work is ever secure' and that precarity 'has become the norm'. The UK trade union centre, the TUC (2023: 3), calculates that one in nine workers are in insecure work, so 8 in 9 are not. Almost 30 years ago the business thinker, Charles Handy predicted 'Before very long, having a proper job inside an organization will be a minority occupation' (cited in Choonara, 2019: 5). Yet the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD, 2019: 15) reports that 'the permanent employee remains the norm for most people and jobs are just as stable as they were 20 years ago'.

Taylor (2022) argues that what *is* happening is a generalised intensification of work and speed-up as part of an employers' offensive in which wages no longer follow productivity growth and management by metrics dominates work experience acting as a source of a feeling of insecurity – regardless of the

contractual status of the worker. Gallie et al (2017) drew a distinction between 'job tenure insecurity' (fear of job loss), and 'job status insecurity' (anxieties about the threat of loss of valued features of the job). Choonara (2019) builds on their work and argues that job tenure insecurity can be further divided into acute and generalised job tenure insecurity. With reference to US experience, Milkman (2006: 16) points to a managerial shift from the 'happy worker' model to the 'frightened worker' model in which 'labour discipline is predicated on fear of job loss'. Thus widespread feelings of insecurity can exist despite the fact that only a minority of workers are employed on insecure contracts. Doogan (2009: 213) explains that 'contrived competition' in the public sector and 'manufactured uncertainty' in the private sector help to explain the 'conundrum of the co-existence of job insecurity and employment stability'.

Evans's use of 'proletarianization' doesn't actually mean that individuals become members of the proletariat, despite what it may look like. He simply means that they are 'struggling' or their job has been degraded or deskilled or their status has declined or their position in the wage/salary hierarchy has worsened. So members of the petty bourgeoisie may find themselves downwardly socially mobile but this does not mean that they join the proletariat, because there is no cultural, social or ideological convergence with that class.

He uses the example of a call centre worker (although confusingly elsewhere he places these workers in the new petty bourgeoisie) and says that the 'fundamental difference between the graduate call centre worker and the non-graduate call centre worker is that the proletarianized graduate did not expect to be in a low paid deskilled job'. Referring to the radicalisation of some petty bourgeois he says this takes place 'because they are unhappy about being close to the proletariat, who they are different to and better than'. This is reducing class analysis to personal expectation or even snobbery.

But towards the end of the book he also claims that not only is polarisation continuing and proletarianization affecting more and more, over time this will become permanent and so the petty bourgeoisie will be forced into traditional working-class roles. Having started by rejecting that process he ends by embracing it as the basis for new alliances and new militancy.

Although the main focus is on the petty bourgeoisie, inevitably he is obliged to spend some time on a discussion of the working-class. He seems to broadly hold to Poulantzas's (1974) view that those engaged in 'unproductive labour' are not part of the working-class. Evans defines 'productive manual work' as work that produces profit, elsewhere says that for Marx 'productive workers are those that produce surplus value', and refers to a study of self-employed building workers who deploy 'productive' to mean making or creating something compared with 'unproductive' white collar or office employees (Scase and Goffee, 1981). On another occasion he refers to Poulantzas as having 'an incredibly restrictive' understanding of the proletariat reducing it to those who are 'productive', i.e. produce material commodities. There are two issues here: what is or is not 'productive' labour in Marx's sense and whether or not this is a measure of what constitutes the working-class. Poulantzas concedes that 'Marx's distinction between productive and unproductive labour is a particularly difficult question' and so it is perhaps not surprising that there is no consensus on this – even among Marxists. So Meiksins (1981), for example, convincingly argues that Poulantzas misinterpreted Marx both on what constitutes 'productive' labour and in seeing the difference between productive and 'unproductive labour' as a class distinction.

In addition, and relevant to the productive/unproductive debate, Evans does not consider Marx's notion of the 'collective labourer', a combination of the workers involved through the division of labour necessary for the production of a single commodity. While no individual worker produces the particular commodity, the workers as a whole (the collective labourer) do produce the commodity. So technical staff and even some managers can be regarded as productive so long as their functions are required by the production process as they collectively produce surplus value and thereby capital.

Gough (1972: 71) outlines the complexity of the arguments around this issue and makes the point that it links into the question of the class balance of forces and the 'correlation between economic functions, class position and political consciousness'. Gough refers to Sweezy's (1962: 284) view that unproductive workers – the 'new middle class' (comparable to Evans's new petty bourgeoisie) – have a standard of living that 'ties them more or less closely to the ruling class of capitalists and landlords' and an 'objective bond' linking them to the ruling class, so they are 'a mass army which readily accepts the leadership of capitalist generals' (ibid). Obviously this has huge implications for both the possibility and the agency of social transformation. Evans's discussion would have benefited from a deeper examination of how class structure, class consciousness and class conflict are connected (or not) in the light of his analysis of the new petty bourgeoisie.

Evans specifically excludes care workers, cleaners and shelf stackers from the new petty bourgeoisie although none of them are 'productive' in Poulantzas's usage. It's not entirely clear what constitutes the working-class for Evans – although it definitely does not include white-collar workers nor those in the public sector.

He approvingly cites Poulantzas's argument that positions like foreman or team leader are involved in directing labour and dominating the worker, which aligns them ideologically with capital and management and correspondingly distances them from workers. In response to the criticism of Olin Wright (1976) (and others) that in practice many supervisors have little real authority or power over workers, Evans concedes that this may be true but says that this misses the point as 'the supervisor will likely think and act as if their power is real'. This is a long way from a materialist approach, reducing class analysis of foremen to the thoughts in their heads. It is all the more important as the concept of domination is central to the boundaries he draws between the working-class and the new petty bourgeois rather than the Marxist concept for class analysis of exploitation.

Evans portrays a modern working-class that is atomised and individualised by the changes in the economy and communities, but as elsewhere in the book, exaggeration and generalisation sometimes get in the way of a more focused analysis. There is a danger in identifying the fragmentation in the working-class that exists today as completely new and of falling into the trap of imagining that there was some past world in which the working-class was a solid, united, class conscious section of the population, despite the 'working-class Tory' being a stalwart of both academic research and popular culture. Capitalism creates competition among workers and one of the goals of trade unions has always been to attempt to overcome that competition in the interests of workers. This has never been entirely successful and various sectional interests and clashes between different groups of workers have periodically cut across working-class unity. Anything from racism and sexism to piece work and performance related pay have fragmented the working-class at different times and places and it takes a conscious effort by workers' organizations to overcome these (there is little recognition of ethnic and gender divides in the book).

And yes, de-industrialisation, offshoring and deployment of technology has seen many (but by no means all) of the large workplaces of the past disappear and this affected the local communities and the civic society previously built around those workplaces (coal mining being an obvious example). But you would never guess from Evans that there are, for example, over 150,000 people working directly in UK auto manufacture with over 800,000 employed across the industry. And there is no discussion of the new mega-workplaces like the Amazon distribution centres or the clerical factories of private and public sector employers. According to Choonara (2019: 12), although there has been some change, the 'UK economy remains one characterised by relatively large workplaces in which employees are concentrated'.

There are one or two references to remote working and a handful of mentions of COVID but no discussion of the impact of the huge increase in working from home that began during the pandemic and has, to a considerable extent, continued. Obviously, this applies to only a certain group of workers but it raises many questions about the labour process, consciousness and the problems and possibilities of trade union organization.

Evans accepts that the working-class is 'dominant globally', still the largest class in the UK (constituting a third to a half of society), is the most powerful and remains the 'motor of history', and claims this is 'because it has nothing to lose'. He frequently uses the term 'straightforwardly working-class' which is never really defined. He also argues that although it is not a class determinant, home ownership in some circumstances 'may give fractions of the working-class, interests that are contradictory, and which cause them to align with capital', so presumably in his view at least some sections of the working-class *do* have something to lose. Elsewhere he claims that home ownership provides the owner with a stake in the capitalist system (Evans, 2023). Some make a similar point about workers' membership of pension schemes as locking them into a vested interest in defending the existence of capitalism. To stretch the point a little further, it could be argued that workers in private companies have an interest in the success of 'their' company and its place in the capitalist economy.

More importantly, capitalism creates an exploitative relationship between capital and labour, but this is at the same time the potential source of workers' power because of capital's dependence on labour. So the importance of the working-class in social change is related to several connected characteristics: it does not own the means of production so has no exploitative powers to defend; it is locked in a clash with capital; its position in the relations of production means it shares common interests antagonistic to the interests of capital; in order to secure its own particular interests it needs to end class division and class exploitation more generally; its conditions as the main producer class gives it potential power within capitalism and the capacity for collective action to make a transformation of society beyond capitalism possible. It is the only class with these characteristics.

The final chapter of the book attempts to answer the 'so what' question. Why is this discussion of the petty bourgeoisie important? What does it matter? Marx (1845/1998) famously declared that 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it' and Engels (1886) was scathing of those socialists he regarded as using their theory as some sort of creed rather than 'a guide to action', so this is an important part of the book.

He ends with a call to arms and a list of demands to undo the impact of 40 years of neoliberalism through the introduction of a series of measures that will bring back collectivist institutions and a universalist approach, such as secure work contracts; mass building of council housing; true

comprehensivisation of schools; the end of means testing and a socialism from below. But there is no 'guide to action', no discussion of how these laudable aims will be achieved.

Evans is scathing about the failures of 'the Left' in general and 'the modern left' in particular and explains this as being due to its social composition – its basis in the PMC and the new petty bourgeoisie and their baleful influence. Unfortunately he never clearly defines what he means by 'the Left' and draws it so widely as to be virtually meaningless – including even the neoliberal, pro-imperialist leaders of the UK parliamentary Labour party. It allows for some unsupported generalisations about 'the Left', such as it being a 'popular conceit' of the Left 'that the class background of agents ultimately determines their class, regardless of the work they do'. It's not clear which part of which Left holds this 'popular conceit'.

He makes some sweeping claims that the new petty bourgeoisie (as he defines it) was the social base of Corbynism, the movement behind Sanders, Syriza, Podemos and the Arab Spring without very much in the way of evidence, and that their respective failures can be broadly explained by their social composition and their consequent inability to appeal to the working-class. These references are a rare mention of movements and events beyond the UK.

Evans complains that 'the Left' is dominated by professionals, managers and university graduates and that 'the lower middle classes and working-classes have been sucked into the orbit of right populist movements'. He writes off the Labour party as a force for radical change and since the book was written, Labour looks an even less likely candidate to lead any serious change in the UK. He believes that the stakes are high: if the Left fails, there are real risks of climate catastrophe, fascism and war.

He argues for the creation of a class alliance between the petty bourgeoisie and the working-class, but despite a section of the book titled 'The Future: how to build class alliances', does not explain how such an alliance could be created, nor on what basis. The programme amounts to spreading an awareness of class divides and reflecting on 'the corrosive effects of the domination of the Left by sections of the new petty bourgeoisie and the professional classes'; abandoning neoliberalism and an overdue confrontation with identity politics. There is little there as to how what he describes as the 'mass disengagement of the working-class' could be reversed, nor how the petty bourgeoisie could be pulled away from the embrace of the Far Right.

Evans is right to say that change can happen rapidly, but there is no discussion of this cross class alliance spontaneously developing so we must assume that some kind of vehicle is required to help create it. In Evans's view this will have to come from outside the Labour party and beyond electoralism. He doesn't advocate the creation of some kind of new revolutionary party nor a syndicalist or anarchist movement, and it is not clear who or what would create this movement other than the trade unions, about whom he is also highly critical.

He says that 'if the working-class movement re-emerges in politics and is led by strong, working-class leaders rooted in the fighting trade unions, then the traditional petty bourgeoisie and the working-class can certainly be won over to the Left'. That is a big 'if', considering his comment about 'the absence of an organized labour movement' and his view that 'the union movement being also dominated by the new petty bourgeoisie and the professional-managerial classes'. He argues for linking up the 'last vestiges of the organized working-class movement' with the 'emergent traditional petty bourgeois-

dominated movements'. It is not clear where these 'last vestiges' are nor what are these emergent movements.

He complains that the professional-managerial class takeover of the Left includes many trade unions, that are often 'staffed by full time graduates who have not worked in the industry they are representing'. For him the role of the unions cannot be overstated as part of the decline of the Left and it is entirely rational for workers to refuse to join unions because 'the majority of trade unions have no fight in them and are often led by charlatans and careerist grifters'. Clearly this presents a serious problem for the objectives outlined, but there is no programme for how this might be overcome.

The proportion of union staff in the UK who previously worked in the industry represented by the union, varies quite considerably from union to union. In some unions almost every official comes from that background, in others fewer. Most unions hire technical experts for specific posts like research, legal, health and safety. The majority of elected union general secretaries have a background in the industry and, by definition, the elected lay members of national executives all come from the industries represented.

If, as Evans claims, unions are often led by charlatans and careerist grifters, how did they get there? Why did the members elect such leaders? Why were the electoral turnouts so low? Why did they elect national executive members from among their fellow workers who apparently go along with these grifters? We might ask why some shop stewards who share the leaders' views are also elected by their work colleagues? To paraphrase Brecht, do we need to elect a new membership?

He applauds the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), the rail workers union as 'one of the last unions to be run by working-class people' with its left wing leaders (the RMT has an impressive record of victorious strike ballots). But it wasn't always left wing, didn't always elect left wing leaders and the members didn't always vote to strike to defend their interests. That position had to be methodically and painstakingly built among the membership over a period of years by active left wing members working together in the branches. As Ellen Wood (1986: 197) argues, class organization is a political task: 'the translation of common interests into concerted action requires organization and coordination.'

Evans clearly sees himself as an optimist – he decries the pessimism that he observes on much of the Left. However without a theory of union bureaucracy and democracy, of grassroots organization, of both working-class passivity and activity, together with an understanding of the material basis of reformism in the trade union movement, simply haranguing the leadership of the unions is both pessimistic and pointlessly moralistic. It can lead to the delusion that it is just this conservative bureaucracy that is holding back the revolutionary mood of the membership.

This is an enjoyable and important book but there are some downsides to it. Evans concedes that Poulantzas could be accused of moving the theoretical goalposts with the way he uses criteria for class analysis, but Evans's own application of the definitions and characteristics of what is or is not the basis of the 'new petty bourgeoisie' are a little slippery at times and they lack consistency. The very personal approach to the analysis is entertaining and relatable but skews some of the takes in the book by generalising from specific experiences – for example the frequent mention of 'cops and squaddies' as part of the author's social circle in Porthcawl when this group is about 1% of the UK labour force. The polemical nature adds to the enjoyability of the read but too often provocative generalisations are

dropped like a hand grenade into the cake mix without much (or even any) evidential support, such as: grammar schools 'were the most effective tools for social mobility the UK has ever seen'; the Nazis had 'large working-class support'; and 'universities are neoliberal hell-holes'.

Nevertheless, the book is a rare attempt to present in a popular and accessible form, complex arguments about class and its central importance in understanding capitalist society. It is a wide-ranging discussion drawing on an impressive grasp of the literature relating to the changing class structure of Britain and the theoretical explanations for that change. It makes a good companion to two other recent books on class from Umney (2018) and Nineham (2023). There is much to engage with in Evans's work and it will undoubtedly succeed in the author's aim of provoking debate and discussion on class within and beyond the academy.

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