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Lumpens and Compradors Their Place in Time and Space

by SAM GORDON

May 21, 2015

There were days when the working class could easily be identified. It was a fairly straight forward affair. Its male members wore cloth caps, went to football (soccer) matches on Saturdays and in Britain during the latter half of the 20th century at least, tended to vote Labour. Its female members worked in continuous production operations – often textile related or light engineering assembly work and were less frequently organised in trade unions than their male counterparts. Women often staffed the junior grades of offices and worked in shops. Or they stayed at home to cook, wash clothes and look after children. All a bit stereotypical but you get my drift.

This was the industrial proletariat, identified and named as such by Karl Marx. The name proletariat he borrowed from ancient Rome where the proletariat formed the lowest form of Roman citizenship. The main wealth producers, the slaves, were beyond official registration. Marx also gave us the term lumpenproletariat, a social stratum for which he didn't much care. The term, in his day and even more recently, referred to those excluded from industrially productive processes.

“The dangerous class, the social scum, that passively rotting mass . . .” was how he referenced the lumpenproletariat in The Communist Manifesto. In The German Ideology he was more specific and included, “discharged soldiers,” “discharged jailbirds,” “gamblers,” “maquereaux” [pimps], “brothel keepers,” “porters,” among others. Marx was making a point of course,

especially with the phrase the “dangerous class.” Capitalist society has its disconnected and alienated social groupings that do not stand with the ranks of those engaged in class struggle. Indeed these people are easy prey for manipulation by those who wishing to vilify others directly struggling for more and better paid jobs, improved housing, and accessible health care.

The Irish Marxist, trade union leader and prolific writer James Connolly managed to be both a porter and a discharged soldier. But time, by definition, changes. In the 21st century left leaning people generally welcome sex workers struggling to improve health and working conditions as well as the rehabilitation of ex-offenders. Nevertheless, lumpen remains a disparaging term.

Another from Ireland, the writer James Plunket, summed it up well in his book, Farewell Companions, when he turned the phrase “Tupence ha’penny (ten cents) looked down on tupence (five cents). Others take license from the bible. When the former tax collector known as Saint Mathew, who I’ll return to later, was extolling the virtues of a more spiritual life he is credited with saying, “consider the lilies of the field; how they grow, they toil not neither do they spin ...” This is a phrase which has come into common usage, at least among those who have been exposed to biblical teaching. Some people get by nicely, thank you very much, yet never seem to break sweat in either a literal or figurative sense.

The Egyptian political economist Samir Amin, unequivocally a Marxist, breaks free from the strictures others have accepted for more than a century and a half when he refers to lumpen development. In *The Implosion of Contemporary Capitalism* he discusses a monopolies and imperialist model of development, one resulting in what he calls social disintegration.

This may serve as an example. In the 1980s Nicaragua struggled to break out of the bond imposed by the 43 year dictatorship of the Somoza family dynasty. One of the family called the Republic of Nicaragua his “farm.” The popular revolution which freed the farm from dictatorship was imperfect, as such revolutionary changes always are. But it opened up possibilities for a different form of development. However the low intensity war waged on the Nicaraguan state and people by different US administrations made a break through when the war weary people voted out the revolutionary Sandinista government in 1990.

The cooperative and public service sectors took a hammering. A progressive agrarian reform program had helped set up cooperative run farms. The imperfections of the revolution, lack of penetrating ideological, administrative and technical education, merged with the monopolizing power of the finance. The result has been that banks have often taken ownership of land formerly worked by families which made up the coops’ membership. The social disintegration went further. Opportunistic individuals in positions of power and influence became the owners of land and other assets. Is this or is this not lumpen development?

In the past few months the British media has carried stories of democratically elected Members of Parliament (MP) caught out in an undercover sting operation. Two former foreign secretaries in both Conservative and Labour governments, Sir Malcolm Rifkind and Jack Straw agreed to undertake well paid contract work for private businesses where their governmental time had earned them valuable commercial contacts. The contract work could be done during the MP’s

normal working time. Surely this put the likes of Rifkind and Straw in the same category as the dangerous class and social scum.

But perhaps more dangerous than the lumpen is the comprador class. Saint Mathew is a good, if dated, example of this. Mathew was a Jewish tax collector in Galilee and operated under the authority imperial Rome. This earned him the contempt of many of his fellow Jews.

The word comprador – taken from the Portuguese meaning buyer – found its way into modern political speak by way of Portuguese / Chinese trading relations of previous centuries. The comprador classes were those who facilitated western traders of silks and spices, not to mention opium, in 18th and 19th China and south Asia.

The textile factory and fruit plantation owners of Honduras serve as a present day example of the comprador class. They have a close association with the country's elites among politicians and senior military officers who find comfort in the establishment of US military bases in their country. Honduras is the original "banana republic", a pejorative term coined early in the 20th century which referenced Honduras's economic base but also its slippery political condition. For the compradors, a few US military bases guarantee economic traction and political stability.

But perhaps the best living example of the comprador class is the UK's three time election winner, Prime Minister and creator of New Labour, the Right Honorable Tony Blair. Putting the final nails in the coffin of a once proud party in the social democratic tradition and joining George W Bush's coalition of the willing in wreaking havoc on the people of Iraq has bought him economic stability. It's not silks and spices now. It's lecture tours and consultancies to businesses and governments that are the shop fronts of a comprador.