

Again on the Lumpenproletariat

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STRUGGLESSESSIONS



Bourgeois Ideology and the Refuse of All Classes

By Kavga

Bourgeois culture is a cadaver which produces countless caricatures of the romantic thief—the disgraced bourgeois whose avenue for criminal acts within the framework of bourgeois law and order closes, at which point he becomes an extra-legal criminal predator. Robin Hood, and, as the gentleman detective variant of this type, Sherlock Holmes, are examples—Maxim Gorky discusses the tropes of the gentleman thief and the gentleman detective in his masterful 1934 speech on Soviet Literature. This is the first type of heroic literary lumpen.

The gangster is the second type. Essentially this character is portrayed as an anti-hero, an immigrant or urban poor who takes advantage of a lack of administrative and social infrastructure to build a tough criminal group which has violent adventures. Our culture is inundated with this type of role model—

Scarface, Frank Lucas, multiple characters from the television show *The Wire*, etc.

The American Dreamer is the third type—work shirkers who dream of big money through high stakes speculation outside of what is considered socially acceptable in order to establish the capital to “go straight”—this is the third type of lumpen hero promoted in bourgeois culture—gambling stories and “big heist” stories fit this third type.

We also find the scorned romantic, the revenge seeker, the vigilante—this type is usually a member of polite society who through other criminals becomes a criminal himself. While not being outright parasitic upon the people, he becomes an anti-social misanthrope in a distorted quest for “justice” which is reduced to revenge, circumventing the masses, a celebration of unbridled bourgeois retaliation and white terror—with some variations on the theme, this is our Rambo, Batman, Oldboy, and a host of lesser vigilantes in regularly-produced moving pictures, television shows, etc.

Why does bourgeois culture lionize such types? Because they represent naked capitalist ambition unfettered by the laws of bourgeois democratic society: the types become something of a fetish, a dark but seductive result of capitalism itself. From the bourgeois viewpoint, crime and black markets are natural and will always exist, while from the socialist viewpoint these things will not always exist. Bourgeois culture also promotes such romanticism for commercial reasons. Just as rock n’ roll and hip-hop have been transformed from their origin as protest music into a hedonistic celebration of intoxication and sex, movies and art serve the same purpose. Promoting romantic criminals gives ideas and role models to the desperate, and this helps to carry out social annihilation campaigns, to fill up prisons as an aspect of repression of the people, to prevent community cohesion, and to keep workers competing more viciously for lower wages, etc. In short, the ideology of the bourgeoisie is in service of the repressive state, and is expressed firmly in the cultural lionization of the “heroic lumpen”.

While there are countless types of romanticized lumpen heroes and anti-heroes—the difference is marginal and superficial—these four are the most common. None of the types accurately express what the lumpenproletariat is from a Marxist viewpoint.

The lumpenproletariat is not just poor proletarians or proletarians with the most precarious existence; they are, instead, correctly defined by Marx as the refuse of all classes, the elements from any class which have been cast out of production for any reason and which become parasitic. Note that in class society this parasitism is more commonly than not at the expense of the proletariat.

To be clear, part time workers, day laborers, etc are not lumpenproletarian even when they may engage in illegal activity to supplement themselves to the point of subsistence.

The lumpenproletariat has no stable relationship to production and must be defined on that basis; their sources of income vary but inevitably involve black market parasitism. It can be fairly forgivable acts like card cheating, petty theft or scams, or it can be completely unforgivable actions like facilitating child prostitution. Being de-classed elements, the lumpenproletariat have no fixed class interest. They are not a class; they are whatever sinks to the bottom.

As a nebulous group with no unifying interests, the lumpenproletariat cannot, under any circumstance, become the revolutionary subject. While some who are forced by poverty into petty parasitism in order to survive will, more often than not, have individual interests which align with the working class, they must be regarded on an individual basis, must receive proletarian leadership, and must be proletarianized. This process involves developing proletarian class discipline which de-classed elements cannot possess on their own volition. While some disorganized lumpenproletarians can be “won over” to revolution in order to drag themselves out of poverty, this section does not represent the lumpenproletariat as a whole.

A significant number of lumpenproletarians are would-be-capitalists whose interests are those of a mercenary who will align with capitalism; the stronger and more organized they are, the clearer this becomes. We have seen evidence of this historically which deserves some examination.

During the Baltimore Uprisings, both Crip and Piru gang members went on national TV decrying the rebelling masses, at one point even sitting down with the police and encouraging the masses to go home.

The collaborations between the old-state and the Italian Mafia are far more numerous: union suppression, strike breaking, supporting US imperialism against the Cuban people, providing control over drug distribution for the CIA, buying record labels to suppress political artists, etc. This list of crimes in service of the capitalist system go on.

Mexican Cartels are perhaps more effective agents of imperialism than the old Italian outfits could ever dream of being. The role of big drug cartels gets very complex when studying places like Mexico, where they have meshed with the old-bureaucratic bourgeois state, enforcing imperialist interests at the highest level in what should be considered a fascist operation. On the lower levels, members form shock troops for reaction and carry out the illegal dirty work of the state.

Let us return to the matter of consciousness which is derived from one's role in production. Parasitic and predatory elements, no matter how small and disorganized, develop a consciousness based on or rooted in abusing others for income, thus shaping their world view. It is possible that they begin with dread and regret for what they have to do in order to survive, but this is not a sustainable condition; it is a contradiction like any other within which one aspect will be principal and define the identity of the individual. The response to this can either be a constant struggle to rehabilitate, or a rationalization and justification of their dubious trades.

Understanding this adds another layer to the issue of the revolutionary potential of the lower and less organized lumpenproletariat. Not only does their activity affect their consciousness, ideology and world view, demanding rehabilitation as a prerequisite for revolutionary activity, but the timing of the “revolutionary intervention” is essential. It must be regarded that the individual’s conditions, the place where he or she is in life, etc, will have significant influence on the movement’s ability to intervene.

Any left-wing movement in the US is significantly under-experienced and lacks the capacity to mount large scale interventions. An individual can become de-classed for any reason, but cannot automatically be revolutionized for any reason. The growth of the proletarian movement, leading and mobilizing the people’s movements, will increase the capacity of revolutionary organizers to develop programs and approaches to interventions with the lumpenproletariat. However, this cannot be confused as a principal task or the orientation of one’s mass work to develop support among the people.

The anarchist infatuation with community service, prison “abolition”, and homelessness is a contemporary way to avoid the issue of organizing the more numerous proletariat. Revisionist approaches amount to the same. Instead of building movements among the working people, these types always seek to cut corners; they do not build the type of organizations which can really help the people towards whom they orient. Only through developing strong proletarian organizations can the most desperate and poor de-classed be reached and provided with necessary services and structures to join and work within. This is the meaning of “revolutionary intervention” or “proletarianization” in the current moment: the task is still to develop proletarian organization, and seizing upon the key link and pulling steadily this way moves the whole chain upward.

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