

Anti-Anti-PMCism: A Response to *nonsite*
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On December 8, 2021—that is, yesterday—the online journal *nonsite.org* published its 37th issue. To start, I should clarify that what I’ve hastily written up, I’ve written not out of a sense that this issue of *nonsite* in its entirety needs pushback. Some of the contributions (Anne Wagner’s excellent piece on David Smith and manual labor, for example) don’t seem to have much to do with the overarching theme at all. There’s also a part 2 still on the way, and I’d hate to prejudice scholarship I haven’t seen yet. I’m writing instead out of concern that the framing of the issue’s theme—“Contemporary Art and the PMC” (or Professional Managerial Class, for those not familiar with the acronym)—is off-kilter. The problem at stake is not a small one. It’s the problem of how we, as historians, correlate artworks, styles, movements, and so forth—the objects of our discipline—to the culture of a class, or a fraction of a class. This is the basic problem of the social history of art. And again, as in most of the founding documents of social art history, the class in question is the bourgeoisie.

We can date the advent of a modern sense of the relation between art and the bourgeoisie rather precisely, I think. It happened in 1846, when Baudelaire dedicated his Salon of that year “aux bourgeois.” This dedication drips with an irony, ambivalence, loathing, and self-loathing that have not ceased to be recognizable: “Les uns savants, les autres propriétaires;—un jour radieux viendra où les savants seront propriétaires, et les propriétaires savants. Alors votre puissance sera complète, et nul ne protestera contre elle.” It’s worth trying to figure out what’s become of this ambivalence today. *Nonsite* #37 might be a prime exhibit, exactly because of the problems it seems to run into trying to approach its object of critique. Sadly, top hats have not been in style for some time; the bourgeois was once easier to recognize. In his study of this mythos, Franco Moretti observes that the outlines of the figure that bestrode the 19th century like a colossus have blurred in these latter days.¹ Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg: *savants et propriétaires*... in blue jeans. In what way does it *tell* us anything to describe Musk or Zuckerberg as bourgeois? Little, I think, except to index a vacant space in the cultural imaginary. Perhaps this failure of the *haute bourgeoisie* to live up to clichés of itself is a reason why it’s tempting to set one’s sights lower, at its *petite* counterpart, of which the PMC is a variant.

Strictly speaking, of course, the more classical term “petty bourgeois” includes shopkeepers, small proprietors, and the like, whereas the PMC are mostly salaried professionals. Worries about the culture and identity of the petty bourgeoisie have run through debates among anti-capitalists since the later 19th century, whereas the PMC was only defined as such in the 1970s, in reaction to the failures of the New Left. (A parallel, slightly earlier, and arguably more fruitful discourse on postwar shifts in the balance of class power can be found in the theorizations of “class composition” that developed in the context of Italian Operaismo, or Workerism, in the 1960s.)² The petty bourgeois/PMC distinction is important, but not a distinction that need be pursued further here, as the matter of aligning artistic phenomena to the

¹ Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).

² See: Steven Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2002).

culture of the “middling” classes is similar in either case (actually *defining* those classes, on the other hand, calls for a more precise terminology).³

For one thing, it strikes me that the argument regarding the PMC in this issue of *nonsite* isn't far off from T.J. Clark's argument about the petty bourgeoisie's relation to Abstract Expressionism, in his notorious “defense” thereof.⁴ Clark's argument, in a nutshell, is that Abstract Expressionism is the form in which the American petty bourgeoisie aspired to aristocratic freedom at the moment in which it *imagined* itself as an ascendant class. Unless I'm mistaken, this is also what is argued of the PMC and its contemporary art in the issue of *nonsite* presently under review. Closer to the PMC's primal scene, Benjamin Buchloh discerns an “aesthetic of administration” in Conceptual Art's paperwork fetish. Thus Buchloh, writing in 1990: “[T]he rights and rationale of a newly established postwar middle class, one which came fully into its own in the 1960s, could assume their aesthetic identity in the very model of the tautology and its accompanying aesthetic of administration. For this aesthetic identity is structured much the way this class's social identity is, namely, as one of merely administering labor and production (rather than producing) and the distribution of commodities.”⁵ Compare Elise Archias in her introduction to the PMC dossier:

If modern art presumed a bourgeois viewer, then most contemporary art expects a professional middle-class viewer, which is to say, of course, a person like ourselves. This person is versed in any number of abstract theories, skilled in using the systems and templates of white-collar and creative-class labor to solve problems, and accepts the pleasures and patterns of shopping, consumption, and self-branding as motivation, reward, economic engine, and primary unifier in the world she lives and conducts her practice in every day.⁶

The PMC aesthetic, then, looks to be a Buchlohian shrinking-down of petty bourgeois, AbEx-style “freedom”: no longer big messy gestures but rather the chilly technocracy of Warhol's Pop, Larry Bell's Light and Space art, Maurizio Cattelan, and so forth (these examples are drawn from the *nonsite* issue). The point here is not really that Buchloh and Clark anticipate many of the claims currently being made of the PMC. It doesn't bother me that this is so, because I think those claims are largely correct. They *work* as a phenomenology of both post-1960s art and of PMC sensibilities (if there is even a difference between the two). My quibble here rather has to do with the derivation of a class habitus.

In particular, it has to do with the sense that the PMC as defined here is a set of habits to which is attached a set of people to which is attached a kind of art (as it happens, nearly *all* art made over the past fifty years). This comes to a head at the following moment in Archias' intro:

³ And this is tricky. The PMC debate, in both its original and revived forms, is a sub-debate that at times feels as if it's usurped the more general, more important problem of describing *what* the “reproduction of social class” actually is. The work of the late Erik Olin Wright is an example of a serious and prolonged, if far from definitive, attempt at figuring this out.

⁴ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 371-403.

⁵ Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (winter 1990), 128.

⁶ Archias, “Introduction: Contemporary Art and the PMC (Parts 1 and 2),” *nonsite* 37 (2021), <https://nonsite.org/introduction-contemporary-art-and-the-pmc-parts-one-and-two/>.

“Whether we think of the PMC as a Marxian class or not is less important to this project than that we recognize them as a loosely held-together, highly educated group with tremendous influence on what art gets made and has been made in the global art world since the early 1960s.” Once again, the lack of Marxian rectitude is not really at issue. It’s something else: lost here is any self-awareness that this definition of the PMC is no less tautological than the PMC’s favored aesthetic. The PMC is, simply, defined as the class to which contemporary art is oriented... because contemporary art is oriented to this class. And the markers of this class are not its position within the reproduction of capital but rather its likes and dislikes.

Thus, quite frequently, in both the introduction to the issue and throughout the issue itself, we find the PMC being ascribed certain (invariably annoying) *Weltanschauungen* or ways of being-in-the-world. For example: Archias writes that, as opposed to modernism’s more worldly interaction of the abstract and the concrete, the contemporary art that is the PMC’s bread and butter “tends to elevate only the abstract side of the dialectic, no longer testing in any real way the invented systems, structures, and icons with something drawn from the differently understood realm of sensuous physicality.” This plays out as what she describes as a rather anal-retentive aesthetic of “defendedness,” or the avoidance of “emotional exchanges.” She gives various examples as unlike as Anicka Yi and Judy Chicago. The crucial one, however, is a contrast between Larry Bell’s *The Aquarium*, 1962-63, and Ed Bernal’s *Summer Mechanic*, 1958-59. Both are low relief sculptures, more or less. But Bernal’s “funkier” and “more human” art is associated here with, well... if not exactly the proletariat, then at least with something more sympathetic than Bell’s “clean white art.” (The phrases in quotations marks are Bernal’s own.)

Fair enough: as a matter of taste this seems more than defensible. But can we really say that cleanliness is a PMC marker whereas “funk” is a marker of something else? Was the “abject art” of the 1990s any less dependent on a PMC social base than Minimal sleekness? What about the “concrete” practices of the body to which Archias herself owes allegiance, on the evidence of her (very good!) first book?⁷ And what of the far from uncomplicated racial shadings of “funky” as a period term?⁸ If funk represents a non-PMC openness to the materiality of the world, is this ever and exactly so, just as an unchangeable default of the PMC mindset? Where are the “concrete transactions” that are the stuff of the social history of art—where are “the connecting links between artistic form, the available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes, and more general historical structures and processes” that T.J. Clark once wanted to see?⁹

This schematism leads to specific difficulties in some (though I should be clear to say: not all) of the essays in the issue. In his contribution, for example, Blake Stimson tries to update Vladimir Lenin’s notorious 1920 screed “*Left-Wing*” *Communism: An Infantile Disorder* as, somehow, a description of the PMC. I will quote at length:

Beyond the historical variations, what we now broadly call the professional managerial class—or you choose from political historian Lily Geismer’s

⁷ Archias, *The Concrete Body: Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, Vito Acconci* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁸ On which, see: Jacob Stewart Halevy, *Slant Steps: On the Art World’s Semi-Periphery* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 75-112. In Archias’ text, the mobilization of Ed Bernal—an African-American artist—seems to have the odd function of smuggling in “identitarian” racial issues under the cover of an Adolph Reed-ish anti-identitarianism.

⁹ Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1973), 12.

collection of related period tags: “professional middle class,” “knowledge class,” “educated class,” “knowledge worker,” “creative class,” “liberal elite,” “latte liberal,” “bobos,” “neoliberal,” or “Atari Democrats”⁵—Lenin in his day distinguished as the middle of three capitalist-era classes: “the liberal-bourgeois, the petty-bourgeois-democratic (concealed behind ‘social-democratic’ and ‘social-revolutionary’ labels), and the proletarian-revolutionary.” Leaning on scare quotes to call its political posturing into question, he flagged this progressive middle stratum as “‘left’” or “‘left-wing’” and, as his title tells us, diagnosed it with “infantile disorder.”

Despite the various political labels used by Lenin and those he was criticizing (“‘left-wing’,” “‘communist,’” “‘democratic,’” “‘social-democratic’,” “‘social-revolutionary’,” etc.), the position of this middle stratum as he defined it was not determined by any coherent or consistent economic or political position but instead, like its new left heir in our time, was marked by its role providing cultural and social critique that obscured and thus crippled clear and effective economic and political thinking and organizing.¹⁰

The remarkable thing about this is that Stimson seems quite uninterested in what “‘left-wing’ communism” actually meant in 1920, or even in what Lenin wanted it to mean. There is not much to hint that when Lenin used the terms “social-democratic” and “social-revolutionary,” he had specific (competing) political parties in mind. There is no indication at all that “left communism” was in fact a robust, well-organized tendency within the international communist movement, comprised variously of the Italian left (Amadeo Bordiga is the key figure), the German-Dutch councilist left (e.g. Anton Pannekoek, Paul Mattick), and the British anti-parliamentary faction (Sylvia Pankhurst). There is no recognition that Herman Gorter, one of the leaders of the anti-Leninist tendency in Germany, already systematically dismantled Lenin’s argument as early as 1921 in his book-length *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*.¹¹ Most of all, there is little recognition that Lenin’s text, far from being an authoritative, disinterested statement of theory, was a precisely targeted intervention written for the express purpose of asserting Bolshevik hegemony (that is, Bolshevik authoritarianism) over an unruly transnational communist movement, members of which included much more than comfortable petty bourgeois (read: proto-PMC) beautiful souls. In short, “*Left-Wing’ Communism: An Infantile Disorder*” is the biggest case of gaslighting in communist theory. For Stimson, though, all of this boils down to a set of ahistorical pet peeves.

This is how what looks, at first, like an admirably hardheaded critique of unworldly leftism turns out to be not much of one at all. The critique is hardly less beautiful soul-ish than were Lenin’s enemies... according to Lenin. It’s a problem that stems, once again, from a reluctance or an inability to think about the “concrete transactions” in play in a given conjuncture.¹² A (possibly useful) position paper on left strategy devolves into *Kulturkritik*.

¹⁰ Stimson, “Infantile ‘Left-Wing’ Disorder: An Update,” *nonsite* 37 (December 8, 2021), <https://nonsite.org/infantile-left-wing-disorder-an-update/>.

¹¹ Available online with a very useful preface by the contemporary German communist group Wildcat: <https://libcom.org/files/Herman%20Gorter-%20Open%20letter%20to%20comrade%20Lenin.pdf>.

¹² In the Marxist tradition, the notion of the “conjuncture” as the unit of historical analysis comes mostly from Gramsci’s use of this term in his *Prison Notebooks*. There are reasons to be not entirely happy with it (for one thing, it easily becomes vague, meaning not much more than “things happening at the same time”). Nonetheless I find the

What we have here, I think, is a mistaking of symptoms for causes. This is ironic because the constant refrain of anti-PMC discourse is that “identitarian” politics mistakes symptoms of class stratification (such as racial inequity) for causes in themselves. The mistake is to see the foibles of the PMC as an expression of their essential ineffectualness as a class “between labor and capital”—rather than a consequence of a demobilization that was the result of historically specific conditions *that might in fact change in the future*. We can specify some of the basis for PMC-type bad behavior more usefully than by reference to “neoliberalism” as an all-pervading miasma; we can, in other words, more usefully write the history of what goes by the name of neoliberalism as a history of working-class struggle and defeat, and of capitalist restructuring. The signal fact in the recomposition of class since the 1970s, for example, has not been the ascendancy of the PMC to (perhaps illusory) cultural hegemony but rather a secular shift towards lower productivity growth, especially in the growing catch-all known as the tertiary or service sector to which the downwardly-mobile fraction of PMC belongs, where capital can rely on a pool of low-wage labor thrown off, in part, from deindustrialization in the Global North.¹³ It would take a longer essay than this to show exactly how, but let me at least suggest that what too often is narrated as a sort of ineluctable shift in sensibilities (from communalism to individualism, say) was the concrete result of the many and not always entirely coherent measures that capitalist firms and allied logics of governmentality rolled out to ensure their own reproduction, in the face, notably, of large-scale proletarian and anti-colonial resistance.

Neoliberalism is not a sensibility, then, but rather an ad-hoc strategy that capital adopted in response to a crisis of profitability at the turn of the 1970s.¹⁴ And the specific ideological formation of the PMC is a conjunctural product of the encounter between these strategies and *specific* codes of conduct, semiotic regimes, artistic and bodily practices, etc. over the past fifty years. There are only diminishing returns to be had in repeating the hoary contrast between working-class productivity and PMC (or petty bourgeois, take your pick) alienation from the site of production, given that the processes just named have increasingly made “working-class identity” itself an exteriority to the proletariat, more a limit to struggle than its ineluctable form.¹⁵ It follows that the PMC mentality is not a bad mental habit to be chased out by better mental habits (or better art, as Stimson suggests: by which he means art committed to shrinking “the gulf between PMC and working class”). It is rather a product of specific historical conditions. And those conditions do change. We have seen them change, and they will only

word “conjuncture” convenient shorthand for everything that Clark mentions in his longer list of factors cited above. For another, more Althusserian perspective, see: RS (Roland Simon), “The Conjuncture: A Concept Necessary to the Theory of Communisation,” *Sic: International Journal for Communisation* 1 (2011), <https://libcom.org/library/conjuncture-concept-necessary-theory-communisation>.

¹³ Good accounts can be found in two recent books on the discourse of automation: Jason E. Smith, *Smart Machines and Service Work: Automation in an Age of Stagnation* (London: Reaktion, 2020); Aaron Benanav, *Automation and the Future of Work* (London and New York: Verso, 2020).

¹⁴ The most impressive account of this crisis remains Robert Brenner’s *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945–2005* (London and New York: Verso, 2006).

¹⁵ Here as in this entire paragraph I am, as it were, subtweeting the entire current of what’s often called “communization theory,” which I’d rather think of, more simply, as revolutionary theory adequate to a world after the collapse of the 19th-20th century workers’ movement. The implications of this body of theory for art history and criticism are unclear. Some years I made a first, inadequate stab at figuring this out: Spaulding, “Value-Form and Avant-Garde” *Mute Magazine*, March 27, 2014, <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/value-form-and-avant-garde>.

change further as the neoliberal edifice crumbles. Leftist critique of PMC leftism, I'm tempted to say, is the eternalization of the PMC's own dissatisfaction with itself (more Baudelaire than Lenin). The PMC dreams of endless hegemony precisely in the way it critiques the PMC, as if *that* critique really matters all that much to revolution. And in this anti-PMCism, oddly, is less advanced than the sectors of the PMC who are ready to give up navel-gazing in favor of just *doing something* without the self-hatred. Anti-PMCism mostly just confirms what the PMC knows best about itself.

I've moved far from what is typically art history's turf, so I'll try to sum up with this final provocation: what is interesting about the petty bourgeoisie (or the PMC) is not its usual listlessness but rather its capacity, in rare moments, to disidentify from the command structure with which it otherwise tries to align itself. We don't have to go very far to see examples of this. The fact—scandalous to liberal sheepdogs—that, during the George Floyd rebellion of 2020, many thousands of *white* middle-class professionals descended into the riotous streets, alongside their newly-discovered comrades in the racialized proletariat, is more important than the politicking that has gone on since (notably, the almost universal walking-back of the demand to defund the police). The first process generated new solidarities. The other tries to pick them apart. In the spirit of Italian Operaismo, we ought to view recent events from the perspective of the growth and ramification of these solidarities, not from the perspective of the police actions (literal and figurative) that have been deployed to mop them up. The latter is capital's perspective. What I am saying, then, is that the PMC's fixation *on* the PMC, on its own badness, is a negative narcissism that obscures the more interesting prospect of interclass and interracial recomposition. This is in no way to deny the deadweight that the “middling classes,” however we define them, more typically represent in any process of mass contestation, to say nothing of the annoyingness of their culture. But doesn't it seem rather “identitarian” in itself always to discover the ever-same in what you, yourself, happen to be?

Hypocrite PMC—mon semblable—mon frère!