

Professional Employees' Transformative Potential: Labour Aristocracy or New Working Class

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ABSTRACT: Class forces founded in production relations are basic agents of continuity and change in all societies today. The main distinction is between those who own means of production and those they hire to produce goods and services, along with others they hire to coordinate and control the producers. Of course, these class differences interact with relations based on race, gender, age and other specific conditions. But those analysts who choose to focus on these factors while either ignoring class relations or reducing them to cultural distinctions are missing the underlying profit-driven dynamic of advanced capitalism. The aim of this paper is to identify the basic classes producing goods and services in advanced capitalism and assess their disposition to progressive change. If we want to move toward a sustainable equitable future, we need to 'find the horses' to get us there. Are non-managerial professional employees' likely candidates?

KEYWORDS: Professional Classes; New Working Class; Oppositional Class Consciousness; Wealth Effect

Introduction

The neoliberal austerity offensive of the past generation has produced wage stagnation and reduced social benefits for workers, record profits for global corporate capitalists and extreme economic inequality. The Great Recession of 2007-8 and the COVID-19 pandemic have only accentuated these tendencies. At the same time, the many effluents of capitalist industrialization now pose imminent threats to any sustainable ecosystem. Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine and the NATO-aided counter-offensive should remind us all of the massive military and nuclear destructive capacities of inter-capitalist conflicts. All of these conditions have been well-documented. The current moment should be provoking concerted efforts by progressive forces everywhere to identify and act toward realizing a more sustainable equitable future. One element largely missing in such efforts to date is class analysis of potential transformative forces that could be involved.

Since Plato, philosophers have aspired to be kings. Technocrats are now occasionally appointed to head crisis-bound governments. But the much-heralded 'professional-managerial class' (PMC) does not exist. It is largely a figment of the imaginations of various intellectual apologists for the similarly fictitious 'post-industrial society' and 'knowledge-based economy' (see Livingstone, Adams and Sawchuk 2021; Camfield 2020). The basic animating notion—promoted most influentially by Daniel Bell (1973)—is that a new form of production was emerging in which skilled mental labour would predominate over manual labour, and that knowledge workers and those who coordinated their labours would become the most influential class, while manual workers would diminish and business owners would increasingly defer to the technical wisdom of these experts. The myth was effectively trashed on conceptual and empirical grounds (see Meiksins 1986).

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But it continues to be reproduced even by critical intellectuals who now point to a “professional class” of technocrats and other knowledge workers whose fixation on objective scientific facts actually aids global capitalists maintain control of the production system and impedes genuine progress on climate change (e.g. Huber 2022). As I will document, both *managers* and *non-managerial professional employees* have increased as proportions of the class structure in advanced capitalism since the 1980s. But shared growth is hardly sufficient reason to treat them as a coherent class.

This professional-managerial class never happened. Corporate capitalist owners have gained increasingly concentrated economic and political power in all advanced capitalist economies. They have hired increasing numbers of managers, many without specialized professional training but with assured allegiance to their owners and with delegated authority to coordinate and control the growing numbers of non-managerial professional employees. These professional employees are the most rapidly increasing part of the class structure of advanced capitalism. But there is now solid empirical evidence that they have much less control of their jobs compared to corporate owners and managers, as well as diminishing benefits for their specialized skills and training. There is no indication that non-managerial professional employees are becoming part of a new ruling class.

The evidence in this paper will demonstrate the fallacy of the PMC. A more difficult challenge is overcoming the tendency to treat all those who share professional occupational training as one big family. They are not. Some professionally trained folks become self-employed and may eventually become employers. Others may become managers. Most become non-managerial employees. As owners/employers, managers or non-managerial workers they have different class interests. A recent book provides ample proof of these class differences among professionals in general and engineers and nurses in particular (Livingstone et al 2021). The facts that many folks trained in a given profession tend to join the same professional association and that most of the research literature on professionals ignores distinct professional classes are not a sufficient basis to deny their existence. The issue is very relevant for potential political change because professional employees are now strategically placed knowledge workers designing, performing, reviewing and adapting the information-based production activities that increasingly pervade the paid workplaces of advanced capitalism. The capture of their specialized knowledge (i.e. by burgeoning ‘knowledge management’ offensives) is seen as vital for continuing profitability and productivity (e.g. Drucker 1998). At the same time, professional employees are increasingly becoming one of the largest groups of non-managerial workers and joining the labour movement.

So, the central issue is not to celebrate professionals as part of a PMC rising to dominance in the ‘knowledge economy’. It is to assess the working conditions of non-managerial professional employees and consider the extent to which these strategic knowledge workers align themselves with capitalist class interests or support the class interests of other labouring classes. The real question in terms of class forces with transformative potential is whether they are more likely to become a new labour aristocracy or a new working class.

The labour aristocracy thesis has had many variants. The central claim is that a relatively well-paid highly skilled echelon of wage-earners in advanced capitalist countries has ‘taken the bribe’. That is, relatively affluent and secure working conditions have made them comfortable with capitalism and reluctant to do much to support their more downtrodden comrades. Variants of this thesis have often been resorted to by progressive intellectuals when non-managerial workers have not met their revolutionary expectations (see Post 2010 for an extensive critical review).

Conversely, the new working-class thesis has played up the revolutionary potential of skilled technical workers in more automated forms of production to gain greater control of their workplaces and lead revolutionary actions (Mallet 1975). Variants of this thesis taken up with enthusiasm in the 1960s were first dismissed by empirical researchers (Gallie 1978) and have now largely devolved into searches for nominees among highly qualified precarious and dissatisfied gig workers (e.g. Winant 2017).

So, what does relevant empirical evidence tell us today with regard to non-managerial professional employees, the knowledge workers who are now effectively a main focus of both labour aristocracy and new working-class theses? In this paper, I will first use the best available empirical evidence since the early 1990s on G7 and Scandinavian countries to document the main changes in the class structure of advanced capitalist economies. Then the general working conditions of non-managerial professional employees will be compared with the upper managers who some presume to be combining with them into the ‘professional-managerial class’. Professional employees will also be compared with non-managerial industrial workers, who have long been regarded as the leading working-class force and with service workers, two groups typically seen as the traditional working class. Finally, I use survey data on political attitudes to provide evidence of the extent to which non-managerial professional employees and those in other class positions express either pro-labour oppositional class consciousness or pro-capital oppositional consciousness. This will provide some initial estimates of the extent to which these strategic knowledge workers may be inclined to become a new working class disposed to progressive political action against capital or, conversely, to become a highly qualified and relatively affluent contemporary labour aristocracy.

Changing Employment Class Structure of Advanced Capitalism

There is an increasingly convergent view among critical class analysts that the employment class structure of advanced capitalism is *tripartite* in character. As noted at the outset, there are owners of businesses, non-managerial producers of goods and services, as well as managers. To stay in business, owners are driven by profit imperatives. The non-managerial workers they hire are driven by the need to gain sufficient benefits to sustain themselves and their families. The managerial hierarchy is driven by both imperatives, with relative priority linked to where they are in the hierarchy. More specifically, we can distinguish ten class positions among these three basic groups in contemporary production relations:

<i>Owners</i>	<i>Non-managerial workers</i>	<i>Managerial employees</i>
• Corporate capitalists	• Professional employees	• Upper managers
• Large employers	• Service workers	• Middle managers
• Small employers	• Industrial workers	• Supervisors
• Self-employed		

I have critically reviewed the relevant research literature, defined and documented all these classes more carefully elsewhere (Livingstone et al 2021; Livingstone 2023). But here I will focus mainly on professional employees in comparison with other non-managerial workers and with upper managers, the class groups that the new working-class, labour aristocracy and PMC theses, respectively, presume as their close allies.

Non-managerial workers include *industrial workers* who produce material goods in extractive, manufacturing and construction sectors. Second *service workers* create or deliver a wide array of sales, business, social and other services. Third, *professional employees* are recognized for specialized knowledge and granted some discretionary control to: a) design production processes for themselves and others; and b) have executed their own work with a relatively high level of autonomy, but they remain subordinated to employer and managerial prerogatives.² Upper *managers* are delegated by owners to control the overall labour process at the point of production to ensure profitability, but also contribute their labour to co-ordinate this process. Under the authority of upper managers, there are middle managers who perform administrative and accounting staff services, as well as supervisors who control adherence to production standards by industrial and service workers but may also collaborate directly with them in aspects of this work. These lower-level managers have not typically been regarded as part of a presumed PMC and will not be included in the following comparisons.

First, I will summarize some of the main features of this class structure over the past 3 decades, based on the best available comparative data for the G7 and Scandinavian countries. The most readily available cross-national source of comparative data on recent employment class structures is the International Labour Office (2015) data set on Key Indicators in the Labour Market (KILM). The KILM report builds on the census data reported by countries to ILO. The KILM report relies on internationally comparable criteria derived from statistical standards agreed by the International Conference of Labour Statisticians. The KILM data provide quite accurate estimates of employment by *status*--the numbers of employers, self-employed and employees—in these countries. Employment by *occupation* data are also provided, distinguishing managers as well as professional, service workers and industrial workers in non-managerial occupations.

But there are a few limits to these occupational data. First, occupation does not equate to class (see Wright 1980). Someone with occupational training as an engineer or nurse could become an employer, self-employed, a manager or a professional employee, with quite different class interests. The KILM data provided do not permit extracting employers and self-employed from the occupational distributions. So, I have taken the numbers of employers and self-employed for given years in these countries from the employment by status data and expressed the occupational distributions of managers as well as professional, service workers and industrial workers as proportions of the residual occupational data when employers and self-employed are removed. Second, the ‘managers’ occupational data category includes only those with primary formal managerial occupations and omits many who combine other occupations with some formal managerial duties. A significant number of lower level managers (i.e. middle managers and supervisors) are buried in the non-managerial occupational groups.

Comparable KILM data are available from 1992 to 2016 and beyond. With the above provisos, basic estimated distributions of main employment classes for G7 and Scandinavian countries in 1992 and 2016 are summarized in Table 1.

² See Livingstone (2014) and Livingstone, Adams and Sawchuk (2021) for further discussion and empirical analysis distinguishing professional employees from professional owners, self-employed professionals and professional managers. Professional employees are found throughout private and public industrial and service sectors.

Table 1 Employment Class Structure, G7 and Scandinavian Countries, (1992) and 2016 (% of employed labour force)

Country	Employers	Self-employed	Managers	Professional employees	Service workers	Industrial workers
Canada	(6) 5	(8) 11	(9) 7	(23) 31	(25) 23	(28) 24
Denmark	(4) 3	(5) 5	(4)	(29) 40	(27) 26	(31) 24
Finland	(4) 4	(12) 10	(4) 3	(22) 37	(30) 22	(28) 24
France	(5) 4	(8) 7	(6) 6	(27) 34	(26) 21	(29) 27
Germany	(5) 4	(4) 6	(4) 4	(28) 36	(25) 25	(34) 25
Italy	(8) 7	(19) 16	(2) 3	(18) 25	(21) 23	(33) 26
Japan	(4) 2	(11) 6	(3) 2	(18) 24	(37) 39	(27) 27
Norway	(4) 2	(6) 5	(13) 7	(21) 42	(27) 25	(30) 20
Sweden	(4) 4	(8) 6	(4) 5	(30) 42	(25) 23	(29) 20
UK	(4) 2	(9) 13	(9) 9	(30) 32	(24) 24	(25) 20
US	(4)	(5) 4	(8) 10	(29) 34	(28) 27	(26) 23

Source: Livingstone 2023 (estimated from ILO KILM Report, 2015).

These data permit the following general conclusions. The vast majority of those in the employed labour force are now hired employees. In most of these countries this amounts to over 85 percent of those employed. Employers and self-employed make up less than 15 percent of the labour force in most countries, and the self-employed are twice as numerous as employers.

Professional employees are increasing significantly and now make up over 30 percent of the labour force in nearly all of these countries. Those in skilled trades, machine operators and other manual occupations ('industrial workers') are declining significantly and now make up less than 35 percent of the labour force in all these countries. Those in clerical, sales and service occupations ('service workers') are also now declining at least slightly in most of these countries and generally make up under 30 percent of the labour force. Those in definite managerial positions are relatively small numbers -- but they are supplemented by those in other non-managerial occupations with some formal managerial or supervisory duties.

The conflating of some lower-level managers with non-managerial occupations is problematic. Much conventional empirical research continues to confuse employment classes with occupations. To the immediate point, professional employees who become managers should not be presumptively conflated with either professional employees per se or with the smaller numbers of professional employers (Livingstone et al 2021). A series of national labour force surveys conducted in Canada between 1982 and 2016 permit more accurate class distinctions, as summarized in Table 2.³

³ The data in most of the following tables is drawn from Livingstone (2023) where there is much further documentation.

Table 2 General Class Distribution, Employed Labour Force, Canada, 1982-2016 (%)

General class location	Employment class	1982	1998	2004	2010	2016
Owners						
	Corporate capitalist/large employer	>1	>1	>1	>1	>1
	Small employer	3	6	6	5	4
	Self-employed	13	10	13	12	10
	All owners	16	16	19	17	14
Managerial						
	Upper manager	1	1	2	2	2
	Mid/low manager	4	7	10	10	13
	Supervisor	4	6	6	6	5
	All managerial	9	14	18	18	20
Non-managerial						
	Professional employee	12	17	18	24	23
	Service worker	33	26	22	23	25
	Industrial worker	30	27	23	18	18
	All non-managerial	75	70	63	65	66
	Employed N	1758	873	5570	1192	2881

Source: Livingstone, 2023

Owners, including tiny numbers of corporate capitalists and large employers, small numbers of small employers and larger numbers of self-employed, all of whom control their own businesses, have continued to make up around 15 percent of the employed labour force. The numbers of corporate capitalists and large employers are both too small for accurate estimates of change with these samples. Corporate capitalists are very tiny in number. Even though the cut-off limit for ‘large’ employers is as low as having 10 employees in these surveys, they remain at less than 1 percent of the labour force. These findings are consistent with mounting international evidence that more national capital assets are being consolidated in fewer hands (Serfati 2014).

The survey evidence does indicate that small employers have remained a consistently small percentage of the labour force. Small employers continue to generate significant numbers of new jobs but often with very limited security for either their employees or themselves. The self-employed have continued to be a more substantial portion of the labour force, around 10 percent, albeit highly prone to bankruptcy and downward mobility into hired labour posts or unemployment, and with more limited prospects of becoming successful enough to hire others and become small employers. Nearly all self-employed remain highly dependent on their own labour, whether in independent enterprises or increasingly subcontracting to larger firms.

Among non-managerial employees, a decline of manufacturing jobs during this period is a major consequence of automation and the export of less skilled jobs to less developed countries. The result has been a reduction of employment of industrial workers in private material goods producing sectors to less than 20 percent of the employed labour force.

A relative growth of service workers, or 'white collar proletarians'; through most of the 20th century was grounded in increasing recognition by capital of the service sector as the 'new frontier' for commodification, as well as the initial difficulty of mechanizing the growing array of discrete clerical recording and personal sales tasks involved in realizing the profits on the burgeoning numbers of material goods. Growth of public service workers was also related to processing general population entitlements for health, education and other state benefits even in the wake of plant closures and office computerization. But, more recently, automation and routinization have also led to the rapid rise of self-service (think of the declines of bank tellers, secretarial pools, travel agents and toll booth collectors) and the export of portable service jobs. Clerical, sales and service workers have therefore declined somewhat since the 1980s although still making up around a quarter of the employed labour force. Professional employees roughly doubled in size to over 20 percent of the employed labour force, consistent with a multitude of predictions about the centrality of 'knowledge workers' in the 'new economy'. Professional employees may now be a larger part of the employed labour force than the declining numbers of industrial workers.

An absolute growth of managerial positions has been generally predicted in terms of the need to coordinate and control an increasingly capital- and technology-intensive labor process (Kenney 1997). Managerial employees actually grew substantially during this period, now making up about 20 percent of the labour force. Upper managers, who control a plant, branch or division of an entire organization, have increased in absolute numbers but still make up only 2 percent of the labour force. Most of the proportionate increase has been in middle management, 'back office' administrative functions regulating non-managerial workers and accounting for production output. Direct supervisors and forepersons still make up about the same proportion of the overall labour force as previously, so a smaller proportion of management per se is now devoted to direct supervision. As the managerial hierarchy has expanded, more managers themselves are managed. In 1982, around a third of all managers had no manager above them to whom they were required to report; by 2010, the proportion had declined to around 5 percent (Livingstone, Pollock and Raykov, 2016). This change is mainly reflective of the general inflation of the numbers of middle managers subordinated to upper managers. It should be noted here that there has been a pervasive assumption that all levels of managers generally share similar orientations. But given their different coordinating and controlling roles, significant polarization of their powers has now been found (Livingstone et al 2021).

So, overall, there have likely been three substantial changes in employment class structure during this period. First and foremost, professional employees with their more specialized knowledge have become a much larger part of the non-managerial labour force. Secondly, the traditional working class of industrial workers and service workers, who mainly provide their labour without specialized requirements, has declined from a majority to a minority of the entire employed labour force. Thirdly, middle managers are playing a larger role in regulating production processes.

Some class analysts might accept the general accuracy of this profile of class structure as well as these recent structural changes. But there is a popular tendency to stress more a growing precariousness among non-managerial employees, as well as to portray those in the most temporary insecure jobs as distinctly more dissatisfied and possibly more predisposed to political extremism in response to their fears, with some in this 'precariat' portrayed as a new working class to fight for progressive change (e.g. Standing 2011). Two points here. First, there may have been some increases in proportions of those in part-time jobs during this period. But the most careful

estimates of presumed dimensions of precarity confirm that such changes have been marginal at best and have not significantly altered the employment class structure beyond the general changes documented above (Ornstein 2021). Secondly, few significant differences in either basic working conditions or political attitudes have been found between those who are full time or involuntary part-time in these respective class positions (Livingstone 2023). Workers' sense of exploitation undoubtedly varies on many dimensions. But most non-managerial workers in capitalism share the precarious condition of being free to find another employer or unemployment challenges, as well as a general relative worsening of wages and working conditions since the onset of neoliberal austerity. Being full or part-time, regular or temporary, does not appear to alter workers' sense of these conditions much—in spite of much huffing and puffing about greater precarity.

Class and Workplace Power

In general, we can expect employers to exercise an overarching prerogative of ownership in their firms, managers to exercise more limited authority in delegated terms, and non-managerial employees to be primarily subject to these ownership and managerial powers. A central dimension of workplace power is the extent of direct involvement in organizational decision-making. Respondents to the series of Canadian surveys were asked whether they participated in significant decision making in their organizations either by making decisions by themselves or with others about such matters as the types of products or services delivered, employee hiring and firing, budgets, workload, and change in procedure. The extent to which people participate in making these kinds of decisions-- their organizational decision-making power-- is likely to be very relevant to the degree to which they can exercise their autonomy and effectively utilize their skills in their particular jobs. Table 3 summarizes the findings for different general employment classes as well as the different professional classes in the 2016 national survey.

Table 3 Employment Class by Participation in Organizational Decision-Making, Canada, 2016 (% Yes)

Employment Class	General Labour Force*	Professionals
	%	%
Employers	88	100
Self-employed	69	51
Managers	62	50
Professional employees	27	27
Service workers	27	--
Industrial workers	27	--
Total	42	36
Total N	2759	702

Source: Livingstone et al 2021.

*General Labour Force class data include respondents in professional classes ($N=702$)

As expected, employers generally as well as professional employers are all involved in significant organizational decision-making--with the exception of a few large employers who choose to fully delegate to their managers. The self-employed, including self-employed professionals, would also be expected to be the primary decision-makers in their own businesses, but some are now reliant on sub-contracts with larger corporations with little further influence. Managers generally and professional managers in particular, as expected, have intermediate levels of involvement on organizational decisions: less than employers but more than non-managerial

employees. The extent of managerial authority can vary greatly from upper managers with power similar to employers to supervisors with much less. *But only about a quarter of professional employees now indicate any involvement in organizational decision-making, a level comparable to both service workers and industrial workers.* In spite of their specialized skills, professional employees in general are now less likely to be involved in organizational decisions than most managerial personnel and no more likely than less formally qualified non-managerial employees. At least by this measure of workplace power, the indications from this time series of Canadian surveys suggest that the job control of professional employees has been diminishing in recent decades, consistent with arguments for the ‘proletarianization of professionals’ (e.g. Oppenheimer 1973).

Further analyses of this time series of national surveys from 1982 to 2016 confirm that professional employees have been experiencing both increasing levels of underemployment of their credentials as well as decreasing opportunities to participate in further education to maintain and upgrade their skills (Livingstone et al 2021). Professional employees previously were favoured over other non-managerial workers both in terms of lower levels of underemployment given their scarcer qualifications and in terms of greater chances for further education given their strategic production value. But the gap has been quickly closing and a ‘reserve army’ of professional workers grows.

These documented changes in workplace power, underemployment and continuing learning opportunities all suggest that professional employees are experiencing relatively worsening working conditions. So what effects if any are these changes having on class consciousness?

Oppositional Class Consciousness

Most recent studies of class consciousness have focused on questions of class identity or specific political attitudes. Studies of class identity usually find that people locate themselves in terms of consumption levels, with growing numbers seeing themselves in the ‘middle classes’, that is neither rich nor poor—a reasonably accurate estimate for most consumers in advanced capitalist societies. Most steelworkers for example in the 1980s considered themselves to be middle-class in terms of wage levels; at the same time, they were among the most progressive groups in terms of political attitudes (Secombe and Livingstone 1999). In conceptual terms, three levels of class consciousness are commonly distinguished (see Mann 1973): class identity; oppositional consciousness; and hegemonic capitalist or revolutionary labour class consciousness.

- Class identity is awareness of classes and extent of affiliation with a particular class;
- Oppositional consciousness is recognition of conflict of interest with another class or classes; and
- Hegemonic (or revolutionary) consciousness is recognition of a vision of society consistent with your class interest and commitment to maintain (or realize) this vision.

In the wake of major worker and student protests in 1968, particularly in France in May and in Italy's 'hot autumn, there were various inquiries into the higher levels of class consciousness in advanced capitalist countries.⁴ Since the 1970s, there have been very few critical studies that have investigated higher levels of class consciousness and even fewer that have examined connections between class consciousness and class position (see Livingstone 2023). In the wake of the Great Recession, continuing neoliberal austerity and the COVID-19 pandemic, it is surely time for more. Here I will summarize highlights from the rare few relevant empirical studies since that time and then assess the current relative connections of employment class and household wealth with higher levels of class consciousness. The main focus will be on oppositional class consciousness.

Oppositional class consciousness in capitalism involves the extent to which the interests of capital and labour are recognized. The basic interest of capital is in the right to maximize profits. The basic interest of labour is in the right to strike, to withhold labour for decent benefits. Someone with clearly pro-capital oppositional consciousness would support profit maximization and also oppose workers' unconditional right to strike. Conversely, pro-labour oppositional consciousness involves opposing profit maximization and unconditionally supporting workers' right to strike. Those with more mixed views on these two questions could be seen as holding a contradictory oppositional consciousness. A coherent oppositional level of class consciousness can be seen as pivotal for understanding the extent of conflict between class interests. Without a clear sense of opposed class interests, any vision of an alternative society is more unlikely to be translated into concerted political action.

The main questions used to estimate opposed class interests in the most recent Canadian labour force survey and the several prior international and Canadian surveys are:

Rights of capital: "Owners of corporations make gains at the expense of their workers."

Rights of labour: "During a strike, management should be prohibited by law from hiring workers to take the place of strikers."

The merits of these specific questions are certainly open to debate. But they are pretty much the only game in town for the moment and at least offer suggestive findings. A rare set of cross-national surveys containing these questions was done in the early 1980s.⁵ I have conducted a secondary analysis of the data to generate the estimates of oppositional class consciousness in Table 4.

⁴ For representative studies including these 'higher' levels of class consciousness, mainly in the late 1960s and 1970s, see: Touraine (1966); Leggett (1968); Ollman (1972); Hazelrigg (1973); and Moorhouse (1976). For earlier presentations of my own approach and more extensive literature reviews, see Livingstone (1976, 1985, 1987).

⁵ These surveys were conducted under the leadership of the late Erik Olin Wright. The data are publicly available. For further information on the CSCC project data, and access to the data base, interested researchers can contact the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, citing: Wright, Erik Olin. Comparative Project on Class Structure and Class Consciousness: Core and Country-Specific Files. [distributor], 1992-02-17. <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR09323.v1>.

Table 4 Oppositional Class Consciousness, Advanced Capitalist Countries, 1980s

Country	Pro-capital (%)	Contradictory (%)	Pro-labour (%)
Australia	32	47	22
Canada	15	44	42
Japan	8	45	47
Norway	28	45	28
Sweden	11	34	56
US	23	47	30

Source: Livingstone 2023.

Many analysts of class consciousness during this period argued—without much direct evidence—that contradictory class consciousness was prevalent in advanced capitalist societies, with many workers’ views clouded by a dominant capitalist ideology (see Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 1982 for critical discussion). The findings for the surveyed countries offer some support for this thesis. But that argument ignores two other important empirical findings. First, oppositional labour consciousness was nearly equivalent to or greater than contradictory consciousness in some countries. Secondly, pro-labour oppositional consciousness was greater than pro-capital consciousness in most countries. Sweden was the leading case, with a majority expressing pro-labour consciousness and only a small minority indicating pro-capital consciousness.

The later series of national surveys conducted only in Canada offers estimates of the more recent development of oppositional class consciousness. The general findings are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5 Oppositional Class Consciousness, Canada, 1982-2016

Oppositional Class consciousness	Year	Pro-capital (%)	Contradictory (%)	Pro-labour (%)
	1982	15	44	42
	2004	12	54	34
	2010	13	55	33
	2016	10	54	36

Source: Livingstone 2023.

The general pattern of oppositional consciousness has been fairly consistent during this period. Contradictory consciousness has been most common, with many people either choosing to pragmatically accept the opposed rights of both capital and labour, or to avoid making a choice on one or the other. Some researchers have argued that such pragmatic acceptance is pervasive among subordinated classes (e.g. Mann 1970). But once again this ignores the other basic findings. Pro-labour oppositional consciousness has remained substantial throughout this period (33 to 42 percent) and much greater than pro-labour oppositional consciousness (10 to 15 percent). The pertinent issue now is how these patterns of oppositional class consciousness are connected to employment class positions.

Employment Class and Oppositional Class Consciousness

For class in the production relations of advanced capitalism to have prospects for progressive political significance, there have to be discernible connections between exploited peoples' grounded experience in these relations and their consciousness of their exploitation. The most basic assumption here is that non-managerial employees are exploited workers. Therefore, there should be distinctive connections between these workers' class locations and their expressions of opposition to capitalist working conditions. More specifically, there should be positive associations between non-managerial employee classes and expressions of *pro-labour oppositional class consciousness*.

Conversely, there should be positive associations among corporate capitalists, larger employers and upper managers with *pro-capital oppositional class consciousness*. Those in more intermediate class positions—small employers and the self-employed, as well as lower level managers—should express more mixed variants of these forms of class consciousness. The basic findings from the rare cross-national surveys in the early 1980s that distinguished employment classes adequately and also included oppositional consciousness questions are summarized in Table 6. The focus is on non-managerial employees as well as large employers and upper managers, and the extent to which they expressed pro-labour versus pro-capital views. The remainder in each class expressed contradictory consciousness.

Table 6 Class by Oppositional Class Consciousness, Advanced Capitalist Countries, 1980s
(% pro-labour/pro-capital views)

Employment Class	U.S.	Norway	Canada	Japan	Sweden
Corporate capitalist	n/a	n/a	0/80	n/a	n/a
Large employer	8/50	17/43	9/55	25/38	0/100
Upper manager	15/46	14/47	6/53	*	26/32
Professional employee	36/22	26/27	48/14	49/9	52/12
Service worker	30/17	29/25	41/13	50/5	59/7
Industrial worker	40/13	39/16	54/8	51/9	71/3
Total %	30/23	28/28	42/15	46/8	55/11
Total N	1697	1676	1758	547	1137

Source: Livingstone 2023.

*Japanese upper managers were not distinguished from middle managers in this sample

Corporate capitalists have extremely rarely permitted assessment of their oppositional class consciousness. But in an exceptional series of Canadian surveys that addressed the relevant questions, representative samples of corporate executives consistently expressed much higher levels of pro-capital consciousness than any other class groups, and a total absence of pro-labour consciousness (Livingstone 2023). This is in keeping with the classic notion of ideological hegemony (see Livingstone 1976), where the leading fraction of the dominant class inherently believes in and acts to realize its class interests while other subordinate classes are expected to express more mixed or contradictory views and are vulnerable to alliances and actions against their class interests. Consistent with this perspective, large employers and upper managers in most countries were more likely to express pro-capital views than mixed views and much less likely to indicate pro-labour sympathies.

Patterns of oppositional consciousness among all three groups of non-managerial workers were quite different than this. While contradictory consciousness was often the most common view, in almost every instance pro-labour consciousness was greater than pro-capital consciousness and often far greater. In every case, professional employees were far less likely than upper managers to indicate pro-capital views. Professional employees were generally much closer to industrial workers and service workers in their pro-labour views. Sweden was the leading case, with majorities among all three groups of non-managerial workers expressing pro-labour views and with very few holding pro-capital views. It is also notable that in the wake of the serious challenge to the sanctity of profits by a proposed wage-earner fund (the Meidner Plan), large Swedish employers expressed the strongest unanimity in defence of profits and against strikes.

But the basic point here for my immediate purpose is clear confirmation that non-managerial workers in general and professional employees in almost every case were more likely to hold pro-labour views than pro-capital views, indicating substantial awareness of opposed class interests with capital among the most exploited workers. The sole exception was Norway where a tradition of use of earnings from public ownership of major corporations--and especially international profits from North Sea oil since the 1960s--to improve Norwegian workers benefits complicates views on benefits of profit maximization and thereby weakens pro-labour oppositional consciousness. This might be seen as a point in favour of the labour aristocracy thesis, but even here non-managerial workers overall were more likely to express pro-labour than pro-capital views.

More recent assessments of connections between employment class and oppositional consciousness need to rely on the later series of Canadian surveys. The basic findings on pro-labour and pro-capital views are presented in Table 7. Again, the residual in each class expressed contradictory consciousness.

Table 7 Class by Oppositional Class Consciousness, Canada, 1982-2016

(% pro-labour/pro-capital views)

Employment Class	1982	2004	2010	2016
Corporate capitalist*	0/80	2/64	n/a	n/a
Large employer	9/55	11/37	0/25	11/17
Upper manager	6/53	23/33	14/28	17/23
Professional employee	48/14	38/10	40/8	41/8
Service worker	41/13	39/9	27/13	37/7
Industrial worker	54/8	41/11	37/14	49/6
Total %	15/42	13/35	13/33	10/37
Total N	1758	2776	1193	2883

Source: Livingstone 2023.

The patterns of oppositional class consciousness among non-managerial workers in Canada remained quite consistent over this period. Pro-labour views were much greater than pro-capital views among industrial workers, service workers and professional employees. All were more likely to recognize their shared exploitation than to accede to the ideological claims of capital. While direct evidence is lacking since 2000, it is safe to assume that most corporate capitalists still hold strong pro-capital views. But there has been a notable change among capitals' closest allies. Both large employers and upper managers express diminishing support for capital. Their majority pro-capital views in 1982 have declined to small minorities while mixed and pro-labour views have increased. This decline appears to be based at least partly on a growing sense among most employers and managers that corporate profits are increasingly benefitting corporate owners at their expense as well.

So, the weight of available empirical evidence suggests that professional employees and upper managers generally have quite different working conditions and forms of oppositional class consciousness. The evidence should be sufficient to dismiss the fiction of an emergent 'professional-managerial class'. The further findings that professional employees do increasingly share working conditions with and consistently express pro-labour oppositional consciousness similar to industrial workers and service workers provides support for their development as a 'new working class'. The remaining issue is whether the more well-paid non-managerial workers, including professional employees, have 'bought the bribe' and become more supportive of capitalism than other workers.

The Wealth Effect

The 2016 Canadian national labour force survey included a question on net total wealth. Respondents were asked to estimate the value of their owned house, vehicles and other consumer durables, cash, checking and savings accounts, stocks and mutual funds, private retirement accounts, and any other assets, minus their mortgage and any other debts. The sample size is reduced because people generally are more reluctant to share financial information. Older workers are more likely to have accumulated more assets while unionized workers benefit from at least some wage premium. On the other hand, since the 1970s the hired labour force has become much more burdened by personal debt which has reduced net assets very considerably. In any case, the basic effects of net wealth on pro-labour oppositional consciousness for key employment classes are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8 Oppositional Class Consciousness by Employment Class and Household Wealth, Canada, 2016 (% pro-labour oppositional consciousness)

Household wealth (\$)	<20,000	20—75,000	75-150,000	150-500,000	500-1 million	1 million+	All wealth levels
Class position							
Corporate capitalist	--	--	--	--	--	0	0
Large employer	--	0	0	0	0	0	0
Upper manager	--	0	0	14	50	10	19
Professional employee	55	39	42	44	36	32	44
Service worker	39	45	37	41	32	57	40
Industrial worker	61	44	45	57	52	57	54
Total	48	42	35	38	36	28	40

Source: Livingstone 2023

In assessing the findings in Table 8, we should keep in mind the overall pattern of oppositional class consciousness in the labour force in 2016 (see Table 5): a small majority with mixed or contradictory consciousness, over a third with pro-labour consciousness and only around 10 percent with pro-capital consciousness. In terms of specific classes, corporate capitalists--generally with net assets over a million dollars--continued to express strong pro-capital views with no pro-labour support in the latest available survey. This only confirms what should be self-evident. In some contrast, large employers have become more disenchanted with exclusion from burgeoning corporate profits, but regardless of their level of wealth they are still clear about their basic class interest in opposing labour's right to strike. Upper managers are also becoming more disenchanted with profit exclusion and some with greater asset security may even increased express support for labour rights. But at most levels of wealth there are still only miniscule pro-labour views at best among those who have been corporate capital's closest allies. None of this should be surprising--aside from glimmers of pro-labour views among some relatively well-off public sector upper managers.

The findings for effects of wealth on the oppositional consciousness of non-managerial workers are directly relevant to the labour aristocracy thesis. First, there is virtually no support for claims that either industrial workers or service workers become more accepting of capitalist interests as they accrue greater assets. Majorities among both industrial workers with less than 20,000 dollars and those with over a million in net assets express pro-labour oppositional consciousness. Service workers may be even more likely to express pro-labour consciousness as they gain greater asset security. It should be kept in mind that much of this asset wealth is in rapidly escalating housing prices which could collapse equally rapidly. At least in these terms, acquiring relatively greater assets is not leading the traditional working class to 'take the bribe'.

The findings for professional employees are not quite so clear. The majority of professional employees with very little net wealth express pro-labour oppositional consciousness. These are mainly younger professionals who are underemployed with large debt burdens. Professional employees who have been able to gain some net assets with highly specialized individual skills may be somewhat less likely to hold pro-labour views. But pro-labour consciousness remains much more common than pro-capital views among professional employees at all levels of wealth including those with over a million in net assets. In common with other non-managerial workers, few professional employees at any wealth level express pro-capital views. There is no significant indication here that professional employees who have accrued more net assets are becoming more sympathetic to capitalism. Their general patterns of oppositional class consciousness are much more similar to those of industrial and service workers than to ‘big capital’ and upper management. At least on the available evidence from the Canadian case, professional employees are not becoming labour aristocrats. Their working conditions and views are converging with other non-managerial workers and they could well be considered as a new working class.

According to further analyses of these survey data, there are also important effects of race and union status on oppositional class consciousness. Black workers, who are more likely to be oppressed/discriminated against in their workplaces, are also more likely to express pro-labour consciousness, with the strongest expression among Black industrial workers (74 percent) compared to white workers (50 percent). Union effects are not quite as strong but majorities of industrial workers, service workers and professional employees who are unionized all express pro-labour views. Finally, a word about findings on revolutionary class consciousness, as analyzed in detail in the related book (Livingstone 2023). Both hegemonic capitalist consciousness and revolutionary labour consciousness--the highest forms of class consciousness--are expressed by small proportions of the labour force. But professional employees are now just as likely as industrial workers to express revolutionary labour consciousness.

Conclusions

On the basis of this investigation, I draw the following conclusions. Non-managerial professional employees are now the most substantial increasing part of the employment class structure in advanced capitalism. Professional employees share both working conditions and extent of progressive class consciousness with industrial workers and service workers, and all three sorts of non-managerial workers sense their exploitation in capitalist production relations to similar extent. Professional employees are quite distinct from upper managers in both working conditions and class consciousness, and they are not part of the false amalgam ‘professional-managerial class’ that some pundits have concocted. There is little support for the labour aristocracy thesis often used to rationalize labour quiescence. Professional employees and other non-managerial workers who have accrued more net wealth are about as likely as workers with less net assets to express pro-labour oppositional class consciousness.

The rejection of the labour aristocracy thesis is consistent with most of the careful historical research on progressive labour movements. As John Kelley (1988 p 165) observed: ‘Historically, the most class conscious and militant sections of the working class have often been those whose earnings, job security and status placed them in a position of relative privilege relative to many of their fellow workers’. Charlie Post (2010, 33) more recently concurs: “...relatively well-paid and securely employed workers...tend to be concentrated in large, capital-intensive workplaces that are often central to the capitalist economy. These workers have considerable social power when they act collectively. Strikes in these industries have a much greater impact on the economy than

workers in smaller, less capital-intensive workplaces (garment, office-cleaning, etc.) Workers in such industries are also often the first targets of capitalist restructuring in periods of falling profits and sharpened competition.” Finally, these workers often have a greater commitment to the collective defence and improvement of their jobs than the lower-paid.

Professional employees are now among the most highly skilled, relatively well-paid non-managerial workers in advanced capitalism and with comparable oppositional class consciousness to industrial workers. Over the past century, democratic national transitions have clearly been more likely to take place when opposition to the incumbent regime has been led by industrial workers (Dahlum et al 2019). Whatever political alliances emerge to lead grassroots transition, one thing is quite likely. Representatives of non-managerial hired labour--Marx's proletariat--will be centrally involved. In current terms this includes industrial workers, service workers and professional employees. The core of capitalism's ‘working class’ has changed markedly since the Industrial Revolution. But these are the people who are now most directly exploited by capital to generate the profits to reproduce this economic system. They have often been divided on bases of race, gender, education and urban-rural grounds but they have remained consistently those with the most oppositional labour class consciousness.

Further analysis suggests that professional employees are now also just as likely as industrial workers to be among the smaller numbers who express revolutionary labour consciousness needed to lead democratic transitions. (Livingstone 2023). Professional employees may not be likely to give themselves ‘working class’ identities. But most workers now see themselves in the middle of the class structure and this has not prevented either industrial steelworkers or professional nurses from developing among the highest levels of pro-labour oppositional consciousness (Seccombe and Livingstone 1999; Livingstone et al 2021; Livingstone 2023). In addition, professional employees are now among the most highly organized workers and they are increasingly represented in professional unions within national labour congresses.

More empirical research is certainly needed to confirm and deepen the findings presented here. Similar comparative studies could now quickly be conducted in many countries with current survey technologies through partnerships of progressive labour and social organizations with qualified sympathetic researchers. (The design information and data for the present study are easily publicly available⁶). Such studies are infinitely easier to do now than when the elderly Marx tried in 1880 with French workers (Marx 1938). But the available direct evidence suggests that professional employees are becoming a new working class ready to play a central activist role in the labour movement of the 21st century to respond to the imminent existential threats of capitalism and to aid in leading transition to a sustainable equitable future.

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⁶ The research design, survey questionnaires, and detailed data are all publicly accessible to anyone interested at: <https://borealisdata.ca/dataverse/CanadaWorkLearningSurveys1998-2016>

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