

My Discovery of the Black Bourgeoisie

By: Deartra D. Madkins-Boone

Despite initially disliking the term "bougie" due to its pejorative use and misunderstanding of its origin, the writer gains a deeper appreciation for the positive legacy and influence of the Black bourgeoisie after researching its historical and contemporary significance.

The term "bougie" is used pejoratively within the African American community to describe someone perceived as acting above their social status, often with an undertone of betrayal or disloyalty to their racial identity.

I have been called "bougie" for most of my life. It was a term that meant an African-American who was stuck up or thought they were better than other African Americans. Oftentimes, I felt that it had more to do with my light skin tone than it had to do with my family's status. If people had done research back then, they would have discovered that I was in the lower class, just like most of them.

I hated the word bougie and never knew where it came from. At the age of 34, I discovered its origin. My research had nothing to do with the discovery of the word. I was writing a story and wanted to use the word in the story. I needed to know how to spell it. It was a slang term derived from the word bourgeois. The bourgeois definition was "relating to or belonging to the middle class of society" (Bourgeois). The definition that made sense to me was "too concerned about

wealth, possessions, and respectable behavior" (Bourgeois). After examining both words, I knew that neither of them fit me. I did no further research to understand the word or its origin, doing a true disservice to myself and the word.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels have different definitions of bourgeois. The Marxist term bourgeois refers to the richest of the rich, the capitalists (Marx 658). In Marx's day, the bourgeoisie was more than just rich people. They were the people who ruled society and had control over wealth, production, and politics. They were the people who subjugated the classes under them. They were the people who "stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers," (659). In Marxist terms, the bourgeoisie was much more than the word meant to me. In Marxist terms, one might not want to be called bourgeois because of its harsh history, but in terms of the Black bourgeois, it means something positive.

In modern-day terms, the Black bourgeoisie is much more than the cruel children in my day used the term to mean.

The term "bourgeois" is deeply layered, straddling socioeconomic, racial, and historical connotations that can significantly differ based on context. Originally derived from the French word "bourgeoisie," which refers to the middle class, the term evolved to connote a certain lifestyle or set of values associated with wealth and respectability. In a broader sense, bourgeois refers to those who are perceived as too concerned with material wealth and societal status.

The term "bougie" is used pejoratively within the African American community to describe someone perceived as acting above their social status, often with an undertone of betrayal or disloyalty to their racial identity. This interpretation aligns with the broader societal understanding but carries a heavier weight of cultural betrayal within a community historically marginalized and stratified by socioeconomic differences.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' concept of the bourgeoisie illuminates a more critical viewpoint, defining the bourgeoisie as a class that not only possesses wealth but also controls the means of production, thus dictating the economic and political landscape. Marx and Engels argue that the

bourgeoisie, through capitalism, has transformed respectable professions into mere extensions of its wealth-generating machine, reducing the autonomy and sacredness of these roles.

In modern-day terms, the Black bourgeoisie is much more than the cruel children in my day used the term to mean. "The roots of the black bourgeoisie are different than the black middle class, which evolved after the civil rights movement" (Butler). The Black bourgeoisie has a history of respect and shame. The Black bourgeoisie has been accused of "...acting differently because we were intergenerational college graduates, belonged to fraternities and sororities, started businesses, generated wealth, built big houses, and were elitist snobs. But our greatest trait is that long before desegregation, a strong tradition of college matriculation and excellence had been established. We stand on the shoulders of black merchants, some without formal education like Gaston, and visionaries such as Booker T. Washington" (Butler). The Black bourgeoisie was something to be proud of. Educated black men and women worked hard to elevate their race and to become people who controlled their destiny. They created a legacy of wealthy people who could influence the wealth of their race, the media, production, and even politics.



Portraits of resilience and power: the enduring legacy of the Black bourgeoisie in shaping history and culture.

When considering the Black bourgeoisie, the term takes on a different significance. The Black bourgeoisie is not merely a reflection of wealth but represents a lineage of educational and entrepreneurial excellence, often born from necessity and survival rather than mere wealth accumulation. Figures like Booker T. Washington and businesses founded by African Americans exemplify this. These individuals and institutions did not just accumulate wealth but fostered educational and economic opportunities for the African American community, particularly at a time when systemic barriers tried to impede such progress.

Therefore, the discussion of the term "bourgeois" in this context not only underscores the complexity of navigating identity and class within African American communities but also highlights the positive connotations of the Black bourgeoisie. This group has historically and continues to play a crucial role in advancing the race by creating sustainable structures that facilitate communal wealth and education. Rather than simply being a term of division, "bourgeois" in the context of the Black bourgeoisie embodies a legacy of resilience, strategic accumulation of power, and community upliftment. Thus, when stripped of its pejorative uses and understood in its full historical and cultural context, this term represents a proud lineage rather than a derogatory label.

**Educated black men and women
worked hard to elevate their race
and to become people who
controlled their own destiny.**

Reading the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels offers a profound insight into the dynamics of class struggles and the roles of different societal classes, particularly the bourgeoisie. Their analysis, primarily through a lens of economic determinism, helps to delineate the contours of class power and its manifestations in capitalist societies. When applying Marx and Engels' concepts to the African American experience, particularly to the term "bougie" as used within the community, it can significantly enrich our understanding of the social and economic implications tied to the label.

Marx and Engels describe the bourgeoisie as the class that, through capitalism, has come to control the means of production. This control is not merely economic but extends into the

political and social spheres, fundamentally shaping society. The bourgeoisie, according to Marx and Engels, were once revolutionaries who dismantled feudal structures to establish a society where capital dictates value and class structures. Their role, however, morphed into that of the oppressor as they began to exploit the proletariat to maintain their wealth and expand their capital.

In the context of the Black bourgeoisie, the term takes on nuanced meanings. The Black bourgeoisie emerged in a racially stratified society as a class that had managed to carve out economic and educational advancements despite systemic barriers intended to limit such progress. This class of African Americans often pursued higher education, established businesses, and engaged in activities that were traditionally seen as markers of middle-class status. However, within the broader African American community, these achievements could sometimes be perceived as attempts to assimilate into mainstream, predominantly white societal norms—thus leading to the pejorative "bougie."

This segment of African American society has not merely accumulated wealth but has strategically leveraged it to create educational and economic opportunities that challenge systemic barriers and foster long-term communal empowerment.

The Marxist framework clarifies why being called "bougie" might carry a negative connotation within some parts of the African American community. From this perspective, the Black bourgeoisie could be seen as aligning with the capitalist values that Marx and Engels critiqued—values that inherently perpetuate class divisions and, by extension, could be seen as betraying a collective struggle against racial and economic oppression. However, this interpretation might overlook the unique socio-economic pressures faced by African Americans, where economic advancement and educational attainment by the Black bourgeoisie have often served as vital strategies for racial uplift and resistance rather than simple class betrayal.

Reading Marx and Engels thus helps illuminate the complexities of being labeled as "bougie." It allows for a deeper discussion about race, class, and identity intersections. It points to a broader dialogue about whether economic and social advancement within a capitalist framework necessarily equates to complicity in oppression or if, particularly for marginalized communities, such advancements can be a form of resistance and empowerment. This nuanced understanding can foster more empathetic and informed discussions within the African American community

about the roles and perceptions of the Black bourgeoisie, challenging simplistic judgments and appreciating the broader historical and socio-economic contexts in which these individuals operate.

The Black bourgeoisie has played a pivotal role in shaping communities, founding significant companies, leading major associations, and establishing private colleges and universities that not only uplift but fundamentally transform the prospects of current and future generations. This segment of African American society has not merely accumulated wealth but has strategically leveraged it to create educational and economic opportunities that challenge systemic barriers and foster long-term communal empowerment.

I found a nuanced understanding of class structures that enriched my perception of the Black bourgeoisie.

Delving into the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, I found a nuanced understanding of class structures that enriched my perception of the Black bourgeoisie. Marx and Engels might not have envisioned the unique position of African Americans within the capitalist framework they critiqued. Historically marginalized and often positioned at the lowest echelons of society, the emergence of a Black bourgeoisie defies conventional Marxist classification, which did not typically account for the racial dimensions of capitalism and class struggle in America.

The formation of the Black bourgeoisie represents a radical form of socio-economic advancement that is deeply entwined with the fight against racial oppression. This class has succeeded within the capitalist system and reshaped it as a tool for racial justice and social mobility. The accomplishments of the Black bourgeoisie—ranging from educational institutions that nurture future leaders to businesses that serve underrepresented communities—highlight a profound commitment to elevating the status and dignity of African Americans across generations.

Therefore, my exploration of Marxist theory has broadened my understanding and deepened my appreciation for the Black bourgeoisie. This understanding compels us to recognize the Black bourgeoisie not simply as a class apart but as integral architects of a more equitable society. Given their contributions, it becomes clear that the Black bourgeoisie deserves admiration and

respect. They embody a powerful response to historical adversities and continue to be a beacon of hope and progress within the African American community and beyond. Their legacy is one of triumph and resilience, and it is one that all people, especially African Americans, can and should take great pride in.

Works Cited

"Bourgeois." *Bourgeois*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 03 Oct. 2014. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bourgeois>>.

Bulter, John. "Celebrating the Black Bourgeoisie." *Celebrating the Black Bourgeoisie*. Cox Media Group, 15 Feb. 2014. Web. 01 Oct. 2014. <<http://www.statesman.com/news/news/opinion/celebrating-the-black-bourgeoisie/ndLYP/>>.

Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. The Communist Manifesto. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent Leitch et al. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010. 657-660.