

From Industrialism to Capitalism
re-assessing the relevance of class analysis

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Class has fallen increasingly out of fashion as a concept in recent decades. In many of the social sciences, authors have questioned its usage. Political theorists Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) published an influential post-Marxist attack against the concept of class in the early 1980s; social history, a repository of very rich class analysis since the 1960s (Thompson 1968; Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000; Palmer 1992), has become a field increasingly populated by objectors to class analysis in the wake of the post-structuralist “linguistic turn” (Jones, 1983; Joyce 1995; Scott 1999); and even sociology, a discipline that largely developed as a debate around the notion of class has come to reassess the validity of this traditionally central concept (Pakulski, 2005).

This paper will critically assess the theoretical rejection of class that has been developed on the basis of American sociologist Daniel Bell’s (1976) work on “post-industrial societies”. First published in the 1970s, Bell’s writing has since paved the way for the rise of a body of literature that announces the demise of class over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. This body of work includes the writings of Terry Nichols Clark, Seymour Martin Lipset and Michael Rempel (2001), as well as the contributions of Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters (1996). According to these authors, class is a phenomenon that belongs to the industrial phase of modernity and which therefore expires along with that historical moment. A discussion of this body of literature is important since it has laid down the theoretical basis of “new social movement” theories. Notwithstanding the many critiques they have faced, these theories merit attention because they have influenced the ways in which contemporary mobilisations are reflected upon as non-class phenomena.

This article also argues that post-industrial theories should be considered in light of the responses they have elicited. Here the work of Erik Olin Wright (1997) is of particular importance, since it is Wright who has proposed one of the most ambitious and influential replies to contemporary class demise theories to date. His work presents theoretically backed class maps of contemporary societies. However, Wright’s static models of class analysis are not without their own flaws and it will be another important aim of this paper to demonstrate why this is so.

After assessing both post-industrial theories and Wright’s reply to them, this article will present an alternative attempt at reasserting the importance of class analysis for the study of contemporary capitalist societies. I will argue that we need to move our analytical focus away from “industrialism” and toward “capitalism” and to rethink, with Marx, the factors structuring class formations as specific relations of exploitation. Moreover, following Edward P. Thompson (1968) and Ellen Meiksins Wood (1995), instead of reifying class formations into an a-historical,

monomorphic phenomenon, I will suggest that we need to approach them as processes and relationships. Such a perspective will allow us to avoid the traps associated with static and classificatory theories and to see that the analysis of capitalist class relations is more relevant than ever before. This theoretical perspective will also offer the potential of better theoretical tools to analyse contemporary social mobilisations.

Class Demise and Theories of Post-industrial Societies

Daniel Bell's (1976) influential book *The coming of post-industrial society* has become a touchstone for authors who argue that class is disappearing from the societies of the Global North. According to Bell, the transition from industrial to post-industrial societies occurred in the period following World War II. Transformations associated with this transition, he argues, tend to invalidate Marx's predictions as formulated in the *Communist Manifesto*, according to which modern societies would become increasingly polarized into two classes. Moreover, the very rapid development of the service sectors and of professional and technical forms of work as well as the related complexification of employment structures have diluted the working class and made Marxist class analysis inoperative.

At the same time, the rise of "technological knowledge" or "intellectual technology", as it is also sometimes referred to, as a fundamental pillar of post-industrial society has allowed for a managerial revolution that has transferred power over the organization of production from the owners of corporations towards administrators. This has also encouraged the development of technocratic approaches to the management of society and the economy. This mode of management differs from previous modes in that it no longer aims at the maximization of profits but at promoting a general interest. As such, technocratic management tends to mute conflicts that stem from production and work relations and make it possible to avoid economic crisis. Hence, if "industrial society is the coordination of machines and men for the production of goods" Bell asserts that post-industrial society "is organized around knowledge, for the purpose of social control and the directing of innovation and change" (Bell, 1976: 20).

The changes described by Bell imply the emergence of a new and radically different form of social stratification; he explains that in industrial society, "the locus of social relations has been the enterprise or firm and the major social problems that of industrial conflict between employer and worker". By contrast, in post-industrial society, the essential social cleavage "is not between those who own the means of production and an undifferentiated 'proletariat' but the bureaucratic and authority relations between those who have powers of decision and those who have not" (Bell, 116, 119). The fundamental axis of society is no longer about exploitive production but about knowledge and control over it.

Class demise theorists Terry Nichols Clark, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Michael Rempel (2001) are directly influenced by Bell. Analyzing post-industrial society and politics they conclude that a series of factors are lessening the salience of class. If class is not dead, they argue, its significance is constantly decreasing and it "has declined in its ability to explain social and especially political processes" (Clark, Lipset, & Rempel, 2001: 78). According to these authors classes were clearly determinant social and political factors during the classical period of industrial society, in late 19th and early 20th century Europe and North America. In these times vast numbers of low-wage blue-collar workers concentrated in large factories led to high levels of worker militancy. Yet this combativeness began to languish in the post-World War II period as workers experienced affluence and as the welfare state developed parallel to collective bargaining processes. These factors limited labour's radicalism at the same time as they reinforced class based political parties, organizations and voting patterns. These welfarist and corporatist institutions thus ensured the perpetuation of class politics, just as their

breaking up from the 1970s onwards announced its demise (82-83).

For Clark, Lipset, and Rempel this declining salience of class in post-industrial societies is also related to the rise of the service sector and of knowledge based jobs in the Global North. This led to the diversification of occupations and the emergence of a new middle class comprising management and highly skilled positions. In other words, they paint a picture that diverges from a polarized class structure consisting of the traditional proletariat and bourgeoisie, insofar as several intermediate classes emerge between these two. It follows that “[c]lass membership, thus redefined, becomes more subtle and less socially grating, as well as less politically salient” (Clark, Lipset, & Rempel, 84).

All of the above leads Clark and Lipset to conclude that if class can still be identified “objectively” through empirical studies of “market stratification patterns”, the link between this economic structure and other social and political phenomena is not as strong as it used to be in industrial societies (Clark, Lipset, & Rempel, 79). As they put it, we are currently observing “the decline of economic determinism and the increased importance of social and cultural factors” (Clark & Lipset, 52). In sum, whereas there one was economic determinism, there is no more (or much less), and so class is fading away.

Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters’ (1996) argument echoes the argument developed by Clark and Lipset, however they take a somewhat more radical stance and announce outright the “death of class”. Not only class formations, but also the economic structures that used to underlay these formations have faded away. According to Pakulski and Waters, in early capitalism, classes were based on property relations that were more salient than they would be in later periods. Labour was simply, directly, and almost entirely reproduced within the household as well as the working class neighborhood and local communities of factory workers. In these historical societies, “one’s entire identity – preferences, life chances, access to power, freedom from constraint, lifestyle, and political behaviour – [was] determined by one’s economic relationships” (69). Moreover, working class formations were anchored in “communities of fate”. These were “small, homogeneous, well bounded and clearly circumscribed” communities that emerged more or less spontaneously from shared experience and with little or no need for formal organizations to intervene in the process (96).

Somewhere “between the beginning of the twentieth century and the Great Depression,” however, class as it existed in this original form came to disappear (Pakulski & Waters, 26). The authors relate this disappearance to the maturation of modern nation-states and their intensified interventions in the economy, education, family relations, and other spheres of social life. These developments implied that social reproduction would cease to be simple and direct. It would become abstracted from local communities and would largely take place at the level of the nation-state.

In this context, classes came to be incarnated in national institutions, most notably unions and political parties that formulated aggregate class interests at a very high level of generality. Working class “communities of fate” consequently dissolved into “imagined communities of national classes” (Pakulski & Waters, 100). However the latter were no longer anchored in a shared experience, and assembled people with differentiated life situations. Consequently, they had to be artificially constructed and reproduced by organizational elites that produced an abstract ideological cement that patched classes together, and systematically and repeatedly worked to convince individuals that they shared a common interest.

According to Pakulski and Waters, this process of institutionalization of class into “imagined communities” reached its zenith after World War II with the extension of the welfare state and of corporatism. Corporatist forms of collective bargaining and class-based political parties sanctioned and largely contributed to the reproduction of these class formations at the very same time as their foundations were further undermined by the “post-industrialization” of society described by Bell. Here again we notice that while there used to be

economic determinism now there is no more: “The inherent economic reductionism of class theory has proven to be untenable. Although high under early capitalism, the salience of relations of production has declined” (44).

The decline of unionization, together with the crisis of the welfare state and ensuing decorporatization and deregulation of the economy signalled the definitive disappearance of class during the 1970s and 1980s. These developments implied the disappearance of superstructures that had artificially kept class alive for decades in the absence of the economic infrastructures to support it (Pakulski, 2005: 175).

The authors discussed above echo the work of post-Marxists such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. For Laclau and Mouffe current social reality calls for the adoption of a theoretical framework that avoids the trap of economic reductionism and recognizes the primacy of the political moment in the structuration of social relations. According to Laclau and Mouffe, class antagonism is not a phenomenon that exists objectively. Rather than deriving from economic relations, a given social antagonism is always a discursive element emerging in a contested political sphere (2001: x-xiv, 76, 84-85).

Moreover, post-industrialist thinkers like Laclau and Mouffe do not equate the end of class with the disappearance of all social conflict, but see post-materialist “new social movements” as the form taken by contemporary collective mobilization (Clark, Lipset, & Rempel, 2001: 92; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xvii; Pakulski & Waters, 1996: 143). At the core of this approach, we find the idea of an epochal social transformation – which is, once again, clearly reminiscent of Bell's work on post-industrial societies – leading to the emergence of a new locus of social conflicts grounded in a cultural terrain and raising first and foremost issues of identity (Buechler, 1995: 443; Carroll, 1997: 17; Johnston, Laraña, & Gusfield, 1994: 7; Pichardo, 1997: 412).

Alberto Melucci, one of the most influential new social movement theorists, claims that in post-industrial or “complex” societies, social conflicts “can no longer be adequately understood in class terms” (Melucci, 1989: 187). Unlike industrial societies, in complex societies “production no longer is identifiable with transforming natural and human resources into goods for exchange through the organization of the forms of production, division of labour and its incorporation into the techno-human complex of the factory”. Instead, social production and reproduction “has come to mean controlling complex systems of information, symbols and social relations” (1996: 100). It is in the face of these shifts that Melucci observes the rise of new forms of social antagonism revolving around contested identities symbols and discourses that for him imply the emergence of new forms of social movements. The latter are moving away from strategic forms of resistance and demands addressed at the state and are developing “alternative codes” in underground networks that work as “cultural laboratories” disseminated throughout civil society (1989: 60, 71; 1996: 8-9, 101).

These social movements become increasingly detached from structural characteristics and consequently gain the capacity to reflexively self-construct (Melucci, 1996: 76). This was less the case in earlier industrial societies, where collective actors “were more deeply rooted in a specific social condition in which they were embedded, so that the question of the collective was already answered from the beginning through that social condition that accounted as such for the existence of a collective actor”. And so it follows that “[a] working-class movement is first of all the expression of a working class social background; it is already defined by the social conditions of that particular group”. Based on this, Melucci asserts “[t]his continuity between the structural location of the actor and the material and cultural world of its experience is what [he] mean[s] by the class condition” (84). Class, then, is in its very essence a direct structural determination as opposed to an historical process. This is reminiscent of the approach developed by the authors discussed above.

It appears, then, that for Melucci as well as for post-industrial theorists in general,

there used to be economic determinism (in the age of industrial capitalism) and so there was class. Consequently, there was no (or limited) agency in the making of classes and social movements. Conversely, in contemporary societies, there is no (or less) structural determinism and so there are no more classes but much more space for agency in the making of social movements. For new social movement theories, just as much as for post-industrial class demise theories, class is thus a social entity that belongs to the specific era of industrial capitalism. It has a given and fixed essence that is directly derived from economic structural factors and is associated with an imagery of factories, industrial neighborhoods and blue-collar workers.

This is precisely the kind of reification of class that this article aims to criticize. Here, there seems to be no room for anything but crude, direct, and unproblematic economic determinism, with a predefined traditional industrial working class on the one hand, and free-floating, contingent, self-elaborating, and cultural new social movements on the other. This produces a false dichotomy between structure and agency, and consequently the adoption of a flawed analytical approach to social class according to which there is a radical discontinuity between contemporary and past forms of collective action. It therefore seems that new social movement and class demise theorists fall prey to the very economic reductionism that they have been denouncing in Marxism. This is precisely what has led them to announce the disappearance of class in contemporary advanced capitalist societies.

Because they have been so influential in shaping the way we think about contemporary social reality, it is important to critically assess post-industrial and new social movements theories and to counter their claim that class is disappearing. In order to present an alternative perspective on class, understood as both process and relationship, an understanding of the structural factors that lie behind class formations will allow us to avoid the false methodological dichotomies adopted by post-industrial theories.

Exploitative Relations of Production as Class Structure

In the face of the challenge presented by post-industrial theories, there have been many attempts at renewing class analysis (Crompton, 2008). Erik Olin Wrights' work, for example, proposes an original and sophisticated theorization of class structures from a neo-Marxist perspective. According to Wright, the post-World War II era has brought an important complexification of class structures, which now consist of different layers of workers endowed with different assets such as authority, skill and expertise (1985: 8-9, 13; 1997: xxvii; 2005: 13).

In light of these changes, Wright has proposed a theoretically informed way of establishing boundaries between contemporary class positions.¹² He tries to assess the issue using the concept of “contradictory class locations within class relations” (1997: 20-23, 396-397; 2005: 20, 27). These are “class locations” positioned between capitalist and working classes within the class structure, which Wright sees as growing out of a differentiated access to authority and skills. For example, capitalists delegate parts of their power over the organization of production to managers and supervisors. Though they are wage-laborers, this granted authority allows them to dominate other workers. It follows that they share interests with both capitalists and workers, but also that they have an interest of their own. Moreover, because of a privileged position of authority or the possession of a specific skill, groups of individuals in the workforce can get a “loyalty rent” that will allow them to secure a revenue

¹ For an important and elaborated critique of Laclau and Mouffe on these matters, see Ellen Meiksins Wood (1998, ch. 4).

² Wright has developed many different class schemes during his career (see Wright, 1979; 1985; 1989). Here, I will focus on his last model (1997).

above the cost of reproducing their labour-power (1997: 21).

Using this concept of “class location”, Wright develops intricate class maps into which he classifies individuals according to their job characteristics and assets.³ He sees these class locations as determinant for different aspects of an individual’s life as well as for processes of class formation. He also tries to empirically demonstrate a causal relation between these locations and levels of class-consciousness.

There are many problems associated with synchronic class maps such as the one developed by Wright.⁴ Most importantly, Wright can be accused of imposing arbitrary theoretical model upon reality. Indeed, Wright's theoretical justifications for the different class boundaries he identifies are very much flawed. For example, how much skill and/or authority, for example, must a worker possess and how high must her wage be before she can be moved from one class location to a higher one (Meiksins, 1986: 108; 1989: 178)? Moreover, while they have real powers, middle-range managers and supervisors must use them in accordance with an overall direction established by owners and top managers facing market competitive imperatives and seeking profit maximization (Carchedi, 1989:110). Finally, Wright assumes but does not and cannot demonstrate that some workers *systematically* get a “loyalty rent”. In a capitalist society the value of labour-power or of any other commodity is not kept in a record-book. It tends to be fixed through inter-individual market competition as well as cultural norms emerging out of a given balance of power between classes. As a consequence its value only appears in its phenomenal form – the wage. Of course the possession of differentiated assets such as authority and skills can and do lead to occasional conflicts between workers, and thus represent obstacles to class unity. However they should not be perceived as a basis for *class* distinctions.

Similarly, since Wright’s gradational approach to class does not articulate class positions to exploitative relations, it is not at all clear why and how the strata’s or “class locations” he identifies should *systematically* affect social reality and historical processes. As Meiksins (1986) rightly suggests, Wright’s model “begs the question of why classes and class conflicts should develop and leave Marxists open to the kind of criticism that they themselves have directed at Weberian methods” (108).

To formulate a more fruitful answer to theories of post-industrialism and class demise, we need to move beyond the “boundary question” (Meiksins, 1986). In order to do so, we must first recognize that the structural factor underpinning class is not production *per se*, but rather *exploitive* relations of production. A fundamental problem of class analysis is to observe and explain how the rise of historical processes of class formation are “determined by the specific form in which, to use Marx’s phrase, ‘surplus is pumped out of the direct producers’” (Wood, 1995, p. 76).

In capitalist societies, this appropriation of surplus-labour is mediated by market relations and takes the form of surplus value. Here, direct producers are separated from the means of subsistence and means of production, which become the absolute private property of capitalists. This property grants them control over production, which they organize in response to imperatives of market competition. This allows for an appropriation of surplus-labour that is no longer dependent upon extra-economic means of politico-military coercion and juridical inequalities, as was the case in non-capitalist class societies. Under capitalism,

³ Wright's most elaborated class map includes “non-skilled workers”, “skilled workers”, “experts”, “non-skilled supervisors”, “skilled supervisors”, “expert supervisors”, “non-skilled managers”, “skilled managers”, “expert managers”, “petty bourgeois”, “small employers”, and “capitalists” (Wright, 1997: 25).

⁴ For a fuller assessment of some of these problems as they appear in Wright's work, see Bensaïd (1995), Meiksins (1986; 1987a; 1987b; 1989); Carchedi (1989) and Wright (1989).

exploitation tends to take an “economic” form and to involve contractual exchange relations between formally free and equal individuals (Marx, 1976; Wood, 1995).⁵ State power is not *directly* involved in the appropriation of surplus-labour. But it still plays a crucial role in the reproduction of relations of exploitation by protecting private property rights, repressing diverse forms of resistance, and regulating and maintaining market structures.

If direct producers are free from formal, juridical relations of dependence, they are also “free” from means of production. They become dependent upon the market where they must sell their labour-power in exchange for a wage to be able to reproduce themselves. Having bought their labour-power, capitalists gain the ability to compel wage-labourers work more than what is minimally necessary to reproduce that labour-power. This produces a surplus-labour that is then appropriated by the capitalist.

Deprived from extra-economic means of coercion, and being dependent upon the market where they buy and sell commodities produced under their supervision, and thus facing competitive imperatives, capitalists are forced to systematically maximize the production and accumulation of this surplus value. This leads to, and is made possible by, a subsumption of the labour process by capital, which continuously transforms it in order to optimize its self-valorization. This involves an increasingly versatile use of labour-power and the systematic eradication of extra-economic obstacles to this versatility. Workers are not only separated from means of production, but are also abstracted from their traditional community life as normative and communal regulation and organization of work are obliterated. As these barriers to capital accumulation erode, market imperatives are forcing employers to methodically intensify the exploitation of their employees by limiting the increase of – and if possible reducing – their wages as well as lengthening and intensifying the workday. A constant search for enhanced productivity also leads to an ongoing development and use of new production technologies, which tend to create unemployment. Taking control over the organization of production, capital also constantly divides and re-divides the productive process, producing the hierarchies of tasks, functions and positions that Wright and others have been trying to analyze and classify.

In the perspective presented here, people are not classified into categories but are placed in antagonistic “class situations” within a relation of exploitation (Wood, 1995: 80). Indeed, it can be argued that a classificatory approach to class hides more than it reveals and becomes inadequate precisely when the capitalist form of exploitation emerges and spreads. In non-capitalist societies, exploitation was directly allowed by juridical inequalities backed by coercive state power. There were, to be sure, wealth inequalities within classes, but the latter corresponded to and were directly derived from differentiated juridical status. It was belonging to a specific juridical category giving privileged access to extra-economic powers that allowed one to appropriate a surplus produced by individuals belonging to a distinct juridical community (1995: 35). Status, state and class powers were largely fused and individuals were thus formally “classified” into distinct and readily identifiable juridical communities that made class boundaries observable.

The erosion of these juridical institutions associated with the rise of capitalism – and deriving from secular struggles led by labour and other social movements – has radically blurred observable class boundaries. It also laid the foundations for a new form of exploitation involving individuals belonging to the same juridical community and divided into classes on the basis of their differentiated access to property. The upshot is a class society existing as a

⁵ Of course, there has been and still are major exceptions to this, as shown by the apartheid system in South Africa and “capitalist slavery” (to use Marx’s term) in the Southern United-States. According to some estimations, around 200 million people can currently be considered to be slaves globally, many of whom produce commodities sold on world markets (McNally, 2006: 193)

continuum of (very important) socio-economic inequalities with no sharp and easily identifiable formal class boundaries. A positivistic classification of individuals on the basis of their precise relation to the means of production – or any other “objective” factor – will not do the trick here for one trying to analyze class relations. Capitalist exploitive relations of production do not automatically produce classes divided into neatly defined categories. Rather, it creates a “field of force” which polarizes society in “class ways”, throwing people into different, and actually *lived*, class situations – as opposed to abstract categories or “empty places”. Capitalist class exploitation launches socio-historical processes that can lead – and has historically led – to the emergence of groups explicitly aware of forming a class opposed to another. Of course, the working class will be divided by differentiated income, power over the organization of production and job status, not to mention racialized and gendered divides. These factors will significantly impact processes of class formation and need to be analyzed. But the point is that the effects of these factors cannot be known in advance and can only unfold within a structured, yet open, historical process of class formation.

There is no denying that over the last century or half century, economically advanced societies of the Global North have been through important processes of transformation and diversification of their employment structures as highlighted by post-industrial theories. These transformations included a rapid expansion of white-collar and public sector jobs. But while these changes are very important to consider they should not lead us to conclude that workers are now stratified into distinct and opposed groups, as contended by Wright. While being divided by different factors and sporadic conflicts, “all non-capitalists – i.e., the entire collective labourer, irrespective of function – are exploited. All sell their labour-power and participate in production. All, even the most privileged, experience the conflicts inherent in capitalist relations of production – being treated as a cost, being exposed to de-skilling tendencies, unemployment and so on” (Meiksins, 1986: 111).

It should be stressed, moreover, that though this aspect is crucial the capitalist mode of exploitation does not structure class relations exclusively by affecting working conditions. The development of capitalism implies a reconfiguration of social power that affects all aspects of social life to different degrees.

The capitalist mode of production, which cannot be defined narrowly in economic terms or by references to technological factors of production, implies a multi-dimensional transformation of social power. It comprises and is supported by a set of social, juridical and cultural relations and institutions whose ramifications reach far beyond the point of production (Thompson, 1978b: 261-262, 264; Wood, 1995: 49-75). Consequently, we need to recognize that class struggle will not be confined to the factory, the office or the store. As Thompson explains, “[w]e do not have *one* ‘basic antagonism’ at the place of work, and a series of remoter, more muffled antagonisms in the social or ideological ‘superstructure’, which are in some way less ‘real’. We have a class divided society, in which conflicts of interest, and conflicts between capitalist and socialist ideas, values, and institutions take place all along the line” (1960a: 68).

Capitalist societies have seen a wider extension of some democratic rights. Yet capitalism has also removed a large range of social activities from political and communal control, placing them outside of the scope of democratic accountability. It depoliticizes, commodifies and thus relegates them to an “economic” sphere where they are submitted to market rules (Wood, 2003: 128). Therefore, while never simply reducible to the logic of capital accumulation, some “new social movements” can be understood as reactions to the ongoing commodification of all aspects of social life. Capitalism can and does provoke conflicts around issues other than wage and working conditions. It follows that so-called “post-material” issues are often related to the impacts of capital accumulation (Williams, 1983: 172-173). Social movements mobilizing around issues such as identity, quality of life, civil rights or the defence

of environment, for instance, can thus often be considered as part of “the rich complexity with which class antagonisms actually find expression in real history” (Thompson, 1960a: 68).

This wide-ranging and multi-faceted capitalist mode of exploitive production, far from having disappeared has actually been expanding in an accelerating way in recent decades. In fact, it seems misplaced to talk of the disappearance of class at a time when the proportion of wage-labourers reaches new heights and continues to grow at a rapid pace throughout the globe, and at a time when more dimensions of human life are being commodified than ever before.

Moreover, far from being planned in a conscious and orderly way as Bell was hoping it would be, the reproduction of contemporary capitalist society is alienated, unplanned, mediated by commodity exchange and full of economic turmoil's. These facts have only become more salient as capitalist social property relations have been universalizing. Indeed, the major worldwide economic crisis that began in 2007-2008 (as well as a series of others in preceding decades) represents a striking demonstration that Bell's expectation that technocrats would develop the ability to smoothly administer social relations and economic development was wrong. Capitalism, its exploitive production relations, and its recurring socio-economic crises are still with us.

In such a context, class formation cannot be ruled out and we need to develop theoretical tools that will allow us to demonstrate the continuing relevance of class perceived as process and relationship.

Class as Process and Relationship

Thompson's work remains an unavoidable starting point for any attempt at theorizing class formations. He is highly critical of synchronic analyses aiming at producing class maps. For him, class is not “a ‘category’, but [...] something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships” (1968: 8). Class “eventuates” as individuals’ experience determinate antagonistic relations of exploitation and collectively react to their effects (1978a: 150). It is thus an *historical process* and can only be observed as such.

Processes of class formation are embodied by “active and conscious *historical beings*” (Wood, 1995: 80). People come to apprehend and to reshape social reality in class terms “as they live their productive relations, and as they *experience* their determinate situations, within ‘the *ensemble* of the social relations’, with their inherited culture and expectations” (Thompson, 1978a: 150). This means that workers experiencing exploitive relations of production are simultaneously imbricated within many other types of social relations, including racialized and gendered relations. While the latter's logic cannot be reduced to the exploitation of labour by capital, all of these distinct forms of oppression are also internally and historically related. We consequently need to recognize that class formations are mediated by racialized and gendered social relations and never occur outside of them (Camfield, 2004-2005: 425-426; Gilroy, 1987: 31; McNally, 2006: 137-194).

Developing this processual approach, Thompson insists that we cannot conceive of class in abstraction from class struggles. He explains:

class is the prior, as well as the more universal, concept [...] [C]lasses do not exist as separate entities, look around, find an enemy class, then start to struggle. On the contrary, people find themselves in a society structured in determined ways (crucially, but not exclusively, in production relations), they experience exploitation (or the need to maintain power over those whom exploit them), they identify antagonistic interest, they commence struggle around these issues and in the process they discover themselves as classes, they

come to know this discovery as class-consciousness. Class and class-consciousness are always the last, not the first, stage in the real historical process (1978a:149).

Classes, then, never exist in isolation but always as a *social relationship* between groups of individuals endowed with antagonistic interests.

Here the concept of *experience* is absolutely crucial and plays a mediating role between the mode of production, as a structuring element, and the actual formation of class. As Wood writes:

[n]either the production process itself nor the process of surplus extraction actually brings [members of a class] together. ‘Class’ does not refer simply to workers combined in a unit of production or opposed to a common exploiter in a unit of appropriation. Class implies a connection that extends beyond the immediate process of production and the immediate nexus of extraction, a connection that spans across particular units of production and appropriation (Wood, 1995: 95).

It follows that it is a shared experience of exploitation “and not simply an objective ‘assemblage’ that unites heterogeneous groups into a class – though ‘experience’ in this context refers to the effects of objective determinations, the relations of production and class exploitation” (Wood, 1995: 91, 95). Hence, class implies not only a “vertical” relation between exploiters and exploited, but also a definite “horizontal” relation between its members (1995: 93). Class develops as a dialectic between these inter and intra-class relations.

Class formations are always “options under pressure” (Williams quoted in Wood, 1995: 106). Though they can crystallize in a specific form over a given period of time, on a broader historical scale, we can recognize that “classes are also always *partial* social configurations to the extent that they are constantly in a process of organization, disorganization, and reorganization in relation to their conflict with other classes” (Fantasia, 1995: 275). As we saw, this moving and changing character of class is not grasped by post-industrial and new social movement theories. According to the latter, class was first directly engendered by the rise of industrial capitalism, without a need for agents supporting this development. However as this economic base eroded class became a purely artificial entity kept alive from above through leaders’ efforts. Class is then perceived as a monomorphic phenomenon that belongs to a given historical period and that could be reproduced after its time only at the expense of purely “subjective” and necessarily temporary efforts from above. Hence, we have the succession of absolute structural determinism, followed by disincarnated voluntarism. Here, there is “no room for historical determination, structured process with human agencies” (Wood, 1995: 78).

In contrast, for Thompson the formation of a class is “an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning” (1968: 8). Classes are made in an historical context characterized by specific exploitive social relations of production that structure their formation. But they are indeed *made* – and never simply generated by relations of production – by individuals with given cultures, values, and expectations, evolving in specific political institutions and through gendered and racialized social relations.

Hence, workers do not simply undergo but also actively appropriate their experience of exploitation, out of which they forge their ambivalent and evolving consciousness. This implies that consciousness and social behavior can never simply be derived from a “position” in a “class structure”, as Wright tries to empirically verify. Class always arises out of partly contingent processes. As Thompson explains, “we can see a *logic* in responses of similar

occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any *law*. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and place, but never just in the same way” (1968: 9). There is no pure or pre-defined model of class. We need to be very clear about this: “class, as it eventuated within nineteenth-century industrial capitalist societies, and as it then left its imprint upon the heuristic category of class, *has in fact no claim to universality. Class in that sense is no more than a special case of the historical formations which arise out of class struggle*” (Thompson, 1978a:150, emphasis added). Though there will be some noticeable and important historical continuities, we should not be surprised if working classes take different forms more than a century after their first appearance in a self-conscious form.

Nor should we be surprised if class does not always appear in this self-conscious form. A form of class-consciousness can and does exist somewhere between a full-fledged self-consciousness and a total integration of dominant ideology by the workers. Establishing class struggle as a prior concept allows us to analyze this “partial” form of consciousness “under pressure” (Wood 1995: 79, 81-83, 105). We then become able to observe how conflictual relations of exploitation shape social reality in “class ways” and imprint a “disposition to behave as a class” even to individuals who would not explicitly grasp their experience in those terms (Thompson, 1965: 357). The identification of an opposition between the “99%” and the “1%” by the Occupy Wall Street movement represents an eloquent example of this. This identification of class processes can represent a powerful answer to those who deny the existence of class in the absence of class self-consciousness and reject structural mappings of class as arbitrary theoretical models imposed upon social reality (Wood, 1995: 81-83).

A conception of class as both process and relationship, then, goes against definitions that “imply that there is one point in the formation of classes where one can stop the process and say ‘here is class, and not before’” or not after. Our goal as class analysts should not be “to identify class with a particular level of consciousness or organization which makes it a conscious political force, *but rather to focus our attention on class in the process of becoming, or making itself, such a force*” (Wood, 1995: 99, emphasis added). Class is a collective and relational phenomenon, as opposed to an aggregation of individuals. It follows that our aim should not be to find a ready-made and neatly defined class-consciousness within individual minds. Rather, our “analyses of class consciousness should be based on actions, organizational capabilities, institutional arrangements, and the values that arise within them, rather than on attitudes abstracted from the context of social action” (Fantasia, 1988: 11). The challenge we are facing, as class analysts, is to identify such phenomena in contemporary historical processes.

Conclusion: Can workers still unite?

The analysis of class in contemporary societies must then start from the two fundamental theoretical principles presented above. First, class is a social process that is structured not so much by a form of industrial production or a type of job than by the widespread experience of a specific form of *exploitative* production mediated by the market. Secondly, and consequently, class is never simply generated by given technological factors of production. It is always *made by conscious agents* in a given social, political and cultural context. It is thus an *historical* phenomenon that evolves over time and that can manifest itself in different forms.

We cannot know in advance what concrete form a renewed self-conscious working class would take. Nor, for that matter, do we know when and if such a renewal will take place. The social actors who are trying to remobilize the labour movement are facing considerable obstacles and divisive factors. But must we conclude that they are insurmountable? The labour movement has always had to face important internal divisions and to unite individuals

evolving within very diverse working contexts. Indeed, Meiksins explains “capitalism has never, not in the past, and not now, generated a homogeneous working class. On the contrary, it has created a varied, highly stratified working class, and capitalists have had an inherent interest in making sure that it is as divided as it possibly can be” (1998: 35). In such a context, solidarity can become reality only at the expense of intense and sustained organizational efforts. As Andrew Richards reminds us, “the physical construction of unions was very much a contingent phenomenon that took place in an extremely hostile environment. Furthermore, uniting workers in the same industry (let alone different ones), and forging a collective class identity, were processes of painstaking construction, usually from the local level upwards” (2001: 27). Contemporary class re-formations, if they are to take place, will be partly contingent and emerging out of such “painstaking construction” efforts.

In any case, we cannot assert, on a purely theoretical basis, the impossibility of a remobilization and renewal of the working class. We can only assess this issue through an empirical analysis of social reality focusing on struggles and organizational efforts led by workers, both within and outside points of production. This should be the main focus of class analysis in the “age of austerity” announced by governments throughout the world, since this will most certainly imply the intensification of the exploitive social relations that Marx saw as the causal factor behind processes of class formation.

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