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The Context(s) of Class¹

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How should we think about class? Indeed, *why* should we think about class? Why should anyone engaged in an emancipatory project constituted around non-class identities consider class to be important? In a period marked by classes having lost their visible identity and those laying claim to class struggles appearing to have less and less purchase on the complexities of the social world, the assertion that class remains central to our understanding of gender, racial or sexual oppression becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. Gender, sexuality and "race"/ethnicity (to take only a few examples) seem equally as, at more, convincing criteria upon which to base the potentialities of political struggle.

In this paper I want to argue that the importance of class to a politics constituted along non-class axes, can only be comprehended if we are able to come to terms with the essential historicity of class. This, I will contend, requires us to accept that class can only be understood, both politically *and* epistemologically, as a *process* that is, by necessity, only ever evolving and never fully constituted.

I will begin by outlining, albeit crudely, what I perceive to be the core problems of a traditional approach to class and then go on to develop what I think is a more constructive way forward.

The problem with class

The charge of "class reductionism" is one often leveled at Marx, usually in indiscriminate fashion.² Marx, it is suggested, has only a class-eye view of the world, everything for him can be reduced to (and explained in

terms of) class. The textual evidence, however, points to a rather less definitive conclusion. There are, for example, a number of instances where Marx acknowledges how social totalities are constituted by a multiplicity of relations and structures that cannot, in and of themselves, be reduced to class (Marx, 1968; Marx, 1973: 100). Given that these are neither isolated nor aberrant examples (Hall, 1977), “blanket” charges of class reductionism appear misplaced. Nevertheless, whilst Marx does not subscribe to a wholesale class reductionism, he does, I think, subscribe to a “tendential” one. In particular, he identifies what he believes to be an inherently simplifying dynamic to capitalism, which will ultimately dissolve those already identified multiple relations and structures along the single axis of class, manifested in two inherently contradictory social locations — those of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie (Marx, 1968a: 36; 1977: 713-715).

Marx, of course, always recognised the differences between classes imagined as abstract types and understood in concrete terms as collective actors. The proletariat were, by way of their common situation and common interests, *always already* defined as a “class in itself” in opposition to capital; but it was only in the course of becoming a “class for itself,” in coming to a revolutionary class consciousness, that the proletariat would realise the potential of that oppositional location (Marx, 1975: 159-160).

The disjunction between “objective” class location (classes imagined as abstract types) and subjective class activity (classes understood in concrete terms as collective actors), is for Marx only ever a *political* problem, resolved in the course of political struggle. This culminates, as I have suggested, at the revolutionary moment, in the expression of what Etienne Balibar refers to as the “ideal” proletarian identity (Balibar, 1991: 166). The problem is that this identity, or more specifically its moment of expression, has been brought about so infrequently — and not for the lack of trying — that it is questionable as to whether a viable political project can be built on the basis

of its potential realisation. It calls into question whether the disjunction between objective location and subjective activity is more than simply the political problem that Marx suggests it is to be. Specifically, it suggests that this disjunction is more critically a problem of epistemology, whereby the idea of class polarisation imposes an unreasonable coherence on the world (McLennan, 1989: 107).

The problem as outlined is no less acute for contemporary theorists of class, however. Indeed, given the increasing complexity of both capitalism itself and the social world in general (Lash and Urry, 1987; Offe, 1985), the problem is especially intense. If class analysis supposes some form of “objective” class location, albeit one not recognised politically by those who might occupy it, it does so in the face of an increasing tendency towards dispersal and differentiation in the contemporary period. Indeed, the situation becomes even more problematic when we recognise the proliferation of social relations and structures that are engendered in ever more complex ways, and articulated along ever more numerous axes that appear to bear little, if any, relation to class whatsoever.

Of course, none of this, by necessity, invalidates the idea of a simplifying class dynamic. We could, for example, argue that these tendencies and proliferations in so-called “late capitalism” have equally little to do with “objective” underlying class structures as Marx supposed was the case in his own time. As long as we retain our faith in the essential logic of the polarising dynamic, so the argument goes, then the problem still remains a political one, albeit a more difficult one than Marx had envisaged. I’ll address this argument more or less directly in the course of what follows. For now, however, I would simply posit the fate of class-centred movements the world over as testimony to the problems that this sort of argument must encounter.

The alternative approach would be to reject the idea of a simplifying class dynamic in late capitalism, and instead accept that its tendential impetus may, “objectively”

speaking, be towards difference and dispersal. However, if we pursue this possibility, it becomes increasingly difficult to conceive of class struggle in terms of the process by which a class in itself *becomes* a class for itself. For what exactly does this process of becoming now involve? How is it tendentially defined? The answer logically must be in terms of differentiation. And this must undermine the very idea of a realisable unitary “ideal” class identity, as Marx posits it. And, of course, if we follow this logic, if the notion of an “ideal” class identity is thereby undermined, the same, of course, must be true of its expression in the revolutionary moment.

What I have explicated here, again rather crudely, are what I think are the core problems of class as traditionally conceived. In order to address these problems, one needs, I think, to consider carefully what is actually involved in the process of class struggle and the attendant development of class identity.

Class struggles and multiple identities

The development of class identity has been determined by a whole range of historically-contingent factors, including (but not exclusively) material conditions of existence, particular economic and political circumstances and the specific role played by “nation” and state. “Working class” identities have therefore been multiple, and, more especially, specific to their historical context. Equally, when we consider “working class” *movements*, not only have they lacked a continuous form, but they have also never in any sense been *purely* working class. Not only have they been made up of individuals from within and outside of the working class, but they have never expressed and were never founded on exclusively working class (that is, “workerist”) demands and criteria; they were also national, cultural, anti-imperialist or whatever (Hobsbawm, 1977; Thompson, 1968). Equally, the solidarities engendered within these movements were never

simplistically worker-based; they were also constituted in different ways around gender and ethnicity, for example (Rose, 1992). This I think exemplifies how social relations are never, in their totality, formed between hermetically sealed (class) units but rather are established through the conflicts that are generated both across and within classes.

What this emphasizes is the genuinely discontinuous and contingent process of actual class formation in the seemingly “forward” movement of class struggle. Indeed, it suggests that the very idea that class struggle has a discernible forward movement is itself problematic. The idea of “forward” movement presupposes some external reference point from which we can discern a directional impulse — and of course, this is the point of “objective” class location. However, the moment we question the nature of that objective location, that is, the moment we question the simplifying dynamic of capitalism, the directional impulse of class struggle becomes increasingly more difficult, not only to discern, but to establish in the first place.

By way of example, we might consider a specific case. In the contemporary period the discontinuity of class struggle is exacerbated by differential strategies of exploitation employed within and between divergent spatial, political and cultural spheres. As Etienne Balibar notes:

Contrary to the illusions of development, which supposes that inequalities represent merely lagging behind that will gradually be made up, the valorisation of capital in the world-economy implies that practically *all historical forms of exploitation should be used simultaneously*, from the most ‘archaic’ (including unpaid child labour as in Moroccan or Turkish carpet factories) to the most ‘up-to-date’ (including job ‘restructuring’ in the latest computerized industries), the most violent (including agricultural serfdom in Brazilian sugar plantations), or the most civilized (including collective bargaining, profit-sharing, state unionization)... (Balibar, 1991: 177).

In reality, of course, these geographical boundaries are only ever contingent. Under the force of labour migration, capital transfers and the export of unemployment, they dissolve in the locale of the nation-state, thereby generating dual societies, where (amongst others) gender, ethnicity, religion *and* class intersect in specific ways at particular moments in the same spatial location. And this, in itself, can only serve to make the problem of tendential definition of class struggle even more difficult than Balibar's original example suggests.

If the argument I have developed so far is accepted, then the idea of objective class locations and thereby their attendant tendential definitions of class struggle becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. The process of formation appears increasingly to be open-ended (or at least has no pre-established end); if it does tend towards anything it is towards fragmentation within, as much as across, classes. The development of classes cannot be seen to confirm the "critical" limits of capitalist development. It would appear that neither the "irreducibility of labour-power to the commodity form" nor "inherently limiting conditions of development" are capable of ensuring the presence of conditions that might allow for the possibility of a struggle directed towards some predefined end — that is, towards the abolition of classes. Indeed, the simultaneous processes of fragmentation (of workforces both across and within national boundaries) and integration (of workforces to the state-industrial complexes), coupled with technological innovation and the intensification of controls on information, suggests a quite opposite conclusion.

The in(ter)determinacy of class

To assert that class struggle is thereby open-ended has, broadly speaking, two rather different consequences. On the one hand, to free-up class and class struggle from *a priori* tendential definitions delivers a greater degree of autonomy and breadth to the politics of class struggle. For example,

the question of deviation from class concerns will inevitably be problematised the moment any suggestion of external parameters is discarded. However, what also results from this freeing-up is the danger that class and class struggle might come to mean absolutely everything and equally absolutely nothing; in other words it may abandon class to the ravages of indeterminacy. Whilst acknowledging that this may be a very real danger, I don't think it is inevitable.

To suggest that class struggle is open-ended may (indeed does, I think) require us to accept that political struggle will always, to a greater or lesser extent, be indeterminate — if only because our understanding of the world and therefore what we see as our interests (which we pursue through politics) are mediated through all sorts of (often contradictory) structures and relations. However, what is also constitutive of our understanding of the world is our experience. And it is endurance that is required to undermine the potential for indeterminacy in our thinking about class and class struggle.

More specifically, it is in the complex articulations and rearticulations between experiences (intentioned/unintentioned, active/passive) and their contexts (the specific structures and relations through which experience are mediated) that knowledge is continually generated, decentered and regenerated. We might think of the relationship between context and experience as a dialectical process ever more violently compressed in both space and time. Understanding is generated only to be thrown into sharp relief by new experiences which then serve to inform that established understanding which is in turn regenerated into more or less new forms of understanding which is in turn thrown once again into sharp relief by new experiences and so on. Whilst some knowledges may be relatively enduring — in as much as the mediating structures and relations through which they are informed are themselves relatively enduring — this process of knowledge generation never stops. Indeed as time and space compress (especially in the age of mass communication) so knowledges become ever

ever less enduring and ever more liable to supervention. (Whilst knowledge is thus never fixed, it is also never total. It is always partially constituted, because all experiences can never be simultaneously synthesised with all knowledges in each and every context over all of time).

Posited in these terms, “objective” class location (the knowledges of class) and “subjective” class struggle (the experiences which inform them) can thereby never be comprehended independently of one another. Indeed, the objective/subjective distinction becomes increasingly blurred. The relationship is a dynamic one, constantly in process, whereby our understanding of class location is always expressed in and through the process of class struggle — and vice versa.

Implications

In accepting that discontinuities in class struggle are structural, as opposed to transitional, and that they involve, at specific moments, particular articulations across non-class social axes, we have to accept that these articulations must themselves be “classed.” However, given the contextually-specific and therefore contingent bases of these articulations there is no essential or necessarily permanent relationship between different axes of oppression. Thus, patriarchy and capitalism may well be causally (and reciprocally) related at specific historical junctures, but there is no essential relationship between them. The ways in which they are articulated can only be discerned from specific historical contexts. Likewise the political struggles constituted around oppositions to them, will be in an equally unstable relationship. It must follow, therefore, that there can be no *a priori* sense in which gender-based concerns can be excluded or included within the politics constituted around class struggle; that, in the end, must be the concern of the particular agents engaged in each historically-specific struggle.

I would argue, however, that an approach of the sort I have suggested does allow for a more complex set of relationships to prevail between and within classes and class struggles without either reducing them to questions about what the “true” priorities of a class politics might be, or wishing them away through an inherent logic in the process of capital accumulation. An approach of the sort I am suggesting must allow that oppressions and the struggles around them should not be rendered non-class simply because they do not evolve within or revolve around specifically workerist struggles. Where those antagonisms are expressed in different terms it allows them to shape, and often define class struggles.

This, it seems to me, applies equally, for example, to racism and to “race.” Racism in this way is not regarded simply as an ideological false consciousness imposing itself on an already constituted class, thereby fracturing an already in place unity. Rather, racism comes to be seen as a constitutive determination in the process of class formation. It is seen as *internal* to the ways in which classes are formed and the identities they assume. Traditional accounts of racism and the effects of racism as epiphenomena of class struggle become increasingly untenable if class formation as a process of class struggle is considered to include struggles within classes, as well as across classes. Thus, racial antagonisms cannot be seen to proceed from class struggles but rather must be seen of constitutive of classes and the politics that go with them.

Equally, though, the ideas developed here allow for “race” to be a constitutive element in the production or formation of classes. Again it is a view which can acknowledge the real effects of divisions within classes between racialised collectivities and at the same time suggest that organising around the concerns and the interests of “race” may be central to the ways in which classes are formed.³ Interests generated in cultural, consumptive, spatial *and* productive spheres may be “race” specific, and more often than not, may be constituted as

such with no reference to class at all, but nevertheless may have a more or less direct capacity over the formation of classes in the process of class struggle.⁴

Accordingly, class formation can be seen to incorporate a whole range of contradictory and antagonistic, as well as complementary and mutually supportive struggles. It suggests, furthermore, that the working class will possess multiples cross-cutting identities simultaneously and these will all, to a greater or lesser extent, be constitutive of class struggle.

Of course, all this may be the case but is not inevitably so. Class and "race" and class and racism may (indeed do) fuse and certain junctures but they are not in most cases synonymous. I have tried to identify, in a very general sense, how other forms of oppression may be constitutive of class but each of these will have its own independent determinations as well. The only way, of course, that we might explain where the points of inter-connection and independence are located is by tracing through the historical articulations between particular sets of social relations. This will often, but not always, show causal connections between capitalist social relations and different forms of oppression; between the formation of a politics around "race" or gender or sexuality and the form taken by the class struggle.

Notes

¹ This paper also will appear in *Politics*, 15.2, April 1995.

² For a critique of recent examples of indiscriminate imputations to Marx (and more generally to Marxism) of class reductionism (see Geras 1990: 6-11).

³ This is similar to Stuart Hall's assertion that "race is a modality in which class is 'lived,' the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and 'fought through'" (Hall, 1980: p. 341).

⁴ For example, CCCS (1982) and Gilroy (1987) offer illustrations of how "race" specific cultural and religious practices have been central to class formation and class struggle in Britain; Fiske (1992) examines the highly sophisticated consumptive and spatial structures through which class struggle is mediated in the contemporary United States; Harris (1993) and Lewis (1993) describe how the intersection of "race," gender and ethnicity have been *internal* to the development of post-war British capitalism and its attendant working class.

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