RETHINKING CLASS AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCE

Edited by Barry Eidlin and Michael A. McCarthy

POLITICAL POWER AND SOCIAL THEORY

VOLUME 37

RETHINKING CLASS AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCE

POLITICAL POWER AND SOCIAL THEORY

Series Editor: Julian Go

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VOLUME 37

RETHINKING CLASS AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCE

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2020

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83982-021-2 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83982-020-5 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83982-022-9 (Epub)

ISSN: 0198-8719

ISOQAR certified Management System, awarded to Emerald for adherence to Environmental standard ISO 14001:2004.

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INTRODUCING RETHINKING CLASS AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCE: A DYNAMIC ASYMMETRY APPROACH

Barry Eidlin and Michael A. McCarthy

ABSTRACT

Social class has long existed in tension with other forms of social difference such as race, gender, and sexuality, both in academic and popular debate. While Marxist-influenced class primacy perspectives gained prominence in US sociology in the 1970s, they faded from view by the 1990s, replaced by perspectives focusing on culture and institutions or on intersectional analyses of how multiple forms of social difference shape durable patterns of disempowerment and marginalization. More recently, class and capitalism have reasserted their place on the academic agenda, but continue to coexist uneasily with analyses of oppression and social difference. Here we discuss possibilities for bridging the gap between studies of class and other forms of social difference. We contend that these categories are best understood in relation to each other when situated in a larger system with its own endogenous dynamics and tendencies, namely capitalism. After providing an historical account of the fraught relationship between studies of class and other forms of social difference, we propose a theoretical model for integrating understandings of class and social difference using Wright et al.'s concept of dynamic asymmetry. *This shifts us away from discussions of which factors are most important* in general *toward concrete discussions of how these factors interact in particular cases and processes. We contend that class and other forms of social difference should not be studied primarily as traits embodied in individuals, but rather with respect to how these differences are organized in relation to each other within a framework shaped by the dynamics of capitalist development.*

Rethinking Class and Social Difference
Political Power and Social Theory, Volume 37, 1–23

ISSN: 0198-8719/doi:10.1108/S0198-871920200000037002

Keywords: Class; capitalism; identity; oppression; cultural turn; intersectionality; dynamic asymmetry

INTRODUCTION

Social class has long existed in uneasy relation to other forms of social difference such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and more. The tension exists both in scholarly and popular debate. Such debates tend to take the form of arguments over which aspect of social difference matters most in explaining a particular social outcome or social inequality more broadly. For example, this very volume emerged out of discussions that occurred in the aftermath of Donald Trump's unexpected victory in the 2016 US presidential election. At the time, analysts seeking to explain Trump's victory were divided over whether "economic anxiety," particularly among the much-discussed "white working class," or social divisions, particularly racism, delivered Trump the White House (Ferguson et al., 2018; Oberhauser et al., 2019; Schaffner et al., 2018; Tankersley, 2016).

Without rehashing the argument, what is striking is the degree to which these two factors were counterposed to each other. Those pointing toward economic factors risked being accused of downplaying Trump's appeal to racism, while those highlighting Trump's racism and misogyny risked being accused of overlooking the real economic challenges that shaped many voters' choices. While some of the stark counterposition between "identity" and "economic anxiety" resulted from the way that political campaign coverage paints participants into opposing camps, it betrayed a more fundamental problem: a basic misunderstanding of what class is, how it works, and particularly how it relates to other categories of social identity like race and gender.

For its part, "class" was understood either as an amalgam of income and education levels or as a set of cultural markers. In either case, "class" was understood as a trait largely, if not explicitly, assigned to white people, particularly white men. Voting analysis focused on the plight of the "white working class" for those advancing the "economic anxiety" argument, while those focused on racism and misogyny centered their analysis on people of color and women. Left out of this framing was the idea that women and people of color could be part of the group called "the working class" or that racism and misogyny could also be bound up with what people need to do to survive, what we typically think of as a class issue. As a result, most analysts missed one of the most salient features of the 2016 election: the sharp drop in Black working-class voter participation, particularly in key states like Wisconsin and Michigan, which exceeded Trump's margin of victory (Krogstad & Lopez, 2017).[1]

This is merely one example, but it is symptomatic of a broader tendency that also surfaces in academic circles. At its most general level, it takes the form of a

[1]For examples of analyses that resist the counterposition of "race" and "class" as factors explaining Trump's election, see (Bhambra, 2017; Davis, 2017; McQuarrie, 2017).

debate over "class primacy" or the degree to which class does or does not serve as the fundamental driver of political and social conflict (Wright, 2005). Implicit in this debate is the question of the degree to which class and other dimensions of social difference such as race, gender, sexuality, citizenship, or ability are autonomous from—or reducible to—each other.

Within sociology, class primacy has largely been identified with the Marxist tradition. It is a perspective that gained prominence in a number of subfields throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, generating a rich and wide-ranging body of scholarship. However, critics attacked class primacy perspectives for being "class reductionist," inattentive or even dismissive of the explanatory role of other forms of social difference. Moreover, they challenged the notion that class could serve as a fundamental basis of identity or social action, arguing that it was necessarily constructed out of cultural narratives and institutional contexts.

By the 1990s, arguments for class primacy in sociology were rare, superseded on the one hand by "middle-range" forms of explanation, where culture and institutions took center stage (Adams, Clemens, & Orloff, 2005; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991), and on the other hand by more multifaceted analyses of how gender, race, nation/citizenship, colonial legacies, and other forms of social difference shape durable patterns of disempowerment and marginalization. In particular, scholars focused on how multiple forms of oppression and marginalization often intersect with and amplify each other (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Such accounts took issue not only with class primacy but also with the concept of causal primacy in general. Instead, they focused on multicausal pathways to explain the effects of inequality and oppression. Class did not disappear as a category of analysis, but did greatly recede in importance. Even for those who did not go so far as to proclaim "the death of class," it became one among many competing and overlapping categories of inequality.

Not coincidentally, this shift in academic research happened in tandem with a sharp decline in class-based political organization. Across the industrialized world, labor union strength diminished, while labor and socialist parties, traditional representatives of the working class, distanced themselves from class-based rhetoric and policies. With working-class political and economic organization in disarray, and its social clout reduced, its analytical salience declined as well.

By the early 2010s though, class was forcing itself back on both the political and academic agendas. The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis exposed the yawning gap between a global "1%" elite and the rest of the world. Meanwhile, movements like Occupy and Black Lives Matter touched a nerve far beyond their US origins, raising distinctly class-based issues among their demands. As for academia, Thomas Piketty's work chronicling the evolution of inequality across industrialized countries reached a mass audience, while sociologists renewed and refocused their attention on issues of class and inequality. One telling academic indicator of this was the founding in 2011 of the Section on Inequality, Poverty, and Mobility of the American Sociological Association.

At the same time, these developments also exposed the chasm that existed between discussions of class and other forms of social difference. On the

movements side, Occupy was criticized for reproducing the patterns of hierarchy and marginalization of women and people of color that it criticized in the broader society (Gould-Wartofsky, 2015; Juris et al., 2012). For its part, Black Lives Matter has faced internal class tensions as the movement has developed. Some work to retain its grassroots, inclusive character, framing issues such as police brutality, housing, and the Fight for $15 as issues of class and racial justice. Meanwhile, others have been drawn toward mainstream politics, including electoral campaigns, policy work, and professionalized forms of organization. Additionally, access to foundation money and fundraising have proven to be flashpoints exposing class divisions within the movement (Ransby, 2018; Rickford, 2016; Sands, 2017).

In academia, the new research on inequality has developed in uneasy coexistence with literatures on oppression and social difference. Some critics argued that the inequality literature was insufficiently attentive to issues of "categorical complexity," where multiple forms of oppression interact with each other to produce specific forms of inequality (McCall, 2005). Likewise, within the social difference literatures, some theorists of intersectionality contended that class remained poorly integrated into studies of the intersection between race, gender, and class (Anthias, 2013; Walby et al., 2012).

Is it possible to bridge the gap between studies of class and other forms of social difference? If so, how? Does class primacy necessarily entail class reductionism, or can it account for other axes of domination and oppression without marginalizing them? Likewise, how might integrating class into studies of other forms of oppression and domination change or enhance our understandings of these forms? These are the questions that lie at the heart of this special issue of *Political Power and Social Theory*.

In our view, the dynamics of class and other forms of social difference are best understood in relation to each other when situated analytically in a larger system with its own endogenous dynamics and tendencies, namely capitalism.

This special issue brings together a group of scholars grappling with these questions in their empirical work. Here, in the introduction, we offer a theoretical framework to begin thinking through them systematically. We start with an assessment of the fraught history of debates surrounding class primacy, its critics, and efforts to theorize class in relation to other forms of social difference. Our particular focus is on assessing how understandings of the causal role of class have evolved over time. Here we trace the development of critiques of class reductionism that challenged class' causal primacy both in relation to other identities or axes of social difference and in relation to other factors like cultural narratives.

While these approaches offered a needed corrective to the overly structural models of explanation common in most forms of class analysis, we contend that it was at the cost of analytical clarity and explanatory power. In arguing for multicausal pathways, it became more difficult to assess competing explanations or discern broader patterns. Instead, the focus shifted to more particular interpretive or narrative accounts, which some criticized as veering into "just-so" models of explanation. In other cases, the broader goal of explanation through identification of key causal factors was called into question.

We contend that recognizing multiple and overlapping forms of social difference and multicausal pathways need not come at the cost of giving up on capitalism as a central analytical category or on causal explanation more broadly. Building on the work of Wright, Levine, and Sober (1992), we argue first for replacing the concept of *class primacy* with that of *class pervasiveness*, the idea that "mechanisms identified in class analysis have considerable importance across a wide range of explanatory problems" (Wright, Levine, and Sober (1992), p. 175), while also understanding that "there is no principle that warrants the conclusion that class considerations always comprise the primary determinants of social phenomena" (Wright, Levine, and Sober (1992), p. 174). Our analytical move, along these lines, is to shift from how class experience informs and shapes the conditions of other forms of social difference to show how all forms of social difference, class included, are shaped and conditioned by patterns of capitalist development itself.

Second, we provide a theoretical model for integrating understandings of class and social difference using Wright et al.'s concept of *dynamic asymmetry*. The *asymmetrical* part of the term does not refer to the idea that certain causal factors always matter more, as a crude class primacy argument would hold. Rather, it refers to two forms of asymmetry. First, asymmetries in the level at which potential causal factors operate. More structural factors that we can identify in the basic patterns of capitalist development tend to serve as limiting factors, providing the range of options available to actors at a given moment. More contextual factors, such as other forms of social difference, contingent events, and strategic patterns of political mobilization, help to select from that range of options. Second, within the realm of contextual factors, there are asymmetries in the degree to which potential causal factors are salient in any given situation.

The *dynamic* part of the term refers to the degree that structural factors are driven over time by endogenous sources of dynamism. With respect to capitalism, one need not ascribe to a full-blown theory of historical materialism for this to hold. One must simply be willing to accept three basic propositions that constitute capitalism as an endogenously dynamic system of change: (1) that the structural interdependence between exploiters of labor and those whose labor is exploited creates an inherent conflict; (2) that competition and conflict between firms on the market creates dynamic patterns of corporate governance, technological change, and growth; and (3) that the competition within the labor market itself over scarce jobs and resources creates inherent conflict between and within working-class communities. We see these as entirely endogenous processes within capitalism. Other factors, such as state policy environments, play similar limiting roles, but are driven by exogenous sources of dynamism. That is, they change in response to external forces.[2]

[2]In the case of state policies, this lack of endogenous dynamism can play a critical explanatory role, as with instances of "policy drift," where policies work differently at different times precisely because they do *not* change to adapt to new situations (Hacker & Pierson, 2010).

This dynamic asymmetry framework shifts attention away from general discussions of which factors are most important overall toward concrete discussions of how these factors interact in particular cases and processes. The many forms of social difference that concern us in this volume, including class, can operate asymmetrically, at the structural-limiting level or the contextual-selecting level, depending on the question or case at issue. In exploring the relationship between kinds of social inequality, we contend that the key analytical move involves shifting from analyzing class and other forms of social difference as individual traits embodied in individuals to focusing on how these forms of social difference are organized in relation to each other. At its core, this involves shifting attention to developmental dynamics within capitalism itself.

THE FRAUGHT HISTORY OF CLASS PRIMACY

Amidst the social upheaval of the 1960s, class analysis saw a resurgence in American sociology. The resurgence was in reaction to dominant mid-century schools of thought such as structural functionalism, pluralism, and stratification theory, which did not account sufficiently for the role of structural power imbalances in shaping social and political outcomes. Even among the subset of mid-century scholars who took power seriously, they viewed contemporary power struggles as occurring within a framework of regulated capitalism managed by pluralist institutions. While these would allow for winners and losers, the lack of deep, enduring cleavages and stability of democratic institutions would ensure that structural inequalities would not persist over time (Bendix, 1964; Dahrendorf, 1959; Lipset, 1963).[3]

The "new" class analysis built on the mid-century power scholarship, but took a more critical stance. Much of it was explicitly rooted in the Marxist tradition, focused on explaining how capitalist (and pre-capitalist) economic relations produced and reproduced structural relations of domination and exploitation. Exploring a wide range of empirical territory, its rise was not bound by method. Erik Olin Wright's quantitative analyses of class established both an empirical and theoretical foundation for understanding middle classes (Wright, 1985, 1997). Frances Fox Piven's historical studies of labor and protest movements laid the foundation for subsequent studies of social movements and contentious politics (Piven & Cloward, 1977). Michael Burawoy's ethnographic study of the workplace provided insight into intraclass relations and the microfoundations for consent, while Paul Willis' study of working-class British schoolboys detailed how class structures are reproduced across generations (Burawoy, 1979; Willis, 1977). Edna Bonacich developed a theoretical framework for understanding the shape of modern labor markets and their role in producing racial conflict (Bonacich, 1972).

[3]The notable exception here would be C. Wright Mills, who while eschewing the Marxist label himself, nonetheless, took structural power imbalances based on class very seriously in his work (Mills, 1948, 1959).

What this wide array of work shared in common was an approach that put a relational, oppositional conception of class front and center. As distinct from the stratification approach, captured so elegantly in Blau and Duncan's status attainment model (1967), which focused on the social causes that best explain why people end up in the positions they do, the emergent relational view asked how the material advantages and power resources of some groups are causally related to the material disadvantages of others. More specifically, it assigned to class a primary causal role in explaining the social phenomena under investigation. Counter to mid-century scholarship, which tended to view class either as a descriptive category or one among many competing and overlapping sources of social cleavage, this scholarship viewed class as a fundamental organizing principle.

There was also an important and influential left-Weberian variant to this new wave of class analysis (Goldthorpe, 1987; Mann, 1986; Tilly, 1998). Drawing from the work of Max Weber, these thinkers tended to emphasize processes of social closure and opportunity hoarding. In these accounts, the mechanism for transforming a disadvantage for some groups into an advantage for others was exclusion from opportunities, as can be seen clearly in the cases of redlining in housing and color bars in occupations. The Marxist variant, which will be our main focus, did not preclude such relational mechanisms. Rather, instead of arguing that class was relational with respect to the exclusion of certain advantages held by some groups, it went further, arguing that the source of material gain for some classes were the other classes themselves. In other words, in the Marxist approach to class, the mechanism that turned a material disadvantage for some groups into a material advantage for others was their exclusion from certain property rights and their subsequent work effort for the advantaged classes. The Marxists, then, argued that relational patterns of domination and exploitation were core to understanding class.

Throughout the 1970s, the new class analysis developed an ambitious and generative research program (see Manza & McCarthy, 2011 for an overview). Its apogee was perhaps a 1982 special issue of the *American Journal of Sociology* organized around the theme of "Marxist Inquiries: Studies of Labor, Class, and States" (Burawoy & Skocpol, 1982). Co-edited by Michael Burawoy and Theda Skocpol, it showcased the breadth of this scholarship, with papers addressing classic Marxist questions such as proletarianization, the labor process, and the changing class structure of capitalist and state-socialist societies, along with broader issues such as the relation between the state and class formation in developing countries, drivers of state military expenditures, and the political economy of the global food order. In his sweeping introductory essay to the volume, Burawoy offered a confident assessment of where the new generation of scholarship fit into the evolution of the discipline:

> Just as sociology responded to the call of the immediate postwar era, Marxism has now taken the baton, trying to piece together a coherent analysis of these interconnected transitions [related to the breakdown of the postwar social and political order] (Burawoy, 1982, p. S28).

But for all the scholarly ferment the new class analysis generated, within a few years of the *AJS* issue, the resurgence had largely subsided. Critics charged scholarship based on the primacy of class with being "class reductionist" and inattentive to other axes of social difference. Even worse, Marxism was criticized for engaging in the great sin of functionalism. While socialist feminists and anticolonial Marxists had long raised such critiques within Marxism itself, as we shall see further below, these critiques progressively distanced themselves from Marxism, giving greater causal weight to other forms of social difference such as race and gender, and often outright displacing class as irrelevant. Even as the class primacy of the Marxist scholarship of the 1970s faded, questions about how to understand class inequality and other dimensions of social difference, such as race, gender, sexuality, citizenship, or ability, persisted. To what extent are other forms of social difference autonomous from class? How might they be reducible to one or the other? Which is the most important for explaining durable disempowerment and marginality?

TURNING TO THE PRIMACY OF CULTURE

At its core, the cultural turn in sociological studies of inequality was not simply about "bringing in" new and understudied dimensions of social life. While the study of nonclass forms of social difference was in part a matter of filling in gaps, much more fundamentally culturalists argued that social positions (including class itself) do not determine social dynamics but rather had to themselves be formed through processes of meaning-making (Adams et al., 2005, p. 39). The cultural turn at its core was a challenge to the causal primacy of class, which in many respects reversed the causal arrow and elevated the status of culture to that of causal primacy in its place.

Margaret Somers' work, in particular, developed unambiguously cultural critiques of class itself. Her work does not simply foreground cultural processes, but rather is framed around an explicit critique of the Marxist causal emphasis on class. There are three broad approaches within cultural analysis. The first is the investigation how extra-cultural factors, such as structure, institutions, and demography, bear on the production of cultural phenomena, an intellectual corner in which many of the Western Marxists found themselves (cf. Williams, 1958). A second endogenous subfield identifies the ways that cultural processes condition and produce other cultural processes. Consider, for example, Sewell's work on how meanings are attached to cultural symbols (1999). And finally, the strongest version is the study of how cultural factors make and condition extra-cultural phenomena. Sewell summarizes this turn in *Logics of History* saying that "[e]ven social and economic structures, which appear to be the concrete foundations or bony skeletons of social life, are themselves the products of the interpretive work of human actors" (2000, p. 42). Structures such as class and capitalism do not precede culture, they themselves are culturally produced. Somers' work, as well as the other strong defenders of the cultural turn, is unambiguously situated in the latter approach, making a clear case for the causal primacy of culture.