

**Lecture 13 Sociology 621**  
**October 24, 2011**  
**CLASS AND GENDER**

**I. Introduction: Standard Feminist Critiques**

Both Marxism and Feminism are emancipatory theoretical traditions. Both identify and seek to understand specific forms of oppression in the existing world -- gender oppression, particularly of women, in the case of feminism; class oppression, particularly of workers, in the case of Marxism. Both theoretical traditions explore the consequences of the oppression on which they focus for other social phenomena, and both seek to understand the conditions which contribute to the reproduction of the oppression in question. Both believe that these forms of oppression should be and can be eliminated. Both see the active struggle of the oppressed groups at the core of their respective theories as an essential part of the process through which such oppression is transformed: the struggles of women are central to the transformation of gender oppression, the struggles of workers are central to the transformation of class oppression. And intellectuals working within both traditions believe that the central reason for bothering to do social theory and research is to contribute in some way to the realization of their respective emancipatory projects.

Given these parallel moral and intellectual commitments, one might have thought that Marxists and feminists would work closely in tandem, mutually seeking to understand the complex ways in which class and gender interact. With some notable exceptions, this has not happened. Indeed, far from trying to forge a close articulation of Marxist analyses of class and feminist analyses of gender, in many ways the most sustained challenge to class analysis as a central axis of critical social theory in recent years has come from feminists. The characteristic form of this challenge involves the accusation that Marxist class analysis is guilty of one or more of the following sins:

1. The concept of class in Marxism is gender-blind, whereas class relations are inherently gendered.
2. Marxist class analysis tends to “reduce” gender to class. That is, gender oppression is treated as if it can be fully explained by class oppression.
3. Marxist class analysis treats gender inequality and gender oppression as “epiphenomenal” -- that is, as effects which are not themselves causally important for anything else. They are treated as a “surface phenomena”, symptoms of something else, but not important in their own right.

Because of time constraints we cannot, in this course, systematically explore all of the theoretical and empirical problems of the relation of class to gender. Nevertheless, it is important to respond to these objections and define a general perspective on how to think about the structural interconnection between class and other forms of oppression.

But first, I want to draw a contrast between Marxism and Feminism as broad traditions of social theory, focusing on the relationship between their *emancipatory visions* and the *explanatory challenges* each theory faces.

## II. Visions of Emancipation, challenges of explanation

### 1. Marxism & Feminism as emancipatory critical theories

Recall how I defined an emancipatory critical theory in the first lecture of the semester: This is a social theory that analyzes existing institutions and practices in terms of an emancipatory alternative. Both Marxism & Feminism are emancipatory traditions of social theory in this sense. They are both grounded in a normative ideal of a world free of oppression; where they differ in these terms is the kind of oppression around which the theory revolves – class oppression in Marxism, and gender oppression in Feminism.

### 2. The emancipatory visions

What, precisely, are the emancipatory visions of these two traditions?

**2.1 Marxism & classlessness.** Marx himself was fairly explicit in his characterization of the emancipatory ideal – a classless society. The institutional implementation of this ideal was much less clear, but the principle of the ideal was clear: a society without class exploitation and alienation, a society governed by the distributional maxim “to each according to need from each according to ability.” Capitalism, then, is to be analyzed from the vantage point of these ideals: how does capitalism block the realization of these ideals? What dynamics in capitalism point in the direction of the realization of this ideal of emancipation?

**2.2 Feminism & Emancipation.** The positive normative vision in feminism is perhaps less clear and contested among feminists. Is the emancipatory ideal gender equality or genderlessness? Does a radical egalitarianism within gender relations imply an obliteration of gender difference or just a valorization of gender difference? But whatever else feminists might believe about this, the emancipatory vision involves an end to inequalities of power, opportunity, and status built around gender relations.

*A note on the normative foundations of gender emancipation:*

I think the most coherent position is in fact *genderlessness* in the following precise sense: gender is a social construction. It is a social transformation of sexual differences which are biologically-rooted into social differences between men and women that are culturally salient and *enforced* through various kind of gender-specifying norms. Genderlessness means the destruction of all gender-differentiated normative rules that govern and enforce expectations about the proper and appropriate roles or identities or behaviors of biological men and women. This does not mean the eradication of all difference between the modal man and woman; and it does not mean normative androgyny in the sense of normatively enforced rules which obliterate expressions of traits that are stereotypically called “masculinity” and “femininity”. What it means is that there would be no *socially enforced* association between masculine and feminine behaviors and dispositions and biological categories. Genderlessness is the withering away of socially sanctioned and normatively enforced expectations about how a man and a woman should behave by virtue of biological sex.

### 3. The explanatory challenges

**3.1 The general problem:** A fully elaborated Emancipatory theory faces three interconnected tasks, as elaborated early in the semester:

- i. *Diagnosis of Harms.* Demonstrating that existing social arrangements impose serious harms on people
- ii. *Emancipatory alternative.* Demonstrating that an alternative structure of relations in which such harms would be absent would be viable – that a social order with those institutions would actually work.
- iii. *Practical transformation.* Demonstrating that this alternative is achievable and providing an account of transformation – the process by which people can move from the present world to the alternative.

Both Marxism and Feminism make convincing cases for i. They face dramatically different challenges in ii and iii.

### 3.2 The explanatory challenges

**Marxism:** It is easy to convince people that harms exist in capitalism and that they are caused by the social institutions of capitalism; what is hard is to convince people that a radical alternative is feasible and achievable. Both of these constitute huge theoretical challenges to anti-capitalists. The idea that a complex industrial society can be effectively run without markets and private ownership is a tough sell, and the idea that political forces could coalesce to accomplish this transformation is also difficult to make convincing. The relatively deterministic quality of Historical materialism helped solve both of these problems: capitalism is doomed, the vast majority of people would, in the face of the demise of capitalism, benefit from a radical democratic control of the economy, where there is a will there is a way, etc. The strongly deterministic tendencies within the Marxist tradition can be thought of as helping to solve the core explanatory challenge of a theory of anti-capitalist class emancipation.

**Feminism:** Feminists do not face the same challenge. Few feminists have ever worried about the question: is social integration and social order possible without male domination? Is a society of egalitarian reciprocity and equal power and opportunity for males and females viable? These questions are not posed because feminists more or less take for granted that male domination and the associated oppression of women are eliminable. Why is this seen as sufficiently obvious as to require little elaborate defense?

*Hypothesis:* the essential core of the emancipatory vision in feminism revolves around micro-level interactions, not macro-level institutions. To be sure, there are macro-institutions needed to accomplish and sustain the micro-level practices, but the moral vision is deeply anchored in micro-relations. And here, then, is the hypothesis: the possibility of stable, egalitarian, symmetrical, mutually empowering micro-level gender relations is something that people experience in prefigured ways within existing society. And further, people have the experience that struggling around these relations at the micro-level pushes them towards greater egalitarian symmetry. This reality of micro-gender, then, underlies a more voluntaristic agent-centered theory.

**Can one imagine a macro-level unraveling of gender emancipation?** Demographic collapse as a possibility. This is not entirely a far-fetched idea: perhaps it is the case that in the absence of asymmetries in opportunities and power between men and women, fertility would drop below 2.1 per woman, and this would lead eventually to demographic collapse unless some new countervailing mechanisms were created (like strong pro-natalist incentives). We already observe very low fertility in developed economies which have significantly eroded male domination and dramatically expanded the power and opportunities for women. In some countries fertility is well under 1.5 per woman. Perhaps this is a consequence of greater equality, and thus poses a problem of sustainability.

### **III. The Interaction of Class & Gender**

#### **1. Micro/macro analysis**

First, a general point of clarification about the context of these issues. The class/gender intersection should be understood as both a micro-issue and a macro-issue:

**Micro:** At the micro-level, understanding the lived experiences, interests, subjectivities, etc. of individuals requires understanding how they occupy locations within gender relations, not just locations within class relations. A “location” is a location-within-a-relation – i.e. a location within sets of relationally interacting practices of different sorts. When people insist that race and gender are important often they are making mainly a micro-claim: Gender & race are (a) salient dimensions of the identities of people and (b) causally important in the lives of individuals (which in part helps explain what it they are salient in their identities).

**Macro:** At the macro level there is significant variation in the forms of gender relations (as well as class relations, of course) across societies (or other units of analysis).

The analysis of the interaction of class and gender involves understanding interactions at both the micro-level of the social relations of individual’s lives and the macro-level of broader social structure.

#### **2. Understanding the interrelationship of Class and gender**

Analysis of the inter-relationship between class and gender (or other forms of nonclass oppression) involves two related, but still different sorts of problems:

1. Analyses of the effects of class and gender *on each other*.
2. Analyses of the joint effects of class and gender in explaining various things.

What I want to do here is simply clarify how to think about these questions for the case of class and gender.

## **IV. Effects of class and gender on each other.**

### **1. Effects of GENDER on CLASS:**

There are two main ways that gender relations affects class:

#### *1.1. Shaping the way people are tied to the class structure*

a. allocating people into class locations: discrimination affects probabilities of getting into class locations either because of blocking access to relevant resources (credit markets, educational attainment) or through direct exclusions (marriage bars, glass ceilings, sexual harassment within work, etc)

b. shaping various indirect linkages of people to class structures. Critical example = the way people are linked to class structures via family and kinship relations.

#### *1.2. shaping the nature of class locations themselves.*

Gender relations can have a direct impact on the nature of class relations themselves. Given certain forms of gender relations, some kinds of class locations are much more likely to occur to be filled by individuals. Particular gender relations around the social standing of unmarried daughters of farming families, for example, was very important for the creation working class textile jobs in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in New England. These young women could not inherit the farm and because of the specific gendered practices of family formation, they were an available labor supply for these positions.

### **2 Effects of CLASS on GENDER:**

#### *2.1. Functional explanations & interest explanations:*

In discussions of the way class relations affects gender relations, two kinds of explanations are often invoked. These can be called “functional explanations” and “interest explanations”. We are going to have a lot to say about functional explanations when we discuss the theory of the state and ideology. This is a very interesting and complex idea. I don’t want us to get bogged down with this here, so I will not go deeply into what a functional explanation is, but I still need to briefly introduce it.

#### **What is a Functional explanation?**

The simplest kind of functional explanations occur in biology, where this is completely standard. If I ask you, why are the bones in the wings of birds hollow, a good answer is: because this enables birds to fly by reducing the weight of wings. Why is the neck of the giraffe so long – a favorite example of evolutionary biologists? To enable the giraffe to eat the leaves of the acacia tree. In each case the explanation for some structural property of a creature is explained by its *beneficial effects for the creature*. This is what we mean by the “function” of the property in question and we say that the function of something explains its form.

The reason this is a special kind of explanation is that we are explaining the existence of something by its effects, by its consequences. In ordinary causal explanations the cause comes *before* the effect; in functional explanation an effect explains its own cause!

As we will see later, some people reject out of hand functional explanations in social science. They work in biology because of the theory of evolution – this provides a mechanism by which functional relations come into existence. In sociology they are more precarious. But we won't worry about that here.

### **Interest explanations**

There is another kind of explanation that sometimes looks like a functional explanation, but really isn't. This is an explanation that invokes the *intentions* of people. It goes like this: Why are tax policies beneficial to rich people? Because politicians intentionally design tax policies in the expectation that they will serve the interests of rich people. Here again the beneficial effects of something (tax policy) help explain the policy, but they do so because politicians consciously designed the policies to generate these effects. An interest-explanation is different from a functional explanation because it works through the intentions of actors. A key difference between a functional and an intentional explanation – which we will make much of later – is that in the former something is explained by *actual* effects whereas in the latter, in intentional explanations, the explanation is based on *anticipated* effects. More on this later in the semester.

### **Back to gender**

“Functional” explanations and “interest” explanations often work together, but they have some significantly different features. A class-functional explanation of Male domination has the form:

Male domination in contemporary society is explained by virtue of the positive effects it has for capitalists or capitalism.

A class-interest explanation has the form:

Male domination in contemporary society is explained because capitalists realize that it is in their interests and so see to it that male domination continues.

Similar kinds of arguments are often encountered for racism, nationalism, and many other things. As we will see later, in many circumstances, a combination of functional and interest explanations are needed.

Here are two examples of class based functional explanations of unequal gender relations that come from the Marxist tradition:

- (1). Frederick Engels' argument in his influential book *The origins of the Family Private Property and the State*: This is a complex and very interesting theoretical account of the *origins* of male domination. Here are the basic elements:

*Thesis 1*: A gender division of labor pre-existed male domination. This division of labor, Engels believed, had biological foundations given the level of technology. Women had greater responsibility for early childrearing and associated domestic tasks; men for hunting and large-animal husbandry

*Thesis 2*: In this division of labor, men tended to have physical control of the most valuable potentially heritable property. Large animals was the pivotal resource here.

*Thesis 3:* For men to insure that this property would be inherited by their own progeny, they needed to control access of other men to the fertility of the mothers of their children.

*Thesis 4:* Male domination of women is the mechanism through which this control of reproduction is assured.

*Conclusion* Male domination of women is thus explained by the *functional requirements for a stable system of inheritance of male-controlled property.*

(2). More contemporary argument of Marxist feminists: Unpaid domestic labor is functional for the accumulation of capital by lowering the costs of reproducing labor power. Structure of the argument:

*Thesis 1* The provision of unpaid domestic labor is beneficial for capitalists by lowering the costs of reproducing labor power (since some of those costs are provided by unpaid domestic services). The question then becomes: who will perform this unpaid domestic labor.

*Possibilities* There are three options: 1. Equal sharing; 2. Predominantly performed by women; 3. Predominantly performed by men

*Thesis 2* Until very recent times, the care of small children was most easily and efficiently done by women because of breastfeeding, relatively high fertility rates to insure surviving adult children, etc.

*Thesis 3* Because of thesis 2, it is more efficient for households for mothers/wives to take primary responsibility for the necessary unpaid household work than for husbands. The allocation of men to the role of fulltime breadwinner and the wife to homemaker will be more efficient -- on average -- than other arrangements. This is the cheapest solution for capitalists and the most advantageous for households.

*Thesis 4* Because the solution 2 is the best for capital, this solution will tend to be the most stable in capitalism.

*Thesis 5* Allocating women to these roles generates (or strongly reinforces) their subordination to men because of economic dependency, isolation, lowered status.

2.2 *Class structure may obstruct change even if gender (or other oppressions) are not positively functional for reproducing class structures:*

Two basic arguments

1. class structures shapes *resources* available for struggle:

class structure → access to resources → affects struggles over gender oppression

2. Struggles over nonclass oppressions require mobilization of solidarities and popular power and this mobilization is threatening to dominant classes (the Pandora's box problem) so they act to undermine such struggles:

class structure → dominant classes are threatened by sustained mobilization of oppressed groups of any kind → oppose struggles against nonclass oppression, even though the oppression itself does not especially benefit them.

### 2.3 *Dynamic Asymmetry of Class and gender: Is there a case for dynamic primacy to class?*

If we look at the question of reciprocal effects *dynamically*, then a pretty good case can be made that, at least within capitalism, *changes* in the class structure have had a bigger effect on *changes* in gender relations than vice versa:

**Gender:** why have gender relations been so dramatically changed in the past half century years? Massive entry of women into the labor force -- which is a change in their class locations -- seems the central factor. The dynamics of capitalism → change in the demand for different kinds of labor → entry of women in the labor force → change in gender relations. It is hard to construct a symmetrical reciprocal argument since there is not a theory of the “laws of motion of gender dynamics”.

In the section on race we will see a parallel case for race:

**Race:** why did the civil rights movement succeed in the 1960s but fail in earlier decades? Transformations of the class structure seem critical for this.

## V. **Joint Effects of class and gender in explaining various things**

Suppose we want to explain some variation across individuals – political attitudes, voting behavior, mortality, standards of living, mental health. How should we think of the way these sorts of phenomena are affected by gender and class?

Two basic theses:

### *Thesis 1. Distinct mechanisms thesis.*

When we speak of “class” and “gender” as forms of oppression we are attempting to identify *distinct causal mechanisms*. That is: “class” and “gender” are each names for causal mechanisms (or clusters of mechanisms) located in specific aspects of social relations. “Distinct” does not imply that these mechanisms do not affect each other, or that in the world any phenomenon we might be interested in is ever simply the effect of one of these mechanisms alone. And it does not prejudge the question of the extent to which changes in one might explain changes in another, but simply affirms the point that these are not just disguised forms of the same thing.

One possible grounding for the autonomy of gender mechanisms is sexuality: Gender oppression is generated in part by the mechanisms through which sexual identities are formed, and these mechanisms are distinct from class exploitation. (also for Race: Racial oppressions are generated in part by the mechanisms through which communal cultural identities are formed -- similar to the way ethnic identities are formed -- and these mechanisms are distinct from class exploitation.)

To say that gender oppression constitutes a mechanism distinct from class, means that it *generates distinctive effects*. This implies that in our analysis of various social questions -- consciousness, voting, educational attainment, income inequality, conflict, etc. -- we face the task of trying to sort out the distinctive ways in which class and gender affect the outcomes.

*Thesis 2: Interactive effects Thesis.*

While different forms of oppression identify distinctive kinds of causal mechanisms, in the world these mechanisms *interact*: **the world is not additive!** This is of fundamental importance and can be called the *structural interaction thesis*. This implies a rejection of two possible claims:

- (1). The view that the category “class” should be regarded as inherently “gendered”. Class and gender are ways of identifying specific causal mechanisms, and our task is to understand the specific forms of their interaction.
- (2). The view that these mechanisms only have additive effects: that the effects of class, for example, do not in part depend upon gender.

In effect this is like arguing in chemistry that the effects of water cannot be understood as the effects of H and O, but of the specific forms of interaction of H + O in the water molecule.

The interactive effects thesis implies the following kind of model for an explanation of X:

$$\text{Explanandum X} = B_1\text{Class} + B_2\text{Gender} + B_3(\text{Gender} \times \text{class})$$

The claim that class is “gendered” is, in effect, the claim that coefficient  $B_1 = 0$ .

Example: in predicting income, gender has an effect, class has an effect, and there is an interactive effect.

In this general abstract model, there is also no universal presumption that class is “more important” than gender, i.e. that  $B_1 > B_2$ .

Note: A famous recent claim in the sociological literature on race is the “declining significance of race” thesis by William Julius Wilson. What does this thesis mean?

Race equation: Explanandum X =  $B_1\text{Class} + B_2\text{Race} + B_3(\text{Race} \times \text{class})$

Strong version:  $B_2$  and  $B_3$  are declining over time.

Weak version:  $B_2$  is declining over time. Race has weaker *additive* effects.

## VI. An example of Class & Gender: The class location of married women

### 1 Stating the Problem

1.1 Consider the following objective locations of women. What is the class location of each?

<i>Wife's Job</i>	<i>Husband's Job</i>
1. Typist, full time	no husband
2. Typist, full time	factory worker
3. Typist, full time	capitalist
4. Typist, part time	capitalist
5. Homemaker	factory worker
6. Homemaker	capitalist
7. Homemaker supported by the state	no husband

1.2. Basic problem: we have until now treated individuals as the incumbents of class locations. But individuals are also members of families. Problem = how do we accommodate families into the class structure? And, how does this affect the “class location” of the members of families.

1.3. *Remember the point of all of this*: class is meant to explain things. The point of this question is that it affects the explanatory power of the category for explaining such things as consciousness formation, class formation, class conflict.

1.4. Basic strategy = different specific instances require different logics to answer the question:

1. *children*: their class = the class of their family -- strictly derived from the class of their parents

2. *students*: their class is *objectively indeterminate* with varying degrees of indeterminacy (not “contradictory”, but indeterminate): they have particular probabilities of ending up in particular classes, and these probabilities define the class character of their studenthood.

**NOTE**: this problem with students is present for people with jobs as well because the *degree of attachment of a person to a given class may be variable* = the problem of intra-generational mobility: a worker who is saving up to become a petty bourgeois *and earns enough to do this* is simultaneously a worker and a pre-PB -- this can be considered an *intertemporal contradictory location*. This raises the important problem of the temporal dimension of class structures.

3. *housewives*: their class = derived from the insertion of their family into the system of property relations and exploitation → derived from their husbands. Note alternative = housewives occupy a class location within the domestic mode of production. (Christine Delphy)

1.5. Difficult case = married women in the labor force.

## 2 Goldthorpe's view

- a. Families pool income as units of consumption → all family members benefit from the exploitation-derived income of any member.
- b. Families have unitary class interests: class struggles occur *between* families, not *within* families.
- c. families are mobilized into class formations, not atomized individuals.
- d. *Because of the gender division of labor and male dominance*, the economic fate of most families depends upon the class character of the husband's job.
- e. Therefore: the class of married women is derived from the class location of her husband.

## 3 Critique

- Given high rates of marital dissolution, many married women are rather like students in the sense that the temporal dimension of their class location is important: whatever we decide about families, they have a current class location and simultaneously have a kind of **shadow class location** = the class location that they would have if the marriage dissolved.
- class formations do not simply mobilize families as units; they also mobilize individuals. Different members of the same family may be inserted into class formations differentially, and at a minimum this means that individual locations may also matter.
- The interests that are tied to classes are not simply income-based interests. Issues of autonomy and domination, the politics of production, are also bound up with class, and these center much more exclusively on individuals as job-holders.
- The degree to which the material interests and fate of a woman are heavily dependent upon the class of her husband (and vice versa) varies across time and place. A variety of institutional features can intensify or weaken this dependency. *The more dependent is the economic welfare of a wife on her husband's class, the more it makes sense to see her class location derived from that of her husband.*

## 4 Implications

- Under certain conditions, Goldthorpe's account is correct. In particular, if there is a) low divorce and b) high material dependency, then the class location of married women would tend to be identical to that of their husbands. If there is a) high divorce rates and b) low dependency, then the class location of women will be more determined by their own jobs, their individual insertion into the class structure.
- The overarching criterion for understanding class structures is this: class structures link individuals to class interests -- interests defined with respect to the mechanisms of exploitation. [NOTE: there is a second possible view of what it is that class structures distribute: class structures distribute identity-formation experiences -- Bourdieu's class habitus]

- If we take this interest-centered approach to class, then there are three primary ways in which individuals become linked to class interests and thus class structures. We can call these the *three axes of class location*. Each is relevant to the analysis of class and gender:

**axis 1: direct class**

**axis 2: mediated class**

**axis 3: Intertemporal class:** critical issue = *shadow class of women if household breaks up*

- To fully specify the class location of women, it is necessary to define their linkage to the class structure along all three of these axes. This opens up the possibility of many more nuances in the structural map of locations themselves: individuals have direct and mediated class locations which may or may not be the same; this opens up possibilities for contradictory combinations of class locations within families; all of these combinations may exist with differing degree of temporal stability; and temporal instability suggests that there is an element of uncertainty in the very specification of a “location” -- locations of intrinsic ambiguities in their properties because of the temporal dimension.

## 5. US/SWEDEN Comparison

The empirical patterns we observe indicate that in the US the mediated class location of women matters a great deal more than their direct class location in shaping their class identity whereas in Sweden the two have roughly equal weight. Why should this be so? Possibilities:

1. Greater dependency of wife on husband in the US --> her class interests are objectively more subordinated to his. This is due to a) greater income inequality between men and women; b) role of the state in partially disengaging material welfare from family income --> less income drop upon marital dissolution.
2. Greater salience of the job itself in shaping consciousness in Sweden than in the US because of greater workplace mobilization through unions, etc.

## VII. Concluding remarks

The central problem of emancipatory social theory of whatever sort is to identify forms of oppression in society and seek to understand the conditions for their transformation. Class and gender oppression remain two of the most salient axes of such theoretical efforts: class, because of its centrality to the problem of economic exploitation, and gender, because of its centrality to the problem of the subordination of women. Marxism and feminism are the two theoretical traditions that have devoted the most attention to understanding these oppressions. In the past a great deal of theoretical energy has been devoted to metatheoretical debates over the general priority to be given to one or the other of these clusters of causal processes. One of the accomplishments of the theoretical progress of recent years has been to move beyond such preoccupations. This does not mean that we must slide into the postmodernist mush of everything causing everything (or nothing causing anything). The rejection of grand metatheory means that the relative causal importance of class and gender depend upon the specific explananda under discussion. The agenda now is to get on with the messy business of empirically examining the ways in which class and gender intersect across a wide spectrum of social questions.