

Berkeley Sociology Lecture 4
Class, Exploitation, Oppression
Tuesday, March 5, 2002

The location of Class within the Broad Theory

Class figures centrally within almost every aspect of Marxism. For this reason I like to think of the core of Marxism as being *Class Analysis*: the study of class and its consequences. Class is central to the normative vision of radical egalitarianism as classlessness or less classness; class is central to the problems of social reproduction; class is central to the dynamics of change.

I. A couple of preliminary terminological notes:

1. *Class as noun and as adjective.* Generally I think the word class is better used as an adjective than as a noun. Rather than ask: “how many classes are there?”, I think it is better to ask “how many different kinds of class locations are there within a specific class structure.” Sometimes it is fine to use the noun, but often it is misleading and confusing.

2. *The basic inventory.* The concept of class is really a repertoire or cluster of concepts. It will help clarify the agenda for the class to briefly run through these:

- *class relations*: the social relations within which class locations are determined
- *class locations*: the locations filled by individuals within class relations
- *class structure*: the total set of class relations within some unit of analysis: one can speak of the class structure of a firm, a city, a country, maybe the world
- *class interests*: the interests of individuals derived from the locations within class structures.
- *class formation*: the organization of class locations into some kind of collective social force capable of collective action
- *class consciousness*: the forms of understanding individuals have of class interests
- *class practices*: the actions individuals take in pursuit of class interests
- *class struggle*: the confrontation of class practices of classes with opposing interests

II. Understanding class relations

1. Relations, relations, relations

There are many different kinds of social relations in a society: gender relations, race relations, friendship relations, class relations. The distinctive thing in a relation is that the meaning of the entities bound together in a relation can only be understood via the character of the relation. Thus: try defining the category “husband” without invoking the category “wife” bound together in a relation called “marriage”.

Class in the Marxist tradition – and some other traditions – is a relational concept. That is the first critical point.

2. What kind of relation is a class relation?

Class relations within Marxist class analysis define the rights and powers people have with respect to the various resources that are used in production. When we say that a capitalist “owns” a factory we are specifying a set of rights and powers of the capitalist over this complex set of resources. When we say workers “own their labor power” we mean that they have the rights and powers over this resource and can therefore sell it on a labor market.

“Rights and powers” define relations among people, not simply a relation between a person and a thing: if I own land I have the power to exclude you from access to it.

As a short hand Marxists often say that class relations are defined by the “social relations of production”, but this really means, “by the social relations that define the rights and powers people have with respect to the system of production”

3. What is it that people in a common location within the social relations of production have in common? Or: what do people in a class location have in common?

There are two principle ideas here: (1) lived experiences, (2) material interests. Both matter. They are discussed in some detail in *The Debate on Classes*. I will emphasize material interests, but let me briefly mention lived experiences.

3.1 Lived Experiences.

By virtue of a persons rights and powers over production resources they are likely to have certain kinds of experiences. If you are propertyless and must sell your labor power to a capitalist you will have the experiences of looking for a job, being subject to the control of others, being told what to do by a boss, being vulnerable to losing ones job. If you are a capitalist you have to boss people around, you face competitive threats from rivals, you take risks in investments, you have to deal with shirking workers, and so on. Each of these defines a profile of experiences tied to locations.

3.2 Material Interests

This is a contentious idea. Many people reject the whole concept of “objective material interests”, but I think it is not so problematic. The key idea is this: by virtue of the assets you own (your rights & powers), you face particular kinds of opportunities, dilemmas and trade offs in trying to optimize your material welfare. Consider the trade-offs among toil, leisure and consumption. It is better to be in a position to have a more favorable trade off between consumption and leisure than a less favorable one. Your interests are in improving these trade-offs; what you have to do to accomplish this depends upon your class. That is why it makes sense to say that people in a common class location share common material interests.

So, people in a class location, by virtue of their relationship to the means of production, share common material interests in this sense.

Ending the analysis here, however, would not quite get to the core idea of the specifically Marxist understanding of class. For this we must move from material interests to the problem of *exploitation*

III. Exploitation

Exploitation is a hotly contested concept. Most sociologists either ignore it or reject it as a meaningful idea. In a footnote in a recent article in *the American Journal of Sociology*, John Goldthorpe says of the concept of exploitation that it is “a word I would myself gladly see disappear from the sociological lexicon.” He adds, by way of clarification, “Its function in Marxist thought was to allow a fusion of normative and positive claims in a way that I would find unacceptable.” And he concludes: “If invoking exploitation is no more than a way of flagging the presence of structurally opposed class interests that lead to zero-sum conflicts, then its use is innocuous but scarcely necessary.” (Goldthorpe, 2000: 1574). Many people, I think, would agree with this judgment. Talk of exploitation seems more like a heavy-handed piece of antiquated radical rhetoric than a conceptual tool for understanding the inner workings of contemporary societies.

I hope to show here that this judgement is wrong. I will argue, contra Goldthorpe, that exploitation is not simply a way of flagging generic zero-sum conflicts of interest, but a way of identifying a specific kind of zero-sum conflict, and further, I will argue, that one of the virtues of the concept is the way it brings normative considerations into the core of the explanatory project of social science. This concept, of course, has its strongest pedigree within the Marxist tradition of class analysis, but, as I hope to show, its explanatory relevance is not restricted to the problem of class nor does it presuppose an acceptance of the theoretical framework of Marxism.

1. The Shmoo story

- The setting: Ozarks, nuclear tests, etc. powers of the shmoo.
- The shmoo taps a deep fantasy in Western culture: Garden of Eden. Destruction of garden → sweat of brow.
- shmoos are thus a threat to both class relations and gender relations. The gender story is especially remarkable

2. Preference ordering for fate of shmoo

- *Table of preferences for the fate of the shmoo.*
- this preference ordering is simply a statement of *material interests*, not moral commitments.
- the material interests of workers correspond to principles of justice. These are the Rawlsian preferences. This is a sense in which workers = a “universal” class: their selfish interests = universal human interests.
- The interests of capital = destroy garden of Eden; interests of workers, preserve it.

3. Meaning of Antagonism of interests

The shmoo test indicates the sense in which there is a deep, inherent antagonism of interests of workers and capitalists, an antagonism that impels them to pursue strategies against each other. This is not simply a zero-sum conflict over the *distribution* of some fixed quantity: the shmoo is of unlimited quantity – everyone can have them. Exploiters not only have a material interest in protecting *their own property* from redistribution; they have a *positive material interest in preventing the exploited from gaining resources which would make them less dependent upon the exploiter*. This is really the fundamental point here:

The capitalist has an active interest in reducing the feasible set of choices available to the worker, or in other words, *an active interest in reducing their real freedom*.

Why? The capitalist wails that if workers have shmoos – greater freedom – workers would “no longer have to work hard any more” -- that is, they would not expend sufficient effort for the employer.

(*Digression:* A curious little aside here: The dogpatch resident says “Nobody that has a shmoo has to work any more”, whereas the capitalist emphasizes that workers “would not work hard any more.” In sociological terms, the dogpatcher is a Weberian who sees the shmoo as simply affecting exchange relations, whereas the capitalist is a Marxist and realizes that the shmoo will undermine exploitation! As I will explain in more technical terms in a moment, the manager understands that the real threat posed by the shmoo is the *extraction of labor effort* -- exploitation -- not simply getting people to show up for “work”. The Dogpatchian only identifies an effect in the labor market; the manager identifies an effect in the labor process.)

4. *Core intuition about Exploitation*: This is what “exploitation” is all about: a set of interconnected practices that are deeply offensive morally: one group of people have a *positive interest in harm* to others.

5. Shmoo-like situations in real history:

- hut taxes to get subsistence peasants off the land
- opposition of rich to redistribution even if it does not redistribute from them
- capitalist opposition to things which raise the reservation wage of workers
- egalitarian proposals for a universal basic income as a *quasi-shmoo-grant*: implications = partial deproletarianization of labor.

IV. More formal discussion of exploitation

1. *Three criteria* for exploitation (chart):

- inverse interdependent welfare principle;
- exclusion principle
- appropriation principle

2. oppression vs exploitation

3. Illustration: **South Africa vs U.S.** -- only good Indian is a dead Indian but not:

Only good worker is a dead worker: *obedient* work; *docile* slave; but not dead.

4. Implication: in simple oppression, the oppressor would welcome shmoos; in exploitation they would not. Nonexploitative Oppression is thus both more benign and more harmful than exploitation: on the one hand, the nonexploitative oppressor would not object to the oppressed simply leaving, moving away. Native Americans were allowed (and often forced) to flee West in the US whereas slaves could not. As long as they don't fight back, the nonexploited oppressed can be ignored. On the other hand, in the face of resistance, in conditions of pure oppression, the privileged may be tempted to adopt a strictly repressive solution to conflict, in the extreme case adopting genocidal strategies. It is therefore not a simple matter to say whether “oppression” or “exploitation” is worse. Still, in general it is probably true that it is better to be exploited than to not be exploited in a situation where the alternative is nonexploitative oppression. Joan Robinson is reported to have said “the one thing worse than being exploited in capitalism is not being exploited”: Workers would rather be exploited than unemployed.

5. **The Underclass**: Relevance of this contrast today: The problem of the *marginalized underclass*: people who have been excluded from access to crucial economic resources but are not exploited. The crucial resource in contemporary highly developed capitalism is human capital/skills. Solution to conflicts generated by this exclusion = purely repressive – this reflects the dispensability of this segment of the population. If one could snap one's fingers and have the underclass disappear, the interests of people of privilege and power would be advanced.

V. Extension of the concept of exploitation outside of class contexts: Sexual exploitation

The contrast between nonexploitative oppression and exploitation applies not simply in the context of class relations. Consider, for example the problem of sexual exploitation vs nonexploitative sexual oppression. In some societies today one might say that women are sexually exploited by men whereas homosexuals are sexually oppressed:

- sexual exploitation of women means that men control female sexuality but still depend upon female sexuality activity for their own sexual interests. One might say that men appropriate female sexual effort.
- sexual oppression of homosexuals means that heterosexuals wish to repress homosexual practices, which to exclude homosexuals from access to the means of sexual expression. If heterosexists in this relation could snap their fingers and make homosexuality disappear, then their sexual interests -- as they experience those interests -- would be advanced.

One might also make a similar argument about **cultural oppression vs cultural exploitation**:

- In the US and many other settler societies, there was a period in which the relationship to indigenous cultures was one of strict cultural oppression (matching the economic oppression). The goal was to eliminate the cultures. Indian boarding schools language policies.
- Now, more commonly, there is a process of cultural exploitation – the appropriation of native American cultural forms for purposes of serving the cultural interests of the dominant culture. New Age appropriation of native American culture would be an example.