

Lecture 7
Sociology 298
Intersections & Interactions:
Thinking about the relationship between Class and Other forms of Inequality

March 12, 2002

These three sessions will deal with the problem of understanding the intersections and interactions of class, race and gender. Mostly I will focus on how to conceptualize this issue, although we will discuss a number of specific historical/empirical problems as well.

I. The problem of laundry list oppressions

There is a tendency in some currents of radical theory to want to treat all forms of oppression symmetrically. One therefore frequently encounters lists of various sorts: sexism, racism, classism, ageism. In one sense this is a legitimate move: in terms of the lived experience and identity of people there is no a priori reason to regard any form of oppression as intrinsically “worse” than others, as more harmful than another. The oppression of people with handicaps can create harms as deep as class or gender. (When middle class kids asked in a survey whether they would prefer to be poor or be grossly obese without the possibility of losing weight, they say poor). Nevertheless, if the implication of the laundry list is that the specificities of the mechanisms of oppression are of secondary importance, or that all oppressions have the same explanatory importance for all problems, then I think this is a mistake.

The task of a critical theory of class, race and gender, then, is to understand the specificity of the causal interactions of these social relations. Sorting these issues out is especially important since, in recent years, perhaps the biggest challenge to class analysis among radical intellectual has revolved around the problem of the relationship between class and other forms of oppression and struggle, particularly gender and race. 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 and/or race-blind, whereas class relations are inherently gendered and racialized.
2. Marxist class analysis tends to “reduce” gender and race to class. That is, gender and race oppression are treated as if they can be fully explained by class oppression.
3. Marxist class analysis treats race and gender as “epiphenomena” -- that is, as effects which are not themselves causally important for anything else. They are treated as “surface phenomena”, symptoms of something else, but not important in their own right.

The first of these accusations is, I believe, broadly correct: that is, the concept of class, as formulated within Marxism is defined in ways that bracket gender and race. However, I think it is a strength rather than a weakness of the concept of class that it does not pack gender and race into class. I think in general the concept of class should be nongendered and nonracialized, but

that the *use* of class in explanations – class analysis – should systematically concern itself with intersections and interactions of class and other forms of oppression. In the case of the second and third accusations, there are certainly examples in the Marxist tradition of analyses which reduce race and gender to class, and perhaps – although I cannot come up with an instance – examples where race and gender are viewed as epiphenomena. But neither of these accusations fit most contemporary Marxist-rooted class analysis, and I would certainly insist that neither race nor gender are reducible to class: these concepts identify real relations with real causal powers and they have independent sources of variation.

In elaborating a strategy for class analysis to engage problems of race and gender, we therefore face both *conceptual* and *theoretical* problems:

1. *The conceptual problem*: how to give specificity to different forms of social division that can be thought of as generating harms. Race, gender and class are all forms of social division. From the normative vantage point of emancipatory social critique, all involve oppressions in the general sense of imposing harms on people. What precisely defines the specificity of these different forms of social division?

2. *The theoretical problem*: how should we understand the logics of interaction of different forms of social division. Once we have clarified the conceptual standing of these different social relations, how should we approach their intersections and interactions within explanations?

These two problems appear in the analysis of both class and gender and class and race. For some issues I will focus on one of these rather than the other, but this is just because of time constraints.

We will begin today with the conceptual problem. For this I will focus more on the issue of race than gender. We will then turn to the problem of understanding the causal interactions with class. For that we will look at both race and gender.

II. the problem of Theoretical Specificity

1. *Methodological point*: what do we mean by “theoretical specificity”?

In the fall of 2001 in the UN conference on Racism there was a resolution proposed by a number of delegations that “Zionism is a form of racism”. Many people regard this as an absurd statement; others regard it as capturing some underlying, deep theoretical unity between Zionism and other, more generally accepted forms of racism. Of course, in part this is a political rather than theoretical question: the forging of certain kinds of alliances and the challenge to certain kinds of policies may depend upon how different phenomena are grouped together. But this may also be a theoretical problem: a problem of identifying the kind of causal mechanisms which justify grouping together what might otherwise seem as disparate phenomena.

The methodological problem of “specificity” involves providing a theoretical understanding of a particular form of social interaction so that we know when specific empirical

cases should be treated as similar or different, as falling under the same broad category or not. This can be an arbitrary exercise in wordplay for political purposes, but can also be a more rigorous matter of figuring out how concepts fit together within theories and how real mechanisms in the world operate.

This is basically the task laid out in the Old Sesame Street ditty: “one of these things are not like the the others, one of these things just isn’t the same....”. There was a funny version of this I heard on BBC Radio 4 in a spoof about Bush. Bush was given four things: a mouse, a turtle, rabbit and a waffle iron and was asked which of these was not like the other. He called up the Sesame Street hotline to discuss the matter:

- Bush: “Well I think it is the turtle. It’s not like the others.”
 Kermit: “Mr. President, I think it is the waffle iron”
 Bush: “No, I don’t think it is the waffle iron. A waffle iron’s got a tail just like the bunny and the mouse. But the turtle doesn’t have a tail.”
 Kermit: “I think it is the waffle iron because it isn’t alive. The other three are alive.”
 Bush: “A waffle iron is alive. It smokes. You have to breath to smoke.”
 Kermit: “Mr. President. It doesn’t really have a tail. That is called an electric cord with a plug on the end. You put it in the wall socket.”
 Bush: “Well, you can put a little mouse’s tail in a wall socket to. I bet it would smoke then also.”
 Kermit: “Anyway, a turtle also has a tail, you just can’t see it under the shell”
 Bush: “You’re joking, a little turtle really has a tail?”
 Kermit: “Yes, under the shell”
 Bush: “Well then, that doesn’t count because you can’t put it in a socket.”

To give theoretical specificity to a form of oppression, therefore, involves identifying the theoretically-pertinent causal mechanisms that constitute the theoretical unity of the category in question. This implies one other important methodological complication in this sort of classification exercise: the theoretical specificity of a particular concept or category depends upon how it figures in some theoretical problem or question. To argue that a particular category has a particular definition *irrespective of its theoretical purpose* is – some would argue – the sin of “essentialism”, but more often it is just sloppy thinking. When a concept is fully integrated into a theoretical program, then this will generally generate boundary conditions on its constituent concepts. But the fact is that in sociology and sociological theory, rarely are research programs so highly paradigmatic in all their conceptual elements that this is the case.

Two things should be classified together if it is the case that they identify the same kind of casual process within some social phenomenon under investigation. It may turn out when you push this that some commonsense, everyday distinctions dissolve, and other things which look very similar “on the surface” may in fact be very different. Until evolutionary theory established a new understanding of the mechanisms of biological variation, dolphins were seen as fish. This also means that for different theoretical purposes different kinds of *conceptual lines of demarcation* and *aggregation* need to be drawn. For some purposes dolphins and fish should be

classified together (although the term for that classification would not be “fish” given that “fish” has a paradigmatic meaning within evolutionary theory). In the case of the debates over what counts as an instance of racism, the issue, of course, is ultimately not so much what gets the tag “racial oppression” – there may be historical and linguistic (if not theoretical) reasons to use this label quite narrowly – but rather how we understand the *conceptual space* within which racial domination/oppression is located. This is tough work and fraught with political passion in the case of racism and racial oppression.

2. *The specificity of Racial Oppression*

Defining the conceptual specificity of racial oppression thus involves two sorts of tasks:

1. Distinguishing it from other sorts of oppression: racial vs class vs gender, etc.
2. Figuring out which historically concrete forms of oppression are instances of racial oppression, which are not, which have some aspects of racial oppression, etc.

Consider the following list of social divisions each of which in various times and places is a source of both conflict and – arguably – oppression:

- black and white in the US
- jew and muslim in Israel/Palestine
- anti-semitism in Europe
- catholic/protestant in Northern Ireland
- Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda
- untouchable castes in India

Which of these constitute instances of racial oppression? You see that in the absence of a theoretical agenda and some explanatory purpose, the question is very hard to resolve.

Now, I will give a provisional definition of racial oppression, but it is one whose boundary conditions – the criteria for what is included or not – may shift depending upon explanatory contexts. But here is a provisional definition:

3. *Provisional Definition:* Racial Oppression is a form of social division within which three conditions pertain:

- i. Racial division is a socially recognized distinction between people based on *biological lineage*: you are born into a racial category by virtue of the racial category of your parents. It is an *ascriptive category*, although in some special cases there are socially validated ways of “escaping” a racial classification. This does not mean that “races” are given biologically, that they constitute real biological differentiations in any meaningful genetic or evolutionary sense. The identification of a specific biological lineage as a basis for social division is entirely socially-constructed: but what makes it a racialized social construction is the fact that it is a construction on the basis of biological lineage. Just as

gender is a social construction that transforms biological sexes into socially salient categories, racial constructions transform biological lineages into social divisions. Typically the biological lineage is linked to some socially recognized and symbolically salient *visible physical attribute* (technically: phenotypic differences), but this need not be the case. Anti-Semitism in Europe was not linked to any consistent, visible phenotypic characteristics. You could be blonde and blue-eyed and be a Jew, but being a Jew still meant being born into a Jewish lineage.

ii. Racial *division* becomes racial *oppression* when it corresponds to some form of socially-significant exclusion, typically with a strong economic dimension, but also political and cultural exclusion.

iii. When racial division takes the form of racial oppression, the oppressed group is also invariably stigmatized, given an inferior social status, in the extreme case regarded as an inferior type of human beings in the biological not just social sense (and sometimes even subhuman). It is possible that the stigmatization and status denigration can continue even if the exclusions have largely disappeared. The most striking example was anti-Semitism in Germany.

Racial oppression, then is (i) a social division rooted *biological lineage*, typically, but not invariably associated with physical markers, (ii) in which some form of *socially-significant exclusion* is tied to that lineage, and (iii) the excluded group is *stigmatized* as in one way or another inferior.

Now, this provisional definition of the distinctively racialized form of oppression did not, directly, make any reference to class. But a class-relevant idea enters in criterion ii: exclusion. Remember that in the definition of exploitation one of the three principles was the exclusion principle, and the idea of social relations of production centers on rights and powers over resources, which are fundamental powers of exclusion. It is this linkage between class-centered exclusions rooted in property rights and racialized exclusions centering on biological lineage that constitutes the axis for the intersection of race and class.

4. *Why should the mechanisms which define racial oppression be causally salient?*

The three criteria for racial oppression certainly *descriptively* specify a form of social relations which will powerfully impact the lives of people. But this does not really, yet, provide an account for what might be called the causal robustness of this form of oppression: why racial divisions, once they become socially institutionalized as forms of oppression, are so durable? Why racialized oppressions create such intense conflict and emotional salience?

We will discuss this more systematically tomorrow, but I want to offer some initial comments here:

I think the answer lies in the ways racialized divisions tap into two dimensions of social existence

that have deep salience quite apart from the problem of oppression:

1. *communal solidarity*: the nature of the immediate social conditions for interpersonal reciprocity and solidarity in the mundane lives of people. A general question to ask about any setting of social interaction and cooperation is: what are the processes at work which facilitate trust and reciprocity among people, thus making solidarities possible. Albert and Hahnel stress this dimension of racialized division: it is a kind of oppressive transformation of community.

2. *kinship and family*: the nature of the social practices of endogamy and exogamy which generate intergenerational ties and structures of obligation, solidarity and reciprocity.

Community and kinship are two pivotal ways in which solidarities are forged. These are both, in different ways, central to understanding collective action: they both help provide conditions under which individuals become willing to make sacrifices for some collective purpose. Racialized oppression thus brings together in one causal nexus a division rooted in kinship and family – because the racial division centers on biological lineage – and communal cleavage – because of the exclusions linked to racial division. This melding of two axes of potential solidarity is, at least in part, which gives racialized oppression such robust causal force.

III. Causal interactions of class and race/gender

Analysis of the causal inter-relationship between class and nonclass oppressions involves two related, but still different sorts of problems:

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

What I want to do here is simply clarify how to think about these questions.

1. Effects of class, race and gender on each other.

A. Effects of RACE/GENDER on CLASS

There are two main ways that race/gender affect class:

(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, color bars, glass ceilings, 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.

(2). *shaping the nature of class locations themselves.*

Both gender and race can have a direct impact on the nature of class relations themselves. Given certain forms of gender relations or race relations, some kinds of class locations are much more likely to occur to be filled by individuals.

Examples:

- ! race: slavery and repressive sharecropping in a liberal democracy
- ! gender: forms of slavery in antiquity; personal secretary

B. Effects of CLASS on GENDER/RACE:

(1). *Functional explanations & interest explanations:*

Aspects of Race and gender relations are functionally explained by class.

Race: divide & conquer. Basic argument:

Functional explanation: racism divides the working class, undermining radical forms of class organization. Such divisions are stable and reproduced because they actually do weaken the working class and thus are functional for capitalism

Interest explanation At various times in history, capitalists encourage racism, believing correctly that this will weaken the working class. Racial divisions are intensified as a conscious strategy by capitalists.

Gender: An example of functional explanations of unequal gender relations:

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) and this explains why women have traditionally been housewives in capitalism.

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

Two basic arguments

1. class structures shapes *resources* available for struggle:
class structure → access to resources → affects struggles over nonclass oppressions
2. Struggles over nonclass oppressions require mobilization of solidarities and popular power and this mobilization is threatening to dominant classes (pandora's box problem) so they act to undermine such struggles:

class structure → dominant classes threatened by mobilization of oppressed groups of any kind → oppose struggles against nonclass oppression

(3) *Dynamic Asymmetry of Class and Race/gender: Is there a case for a kind of dynamic primacy to class?*

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

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. We will examine this case in the next lecture.

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.

III. Joint Effects of race, 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 race, gender and class?

Two basic theses:

Thesis 1. Distinct mechanisms thesis.

When we speak of “race”, “class” and “gender” as forms of oppression we are attempting to identify *distinct causal mechanisms*. That is: “class”, “race” and “gender” are each names for causal mechanisms (or clusters of mechanisms). “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.

example: gender oppression is generated in part by the mechanisms through which sexual identities are formed, and these mechanisms are distinct from class exploitation. 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 Race and gender oppression constitute mechanisms distinct from class, means that

they generate 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, race 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 is a rejection of two possible claims:

(1). The view that the category “class” should be regarded as inherently “gendered” and “racialized”. Class, race and gender are ways of identifying specific causal mechanisms, and our task is to understand the specific forms of interaction.

(2). The view that these mechanisms only have additive effects: that the effects of class, for example, do not in part depend upon race or 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:

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

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?

Strong version: B_2 and B_3 are declining over time.

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