

CLASS: A Note

The classification of people in capitalist society

Class is a perplexing notion in capitalist society. It is the source of considerable sociological research and speculation. There is a great *to-and-fro* between a person's 'objective' class position, and their 'subjective' understanding of their own place within the 'class system'. There is a kind of parlour game in which people award themselves and others their appropriate place within an imaginary 'class system' as if classes were simply composed of aggregates of appropriate individuals ranked in some kind of social or cultural hierarchy. The 'class system' appears to be a profoundly contradictory phenomenon; it is a robust hierarchy, composed of radically unstable layers or elements.

This confusion is compounded by a radical lack of agreement about the architecture of this hierarchy and the number, composition, and stability of its tiers or layers. There is not even agreement that class differences actually exist; some people argue that we live in a "classless" society or in one in which we all belong to the same class described, according to personal taste, as "the working class" because most of us have to work, or as "the middle class" because most of us aspire to something called 'middle class values'.

There is a mass of different cultural associations attached to the different class labels in circulation which certainly strengthen the idea that a person's class identification is more of a voluntary matter associated with personal aspirations and the form of one's cultural consumption: the kind of movies watched, clothes worn, holidays taken, newspapers read, and our taste in furnishings, pictures and music, all orchestrated by our personal demeanour, way of speaking, sense of humour, table manners and much else.

This cultural matrix gives rise to a semiotic system in which people can be 'placed' in their appropriate class position as "pond life", underclass, working class, middle class, upper middle class, upper class, posh, celebs, and a mass of sub-categories, including the rural 'toffs' various urban tribes, and everybody from 'Hooray Henrys' and 'Sloans', to classy bohemians, and grungey squatters. It is a shifting caste of characters and classifications that change in a kaleidoscopic

manner around the perennial labels of *working*, *middle*, and *upper* class.

The problem arises because of the dynamic and fluid character of capitalist society in which technology and the organisation of the labour process is constantly changing the nature of the broader social composition; as large numbers of people are shifted from blue collar to white collar occupations, and as people who were formerly from the countryside move into an urban setting, older arrangements and assumptions dissolve and are replaced by new associations and aspirations.

This process, when added to the growing wealth, both absolute and relative, of working people in England from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards has played havoc with ideas of class associated with consumption. Edwardian ladies and gentlemen were often appalled by the pretensions of shop girls and lowly clerks, and even housemaids on their day off, aping their 'betters' by adopting the fashions and manners of those far above them in the social scale. This can be seen most recently with the proliferation of luxury brands among people who are supposedly far too vulgar to really appreciate their subtle quality, and who were until recently far too poor to be able to compete with the upper middle class and upper class consumers of luxury goods. This has thrown the designers and promoters of brands such as Burberry and Louis Vuitton into something of a *tiswaz* as they try to maintain the special association of their products with an elite of discerning *cognoscenti* as distinct from mobs of *chavs* and *hoi polloi*, who might ultimately give the brand a bad name.

Before the growth of commercial or capitalist society social distinctions were much more caste-like. Of course even in feudal or aristocratic societies people rose and fell within the social order. Relatively modest gentlemen farmers could, and sometimes did, rise into the aristocracy. The sons of artisans could, and did, rise to be leading churchmen and wealthy politicians. Then, as now, people from very humble beginnings were able to climb the social hierarchy of wealth and power. The principal difference between then and now, however, is the absence of any legal or formal distinction between classes.

Class relations within capitalist society, particularly within modern or liberal democratic societies have no legal status. Everybody is equal before the law, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, income or social position. This has tended to

give class and the class structure a much less defined or formal status than the social orders, which existed in pre-capitalist societies, where boundaries between the different orders, ethnicities, races and castes often had legal force or at least the sanction of venerable and often insurmountable social or religious prejudices.

Marxists have tended towards the view that modern class relations are determined by one's relationship to the means of production. Hence the capitalist class is identified by their ownership of productive property, and by their capacity to use that property, which is often called "capital", to employ other people. In contrast the working class is composed of people who only own consumption goods like the house or flat that they live in, or their car or other possessions; the working class is made up of people do not own capital and consequently have to work for capitalists, for the state, for local authorities, or charities and co-operatives, in return for wages.

During the nineteenth century Marxists and others tended to think that the division of society between two classes, the capitalist class on one side, and the working class on the other, would greatly simplify the class structure; they imagined the formation of two great hostile classes facing one another in irreconcilable conflict and struggle. However, things have not turned out like this.

As technology advanced, and capitalist society developed, public and commercial institutions became larger and more complicated; the demand for professionals and technicians of all kinds grew, and their greatly increased numbers and status complicated, rather than simplified, the class relations. To this was added the fact that working people were required, as capitalism deepened its roots, to raise the level of their technical expertise and their general level of culture. Mass literacy was required, close attention to personal hygiene and grooming, and a more sophisticated level of knowledge and understanding of the world and its ways was demanded of those entering the labour market. This resulted in the gradual incorporation of working people into bourgeois society through the lengthy struggle to improve mass education and housing, and through the acquisition of political rights, the right to vote and the right to organize trade unions and neighbourhood organizations of all kinds.

So, the composition of classes, and the relations between them, became more complicated as the glaring cultural distinctions of old were softened somewhat by free schooling, the growing cultural sophistication of the working class, and the deepening of democracy. At the same time divisions both *within* the working class and *within* professional and technical occupations also became more complicated with the multiplication of different levels of skill and income demanded within particular trades and professions. This phenomena was further compounded in Western Europe and North America during the forty years following the Second World War as labour employed in mining and heavy industry began to decline and those employed in clerical and technical occupations began to increase; this resulted in the children of millions of manual workers being incorporated into the college and university systems of higher education, into ‘salaried’ occupations, monthly pay, and in their introduction to the mysteries of personal bank accounts and the payment of income tax.

The dense matrix of social and political institutions in which industrial workers had lived, non-conformist churches and chapels, sports associations, working men’s clubs and institutes, trades councils, and trades union branches; Labour, Communist, and Cooperative Party local organizations, and clubs and societies of all kinds, have faded away. Many of these institutions, of course, continue to exist but in such radically changed circumstances as to be almost unrecognisable; they no longer constitute the cultural heart of neighbourhoods composed, as they were in the past, almost entirely of manual workers and their families. Consequently, as the needs of capital – the needs of modern business and technical organization have changed – the working class has been reconfigured and the industrial working class has lost its distinctive cultural presence as the political articulation of its interests, first faltered, and finally died away.

This has strengthened the idea that class has become irrelevant and that class conflict has become *passé*; as Tony Blair told the Labour Party Conference in Blackpool in 1996: “Forget the past. No more bosses versus workers. You are on the same side. The same team. Britain united. And we will win.” This, of course, was nonsense then, and it’s nonsense now. It’s the kind of thing that only a millionaire politician could say and expect to be believed. We all occupy radically different positions in the class

structure and while it is perfectly true that the interests of employees may often coincide with those of their employers, they do not in some generally applicable sense share the same interests, worries, or concerns. On the contrary, the decisions of employers, taken *exclusively* on behalf of shareholders (as they are required by law to do), often impact very badly indeed upon their employees.

In a country like England, and in Britain generally, there are also intractable class divisions expressed in the education system where schools and universities are broadly ranked on the basis of their material, scholarly, and intellectual resources. It goes without saying that the children of those with substantial amounts of capital, those of parents in positions of prominence and leadership in the professions and state institutions go to the best schools and universities. At school, the privileged attend classes of no more than ten and often fewer; at university they enjoy one-to-one tuition or very small group seminars. Consequently, these young people are encouraged to work harder and to develop greater skills of self-organization and discipline in the context of institutions that make greater and more measured intellectual demands upon them.

By contrast the children of the mass of working people have access most readily to schools and universities of much poorer quality in terms of material resources and of the ratio of teachers to students. This mass provision is of variable quality ranging from the excellent to the truly appalling.

The class distinctions and prejudices, which spontaneously arise as a consequence of these divisions, together with objective differences in the resulting skills and abilities possessed by the young people sieved through this educational strainer, often stay with them for life. They are made worse by the suggestion that the glittering prizes awarded to those who attend the best schools and universities are in some way merited because they are naturally more intelligent and deserving than those who go to ordinary schools and inferior universities, or indeed to no universities of any kind. This is, in fact, the most pernicious aspect of class relations in modern or liberal democratic capitalist societies where inherited family advantages and inherited wealth are routinely camouflaged as being the result simply of 'merit' and 'meritocratic' systems of assessment.

Of course, many people of modest means continue to make their way into the professions and even into the capitalist class despite the numerous obstacles, which stand in their way. However, this does not mean that class and class distinctions are irrelevant any more than the election of Barack Obama to the Presidency can be taken to mean that Black or Hispanic people, or the children of poor white parents, do not face enormous obstacles blocking their entrance into the professions or into the managerial and employing ranks of society.

So class continues to matter a great deal, it continues to shape the life chances of many millions of people in the wealthy capitalist countries. Perhaps the easiest way of understanding the class structure is to think about the nature of a person's occupation, as much as their income, and as much as their ownership of capital. The working class can be thought of most usefully as all those people who do routine manual or clerical labour – people who have little or no say in the tempo or the organisation of their day's work. The middle class consequently, can best be thought of as those people who have more control, responsibility, and input, into the structure of their working day and/or the terms of their employment; middle class people have a large measure of control over how they perform their jobs and may have access to professional organizations and institutions capable of controlling or supervising entrance to their profession.

Consequently, there are huge variations *within* classes and *between* classes, just as there are enormous numbers of tiny capitalists with only one or two employees, who in some abstract sense can be said to occupy the same class position as those employing tens of thousands of workers. The truth is that class relations in capitalist society represent a large shifting social terrain in which people simultaneously occupy many different and contradictory positions. For example, millions of workers own capital in the form of savings in building societies, banks, and pension funds. Some workers may even have bought a second house or flat, which they rent out to tenants. Some capitalists own very little capital and have had to put up their family's house as collateral against their bank loans. Indeed, in the 'private sector' your boss is most likely to be a small capitalist with fewer than twenty or thirty employees with whom you have personal contact on a daily basis. In the 'public' sector your supervisors or managers are likely to be drawn from a range

of different professional groups, or may be simply drawn, by promotion and competitive staff development routes, from the general labour force.

It will be readily seen from all this that modern capitalist society cannot in any strategic political or economic sense be understood as the product of class struggle. Conflicts most certainly exist between people who are differently situated within the hierarchy of income, education, occupation and power. But, it is not at all clear that these conflicts can be said to coalesce around the classes defined in communist, socialist, or anarchist rhetoric as the ‘working class’ or the ‘capitalist class’ or the ‘middle class’, or even around the similar categories which have emerged from traditional forms of Marxist theory. It is true that Marxists have often designated particular social movements as ‘objectively’ ‘working class, or ‘objectively’ reactionary, as a way of dismissing the importance or relevance of their actual social composition in order to achieve ‘a better fit’ between their theoretical constructions and the world itself.

Some modern Marxists like Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have attempted to conceive of the aggregate of modern working people as a more diffuse social formation to which they have given the name “multitude”.¹ By this means they clearly hope to elude the historical limitations of the ‘working class’ as earlier Marxist thinkers and militants have conceived it. But this move is not quite as radical a shift as it seems at first sight as Antonio Negri has demonstrated by insisting that the “multitude” is simply the modern form or instantiation of the working class.² The grounds for this theoretical move to the “multitude” remain important, however, as a way of incorporating many different elements of the productive population from women working in the home, to those engaged in new occupations and activities like software and website designers, who might appear to have no cognates in the older Marxist conceptions of the class structure.

Despite these conceptual manoeuvres, social conflicts have not, throughout the history of capitalist society, ever corresponded in any overwhelming or decisive sense to class

¹ See Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000, *passim*. And Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005, *passim*.

² See Antonio Negri, ‘Multitude or Working Class’ posted on Libcom.org at <http://libcom.org/library/multitude-or-working-class-antonio-negri>, accessed February 5, 2010.

lines or class loyalties, determined by “the relationship to the means of production” of those involved. Great social movements and upheavals have always been composed of a complicated admixture of different classes and social forces or only of fragments or sections of particular classes with a sprinkling of support from other classes.³

Despite the rich iconography of class struggle on the left, and exhaustive historical accounts of strikes, riots, insurrections, and communes, and of the counter measures taken by soldiers, magistrates, and police, often involving hard-fought battles, and armed conflict between ‘classes’, there is little evidence that the forces marshalled in such conflicts were actually ‘class’ forces; when looked at more closely, one is constantly struck by the sectional character of the social elements involved. By and large, throughout the history of capitalism, the defence of private property, whether, in the form of capital, or consumption goods, forms the keystone in the arch of bourgeois or capitalist society, and unites most people, irrespective of their class position, around a range of fundamental commitments to the bourgeois state and capitalist relations. The conflicts between demands for more social insurance, or for more freedom for private capital do not have a class character; they divide all social classes and sections within classes to a greater or lesser degree.

One can only conclude that classes continue to exist, and that one’s class position might often have a determining influence on the course of one’s life, but that classes do not seem to possess any decisive relevance in the political life or direction of wealthy capitalist societies. They form an important constitutive part of everybody’s social experience, and inform many of our social assumptions and personal calculations, but they do not permit us to articulate any general demands or express any wider loyalty or class commitments beyond the level of nostalgic mythologies associated with yesteryear or with our own biographies.

³ Even in the contemporary struggles in Greece during 2010 it is clear that the sections of the working class mobilizing against the government’s austerity measures are disproportionately concentrated in public employment and the government service. On the other hand, large numbers of workers in the private sector are prepared to side with the socialist government and with small proprietors and capitalists in support of budget cuts designed to stabilize the economy. This kind of picture has been replicated in the Irish Republic and in a number of other modern economies faced with large debts and fiscal crisis.