

Alienation of Workers: The Contemporary Japanese Working Class's Situation

The major characteristics of the Japanese employment system have been said to be seniority promotion and lifetime employment. It used to be a common belief that a white-collar worker will work for one company for his entire life, from after he graduates from a university at the age of 21 with increasing pay as he gets older, until he retires at the age of 65 and receives his monthly pension from his company for the rest of his life. However, the average life course of white-collar workers has been changing drastically since the collapse of the 'bubble economy' in 1991 and the subsequent long-term recession for over 10 years. Major Japanese corporations started abolishing various welfare benefits and their seniority promotion system—e.g. SONY introduced the merit-based personal system in 2000. People no longer think they will work for one company for their entire life, and the notion of changing jobs has become more common.

Advertisements on magazines, newspapers and fliers in trains and on streets persist in soliciting white-collar workers to get more educational certification to increase their 'market value' in order to survive in the mobilizing employment market. The popular certificates include TOEFL, TOEIC, accountant, tax accountant (CPTA), MBA, system administrator, among others. Many white-collar workers have started going to career colleges at night after they return from their offices. Aiming to promote the mobilization of the employment market, the Japanese government has started to support those workers who go to professional training schools by paying partial fees for schools.

Japanese white-collar workers do not think of themselves as 'workers'—the term 'worker' in Japan refers to manual laborers, and manual laborers are occupied by an increasing number of foreigners since late 1980s. Rather, white-collar workers believe that they are 'freer' laborers. Those workers seem to welcome the breakdown of the traditional employment system, which forced them to be obedient to their companies, and the mobilizing employment market. This is because the current shift in the employment system appears to them to indicate further freedom; they think "We are no longer a cog in the machinery of the corporation. We have different qualities as human beings, and our different personalities, skills, and abilities now are accounted for." However, ironically enough, the white-collar workers' efforts to 'improve' their qualifications means further alienation from their real personalities and further subordination to capitalism. Indeed, "[m]an is most completely a class determined being when least believe himself to be" (Ollman 1976: 208).

My central questions of this paper are: Is class relation power relation? If so, what are the source and the mechanism of power? The secondary questions I will explore is how the docile people, now to the market, can be empowered as a revolutionary agent. My answers to the main questions are: first, class is not just a category but a power relation; second, the 'logic of capital'

(Brown) allows the capitalist to be powerful, making all the others powerless; third, power is not what one can possess; as Sayer argues, power takes the guises of money, commodity, and capital, and the holders of those ‘things’—i.e. capitalists—indirectly exercise power over the powerless.

This paper will first analyze the notion of power in Marx, relying mainly on the arguments of Brown, Janmohamed, Ollman, Postone, and Paige. In the second section, I will examine the relationship between class and power, mainly focusing on Wright, Sayer, and Portes, as well as Marx. In the last section, I will discuss my rudimentary thoughts on how workers can retrieve their real personal life—i.e. species being—in the context of Japan.

Power

The comparison with power relations in the pre-capitalist period helps to define the peculiarity of power relations in capitalism. As the historical analysis of Perry Anderson shows, feudalism, a mode of production, is defined by an organic unity of economy and polity; a king parcelized sovereignties and distributed those sovereignties to overlords. In villages lords extracted economic surplus from surfs and exercised politico-legal coercion over them, and the lord in turn owed liege-loyalty and knight-service to his seigneurial overlord (Anderson [1974]1979: 19). In feudalism when power relations were layered, kings, overlords, and lords possessed and exercised their power within territories in which economy and polity were congruent. More importantly, power relations were based on concrete and personal dependence, and the lordship was inseparable from the individual lord’s personal identity (Paige: 6).

In contrast, power in capitalism become divorced from persons. In Marx’s theory, power is discursive and cannot be possessed—this is the point which is shared with Foucault—and abstraction governs the societal and the subject—this is the point which Weber also argues. The

ideas of discursive and abstract forms of power, which no one can possess, are particular to capitalism in Marx's theory. My points are: power is discursive, no one can possess power, and power is generated in abstraction. Let me elaborate on this point more precisely.

As both Brown and Janmohamed argue, Marx views power as discursive similarly to Foucault, despite differences in their approaches. Marx argues that power is generated in 'logical entailment' and travels along the 'circuit of logic of capital' (Brown 1996: 6). Primarily, power originates with abstract labor when people lose their personalities and give up their real lives by selling their labor power. People make products not for themselves but for the capitalists, and are thus alienated from their activities and their product. The product gains value from those labors and is turned into commodity, the value of which is inflated to an amount greater than the value of the labor inscribed initially. This is the point where surplus value is created; the rate of surplus value is an expression for the degree of exploitation of labor power by capital, or of the labor by the capitalist (Marx 1977: 474). Surplus value, then, is invested into capital, which is the means of production transformed into capital (Brown 1996: 14).

In this logic of capital in Marx's theory, there seems no place for the concept of power to intervene; indeed, as far as our reading tells, it seems that Marx does not argue about power by using the term 'power' in a conventional way. It is because, as Janmohamed mentions, what Marx examines is not a command economy directed by some juridico-discursive center but precisely a mundane discursive practice controlled by the accepted 'truth' and the knowledge of an 'autonomously functioning' market (Janmohamed 1995: 35). Put differently, Marx focuses on the capillary level of power, which is similar to Foucault. Furthermore, as Postone points out, Marx's primary interest lies in domination in terms of value and capital which are beyond the

control of the individual (Postone 1993: 31). Indeed, Marx approaches power in a distinct way, which is very pertinent to illustrate the source and mechanism of power in capitalism.

Regarding the above mentioned circulation of labor power, commodity, and capital, Janmohamed argues that commodity is the essential motive for capitalism. Furthermore, he adds, it is the commodity that illuminates the “crystallization of power relations” (Janmohamed 1995: 42-4). When labor power comes into commodity in the employment market, disciplinary power appears against laborers¹, which is such that urges workers to accumulate skills and knowledge.² In my reading, this is why Janmohamed argues that labor as a commodity occupies the center of power relations. According to Janmohamed, as well as Brown, Marx is very close to Foucault, who argues that power is generated from the bottom through multiple and mobile relations and is exercised in innumerable points (Foucault 1980: 94; 98). Indeed, power is generated and is traveling in the circuit of capital. Furthermore, for both Marx and Foucault, power in capitalism is disciplinarily power toward the subjects.³ In sum, Marx considers power as discursive and disciplinary as Foucault does.

Secondly, in my view Marx sees that power is not a ‘thing’ that can be directly possessed by individuals, and this view is also close to Foucault. Janmohamed claims that both in Marx’s and Foucault’s theories power can be possessed. His argument is that in Marx’s logic, value can exist as a ‘possession’ within-the-circuit (Janmohamed 1995: 48) and that Foucault’s logic would fail if Foucault did not presuppose the possession of power (Janmohamed 1995: 55). However, in my reading, this is not a valid understanding. In both the theories of Marx and Foucault power in capitalism can be neither possessed directly nor exercised directly as power was in

¹ Paige examines the disciplined self in modernity in more detail.

² The Japanese white-collar workers are currently facing increasing disciplinary power in the mobilizing employment market. In the past, they were under disciplinary power in offices and were not so much exposed to the market force as they are today.

³ Foucault depicts disciplined docile bodies in factories ([1977] 1995: 144-5).

Feudalism. It is important to note that capitalists as well as workers are alienated in the circuit of exchange values. As Ollman argues, capitalists as well are alienated from the products of workers and even alienated from their relation to workers (Ollman 1976: 155-6). Therefore, it is more appropriate to say that capitalists may appear to hold power, but it is not in the sense that they are able to directly control and exercise it at their will. It is the logic of capital which allows capitalists to ‘possess’ power, and those capitalists are just “passive exploiters” (Ollman 1976: 155). Power is not a ‘thing’ that subjects can possess at their will, and this view of power in Marx resonates with Foucault’s view; “power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared” (Foucault 1980: 94).

Why can power not be possessed? The answers are: first, it is because all individuals are ruled by abstraction in capitalism; and second, it is because all subjects are agents for capitalism. Postone argues that Marx says that social domination in capitalism does not consist of domination by other people, but of domination by an abstract social structure (Postone 1993: 30). Similarly, Paige argues that “capitalism is a fundamentally social system based on the subordination of human beings to an abstraction, capital, which is simply the expression of the alienation of their own power” (Paige: 2). To put it simply, capitalism is a system in which abstraction governs all subjects. As Paige argues, in modern society people are ruled by abstract creations—alienated labor and commodity in Marx and the iron cage of rationalization, in capitalism, in Weber (Paige: 16).

Furthermore, in Marx’s theory, the system of capitalism is a holistic and systematic one; this is also the point where Marx distinguishes himself from Foucault, being closer to Weber. No one can possess power in capitalism since capitalists as well as workers are merely the agents of capitalism. The principle purpose of capitalism is to continuously maximize value and capital.

The system of capitalism provides the mode of domination not in terms of persons but in terms of value and capital, which are beyond the control of individuals (Postone 1993: 31). As seen before, power is generated and circulates in this abstract system of capitalism, and capitalists appear to be ‘empowered’ by the structure of capitalism, a system of abstraction. In Weber, it is also the system, such as bureaucracy, which allows agents to exercise power.

So far I have argued that power in Marx is discursive in the circuit of capital, no one can possess power as one could in Feudalism, and power originates in the holistic system of abstraction. Can we say capitalists and workers are the same? No. Then, how can we argue the case that capitalists dominate workers in the capitalist society? The next section argues the relationship between class and power.

Class and Power

Marx defines class in terms of the ownership of property. The capitalist society consists of those who own the means of production and those who sell their labors. First of all, class is determined by economic base in Marx.

Furthermore, Marx sees classes as relational entities. According to Wright, classes in Marx do not simply mean different material interests; rather class relations are also based on exploitation and antagonism (Wright 1997b: 39). Following Marx, Wright defines class as an antagonistic relation between the exploiter and the exploited (Wright 1997a: 10). The comparison with Weber helps to highlight the Marxist definition of class. In Weber, class consists of people who share equal life chances based on the market situation—i.e. different classes have different economic opportunities (Wright 1997a: 31). Therefore, while Weber’s

theory on class does not include confrontational relationships, the theories of Marx and Wright argue that classes exist in antagonistic relations among people.

Ollman approaches this point in an interesting way. Through intensive re-reading of Marx, he argues that class in Marx occupies a position akin to labor and value (Ollman 1976: 210). People (workers), activity (labor), and the product (the commodity) have causal ties in capitalism, so that class is “the preferred Relation for encompassing the interpersonal ties which are established in its activity through its products” (ibid.). In a way, classes are locations to which people are assigned, in favor of the development of capitalism. Furthermore, while being antagonistic, those locations connect and necessitate one another, thus serving the circulation of capital. In this way, Marx and Marxists argue that classes are based on material interests, which consist of antagonistic relations.

By comparing of theories of orthodox Marxists (such as Wright) and contemporary Marxists (such as Ollman, Postone, and Sayer), Paige points out that while the former defines material interests as the essence of class, the latter views class as the reduction of human relationships to material interests. Put differently, for contemporary Marxists (in Paige’s words, “the theorists of capitalist modernity”), class is defined not by material interests but by the abstraction of social relationships reduced to material interests. Ollman’s above-mentioned view on class sharply illustrates this point. Ollman argues that class consists of alienated people and those people relate to each other in alienated forms (e.g. abstract labor) via mediations of abstraction (e.g. commodity). In a similar way, Postone has argued that social domination in capitalism does not consist of domination by other people but in domination of people by abstract social structures that they constitute (Postone 1993: 30). In short, domination is possible only in and by abstractions.

In the capitalist system where abstraction governs and mediates social relationships, capitalists do not directly exercise power over workers. Then, how do they dominate? Sayer offers a useful discussion. According to Sayer, in pre-capitalism, social power is held by a person and exercised over another person directly; therefore, for example, the lord commanded his servants to move away from their homes. In contrast, in capitalism power is no longer inscribed in particular social personalities but instead becomes a ‘thing’ which is possess-able (Sayer 1991: 67). Power cannot be held and exercised as in the form in which it used to be, but can be possessed only in the form of a ‘thing.’ Sayer argues;

It is exactly, and only, this possession of social power in the form of ‘things’—commodities, money, capital—which defines the modern bourgeoisie, in the relation to one another, in relation to propertyless labor, *and* by contrast to former ruling classes, whose power assumed different forms society and self. (Sayer: 68; the emphasis is in original)

By possessing those things such as commodities, money, and capital—which originate with the abstraction of labor—capitalists are able to dominate workers.

Starting from Weber’s definition of power, Portes approaches class similarly to Sayer. Portes defines class by wealth, with the view that “the possession of wealth represents a fundamental divide in modern capitalist society with possessors and non-possessor” (Portes 2000: 260). For Portes, class is about power relations; as he also says, power is the basic source of class cleavage, and the possession of wealth is its principle indicator (Portes 2000: 264). However, wealth in Portes actually refers to the ability to control resources (Bonacich 2000: 309). Those resources can include commodities, money, and capital, besides land or skills. In this point Portes, who takes a Weberian approach, is in fact close to contemporary Marxists, especially Sayer. In my view, this indicates the fact that power in the definition offered by Weber—power is “the possibility of imposing one’s own will upon the behavior of others”

(Weber 1978) —is impossible to exercise if power does not take the forms of ‘things’ in capitalism.

In conclusion, class is not just differences in material interests, but class is power relations. Power is generated and is traveling discursively in the system of abstraction of capitalism. Therefore, no one can possess power directly; however, capitalists are able to exercise ‘power’ indirectly over workers only with the mediation of abstractions (by possessing ‘things’ in Sayer’s words). However, as I argued in the previous section, those capitalists are ‘empowered’ by the demands of the system of capitalism whose primary purpose is to accumulate capital.

Toward Revolutionary Class Formation

Paige argues “only when the worker rejects his reduction to the status of ‘worker,’ ..., and thereby recognizes the contradiction between the ‘passive status of merchandise’ under abstract labor...and the ‘potentially creative essence of work,’ can class be transcended.” (Paige: 7). However, capitalism is such a thorough system as I have argued. Then, is not there any way in which workers can transcend class and people can retrieve their real lives?

Going back to the worker’s situation in contemporary Japan, it is such a tragedy and irony that Japanese white-collar workers believe that obtaining advanced degrees and certificates will bring about a more humanistic life. A friend of mine is an office worker; from Monday to Friday, she gets up at 6 a.m., gets on a full crowded train at 7 a.m., arrives at her office by 8 a.m., and sits on the desk the whole day in a building which has no windows for security reasons. She works all day without seeing the sun, and night comes before she leaves her office at 7 p.m. She knows she does not have any life and now feels devastated after seven years of working for the

credit company. She thinks that she needs to do something to fulfill her 'life.' In order to advance in her career, and also in order to have her social life, she started going to English school twice a week, but she did not feel satisfied. Now she has begun spending weekends preparing for the examination to be an accountant. She believes that those efforts will advance her *personal quality as a human being* as well as her value as an employee. Moreover, she hopes that her efforts will bring a chance to escape from her dead life and retrieve her real life. She is not an exception in Japan.

As I have argued, the efforts in fact only mean further alienation from her real life and further subordination to the abstract system of capital. How can those workers be rescued? It may sound that I repeat the same argument which prevailed among theories of class formation in the past, but I would say "by realizing that they are workers who are exploited."

In discussing the transition from class-in-itself to class-for-itself, Marx argues the crucial phase of a revolutionary movement. Marx argues;

[e]conomic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But, the struggle of class against is a political struggle. (Marx 1977: 214)

This passage does not just suggest having a subjective identity as a worker. In Marx, subjective identification as workers is not a passive identity such that workers will accept and accommodate to that identity. It is more active and transformative identity. More precisely, to realize that they are workers is a crucial step so that they are able to breakdown the class system, and capitalist system, which determines them as workers. To repeat, what Marx argues in the phase of class-for-itself is not that passive self identification will occur, but that the transitive and

transformative moment will happen. And, this is the very central issue that Thompson's historical ethnography illustrates.

Therefore, the only way for Japanese white-collars to retrieve their real lives is first of all to identify themselves as workers. Paige has said that when workers reject their identity (in his word, 'status') as workers, a revolutionary movement will happen. However, the problems in Japanese workers is that in Japan workers do not think that they are workers and that they do not think they are exploited either by capitalists or by capitalism. Paige also seems to suggest forming a universal and transcendental consciousness as a human being for more successful way to a revolutionary moment. However, in Japan, 'workers' believe that their society is shifting toward a more desirable society where they will be able to realize qualities more freely as human beings.

Therefore, in the case of Japanese white-collar workers, to have an identity as workers will be the most important step. Accepting the category of 'worker' does not imply an inward-looking and passive identification; it is not a docile identity; rather, it is a transformative identity, and to have that identification is a crucial chance to transform the system which determines that category as subordinate. If workers do not realize that they are workers, how can they know they are exploited and alienated, and how can they stop further alienation?

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