

2nd paper: Rethinking the “Cultural Turn” in Class Formation Theory—To be a Marxist or not?

In this paper, I will critically assess a culturalist approach of class formation. My central question is; how has a cultural approach advanced Marx’s theory on class? In my view, culturalists have not always substantially advanced Marx’s class theory. As Swell brilliantly shows, Thompson cannot avoid rigid economic determinism, despite his initial intention of avoiding determinism, and does not offer an alternative theory on class. This will apply to other culturalists among Marxists. Not only do they not prepare for alternative theories, but to step back, they seem to blur views on what elements of economic foundation determines classes and on what kind of class structure they see in society. Among other culturalists, however, Bourdieu is an exception and radically develops class theory from Marx.

This paper begins with reviewing Marx’s theory on class. Drawing upon Sewell, next, I will examine Thompson’s approach and Rose’s notion of ‘seriality’. My main argument is that Marxian culturalists are trapped in a ‘culturalist’s dilemma’—attempt to escape, and yet are bounded to economic determinism. Third, I will discuss how Bourdieu escapes from this dilemma.

Marx defines class in terms of the ownership of properties. The capitalist society consists of those who own the means of production and those who sell their labor. The most fundamental ground of class lies in economy. Two more points are important. First, classes are relational entity. According to Wright, classes in Marx do not simply means to have different material interests but also that class relations are based on exploitation and antagonism (Wright 1997b: 39). In short, classes exist in the antagonistic relations among people.

Ollman approaches this point in an interesting way. Through intensive re-reading on Marx, he argues that class in Marx occupies a position in it akin to labor and value (Ollman1976:

210). People (workers), activity (labor), and the product (the commodity) have causal tie in capitalism, so that class is that “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, those locations connect and necessitate one another, thus serving for the circulation of capital.

A second distinct point of Marx’s class theory is that the consciousness of actors is a key in the formation of class. He 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)

Here is illustrated Marx’ well-known theory on the transformation of class-in-itself into class-for-itself. As is clearly seen, he emphasizes the significance of the latter in its formation. For Marx, class is formed, first, where it is based on the objective situation, and second and last, where it is subjectively acknowledged by actors.

To summarize the essence of Marx: first, class is determined by economic base; second, classes exist relationally in terms of class relations and in terms of the logic of capital. Third, class formation requires two dimensions—objective condition and subjectivity of people.¹

The third point is where succeeding Marxists diverge into two; structural (in the sense that it focuses on structure of class) and cultural approaches.² Wright, for instance, belongs to the former. He defines exploitation as the condition where the material welfare of one group depends on the material deprivation of another (Wright 1997a: 10). Indeed, material exploitation

¹ The comparison with Weber highlights Marx’s points. First, Weber’s theory on class does not include the confrontational relationship. Class consists of people who share equal life chances based on the market situation—i.e. different classes share the different economic opportunities (Wright 1997a: 31). Second, a class is not necessarily to have collective identity and action. Weber argues that class is not a community, while status groups are communities (Weber 1966: 21-24).

² Another approach can be included; a synthetic approach (e.g. Katznelson), but our readings do not cover.

is central in Wright's analysis, and he maps classes based upon it.³ In so doing, he retains Marx's first two premises.

In contrast, a cultural approach stems from the subjective dimension of class. Thompson insists on "not see[ing] class as a 'structure', not even as a 'category'" and claims that "class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition" (quoted in Sewell 1986: 4). In his definition, class is determined by people's subjectivity. What kind of subjectivity defines class? Thompson provides more detail; "class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences, fell and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from theirs" (Thompson [1963]1966: 9). Here, we can find Marx's second premise of class formation—antagonistic relations, but in consciousness. Then, how do those antagonistic consciousnesses emerge? Thompson thinks that shared cultures and experiences in daily life—e.g. at the English pub—form those consciousnesses. In short, shared cultures and experiences make class.

This is the point at which Sewell intervenes. He finds that economic determinism underlies Thompson's class theory. According to Sewell, Thompson regards experience as the mediator between material relations and actors' class consciousness (Sewell 1986: 6-7). Truly, Thompson holds hidden theoretical presumptions that each class have its own culture and that class culture be defined by class structure—not in vice versa. Otherwise, there is no way to identify a culture as the culture of a certain class. What if, for example, white collar workers, such as key punchers, have their culture, share common experiences, and build up their consciousness as a high class, or any category, different from manual laborers? Would Thompson regard those white workers belong to a different class other than workers? He would not. He does not advocate phenomenology, which sees epistemology of actors as the reality.

³ Although Wight also includes ambiguous class locations, such as multiple locations or the class location mediated by social networks (Wight 1997b: 61-2), his analysis does not encompass subjective class.

Despite his intention, Thompson does stand on theoretical realism, the same as Marx, who sees that economic base defines classes and that those classes consists of workers and capitalists.

Sewell's second critique of Thompson is that he does not provide an alternative theory. In my view, however, this shortfall originates from the dilemma between the intended theoretical position (against economic determinism) and the actual theoretical position (founded upon economic determinism). Trapped in this dilemma, it is almost impossible to construct any alternative theory.

The culturalists' dilemma is shared by other Marxists. By scrutinizing Rose's idea of 'seriality', we will find that she deepens this dilemma by obscuring frameworks regarding what class is.

Rose's primary goal is to revive 'quintessential' workers as conventional theories have depicted. In order to rescue lively life and diverse experiences of workers, she appropriate Sartre's concept of seriality. Originally, Sartre considers seriality as "aris[ing] from people's historically congealed institutionalized actions and expectations that position and limit individuals in determinate ways that they must deal with" (quoted in Rose 1997: 150). Therefore, regardless of their identifications, a 'series' is the structure which exists outside of actors and constrains their thoughts and behaviors. In a way, seriality in Sartre's sense relates more to class-in-itself in Marx's distinction.

However, Rose seems to want use this concept as the one which gives a space for agency. She says that seriality is like habitus in Bourdieu; however, while habitus is a structured structure and a structuring structure, allowing actors to intervene in structure, seriality is a structured structure which constrains actors. Therefore, using seriality as an analytical tool will not rescue agency. Even worse than that, this concept obscures what class is, how it is constructed, and

what class structure exists in society.⁴ For example, in her theory, we do not tell if she retains the first and second premises of Marx's theory on class.

Surely, I understand the importance of the cultural turn in class formation; it aims for rescuing actors, so that it rejects rigid theory constructed in advance. However, importantly enough, the backbone of this cultural approach is not phenomenology but Marxism. More or less, they cannot escape from being economic determinists. The culturalists' dilemma—wants to avoid economic determinism but is still implicitly based on the economic—does not bring them anywhere and obscures the essence of class.

However, without being trapped by the culturalist's dilemma, Bourdieu attains the goal of the cultural approach—to rescue agency. How? —by incorporating subjectivity as the determinant of the class, as well as objectivity. Bourdieu argues that the subjective moment is crucial in constructing class since “agents are both classified and classifiers” (Bourdieu 1987: 5). People have the power to make something exist in an objectified, public, and formal state (Bourdieu 1987: 14)—although ‘symbolic power’ is not equally distributed.

Bourdieu is distinct from Marxian at least two points. First, he suggests the ideas of ‘social space,’ where those who occupy the same positions have same habitus (Bourdieu 1987: 5). Social space is conceived as multi-dimensional space (Bourdieu 1987: 3). As he says “constructed classes...occupy similar positions in social spaces” (Bourdieu 1987: 5), class is a part of a social space. Second, class also is constructed in a multi-dimensional way. Not only economic capital but also cultural capital and social capital are constitutive of class. This way of treating culture of Bourdieu is distinct from the cultural approaches of Thompson and Rose outlined above. Bourdieu incorporates culture as a constitutive element of class, while

⁴ Rose says that class refers to those people share particular constraints and opportunities stemming from how they are economically situated, and that class is the effects, as the consequence of the structuring inequality by racialized and gendered capitalists (Rose 1997: 150). Here I do not find any clear theory (but perhaps because we read a part.)

‘culturalists’ implicitly consider culture either as a reflection of economic base or as a mediator between actors and economic base. Bourdieu does not persist only in economic capital.

Bourdieu contains a Marxian element in that he argues that economic capital is the root of other forms of capitals (Bourdieu 1986: 252). However, his theory on class is very different from Marx. Economic material is not the only base of class; classes do not have antagonistic relations, rather it is about difference; and the subjective dimension and the objective dimension of class are co-determinant (in Marx, those moments are dialectic).⁵ This is how Bourdieu avoids the culturalist’s dilemma. In conclusion, while Marxian cultural approach has not advanced Marx’s theory on class by being trapped by theoretical dilemma, Bourdieu has radically advanced theory on class avoiding the dilemma and attained the purpose of culturalists by dismissing many of Marx’s premises of class.

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⁵ It can be said that Bourdieu is closer to Weber since both consider class is difference (see footnote 1).