

The Role of Gender in a Class Analysis of Poverty

THESIS

In his paper “The Class Analysis of Poverty,” Erik Olin Wright argues that capitalism of necessity requires a social structure in which the upper class has a definite material interest in exploiting the lower class. He defines exploitation and oppression as discrete categories, in that “[o]ppression occurs when one group illegitimately excludes another from access to resources [while] exploitation occurs when such exclusion from resources also gives the owners of the resource the capacity to appropriate the fruits of labor of others” (p. 13). His sub-thesis regarding poverty distinguishes between two types of poverty – that created by exploitative relations (the working class) and that created by oppression (the underclass). While Wright successfully develops a Marxian structural argument that poverty is an inherent property of a capitalist system, he does not ensure that his theory explains the rampant poverty among women. Thus, his thesis is not completely sound. Specifically his two ideal groups, the underclass and the workingclass, cannot always be discrete as the case of women demonstrates.

ARGUMENT

In formulating his theory, Wright identifies “four general ways of explaining poverty found in both the scholarly literature and popular consciousness” (p. 32). First, he identifies the explanation he terms the “culture of poverty” theory. This sees poverty as an unfortunate by-product of capitalism which is exacerbated by individual problems. Culture of poverty theorists, he claims, argue that social forces cause certain personal attributes such as laziness or immorality to develop, which then cause individuals to become poor. Second, Wright identifies the “liberal reformist” explanation of poverty. Reformists argue that poverty is an unfortunate by-product of capitalism worsened by a negative social situation. Disadvantaged people are poor because

discrimination in society prohibits them from access to opportunity for advancement. The third explanation for poverty Wright identifies is that of genetic/racial inferiority. This theory is not often heard in contemporary society, but it retains its place in the matrix of poverty explanations. It argues that poverty results from inherent negative characteristics personal to an individual – that is, certain races, genders, ethnicities, etc. are inferior and thus not able to succeed economically. Finally, Wright identifies his view – that poverty is an inherent feature of a capitalist system. This Marxist class analysis argues that worker exploitation and the resultant poverty is essential to the existence of capitalism. He argues that capitalism can only function when capitalists have a pool of propertyless, needy individuals willing to sell their labor power in exchange for money, goods, etc. This group forms the class in poverty.

Wright further divides the lower class into the exploited, which he terms the working poor, and the oppressed, which he terms the underclass. According to Wright, the working poor are those people engaged in an exploitative (work) relationship with the wealthy class. The underclass, by differentiation, is those who are oppressed and excluded by society, but are not a part of the work world and are thus expendable in the eyes of capitalism. He concludes his article by stating that acknowledging the class base of poverty that he outlined earlier and checking the power of the privileged, are necessary to make “significant inroads on poverty” (p. 53).

Wright does not address how women fit into his theoretical framework of working poor and underclass. Certainly, women are part of the working poor. 62% of women early less than \$35,000 per year, while only 44% of men do. 12.9% of American women live in poverty, contrasted with 10.4% of men. A full third of all single-mother households live in poverty, while only 13% of single-father households do. This data is particularly striking given that the official “poverty line” is \$15,067 per year for a family of three, hardly near enough to get by on. Thus,

any analysis of poverty must be able to be meaningfully applied and relevant to women's experiences (aU.S. Census Bureau).

Wright defines the working poor as those involved in exploitative labor relations, and also as a result of low firm wages, low worker skill levels, and a weak labor movement. A large part of women's status as working poor also stems from sexism in the workplace and society at large. A firm's ability to pay wages and the level of skill a job requires cannot explain why women continue to make only 75% of what a man makes in the same job across the board, and a pathetic 68% of what men make in service-industry jobs (aU.S. Census Bureau). Also relevant is the fact that, according to the U.S. Census, out of "12 million one-parent family groups, the 10 million maintained by women were more likely than the 2 million maintained by men to include more than one child" (bU.S. Census Bureau). Thus, a smaller income is being spread more ways in many women's households. A woman's poverty status cannot be only explained from a worker/owner, exploitative/non-exploitative relationship. Social factors like sexism in both hiring and in the labor movement, and the higher number of dependents women are likely to be responsible for, must be taken into account.

Wright goes on to define his concept of the underclass as people who can physically control his or her own ability to labor, but are "oppressed because they are denied access to various kinds of productive resources, above all the necessary means to acquire the skills needed to make their labor-power saleable" (p. 48). Women who are trying to find gainful employment fit into this category via the latter definition. Due to sexism in the hiring process, "mommy-tracking" in promotions (assuming that a young woman will become pregnant and leave a company and thus not investing in her growth as a worker), pervasive educational tracking away from lucrative skills such as math and science, and other such problems create a class of people

who have been institutionally denied the skills and experience needed to be competitive and saleable in an advanced capitalist society. Women not seeking to enter the formal workforce are part of the underclass via Wright's first definition. Women in domestic relationships are economically dependent upon and oppressed by this dependence on their partner. Because they are not working for pay, they experience limited autonomy and life chances in any arena that requires money (which is arguably the majority of life in modern societies). They are also not exploited in the capitalist system, as per Wright's definition by an owner appropriating the fiscal fruits of their labor.

Wright's article fails to form a complete class analysis of poverty, because he does not recognize the total experience of women, who comprise over half of all poor people in the U.S. Women's poverty situation cannot be explained only by a class analysis of capitalism in the U.S. Wright convincingly argues that maintaining a poor class willing to sell their labor power is an unavoidable feature of capitalism. However, he states that breaking poverty down into that generated through exploitative relationships and that created by oppression, provides a sufficient lens through which to examine it, and here he is incorrect. His analysis of exploitative relations does not capture all of the forces acting upon women in the workplace that contribute to their poverty.

References

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