

**Lecture 13 Sociology 621**  
**October 19, 2009**  
**THE DILEMMAS OF WORKING CLASS COLLECTIVE ACTION**

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Classes are not simply formed or unformed, organized or disorganized. They are organized in particular manners, with historically specific inter-relationships with the class formation of other classes. One of the important tasks of a Marxist analysis of class formation is to understand the *variability* in *types* of class formation, and the central *determinants* of this variability. In the last weeks of the semester we will examine the various ways in which the state and ideology help to shape the specific forms of class struggle and class formation. In this session our focus will be more on the “material basis” which underlies different class formations.

## **I. Stating the Problem**

### **1. Why is reformism the universal form of working class politics in developed capitalism?**

Marxists traditionally distinguish broadly two ideal types of class struggle: **revolutionary** class struggle in which the struggle is over what *game should be paid* (socialism vs. capitalism) and **reformist** class struggles in which struggle is over *the rules of a given game, capitalism*. Corresponding to these forms of class struggle is a distinction in class formations: class formations organized around the tasks of revolutionary transformation, and class formations oriented towards reformist modifications.

This distinction poses a basic puzzle for Marxism. If Marxists are correct and the interests of the working class are fundamentally opposed to those of the bourgeoisie -- if these are intrinsically polarized classes -- why is it the case that in *no* advanced capitalist country is the working class a revolutionary class? The puzzle is actually even stronger: in no mature capitalist country has the working class ever been a revolutionary class. How can the theoretical claim of antagonistic class relations be reconciled with the pervasive empirical fact that in the most developed capitalist countries class struggles overwhelmingly take the basic rules of the game for granted? This is not to say, of course, that all reformisms are identical. There are deep and important differences among the various types of reformism that have characterized the history of the advanced capitalist nations – from full incorporation and class collaboration to critical-oppositional progressive reformism. But the fact remains that *no Western working class is struggling for a rupture in capitalism*.

How is this to be explained? In the next lecture on Adam Przeworski’s theory of class compromise we will explore one kind of answer to this question: the dynamic of struggle between workers and capitalists opens a space within which class compromise may be possible. Here we will explore a quite different answer offered by Claus Offe and Helmut Weisenthal in their analysis of *the intra-organizational dilemmas of working class formation*

## 2. Two rejected explanations: misleadership & false consciousness

Both Przeworski and O&W reject two common explanations of reformism (or what Offe and Weisenthal term “opportunism”): misleadership and false consciousness. The reformism of working class associations, both unions and parties, is often attributed to “**misleadership**”. Leaders are accused of being sell-outs and corrupt, or at best misguided. The absence of revolutionary struggle reflects a failure of will on the part of the leadership of the working class and/or working class organizations. Alternatively, the failure is attributed to the faulty subjectivity of workers – **false consciousness**. Workers are the victims of ideological indoctrination from above, deception by bourgeois media, propaganda, anticommunist mystification. In the absence of such ideological manipulation, workers would engage in revolutionary struggle.

Both Offe/Weisenthal and Przeworski reject these subjectivist explanations. While they do allow an important role for ideology in their respective explanations of class compromise, the central mechanisms are not to be found in duplicity on the part of leaders or ideological susceptibility on the part of workers. Rather, the central mechanisms are rooted in the dilemmas of collective action imposed on the working class by the logic of capitalism. Offe and Weisenthal analyze these dilemmas in terms of their effects on the associational practices of opportunism within working class organizations, Przeworski analyses them in terms of their effects on the terms of struggle between workers and capitalists. Both analyses share a common overarching claim that the basic mechanism which explains reformism centers on the constraints and dilemmas faced by rational, strategically acting workers.

## 3. Opportunism and Associational Practices

Offe and Weisenthal’s analysis revolves around the concept of “opportunism.” Needless to say, this is a highly pejorative label, used in political debates as a way of impugning the integrity of particular political positions. Offe and Weisenthal are less interested in condemnation, however, than in understanding the material basis for the kinds of associational practices that are typically linked with the accusation.

What then is “opportunism”? Offe and Weisenthal identify three primary attributes:

- (1) an inversion of means over ends in which maintenance of the organization has higher priority than the pursuit of the goals of the organization;
- (2) a preoccupation with short-term gains and losses rather than long-term possibilities;
- (3) primacy of tactics over strategy.

The task is to explain the pervasive fact that to a greater or lesser extent these three attributes have generally characterized the working class formation in advanced capitalist societies.

Offe and Weisenthal make three very interesting propositions about underlying logic of opportunism:

1. *Structural logic*: Opportunism is an organizational response to the structural logic of collective action faced by workers.

2. *Dynamic logic*: Opportunism is a self-limiting phenomenon: it erodes the conditions for its own rationality, and thus there is a tendency for a cycle to exist between opportunism and militancy.

3. *Historical logic*: Because a kind of historical learning process occurs across cycles, each cycle occurs at a higher level of *potential* mobilization: the historical trajectory thus has a tendency to be a *spiral* rather than a simple cycle.

Let us begin by looking at the nature of the structural logic of the problem:

## II. The structural logic: Dilemmas of Strategic Action

The basic assumption of most political sociologists who write about collective action is that all potentially organized groups face fundamentally similar dilemmas of collective action. While groups may differ dramatically in the content of their demands and the resources they have available to pursue their demands, they all face a similar agenda of tasks in becoming effective collective actors. Above all, prisoner's dilemmas and free rider problems pose logically equivalent problems of mobilization and action for all potential interest groups.

### 1. Contrast of logics of collective action of workers & capitalists

In an important essay on the problem of class formation, "Two Logics of Collective Action" (see readings for reference), Claus Offe and Helmut Weisenthal argue that this basic assumption of pluralist theory is incorrect. Different groups, they argue, may differ profoundly in the very *logics of collective action* which they face. In particular, such differences in logics of collective action are important in understanding the problem of class formation for workers and capitalists. The differences in these logics, they argue, is rooted in the qualitatively different natures of the class *interests* and inherent class *capacities* of workers and capitalists:

**(1). Interests.** Capitalists and workers face different problems in knowing or discovering their "true" interests (i.e. in eliminating distortions in their understandings of their interests). Interests are *transparent* to capitalists, but are discoverable only through *dialogue* for workers.

**(2). Capacities.** Workers and capitalists have different inherent capacities for struggle for the realization of their interests and thus must do qualitatively different things in order to act strategically. In particular, capitalists only have to mobilize *financial resources* whereas workers have to mobilize *people*. This creates a profound difference in the dilemmas of collective action which they face.

In the rest of this lecture we will look in detail at the arguments developed by Offe and Weisenthal to sustain this contrast in the logic of collective action of workers and capitalists. In particular, we will discuss three aspects of what Offe and Weisenthal call the problem of "associational practices of labor and capital": *inputs* (what has to be organized); *internal processes* (the dynamics within organizations created to realize the interests of members); and *outputs* (the conditions for strategic success imposed by the environment of the association).

## 2. INPUTS: what do different associations organize?

The starting point for understanding the specificity of different logics of collective action for different classes is to ask: ***what do different associations organize?*** In particular, we want to ask what do associations of workers and associations of capitalists organize. Following Offe and Weisenthal, we will focus our attention on trade unions for the working class and on employers associations for the capitalist class, rather than on political parties.

What, then, do unions organize? In Offe and Weisenthal's view, the crucial fact about unions is not simply that they organize workers, but that they organize workers who are *already* members of capitalist organizations, that is, workers who are already employees in capitalist firms. Unions are thus "secondary" organizers whose task is to *reorganize* workers already organized by capital.

### 2.1 The insuperable individuality of workers

The central property of this input according to Offe and Weisenthal is what they call "*the insuperable individuality of workers*". You can merge units of capital into ever-larger and more powerful integral units but you cannot merge living labor; it remains intractably discrete. Individual workers own their individual labor power but confront an integrated capital: capital can grow in its *individual* power by capital accumulation; workers always remain weak as individual labor powers. The power of workers to confront capital, therefore, requires their organized association.

This insuperable individuality of workers has pervasive consequences for the *interests* pursued by workers associations and for *power* of those associations. In terms of interests, the implication of the inseparability of workers from their labor power is that the interests bound up with the sale of labor power are vastly more complex and heterogeneous than those bound up with the ownership of capital. In terms of power, the implication is this:

*Working class power cannot be enhanced simply by adding together more and more labor power; it must be built on forging solidarities among the owners of that labor power.*

Let's look at each of these issues a bit more closely.

### 2.2 INTEREST AGGREGATION.

Because the full scope of workers' lives are linked to their role in exchange, workers' associations, therefore, face the problem of somehow or other aggregating the heterogeneous interests workers bring to their class positions. In contrast, for employers associations, there is a simple ready-made criterion for all interest-calculations: **profit**, monetary costs and returns. The interests of capitalists in their role as owners of capital are fixed, pre-given by the nature of the market. **The only issue facing employers associations is the best means for realizing these interests.** The interests of workers, even in their role as sellers of labor power, are not fixed, not fully defined by the market precisely because the worker cannot separate him/herself as a living human being from labor power.

The result of this difference in the nature of interests of workers and capitalists is that the process of representing those interests organizationally is much simpler for capitalists. This, as

we will see below, has important consequences for the internal processes within capitalist and working class organizations. Capitalist interests are transparent and thus are capable of being articulated by experts in what Offe and Weisenthal (following Habermas) call a **monologic process (i.e. a process of top-down, one-way communication between leadership and members)**. Workers associations must somehow or other discover what constitutes the interests of their members and thus need much more **dialogic processes of communication and interaction** (i.e. forms of communication that are symmetrical, participatory and open between leadership and members).

### 2.3 POWER ACCUMULATION.

The problem of power accumulation is just as difficult for workers' associations as interest aggregation. Working class power cannot be aggregated in a simple additive way; the atomization of workers is an inherent problem, not just a result of external manipulation by capitalists. It is intrinsic to the asymmetry between capital and labor: since the worker cannot be separated from the labor power he/she sells on the labor market, the power of workers cannot be enhanced by literally accumulating labor power; it must be **continually constituted by forging solidarity among workers as persons. Workers power depends fundamentally on solidarities; capitalist power does not.**

In attempting to forge such solidarity, individual workers face a deep dilemma in terms of the interests which working class associations pursue. So long as individual workers calculate the costs and benefits of participation in collective organizations and collective action strictly in terms of their own *individual* material benefits, such participation will always be problematic. Because capitalists are individually so much more powerful than workers, they are in a much stronger position to punish individual workers for such participation than workers are *individually* able to punish capitalists (i.e. in general, being fired is a bigger threat to individual workers than quitting is a threat to capitalists). **If the only value which unions pursue are the atomized interests of workers -- the interests of workers taken individually -- then such organizations will be permanently vulnerable to the disintegrative effects of prisoners dilemmas and free riders. Indeed, this is one of defining what it means to describe a class as dominant: it has a capacity to impose prisoners dilemmas on challenging class, to intensify free-riding problems.**

These observations lead Offe and Weisenthal to an important conclusion:

“Those in inferior power positions can increase their potential for change only by overcoming the comparatively higher costs of collective action by changing the standards according to which these costs are subjectively estimated within their own collectivity....The logic of collective action of the relatively powerless differs from that of the relatively powerful in that the former implies a paradox absent from the latter -- the paradox that *interests can only be met to the extent that they are partly redefined*. Therefore, the organizations [of the relatively powerless must always]... simultaneously express and define the interests of their members” (Offe and Weisenthal, p.78-79).

Or, to use Elster's terms, **working class associations must try to create the conditions for conditional altruism if they are to be able to shift the balance of power with capital.** Solidarity, community, common fate: these must become part of the subjective calculus of

workers if collective action is able to shift the balance of power. Capitalist associations need not rely on such deep commitments.

These arguments suggest that in the case of working class formations there is a deep causal *interconnection* between the interests pursued by working class organizations and the power of those organizations. In all instances of class formation, the power of class-based associations helps to explain the extent to which different class interests can be realized. This is true for both the working class formation and the capitalist class formation. **In the case of working class formation, however, the reverse causal relation also exists: the transformation of the interests that are represented within working class organizations helps to explain the power of those organization.** This dialectical relationship between interests and power within the working class defines its distinctive logic of class formation.

### 3. ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES

The above comments on the interests and power of workers and capitalists has direct implications for the kinds of organizations they need to create in order to effectively pursue their interests. More specifically, employers and workers associations differ fundamentally on what it is that determines the *power base*, and this in turn affects their internal processes.

For employers associations, the power base depends essentially on the sanctioning abilities of individual members, not the organization as such. Business associations are powerful because their members are individually powerful and can individually impose sanctions on workers in conflict situations. The result of this is that the activities of the organization depend primarily on the willingness of members to provide funds to the organization – *the willingness to pay* -- and the direction of those activities can be broadly delegated to a *monologic* leadership – that is, a leadership which relates to the associational membership primarily in one-way, top-down communication.

In sharp contrast, the power base of workers association depends almost entirely upon the sanctioning ability of the association, not the individual members, and this sanctioning ability depends in turn upon the *willingness to act of the members* (especially their willingness to strike). The power of even the most bureaucratic union thus ultimately rests on the reality of membership support.

[This contrast between power based on the willingness to *pay* vs. willingness to *act* generates very different leadership tasks and dilemmas for employers and workers associations.

Labor unions, unlike employer associations, face a basic contradiction between the conditions for the *accumulation* of power and the *exercise* of power.

- In order to *accumulate power*, unions must do two things: first, they must attempt to *increase their membership and the financial resources* controlled by the union, and second, they must increase the *bureaucratic control over these resources* in order to ensure that these resources will be effectively used and coordinated in struggles.
- In order to *exercise power*, on the other hand, unions depend upon the degree to which the association is able *reinforce solidarities and commitments among members*. This, in turn, depends to a significant extent upon the degree to which the internal structure of the union organization is governed by dialogic forms of communication -- interactions which

are fundamentally participatory and help to forge collective identities that shield the organization from free rider problems.

All things being equal, increasing size and centralization undermine such solidaristic interaction, and in this sense *unions typically face a trade-off between the accumulation and exercise of power*. The history of the labor movement is rife with examples of rich unions that cannot mobilize to strike vs. militant small unions that cannot afford to strike.

Working class formation thus generally faces a range of organizational antinomies that are absent from capitalist class formation: mobilization of resources vs. mobilization of activity, increasing the size of the organization vs. increasing the strength of collective identity, building the bureaucratic efficiency of the organization vs. deepening democratic participation within the organization. These are deep trade-offs inherent in the nature of working class interests and conditions of struggle. Because these antinomies cannot be eliminated, they result, as we shall see below, in tendencies within working class associations for internal organizational practices to oscillate between dialogic and monologic forms, punctuated by periods of organizational crisis and reconstruction. Employer associations lack these dilemmas and thus tend to have more continuous, less crisis-ridden organizational histories.]

#### 4. OUTPUTS

The criteria and mechanisms of success for workers and employers associations are entirely different. Capitalist association is not the basis of capitalist power; it merely serves to rationalize that power. Employers associations are largely devoted to improving the functioning of the market, to reducing uncertainties and providing information to members and other constituencies. ***Basic capitalist interests are reproduced by mechanisms that are independent of the activities of any associated action of capitalists.***

Workers associations, on the other hand, do constitute the essential basis of working class power. The mechanisms for success depend crucially upon the nature of the conflict environment in which working class association operate. Where such associations lack institutional legitimacy by employers, success depends upon the ability of the association to actually mobilize collective action to impose sanctions on capitalists. Under conditions of stable bargaining relations, in contrast, success depends upon the ability to *threaten* mobilization *and* restrain actual collective action in the face of agreements with employers. This, again, reinforces the internal tensions within working class associations, for the ability to restrain mobilization depends upon the extent of bureaucratic control within the association, while the ability to actually mobilize collective action depends upon the degree of active participation and involvement by members.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Working class associations face deep, and, at least within capitalist society, unresolvable tensions. These tensions can be summarized in a series of interconnected propositions:

1. Workers material interests can be collectively advanced only through association.
2. The ability of workers associations to realize these interests depends upon the willingness of members to act, to make real sacrifices for collective goals.

3. The willingness of members to act depends upon the extent to which workers feel high levels of solidarity and commitment.
4. High levels of solidarity depend upon the transformation of interests from purely individual material interests to interests bound up with collective identity.
5. This transformation depends upon the existence of dialogic, reciprocal forms of interaction within associations engaged in struggle.
6. But, the ability to actually *succeed* in struggles with employers, to forge bargains and win concessions, depends upon the ability of the leadership of workers association to contain militancy, to restrain mobilization, to live up to the promises made in a bargaining arrangement. And this ability to control membership is enhanced by monologic forms of organization.
7. Such monologic forms of organization ultimately undermine the basis of power of working class associations.
8. Taken together, these processes generate a contradiction between two models of working-class class formation: a dialogic model of *associational representation through struggle* and a monologic model of the *dissociation of representation and struggle*.

These propositions suggest that there is a fundamental divergence between two organizational models which characterize working class formation. Following Offe and Weisenthal, these can be referred to as a dialogic model of *associational representation through struggle* and a monologic model of the *dissociation of representation and struggle*. Corporatism and other forms of modern representation of working class can be thought of as attempts at institutionalizing the latter and thus undermining the possibilities for dialogic organizational practices. Specific examples of this would include legal restrictions on legitimate union demands, industrial citizenship rights (grievance committees and procedures, formal plant rights, codetermination elections, etc.) which dissociate representation from struggle, and various mechanisms which generate organizational fragmentation of communication (eg. postal ballots for strike votes).



### III. The Historical Trajectory of Working Class Formation: Offe & Weisenthal's analysis

The result of this structural logic and the dynamics it sets in motion is a particular kind of historical trajectory: a theory of a *spiraling cycle of opportunism and militancy* that can be decomposed into five general stages.

#### *Stage I. Initial formation*

This is the **initial period of class formation** in which a small, tightly knit group of militants engage in primary organizing activities. The associational practices are highly dialogic and participatory; the effectiveness of the association is almost entirely based on the willingness to act.

#### *Stage II. Consolidation*

This is the **phase of consolidation**. The organization has gained sufficient strength and public recognition that part of its power comes from its ability to make *threats* rather than simply its ability actually impose sanctions on adversaries. In the case of unions this means that the threat of strikes becomes more important than actual strikes.

While this clearly augments the power of the association, it also imposes two contradictory imperatives: On the one hand, there is what can be termed a *survival imperative*: the organization must maintain the credibility of the threats if it is to survive. This requires mobilization, continual recruitment, sustained militancy. On the other hand, the organization faces a *success imperative*: it must show that it can control the threats it makes and be capable of delivering on promises made in response to these threats. This requires that the leadership be in a position to control the organization and restrain the militancy of members. The coexistence of these two imperatives creates a maximum tension between monologic and dialogic forms of associational practice: the need for mobilization requires dialogic forms, the need for control requires monologic forms.

Offe and Weisenthal argue that there are two basic ways in which this tension can be resolved: either the organization can return to stage I or it can attempt to create external guarantees for the survival of the organization. This ushers in stage III.

#### *Stage III. Opportunism*

This is the stage of full-fledged opportunism: the triumph of monologic over dialogic forms of associational practice. In order to resolve the tensions of stage II, the leadership of the organization seeks external guarantees for the survival of the organization, most importantly, external legal guarantees from the state. The objective of these guarantees is, in Offe and Weisenthal's words, "to make the organization's survival as independent as possible of the motivation, the solidarity and the 'willingness to act' of the members" (p.107). Of particular importance is labor legislation which legally protects union rights and survivability, both by making unions less vulnerable to attack by employers and by making it possible for unions to recruit members (and thus obtain financial resources in the form of membership dues) without having to mobilize workers in active struggles.

To obtain these external guarantees, of course, the union has to give something up in return. What they give up is militancy. They promise to be "responsible", to institutionalize internal controls within the union over militants in exchange for security. In short, they agree to adopt the organizational practices described as "opportunism" above. Opportunism is thus

institutionalized as a rational strategy of insuring organizational continuity. In Offe and Weisenthal's words, this "secures the chances for success while escaping the threats to survival" (p.107).

#### *Stage IV. Capitalist counteroffensive*

The creation of monologic institutional forms and opportunistic practices within working class organizations may be a rational strategy on the part of leadership, but it does not eliminate the fundamental antagonism of interests between workers and capitalists. This means that capitalists will always have an inherent interest in undermining the power of workers if this is politically possible. Periodically, therefore, capitalists launch offensives against working class organizations, sometimes tentatively to see how vulnerable those organizations are, sometimes aggressively with the hope of seriously undermining their power.

So long as the state provides the external guarantees for unions, these offensives are unlikely seriously to jeopardize their power and viability. But of course, these guarantees can be withdrawn, and indeed one of the objectives of anti-union offensives is often to erode or even to eliminate these legal protections. In such circumstances, unions may become extremely vulnerable. The monologic form of the organization will have eroded the solidarities among members and weakened the leadership's ability to mobilize members for collective action, while the assault on the organization makes such mobilization imperative.

Such situations are likely to provoke a general organizational crisis in which the established monologic associational practices confront re-emergent dialogic tendencies. Such crises form the basis for the next stage of the historical trajectory.

#### *Stage V. Renewed Militancy.*

The final stage is marked by a period of renewed militancy and mobilization, by a re-formation of the associational practices. This looks like the first stage of the process, but with certain important differences. First, this reemergence of militancy and mobilization usually takes the form of divisions and splits within existing unions. This means that the new militancy typically operates within a very different organizational environment from the initial militancy, an environment in which there are more organizational resources available and in which the contest is between different factions of workers, not simply between workers and capitalists. Secondly, the renewal of militancy action takes place at a potentially higher level of ideological awareness than the initial phase of militancy. Workers have lived through the historical cycle of militancy and opportunism, and thus potentially have learned lessons which will inform the subsequent struggles over class formations.

The overall result of these interconnected processes, is that the long-term historical trajectory is not necessarily an endless cycle of militancy leading to the organizational strategies of opportunism which ultimately undermines the power base of the organization thus leading to a renewed period of militancy. Rather, the process is potentially one of an historical spiral in which periods of militancy oscillates with periods of opportunism, but at ever more politicized and radical levels of consciousness.

Offe and Weisenthal view this spiral-like quality of the historical learning curve of working class formations as inherent in the logic of collective action. This is, perhaps, an overly optimistic view. Whether or not historical experiences produce a cumulative learning process depends upon the strength of historical memory within the working class and on the ability of

workers to draw the correct lessons from the victories and defeats in class struggles. Historical forgetting, however, is as pervasive a fact of social life as historical memory, and the lessons to be learned from struggles are often opaque and highly contested. Ruling classes have a deep interest in erasing historical memory and of interrupting the learning process embedded in such cycles. Whether or not such lessons are learned and cycles are transformed into spirals, therefore, cannot be read off of the logic class formation itself.