

Class Counts

Student Edition

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6. Conceptualizing the interaction of class and gender

6.1 The debate over class primacy

In many ways, the most sustained challenge to class analysis as a central axis of critical social theory in recent years has come from feminists. Class analysts, especially in the Marxist tradition, have often implied that class was a "more important" or "more fundamental" dimension of social structure than gender.¹ While such claims to explanatory primacy have rarely been explicitly defended, the relative inattention to gender in the Marxist tradition is taken by many commentators as a *de facto* denigration of gender as a significant explanatory factor.

To some extent this suggestion that class is "more important" than gender is simply a by-product of a specific set of theoretical preoccupations. To focus on class as a causal mechanism in social explanations implies bracketing other concerns. Class analysis is an "independent variable" specialty, and of necessity this means focusing on class and its ramifications and giving relatively less attention to other causal factors. This does not absolve class analysts from the criticism of sometimes overstating the explanatory power of class for certain problems, but it does imply that the sheer fact of focusing on class and its effects is not a legitimate basis for indicting class analysis.

There are times, however, when the claim that class (or closely associated concepts like "mode of production" or "economic structure") is "more important" than other factors is a substantive thesis, not a heuristic device. Classical historical materialism is the most elaborated instance of such an argument. As G. A. Cohen (1978) has forcefully

¹ The idea that in a multicausal system one factor is "more important" than another is fraught with ambiguities and is very difficult to pin down. For an extended discussion of the problem of causal primacy, see Wright, Levine and Sober (1992: ch. 7).

demonstrated, the part of historical materialism that is built around the base/superstructure metaphor ascribes explanatory primacy to class through the use of functional explanations: the base (the economic structure conceptualized in class terms) "functionally explains" the superstructure. What does this mean? It means that superstructural phenomena take the form that they do because this form helps to reproduce the existing economic structure. This is quite akin to functional explanations in biology where a given trait of an animal is functionally explained by its effects in helping the animal survive and reproduce. Why are the bones in the wings of birds hollow? Because this helps them to fly. The beneficial effect of hollowness (lighter wings facilitate flight) explains the fact of hollowness. In the social case, the functional explanation embodied in historical materialism means that various social institutions – certain features of the state, certain aspects of ideology, certain kinds of laws and so forth – are explained by the fact that they generate effects which help reproduce the economic structure.² Since the economic structure is itself composed of social relations of production which collectively define the class structure, this is a form of class primacy.

At first glance it might seem like classical historical materialism makes extraordinarily strong and encompassing claims about the centrality of class. But as G. A. Cohen (1988: ch. 9) has also argued, even classical historical materialism does not make the grandiose claim that class is the most important cause of *everything* social. Historical materialism is not a theory of all social phenomena, but only of a specific set of *explananda* – the historical trajectory of economic structures and their accompanying superstructures.³ The superstructure, in these terms, is not defined as all social relations and institutions that are not part of the economic base.

² It is important to note that in this kind of functional explanation there is no suggestion that the superstructure is "epiphenomenal" – a mere reflection of the base that has no consequences in its own right. To say that X functionally explains Y implies that Y has significant effects on X. If it is true that the class structure of capitalism functionally explains the form of the state, then this implies that the state must have significant consequences for reproducing the class structure. If the state had no consequences there would be no point to a functional explanation.

³ There are Marxists, particularly those working within a strongly Hegelian tradition, who insist that Marxist concepts and theory do attempt to explain everything. Shelton and Agger (1993: 36), for example, write, "Marxism is *not* simply a theory of class but a theory of everything, including women." While I do not think that the aspiration for such a totalizing theoretical project should be rejected a priori, in practice Marxism has not been successful in accomplishing this ambition, and the prospects for doing so are not very promising.

Rather, the superstructure is limited to those noneconomic social phenomena which have effects on the reproduction of the base; these are the phenomena which are candidates for functional explanations of the sort historical materialism defends. What Cohen aptly calls "restrictive historical materialism" is agnostic about the relative explanatory importance of class for various phenomena which are not part of the economic structure or the superstructure, and this would potentially include many cultural phenomena and possibly significant aspects of gender relations.⁴

This kind of functionalist reasoning in historical materialism has played an important role in Marxist analyses of gender relations. Engels' (1968 [1884]) famous discussion of the origins of male domination, for example, explains the subordination of women in terms of its effects on stabilizing the inheritance of private property. This is an explanation of gender relations in terms of the functional requirements of maintaining a system of private property. In more recent discussions, the functional explanations have shifted to the beneficial effects of gender oppression for capital accumulation.⁵ For example, a number of contributors to the "domestic labor debate" of the 1970s (e.g. Secombe 1974; Gardiner 1975) argued that the subordination of women is rooted in the sexual division of labor in the household, and this in turn is to be explained by the fact that the unpaid domestic labor of women raises the rate of profit by lowering the costs of reproducing labor power (since part of the consumption of workers takes the form of unpaid services of housewives). Others (e.g. Zaretsky 1976) have argued that the central basis for women's oppression in capitalism lies in the ways the gender division of labor helps to reproduce capitalism ideologically by strengthening a

⁴ The contrast to "restrictive" historical materialism is "inclusive" historical materialism, in which the superstructure is defined as everything that is not in the base. Cohen shows that inclusive historical materialism is wildly implausible. Probably no one who really thought systematically about the issues seriously ever really held it.

⁵ These arguments do not necessarily use the explicit language of functional explanation. Thus, for example, Gardiner (1975: 52) discusses domestic labor in terms of the "essential although changing role" it plays. She asks the question, "Why has domestic labour been maintained?" and answers it by saying: "capitalism developed out of feudalism through workers becoming dependent on the wage system, but has never provided totally for workers' needs through commodity production, instead retaining domestic labor to carry out an important part of the reproduction and maintenance of labor power." The suggestion here is that the explanation for the maintenance of unpaid domestic labor (and the gender relations associated with this labor) is the role played by this labor for capitalism. The word "role" in this context implies a functional explanation.

privatized, consumption-centered vision of family life. In all of these instances, class is accorded explanatory primacy through the use of functional explanations.

Relatively few class analysts, even those still explicitly identifying with the Marxist tradition, strictly adhere to the tenets of classical historical materialism any longer. Virtually no one defends strong functionalist versions of the base/superstructure image of society, even for the specific task of explaining historical trajectories of economic structures. Marxist class analysis is now generally closer to what might be loosely termed "sociological materialism" in which class, because of its linkage to exploitation and the control of economic resources, has a presumptive importance for a broad range of social problems, but is not invariably viewed as the most important determinant. While it remains the case that Marxists generally do try to place class analysis in an historical context, this usually has at best a tenuous relation to a materialist theory of the overall trajectory of human history as such. In practice, then, to be "historical" has generally come to mean "to be historically specific," rather than "to be embedded in a theory of history."⁶ As a result, the debate over what was once called "class reductionism" or "economic determinism" has waned considerably in recent years.

If one accepts this way of understanding the explanatory project of class analysis, then the central task is to sort out for specific *explananda* the forms of interaction between class and gender as causal processes. Class may indeed turn out to be "more important" than gender for certain problems, but equally, gender may be more important than class for others. Advances in the class analysis of gender *and* the gender analysis of class depend upon research that will clarify these interactions.

6.2 Forms of interconnection of class and gender

As a preliminary task to empirical investigations of class and gender, it is useful to lay out a conceptual menu of the various ways that class and gender might be interconnected. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, and it certainly does not constitute a *theory* of class and gender. Rather, it is an agenda of issues that need to be considered within empirical

⁶ For a discussion of the slide from historical materialism towards sociological materialism, see Wright, Levine and Sober (1992: ch. 5).

research and theory construction. Five forms of possible class/gender interconnections are particularly important: gender as a *form* of class relations; gender relations and class relations as *reciprocally affecting* each other; gender as a *sorting mechanism* into class locations; gender as a *mediated linkage* to class locations; and gender as a *causal interaction* with class in determining various outcomes. Let us briefly look at each of these.

1 Gender as a form of class relations

While the concepts of class and gender are analytically distinct, there are empirical situations in which gender relations themselves are a form of class relation (or, equivalently, that class relations are themselves directly organized through gender relations). Frederick Engels (1968 [1884]: 503), in his classic essay on the family and private property, formulates the relationship between class and gender in early civilizations this way: "The first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression with the of the female sex by the male.." Gerda Lerner (1986) elaborates a rather different argument about the confluence of class and gender in early civilizations. She argues that one of the earliest forms of male domination consisted of men effectively *owning* women, and by virtue of this appropriating the surplus produced by women. The most important form of this surplus was new people – children – who were a valuable resource in early agrarian civilizations. Control over the capacity of women to produce new labor power was thus a pivotal form of property relations. If this account is correct, then this would constitute a specific form of gendered slavery in which gender and class are melded into a single relation.⁷

2 Gender relations and class relations as reciprocally affecting each other

Certain kinds of class positions may only exist by virtue of the fact that specific forms of gender relations are present. The classic example is domestic services: gender relations play a crucial role in making possible maid and childcare services (Glenn 1992). It is not just that gender sorts people into these jobs; if gender relations were dramatically more

⁷ This would only strictly be true if it were the case that all women were slaves, which does not seem to be the case in the historical examples cited by Gerda Lerner. The dystopia portrayed by Margaret Atwood (1987) in *A Handmaid's Tale* comes closer to a society within which class and gender are fused into a single relation.

egalitarian, the jobs themselves might not exist. The availability of single, unmarried farm girls in nineteenth-century New England who were not needed on the farm and who were not in line to inherit the farm was important for the development of the textile industry and the accompanying emergence of the early industrial working class. In many parts of the Third World, gender plays a critical role in making available a supply of cheap, vulnerable labor employed in various kinds of manufacturing. Again, it is not just that gender distributes people into an independently created set of class positions; the structure of gender relations helps to explain why jobs with particular characteristics are available.

Equally, class relations can have an impact on gender. The physical demands of many blue-collar, industrial working-class jobs put a premium on toughness, which in turn may help to reinforce a macho gender culture among working-class men. The competitive, high-pressure career demands of many managerial and professional occupations help to reinforce a specific kind of domestic gender relations in which housewives are available for managing the personal affairs of their husbands. As it is often quipped by women in such careers, what they need is a wife.

One of the most important ways in which class relations and gender relations have shaped each other centers on the problem of the "family wage." Johanna Brenner and Maria Ramas (1984) have argued that the material constraints of working-class life in the nineteenth century were a major force in shaping the development of the working-class family form, and thus gender relations. Because of high infant mortality and the need for high rates of fertility among workers (since having adult, surviving children was crucial for old-age security for parents), it was in the interests of working-class families for the wife to stay at home and the husband to work in the paid labor force. This was not feasible, however, until the "family wage" was instituted. The family wage, in turn, became a powerful material force for keeping women in the home and reinforcing gender differences in pay. These gender differentials in pay, in turn, made it rational for families to orient their economic strategies around the class and job interests of the "male breadwinner," further marginalizing women's paid work. It is only in the last several decades as the male breadwinner family wage has begun to decline that this system has begun to erode.⁸

⁸ There has been a lively debate over the explanation of the family wage (see, for example, Humphries 1977; Hartman 1979; Barrett 1984; Lewis 1985). In contrast to Brenner and Ramas's argument that the family wage was in the interests of both male

Particular class relations may also facilitate the transformation of gender relations in more egalitarian directions. As a professor, I occupy a quite privileged class location as a relatively affluent "expert" with high levels of control over my own work. Of particular importance to many professors is the way in which professorial work confers tremendous control over scheduling and time. Professors may work many hours per week, but they often have considerable discretion over when and where they put in the hours. Furthermore, at various times I have had grants which enabled me to buy off teaching and thus have even greater flexibility in organizing my time. This has made it possible within my family for me to play a major role in all aspects of parenting from the time when my children were infants. It has also changed the domestic terrain on which struggles over the domestic division of labor have been waged. The result is a relatively egalitarian division of labor around most domestic chores. This does not imply that class determines the gender division of labor. Far from it. As we shall see in chapter 8, class location does not have a powerful overall impact on the gender division of labor in the home. Nevertheless, the specific properties of class positions transform the *constraints* within which people struggle over gender relations in their own lives, and under certain conditions this facilitates forging more egalitarian gender relations.

3 Gender as a sorting mechanism into class locations⁹

The way gender sorts people into class locations is probably the most obvious aspect of the interconnection of class and gender. One does not need to do high-powered research to observe that men and women in

and female workers, many feminists have argued that the family wage should primarily be viewed as a victory of men over women, reflecting the strategic interests of men in keeping women in their place. Insofar as it was the gender interests of men that formed the basis for the struggle over the family wage, then this would be another instance of the way in which gender relations shape the class structure. In any case, once the family wage is in place as a specific feature of class relations, it becomes an important material condition constraining transformations of gender relations.

⁹ It may also be possible to conceptualize the complementary causal relation: class as a sorting mechanism of people into "gender locations." At first glance this might seem like a bizarre claim since we tend to think of gender categories as dichotomous, polarized and isomorphic with sexual categories – male and female. This image reflects the tendency for most people (including most sociologists) to conflate gender categories with sex categories, in spite of the formal acknowledgement that gender is a social, not biological, category. Once we break from the biological specification of gender *relations*, however, then it is clear that men and women can occupy many different sorts of gender locations, and class may influence where people end up in such relations.

the labor force have very different occupational and class distributions, and most people would explain these differences by referring to gender in one way or another. It is less obvious, of course, precisely what gender mechanisms are at work here. Relatively few social scientists now believe that biological differences between men and women are the primary cause of occupational sex segregation, but such views are undoubtedly still common in the general population. Typically in social-science discussions of these issues two kinds of factors linked to gender relations are given center stage in explanations of gender differences in occupational and class distributions: (1) gendered socialization processes which shape the occupational aspirations and skills of men and women, and thus affect the kinds of jobs they are likely to get; (2) various forms of inequality, domination and discrimination which either directly affect the opportunities of men and women to pursue various kinds of jobs, or indirectly affect access by affecting their acquisition of relevant resources. As feminists have often noted, inequalities in the sexual division of labor in the household constrain the labor market strategies of many women and thus the kinds of jobs for which they can realistically compete. Discrimination in credit markets may make it more difficult for women to become capitalists. Traditionally, discrimination in admissions to certain kinds of professional schools made it more difficult for women to acquire the credentials necessary to occupy the expert locations within class structures. As we shall see in chapter 9, gender discrimination in promotions within authority hierarchies directly affects the probabilities of women becoming managers. In each of these instances, the distribution of power and resources within gender relations affects the likelihood of men and women occupying certain kinds of class locations.

4 Gender as mediated linkage to class location

As we discussed in chapters 1 and 2, individuals are linked to class structures through a variety of relations other than their direct location in the social relations of production. The class locations of children are derived from the social relations within families that tie them to the class of their parents, not their own "jobs." Gender relations constitute one of the pivotal ways in which such "mediated linkages" to the class structure are organized, especially through marriages. One of the ways in which class and gender are interconnected, then, is via the way gender relations within families and kinship networks link people to various locations within the class structure. These mediated class loca-

tions affect both the gender interests of men and women – the interests they have by virtue of the specific gender relations within which they live – and their class interests.

5 Gender as a causal interaction with class in determining outcomes

Gender and class are interconnected not merely through the various ways they affect each other, but also through their mutual effects on a wide range of social phenomena. Of particular interest are those situations in which class and gender have interactive effects, for the presence of interaction effects indicates that the causal processes represented by the concepts "class" and "gender" are intertwined rather than operating simply as independent mechanisms.

One way of formally representing the interaction of class and gender is with a simple equation of the sort used in multivariate regression analysis. Suppose we were studying the effects of class and gender on political consciousness. The interaction of class and gender could then be represented in the following equation:

$$\text{Consciousness} = a + B_1(\text{Class}) + B_2(\text{Gender}) + B_3(\text{Class} \times \text{Gender})$$

The coefficients B_1 , B_2 , and B_3 indicate something about the magnitude of the effects of each term in the equation on consciousness. The interaction term, B_3 , indicates the extent to which the effects of class vary by gender or, equivalently, the effects of gender vary by class. An example would be a situation in which the ideological difference between capitalists and workers was greater among men than among women.

In a model of this sort, it could turn out that the additive terms were negligible (i.e. B_1 and B_2 would be zero). This would imply that both class and gender only have effects on this dependent variable when they are combined in a particular way. This would be the case, for example, if male and female capitalists and male workers all had indistinguishable attitudes, but female workers were significantly different. In such a situation, the two independent variables in our equation – class and gender – could in practice be replaced by a single variable which would have a value of 1 for female workers and 0 for everyone else. The effects of class and gender would thus function like hydrogen and oxygen in water. When the amount of water given to plants is varied, there is no "additive effect" of the amount of hydrogen and the amount of oxygen on plant growth; the effects are entirely a function of the amount of the

"interaction" compound, H₂O. If class and gender behaved this way then perhaps it would be useful to introduce a new concept, "clender," to designate the interaction term itself. In general, however, the claim that class and gender "interact" in generating effects does not imply that there are no additive effects. This means that some of what is consequential about gender occurs independently of class and some of what is consequential about class occurs independently of gender. The task of class analysis, then, is to sort out these various kinds of effects.

In chapters 7, 8 and 9 we will explore several of these forms of interconnection of class and gender. Chapter 7 discusses the problem of the class location of married women in dual-earner families. It is thus an investigation of the ways in which gender mediates class locations. The chapter also includes an analysis of the effects of the interaction of the class composition of households and gender on class identity. Chapter 8 explores the ways in which class locations might shape one important facet of gender relations – the sexual division of labor in the home. Finally, chapter 9 looks in detail at one specific aspect of the way gender sorts people into class locations – the differential access to position of workplace authority of men and women.

7. Individuals, families and class analysis

Consider the following list of households in which family members are engaged in different kinds of jobs:

<i>Employment composition of household</i>	
<i>Wife's job</i>	<i>Husband's job</i>
1 Typist, full time	No husband
2 Typist, full time	Factory worker
3 Typist, full time	Lawyer
4 Typist, part time	Lawyer
5 Lawyer	Lawyer
6 Lawyer	Factory worker
7 Homemaker	Factory worker
8 Homemaker	Lawyer

What is the appropriate way of defining the social class of each of the individuals in this list? For some of the cases, there is no particular difficulty: the women in the first two households and the man in the second would usually be considered working class, while both people in the fifth household, "middle" class. Similarly, the class of the homemakers in cases 7 and 8 would generally be identified with the class of their husbands.¹ The other cases, however, have no uncontroversial

¹ Some feminists would object to deriving the class location of full-time housewives from the class of their husbands. Such critics insist that the social relations of domination within the household should also be treated as a "class relation." One rationale for this claim treats production in the household as a distinctive mode of production, sometimes called the "domestic mode of production." In capitalist societies, it is argued, this mode of production is systematically structured by gender relations of domination and subordination. As a result, within the domestic mode of production, the domestic laborer (the housewife) occupies a distinctive exploited and dominated class position in relation to the nonlaborer (the male "head of household"). This effectively places