# What is Missing from a Marxist Account of Class

Capitalism is a market system in which the means of production are privately owned. Further, the profits realised from such production are accrued to the owners of the means of production. Exploitation, as argued by Karl Marx, is one of the three laws of capitalism (Bianchi 2009, p. 487). In essence, exploitation is accountable for the unequal distribution of wealth, both in terms of production and distribution of wealth. According to Marxism, the central actors in this phenomenon are economic classes rather than states, institutions, firms or individuals. Further, Marxism argues that these economic classes are created by private property, which also ensures that the classes do not have equal (Chitty 2013, p. 242). From these arguments, it can be deduced that private property facilitates and ensures the exploitation of one class by another, whereby those who own property exploit those who do not. In turn, ideological and political consciousness is determined by class status. Therefore, the classical notion of class is founded on the ideas of economic domination as well as political inequality (Bellamy 2009, p. 49). However, from the psychosocial perspective, this Marxist approach notably misses the importance of culture and how it relates to class. The purpose of this paper is to explore the notion of class from a psychosocial perspective and elaborate on how culture is missing from the Marxist account of class.

## Contextualising Culture and Class

Class is a key determinant of participation in culture and, in turn, culture is a critical pointer of social difference (Hook 2005, p. 1). It follows, therefore, that culture has the potential to significantly influence social mobility and reinforce class division. By understanding how culture influences social mobility and reinforces class, ultimately broadening the income gap between social classes, class can appropriately be inserted into a psychosocial perspective. Ideally, Marxism fails to deliver a democratic definition of culture yet the changing times demand a perspective shift from products to people (Niemi 2011, p. 50). Such a shift would facilitate the opening of ways whereby culture would be instrumental in breaking down inequalities and class divisions through empowering people across societies to be creators as well as consumers of culture (Blanden & Machin 2004, p. 230). From a sociologist perspective, Bourdieu often made reference to an economy of ‘cultural goods’. He argued that inequalities in the cultural goods economy impacted upon people’s life chances in much the same way as the income inequalities conventionally refered to. Yet, in an era when Marxism acknowledged the increasing rich-poor gap, its proponents failed to address the role culture directly plays in widening the distinctions (Kopstein et al 2014, p. 104). It is generally acknowledged among sociologists and psychologists that cultural production, fun and access play crucial roles in eradicating inequalities, yet culture is not adequately addressed in the Marxist approach to class.

Everyone is in and of a social class (Marcuse 2014, p. 52). Essentially, everyone is of the class that their parents occupy, born into such class just as they as they were born and placed into a nation and its culture. However, no one deserves their ascribed class status regardless of what it is, contrary to cultures that have strong beliefs in reincarnation (Niemi 2011, p. 42). People belong to the class that they fell into as adults or rose to as children, although before the completion of education, such acquired class status is more expectational than realised. Unlike the Marxist belief, when people speak of class, just as they do of culture, they do so in the context of their own class affiliations (Lott 2007, p. 101). Typically, outsider or neutral views in the idealised anthropologist sense of conducting field research do not exist since everyone is a participant observer. Both applied and academic psychologists work in settings of either the middle class or upper-middle class that shape the values of such middle class, irrespective of the psychologists own class background (Majumder 2010, p. 44). Critically analysing this observation, it is fairly difficult to contextualise a scientific discipline whose settings, attitudes and values are all working class. Therefore, in the absence of an impartial approach to the subject matter, caution to classist judgements is imperative. As the following overview shows, Marxist approaches fail in addressing the cultural aspect of class.

## Overview of Class According to Marxism

A class is defined as a large group of people that differs from other groups owing to the place they occupy in historically determined production systems, their relation to the means of production and their role in how labour is socially organised (Marx 2010, p. 93). By scientifically investigating social organisation, Marx created a methodology for political and social science whereby human history was perceived to have consisted of a series of conflicts between classes: the oppressing class and the oppressed class. Marxism provides that the concept of class is defined by the order or division of the society according to status, but maintains that an individual’s social class is determined by their source of income rather than amount of their wealth (Marx & Engels 2009, p. 58). More importantly, class is determined by how an individual relates to the means of production and labour. This is to mean, according to Marxism, that an individual’s class is not determined by their own opinion but by objective reality. Basing on this opinion, Marxism argues that there were three fundamental classes in Britain in the 19th century and they included the Landlord Class (which lived on ground rent), the Proletariat Class (which lived on wages) and Bourgeoisie Class (which lived on profit) (Reay 2006, p. 289).

At its core, the Marxist concept of class is entrenched in a set of normative commitments to a type of radical egalitarianism (Marx & Engels 2009, p. 59). Marxists have historically been averse to analytically argue for these moral commitments and Marx himself believed deliberations on morality and justice were not necessary, arguing that morality was a reflection of material interests and conditions of the actors. Marx was also reluctant to argue for socialism on the basis of social justice or normative principles but instead preferred to argue that it was merely in the interest of the working class (Mouffe 2014, p. 114). Even so, his works are characterised by moral vision, moral judgement and moral outrage. Equally importantly, the Marxist practice of class analysis is distinctively driven by it link to a radical agenda of normative egalitarianism. Radical egalitarianism in this Marxist context provides that when the material conditions of life are distributed in a radically egalitarian manner, human prosperity would be enhanced widely (Marx 2010, p. 92). Ideally, this concept is as argued by Marx that each individual receives according to their need and each individual gives according to their ability. According to the Marxist approach, that is the manner in which resources are distributed in accordance to the ideals of a classless society among egalitarian families (Thompson 2016, p. 33). In a practical example, children with more needs would receive more resources whereby people are expected to contribute to the best of their ability. Similarly, books are also distributed that way in public libraries, whereby people search for what they need rather than what they can afford. Thus, according to the Marxist custom of radical egalitarianism, human thriving would generally be enhanced in the event that such principles we generalised to the whole society (Marx & Engels 2009, p. 63).

From the perspective of historical possibilities, Marxists argue that under a highly productive economy, a society can be organised materially such that radically egalitarian distribution of life’s material conditions is sustainably realised (Niemi 2011, p. 40). In the context of the Marxist customs, egalitarian normative principles are not simply a reflection of timeless human values; they are also believed to be personified in practical political projects. Therefore, at the core of the Marxist theoretical project is an attempt to envisage the circumstances under which the moral principles can be translated feasibly into social practice (Majumder 2010, p. 65). The fundamental idea here is that as absolute scarcity reduces and a society’s productive capacity increases, radical egalitarianism develops into a more feasible principle of social organisation. On one hand, in the strongest sense of this historical perspective, it is not possible to implement and sustain the egalitarian principles until material insufficiency is overcome (Marx & Engels 2009, p. 71). On the other hand, in the weaker version, Marxism claims that a basic egalitarianism or material conditions of life is rendered more feasible by high productivity.

Finally, Marxism argues that capitalism is an impediment to the realisation of a radically egalitarian distribution of life’s material conditions (Marx 2010, p. 94). On one hand, Marxism credits capitalism for developing human productive capacity such that radical egalitarianism necessary for human thriving is materially made feasible. However, on the other hand, Marxism also argues that it is the same capitalism that gives rise to power and institutions that are obstructions to the actual realisation of egalitarianism (Abrams 2001, p. 106). In the context of culture, this capitalism approach brings forth a new angle to the debate: capitalism is the process that incessantly reinforces material conditions for a wider scope of human thriving while at the same time hindering the creation of social conditions to facilitate this potential. Marxism’s political mainstay is that such barriers can only be prevailed over by the eradication of capitalism via revolutionary rapture (Majumder 2010, p. 54).

## Culture and Class

Economic and political systems and regimes come and go cultural traditions evolve and change and races are constructed and deconstructed socially; however, in all these expressions of the social organisation of humanity, socioeconomic class remains a common factor (Majumder 2010, p. 46). For many centuries, social class has been analysed and addressed in the context of economics, political science and philosophy. Notably, Marxism is one of the leading approaches that has addressed class from these perspectives but failed to focus on cultural perspectives. The analysis of class has undergone a reworking in sociology whereby cultural analysts of class emphasise on class practices and processes and the everyday functioning of social class (Chitty 2013, p. 250). From such initiatives, conceptualisations have been developed that shift focus from the economic concepts to the implications of cultural struggles and how they are elements of new marketisation. Essentially, this cultural approach engages in the exposing of the middle class’s normality, which is largely unacknowledged, and the equally important but also unacknowledged diminishing working class. The key influence behind this approach is Bourdieu and his conceptual habitus tools, field and capitals (Chitty 2013, p. 250).

Examples are given of the defeat of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, of which cultural analysts argue did not signify the disappearance of social class (Niemi 2011, p. 39). Rather, these historical occurrences were only markers that liberal democracy and capitalism were fated to be the political and economic forms that would dominate the world. On one hand, cultural analysts note that owing to its links with class conflict, communism sought to polarise the classes so as to stir up self-consciousness among the working class to enable them see their options in the capitalist system. On the other hand, they also note that the perceptible defeat of communism did not suddenly place everyone in the middle class, neither did it render them classless or satisfied with the class they belonged to (Niemi 2011, p. 40). On the contrary, there still exist fundamental class differences as a force with the liberal democracies of the present day. Although capitalism is credited for being the best economic systems of all, even by Marxists, it still features intrinsic issues linked to the evolution and change of social class.

Viewing class from the cultural perspective presents two fronts whereby one concerns who can access what is traditionally defined as culture and the other concerns who decides what culture is in the first instance (Chitty 2013, p. 247). Thus, these fronts are not merely about the artistic and aesthetic qualities of culture but matters of liberty and power, in which class and culture are inextricably linked and highly politicised. An examination of the relationship between class and culture in modern day Britain reveals that there is a notable inconsistency in that possessing cultural capital augments social mobility but in itself, cultural capital is predicated on culture as social difference pointer (Niemi 2011, p. 43). In that context, one of the functions of culture is to augment and legitimize social inequality, and that is not comprehensively addressed under Marxist approaches. Culture, wealth, status and education function together; therefore, the disadvantaged can be assisted in improving their social mobility by increasing their cultural capital. However, cultural capital is no longer defined by the mere appreciation of classical art; rather, it entails more of an interest in all sorts of culture. But rather than simply re-inventing the old-era cosmopolitanism, the modern-era cosmopolitanism must entail participation, action and production. As opposed to the old cosmopolitan that was at ease in different cities’ elite culture, the modern-era cosmopolitan must be comfortable with the different cultures in their own cities (Chitty 2013, p. 252).

**Social Class as a Cultural Phenomenon**

Unlike Marxism, the complexities of culture, including variations in practices, values and beliefs within societies that share a homogeneous culture, are acknowledged and appreciated more in modern views (Niemi 2011, p. 43). Such divisions are typically identified in regional variations, tribal communities and rural versus urban communities. However, it is imperative to note that the utility of the concept of a unitary culture has been put to question by cross-cultural psychologists when cultures are taken apart on such lines (Lott 2007, p. 100). Nevertheless, social class must necessarily be taken into account for the sake of understanding the culture of a society. To this end, the conceptions of culture can be categorised into two, with the materialist conception of culture on one and the cognitive idealist conception on the other. The materialist model starts with the social class of the parents, which significantly impacts on their lives and, in turn, the life chances of their children (Lott 2007, p. 101). Further, although values are the consequences of experiences in this model, their causal effects on life chances are relatively insignificant. The cognitive idealist model is more of a cyclic series of events. Parents pass down to their children their values and how they are expressed in behaviour. Then, the children’s life chances, such as income, will be determined by their values; in turn such life chances will further situate them in circumstances that, in turn, influence their psychological qualities (Niemi 2011, p. 46).

From the foregoing, culture is thought in the materialist model as situational and behavioural; essentially, culture is what people do habitually in the context of the circumstances they find themselves in. Looking further, these circumstances are themselves consequences of the society’s self-maintenance through the production of goods and services and the way it organises itself for the production. Essentially, the production and organisation are, respectively, the infrastructure and social structure elements of the society and, more importantly, are elements of culture (Lott 2007, p. 104). It is also acknowledged that agriculturist societies and hunter-gatherer societies have considerably different circumstantial contingencies. Therefore, people from different cultures will have varying ideologies and perspectives of life, and more importantly including social class, because of the different lives they live. Notably, social class in not comprehensively addressed in this context under Marxism (Majumder 2010, p. 51).

The cognitive idealist conceptualisation perceives culture as an ideological system of scientific theories, values, norms and rules identifiable within a society, regardless of whether every member of that society views them in the same way or not (Lott 2007, p. 107). However, it is agreeable that people from different cultures live differently because they about things differently, a concept refered to in social science as the cognitive turn. More importantly, both the materialist and cognitive idealist models converge in their views of social class as a cultural phenomenon. For instance, the materialist perspective asserts that members of different social classes face varying circumstantial contingencies because of their participation in different aspects of the economic system (Majumder 2010, p. 52). To some degree, their participation in different infrastructures is because of their involvement in different activities aimed at producing goods and services to earn a living. Typically, managers will be charged with the responsibility of thinking, manipulating data and directing people while labourers will typically take and execute orders, work with machines and toil manually. On the other hand, the cognitive model provides that social classes live in societies that share diverse versions of the ideology of culture (Lott 2007, p. 110). Characteristically, there are differences in class beliefs and values regarding matters such as the right way to live and have social and political attitudes. Apparently, Marxism does not elucidate that these ideologies specific to class are not learned through experience but are rather passed down through generation by way of socialisation and practices of enculturation.

## Social Class and Cultural Values

Studies on class differences in social beliefs and values have clearly illustrated that cultural differences exist, most notably in terms of authoritarianism, fatalism and religion (Aronowitz 2016, p. 69). In its most abstract description, authoritarianism entails placing value in power, extreme conservative political philosophy, stereotyping certain groups, submission to superiors and dominance of inferiors. Further, it is linked to personality measures such as low cognitive complexity and dogmatism as well as some child-rearing practices. Fatalism on its part, is the belief that individuals do not have control over their own life experiences and what happens, happens. According to studies, fatalism is a response to life experiences and passed-down values and beliefs (Aronowitz 2016, p. 74). More importantly, working class people have consistently scored higher that middle class people in both authoritarianism and fatalism.

Religion, perhaps more than authoritarianism and fatalism, is a stronger agent of social control within societies (Niemi 2011, p. 44). Religions hold both implied and unequivocal beliefs and values that are believed to God-given rules of conduct that can be enacted eternal and material sanctions. However, religions have fundamental differences amongst themselves in aspects such as lenient, open-mindedness and flexible versus behaviorally restrictive and doctrinally strict; conception of God; expressiveness; and fundamentalism. Ideally, membership to organised religion is linked to social class, which in turn, enhances class differences in social values and beliefs. However, it must also be acknowledged that the social class-religion relationship is not simply a social science curiosity; it has had significant political implications in both British and Amerian politics. Historically, religions have turned up for opposite sides in the culture wars and their positions have engaged with party politics to culminate in the present-day coalitions (Niemi 2011, p. 47). A practically relevant example is manifested in the Republic and Democratic parties of the US. Critically analysing this situation from a perspective of social class, it is evident that capitalism does not play as significant a role as culture in bringing together social groups with inherently conflicting economic interests.

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