

On class

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Dear friends,

Let's take a voyage together through three understandings of class. This concept is becoming increasingly interesting to me, particularly in relationship to transformative movements. Across history a great many Marxists, and others who on occasion appropriated from Marx and Marxists (looking at you Bourdieu), have debated class as a (social/political/economic/determining) construct. The brackets, here, are worth some discussion but let's first think about defining some key terms that will be useful for us as we progress through this discussion.

At the source class can be understood in terms of a person's relative relationship to the means of production. The means of production ranges from: (1) the physical spaces where work happens (factories, farms, offices), (2) the tools and machinery used in production (from hammers to industrial equipment), (3) the raw materials that are used to make things (iron ore, cotton, oil —also referred to as the subjects of labour), to (4) the knowledge and technology required for production (know how, processes). For Marx, there is a cleaving of humanity in two: those who own these means of production (the capitalists or bourgeoisie) and those who must sell their labour (power) because they do not own these means (the working class or proletariat). Even partial ownership of any one of these categories of things places you in the capitalist class.

You might already viscerally feel the politics dripping from each of these sentences. This is a somewhat 'orthodox' view because it is shaped directly by Marx's work in *Capital*. But many, if not all, theorists who have followed in the historical materialist tradition have engaged with class conceptually as it emerges (from where remains a debate). Much later on theoretically the *base* has been conceptualised as an ontological (real, physical) force which not only conditions how we live, but also how we might live, in a way that is inescapable. But let's not get ahead of ourselves, we're concerned with class, not the nature of all things (or are we, I'm already lost).

Let me work an example with you, using this orthodoxy, and we'll retain this example as we discuss a few historical materialist (Marxist in different words) conceptions of class. Let me introduce to you Fillipe, who works in a civil servant job as an administrator for the Department of Social Inclusion (this is not even a vaguely real person and I have little idea how DSI actually works —it's just a context for our discussion). A civil servant working in social inclusion occupies a contradictory class position —okay, great, why are we starting here? Because boundaries make things interesting, and they are very real in our contemporary "late capitalist" context. Fillipe doesn't (directly) own the means of production. Going by our definitions above this plants them in the working class. Sweet — job done? Not quite. They also don't directly produce surplus value in the classical Marxist sense, as their labour isn't directly involved in commodity production. You're not directly involved in transmuting oil into plastic ergo some historical materialists argue that you are not, then, working class. Poulantzas, for instance, would argue, instead, that they are part of the "new middle class" or petit bourgeoisie. From here, let's move to a contrasting perspective with elucidatory potential, and we'll revisit Poulantzas in a moment.

For Gramsci, class formation is a historical process that goes beyond economic position. Two things are important here —the *historical* nature of class and class formation, and the role of economic position. The role of history in class formation is important, beyond mechanistic or formulaic notions of "class", as it shows that the character of class is always predefined and carries the weight of generations: "[t]he tradition of all dead generations

weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” [1]. Here, we begin to see some of the “organic” thinking Gramsci did which is, to me, more humanistic than Marx. While Gramsci maintains Marx’ s core insight about the relationship to production, he sees, in parallel, classes as being formed through political and cultural processes. He is particularly interested in how different social groups come to understand their interests and organise themselves politically.

Gramsci introduces the concept of “organic intellectuals”, people who emerge from within social classes to articulate their interests and organise their political projects, and “traditional intellectuals” , professionals, civil servants, and others who see themselves as independent from class interests but actually play a crucial role in organising social life (for capitalism’ s reproduction). These intellectuals, to Gramsci, are essential in understanding bourgeoisie and proletarian interests, and the social and cultural conditions that construct their class’ s broader positioning. Theoretically this also introduces a level of nuance to the organisation of human behaviour atop the economic “base” which is helpful for understanding modern economic organisation. Let’ s return to Fillipe, with particular interest in the intellectual position they might hold in this fictional representation.

Our civil servant occupies what Gramsci would call an intermediary position as a type of state intellectual. They’ re not simply a “neutral administrator” but are involved in organising social relations and mediating between different class interests. What makes this position especially complex is that civil servants in social services sometimes come to see themselves as advocates for “subordinate groups” (subalterns) while simultaneously being part of the state apparatus that maintains existing social relations. Gramsci would be interested in how such officials might sometimes act as organic intellectuals for subaltern groups (advocating for their interests *within* the state) while simultaneously functioning as traditional intellectuals who help maintain social order. Where does this position Fillipe? Are they bourgeoisie? Are they proletarian? Are they sandwiched between?

Their class background would matter significantly in Gramsci’ s analysis, but not in a simple deterministic way. He would be interested in how their background shapes their understanding of their role and their relationship to different social groups. A civil servant from a working class background will have different capacities to connect with and understand subaltern groups, but their position within the state apparatus would still shape how they can act on that understanding. This nuance, which I have argued on several occasions is fundamental to activist transformation, is what sets Gramscian understandings of class apart. Rather than troubling who is part of what class, and how the schema for understanding class is used, Gramsci holds with Marx’ s “distance” notion, and offers fluidity for how human action is subsequently shaped (or not) by class and social (group) connection. The modern state creates its own social categories and class fractions through its bureaucratic structures –but fundamentally there remains the “owners” and the “workers”. Civil servants aren’ t only members of pre-existing (historical) classes but part of what Gramsci saw as new social formations created by modern state institutions. The purpose of these formations is, naturally, dubious and may be exploited in identity politics, but coexists with and is informed in part by class origins in important ways that condition agency.

Poulantzas, contrastingly, spent a great deal of time building on and significantly developing Marxist class theory as a primary concern. He argues that class positions are determined not just by economic relations, but by the combined effects of economic, political, and ideological relations. This, in itself, is similar to how Gramsci conceptualised class and/or social group formations. For Poulantzas, classes only exist in class struggle. They are not fixed categories but dynamic relationships. He emphasises that class positions are objective –they exist independently of whether people are conscious of them –but they are also complex and can be contradictory. Great, thanks for that clarification Nicos. Let’ s get clearer.

Poulantzas pays particular attention to what he calls the “new petty bourgeoisie” . This group is, to him, inclusive of technical workers, civil servants, and other white-collar employees. Unlike some Marxists who would fit these groups into traditional categories of workers or capitalists, Poulantzas saw them as occupying distinct class positions shaped by their role in organising and supervising labour, their position in ideological relations (like education and culture), and their relationship to state power. This is congruent with contemporary notions of a “middle class” which exists, primarily, to manage production and enforce the reproductive processes of capitalism broadly. Crucially, Poulantzas argues that the state isn’t exclusively a subservient domain of the ruling class but that it has relative autonomy. He suggests that state workers, including civil servants, occupy class places that are defined by their position in political and ideological relations, not just economic ones. This helps explain why state workers might sometimes act against the immediate interests of capital while still ultimately helping to reproduce capitalist social relations. This also gives us reasons why liberal reformism will never work, but that’s a topic for another day.

Let us be extremely clear that in Poulantzas’ s view only those immediately located at the nexus of production without any ownership of the means of production can be considered working class. To me, this is an extremely limited view, but it doesn’t end here. Poulantzas also clearly notes that while there may be some autonomy in the roles of the *petit bourgeoisie* or rather, specifically, his *nouveau petit bourgeoisie*, their primary function and continued existence is dependent on utter subservience to capital. This self loathing positionality of inaction is another point of contribution to Marxist’s praxis stasis –but, again, a conversation for another day. Let’s spend a bit more time with Nicos before we wrap up.

A production line worker in a car factory might represent what Poulantzas sees as productive labour in its most direct sense. They are directly involved in producing surplus value through manual labor in the production process. Their position is defined by both their economic relationship (not owning means of production, selling labor power) and their place in the social division of labor (manual rather than mental labour). This gels directly with the orthodox Marxist understanding. A nurse in a public hospital presents a more complex case. While they perform essential labour, Poulantzas would classify this as unproductive labour in the strict economic sense since it doesn’t directly produce surplus value. However, their position involves both mental and manual labour aspects, and they are part of what he calls the social reproduction of labour power. This work of helping maintain the workforce that capitalism needs, or (re)producing the actual bodies to do the labour. You may also notice the entrance of gendered thinking as we move through some of this theorisation particularly around (re)production, even though we know this is the most fundamental part of human existence it is often marginalised or backgrounded in sexist and fundamentally unhelpful ways.

A software developer at a tech company shows another complexity. They’re engaged in mental labour rather than manual labour, which might suggest new petty bourgeoisie status. However, if they are directly involved in producing software as a commodity that generates surplus value, they might be considered productive workers despite not fitting traditional images of working-class labour. A retail worker at a chain store represents what Poulantzas would call commercial labour. While they’re clearly part of the working class in terms of their economic position (selling labour power, no ownership of means of production), they’re not directly producing surplus value but rather helping realise it through the sale of commodities. While some of this nuancing is helpful for specific analysis of class, the categorisation of anyone not working in a precious metals mine in the south of the African continent (almost literally by modern standards) is limiting and limited in thinking and analysis.

Through Poulantzas’ s theoretical framework, Fillipe occupies a distinctively complex class position that exemplifies the intricate dynamics of state power reproduction –or, perhaps,

considerable time wasting waiting for the revolution. As member of the nouveau petit bourgeoisie they are situated within a nexus of economic, political, and ideological relations that transcends productive categories. They are engaging in mental labour that organises and mediates class relations rather than directly generating surplus value. Their position within the state apparatus grants them relative autonomy while simultaneously embedding them in the reproduction of existing social relations, creating a profound contradiction where they both ameliorate and perpetuate class inequalities through their role in managing social cohesion. This structural position, determined by their place in the combined economic-political-ideological matrix rather than their class origin, would result in a petit bourgeoisie status and a static framing of state functionaries whose role, to Poulantzas, might be simultaneously to work addressing subordinate class conditions while directly helping to reproduce the system of class relations they seek to reform. “Reformism bad” is the productive message, but it is easy to read Poulantzas as effectively a capitalist realist with no potential for base transformation because of capitals capacity for transmutation.

Naturally, Gramsci is not without possibility for critique. Gramsci’s framework requires organic intellectuals who hold with their class origin and gain and wield sufficient power to genuinely create a collective which can transform systems of our very existence for radical and *different* ends. This heroism and frankly somewhat internally contradictory positioning of organic intellectuals for class transformation is difficult if not impossible. For instance, our civil servant will never be positioned as an organic intellectual for the communities which they seek to serve because they are not members of that social group –not in the originary sense. This, also, limits the possibility for transformative agency. And transformative agency, praxis, is what we’re most interested in here on **mind reader**. I should also log, at this juncture, that because Gramsci wrote from prison and was subject to significant censorship, as Anderson has discussed at length, social group, for example, may well have been code for class in his writing, but we will never truly know if this is categorically distinct from Marx’s definitions or if it is a direct evolution. But let’s end with hope and action from both understandings of class built on the work of Marx.

For Gramsci, our civil servant could potentially play a significant role in social transformation through their position as an intellectual within the state apparatus. Gramsci sees intellectuals as crucial organisers of social groups’ political projects. A civil servant in social inclusion, particularly one from a working-class background, might even function an organic intellectual. A person who can articulate and organise the interests of subaltern groups within state institutions. This could involve using their position to create spaces for subaltern voices, redirect resources, or challenge dominant interpretations of social problems.

However, Poulantzas would be more sceptical of this transformative potential. In his framework, the civil servant’s position within the state apparatus is structurally determined in ways that tend to reproduce existing class relations, regardless of individual intentions. Their role in managing social inclusion is part of what he sees as the state’s function in organising the political unity of the ruling class while disorganising subordinate classes. Even when they try to advocate for subaltern groups, they are still operating within structures that ultimately maintain class domination.

The key difference lies in how they understand the relationship between structure and agency (or myriad different words for this debate that are not central to our discussion). Gramsci sees more possibility for strategic action within existing institutions –importantly, though, *not* reformism. He believes that organic intellectuals, including potentially progressive civil servants, can help build counter-hegemonic forces from within the state apparatus. This could involve creating trenches, institutional positions from which to advance alternative social projects. A hopeful future in collective imagining and working.

Poulantzas, while not completely dismissive of individual agency, instead advances how

class positions within the state apparatus create objective effects that operate regardless of subjective intentions. Our civil servant might sincerely want to advance subaltern interests, but their position within the mental/manual labour division and their role in managing rather than transforming social relations limits their capacity for genuine transformation. This, naturally, has practical implications for how we understand change and the potential for change. Following Gramsci, we might encourage civil servants to consciously connect their work to broader subaltern movements, using their institutional position to create spaces for genuine bottom-up participation and organisation —or flatly anti-authoritarian movements leveraging the apparatus of the state. This could involve finding ways to transfer real decision-making power to affected communities rather than just managing their inclusion. Following Poulantzas, we would be more focused on how structural transformation of the state apparatus itself is necessary for genuine social change. The civil servant's role would be more about understanding and potentially helping to expose the contradictions in their position rather than trying to use it for progressive ends.

The latter position remains interesting to me, despite my own objections to Poulantzas's theorisations. In an almost anarchist modality, Poulantzas nearly suggests burning it down through thinking. You can't say that's not somewhat appealing. Gramsci helps us see how individuals within institutions might contribute to transformative projects, while Poulantzas reminds us of the structural limitations of such efforts. Perhaps the most productive approach would be to combine these insights? Recognising both the possibilities and limitations of working within state institutions while maintaining a clear focus on the need for broader structural transformation.

Thanks for sticking through this (lengthy) one! More on this to come.

In solidarity,

Aidan

[Throughout] Poulantzas, N. (1975). *Classes in contemporary capitalism* (D. Fernbach, Trans.). NLB.; Poulantzas, N. (1973). *Political power and social classes* (T. O'Hagan, Trans.). NLB.; Gramsci, A. (2007). *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell-Smith, Trans.; Reprinted). Lawrence and Wishart.; Gramsci, A. (with Bordiga, A., & Tasca, A.). (1977). *Selections from political writings (1910-1920)* (Q. Hoare & J. Mathews, Trans.). Lawrence and Wishart.

1. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>