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TOWARD A NONESSENTIALIST CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

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The project of this paper is the construction of a conception of class consciousness within the epistemology and social theory of Marxism. The purpose of analyzing class consciousness is to understand the effectivity of that consciousness on social life.

Class consciousness is defined in this paper as discourse conscious of class. It is class-expressive discourse. Class unconsciousness is class-repressive discourse; unconscious discourse of class. After the elaboration of these concepts in Part One, the paper proceeds to a critical review of concepts of class consciousness. It examines the works of Freud, Lacan, Hegel, Marx, Gramsci, Lukács, Althusser, E. P. Thompson and Waterman. This paper limits itself to a discussion of class consciousness, leaving analysis of class unconsciousness to another paper.

The investigation of the conscious/unconscious, the languages of expression/repression, of Freud and Lacan led this writer to an investigation of the complexities of discourse elaborated in the works of Saussure and Foucault. From their various analyses of thinking (specifically language and discourse), it was possible to proceed to a specification of conscious thinking and then to conscious thinking about class, the project of this paper.

Concepts of class consciousness were then explored in

nonessentialist and essentialist Marxist writings. Through a critique of these concepts, a concept of class consciousness as class-expressive discourse was constructed.

A nonessentialist epistemology and Marxist social theory are employed in this paper. The concepts of consciousness and class consciousness constructed here focus not on the "level of awareness" of "a fact" of class, but on the variety of conscious discourses that are constituted by notions of class.

The project of this paper demands a radical reconstruction of such concepts as "thinking" before it can begin constructing concepts of conscious thinking or class conscious thinking. In the end, a new way of looking at consciousness and, combined with the nonessentialist Marxian notion of class as the process of surplus labor extraction, a new way of looking at class consciousness, is produced.

Part One sets forth the concept of class consciousness. Part Two differentiates this concept from other commonly held notions of class consciousness.

### The Theory of Class Consciousness

Consciousness. This paper analyzes consciousness as a discourse; in particular, discourse that is "expressed." In the framework employed by this paper, discourse is

determined in part by essentialism/nonessentialism. Essentialism of theory, essentialist epistemology, involves a claim to the ability of theory to capture however complexly, the true and theory-independent reality. Essentialist social theory asserts a particular essence that causally determines other aspects of social life. In economistic social theory, the economy (or an element of it such as class) is asserted as the essential determinant of society. In humanist social theory, humans (or an element of them such as their consciousness) is often asserted as the essential determinant of social life.

In contrast, nonessentialism, both the epistemological and social theoretical framework of this paper, asserts no essential determinant of social life (whether human beings, the economy or theory itself). In place of this treatment of knowledge as the capture of social reality and in place of this dynamic of social causality, nonessentialism asserts epistemologically as well as theoretically, complex and constitutive mutual effectivity. This effectivity is called overdetermination. All aspects of society including theory itself are related in this mutually contradictory way. For purposes of analytical specificity, social life is conceptualized as a multitude of overdetermined processes: economic, political and cultural.

Nonessentialist rejection of essentialism is not a rejection of one essence for many essences. Rather,

nonessentialists reject the particular dynamic of essentialism--essential causality. Nonessentialism does not assert multicausality (many essences) for monocausality (one essence); nonessentialism rejects any essential causality. In place of essential causality, nonessentialism asserts a different dynamic; the dynamic of overdetermination. In overdetermination aspects of social life constitute and change each other.

In this framework, thinking is one of the many overdetermined processes that constitute social life. As one kind of thinking, conscious thinking constitutes and changes other processes in society as it is itself changed. It is neither caused by, nor does it cause any single social process.

Consciousness is a particular kind of overdetermined thinking or discourse. It is expressed discourse. Expressed discourse is that "permissible" discourse; the discourse of that which is "allowed." Unconscious discourse is repressed discourse; the discourse of the "forbidden." These notions come in part from the works of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault.

As theorized by Freud and Lacan, thinking is effected by processes of repression/expression. Specifically, that which is conceptually determined "forbidden" or "unacceptable" psychic material is repressed. That which is determined "permissible" is expressed. This process is

continuous. No idea is either inherently or absolutely conscious or unconscious. Thoughts are more or less (un)conscious, depending on their particular determination.

The term expressed is used to identify those "more permissible" thoughts; the term repressed those "less permissible" (forbidden) thoughts. Because a thought is only more or less expressed/repressed, a thought is only more or less conscious/unconscious. For convenience, the term conscious is used to refer to those expressed thoughts; unconscious to those repressed thoughts. The term consciousness is used to refer to the totality of expressed (permissible) discourse; unconsciousness the repertoire of forbidden or repressed discourse.

There is no one cause of repression/expression, either in the mind of the individual or "outside" the mind. Repression/expression is overdetermined, i.e., produced in the contradictory interaction of the various social and natural processes in society. Thus consciousness/unconsciousness is produced not only by "psychological processes" but also by the various cultural, political and economic processes in society. An examination of conscious/unconscious must consider this complexity.

Conscious "permissible" and forbidden, or unconscious conceptions are constituted by processes of conceptual condensation/displacement. Through these processes unconscious thoughts, condensed in metaphorical and



displaced in metonymic form, become conscious thoughts. Our conscious thoughts are constituted in this way by our unconscious thoughts and vice-versa. That which is conscious is therefore, partially, that which is displaced/condensed (i.e., symbolically transferred from unconscious to conscious language). An analysis of conscious discourse must consider, as part of that discourse those displaced/condensed aspects. Neither conscious nor unconscious thoughts are reducible to the other.

The notion of consciousness as permissible discourse is articulated in the works of Michel Foucault, reiterated in Hayden White's critique of Foucault.

Like desire and power, discourse unfolds 'in every society' within the context of external restraints which appear as 'rules of exclusion,' rules which determine what can be said and not said, who has the right to speak on a given subject, what will constitute reasonable and what 'foolish' actions, what will count as 'true' and what as 'false.' These rules limit the conditions of discourse's existence in different ways in different times and places. Whence the distinction, arbitrary but taken for granted in all societies, between 'proper,' reasonable, responsible, sane and truthful discourse, and 'improper,' unreasonable, irresponsible, insane, and erroneous discourse, on the other. Foucault himself vacillates between the impulse to justify the discourse of madness, criminality, and sickness . . . on the one hand, and his constantly reaffirmed aim to probe beneath the distinction between proper and improper discourse, in order to explicate the ground on which the distinction itself arises, on the other. Despite this vacillation, his probings take the form of 'diagnoses' intended to reveal the 'pathology' of a mechanism of control which governs discursive and nondiscursive activity alike.<sup>1</sup>

Foucault himself alludes to the significance of

discursive permissibility.

Such an archeology [of knowledge] would show, if it succeeded in its task, how the prohibitions, exclusions, limitations, values, freedoms, and transgressions of sexuality, all its manifestations, verbal or otherwise, are linked to a particular discursive practice. It would . . . show how this way of speaking is invested not in scientific discourses, but in a system of prohibitions and values.<sup>2</sup>

In the theory of consciousness proposed in this paper, the concept overdetermination is used to understand expression/repression (permissible/forbidden). That which is "permissible" is overdetermined by the various contradictory social and natural processes. That which constitutes "permissible" at one site is different than at another. Permissibility has no externally or absolutely derived (i.e., essential) meaning. It is constantly changing and its various "meanings" at different sites are contradictory.

A thought is only more or less permissible/forbidden, and only more or less expressed/repressed. A thought therefore gains its "greater permissibility" from another's "lesser permissibility," i.e., gaining its meaning relatively; permissibility is intradiscursively defined.

People have different conscious discourses at different moments and over time. Consciousness is constantly changing. An understanding of a particular conscious discourse comes from an understanding of the various processes that overdetermine that discourse, i.e., its "conditions of existence."

Peoples' conscious discourses are more or less similar/different to each other. They cannot, because of overdetermination, be "the same." Peoples' various conscious discourses (about class, race, gender, family, religion, etc.) condition the existence of each other and they are all conditioned by nondiscursive aspects of society.

Emphasis is not placed on the conscious/unconsciousness of the individual, but on the conscious/unconsciousness of discourse. Individuals possess a variety of contradictory conscious and unconscious discourses.

It is possible to analyze consciousness/unconsciousness at a variety of sites: at the site of the individual (an individual's consciousness-unconsciousness); the site of a group (a group's consciousness/unconsciousness); the site of a society (a society's consciousness) etc. With these definitions we may refer to "individual consciousness," "group consciousness" or to "social consciousness."

A person has multiple and contradictory conscious/unconscious discourses at one moment and over a lifetime. Each of these discourses effect and change the others (i.e., each are among the others' conditions of existence). These discourses are further conditioned by nondiscursive aspects of society (the economy, politics).

Class. Nonessentialist Marxian social theory distinguishes itself from other social theories in part through its use

of class as an analytical entry point and through its particular definition of class as a process. In Marxian social theory class is the process of surplus labor extraction. For a class analysis, therefore, the concepts necessary and surplus are elaborated. Necessary here refers to the amount of labor overdetermined to be socially necessary to reproduce the laborer. Surplus is that labor over and above what is deemed socially necessary. In every society both necessary and surplus labor are performed and surplus labor extracted.

The process of performing and extracting surplus labor is referred to in this theory as the fundamental class process. Extraction is defined abstractly as the process of receiving and distributing the surplus. In every social formation (SF) the class process is one of a multitude of overdetermined social and natural processes. In this theory we analyze that overdetermination through the concept conditions of existence (COE).

This analytical tool encourages an examination of the particular "conditioning" of each process of and by the others, i.e., the effect of each process on the others.

The class process is analyzed as the overdetermined (and hence contradictory) "conditioning" of and by nonclass processes in the social formation. Nonclass processes referred to for purposes of analyzing class as conditions of existence (COE) of the class process, are categorized

into economic, political and cultural COE.

In the overdetermination of the fundamental class process, conditions of existence are contradictorily performed. Some social processes that condition the fundamental extraction (class) process involve the reception of part of the surplus extracted. Those "conditioning" processes, whose performers receive part of the surplus, are called in this theory, subsumed class processes or subsumed COE (in distinction from "conditioning" processes that do not involve a SS class process). Occupants of subsumed class positions are called subsumed (SS) class occupants. They obtain distributed shares of surplus first extracted in the fundamental class process.

The fundamental extraction process and subsumed class processes take on various forms in different conjectures. In other words, surplus labor is extracted (received/distributed) differently. In this theory different forms of the fundamental class process that are distinguished as different forms of the process of surplus labor extraction are the primitive communist, slave, ancient, feudal and capitalist class processes. A particular set of class (and nonclass) processes occur at particular "sites" (e.g., at the site of a particular social formation; at the site of the state, at the site of the household, at the site of the workplace, etc.).

Class Consciousness. Class consciousness is discourse conscious of class, or class-expressive discourse. Class consciousness is discourse in which class is permitted. Class unconsciousness is discourse in which class is repressed or prohibited. Class consciousness is not the consciousness of a class (group). Nor is class consciousness the various discourses about the "fact" of class. The presence of class in discourse is not the result of an individual's ability to grasp the essence of his/her being as a class member or to realize the class-essence of society, or to (however variously) conceptualize a "fact" of Reality called class. Each of these conceptions contain essentialist epistemological and social theoretical aspects rejected earlier.

Class is itself a concept whose discursive presence is overdetermined. The determination of that presence is politically, economically and culturally complex. That determination cannot be reduced to one of those (political, economic or cultural) "aspects of society" or an "aspect of the individual" (such as "intelligence" or "psychology"). The complex processes by which class is included in discourse must be analyzed for their overdetermined complexity.

Class can appear in conscious discourse in a variety of ways. One way is in metaphor and/or metonymy. Class can appear in a variety of (predominantly) nonclass

discourses, such as discourse about religion or sex. In these discourses a concept of class may constitute part of that discourse. In other words, in predominantly nonclass discourses, there may be a class component. This is called the class-constituent of discourse. These class discourses, taken together, are called class conscious discourses. These various expressions of class can be analyzed collectively as "class consciousness." Thus to "have" a class consciousness, is to express in discourse, concepts of class.

Class Conscious Discourses. The theory of class consciousness proposed here is one of a number of theories about class consciousness. In other theories, analyses are often made of the various usages of the word "class." Class consciousness is those various different usages of the word class by individual "class members." In contrast, the theory of this paper analyses expressions of a particular concept of class--the process of surplus labor extraction. This concept of class comes out of the Marxian framework elaborated earlier.

The theory of class consciousness developed here explores the various expressions of the concept of surplus labor extraction in discourse. It looks less at whether the words "class," "surplus," "labor," "extraction," are employed than at their various discursive forms of expressions of this particular concept of class. Different

expressions of surplus labor extraction may be found across discourses on religion, family, work, race and gender. The variety of forms of expressions of class and their particular determinations are the focus of this analysis.

The purpose of analyzing class consciousness is to understand the effectivity of that consciousness on social life. To that end a specification of consciousness is sought. A differentiation of some of the possible class conscious discourses can be made. Employing a notion of class as the process of surplus labor extraction, class can be expressed as the extraction of produced surplus. Surplus may be in the form of surplus value, labor (in the form of rent or part of the harvest) or in the form of commodities or services. Extraction of surplus may occur individually or collectively by the producer(s) of surplus or by nonproducer(s) of the surplus.

Of the various possible elaborations of this definition of class, we can differentiate four discourses: 1) ancient class consciousness (ACC)--that permitted discourse about individually produced and extracted surplus in the form of commodities or services; 2) capitalist class consciousness (KCC)--that permitted discourse about surplus labor extracted in the form of surplus value extracted from its producer; 3) feudal class consciousness (FCC)--that permitted discourse about surplus in the form of rent, part of the harvest or labor time, extracted from its producer;



and 4) primitive communist class consciousness (PCCC)--that permitted discourse about the collective reception of collectively produced surplus.

None of these conceptual distinctions of consciousness claims to capture an essence of that consciousness, class or otherwise, e.g., as "essentially" ancient class consciousness. These distinctions constitute no more and no less than an entry point into the differentiation of some of the many possible class discourses.

Discourses will variously express one set of class concepts (e.g., ancient class concepts) as well as combining sets of class concepts (e.g., feudal with capitalist class concepts). The purpose of the analysis of discursive class-expressions is an examination of the class complexity of consciousness, not a debate over terminology. The following example will illustrate one set of possible elaborations of ancient class consciousness.

One possible form of ancient class consciousness--the permissible discursive notion that individually produced surplus (in the form of commodities and services) is received individually--is the elaboration that "what you receive is what you produce." If you receive less (quantitatively or qualitatively) than you thought you should, then, in the logic of ancient class discourse, you must have produced less than you thought you did. In other words, if you receive less, it is a result of your (lack

of) individual effort; it is a result of you individually; it is "your fault." In the "lens" of ancient class consciousness, if a producer does not receive his/her surplus, it is his/her own fault for not producing it. Thus through the lens of an ancient class consciousness, capitalist extraction of producers' surplus might logically be viewed as the producer's vs. the extracting capitalist's "fault." The capitalist might be viewed as a "distributor" of surplus (the wage) similar to the way the state might be viewed.<sup>3</sup>

This consciousness of the capitalist class process has far reaching implications for class struggle. Fundamental capitalist performers' possession of an ancient class consciousness, would have a significant effect on their participation in class struggle. Under certain conditions ancient class-consciousness might mitigate against capitalist performers' struggle over the extraction of their surplus labor. The implications of this is demonstrated in the case of the British Virgin Islands (see Oakes, 1983).

Class and Consciousness: Conclusion. An individual occupies multiple and contradictory class and nonclass positions at various sites over his/her lifetime. Those processes condition consciousness. Consciousness, in turn, conditions class. Because class is the analytical entry point in this theory, class consciousness is analyzed as a

condition of existence of class.

Class conscious discourses are not the discourses of a class member or of the "fact" of class. Ancient class consciousness is not the consciousness of an individual ancient producer. Capitalist class consciousness is not the conscious thoughts of a capitalist or "worker." Capitalist-class conscious discourse is discourse in which an individual capitalist may or may not participate. An individual capitalist may hold simultaneously an ancient class consciousness and a feudal class consciousness and not a capitalist class consciousness. This does not mean that the capitalist thinks "like" a feudal serf or lord, but that s/he may view the world (including the FKCP), in part, through the lens of the feudal class consciousness.

Implied in this analysis is the absence of any necessary relation between class position and class consciousness. Class position conditions the existence of consciousness; it does not cause that consciousness. People may occupy multiple and contradictory class positions at one moment and over a lifetime that condition the existence, but do not guarantee any particular class consciousness. The contradictions this presents for social life in general and class struggle in particular are many.

The effectivity of these various class conscious discourses on the class process, will be different and they will vary in their desirability (which is itself

overdetermined). An ACC of the FKCP will effect that class process differently than a FCC of the FKCP. No class consciousness is noneffective. The particularity of that effectivity (and its desirability) cannot be determined a priori.

The permissibility of discourse about class varies at different sites. At one site, capitalist class conscious discourse may be acceptable and at another, unacceptable. "Forbidden" class discourse may be expressed metaphorically and metonymically at one site differently than at another. The object of this analysis is the complex and contradictory determination of that permissibility (its political, economic and cultural conditions of existence) and its social consequences.

The absence of a particular class consciousness is not the absence of an "unmystified" or "clear" view of the world (i.e., the possession of a "false" consciousness) but may be the presence of a different class consciousness.

#### Other Concepts of Class Consciousness

The concept of class consciousness presented in this paper differs significantly from some predominant notions of consciousness and class consciousness both in and outside the Marxian tradition. Some predominant notions of consciousness imply the view of knowledge as essential truth and consciousness as the capture of this truth, when

consciousness is analyzed as a "level" or "stage" of awareness. In many of these theories, it is asserted that consciousness develops within Levels of Knowledge. Truth is "discovered" or "captured" via Levels of Knowledge. Through these "levels" impressions of the Real world (and/or one's essence) develop. These levels of knowledge (variously called "forms," "states," or "stages" of knowledge) are either "closer" or "further" from the Truth. One level is Truer or less True than the others. Some levels are "clearer," "less obscure" or more Real than others; or levels are less True (false), less clear (obscure) or less Real (illusory/imaginary) than others. Occasionally, the Truer levels are conceptualized as "higher" (closer to the Truth). Lower, or less True levels are sometimes referred to as "immediate," "impressionary," or "less coherent." The theoretical assertion of "lower levels" of Knowledge necessarily implies the assertion of "higher" levels of Knowledge. In the idea of lower and higher levels of knowledge the assertion of knowledge as Truth of an essence is often implied. Consciousness is often seen as this "higher" level of knowledge. Class consciousness is a particular "high level" of knowledge; often in the Marxian traditions, the knowledge of society's essence--class.

Concepts of Consciousness and Class Consciousness in the Marxian Framework. This "levels of knowledge" concept is

variously asserted. It is implied in Althusser's early writings in his notions of "Levels of Generality." He calls Generality I, Ideology, the "raw material" of Level II which transforms Ideology into the "Science" of Generality III. Through the movement "up" from Level I to Level III, Ideology becomes Science.<sup>4</sup> While Althusser criticizes the Science/Ideology distinction later, the concept exemplifies the notion of various "levels" of knowledge.

Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci juxtapose two levels of thinking in their concepts of consciousness. Lukács opposes a lower level of "immediacy" to a higher level of "mediated knowledge."<sup>5</sup> On this "higher scientific plane" of mediation, the proletariat achieves its True consciousness, its self-consciousness, which for Lukács, is class consciousness. On the lower level of "immediate knowledge," the proletariat is "mired" in the mask of bourgeois ideology. Gramsci asserts a higher level of thinking--"philosophy," on which one attains True consciousness. For him True consciousness is class consciousness. This higher level of Philosophy stands in opposition to a lower level of "commonsense"<sup>6</sup> on which bourgeois ideology (the mask of Real relations) is "uncritically absorbed" by the proletariat.

Lukács' and Gramsci's formulations are similar to Hegel's notions of self-consciousness as the realization of

the spiritual essence of man, each of which contain essentialist assertions.<sup>7</sup>

Marx distinguishes a "class-in-itself" from a "class-for-itself." A class-for-itself realizes its essence as a class (with its class interests) that a class-in-itself lacks. The former is a "self-conscious" class.<sup>8</sup> In this concept also is implied an essentialist assertion of consciousness as a "capturing of an essence."

In the concept of consciousness proposed in this paper, the following notions are rejected: consciousness as a "level," "state," "form," or "stage" of knowledge that is more or less "distorted," "imaginary," "coherent" or "systematic," i.e., more or less True. These notions are rejected as essentialist, whether the levels juxtaposed are Ideology vs. Science, Theory vs. Ideology, commonsense vs. Philosophy or unconscious vs. conscious. The assertion of essentially "better" or Truer thoughts is rejected as essentialist; not the assertion of differences among thoughts. While each of the concepts briefly examined here (see footnotes for elaboration) are complicated by the largely nonessentialist framework within which they are placed, their essentialist aspects are identifiable.

The nonessentialist construction of a concept of consciousness is not a search for the "real matter," i.e., the essence of consciousness. Instead of asserting the validity of a Truth-capturing concept of consciousness, it

focuses on how consciousness is overdetermined. The focus is therefore not on determining which of the conscious discourses is that Truest understanding of social life in general or the class process in particular (i.e., which consciousness best captures the "fact" of class) but on the complexity of the determination and the effectivity of class-conscious discourses.

Different conceptions of class have differential effectivity and desirability. One class consciousness may effect more desirable change at one moment than at another. The nonclass determinants and consequences of that consciousness must be examined in an analysis of effectivity and desirability. The focus here is on understanding how different acceptable and unacceptable discourses about class are themselves overdetermined and how they effect social life culturally, economically and politically.

Concepts of Consciousness in Psychoanalytic Theory. The concept of consciousness presented here is similar to concepts of consciousness developed by Freud<sup>9</sup> and Lacan.<sup>10</sup> In the works of Freud and Lacan unconscious thoughts are those which are determined, "forbidden or prohibited" material (e.g., sexual desire for one's mother). A focus of Freud and Lacan is the determination of that prohibition unconsciously. Others, like Foucault, focus more on the determination of that prohibition in the larger society.



While distinguishable as sites, neither "society" nor individual unconsciousness are separate from the other.

Both Lacan and Freud seek to analyze that determination of unconsciousness not as essentially or causally determined, but as overdetermined (indeed Althusser bases his concept of overdetermination on Freud's, as does the analysis here). In the psychoanalytic framework, the continuous struggle between processes of repression/expression partly overdetermine discourse. Thoughts determined to be forbidden (through society's "norms" or laws) are repressed; they are unconscious. Repressed thoughts are not "forgotten"; they constitute thinking in metaphoric/metonymic unconscious language and they are "displaced" (transferred) onto conscious thoughts (metonymically) and they are also "condensed" (combined) into conscious thoughts metaphorically.

This condensation/displacement aspect of thinking constitutes all thinking, i.e., each conscious thought has its unconscious aspect. This overdetermination of conscious/unconscious-ness occurs continuously. Thoughts are continuously engaged in repressive/expressive overdetermination. It is this process of repression/expression that Freud and Lacan sought to elaborate.

Freud and Lacan conceptualized the conscious/unconscious as discourse; Lacan explicitly, Freud implicitly. (Lacan uses the linguistic terms metaphor and

metonymy to describe the process of condensation and displacement respectively.) Lacan focuses on language as it is spoken (and unspoken) as a means of understanding the interaction of the conscious and unconscious. He refers to the "languages" of the conscious and unconscious. It is this concept of conscious/unconscious as discourse that is employed in the concept of consciousness presented in this paper.

Freud and Lacan made revolutionary insights into the effect of society on the individual psyche.<sup>11</sup> Through their analyses, an entire dimension has been added to a nonessentialist understanding of society as a complex set of overdetermined processes. Freud and Lacan contributed the "process" of the conscious/unconscious to this analysis. With this it is possible to analyze the effect of unconscious thought on consciousness, on class and on class consciousness (and conversely).

Economistic Conceptions of Class Consciousness. The concept of class consciousness presented in this paper is also distinct from other conceptions of class consciousness. The definition of class as the process of surplus labor extraction differs from other concepts of class. Some other concepts of class posit class as an essence in society and/or class as a group to which people belong. From this, class consciousness is variously asserted as the realization (or higher level of thinking)

of an essence: class. These assertions are differently conceptualized, but they are similar in their assertion of a theoretical essence.

One framework out of which class is constructed is that social theory which posits the economy as the original or final determinant of social life. In this economic conceptualization, aspects of life, including humans and their consciousness, are viewed as complexly but ultimately deriving their existence from an economic essence in society.

In a class essentialist framework, class consciousness is often understood as the "realization" of society's class essence. That "realization" or consciousness is often understood "essentially" as well, i.e., as an "essentially" higher level of thinking. Epistemologically, this is essentialist.

There is great and lengthy debate over economic conceptions of class consciousness. For some, consciousness of one's class essence is automatic.<sup>12</sup> In this discourse class produces, in its members, an immediate understanding of its "nature." For some this "nature" is "revolutionary." Thus all class members necessarily have a revolutionary class consciousness. For others, class consciousness is not necessarily revolutionary, but it is latent in all class members.

For some the acquisition of essential class knowledge

is neither immediate nor automatic; class consciousness is possible only through a lengthy process of consciousness "raising." Class consciousness is a possible, although not necessary, achievement.

Debate extends into the meaning of True class consciousness because analysts disagree over the essence in class as well as the "nature" of a True consciousness of that essence.

This contrasts with the nonessentialist concept of class consciousness presented by this paper which rejects 1) consciousness as True knowledge, thus consciousness as a level, form or state of knowledge that captures Truth, 2) class as a social essence or "group" to which people belong and therefore, 3) class consciousness as essential knowledge of a "fact" or "essence" called class.

Humanist Conceptions of Class Consciousness. Humanism is another theoretical terrain of many concepts of class consciousness. Many humanist concepts of class consciousness posit the essential position of humans, and their human consciousness (of class) the realization of that position; the pivot on which society changes. Consciousness is realization of the True nature of human beings. True class consciousness is consciousness of self as a class ("class-for-itself"). The following illustrates these concerns. Class consciousness is understood here as the consciousness of class members. Specifically,

consciousness is any or all of the ideas of class members. Class consciousness, in some of these frameworks, is the True self-consciousness of class members. These notions are examined in the following critique.

In these analyses, class is conceptualized as a (the) subject of history. Class consciousnesses are, respectively the ideas of the different classes' members. The various ideas, beliefs, values of that subject are its "class consciousness."

E. P. Thompson defines class as something that "happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs." "Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition;" ". . . class is a cultural as much as an economic formation." An identity of interests between class members gets expressed as a "collective self-consciousness" in which experiences are embodied in "traditions, value systems, ideas and institutional forms." He says "Class consciousness is the way in which their experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value systems, ideas and institutional forms." While this "collective" self-consciousness possesses a "logic," there are no "laws" that govern its formation.

For E. P. Thompson, class consciousness is articulated in cultural institutions: art, music, oral history, values and traditions all of which constitute "working class culture." He distinguishes the "18th century mob" from the 19th century English working class on this basis, i.e., by the latter's "collective" self-consciousness with its corresponding theory, institutions, discipline and community values.<sup>13</sup> Class consciousness is the vast array of ideas of class members which, by virtue of the essential position of humans (as class members) in society, is, by derivation, the class consciousness. That consciousness as True Knowledge, is the essential realization of human, and therefore, social existence. Thompson's essential humanism as well as his essentialist epistemology (his understanding of consciousness) is rejected in the framework of this paper.

Leggett defines class consciousness as workers' awareness of the "allocation of wealth within the community or society." Safa understands class consciousness as the "cumulative process by which [people] {1} recognize that they are exploited and oppressed {2} recognize the source of their exploitation and oppression, and {3} are willing and able to organize and mobilize in their own class interests." Mintz analyzes class consciousness as a "recognition of workers' 'felt oppression'." And Waterman defines class consciousness as the "definition of oneself

as a worker sharing common interests with those similarly situated." Each of these conceptions variously view consciousness as an awareness of class members about their class membership (i.e., class consciousness is to "have consciousness" of oneself as a class member).<sup>14</sup> In these conceptions, class is variously understood (as "exploitation and oppression"; as the "allocation of wealth"). Consciousness is the realization of the essential reality of social life. Class consciousness is the realization of the particular class essence of social life.

Some explicitly refer to levels of class consciousness. Waterman posits "stages" in the development of consciousness, most commonly expressed as a natural progression from cognitive identification to class action.<sup>15</sup>

Waterman describes three levels of "class consciousness." The lowest level is:

a simple definition of oneself as a worker sharing common interests with those similarly situated . . . the second level [is] identification of a class to which the interests of one's own class is opposed; identification is usually in terms of rich and powerful rather than in class terms . . . the higher level . . . a definition of one's total social universe in terms of this class opposition.

The next cognitive process of consciousness is the development of a "vision," the possibility of an alternative to the existing class structure and ". . . the demand that society be transformed to fit this vision."<sup>16</sup>

Leggett describes this first level of class consciousness as "the cognitive aspect [that] refers to whether workers utilize class terms, identify with this class and display an awareness of the allocation of wealth within the community or society."<sup>17</sup> This initial class analysis may not be strictly in class terms, but rather in terms of "rich"- "poor," "we"- "they," etc. Mintz argues that rural proletarians for whom "state ownership of the means of production . . . may not even arise as an issue . . . yet this will not mean that they lack consciousness . . . or that they are incapable of forging links with other classes in a revolutionary situation."<sup>18</sup> Class action is considered another level of class consciousness development in this framework. In these analyses, consciousness is understood as essential knowledge (knowledge that develops through "levels" or "stages" to become True Knowledge) and class consciousness that acquired realization of the class essence of humans.

Waterman distinguishes between three levels of action that correspond to "stages" of political theory. "Reformist action" [he says], seeks gradual incremental improvements within an existing sociopolitical system . . . it is sectionalist in nature [with] nothing essentially radical about [it]." This contrasts with "radical-democratic" [action that] directly challenges the rich but fail[s] to define them as capitalists or to replace them by



socialism." The most radical form of working class action is "socialist-revolutionary" which is anti-capitalist. Workers abandon their ties of "ingrained customs, values, and practices." One level of action he says can rapidly develop into the next level if conditions allow. Thus he focuses on the stages of progression from "reformist" to "socialist-revolutionary" class action.<sup>19</sup> Here, action or behavior is seen as hierarchically progressive as well-- "developing" from "less radical" to "more radical."

In these analyses humans are variously analyzed as the subjects of history; their class consciousness, the ideas of class members. This class consciousness may exist as any and all the ideas of class members (class consciousness defined solely by its subject--class members; who does the thinking vs. its object--thoughts about class, re: E. P. Thompson). Or class consciousness may be defined as subjects' increasing realization of their class essence (consciousness that progressively develops to "class" consciousness) as indicated in Safa, Waterman and Leggett. In contrast the nonessentialist Marxian conception of class consciousness views class as a process (vs. a characteristic of humans) occurring at the site of (vs. contained within) human beings and constituted by (vs. separate from) non-class conscious aspects of social life. Consciousness is acceptable discourse, not an essentially truer level of knowledge. Class consciousness is that

permitted discourse about class. Class consciousness is not the various discourses of class members but their particular and expressed discourses about class.

### Conclusion

This paper has presented a concept of class consciousness from the framework of nonessentialist Marxism. Class consciousness as class-expressive discourse is epistemologically and theoretically different from concepts of that consciousness both in and outside the Marxian and nonessentialist frameworks. The concept here was developed within and by means of that framework-- through the process of conceptual juxtaposition.

This paper has indicated that instead of viewing a "lack" of class consciousness as "false" or "mystified" consciousness, it is possible to analyze various class conscious discourses. Thus an individual's lack of a capitalist class consciousness is attributed not to his/her inability to perceive the essence of his/her being as a capitalist class member, but as the presence of (multiple and contradictory) class conscious discourses that are themselves determined by the various social and natural processes in society.

From the theory of multiple class processes and nonessentialist epistemology, the complexity of class and class consciousness was explored. Neither consciousness

nor class was reduced to each other. Rather, their overdetermined complexity was analyzed.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> White, Hayden, "Michel Foucault" in James Sturrock. Structuralism and Since. Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, Michel. The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language. New York, 1972, p. 193.

<sup>3</sup> This elaboration of class is only one of a variety of possible elaborations. The particularity of the elaborations themselves as well as the analyst's reading of them depend on a variety of overdetermined conditions. An analysis of ancient class expressions, as some of many possible class expressions, is not a "discovery" of the "fact of" the ancient class process in discourse; (that discourse merely a reflection or cognitive appropriation of the Real world). Rather, that analysis is a "reading" of discursive "meanings" more or less similar (the determination of similarity itself a "reading") to nonessentialist Marxian "meanings" of class. These class expressions and their readings will vary across discourses, at one moment and at different moments. The purpose of this analysis is no more and no less than a nonessentialist Marxian class-specification of discourse.

<sup>4</sup> Althusser, Louis. For Marx. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: NLB, 1977, p. 185.

<sup>5</sup> Lukács, Georg. History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics. Trans. Rodney Livingston. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971.

I understand Lukács' definition of immediacy as that distinguished from "mediation." Immediacy is the first impression/perception of the material world; mediation the more analytical conceptualization of that totality. In Lukács' formulation, the bourgeoisie's and proletariat's immediate perceptions of bourgeois society are similar. But while the bourgeoisie "holds fast in its mire of immediacy," the proletariat is able "to extricate itself"; moreover is "forced" to go beyond its immediate impressions and come to an "awareness" of its objectification in society. This mediated proletarian knowledge is "on a higher scientific plane" he says (p. 163).

Implied in this conceptualization is that mediated perception is essentially truer knowledge than immediate perception. Mediation is the conceptual process by which

the Truth is captured. Mediation, says Lukács,

. . . is a lever with which to overcome the mere immediacy of the empirical world and as such it is not something (subjective) foisted on to the objects from outside, it is no value-judgement or 'ought' opposed to 'is.' It is rather the manifestation of the authentic structure (Lukács, p. 162).

. . . immanent meanings that necessarily inheres in the objects of bourgeois society now become objectively effective and can therefore enter the consciousness of the proletariat (p. 163).

<sup>6</sup> Gramsci, Antonio. Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci. Trans. and ed. Quinto Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell. New York: International Publishers, 1971, pp. 333; 419.

<sup>7</sup> Hegel distinguishes consciousness as "Certainty at the level of sense experience . . . Perception or the Thing with Its Properties and Deception . . . Appearance and the Super-sensible World" from self-consciousness "The Truth of Certainty of Self" (my emphasis) (The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pp. 86-87). For Hegel, the Truth of self (self-consciousness) was realization of the Spiritual essence of man (specifically the governing of man by Absolute Spirit; subjectified Idea or Reason that lay outside of man). Man's alienation as Spirit's alienation is the alienation of self-consciousness (a failure to realize that the world is a creation of Absolute Spirit) (Lukács, p. 46 and McLellan 1975, p. 105). Hegelian Idealism embodies the notion that humans are vehicles for expression of Absolute Spirit; the "spirit of a people is the doer of [history's] deeds." World Spirit "accomplishes its deeds by means of and in spite of the spirit of the people (Lukács, p. 146). For Hegel self-consciousness was the realization of the essential spiritual self, i.e., the spiritual essence of man.

<sup>8</sup> Marx criticized the Hegelian Spiritual essence of man.

Since the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thought, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men (just as the Old Hegelians declared them the true bonds of human society) it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness. Since, according to their fantasy, the relationship of men, all their doings, their chains and their limitations are products of their

consciousness (Karl Marx, The German Ideology, p. 113).

In contrast, Marx asserted a dialectical materialist concept of consciousness.

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men . . . . Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.--real active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their life-process (Ibid. p. 118).

And finally, Marx's famous statement:

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. (Karl Marx, Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, p. 4. There is a similar reference in the Communist Manifesto, pp. 20-30).

This last passage is often interpreted as economic determinism by essentialists who, in their recognition of Marx's rejection of idealism, necessarily presume his assertion of a "substitute essence": the essence of the economy. In contrast I interpret this passage, not as the substitution of one essence (the economy) for another (ideas) but as an assertion of nonessentialism (continuous mutual effectivity) over essentialist idealism (specifically that of Hegel).

Marx initiates the elaboration of the twin concept "class-in-itself" "class-for-itself" which numerous others have attempted to extend with varying degrees of success. This concept suggests an economic essentialism in its assertion that a class, conscious of itself, i.e., self-conscious, is conscious of its "class interests," its economic essence. In this notion there is the Hegelian self-consciousness as realization of an essence in "self" (here in class). First it asserts that a class that is conscious realizes its interests, its essence. In this case, its interests are economic; they are its class interests. A class-for-itself, has the consciousness (of its essence) that a class-in-itself lacks. Moreover, this notion asserts that a class with no realization of itself (its essence) is not self-conscious. The latter again, is a

class-in-itself distinguished from a self-conscious class-for-itself. In this conceptualization, consciousness is realization of an essence; class consciousness, the realization of a particular essence, class (specifically "class interests"). Both notions contain essentialist aspects. Marx says:

The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority (my emphasis) (Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto, p. 21).

And

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The domination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phrases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become its class interests (Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, p. 82).

Marx's in-itself/for-itself contrasted with Hegel's use of the terms. "In-itself" for Hegel was the existence of a thing only in itself or "for-us." "For-itself" ('the fact that an object is conscious of itself') implied the awareness of one's Spiritual essence (Lukács, p. 132) absent in a thing which existed only "in-itself" or "for-us." Thus, Marx extended Hegel's notions, albeit differently.

<sup>9</sup> Freud, Sigmund. The Interpretation of Dreams. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: Avon, 1965, p. 155.

<sup>10</sup> Lemaire, Anika. Jacques Lacan. Trans. David Macey. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977, p. 121.

<sup>11</sup> For further critique of these concepts of consciousness see Oakes, Elizabeth unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1983.

<sup>12</sup> Przeworski examines automatic vs. spontaneous acquisition of class consciousness (Przeworski, p. 348). Lukács criticizes these notions pp. 131-143 in History and Class Consciousness.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, E. P. The Making of the English Working Class. New York: Vintage/Random House, 1966, pp. 9-13; 424.

14 Leggett in Safa, Helen. "Class Consciousness Among Working-Class Women in Latin America: A Case Study for Puerto Rico" in Cohen, Gutkind and Brazier, 1979, p. 443; Safa, p. 443; Mintz, Sidney, "The Rural Proletariat and the Problem of Rural Proletarian Consciousness" in Cohen, Gutkind and Brazier, 1979, p. 191; Waterman, Peter, "Workers in the Third World" Monthly Review, vol. 29, no. 4, p. 54.

15 Other writers explicitly refer to levels of consciousness as levels knowledge or as the level preceding a level of class action (see Touraine and Pecaut, p. 77; Waterman, p. 54; Fanon, pp. 4-5; Rorty, p. 1 and p. 22; Godelier, pp. 9-10).

16 Waterman, 1977, p. 54.

17 Leggett, p. 443.

18 Mintz, pp. 193-194.

19 Waterman, 1977, p. 62.



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