

## Reconstructing the Ruined Tower: Contemporary Communications and Questions of Class

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### Abstract

During many years, media and communication studies shared a common conception with other knowledge fields: the conception of social class. Little by little, this conception was replaced by others that looked for standing out not the invariances, but the singularities between social groups in conflict. The strict vertical outlines of the social class gave place to the horizons opened by the difference. It is time to reverse this perception and insist on the idea that beneath the beach are the graves of pavement rocks. The social class could be rhetorically abolished from many texts, but the impressive amount of empirical evidence confirms that it remains as an essential force to model how we live today.

**Keywords:** media, communication, social class, contemporaneity

### *Picking over the rubble*

There was a time, not so long ago, before the present boundary fences were erected, when media and communications studies was common land. Scholars from far flung settlements converged on it to gather data and graze new conceptual strains produced by cross-breeding. The few structures that dotted the landscape were mostly makeshift affairs, temporary shelters, erected to service immediate needs. The one major building was a dark, forbidding, stone tower. Wherever you stood, your eye was drawn towards it. Its visibility made it an object of endless speculation. Some set out to trace its origins and transformations over the years. Some tried to describe its organisation and workings. And some recorded the stories of those who lived and worked there, crafting melancholy narratives of dashed hopes and blighted lives or recounting stirring tales of heroic resistance and dogged refusal. Over the years however, progressively larger and larger cracks appeared in the tower's foundations until it was eventually declared unsound and demolished. It was replaced by a stylish new housing development in which each dwelling was built to a unique design reflecting the owners' particular personality and preferences. The stark vertical contours of class had given way to the open horizons of difference.

In conversations and arguments about these changes, attention moved from structural constraint to self expression, from blocked mobility to fluidity, from necessity to desire. Many commentators welcomed these shifts, arguing that the tower's looming presence had held back new thinking on stratification for far

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too long, returning the observer's gaze to the same narrow agenda of investigation and debate. They gleefully declared 'the death of class' and revelled in their role as gravediggers (Pakulski and Waters 1996). Others however, felt that reports of the death may have been exaggerated. They saw people still picking over the rubble and imagined the spectre of class still haunting their conceptual dreams, like a zombie in a horror film, blinding them "to the realities of our lives" in a fast changing world. (Beck 1999: 25). This argument is upside down. It is the refusal to acknowledge that class remains a fundamental structuring principle of every aspect of life in late capitalism, including communications, that blocks a comprehensive view of contemporary conditions.

One of the most resonant slogans that appeared on walls and posters across Paris in the Spring of 1968 was "under the paving stones, the beach". This deeply romantic promise could stand as the leitmotif for the great wave of recent research devoted to uncovering the possibilities for personal liberation and self-expression concealed within the mundane and the circumscribed. It is time to reverse this perception and insist that under the beach lie the paving stones. This is particularly important in media and cultural studies, where too many commentators have spent too much of the last decade or so, detailing the creativity and pleasure of everyday consumption. But as Zigmunt Bauman points out, "there is life after and beyond television" and for many people "reality remains what it always used to be: tough, solid, resistant and harsh" (Bauman 1992: 155). Class may have been abolished rhetorically in many texts but an impressive amount of empirical evidence confirms that it remains a pivotal force in shaping the ways we live now. It is supremely ironic that the postmodern theoretical 'turn', which has propelled questions of identity, consumption, and difference to the centre of academic attention, has coincided almost exactly with the neo-liberal revolution in economic and social policy. It is easy to "think that class does not matter" if you remain relatively "unaffected by the deprivations and exclusions it produces" (Skeggs 1997: 7).

"The retreat from class" is the perfect academic expression "of the new individualism" (Crompton 1998: 9), a convenient loss of memory that has evaded the relentless erosion of hard fought-for welfare provisions and public resources and ignored the steadily widening gap between the top and bottom of the income scale which, in Britain, has not been seen in since the late Nineteenth Century. We therefore find ourselves in the paradoxical situation where "class has ...been re-declared dead ... at a time ... when its economic configuration has become even sharper" (Westergaard 1995: 113-4). To ignore this brute reality is to collude with the destruction of dignity and hope and to embrace, however unwittingly, the marketeer's deceitful celebration of an undifferentiated expansion in choice and opportunity.

A critical approach, worthy of the name, must look beneath this promotional rhetoric and recover the underlying mechanisms that reproduce structural inequality. For myself, and many others, this is a personal epiphany as well as an intellectual project, a way of relating biographies to histories, of trying to make connections and "generate theory which can speak across the void, to make class matter" (Skeggs 1997:15). Reconstructing the ruined tower of class analysis is central to this project. This is not an exercise in nostalgia, salvage, or restoration. We "have to rethink what class means in the era of late modernism and a global capitalism" (Dahlgren 1998:302) and ruthlessly rework the materials and techniques handed down by successive architects, deciding what to keep, what to modify and what to throw away.

## ***Manufacturing Inequality***

The process is not novel. Before the Nineteenth Century was two decades old, it was clear that the established vocabulary of 'ranks' and 'estates' had been overtaken by events. It was altogether too rigid to catch capitalism's creative destruction of the old social order. A new, more flexible, term was needed to describe the emerging pattern of economic divisions. That term was 'class'. But as John Stuart Mill noted

in 1834, the tripartite division of society into “landlords, capitalists and labourers” rapidly became as ossified and ahistorical as the feudal vision it had displaced. Too many commentators, he complained

seem to think of the distinction of society into those three classes as if were one of God’s ordinances not man’s, and ...scarcely any one of them seems to have proposed to himself as a subject of inquiry, what changes the relations of those classes to one another are likely to undergo in the progress of society (quoted in Briggs 1985: 3).

Of the various writers who took up the challenge of mapping shifts in class relations Marx has been by far and away the most enduringly influential. Unfortunately, he died conceptually in testate. Although he saw class as the axial principle of social division and class struggle as the principle engine of historical change, he never provided a concise definition of what exactly he meant by a class. As he notes on the final page of the last, and unfinished, volume of his magnum opus, *Capital*, “What constitutes a class” is the obvious “first question to be answered” in any class analysis (Marx 1863-7) but tantalisingly, the manuscript breaks off a few lines later, before he offers an answer. Looking across the range of his work however, we can identify five basic dimensions to his analysis of class: class structure, class formation, class culture, class consciousness and class action. Even his fiercest critics have tended to accept this list as a serviceable agenda for research and debate.

## ***Class Structure***

Like most of his contemporaries and successors, Marx identified classes with economic position. The key division for him was between those who owned the tangible forms of property – land, real estate, factories, shares – that could be used to generate profits, and those whose livelihood depended on selling their labour power for a weekly wage or monthly salary. In a much quoted sentence towards the beginning of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, written in 1848, when he was thirty, he argued that capitalist society was “more and more splitting” along this central fault line, producing “two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat” (Marx and Engels 1848: 36). Many commentators have misread this remark. It was intended to characterise a long-term tendency not to describe the situation at the time he was writing. Although Marx saw increasing polarisation as an inevitable consequence of more productive resources being concentrated in the hands of large corporations and more and more workers labouring for a wage rather than for themselves, in his journalism and polemical commentaries on contemporary events, he was always careful to point up the complexities of contemporary class divisions. His blindspot was the middle classes.

He readily conceded that there was a proliferating group of “middle and intermediate” strata produced by the growth of the professions, the rise of managerial occupations and the expansion of state bureaucracies, that stood between capital and labour, softening, or as he put it, “obliterating”, this central division, but he persisted in arguing that in the end, “this is immaterial for our analysis” (Marx 1863-7: 885). This cavalier dismissal, particularly of experts and professionals with no managerial role within capitalist enterprises, has posed continual problems for analysts wanting to formulate “a coherent Marxist concept of the class structure” (Wright 1997b: 64). Within their models, the middle classes appear a permanent awkward squad.

## ***Class Formation***

For Marx, command over capital was not simply the Bourgeoisie’s defining possession, it was “the means to the exploitation of the proletariat”. (Crompton 1998: 27). Its deployment in production consolidated the central division between capital and labour. Together with most of his contemporaries, he assumed that the value added to raw materials during their conversion into saleable goods depended on the labour expended on them. He then went on to argue that the wages employers paid covered only part of this value, leaving a surplus that they appropriated for themselves. The appearance of equal exchange – ‘a fair

day's pay for a fair day's work' – therefore concealed a perpetual motion machine of exploitation that continually manufactured structural inequality. In his view however, there was a time-bomb ticking away in capitalism's basement. Concentrating workers in large factories and high density housing might maximise industrial efficiency but it also created the conditions for pooled ideas and communal action, in a way that was not true of peasants, scattered across the nation in isolated settlements. For Marx, peasants might be defined as a class analytically, by virtue of their common position in the system of production, but they could not become a class "for themselves", pursuing their interests collectively. They were destined to remain like potatoes in a sack, in a shared location but inert (see Marx 1852: 106). At the same time, the culture of industrial workers was not an automatic guarantee of militancy.

## ***Class Cultures***

There was no question in Marx's mind that every class generates a "distinct and peculiarly formed" set of "sentiments, modes of thought and views of life" out of their collective experience, which members continually draw on in their attempts to make sense of their situation. Individuals enter these class-based cultures at birth and through continual immersion in "tradition and upbringing" they come to provide the taken-for-granted "starting point" for views, judgements and actions (Marx 1852: 37). Ironically, Marx's own cultural tastes, formed by growing up in a respectable middle class German family with a strong Rabbinical tradition, demonstrated this process very well, as he wryly recognised. When a sympathiser's wife teased him, pointing out that she couldn't imagine a man of such aristocratic tastes fitting very well into the egalitarian society he predicted in his writings, he was honest enough to reply "Neither can I" (quoted in Wheen 1999: 296). In the meantime, he had to explain how people came to recognise themselves as members of a particular class.

## ***Class Consciousness***

As Michael Mann has pointed out (1973: 13) class consciousness operates at several levels that are easily uncoupled. To become a class 'for-themselves', workers needed access to a language that supported opposition. The cultures of working class neighbourhoods and occupations generated strong class identities, encouraging people to see themselves as members of a distinctive class, but they did not always cast capitalists as the principal enemy or see the struggle against them as the major means of achieving personal liberation and an alternative society. On the contrary, as Frank Parkin argued in an influential formulation, these 'subordinate' meaning systems tended to emphasise "various modes of adaptation, rather than full...opposition to, the status quo" (Parkin 1972: 88).

## ***Class Action***

Translating class identity into class struggle has been the principle mission of socialist parties. Deflecting this movement has been one of the major effects of a commercialised media culture anchored around consumerism.. As Marx famously argued in the opening chapter of the first volume of Capital, capitalism presents itself as a cornucopia of commodities whose origins are forgotten in the anticipation of pleasure. Promotional culture depends on projecting attention forward, to the moment of possession, repressing uncomfortable images of the exploitation involved in production. Consumer goods therefore appear as a compensation for alienating work not a continuation. They promise a sphere of freedom to set against the dictates of necessity.

The central institutions of promotional culture (advertising agencies, department stores, public relations), the modern commercial mass media (tabloid newspapers, commercial broadcasting, consumer magazines, movies), and mass socialist and labour parties were all products of capitalist modernity. They emerged at more or less the same time and their competing visions of the good society have been locked together, like wrestlers, ever since.

Marx died before promotional culture or commercialised media assumed their contemporary forms, but he was in no doubt that overall control “over the means of mental production” lay, in the end, with the capitalist class. (Marx and Engels, 1846: 64). In this conception, intellectuals and cultural workers appear as casts as a subordinate fraction of the capitalist class, loyal lieutenants, crafting ideas and representations that promote the system’s benefits. Marx did concede that this convenient division of labour might, on occasions, “develop into a certain opposition and hostility” but he quickly added that wherever this collision endangers the survival of the class, it “automatically comes to nothing” (op cit: 65).

At the same time, he remained too much of a Romantic not to believe that true ‘art’ and key ideas could transcend place and time. He had no difficulty applauding Milton for producing *Paradise Lost* “for the same reason that a silk-worm produces silk. It was an activity of his nature” even though he later sold the manuscript for £5, while condemning “the literary proletariat of Leipzig, who fabricates books under the direction of his publisher” (Marx 1969: 401). He forgets to mention that whereas Milton was already a celebrated poet with a substantial readership at the time he wrote *Paradise Lost*, the hack of Leipzig was an unknown foot soldier in the reserve army of fictional ephemera. This raises the possibility that class positions may also be determined by the resources that actors bring to the marketplace.

## ***Coins of Exchange***

This idea was pursued by the German sociologist, Max Weber, writing in the decades after Marx’s death, against the background of a further rapid expansion in the middle and intermediate classes, including the burgeoning ranks of cultural professionals – journalists, teachers, librarians, scientists, musicians, visual artists – who were employed not only in the rapidly expanding commercial cultural industries but also in a growing ensemble of publically funded cultural institutions. Weber made sense of the new cleavages in the class structure by arguing that Marx’s “basic distinction between the propertied and the propertyless can be further differentiated by the kinds of property or services” people bring to their bargaining over jobs and rewards. (Hall, John 1997: 18) and including acquired skills and formal education as key coins of exchange. In a widely influential book, Anthony Giddens stretched this definition of market capacity still further to include “all forms of relevant attributes which individuals may bring to the bargaining encounter” (Giddens 1981: 103). As we shall see, this general idea has been most fruitfully developed by Pierre Bourdieu, in his model of competing forms of capital.

## ***Extensions and Refurbishments***

### **Disciplining the Awkward Squad**

By the early 1970’s commentators were increasingly talking about a fundamental shift in the economic organisation of capitalism, away from the classic industrial order addressed by Marx towards a system centred on services and command over strategic information and knowledge. Some writers described it as a ‘post-industrial society’ (Bell 1973), others as an ‘information society’ but there was widespread agreement that “clerks, trachers, lawyers and entertainers” were beginning to “outnumber coalminers, steelworkers, dockers and builders” (Webster 1995: 13). This shift forced Marxist writers to revisit Marx awkward squad – the middle classes.

The most consistent attempt to rethink Marx’s analysis has come from Eric Olin Wright. He began by arguing that although experts and professionals differ from industrial workers in being able to exercise a degree of self-direction and autonomy within work they remain proletarians by virtue of the fact that they still have to sell their labour power in order to work. Consequently, they find themselves in a contradictory position with one foot in one camp and one foot in the other. However, as Wright conceded this model did not fit professionals working for publically funded institutions. Universities presented a particular problem. The leading theorist of ‘post-industrialism’ Daniel Bell, argued that because they played a pivotal role in codifying and testing knowledge in key areas of emerging economic activity such as information processing, biotechnology and new materials, they were the pivotal institutions in the

emerging economic order (Bell 1979: 198). Academic wishful thinking aside, there is clearly a case to answer here. Unfortunately, like Marx before him, Wright, himself a university professor, had managed to explain the social position of everyone except himself. This lead him to revise his position and suggest that the top end of the class structure is organised around the distribution of three kinds of assets – capital assets, organisational assets (which managers command) and skill and knowledge assets (which professionals and experts possess) – with each group trying to monopolise and exploit their holdings to the full in struggles over the distribution of the surplus. As he notes, this very Weberian solution cuts through the “conceptual knots” generated by Marxian models (Wright 1997b: 60) and suggests a way of combining them which sees “exploitation as defining the central cleavages within a class structure and differential market capacities as defining strata within classes” (Wright 1997: 36).

Pierre Bourdieu also arrives at a synthesis between Marx and Weber but by a different route. He takes Weber’s notion of market capacities and converts it into Marx’s rhetoric of capital, arguing that there are three basic forms of capital circulating in capitalist societies ; economic capital; social capital, “which consists of resources based on connections and group membership”; and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1987: 4). In this model the class structure appears as a multi dimensional space in which classes are defined, firstly by the amount or volume of capital they posses, secondly by its composition, and thirdly, by the changing weight and make-up of their holdings over time as they try to maximise their advantages, struggling to convert the initial hand they have been dealt into three aces (Bourdieu op cit).

Not surprisingly, it is the idea of cultural capital that has attracted most interest among scholars working in communications and cultural studies. However, it has proved be a particularly slippery concept. At some points in his work, Bourdieu offers a relatively narrow definition, equating it with “informational capital”. Elsewhere he identifies it with the knowledge underwritten by academic or professional qualifications. But more often defines it in terms of familiarity with a particular range of cultural artefacts and practices, especially those that have acquired what he calls, symbolic capital, by virtue of being classified by central cultural institutions, such as schools and museums, as worthy of being sought and possessed (Bourdieu 1973). This selective conversion of cultural capital into symbolic capital is he argues, one of central ways that class inequalities are reproduced and legitimated.

Following Marx’s account of class cultures, he argues that the communal experiences generated by particular class locations produce shared sets “of generalised schemes of thought, perception, appreciation and action” which are handed on to the next generation through the everyday talk and rituals of family and neighbourhood (Bourdieu 1968). However, these class based meaning systems, or habituses as he prefers to calls them, do not carry equal weight within schools and other major cultural institutions. On the contrary, he argues, the education system identifies ‘real’ culture with the forms of knowledge and expression possessed by the middle classes and stigmatises the vernacular knowledge and popular tastes of working class cultures as inferior and unworthy of serious attention. This places children from subordinate class locations at a permanent disadvantage. Since they have not been socialised into the legitimate habitus within the family they have to run harder to catch up. Many fail or give up exiting from full-time education with only a glancing acquaintance with Culture with a capital ‘C’ and often with an antagonism towards it. As a consequence they count themselves out of the audiences for ‘high’ culture, confirming the symbolic advantage that middle class groups already enjoy. Even those who successfully use the education system as a route for upward mobility often feel that they have only squatter’s rights. As Annette Khun as noted;

You can so easily internalize the judgements of a different culture and believe – no, *know* – that there is something shameful and wrong about you ... You know that if you ... act as if you were one of the entitled, you risk exposure and humiliation. And you learn that these feeling may return to haunt you for the rest of your life (Khun 1995: 97-80 emphasis in the original).

“This fear of being summoned before some hidden bar of judgement and being found inadequate infects the lives of “ many people who appear to be “coping perfectly well from day to day”. It is one of the ‘hidden injuries’ of class, no less real for being mostly unspoken (Sennett and Cobb 1972: 33).

This argument, and Bourdieu’s general model, has major implications for the study of consumption and media audiences since it suggests that we need to explore the symbolic as well as the economic barriers to participation.

While conceding that Bourdieu’s schema may help to account for the marked class and educational differences in attendance at legitimated cultural sites such as public galleries, a number of commentators have argued that it doesn’t help much in explaining current patterns of media consumption, particularly television viewing, where the evidence points to “a significant breaking down of the class-based distinctions among types of cultural consumption and their related hierarchy of values” (Garnham 1998: 188). Bourdieu would reply that class-based habituses structure not only what people consume but how they consume. As he points out, “any cultural asset, from cookery to dodecaphonic music by way of the Wild West film can be a subject for apprehension ranging from simple actual sensation to scholarly appreciation” (Bourdieu 1968: 593). If this wasn’t the case, it would very difficult to explain how so many people working in cultural and media studies can spend so much time demonstrating that the most ephemera products of the communication industries can always be read at more than one level and in relation to myriad theories. This labour of decoding is not an academic monopoly however. As recent interpretive work on media audiences has shown, people constantly read between the lines and locate particular television programmes, films or records on mental and emotional maps criss-crossed by multiple lines of knowledge, resonance and judgement. Some of these lines will have been drawn by socialisation within the family and by educational career, but other will have been added later. As Bourdieu notes, habituses are “durable but not eternal” and are “constantly subjected to experiences, and are therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structure” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 133).

Bourdieu’s refurbishment of class analysis suggests three important lessons for research on everyday consumption and media audiences. Firstly, though we need to start with the constraints imposed by the unequal distribution of material assets, we must go on to uncover the symbolic and social dynamics of participation and choice. Secondly, we need to explore how the unequal recognition, respect and legitimacy accorded to different forms of culture and the ‘hidden injuries’ and resistances they generate, structure people’s deep relations to artefacts and experiences. Thirdly, we need to examine the interplay between class-based meaning systems and other discourses that provide resources for identity, interpretation and action.

This last point was developed in a very fertile way by David Morley, in his influential study of audience responses to the British daily current affairs programme, ‘Nationwide’. He begins by arguing that the study set out to show “how members of different groups and classes, sharing different ‘cultural codes’, will interpret a given message differently...in a way ‘systematically related’ to their socio-economic position” (Morley 1980: 15) but he goes on to suggest that “any adequate schema” will also need to “address itself to the multiplicity of discourses at play within the social formation” (op cit: 21). Some of these, like the rhetorics of socialism or militant trade unionism (which his group of shop stewards mobilised in their responses) may derive from discourses of class and support class identities, but others, like discourses of feminism or nationalism, will support other ways of looking and other identities. These other discourses have become a major focus of study within cultural studies, leading many writers to forget about class. Indeed, the field has become increasingly dominated by “discourse about gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, in short, about almost all differences other than those of class” (Milner 1999:145 *italics in the original*). In many accounts, class has become a category that no longer dares to speak its name.

## ***Beneath the Beach***

“The strange death of class” (Milner 1999: 173) in much contemporary cultural studies represents a fundamental break with field’s founding concern with debunking the comfortable assumption that rising affluence was washing away the old class lines and producing a more open society. As Stuart Hall put it in 1967; “all the evidence leads us to say that it is false to describe this increasing fluidity as tending to the condition of ‘classlessness’. It would be more accurate to say that...we are dissolving one way of experiencing class situations and making another” (Hall 1967:94). This argument was explored empirically through a wave of work on youth subcultures. This was a highly strategic choice, since an increasing number of writers at the time, were arguing that the new mass media, particularly rock and pop music, had created a universal youth culture that transcended class. In this enticing vision, “teenagers appeared as the harbingers of the coming society of spectacular consumption, announcing the imminent arrival of a capitalist society without classes” (Murdock and McCron 1976: 17). The new research set out to demonstrate the resilience of class by showing how subcultural tastes and styles were fundamentally structured by the class based distribution of experiences and meanings (see Hall and Jefferson 1976; Murdock 1974). This work was rightly taken to task by later writers for its masculine and ethnocentric biases. But learning to forget about class did scant justice to the complexities thrown up by continuing shifts in the stratification system.

## ***Intellectual Irresponsibilities***

As well as raising issues for research on audiences, Bourdieu’s writings also pose questions for work on the cultural industries. He includes in the dominant class anyone who holds a high volume of any kind of capital. This leads him to endorse Marx’s argument that intellectuals workers are “best considered as a subordinate fraction of the same class as the bourgeoisie itself” because they are able to exploit their very sizeable holdings of cultural capital to secure significant economic and social advantages but cannot command the levels of economic or social capital enjoyed by capitalists (Milner 1999: 140). Other writers, notably John Frow (1995), have questioned this conclusion, arguing that intellectuals often enjoy rather greater independence from the bourgeoisie than Bourdieu (or Marx) allow, and that they are more usefully seen as a separate but weakly formed class, dealing in education-generated knowledge (a position that comes close to Daniel Bell’s view). Even if we accept this as a plausible characterisation of intellectuals, extending the argument to cultural workers more generally, immediately presents problems, since a number of major areas of cultural enterprise – advertising, public relations, and market research – are rather more obviously tied to the business of servicing Capital. We might want to address this problem by distinguishing between cultural workers operating in the private and public sectors, on the grounds that public institutions are less directly governed by market imperatives and ideologies, though given the rapid marketisation of universities and public broadcasting organisations in recent years, this is now debateable.

Identifying the class position of various groups of cultural workers and mapping their degrees of relative autonomy is not just an academic exercise. It has real political consequences. Viable democratic politics depends on a shared commitment to renegotiate not simply individual entitlements but what we mean by the ‘common good’. This requires debate and dialogue across class boundaries and class interests. The cultural industries provide the major spaces where these encounters now take place. The relative openness of this space and its hospitality to dissent is therefore crucial to sustaining democratic life. There is little point in arguing for one way of organising cultural production rather than another unless it we can demonstrate that particular structures and forms of financing are more likely to create the conditions that secure the expressive diversity, informed critique, and open debate required by a complex democracy. The academic flight from class analysis has largely left this issue behind displaying a studied disinterest in the social responsibilities owed by intellectuals.

## ***Demolitions***

By the time Bourdieu's monumental study of class and culture in contemporary France, *Distinction*, appeared in English in 1984, the demolition of class analysis was in full swing. It was propelled by several interlinked movements.

Firstly, the general turn from social structure to cultural life within sociology progressively removed questions of economic process from the research agenda.

The newly fashionable "conception of 'culture' as a series of discourses, endlessly renegotiated ... by all those who participated in them" ... had the effect of rendering "invisible the fact that cultural products such as books, films, 'science' or advertisements" were also the "products of human labour" undertaken within particular work and market conditions which fundamentally shaped their direction, form, and overall diversity (Huws 1999: 32). Far from being 'weightless' and free floating as some commentators imagined, cultural production remained inextricably bound up with capitalist dynamics and market relations. Indeed, the further concentration of key productive resources in the hands of the new mega media corporations, with interests spanning every major field of communications, has tightened these connections still further.

In much writing on media and culture however, the changing conditions of production, came a poor second, if they were mentioned at all. Attention was fixed firmly on the dynamics of consumption conceived primarily as a system of signs which generated new symbolic spaces for experiments in identity. This in turn directed attention away from the possible links between consumption and class position to questions around the relations between commodities and self expression, a shift mirrored by the parallel movement within market research, from identifying market segments by class and other demographic variables to mapping them using psychographic categories based on consumer's personal traits and dispositions. These shifts reproduced the fetishism of commodities which Marx had argued was the basic plot device in capitalism's grand narrative of steadily increasing choice and betterment. The active audiences and nomadic consumers celebrated in the new wave of cultural and media studies looked more and more like the sovereign individuals of Adam Smith's capitalism, achieving self realisation through market choices. This comforting story of personal choice and fulfillment could only be sustained by conveniently forgetting the exploitations involved in commodity production and the ignoring the deep structural inequalities the system reproduced.

This emphasis on individual choice was reinforced by a new emphasis on the fluidity and plurality of social identities. As one British sociologist put it; "Are we seriously to believe that in their everyday lives people think of themselves as members of a class rather than say....drinkers, smokers, football supporters?" (Saunders 1989: 4-5). This is a classic Lego model, in which divisions with very different weights and consequences are simply joined together and pulled along in a line, like the coloured blocks in the child's building game. In this conception class has been reduced to just another difference among many (Coole 1996). There is no sense that it may be more fundamental, more enduring and more far-reaching in its effects on the ways we live and think of ourselves. In fact, there was a great deal of empirical evidence that class remained a difference that made more of a difference than many others. As two other British sociologists concluded, available research suggested that there "was no reason to suppose that over recent decades, classes in Britain – the working class included – have shown any weakening in either their social cohesion or their ideological distinctiveness" (Golthorpe and Marshall 1992: 391).

Even if we accept the general argument that working class cultures and consciousness have remained surprisingly resilient in the face of change, we are still confronted with the decline of trade unionism, the evaporating commitment to class-based politics, and the rise of new social movements, particularly

feminism and ecology. The new social movements certainly offer new foci for campaigning and new political identities, but as Andrew Milner has argued, these are best understood “as the substitute, not so much for class as for individuality” (Milner 1999: 168). They offer nodes of solidarity and communality in an increasingly unstable and heartless world. But to call for extended rights of consumption and personal choice, though laudable in themselves, does little to challenge “the fundamentally class-divided nature of late-capitalist society” (Milner 1999: 166). Not only can major corporations live quite comfortably with many of the demands being by re-presenting themselves as more ‘caring’ and customer-friendly, they can also capitalise on them by creating new markets to replace those under attack, or, if needed, moving off-shore to emerging markets in economies where civil society is less well mobilised and less effective in making its demands felt.

Recently however, there are signs that the long retreat from class analysis in cultural and communications theory may be ending. As the country-and-western song puts it; more and more people are forgetting to remember to forget. A new series on ‘core cultural concepts’ from a major publishing house in the field, includes a volume on ‘class’ (Milner 1999) while a new collection urges “cultural studies to return to the question of social class as a primary focus of study” (Munt 1999). These may be straws in the wind, but then straw is indispensable to making bricks. \

## ***Reconstructions***

What is it then that we want to build? By way of illustration, let me suggest three general areas where class analysis remains indispensable to a proper understanding of current shifts in the organisation of communications and culture.

## ***Cultural Labour under ‘Flexible’ Capitalism***

Is not surprising that Marx, and every later commentator, has had so much trouble locating cultural workers on their maps of the class structure. This general category conceals a wide range of different relations to capitalist production and market relations. A few, have been supported by a private income, or in Marx’s case, by funds donated by Engels topped up by an unexpected legacy. Engels earned the money working for the family firm but he gave it with no strings attached, which allowed the great sage a rare degree of freedom in organising his intellectual labour. This is comparatively rare however. Most cultural workers have to earn a living by selling their skills. Some work for themselves as freelancers; others launch small businesses employing a few other people. These ‘semi-autonomous’ workers, or ‘independents’ as they are often called nowadays, either produce material on spec and hawk it around or try to secure a commission from a patron. But historically, under capitalism, more and more cultural workers have been employed (on contracts of varying duration) by one of the major commercial cultural producers. This situation has prompted a lively and long-running debate about the relative degrees of creative autonomy they enjoy.

Discussion has focussed particularly on the tensions between the commercial and political interests of owners on the one side and the professional integrity and creative ambitions of journalists, television dramatists, film makers, and musicians, on the other. Concern that owners will exploit their economic and organisational power and place their private interests before the public interest has continually fuelled objections to further concentrations of corporate ownership, while a steady stream of evidence of actual abuses has reinforced arguments that Capital’s domination of cultural production produces “Rich Media” but “Poor Democracy” (McChesney: 1999). This issue remains highly relevant. Indeed, the recent rise of mega media corporations makes it more pertinent than ever.

In tackling it however, we need to take account of the accelerating movement towards a more ‘flexible’ cultural labour force, which is replacing life-long careers, or even relatively long-term contracts, with a system of payment by results. The increasing parcelling out of programme production to ‘independent’

companies within British television is a good example. A recent survey of employment conditions in the industry found less than a third of those questioned (31%) on the payroll of the major broadcasting organisations, as against 38% who were working freelance (defined as on contracts of less than a year), 11% who were working for an 'independent' producers and 15% who owned their own production company (British Film Institute 1997: 8). This shift to 'outsourcing' will be given a further push by the transition to digital technologies which will concentrate programme production in "small teams of computer-literate newcomers" (Ursell 1998:151). British universities, once a bastion of security have gone through a parallel move towards greater 'flexibility' with a substantial shift towards casualisation and short-term contracts and the abolition of the traditional tenure arrangements.

These developments raise interesting questions about the class position and affiliations of intellectual and cultural workers within contemporary capitalism. They suggest that a major cleavage may be opening up between groups with relatively secure conditions of employment or their own successful businesses and those operating in conditions of permanent insecurity and dependence. The implications of 'flexibility' for the overall diversity of cultural expression deserves urgent investigation. As Angela McRobbie's recent work on fashion designers suggests however, the connections are unlikely to be straight forward. On the one hand her respondents' relatively low earnings coupled with their high degree of financial insecurity and instability of employment suggested a process of 'proletarianisation'. On the other hand, their occupational identities, as university graduates with a quasi-professional status, meant that they consistently "disregarded or disavowed those skills associated with the more menial side of fashion manufacture" and thereby reproduced "some of the most traditional of class divides in their own working practice. They wanted to believe that they were above manual labour" (McRobbie 1998:187).

The onward march of 'flexibility' also returns us to Pierre Bourdieu's multi-dimensional model of class formation. In order to use it productively however, we need to look again at the shifting relations between skills possession, formal accreditation, and cultural competence that are concealed in his portmanteau conception of cultural capital. The rapid growth of courses in cultural and communications studies within higher education and the growing professionalisation of skills training suggests that formal accreditation may come to play an more important role in regulating entry to cultural labour markets than it has in the past. At the same time, emerging evidence suggests that social capital is also coming to play central. The BFI survey found that personal contacts were easily the most important channel that respondents used to seek and obtain work in television (British Film Institute 1997: i). And as Angela McRobbie notes, the fickleness of fortune in fashion markets, increases the importance of contingency and serendipity in providing "unexpected windfalls and opportunities" through chance meetings and unexpected encounters (McRobbie 1998: 179).

## ***Classing Difference***

McRobbie's fashion designers were almost all women and as she points out the insecurities of their market situation imposed heavy costs on their personal choices. The interplay between gender and class has been a central theme in feminist writing, with many commentators arguing that 'patriarchy' – the subordination of women's lives to men's interests – is as important, if not more important than class in reproducing structural inequality. Some class analysts have responded by uncoupling class for gender. Eric Wright for example, regretfully accepts that his model of class "probably does not – and perhaps cannot – provide adequate tools for understanding many of the important issues bound up with gender oppression" (Wright 1997b: 60). Fortunately, some feminist researchers have not been so easily dissuaded from exploring the interplay between class and gender. As Carolyn Steedman notes, approaching "the felt injuries of a social system through the experiences of women and girls suggests that beneath the voices of class-consciousness may perhaps lie another language, that might be heard to express the feelings of those outside the gate" but "there is no language that does not" also "let the literal accents of class show" (Steedman 1996:113-114).

After extensive ethnographic work with a group of working class women in the North of England, Beverley Skeggs concludes that “class was completely central to” their lives (Skeggs 1997:161). She is particularly interested in the way that the unequal distribution of capital (in Bourdieu’s extended sense) combines with the circulation of competing discourses of identity, to lower their ambitions. For them the hidden injuries of class were very forcefully gendered. “They were never able to feel comfortable with themselves, always convinced that others will find something about them wanting and undesirable” (Skeggs 1997: 162). The dominant image of working class women as disreputable, dangerous and sexually voracious was a particular source of anxiety. In response they rejected the models of individualism offered by feminism and opted for a “respectable” femininity. But, as Skeggs argues, their claims to respectability should not be read as signs of passive resignation but as the outcome of an active “emotional politics of class”. They entered a system of valuation “at a disadvantage” where “access to positive valuations were limited or closed,” but they were nevertheless “forever trying to make the best out of limited resources” (Skeggs 1997: 161-162).

Class boundaries are not completely fixed however. Individuals manage to get out and away through education or marriage. The pains and pleasures of leaving and the difficulties of moving between grounded and erudite cultures were a major theme in early British work in cultural studies. Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, and many of the younger generation who followed in their wake, were working class ‘scholarship boys’ who had fought their way through the education system and to go on to become university teachers and researchers. As Derek Wynne’s recent research (1998) shows, the strategic deployment of cultural capital is typical of those who have moved into the middle class by way of higher education. It is their trump card in the game of distinction, a visible marker of their arrival in their new location. In contrast, those who have made their way up through the school of hard knocks or have launched their own businesses are more inclined to display their command of economic capital, through conspicuous consumption. They are constantly looking back over their shoulder, seeking to prove their success to those left behind.

Despite this flurry of research however, in most tales of mobility the protagonists are still almost all male. Steph Lawler’s recent work with upwardly mobile working-class women addresses this imbalance. She notes how the pathologising of working class sexuality intersected with “the lack of a history of being middle class” among the women she talked with, to compound the hidden injuries produced by the moments when they “were shamed by the (real of imagined) judgements of others – judgements which hinged on the women’s lack of the ‘right’ judgement, the ‘right’ knowledge, the ‘right’ taste” (Lawler 1999: 13). They felt that the habitus they laid claim to could never be fully inhabited and the dispositions it required never completely possessed (op cit: 17). They were condemned to be perpetual visitors in other people’s houses, continually on their best behaviour.

This emerging work suggests that while feminists are right to insist that class is always gendered, gender is equally always classed. Consequently, it is not a matter of choosing to focus on class or difference but of exploring the ways they intersect. Much recent work on media audiences has used variants of focus group methodology to explore people’s interpretations and responses to films and television programmes. The problem is that these relatively short, usually one-off, occasions cannot produce the depth of evidence that the arguments developed by Skeggs and others require. If we are going to relate biographies to histories, we need biographies which will allow us to uncover the subtler connections between subjectivities, social discourses, and cultural practices. For this, life histories of the kind Bourdieu collects in *La Misere du Monde* (1993) are essential. If we are to do justice to the complexity of everyday media practices we need to show how they are formed by personal journeys as well as by social locations and public discourses.

## *Global Shifts*

As C Wright Mills pointed out some time ago however, a truly comprehensive analysis also needs to continually move, backwards and forwards, from the particular to the general, reconnecting the “the most intimate features of the human self” with “the most remote and impersonal transformation” (Mills 1970:14). Because most work to date has been “based on the convenient assumption that class structure and nation state coincide” (Breen and Rottman 1998:16). Class analysis is not as well equipped to make these links as it should be. In the era of globalising capitalism this is a serious limitation.

The last two decades have seen a sustained romance with neo-liberalism’s promotion of private ownership, market dynamics and minimal public regulation, among government of very different political complexions. Over this time, the world’s three largest nations, Russia, China, and India, which for most of the post-war period were relatively (though differentially) isolated from the capitalist world system, have re-entered it, albeit by different routes and for different reasons. This movement has major implications for the role of class analysis in communications and cultural research.

Firstly, as many writers have observed, the erosion and removal of regulatory barriers, coupled with the rise of transnational satellite and computer networks, has massively extended the global reach of major corporations. This raises the possibility that we may be witnessing the formation of a new ‘transnational capitalist class’ made up of the executives of the leading transnational corporations, politicians and state bureaucrats who support greater inward investment and ‘borderless’ economic flows, and last but not least, the captains of the leading media companies. The allegiance of this class is not to the nation-state but to the new global corporate playing field (See Sklair 1995:133-137). Within this formation, communications companies play a pivotal double role.

Firstly, they provide the essential communications infrastructure that enables this new, geographically dispersed, class to develop internal networks of exchange and solidarity. Mapping these emerging transnational flows and connections is an urgent research task.

Secondly, they seek to re-organise public communications around consumerism in the interests of market extension, promoting it as an identity and way of life that transcends national borders and excludes no one. In examining the impact of this intervention however, we are faced once again with the problem of analysing the middle class.

The rapid rise of marketisation and liberalisation in China, India, and South East Asia has led to a notable expansion in both business ownership and in occupations linked to the management and servicing of commercial enterprise. This emerging group is often called the ‘new’ middle class or the ‘new rich’ (Buckley 1999: 218) to distinguish them from the traditional middle class comprised of independent professionals and state bureaucrats. Some commentators though, prefer a wider definition which includes clerical workers, public administrators and professionals as well as business owners and corporate managers (cf. Stivens 1998: 15). Analysts agree however, that the expanded middle classes (however defined and subdivided) are the pioneers of the new consumer system.

In India and China, consumption is emerging as both “a profound basis for group identity” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995: 6) and a central site for social display and competition. The “new middle class lifestyle” celebrated in advertising and popular television, pulls lower class aspirations towards it (McCarthy 1994: 45). It offers visible markers of the ‘new’ and modern against the old and outmoded (Stivens 1999: 5) whilst the constant flows of people and goods returning ‘home’ from travel and diasporic settlement reinforces strong contrasts between the transnational and the parochial, openness and limitation (Lakha 1999: 269). The new marketeers beckon people to join a placeless community of cosmopolitan consumers. If we look at the lives of women however, we see once again how the relations

between this meta-ideology and the new class formation is also profoundly gendered and how the identities it supports are continually cross-cut by other discourses.

In her ethnography of women viewers in New Delhi, Purima Mankekar argues that the Indian state television system of the early 1990s addressed female members of the upwardly mobile classes as the prime market for the consumer goods promoted by the programmes' commercial sponsors while simultaneously seeking to enlist them in "the project of constructing a national culture" through their involvement in serialisations of the great Indian mythological cycles and in patriotic serials dramatising women's central role in knitting together, home and homeland (Mankekar 1993: 547). As a consequence she argues, the imagined liberties of consumerism were in permanent tension with the presented the duties of nationalism and commercial images of women's self actualisation continually "circumscribed by metanarratives of nation and family" (op cit: 553). Dulai Nag has shown how this central tension is reproduced in the advertising material used to promote the saris worn by Bengali middle class women. Some texts reinforce the sari's position as the central signifier of continuity and nation by using quotations from early twentieth century modernist Bengali literature. Others evoke associations of consumer modernity by mobilising material from a popular film magazine (Nag 1991).

As this developing work shows, it is precisely because they are positioned as the vanguard of the transition towards consumer modernity that the new middles class in general, and middle class women in particular are the epicentre of the unfolding struggle over the terms of this transition.

If the body of recent work emerging from India and other marketising societies confirms that class analysis remains central to understanding contemporary change, it also demonstrates once again the urgent need to refurbish it.

## **CONCLUSION**

What then can we take away from this discussion? I would suggest five main conclusions.

- First, that the fashionable injunction to examine the shifting links between the national, the local and the global, applies with particular force to the analysis of class.
- Second, that the most promising approach to mapping present-day class formations is to build on Pierre Bourdieu's provocative suggestions and work towards a new synthesis of Marxian analyses of production and exploitation and Weberian discussions of market capacities
- Third, that rather than opposing class to difference, we need to explore how differences are classed and how, at the same time, they cut continually across the organisation of class experience.
- Fourth, in examining the role of class-based meaning systems in providing resources for interpretation and action we must always look for the ways they intersect with other discourses.
- And fifth, in exploring class identities we must always go beyond overt statements of loyalty and affiliation to examine how class subjectivities are shaped and bent by the unequal distribution of recognition and respect and by the hidden injuries it generates.

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