Class

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Class is one of the most important, widely used, and complicated concepts in human geography and the social sciences. Its meaning varies according to particular social theories and human geographical traditions, and to related conceptualizations of the economy. Different geographers, therefore, use and understand class in a number of ways. It is important to understand these distinctions because they affect our understanding of how class works and have different implications for policy, politics, and geographic research. Class as a concept is foundational to economic geography; it permeates research on local and global issues, the gendering of work and socioeconomic space, geographies of race and racialized economies, postcolonial struggles, and labor migrations.

Class as a group (neoclassical economics)

The concept of class entered Anglo-American economic and social geography after World War II. The Great Depression and the war made such a profound impact on the economic activities of the time that they required special analytical and theoretical understanding. The works of the prominent German sociologist Max Weber on social stratification and social class, published in the first decades of the twentieth century and translated into English in the 1940s, became influential in modern American sociology and neoclassical economics. Influenced by Karl Marx, Weber observed social groups marked by dramatic differences in wealth and social standing. Rich industrialists and impoverished immigrant laborers, middle classes and state bureaucrats, large masses of destitute homeless – all were emerging in a society being remade by the seemingly unruly forces of capitalism. According to Weber's theory of social stratification, these groups possess drastically different fortunes which are shaped by differential access to economic opportunities provided by the market (called economic class), social status, and access to political power. Weber saw economic class as a major factor in the stratification of social classes. This factor, in contrast to more vague notions of status and power, can be relatively easily measured in terms of income.

At the same time, the economy was increasingly explained in terms of neoclassical economic theory and as an entity governed by its own objective internal laws. These laws, which economists aimed to discover, guided the invisible hand of the market in sorting people into groups based on their economic performance. This concept of class as a group of people with particular characteristics of income has dominated social sciences for decades and is still widely used today in reference to the upper class, middle class, and lower class, for example. In geography, this concept led to prolific research on social and residential differentiation that sought to identify homogeneous neighborhoods using social area analysis techniques and, with the advent of computation, so-called factorial ecologies. Measures of income were often combined

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with those of educational attainment, household size, and race/ethnicity. Using census data and surveys, geographies of class were calculated and mapped for research into housing markets, access to schools and other services, and even, to a degree, the creation of foundational urban models (concentric, sectoral, and multinuclear). These models explained spatial and socioeconomic differentiation as a result of a tradeoff between land values and commuting costs contingent on advances in transportation. Mobility between classes (and therefore urban neighborhoods) depended on a household's ability to raise higher income through participation in the labor market (usually as a function of education or entrepreneurial acumen). Class mobility had a spatial component, most prominently expressed in the relocation of upper and then middle classes to the suburbs (where money can buy more land and a better house and absorb commuting costs) and, in recent decades, back to the rapidly gentrifying inner city. Such census-based empirical analyses have received another boost in the current era of mapping, which allows a combination of advances in geographic information science, geocomputation, and big data analysis. Explanation, however, now draws on theories of class rooted not only in neoclassical economics but in Marxism, feminism, poststructuralism, and their many combinations.

Class as structural relation (Marxism)

Although Marx developed his theory of class much earlier than Weber, his legacy took hold in Anglo-American geographical theory considerably later. Marxian theory was introduced into geography most prominently by David Harvey, Doreen Massey, Dick Peet, Bill Bunge, and others in the 1970s and 1980s, as part of the critique of the post-World War II quantitative revolution and neoclassical economics. Class is a central concern of Marxism but its meaning differs from that of neoclassical economics. Marx viewed class as a structural relation that informs the whole of human history but is hidden from direct empirical observation. Classes are distinguished by their position in relation to ownership of the means of production instead of as groups of individuals with similar socioeconomic characteristics. The source of wealth lies in exploitation, which results from the appropriation of surplus from those who produce it but who do not own the means of production. Under capitalism, the means of production includes factories and other modern ways of manufacturing material and nonmaterial commodities, and the two main classes are capitalists, who own the means of production, and workers, whom they employ for wages and whose surplus they appropriate and use for capital accumulation. Tied into an exploitative relationship, classes are in tension and their struggle defines the workings of the capitalist economy and development more generally. Accordingly, Marxist scholars reject market-based causes as valid explanations for the making of economic geographies. Instead they advance explanations tied to the logics of capital accumulation and the dynamics of class exploitation. Class mobility, therefore, depends on the ability to gain control over the means of production and can be achieved by joining the capitalist class or by working toward social change which would transfer this control to workers themselves.

Marxist geographers have theorized space as integral to the process of capital accumulation and class relations. Thus, David Harvey (2001) advanced a theory of spatial fix as a means of temporarily resolving – or of always delaying – the crisis of accumulation. He argued that capitalism must search for new geographic markets, into which to invest surplus capital in order to avoid losing it. In this way, new

territories and resources enter the circuits of capitalist accumulation, a process that has become increasingly globalized. Similarly, surplus capital can be invested into (re)building infrastructure within capitalist space once an obsolete urban fabric becomes a new investment frontier (through, for example, suburbanization, urban redevelopment, and gentrification). Both geographical expansion and the remaking of the built environment offer only a temporary spatial fix; capital never rests securely and continues to produce new capitalist space and, by extension, class relations. Neil Smith (2008) refuted the tendency toward equilibrium espoused in neoclassical economics and argued that uneven spatial development is a necessary condition for creating new frontiers for capital. The production of the built environment, and its destruction, channel investment into real estate, including suburbanization and, most recently, gentrification, during the recurring crises of capital accumulation. Thus, Marxist geographers mainly focus on the production side of capital accumulation and examine geographies of the working class primarily as part of this process. Gordon's (1978) explanation of urban form, for example, is that it is an attempt by capital to retain its control by spatially dispersing the working class. In Marxist analyses of class politics in the Fordist era, the working class was largely assumed to consist of unionized male and white industrial workers, an assumption challenged by feminist developments in understandings of class.

Class as social reproduction (feminism)

Since the 1960s, Marxian theory has been taken up, critiqued, and radically transformed by feminist scholars. While they allied with the idea of class exploitation as the cause of economic and social inequality, feminists have challenged the omission in Marxist analyses of (working-class) women in waged work. They have also challenged the conceptualization of social reproduction – the space of women's unpaid work in patriarchal societies – as secondary to the sphere of production in which the exploitation of the (male) working class takes place. Feminist scholars have argued that unpaid women's work in social reproduction is as important for capital accumulation as waged manual work and that this unpaid work has been the source of the specific exploitation of women by capital and by their household members. Early theoretical debates focused on the relationship between two structures of exploitation: capitalism as the exploitation of workers and patriarchy as the exploitation of women. In the course of theorizing this relationship, feminist scholars have developed a gendered critique of capitalism that links class exploitation to other dimensions of experience such as gender and extends it beyond the workplace: capitalists exploited working women as well as working men, while capitalists and working-class men also exploited women in the household. Feminist scholars, therefore, ~~moved~~ placed or positioned social reproduction alongside production, profoundly changing the meaning of class.

Feminist geographers have specifically focused on the relationship between class, gender, and space. They have shown that the gender gap in wages, for example, is also related to differences in commuting time between men and women and that commuting time also differs for women with different class and racial backgrounds (McLafferty and Preston 1991); that the gendered nature of the workforce plays a major role in shaping regional economies (McDowell and Massey 1984); that access to work outside the home is mediated by unequal domestic responsibilities (Hanson and Pratt 1995); that, within the workplace, women have systematically been undervalued and underpaid (McDowell and

Massey 1984; Wright 2006); and that women are generally more likely than men to engage in the informal economy. More recently, feminist scholars have also problematized the conflation of women's unpaid domestic work with emotional support and care (Atkinson, Lawson, and Wiles 2011) and argued for the recognition of women's agency as a means of empowerment.

Another important contribution of the feminist rethinking of class is that it has enabled scholars to see class experiences as embodied and class subjects as empowered actors (Mitchell, Katz, and Marston 2004). The embodied class subject stands in stark contrast to neoclassical economics, which regards labor as an input and class as an income category. It also contrasts with Marxist theory which highlights the power of capital over workers and rarely recognizes the agency of workers in the production of capitalist landscapes. By creating an embodied and empowered class subject, feminism has also opened class analysis to further theorization through the lens of black, postcolonial, and poststructuralist theory.

Racial economy and class

Antiracist, black, and postcolonial scholars have drawn on Marxism to understand the political economy of racial exploitation while also complicating the Marxian concept of class. They argue that colonialism and slavery have been instrumental in enabling large-scale capital accumulation in Europe and the United States. Structural racism, in other words, has been a necessary condition for the rise of capitalism. The exploitation of colonies supplied the capital needed for expanded capital accumulation during industrialization, and secured a food supply for impoverished and overexploited European industrial workers and peasants. Not only did slavery make plantation economies prosper in the southern parts of the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean, but slave labor in the American North supported most middle-class households, urban economies, and city governments in crucial ways. Moreover, modern capitalism continues to thrive because of continuing racial exploitation. Examples include concentrated poverty in urban ghettos in the United States, where ~~they~~ people of color have no prospects of work but experience the ever-present threat of incarceration; continuing institutional racism at the workplace and in the housing market; and the exploitation of numerous immigrant workers, many of whom are undocumented, and who have fled economic devastation, war, or gang violence in their home countries (Wright 2006; Gilmore 2007; McKittrick 2011). In short, capitalism moves surplus from black and brown bodies to capitalist owners and to larger segments of white waged workers, who often fail to recognize their white privilege and exclude people of color from their solidarity struggles for wages and benefits. Capitalism, of which a racial economy is an integral part, can be thought of as a thoroughly racialized class relation at scales from local to global.

Intersectionality and class as a process

The constitution of class by the social relations of gender and race can be ~~articulated~~ illuminated using the concept of intersectionality. Articulated in the 1980s by black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to explain black women experience as defined by both race and gender, it has gained in popularity in the social sciences. Intersectionality draws on poststructural concerns with decentered identity, that is, when the identity of an individual or a group is simultaneously shaped by class, gender, race, sexuality, nationality, and other relevant

power relations. As these intersecting registers of social experience can be understood only in their interaction, intersectionality provides an entry point into the analysis (Valentine 2007).

This thinking is clearly related to earlier feminist theorizing of class and gender, as well as race and gender, as inseparable or mutually constituting relations. But an explicit reworking of class and gender through the lens of post-structuralism occurred in feminist geography in the works of Julie Graham and Kathrine Gibson who wrote together under the pen name of J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996; 2006). Drawing on a Marxist anti-essentialist concept of class, J.K. Gibson-Graham do not see class as a group or structural relation but as a process that leads to the production and appropriation of surplus. Class processes occur when any kind of work takes place – as a waged relation within a factory or as unpaid domestic work within the household – because class exploitation takes place when those who produce the surplus do not control its distribution, and in a patriarchal household men typically appropriate the surplus produced by women through cleaning, cooking, and caring. Patriarchy, therefore, generates a class process, albeit one that is different from waged employment in a factory.

Another crucial consideration of class as a process is that people can participate in more than one class process, and can be exploited as well as exploit others (e.g., a waged factory worker who appropriates his family's surplus at home). Capitalism and patriarchy can interact with other exploitative but different class processes such as modern slavery (i.e., forced labor, human trafficking for sex work, and the enslavement of ethnic and religious groups). The bottom line is that, while capitalism is dominant discursively and in terms of traditional measures of wealth, modern societies are complex and embrace many types of class processes including those with the potential for progressive class politics.

In sum, poststructural class analysis seeks to identify a range of class processes within capitalism and to explain how they are mutually constituted with social relations of gender, race, sexuality, nationalism, and so on. In this respect, J.K. Gibson-Graham's approach and intersectionality go hand in hand but Gibson-Graham explicitly use Marxist concepts of class and exploitation as a point of entry while intersectionality may or may not be concerned with class. Gibson-Graham's "diverse economies" approach also aims to advance transformative class politics and eliminate class exploitation.

Class in the neoliberal era and changing labor geographies

The era of post-Fordism or late capitalism has been associated with the rise of neoliberalism, which promotes privatization, globalization, and the deregulation of markets at all scales. These developments have profoundly changed the nature of economies and posed new challenges to class theories and analyses. Unions representing working-class, white-collar, and professional workers have long, and with some success, advocated for secure employment that provides financial stability for working families and communities. Yet one of the most striking developments is the shift away from permanent full-time employment, with a living wage and benefits as a golden standard of the modern economy, and its replacement by temporary, part-time, low-paying jobs with no benefits (Standing 2011). In many cases, even the remaining full-time jobs no longer pay a living wage. Those who work multiple jobs but still remain in poverty join the growing ranks of

the "working poor" while the relatively secure middle class continues to shrink.

Highly paid professional occupations in banking, law, information technology, and higher education are also moving rapidly toward temporary contracts that no longer provide job security. Temporary labor agencies now supply highly skilled professionals in addition to low-skilled service workers. Information technology specialists, graphic design artists, and lawyers get hired for a project and are fired when the project is terminated. In many North American universities, adjunct professors now teach the majority of courses at a fraction of the salary of a full-time professor. While professional workers usually have more resources than low-paid service workers to weather periods without work, the point is that job security and wage levels across sectors and occupations have declined. The trend amplifies as corporations push for the further deregulation of employment and justify reductions in wages and benefits by global competition. The decentralized global production networks that rely on multilayered subcontracting have fragmented employment to a high degree.

As well as the nature of work, both the composition and the geography of workforces have also changed. Today's working class is no longer white, male, and unionized but largely female, nonwhite, and fragmented. It includes Sun Belt workers in the United States, immigrant and minority workers in the Global North, and outsourced industrial and service workers in the Global South (Wright 2006). And, while notions of the working class have expanded to embrace the greater numbers and diverse kinds of working people, the power of class politics in the last several decades has declined because it has been centered on a male industrial working class.

Is class still relevant?

This question raises the possibility that class may not ~~still~~ be relevant in the neoliberal world, where both work and workers are fragmented along lines of gender, race, nationality, occupation, and other dimensions. Neoliberalism, to some, has made it impossible for working people to connect and articulate collective demands on corporations and capitalism. With traditional class politics linked to unionism in decline, no other leverage is in sight. Some see the subjection of working people to corporate power as almost complete. The only resolution to unfettered domination and exploitation may be the inevitable, large-scale class war that may replicate forms of militancy in armed struggles against colonial regimes (see Harvey 2014).

Yet others think that, although traditional working-class politics is declining, neoliberal restructuring has created not only new sites of exploitation but new class subjects as well. As disenfranchised workplaces extend to household economies, agricultural fields, urban neighborhoods, biotechnology labs, university campuses, and global production networks, new class subjects come into being. Domestic workers, unemployed college graduates, service and construction workers, immigrants, teachers and university professors, lawyers, and information technology specialists, peasants and farmers, and subcontracted garment workers across the globe –can now all fill the ranks of the working class. These diverse class subjects have different levels of education; work in manual, service, and professional occupations; and can be of any racial group or gender identity. But they all share the condition of the increasingly precarious employment and income that, therefore, makes vital new class alliances and transformations that can potentially bring these new workers security and control over the economy.

Social theory struggles to understand the nature of impending class transformations, with one frequently invoked scenario being the rise of the "precariat" – economically and culturally precarious and politically ambiguous proletarian masses of all walks of life (Standing 2011; Munck 2013; also see Harvey 2014). At the same time, the diversification of class subjects may provide an opportunity to broaden progressive class politics to build alliances across places, scales, and cultures and to cultivate imaginations of the shared future. The major challenge is how to build these alliances and make them work. In short, class analysis and politics ~~has~~ have not lost its relevance; ~~it~~ class remains a central concern ~~and continues to inspire multiple new subjects~~.

Economic crisis, the problematic of class, and new class struggles

Class relations have indeed gained new attention during the protracted and continuing global economic crisis triggered by the financial collapse of 2008 in the wake of the pervasive foreclosure crisis in the United States. The Occupy Wall Street movement has somewhat waned since then, but it achieved astonishing success in bringing the problematic of class into the center of public debate, albeit a problematic framed more in liberal than in Marxian terms. Liberal discourse usually tolerates economic inequality under capitalism as a price for economic efficiency and growing overall prosperity, but the extreme concentration of wealth becomes counterproductive to capitalism as it interferes with growth. This reframing of class inequality as an impediment to economic development has rung bells across the political spectrum, and produced a feeling of disillusionment with capitalism as the principal model of development. At the same time, it has created room for debate about new economic policies and economies that are different from capitalism and that could lead to more sustainable social, economic, and ecological futures. It is vital, therefore, to turn to theories that begin to point to the ways in which progressive class transformations can occur.

Primarily concerned with the analytics of class, J.K. Gibson-Graham grounded their vision of transformative class politics in feminist and poststructuralist theory. Feminist theory helped to expand the scope of class processes into households and communities and to advance the possibility of decentralized but widely spread class transformations. These transformations are theoretically possible when the economy is read in poststructuralist terms as constituted by multiple economic processes, of which capitalism is only one. Some already existing noncapitalist practices, such as cooperative enterprises or egalitarian households, may act as the seeds of progressive class transformations, leading to the development of community economies. The latter are economic practices at all geographic scales, from household to international, that are guided by ethics of cooperation, care, and mutual support, and in which the participants collectively create and appropriate a surplus. On the one hand, seeing the economy as diverse instead of homogeneous and capitalist fragments capitalist space and diminishes the power of capitalism over societal practices more generally. On the other hand, it creates and multiplies opportunities for progressive class transformations. Once in the realm of public imagination, the already existing alternatives to capitalism, such as economies of cooperation and solidarity, may stimulate creative engagement and the creation of new progressive class processes.

While J.K. Gibson-Graham have most prominently advocated for the possibility of transformation here and now (1996; 2006; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013), other conceptions of class also work to advance

the politics of possibility. Thus, Andrew Herod's (1997) insistence that workers, in addition to corporations, actively shape economic landscapes can be pushed further to argue that workers can exercise their agency to produce noncapitalist landscapes by, for example, reorganizing social production based on cooperative ownership of enterprises, land, and housing.

Intersectionality also helps in understanding the nature of class subjectivities as embodied, gendered, and racialized. This proliferation, instead of being seen as a barrier to solidarity, can be regarded as multiplying opportunities for both resistance and progressive class transformations. Thus, households can work to eliminate domestic exploitation; transnational immigrant households can make economic demands of national governments based on the impact of their remittances; fishermen can set up community-supported fisheries instead of working for corporate boats; indigenous people may work to rebuild their communal economies even in neoliberal contexts; and domestic workers can exercise their solidarity by using the Internet to overcome dispersed workplaces. Working people can join collectively owned enterprises at greater scales, which would help to increase worker security, pool resources around collective housing, and use the financial services of credit unions instead of private banks. New community economies can also form around the commons that ensure collective control over land, oceans, housing, and urban space (Gibson-Graham 1996; Pavlovskaya 2013; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013; Roelvink, St Martin, and Gibson-Graham 2015).

While the politics of resistance retains its importance in the face of the continued consolidation of neoliberal control over the economy and politics, there is also a need to cultivate the capacity of diverse working classes to enact progressive class transformations. This capacity is already evident in the growing international movement of solidarity and social economies, economic democracy, and other creative innovations coming together at the World Social Forum (Miller 2005). These movements seek to build alliances between economic actors who pursue ethical goals (e.g., social justice, workplace democracy, cooperative ownership, and environmental sustainability) instead of profit maximization and competition. By forming noncapitalist production networks with each other, they have the economic power to grow and to nurture new solutions and imaginations.

Despite the fragmentation of class politics by neoliberal policies around the globe, the relevance of class as a dimension of social experience and category of analysis has not diminished. The concept of class has been evolving to account for the fragmented nature of work and the embodied nature of class processes. The experiences of diverse – in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, gender, occupation, economic sector, nationality, and so on – labor forces are in need of new theoretical insights that can articulate opportunities for progressive class politics here and now, in multiple economic contexts, and across geographic scales.

Their differences notwithstanding, notions of class in different human geographic traditions are not mutually exclusive; they may all usefully address specific aspects of class problematics. Census-based socioeconomic variables are helpful for constructing the changing geographies of class differentiation, while Marxist concepts of class as social relations help to focus critique on growing capitalist class exploitation and consolidation of economic power as causes of this differentiation. Made ever so powerful by analytics of gender and race, class analysis is now able to account for complex social experiences and to be more in tune with the rich fabric of daily life while poststructuralist interventions

open class to progressive transformations here and now.

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SEE ALSO: Feminist geography; Gender; Gender, work, and employment; Globalization; Intersectionality; Labor geography; Marxist geography; Poststructuralism/poststructural geography; Radical geography; Race, work, and employment

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Abstract: Class is one of the most important, widely used, and complicated concepts in human geography and the social sciences. It underpins economic geographies and intersects with geographies of gender, race, and sexuality. Different notions of class have been in use, along the spectrum from neoclassical to Marxist economic theories. These theories have also been reworked by feminist, post-colonial, and poststructuralist scholars in order to augment critiques of class-related inequalities and to construct possibilities for imagining and producing progressive geographies of class. The contemporary global and neoliberal economy has given rise to high levels of concentration of wealth and economic insecurity that cut across the class divisions and social safety nets of the twentieth century. The politics of class remains central, however; imagining new horizons in class solidarity and transformation is as vital as ever for new and diverse class subjects.

Keywords: gender and sexuality; race and racism; social class; social theory; work