# Class

re:articulate

In recent years, a number of internationally acclaimed novels, TV series and films have engaged the problem of class in bold and interesting ways. Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), Paul Abbott's *Shameless* (2004-2013) as well as Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) and *Sorry We Missed You* (2019) all attest to this. Next to social and comedy drama, crime and biographical fiction, writers and directors have chosen sci-fi and horror to address the problem of class in allegorical form with great success, as in Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *Parasite* (2019) or Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019). Popular culture as a whole appears haunted by the specter of class and class struggle, not to mention proletarian insurrection. This is hardly surprising. After all, class relations are constitutive of modern capitalist societies. Yet there seems to be a renewed interest in exploring the workings of class in (non-)fiction, theory and politics in the post-2008 conjuncture and its possible unraveling through interconnected global crises and social struggles.

What these recent films and TV series show – just like the (semi-) autobiographical accounts of the attempts to escape one's milieu in celebrated books by Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis as well as J. D. Vance's essentialist *Hillbilly Elegy* – is that social differences must be represented to become effective in practice. Accordingly, an individual's dress, their manner of speaking, their taste, as well as their whole way of thinking, evaluating and acting – what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls 'habitus' – signifies their social position. "Taste classifies", writes Bourdieu, "and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make". [1] While the socially valid (and valued) classifications are subject to change, and can be challenged and potentially rearticulated in symbolic struggles, they nonetheless present a formidable challenge to the social mobility of individuals.

But is this what we mean when we talk about class? Jay Gatsby, the central character in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), is snubbed for being a "Mr Nobody from Nowhere" [2] ; but while this shows that the

representatives of 'old' money might close their ranks against the *nouveaux riches*, Gatsby remains a millionaire and, consequently, a member of the upper class in terms of wealth. Republican candidate and venture capitalist J. D. Vance likewise remains a millionaire in spite of his 'authentic' memoir confession: "To understand me, you must understand that I am a Scots-Irish hillbilly at heart". [3] What the focus on habitus and lifestyles refers to are, to use Max Weber's terms, "status groups"; these are "stratified according to the principles of their *consumption* of goods as represented by special styles of life". "Classes", on the other hand, "are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods". [4]

Sometimes, work in Cultural Studies tends to focus on the former, on lifestyles and the way practices of consumption signify – and, thus, classify – individuals and groups. Stuart Hall, for example, put much emphasis on the "connotative" codes which "cover the face of social life and render it classifiable, intelligible, meaningful". [5] In order to understand such processes of meaning-making and classification, Dick Hebdige argues in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, "we must first consider how power is distributed in our society [i.e.] we must ask which groups and classes have how much say in defining, ordering and classifying out the social world" [6] Yet, it remains significant to keep in mind that class relations – including the relations of production in modern societies – transcend the experiences and actions of individuals and definite groups.

*The Making of Class*

Structures don't take to the streets, as was written on the Sorbonne walls in the tumultuous May of 1968 when protests by Paris students were followed by a nation-wide general strike. That is to say, the underlying class structure shaped by the way in which the production and distribution of goods is organized does not immediately determine the actions of social groups. Indeed, class has to be made, as the British historian, E. P. Thompson, famously argued in *The Making of the British Working Class*:

> The relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context. [...] Class happens when some men [sic], 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 [sic] whose interests are

> different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men [sic] are born – or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not. [7]

Again, the relations of production are key insofar as they provide the material conditions of possibility in which class is 'handled' culturally and politically – without mechanically determining the way it is reflected in people's consciousness. Moreover, class is a category that names an antagonistic relationship and, consequently, classes are made in and through struggle.

An antagonistic conception of class relations also informs Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' famous line in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, written on the eve of the democratic revolutions of 1848: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle". [8] This is, they argue, because societies (barring early forms of 'primitive' communism) have consistently been divided into a) the direct producers of the means of subsistence, and b) a class that appropriates the former's surplus product – though the manner in which this division is organized varies throughout history. Elsewhere Marx writes: "The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relationship of domination and servitude". [9] Before the transition to capitalism, the dominant classes relied on "extra-economic" ways of appropriating the surplus, such as access to political offices that allowed them to tax peasant producers, [10] or "a régime of calculated brutality and terrorism" in the case of slavery or other forms of unfree labour. [11] Think of the well-known *Hunger Games* series: the inhabitants of the twelve outer districts of Panem are forced to directly supply labour and raw materials to the Capitol, because they are subjected to the despotic control of a dominant class of non-producers. Thus, the system represented by the dystopian films is aptly characterized as "cyber-feudal". [12]

*The Capitalist Class Relation*

What distinguishes capitalism from pre-capitalist societies is that the capitalist class (at least in theory) uses exclusively economic mechanisms

to appropriate surplus labour by exploiting a class of workers who freely sell their ability to perform labour on the market. The capitalist class does not need to hold political positions to do so – even though they doubtlessly exert pressure on office-holders to pass legislation in their favour. Instead, they own the means of production and hire workers, who are "free in the double sense" that they can (ideally) freely choose to enter and leave a contract while simultaneously being free (i.e. devoid) of the means to reproduce their own lives. [13] That is, the relationship between direct producers and the appropriating class is mediated by the market and not immediately based on political power (as it was in a feudal society).

The capitalist class relation, then, is a relationship of exploitation and domination, a fact that is obscured by representing it as a benign and mutually beneficial encounter between employers and employees on the labor market. And yet, if class is conceptualized exclusively on the basis of the wage-relation, other aspects of class society might be occluded. Most significantly, by focusing on the exploitation of 'free' wage-labourers, such conception tends to exclude everyone who performs unpaid reproductive labour in the domestic sphere (usually women), or who works under the "despotism of the unwaged relation" (often Black People and People of Color). [14] This is why Søren Mau proposes the following revision of the concept of 'class':

> The relation of exploitation is premised on a broader class domination rooted not in the extraction of surplus labour but in *the relation to the means of production*. [...] Class domination [...] refers to the relation between *those who control the conditions of social reproduction and those who are excluded from the direct access to the conditions of social reproduction*. 'Class' thus denotes *the relation of a group of people to the conditions of social reproduction*. [15]

Consequently, the capitalist class is opposed not just to the waged working class, but to the *proletariat*. The latter term often evokes representations of male wage-labourers toiling in large mechanized factories or deep down in poorly ventilated mines (whose tendential disappearance from view in the Global North produces the fantasy that humanity has entered a 'post-industrial' society no longer structured by class relations). It makes more sense, then, to define "*the proletarian condition*" as a "*radical split between life and its conditions*". [16]

This split has been the product of what Marx (ironically) termed "so-called primitive accumulation [*urspriingliche Akkumulation*]" – a form of class-making from above – in which peasant producers were brutally separated from the land that used to provide them with means of subsistence. [17] Far from being a phenomenon of the past, however, primitive accumulation designates an ongoing process of proletarianisation that forces populations into market dependence, for instance through 'structural adjustment programs' in the Global South. [18]

Once proletarianized, individuals become dependent on the capitalist class to secure their existence. This can entail moments of direct domination in the sphere of production, though class domination need not be exerted *personally* by members of the capitalist class since this function can be taken over by management or supervisory labourers. Consequently, Marx's account offers not a moral condemnation of particularly vile forms of exploitation, but a structural account of *impersonal* domination, in which workers are not exploited as individuals but as "representatives of the class of laborers" [19] who are "subjected to *a class as such*" rather than to individual capitalists. [20]

Some readers of Marx, most prominently the late Moishe Postone, have argued that the capitalist mode of production is defined by the fact that it subjects *both* capitalists *and* labourers to the abstract domination exerted by the imperatives of capital accumulation (the 'law of value'). [21] According to this reading, the fact that social relationships in capitalism are mediated by the exchange of commodities compels even capitalists to meet socially average standards of productivity, subjecting them to the "social domination of abstract time" [22] : if a capitalist company fails to produce commodities on the socially valid level of productivity it risks losing market shares and, eventually, bankruptcy. Thus, Postone concludes that *class domination* is, in fact, secondary to an *abstract compulsion* that all members of capitalist society live under, determined by increasingly autonomous social relations.

While this is a salutary reminder that capitalism is characterized by a unique form of market-dependence, [23] Mau has convincingly argued that this abstract domination *presupposes* the class relation, so that the latter must be regarded as an essential feature of capitalist societies. [24] Yes, capitalism is the never-ending process of self-expanding value which subjects both capitalists and workers to the imperative of profitability; but at the same time, it is a relation between capital and labour, for

accumulation *requires* exploitation: "The two moments are intrinsically connected: the relation unleashes the process, which in turn reproduces the relation". [25]

*Class and Crisis*

At times when capital expands swiftly and 'the economy' grows exponentially, wages may rise and more workers tend to be absorbed into the wage relation, allowing for a broader distribution of general social wealth if only within the limits of the market and private property. The prime example here is the postwar economic boom that heralded the so-called Golden Age of Capitalism (1950-1973) in the technologically advanced capitalist core countries of the 'West'. This period of 'social-welfare capitalism' came to an end in the late 1970s with the adoption of neoliberal policies and forms of governance (welfare retrenchment, financial deregulation, austerity, etc.) in response to the economic crisis of the 1970s. Initially, such neoliberal reforms were met with fierce resistance by workers and unions who sought to defend their interests against Thatcherite and Reaganite (as well as Clintonite and Blairite) 'class struggle from above'. By the 1990s, however, after two decades of retreat and defeat for organized labor, neoliberalism had become hegemonic. Under such conditions, capitalism tends to

> present itself as a classless class society, in which the old workers' milieu has been dissolved into a generalized wage-dependency: everywhere proletarianized individuals, nowhere the proletariat, not as a recognizable group of people and certainly not as a collective actor [...]. Developed capitalism [thus] can appear to be classless. [26]

Yet, with the 2007 financial crash and ensuing recession, the neoliberal paradigm increasingly came under attack politically and a new wave of global class struggles began. [27]

In recent years, thus, we have witnessed a so-called 'return' of class and class struggle under conditions of long-term stagnation and crisis. When the extended reproduction of capital (i.e. accumulation) goes into crisis, the pressure on the proletariat intensifies through wage stagnation, austerity, rising debt, under- and unemployment. The prime example here is the so-called "long downturn" [28] of industrial profitability (driven by over-capacity) that has characterized the capitalist core since the early

1970s and that came to a head in the years leading up to the financial crash of 2007. Under conditions of capitalist crisis and deindustrialization in the 'West' (sometimes described as a shift from Fordism to post-Fordism), class struggle necessarily intensifies and capital (investments) tends to shift into the sphere of circulation, esp. finance, insurance and real estate markets (also known as "FIRE") as well as Big Tech. The capitalist class, after all, still seeks to generate profits, while proletarians – caught in the social logic of capital – remain wage and market dependent. This includes the "relative surplus population" [29] that finds itself excluded from the extended reproduction of capital, unable to sell their labor power on the market due to shrinking demand.

As a result, class struggles in all 'social spheres' tend to proliferate, whether at the site of production (in the form of strikes), in circulation (where they take the form of riots, blockades and occupations) or social reproduction (e.g. in the form of mutual aid, movements for food sovereignty and communes). [30] But so do struggles over hegemony and forms of state repression, left- and right-wing populisms, militarization of borders, and new forms of fascism. Contemporary examples of class struggles range from the Occupy protests to the recent wave of anti-police riots (Paris, London, Oakland, Ferguson, Baltimore) and insurrection (George Floyd Uprising), the Gilets Jaunes and anti-pension reform struggles in France, anti-austerity demonstrations, port blockades, wildcat strikes by teachers, newly unionized Amazon warehouse workers, transport workers, care workers, etc. As trade unionist Mick Lynch put it in the UK strike winter of 2022-23, "the government was 'coordinating … an attack on working people' by worsening working conditions and offering below-inflation pay rises". [31] Poverty, precarity and "wageless life" [32] always haunt workers under capitalism and jeopardize their very existence as survival goods like food and shelter may become unaffordable. In the absence of a functioning welfare state, the problem of poverty turns from a precarious and debilitating condition into a question of survival. Globally, this is the rule rather than the exception.

*Class and Geography*

Under the conditions of capitalist globalization, the Global South has seen the rise of the world's largest slums. These slums are home to what geographer Mike Davis in *Planet of Slums* has termed "a surplus humanity" that is as much a product of capitalist modernity as the industrial working class. [33] Under conditions of catastrophic global warming, the number of

slum dwellers is estimated to grow to 2 billion by 2030 (according to the UN) as forced migration, criminalization, detainment and incarceration of migrant workers increases, swelling the ranks of a global 'surplus humanity'. At the same time, there exist more wage laborers today than ever before, whether in the post-industrial service sector or the mega-factories of Guangdong, California, or Berlin-Brandenburg. On a world scale, then, the industrial working class has disappeared as little as the concept of the proletariat could be brought into line with it. Over the last half-century of economic turbulence, capitalism's "combined and uneven development" [34] has reshuffled traditional core-periphery relations inherited both from colonialism (empire/colony) and 19th century urbanization (town/country).

As a result, the proletariat in the US, Britain, and elsewhere, is becoming more fragmented and separated not only from the means of (re)production but also from each other, that is from a common working-class experience and identity. It is therefore crucial to understand the spatial dimension of class in conjunction with the racial and gendered divisions of labor in the urban hubs and hinterlands of global capitalism. In this regard, *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 1978) stands as a model of intersectional and interdisciplinary conjunctural analysis of the shifting socio-economic, legal and political terrain of class struggle and the formation of neoliberalism in the UK. [35] Globally as well as on a national level, the proletarian condition rather than any one working-class identity becomes a common experience:

> Beyond the city, where there is little question of inclusion, it becomes clear that these populations are also unified by something else: the commonality that comes from being increasingly surplus to the economy, though also paradoxically integral to it. This is the experience of class in the Marxist sense – the proletariat as the population that is dispossessed of any means of subsistence other than what is afforded by selling time for wages, simultaneously forced from the production process by technological development and nonetheless necessary to it, as its basic constituent. [36]

In his study of the American *Hinterland* (2018), geographer Phil Neel analyzes how and why sub- and exurban spaces are transformed into waiting rooms and holding areas for racialized migrant workers and surplus populations gathered in rings around major cities, while many

rural regions are simply abandoned, becoming wastelands for global production:

> At best, they can hope to be transformed into recreation zones, military and prison complexes, or massive sites for primary production – swaths of countryside converted to mines, oil fields, or farms, or simply flooded to make way for reservoirs and hydropower projects serving the cities. Though sometimes geographically distant, most non-urban areas function as subsidiary zones for global capital and for the particular cities that happen to be closest to them – they are by no means outside the economy, and they therefore no longer constitute 'peripheries' that are not yet fully subsumed into world capitalism. The global destruction of the peasantry has converted the periphery into a worldwide economic hinterland, defined by expulsion and exclusion. [37]

As Ruth Wilson Gilmore has argued in her aptly titled study of the prison system in California, *Golden Gulag* (2007), "the correspondence between regions suffering deep economic restructuring, high rates of unemployment and underemployment among men, and intensive surveillance of youth by the state's criminal justice apparatus, present the relative surplus population as the problem for which prison became the state's solution". [38] More than 350 prisons have been built in the U.S. since 1980, "with certain regions of the country accounting for large shares of this dramatic growth", writes Judah Schept in *Coal, Cages, Crisis* (2022), and "Central Appalachia is one such region; there are eight prisons alone in Eastern Kentucky". [39] California alone has a total of 36 prisons as of 2022, despite the fact that both the violent crime rate and property crime rate have decreased and/or stagnated since the 1980s. While the U.S. are renowned for the racial disproportionality of its approx. 2 million prison population (incl. jails), there is another striking pattern that is often sidelined: "90 percent of inmates come from the most precarious sectors of the working class [...] half of jail inmates come from family who live below *half* of the poverty line". [40]

Under such conditions, to struggle against the impositions of class is to struggle against "a capitalism compelled to act as colonial", [41] where the 'discipline of the wage' meets or gives way to state violence and dispossession. The odds of rising from poor hillbilly to venture capitalist, like J. D. Vance, are one in a million. For workers, to hold on to the liberal

fantasy of upward social mobility as available to all who just try hard enough thus constitutes "a relation of cruel optimism [where] something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing". [42] Cultural Studies research into historical and contemporary representations of class and re-compositions of capital can provide some clarity as well as a starting point for political education and social emancipation. In any case, the analytical category of class needs to be widened to include impositions of class in and outside of the wage relation: exploitation, rising precarity, unpaid social reproduction, immiseration, and superfluity. The "doubly free" proletarian, as Marx himself saw so clearly, is always-already a "virtual pauper". [43] They are also a virtual refugee, a virtual homeless, a virtual prisoner.

*Concluding Class in Cultural Studies*

From the outset, the discussion of class was a key concept within (British) cultural studies. "Its interest in youth subcultures, resistance, hegemony and popular culture, all derived from a concern with class". [44] Yet, through the pressures and emerging ideological consensus and dominant culture of neoliberalism, class was made to seem an outdated concept for politics, policy and academia, while deindustrialization (in the global north) resulted in a certain loss of visibility and availability of class as a positive identity. This resulted in the myth of a classless society and questioned the relevance of discussing class. Events following the financial crash of 2007 and the ensuing politics of austerity, which were compounded by experiences during the pandemic, however, have made the growing social inequalities and imbalances in power-relations more visible and tangible again. A growing awareness allows for a critical questioning of the meanings, representations and significations of class at a time when means of re-production and acquisition of goods are becoming increasingly precarious.

To critically engage with this renewed interest in class and move beyond representational discussions of social class it is important (if not paramount) to understand the making of class not just on a discursive but also on a material level. Which is why in analyzing contemporary cultural production and consumption we need to understand how class is made, recognize the contemporary underlying capitalist class relations and acknowledge the implications of class for crisis and geography. This way, we can, once again, critically include class as a key concept within an intersectional cultural analysis.

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Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital*, London/New York: 2023. (This is a comprehensive account of the economic power of capital, which relies on a wide range of Marxist scholarship over the last decades and introduces very useful categorical distinctions re: class.)

Phil Neel, *Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict*, London: 2018. (A great book which, instead of treating class in the abstract, provides a compelling discussion of the way class is lived and experienced and mediated by geography.)

E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, New York: 1966. (A classic which has been extremely significant for the formation of Cultural Studies as a discipline by rejecting mechanical accounts of class in the Marxist tradition.)

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