
CLASS AS A TOOL OF HISTORICAL ENQUIRY: EVOLVING PARADIGM

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Class, or an understanding based on class formation, class analysis and class interaction, has been an important way of looking at history or historical change. But the notion of class itself, the working class to be precise, has been a subject of much theoretical discussion and disagreement in the last few decades. What actually we mean when we talk of class? Is it a social category or a construct eventuated by a particular mode of production in a given time frame and is, therefore, static and unchanging, its contours rigid and well defined and its historic role fixed and predetermined? Or is there some free space around the notion of class which allows it to breathe in new experiences and add new dimensions to class awareness?

The debate around class has split the academic world into two. The starting of the debate can be found in Marx's own delineation of the model 'class in itself/for itself' which emphasised the objective class position growing from the objective historical condition of capitalism and, as a result, imbued with a revolutionary consciousness which was destined to play a historical role. This objective and normative approach to class analysis run into various conceptual, methodological and explanatory problems. The rich world of labour has varying degrees of experiences enabling numerous currents to converge into class formation. This further accounts for its engagement in activities other than what this normative approach has assigned to it.

The Marxist position of 'class in itself/for itself' is too objective an approach to allow for any role for politics and social action in class formation. Its involvement in activities other than a programmatic revolutionary action is explained away as an aberration and only the normative and teleological aspect of class identity and behaviour is taken note of. This silence of the traditional theory on the varying dispositions and practises of the working class has been appropriately described as an epistemology of silence.

Blending historical experience into a theoretical analysis the masterly work of E P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 1963, (1) underscored that class being a lived experience was shaped as much by the active historical participation of the workers as by the objective forces of production that they were subjected to. This divided the scholarship

on class formation into two warring camps of proponents of theory and proponents of history, or, in terms of scholars, between Althusser and Thompson. The rigid Marxian position of Etienne Balibar that 'classes are functions of the process of production as a whole. They are not its subjects, on the contrary, they are determined by its form' evokes a sharp comment from Thompson in a rather colourful language:

'The subject (or agency) of history disappears once again...And since classes are 'functions of the process of production' the way is thrown open once again to all the rubbish of deducing classes, class fractions, class ideologies (true and false) from their imaginary positioning – above, below, interpellatory, vestigial, slantwise- within a mode of production... and this mode of production is conceived of as something other than its eventuation in historical process.' (2)

The sarcasm in the above quoted remark is inescapable. E P Thompson explained his theoretical position in lucid terms in *The Poverty of Theory* in the following words:

'Class formation...arise at the intersection of determination and self-activity; the working class made itself as much as it was made. We cannot put 'class' here and 'class consciousness' there as two separate entities...Nor can we deduce class from a static 'section' (since it is becoming over time), nor as a function of a mode of production, since class formation and class consciousness....eventuate in an open ended process of relationship- of struggle with other classes- over time'. (3)

E P Thompson's classic work threw up many important questions and inspired future writings on the subject. The earlier conservative approach gave way to a new social history in which the actual lived experiences of the workers was held important. Since the premise for studying working class changed, it set off concomitant shifts in other key positions. The process of class formation in this approach varied from country to country and was shaped not only by the relationships at the workplace but was affected equally by the larger societal and political forces. The traditional norms and patterns of life also impinged on working class consciousness. In this new approach, therefore, class and society, polity and cultural moorings, economy and religious belief systems, all get intricately interwoven. Jean Willems has neatly defined this fresh thinking in the following words:

'In place of a static instrumentalist economic determinism they have treated class as a dynamic social relation, a form of social domination, determined largely by changing relations of production but shaped by cultural and political factors (including ethnicity and religion) without any apparent logic of economic interest.'

The acceptance of these propositions make class formation time and space specific: it varies from nation to nation and changes over time. The work by Ira Katznelson and Aristiole Zolberg, *Working Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (1986) assumes an important significance in this changed intellectual milieu. Class, they lamented, was 'too frequently used in a congested way' and argued for the need to alter the conceptual vocabulary. Driven by empiricism they based their theoretical constructs on the processes of working class formation in France, Germany and the United States.

The first step towards de-congesting, re-defining the notion of classis by sharpening the analytical tools. Class, they argued, was to be conceived of through four connected levels of theory and history which they mentioned as structure, ways of life, dispositions and collective action.

The first level of structure refers to economy. The level of economic development is the most fundamental aspect on which rests other important processes like commodification of money, land and labour, proletarianisation and exploitation of the labouring poor. At this level of analysis class is used in philosophical terms and is 'experience-distant'. Yet at this level of macro-economic analysis, the commonalities in the process of capitalist development need to be suitably altered by cultural, demographic and political conditions which are different from nation to nation.

As compared to the first level, the second level of ways of life deals with actual patterns of life and social organisations and is, therefore, 'experience-near'. This level of class formation also includes social relations at the work place and in the residential areas and the labour markets. The first two levels are intricately linked so much so that the second may be considered as an attribute of the first.

The third level of disposition is what the workers make of the first two levels of class formation, the meanings that they derive and the shared experiences that they form. It is a cognitive construct. E P Thompson sums it up aptly:

'Class is a social and cultural formation (often finding institutional expression) which cannot be defined abstractly, or in isolation, but only in terms of relationship with other classes...When we speak of a class we are thinking of a very loosely-defined body of people who have the same congeries of interests, social experiences, traditions and value system, who have a disposition to behave as a class...'

At this level Geertzian cultural analysis assumes significance. It is through disposition that workers draw an understanding of their own experiences and respond to other classes and circumstances in class ways.

The fourth level of class formation, too, is the one suggested by E P Thompson himself when he says that 'class itself is not a thing, it is a happening'. Class must act to be defined as a class. It is action that invests meaning to the disposition. The disposition of the class at the fourth level is expressed through movements and organisations in a self-conscious way.

This kind of four layered analysis of the processes of class formation has the advantage of gauging the specificity of such processes at each of the four levels and also to trace their inter-connections to see the overall pattern. It may, however, be added that this four tiered analysis can be seen as an elaboration of E P Thompson's description of class as 'junction term' straddling between structure and process. This analytical framework has been tested by scholars like William Sewell, Michelle Perrot and Alain Cottureau in the context of France, Amy Bridges in the case of United States and Kocka and Mary Nolan for Germany to see the dissimilarities, the divergence rather than the commonalities in such a process. Fundamental changes in the economy in the nineteenth century affected wide ranging changes in social milieu and political organisation, in language, culture and webs of relationship. The awareness of belonging to a traditional craft or trade came to be replaced by a new working class consciousness. Though these changes occur around the same time in the three countries, the form of changes at the level of disposition and action vary.

Apart from E P Thompson other British Marxist historians through their writings have expanded the definition of class as a category by seeing it as a coming into existence as a historical experience. A brief survey of some of these writings will be in order to prove the point. The book by Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*(1947)(4) sparked off a debate on what led to the transition from feudalism to capitalism. He differed with the definition of Max Weber of 'spirit of capitalism' and also refused to see it as a result of long distance trade, as done by Henri Pirenne. For Maurice Dobb capitalism was the outcome of a specific mode of production. His perspective may be described as politico-economic which saw class not as a sociological category but as a historical phenomenon and class relations as the basis for historical enquiry. In this way he took economic history beyond economics. Whereas Paul Sweezy argued that feudalism was swept away by increasing mercantile activity, Maurice Dobb saw it as the outcome of the 'class struggle of peasants against lords'(5).

Rodney Hilton has been chiefly concerned with the study of the feudal mode of production. His main works include *The English Rising of 1381*, *Bond Men Made Free* and *Medieval Peasant Movements*. He also contributed to the transition debate(6). The first emphasis of his study was the peasantry which he refused to see as part of a social order as done by the historians of the Middle Ages or by sociologists following the Weberian model. He was also opposed to the tendency of the anthropologists to de-historicise peasant experiences. He saw peasants as part of larger social and geographical units and participating in broader social relations of production. By situating the peasantry in a larger feudal context Rodney Hilton not only outlines the prevailing feudal social institutions, the feudal culture and the political economy of the feudal mode but also the peasants' reaction to it in the form of rebellion which ultimately led to its demise.

Another important historian is Christopher Hill. His notable writings are: *The English Revolution, 1640*, *Puritanism and Revolution*, *The Century of Revolutions, 1603-1714*, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution*, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution*, *The World Turned Upside Down*(7).

The main focus of the works of Christopher Hill was the application of class analysis to the study of seventeenth century England and, secondly, to the growth of ideas in which he put emphasis both on the 'intellectual' and the 'popular'. To him the English Civil War was more than just a political and religious struggle; it was a bourgeois revolution much like the Revolution in France in 1789. He saw it as a bourgeois revolution not because it was led by the bourgeoisie but because it created the conditions which paved the way for Industrial Revolution and the growth of capitalism. And since he believed that '... a Revolution embraces all aspects of social life and activity'. He paid equal attention to examining the relationship between ideological movements and social change. His observation on the issue is worth noting: 'Marx himself did not fall into the error of thinking that men's ideas were merely a pale reflection of their economic needs...but some of his successors...have been far more economic deterministic than Marx'.

Christopher Hill's application of class analysis to seventeenth century English history was criticised by some. His reply to them is noteworthy: 'I think of class as defined by the objective position of its members in relation to the productive forces and to other classes'.

Eric Hobsbawm while working on the history of labour included within his analysis the submerged groups of pre-industrial times, their collective behaviour and the growth of class consciousness. The seminal writings of Eric Hobsbawm are *Labouring Men*, *Primitive Rebels*,

Bandits, Industry and Empire, The Age of Revolution(8), 1789-1848 and The Age of Capital, 1848-1875. In his labour history he included the entire working class, both organised and otherwise, and reflected on their experiences. Answering the question if class is just an analytical construct he observes: 'Class in the full sense only comes into existence at the historical moment when classes begin to acquire consciousness of themselves as such'.

All these British Marxist historians, Thompson, Dobb, Hilton, Hill and Hobsbawm turned class analysis into class struggle analysis. Therein lies the significance of their contributions. By placing class historically in the context of a struggle they ushered in the writing of 'history from below'. Their writings also take us far beyond Moore's description of the working class by seeing them as predating industrial times.

References:

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