Rescuing class from nostalgia: notes towards an anthropology of class transformed

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Abstract

Much has been written about the working class in recent years, especially since the ugliest proponents of our domestic culture-wars have vociferously laid claim to representing 'it'. Anthropologists too have re-engaged the concept of class as an analytic for thinking through unjust and unequal structures of power with a new interest. While the return to class in the study of oppression is both timely and urgent, it will be advanced that ethnographic approaches that fixate on stable cultural images and understandings of class relations but are inattentive to the ways in which capital continuously transforms them are inadequate. In the worst cases, such approaches can come dangerously close to validating the 'legitimate concerns' of the nativist right, by way of naturalising the social relations that underpin them. Beyond offering a critique of narrow 'identitarian' studies of class, the present article will argue for a thoroughly dynamic and multidimensional approach that foregrounds class as heterogeneous, historically produced and always in becoming – always transformed and, in turn, transforming people. It will be proposed that such an anthropology of class should be particularly attentive to processes of class composition, decomposition and recomposition. These processes can only be grasped if our analyses are stretched to encompass both their cultural and ideological representations, and concrete struggles, against the changing organisation of capitalist relations in our fields.

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After Brexit and Trump, the social sciences looked at class with a renewed preoccupation for its spatial composition, the 'lumps' that capitalism's uneven and combined development had produced (Cooper in Kasmir and Gill 2018). After all, the departicularising force of globalised financial capital was what, according to some commentators on the left (and the right), the 'populist' electoral upsets of 2016 represented a break with (c/f Streeck 2017, Friedman 2018). The euro-american working-classes, the argument went, had rejected the amalgam of fiscal conservatism and skin-deep social liberalism which had characterised Third-Way politics on both sides of the Atlantic for over two decades: a politics that relentlessly undermined working people's capacity to reproduce their local communities, to then blame them for supposedly failing at it (Fraser 2017). People like Gurminder Bhambra, however, warned us against romanticising the emplaced and embedded. She argued then that the localist 'legitimate concerns' rhetoric in which much dog-whistling is coated had too often been echoed by those ethnographers who wanted to give voice to the casualties of deindustrialisation, those 'citizens of somewhere' (c/f Goodhart 2017) who had grown to feel 'strangers in their own country' (Bhambra 2017). When social scientists tell the stories of the 'left behind' but elide those who were always 'left out', to paraphrase Bhambra, they

contribute to foreclosing the possibility of realising the working-class as a truly emancipatory collective political subject. This kind error is due to what Bhambra calls methodological whiteness, an unwillingness to centre the production of difference as a defining and structuring feature of the accumulation of capital (c/f Bhambra 2017).

Bharmbra's critique resonates with me. I would further argue, however, that the misrecognition of the relationship between capitalism and difference is not the consequence of a too-narrow focus on class: in fact, it is compounded by its dematerialisation, by which working-classness is recast primarily as a denigrated cultural identity rather than a position in a social system necessitated by the exploitation of labour (but not wholly determined by it, c/f Shi 2018). Is there a difference between an anthropology written about, and sometimes with, working class people, and an anthropology of class? This article is preoccupied with the unintended political and epistemic consequences of substituting the first for the second. I will look at well-known ethnographies of working-class housing estates in England, wherein class is primarily framed as culturally-constituted identity, and class struggle is located in the clash between local moral economies and the calculative logics of state and market (Smith 2014). Their authors are fiercely committed to 'restore people's humanity through ethnographic depth' (Tyler, 2015:1182). By insisting on the autonomy of local moral and political configurations, they give us a counter-history 'from below' of the reactionary turn of the English post-industrial working class: one that apportions blame, duly, to state and capital. Yet the image of the working-class they present us with is static and self-limiting, built out of obsolete maps of productive relations.

There is an ethnographic approach better suited to capture the dynamic, always-in-becoming, multifarious character of the working class. This approach, informed by the Marxist distinction between class composition and class consciousness (Salar and Mohandesi 2013), considers the reproduction of specific working-class cultural formations, and the ways of being, feeling and thinking that make them up, by centring the transformations which constantly decompose and recompose class 'at the point of production'. This methodology asks that we look at the conflicts that emerge within the transformations of labour, and follow these faultlines outwards, into the communities that are reproduced by work, and upwards, so as to open up the world-historical processes, that are their distant source, to interpretation.

New Problems, Old Maps

Gillian Evans, who does fieldwork in a Bermondsey council estate, writes about 'placeism': the system by which resources where distributed within the local working-class community according to 'born-and-bred' systems of place-based belonging, to the detriment of Irish and Jamaican immigrant workers (Evans 2006:61). Xenophobia is rooted in local histories of precarity, where 'work, housing and public services were to be defended at all costs' from outsiders (Evans 2017a:217). Discontent is voiced against a welfare system which allocates resources according to need, thus trumping local hierarchies of deservingness as rootedness, and people become increasingly resentful of the growing visibility of culturally foreign ways of living, perceived as a threat to their sense of place (2017a:217). Displaced from their socio-economic status as the 'nation's backbone' by the ravages of globalisation and Thatcherism, unable to ascend into the middle class, within the new 'multiculturalist'

hegemony cemented under New Labour, Evans' informants 'became ethnic' too (2017a:218). Hence, their turn towards political formations like the BNP, EDL, and the relatively 'moderate' UKIP – an 'expression of discontent in post-industrial Britain' (2017:219). This kind of argument has a precedent in Young and Wilmott's suggestively titled *The New East End: kinship, race and conflict* (2002), a follow-up study to their seminal *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957), where they argue that white Tower Hamlets working-class residents' hostility towards their Bangladeshi neighbors is the localised effect of the 'over-centralisation of welfare in the name of strict equality', which transgressed local informal networks of mutual support (2002:230-231).

In a similar move, Koch claims that 'a retreat to defensive populism may be the only space left to working class people in the current political system' (Koch 2016:27-28). She investigates the declining fortunes of the Free Workers Party (FWP), a 'localist populist' political formation born out of a majority-white council estate in an English town 'heavily affected by industrial decline' (Koch 2016:4). The FWP saw itself as a left-wing alternative to far-right formations like the British National Party (BNP), yet like its rightwing counterparts it rejected multiculturalism, foregrounding instead 'bread and butter' issues such as the fight against 'crime and anti-social behaviour' on the estate (2016:10). The FWP informally policed the estate, targeting perceived drug dealers and drug users. Their moderate electoral success in the mid-noughties, Koch argues, reflected both their appeal to local working people's 'ordinary concerns', and her informants' disenchantment with the Labour party, which had cemented support in the post-war era through 'paternalistic' housing policies, but, in the aftermath of welfare reform, was perceived as distant and unaccountable, far removed from those close networks of support which had by then become 'a precondition for survival against the predicaments and unpredictability of daily life' (Koch 2017:108). To the outside of these networks were also recent immigrants, and new council tenants, often in temporary accommodation.

What establishes working-class concerns as such? Throughout Tony Blair's tenure as Prime Minister, the Institute of Race Relations1 documented the government's relentless assault on asylum rights, the intensification and consolidation of a crisis rhetoric around immigration, the exclusion of all non-European migrants from the benefit system, the singling-out of Muslim minorities as the new enemy within (concurrent with the turn to 'war on terror' national security policies), and the expansion of the criminalisation and policing of minorities and working-class youths (IRR archives 1999-2007). All of these phenomena must be seen in a labour context marked by 'racialized exclusion compounded by household poverty, unemployment and educational underachievement', which did 'persist [and] indeed multiply' throughout the 1990s (Hall 2000:2). Outsiders, it would seem, are not just the making of 'local' people preoccupied with reciprocity and embeddedness: state and capital play a decisive role in their invention. Immigration, or antisocial behaviour for that matter, are not 'working-class concerns' any more than they are upper class concerns. Moral panics around them are routinely manufactured to constrain and contain those social forces which capital perceives as threats (c/f Jackson 1988, Glynn 2002, 2005). Therefore, to engage working-class support for xenophobic policies and punitivism as a 'legitimate' form of political consciousness emerging from subjective experiences of dispossession, is to 'abstract individual effects from the contradictory structures which produce them' (Hall 1978:x).

What we ought to be asking instead, is how 'demands for protection [are linked] to structures of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic domination' in our fields (Samet 2019:278). Koch and Evans might have illuminated these processes, had they undertaken to rekindle the severed ties between the 'place-based' networks of reciprocity in which their informants are enmeshed, and current productive relations in their fields. In this sense, there is an important difference between considering all antagonisms in which self-identified working-class people are involved as having emerged from the class relation, and consciously attempting to engage the social relations which are evinced from these conflicts from the antagonistic perspective of the subversion of the system (cf Panzieri 1994). The latter exercise is what we may accomplish if we turn our ethnographic focus towards the small and big transformations which result from specific processes of class composition, decomposition and recomposition in our fields.

Towards and anthropology of class decomposed and recomposed

Working class cultures, as I have argued before, are strongly tied to modes of production, but never wholly determined by them as they are brought about by conscious and agentic working-class self-activity (see Hall, 1981). As such, they do not just disappear when modes of production change, but stay behind in the form of shared traditions, memories, practices, and structures of feeling (Williams, 1957). These 'hauntings' of class culture are what, in my opinion, the ethnographies I have analysed are chiefly preoccupied with. However, different locations and historical conjunctures correspond to contingent social relations of production, with particular technological characteristics, and recombining workers in new alliances. The 'micro' scale at which class is made and remade is what the framework of class composition seeks to gauge, by differentiating between the technical composition of the class, i.e. the manner in which it is materially constituted by capital through the division, management and exploitation of labour, and its political composition, i.e. the manner in which it composes itself in the struggle against concrete situations of exploitation (Mohandesi 2015:85). Divisions of gender, race, ethnicity, and citizenship play a role both in the technical and political composition of class, and can be reproduced, reconfigured or (through class-based solidarities) transcended. Decomposition and recomposition point to the processes by which class breaks down and is rebuilt, both in terms of the technical restructuring of modes of production and of their social components, and of the defeat of a political subject which may be afterwards replaced by another, related to, and yet distinct from that which came before it (2015:86). It follows that, at any given moment in time, one objective class formation can correspond to different political subjects which operate within different temporal horizons and are more or less tightly related to concrete situations of exploitation (Kasmir and Carbonella 2018:3).

One way we might study this identity is by centring the tensions between 'recomposed' class formations and long-standing class cultures. The permanence of old labour cultures, in this sense, can manifest itself by reorienting emerging arrangements towards old forms of sociality, as the deregulation of work re-embeds formal economic processes within informal strategies of production and reproduction (Narotzky and Goddard, 2017). This is evidenced

by ethnographic work on the 'distributional labour' through which new surplus populations 'try to recast claims of deservingness by mixing logics of production and redistribution after deindustrialisation' (Rajkovic, 2017:42). One very good example is Mao Mollona's (2005, 2008) research on the transformation of work and workers in the British steel industry. His informants in Sheffield have responded to deindustrialisation by communising their resources through 'extended and flexible households' whose income streams pull together 'informal exchanges and production with the formal organization of the factory' (2005:543). However, the wealth generated through such solidaristic practices is distributed unequally, in line with the hierarchies of skill, age and gender that 'hegemonic capitalism' (Burawoy in Mollona 2009) makes on the shopfloor and which ultimately generate an informal culture 'that reproduces the capitalists' values and intensifies their profits' (Mollona, 2005:544). If, for Evans, exclusion is an uncontrived response to scarcity in a disunited country (Evans 2017:217), Mollona traces it back directly to the (much more intentional) work of the Fordist 'psycho-political nexus' (c/f Gramsci 1971).

But transformations to the social organisation of labour in a given locality are not thrust upon working people by an invisible hand: they are the result of the always ongoing struggle between labour, state and capital. Desolidarisation and fragmentation can be resisted, new solidarities forged. Maria Ines Fernandez Alvarez' work with the Argentine *Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular* (Confederation of Workers of the Popular Economy), a coalition of wageless workers engaged in a diversity of socio-economic activities, shows how a shared consciousness is built across differences (generational, of gender, and ethnicity) through labour (Fernandez-Alvarez 2017, 2019). In her field, highly precarious workers 'with neither labor rights nor employer', in the process of identifying, articulating and making claims to collective rights qua workers, embed themselves into a new collective subject. Through the everyday practice of political organising, in turn, they direct the collective towards the creation of future forms of well-being that can integrate heterogeneous, long-standing ways of being, while also seeking to expand, and not just preserve, individual freedoms (Fernandez-Alvarez, 2019). In the case of Fernandez-Alvarez's informants, this takes the form, amongst others, of demanding recognition from the state of the special relationship that exist between the public spaces of production and exchange and those who make their livelihoods there, in what is fundamentally a process of commoning (ibid 2019:64).
This is a model of place-based resistance which has the potential to be subversive, rather than reactionary, inclusive, rather than exclusive.

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1: The Institute of Race Relations archives can be accessed at https://irr.org.uk/

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