

(Q)

The inequalities of a class society do not end with economic inequality: indeed, economics may not necessarily be the most meaningful way to talk about class. Rather, in the complex interplay between economic and cultural configurations of class, it may be cultural factors which are the more apparent indicators of class distinction and class inequality (Lawler, 1999, 4).

Examine the implications of this argument for understanding the inter-relationship of class and gender.

Introduction

Specifically my investigation will centre on cultural capital, as cited in Lawler's statement, and the implication for class and gender, due to the assertion of 'cultural factors the more apparent indicators of class distinction and class inequality.' Thus I shall first examine class and its connotations. A subdivision of this initial section shall draw on Skegg's work of the disidentification of class among a sample of working class women and how the working and middle classes observe and implicate their distinctions, and additionally the ease of movement within these classes. This shall lead onto the illustration and persona of a working class man and woman and their differentiation. Further I shall implicate the meaning of patriarchy interwoven in capitalism as the means of production.

For the latter part of my essay I shall concentrate on Bourdieu's seminal studies on the concept of cultural capital and its importance. Disputable is the importance of economics in this concept and the translation of the social strata using the example of education. Subsequently I shall discuss the habitus which permits economic migration but concentrates on the perceived greater importance of cultural indicators. Contemporary ideas of moving from the 1980's decade of yuppiedom to conspicuous consumption will form an undertone of my argument to form the conclusion that the

ultimate passport of cultural capital is to a large extent unobtainable and more significantly unaccepted by the judgement of the accrediting middle classes.

Understanding Class

Defining class as an order initially helps me in its understanding. Thus I conceive initially that class is a grade of society as disposed by birth, wealth or occupation (Garmonsway and Simpson, 1970, 134). Therefore, it seems easy to reduce class simply to economic analysis in the primary stages of analysis. However, this is a fallacy. Class is intrinsic and furthermore suggestive in cultural factors where it is ever more consequential.

Answering questions related to class can be regarded by some as an embarrassing subject and the implication of this is the severance of class as an economic valuation and ethical valuation (Sayer, 2002, 1.1). Again this is reiterating the superior value of cultural capital concurrently in relation to those of economics.

However, it is important when considering class in relation to divisions of sex to understand the perspective of available material. As a tool of analysis in gender studies, there has always been a significant convergence on white middle-class women, specifically in western societies. This is because of the unproblematic situation in being 'subject to no other form of discrimination, abuse, oppression, or exploitation' (Spelman, 1990, 51). Plainly, this has to be contemplated when questioning the status of working class women.

Further I am answering a question of gender and class. It is essential to find the distinctions in the working class between men and women. It is important to understand that 'men and women experience class in different ways, and that potential unitises of class are disrupted by conflicts of gender' (Bryson, 1992, 258).

Conceiving Class

Class has come to be an indicator, primarily economical but more importantly in cultural terms. It is a personal embodiment of how we are, and serves to 'infuse daily interactions; influencing to whom we talk and shaping what we say and how we say it' (Reay, 1998, 267). More importantly this can come to act as a barrier of segregation and devalue the person we believe ourselves to be. There is a pursuit of serving to seek approval for our comportment that serves to legitimise our existence in our occupation in the social strata. As Skeggs investigated this can be 'institutionally, discursively or through practice' (Skeggs, 2001, 297).

Expressions of class can serve to configure a 'loaded moral signifier as a source of stigma or status' (Sayer, 2002, 1.4) whereby the same behaviour is judged. I shall use the example of single mother. In the context of working class women they are despised as being drains on welfare benefits and council provided housing, depiction of the underclass theory. Juxtaposed against the single middle-class woman, who simultaneously holds down employment and is a mother; an epitome of independence. Though they may not be regarded by their own classes as desirable, their self-determination is revered. It is clear there are moral implications of class which transcend boundaries, whereby a similar situation denotes overt distinctions in accordance to position in the social order.

Refusal of Recognition

A study of working class women in Skeggs' 1997 work titled '(Dis) Identifications of Class' focuses on the women's inability to classify themselves with regard to class, a 'refusal of recognition' (Skeggs, 1997, 74). I believe we can categorise these women as being seemingly in class limbo. They are aware of what they are trying to escape and the brush of the working class onus, though they are aware of their inability to conform totally to the standards they believe being middle class encompasses, an example of the motion of the habitus.

Lawler's study follows women who have escaped from the working-class, through marriage to a middle-class man or gaining a university degree. Thus the women are in a process of escapism, they are wanting to 'get out and get away' (Lawler, 1999, 12) but the importance is where they are trying to escape to, and not from. Their lives encompass a position that is allied to trying to gain status by following traditional middle class pursuits, however their lives are an act of pseudo existence. Their position is peripheral, and they feel they do not fit in, excluded from where they are trying to be accepted. For example, accents lost through elocution disengage their sense of working class identity, but this does not presume their acceptance into the middle class.

Figuratively, the women are in a terminal position of a Venn diagram within the overlaps of working class and middle class, to which they cannot elude. Thus women who are fugitives from their working class pasts and feel unwelcome to the middle class discard class as important, thus their 'classlessness is the consequence of

compromise' (Reay, 1997, 228). The women's words of repudiation of their social positioning is extremely charged with meaning. There is no apertaining of identity, and this source of 'classlessness' forms the vulnerability of class and its association. There is a sense that negation of class signifies a 'sensitive, subtle and minute indicator' of the importance of class to these women,' (Sayer, 2002, 1.3). Thus 'I am' is as similarly loaded as 'I am not' (Skeggs, 1997, 77). Questions should be asked as to the reason why women are so solicitous to escape their sense of working class identity, and shall be enquired in the ensuing part of the essay.

A 'gendered' sense of being working class

Restating an earlier point, I am going to investigate the 'gendered' difference existent between men and women within the scope of the working class. Such that 'men and women experience class in different ways, and that potential unities of class are disrupted by conflicts of gender' (Bryson, 1992, 258).

Feminists understand patriarchy as a tool of capitalism being wielded by men. Within their own class, women are further subordinated under the position of the men. Thus 'pride in being working class amongst men is that despite their subordinate class they nevertheless belong to the dominant gender which provides them with some self esteem' (Sayer, 2002, 6.1). Women are disadvantaged by class, and further by their gender which cannot be sought to escaped as class can.

There is a history of romanticism with the male working class hero. Working class men celebrate their collected sense of identity garnered from the unity of the working class males. There is a background and contemporary continuance of working men's

clubs. Thus 'working classness is not entirely a stigmatised identity that people tend to distance themselves from. This underestimates the continued moral force of working-class identities, at least for men,' (Savage, 2001, 886). Interviews in Savage's north west study are with both sexes. It is interesting to note how the men interviewed were more readily able to categorise themselves as working class than the women interviewed in Skeggs work, and central to the question of the interdependence of class and gender.

Using this idea of the working class men's unity juxtaposed against the portrayal the 'classless' working-class women interviewed in Skeggs' 1997 work serves to illustrate the women's idea of their own agnostic social positioning. They want to avoid the idea of being identified as working-class. They don't want to be associated with the women they see as working class:

You know you see them walking round town, dead fat, greasy hair, smelly clothes, dirty kids, you know the type, crimplene trousers and all, they just don't care no more, I'll never be like that. (Skeggs, 1997, 83).

The women specifically distance themselves from what they perceive working class to be. There is no working-class heroine for these women to adore, and is part of the reason women are seen to want to bypass the working class.

What is cultural capital and why is it important?

Pierre Bourdieu's seminal work on cultural capital serves to enforce the idea that class should be moved out of the economic realm. There are differing aspects to this sense of cultural capital. Definitive is that of the symbolic and how forms are taken once the types of capital are recognised as legitimate. However, this can only be enabled by the middle-class. It is 'their tastes and dispositions which are coded as inherently right,

and inherently tasteful,' (Lawler, 1999, 6). Thus the working class can have economic, cultural and social aspects of capital, though if there is no acceptance of these then their exchange value is ineffectual. 'This cultural configuration of class can enable middle-class observers to despise and ridicule the aspirations of working class people,' (Lawler, 1999, 19). It is this that brings about the sense of limbo for the classlessness discussed earlier. Holding cultural capital can bring about a shift from the working class, but does not guarantee a position in the middle-class. A sense of belonging is in transience: fitting not into the mould of working class roots and not reaching the acute levels of the middle classes.

Using the example of education as cultural capital

Working class women identify education as an important way for them to distance themselves from the negative associations of being working class. Skeggs' work justifies this position as she states the following: 'The real working class for these women is something from which they are desperately trying to escape. It is why they are doing college courses. They want to be seen as different,' (Skeggs, 1997, 76). Thus the women are pursuing a medium they believe can be used as a passport for class mobility. Education is a way these women believe they can meliorate their standing in the social arena.

Similarly, working class women want to aid their children's transcending of social class. However, they are less informed of the rules of the game as their middle-class counterparts are. 'Middle class mothers' preferences are for predominantly middle-class schools. Working-class mothers have to negotiate these middle class preferences from their own position of being socially less powerful,' (Reay, 1998, 274). Reay's

considerations of the lacking social power of the working-class mothers' allies with the greater social leverage of middle-class mothers, advantaged due to their confidence and ability to intervene in their child's education. They push for 'advantaged circumstances for their own children', (Reay, 1998, 274). Economically benefited, middle class women can better their children's position to the disadvantage of working-class children by seeking and expending on extra tuition in the private sector. Reciprocally working-class mothers feel simultaneously inadequate in this respect. Jane M, in Skeggs' 1997 work, wants her children to fit into their school, and this drives her to consciously alter her appearance when she collects the children from school. She wants to be accepted in the middle class sphere, of which she feels barred. Consequently, she invests in her appearance as a way to disguise her social roots to advantage the position of her children, so they fit in as Jane M believes they should be, and not ostracised from their position of attempting to penetrate the middle class from the working class (Skeggs, 1997, 88). Explicitly the sense of segregation of classes is evident. The working classes use education as their getaway to try and be initiated into the higher social strata of the middle class.

The Habitus

Habitus is a term delivered by Bourdieu which relates to social positioning and ultimately is 'inculcated from birth, derived from one's position in a particular family form (with its attendant economic, cultural and symbolic capital), as well as within systems of social difference' (Lawler, 1999, 13). It is thus 'an intrinsic feature of the self' (Lawler, 1999, 14).

Bourdieu refers to this process of one of 'alchemy' (Bourdieu, 1984, 172). This associates the complex changing of habitus with that intricate system of alchemy, changing metals into gold. Hence Bourdieu sees cultural capital as something precious and well renowned. In a system of exchange, gold was considered the greatest capital. However, there is also the implication that the habitus cannot ever fully serve to better one's social position, as the process of alchemy was one that was ultimately unachievable. The authorisation of the middle classes will never fully accredit the climbing social fortunes of increased cultural capital.

'Bourdieu's concept of habitus enables us to understand women as a complex amalgam that is always in the process of completion. There is no finality or finished article,' (Reay, 1997, 227). Habitus can thus be adapted by the forces of change. 'When a specific habitus is not fully inhabited, it is not what you own but who you are that can be exposed and uncovered,' (Lawler, 1999, 18). Always underlying is an actualisation that you can divest from your position. Economically one can move classes, but culturally it is much harder. Cultural and symbolic have to be recognised and legitimated. Is thus then femininity used as a construction of cultural capital void in the essence that it can be wiped away at the end of the day, and exists merely as a facade of embodiment? Stripping away the layers, habitus of the past will always disclose roots of working class history, and lead to rejection by the middle classes, the elementary approvers.

Consumerism

Migration of social classes in the twenty first century may be an easier accomplishment in the context of the post-modernist world. Britain's growth in mass

consumption is allied with that of capitalism, of which patriarchy finds its power. Consumption is not simply the use of commodities for the satisfaction of needs, it goes further than this. Goods and services are manipulated not only for needs, but additionally for desires. Consumption is less about fulfilling needs but constructing an identity. Clothes can then be considered as the fabric of life conveying purposes with which we have invested them, implementing a symbolic importance. This investment in the self comes at a price, and so inter links with the idea of economics as capital. However, an important question is whether this use of economics translates to cultural capital. Skeggs' work on becoming respectable executes this idea. An interviewee informs Skeggs of her image and how she wears 'classy clothes,' (Skeggs, 1997, 84). She reinforces her choice of fashion by the accreditation she receives from others as a friend commented: 'you look exquisitely elegant, you look totally different,' (Skeggs, 1997, 84).

However, simple economics do not convert directly into cultural capital. Conspicuous consumption can be identified by the onset of the nouveau riche using the examples of the Beckhams, lottery winners and footballers. Their amassing of great fortunes in the sphere of economic capital fails to transform to cultural capital. The acceptance of the middle classes is paramount in the conception of this. Their approval is lacking, thus the habitus cannot be fully occupied. Consequently, it may be concluded that cultural capital is the ultimate passport, and the one commodity economics cannot buy.

Conclusion

There is a definite correlation between cultural capital and social mobility. Though economic power is seen as secondary it should not be disregarded as it serves to aid the acquisition of cultural capital. Without economic standing, the working class women are unable to act in the middle class manner they believe is right for their

social fluidity. Thus their self-investment in clothes and practices such as going to the opera bear the mark of social accreditation, as Jane C reveals in Skeggs' work (Skeggs, 1997, 86).

However, this pursuit only reveals the complexity of the habitus. Pursuing the higher levels of the social strata merely leaves the women feeling deficient. They are excluded from the middle class due to their working class roots and excluded from the working class due to their self-belief they are classless. The women are in class limbo, knowing what they are not, rather than what they subsist. Their legitimacy is denied, and such sources their frustrations at being marginal. Creditability as a working class woman is a malignant concept. Therefore, the women's attempts at social mobility will always be defunct.

Returning to my original definition of class ordered through birth, wealth and occupation, this has foundations of truth but is incomplete. Class and moving upwards in the social strata is denied by cultural capital. The women are aiming to 'get out and get away' (Lawler, 1999, 12) though their arrival is at a place of agnosticism, peripheral from where they were and where they want to be. Seeking approval, but facing embarrassment in the process, leads fundamentally to anxiety and lack of fulfilment.

Even gaining cultural capital does not allow legitimacy, as Bourdieu's idea of the habitus investigates. The working class women are aiming to occupy a specific habitus, but this leads only to isolation. Undoubtedly, economic capital induces cultural capital, however this does not translate with ease. Their habitus is one of

continuum, continually in class limbo. Cultural capital is essential for class mobility. However, the women experience anxiety due to the lack of approval from the middle classes. Ultimately their journey to the middle classes leaves them verging on the boundaries. Improving themselves may lead to sequestration from their roots, whereas the ubiquitous habitus they desire to occupy will always be denied by the people themselves aspire to be, the middle class.

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