

Lecture 9
Sociology 298
March 15, 2002

CLASS AND GENDER

I. Functional explanations of male domination

- (1). Engels argument classic argument: This is a complex and very interesting theoretical account of the *origins* of male domination. Here are the basic elements for :

Thesis 1: A gender division of labor pre-existed male domination. This division of labor, Engels believed, had biological foundations given the level of technology. Women had greater responsibility for early childrearing and associated domestic tasks; men for hunting and large-animal husbandry once domestication of animals occurred.

Thesis 2: In this division of labor, men tended to have physical control of those resources which, if they were to become private property, would be most valuable. Large animals was the pivotal resource here.

Thesis 3: Once privately controllable property becomes possible, eventually some people will attempt to accumulate and secure such control. When this happens a problem is posed to men in terms of inheritance: For men to insure that this property would be inherited by their own progeny, they needed to control access of other men to the fertility of the mothers of their children.

Thesis 4 Male domination of women is the mechanism through which this control of reproduction is assured.

Conclusion Male domination of women is thus explained by the *functional requirements for a stable system of inheritance of male-controlled property.*

- (2). More contemporary argument of Marxist feminists: Unpaid domestic labor is functional for the accumulation of capital by lowering the costs of reproducing labor power. Structure of the argument:

Thesis 1 The provision of unpaid domestic labor is beneficial for capitalists by lowering the costs of reproducing labor power (since some of those costs are provided by unpaid domestic services). The question then becomes: who will perform this unpaid domestic labor.

Possibilities There are three options: 1. Equal sharing; 2. predominantly performed by women; 3. predominantly performed by men

Thesis 2 Until very recent times, the care of small children was most easily and efficiently done by women because of breast-feeding, relatively high fertility rates to insure surviving adult children, etc.

- Thesis 3* Because of thesis 2, it is more efficient for households for mothers/wives to take primary responsibility for the necessary unpaid household work than for husbands. The allocation of men to the role of fulltime breadwinner and the wife to homemaker will be more efficient -- on average -- than other arrangements. This is *the cheapest solution* for capitalists and *the most advantageous* for households.
- Thesis 4* Because the solution 2 is the best for capital, this solution will tend to be the most stable in capitalism.
- Thesis 5* Allocating women to these roles generates (or strongly reinforces) their subordination to men because of economic dependency, isolation, lowered status.

I think there is a lot in this explanation: these are adaptive strategies of people within families struggling to forge stable and sustainable social relations. Of course there are prior gendered power relations which come into play, and gendered cultural norms which are also resources used in forging these patterns. But these power relations and norms get reinforced at least in part because they crystallize in a structure of relations which also fit with capitalism – and that is the “value added” of the class analysis component of the argument.

II. An example of a Class & Gender problem: The class location of married women

1 Stating the Problem

1.1 Consider the following objective locations of women. What is the class location of each?

<i>Wife's Job</i>	<i>Husband's Job</i>
1. Typist, full time	no husband
2. Typist, full time	factory worker
3. Typist, full time	capitalist
4. Typist, part time	capitalist
5. Homemaker	factory worker
6. Homemaker	capitalist
7. Homemaker supported by the state	no husband

1.2. Basic problem: we have until now treated individuals as the incumbents of class locations. But individuals are also members of families. Problem = how do we accommodate families into the class structure? And, how does this affect the “class location” of the members of families.

1.3. *Remember the point of all of this*: class is meant to explain things. The point of this question is that it affects the explanatory power of the category for explaining such things as consciousness formation, class formation, class conflict.

1.4. Basic strategy = different specific instances require different logics to answer the question:

1. *children*: their class = the class of their family -- strictly derived from the class of their parents

2. *students*: their class is *objectively indeterminate* with varying degrees of indeterminacy (not “contradictory”, but indeterminate): they have particular probabilities of ending up in particular classes, and these probabilities define the class character of their studenthood.

NOTE: this problem with students is present for people with jobs as well because the *degree of attachment of a person to a given class may be variable* = the problem of intra-generational mobility: a worker who is saving up to become a petty bourgeois *and earns enough to do this* is simultaneously a worker and a pre-PB -- this can be considered an *intertemporal contradictory location*. This raises the important problem of the temporal dimension of class structures.

3. *housewives*: their class = derived from the insertion of their family into the system of property relations and exploitation → derived from their husbands. Note alternative = housewives occupy a class location within the domestic mode of production. (Christine Delphy)

1.5. Difficult case = married women in the labor force.

2 Goldthorpe’s view

a. Families pool income as units of consumption → all family members benefit from the exploitation-derived income of any member.

b. Families have unitary class interests: class struggles occur *between* families, not *within* families.

c. families are mobilized into class formations, not atomized individuals.

d. *Because of the gender division of labor and male dominance*, the economic fate of most families depends upon the class character of the husband’s job.

e. Therefore: the class of married women is derived from the class location of her husband.

3 Critique

- Given high rates of marital dissolution, many married women are rather like students in the sense that the temporal dimension of their class location is important: whatever we decide about families, they have a current class location and simultaneously have a kind of **shadow class location** = the class location that they would have if the marriage dissolved.

- class formations do not simply mobilize families as units; they also mobilize individuals. Different members of the same family may be inserted into class formations differentially, and at a minimum this means that individual locations may also matter.
- The interests that are tied to classes are not simply income-based interests. Issues of autonomy and domination, the politics of production, are also bound up with class, and these center much more exclusively on individuals as job-holders.
- The degree to which the material interests and fate of a woman are heavily dependent upon the class of her husband (and vice versa) varies across time and place. A variety of institutional features can intensify or weaken this dependency. *The more dependent is the economic welfare of a wife on her husband's class, the more it makes sense to see her class location derived from that of her husband.*

4 Implications

- Under certain conditions, Goldthorpe's account is correct. In particular, if there is a) low divorce and b) high material dependency, then the class location of married women would tend to be identical to that of their husbands. If there is a) high divorce rates and b) low dependency, then the class location of women will be more determined by their own jobs, their individual insertion into the class structure.
- The overarching criterion for understanding class structures is this: class structures link individuals to class interests -- interests defined with respect to the mechanisms of exploitation. [NOTE: there is a second possible view of what it is that class structures distribute: class structures distribute identity-formation experiences -- Bourdieu's class habitus]
- If we take this interest-centered approach to class, then there are three primary ways in which individuals become linked to class interests and thus class structures. We can call these the *three axes of class location*. Each is relevant to the analysis of class and gender:

axis 1: The **direct mechanisms** through which the individual is exploited and/or exploits others. This is defined by the class character of the individual's own relationship to productive assets. I refer to this as the individual's *direct* class location. Gender enters this aspect of class through sex segregation of employment, gender structuring of credit markets, etc.

axis 2: **Indirect mechanisms** through which individuals are linked to class interests. To the extent that families pool income, then the wife of a capitalist has class interests in the exploitation of her husband's workers. And if she has capitalist class interests, this means that regardless of her own job, she is *through this social relation*, in the capitalist class. I refer to this as the individual's *mediated* class location.

axis 3: Intertemporal links to class interests. To the extent that there are high levels of temporal stability in the first two axes, then this dimension becomes attenuated. But where it is the case that any individual has a high probability of changing direct classes (instability in axis 1) or changing mediated classes (axis 2) then these potential future states must be thought of as an aspect of the present class location itself. I refer to this as the individual's *intertemporal* class location. For married women this constitutes as *shadow class*: the class which they would occupy in the event of marital dissolution.

TWO NOTES ON AXIS #3: Axis 3 is subversive of a fill-the-objective-slot view of class structure:

1. It is conventional for Marxists to treat movement between positions as a problem of recruitment and mobility rather than a problem of the nature of the positions themselves. This seems to me to be basically untenable: an important, if hard to measure, property of the class structure is the extent to which the time horizons of incumbency are long or short. Class structures are explanatory because of the way they organize material interests and material constraints of action. Where incumbency in a "location" has a short time horizon or is temporally unstable, this affects the actual interests of incumbents. (= the problem of TA unions)
 2. The temporal dimension has an even deeper subversive implication for class structure theory: the temporal dimension of class location cannot be considered a strictly objective datum *independent of the subjective time preferences of actors*. In the case of both axis 1 and axis 2 we can define "objective material class interests" on the basis of exceptionally thin assumptions about actors preferences (they simply need to prefer higher levels of material welfare defined in terms of labor-leisure-toil-consumption packages). In the case of this temporal dimension, however, we cannot even define the dimension independently of the time preferences of actors -- the time horizons in which they make their calculations of material welfare. Of course, the probabilities of stability/change can be mapped independently of time preferences, but this would not have any obvious implications for the specification of the class structure itself without knowledge of the actors preferences.
- To fully specify the class location of women, it is necessary to define their linkage to the class structure along all three of these axes. This opens up the possibility of many more nuances in the structural map of locations themselves: individuals have direct and mediated class locations which may or may not be the same; this opens up possibilities for contradictory combinations of class locations within families; all of these combinations may exist with differing degree of temporal stability; and temporal instability suggests that there is an element of uncertainty in the very specification of a "location" -- locations of intrinsic ambiguities in their properties because of the temporal dimension.

5. US/SWEDEN Comparison

The empirical patterns we observe indicate that in the US the mediated class location of women matters a great deal more than their direct class location in shaping their class identity whereas in Sweden the two have roughly equal weight. Why should this be so? Possibilities:

1. Greater dependency of wife on husband in the US --> her class interests are objectively more subordinated to his. This is due to a) greater income inequality between men and women; b) role of the state in partially disengaging material welfare from family income --> less income drop upon marital dissolution.
2. Greater salience of the job itself in shaping consciousness in Sweden than in the US because of greater workplace mobilization through unions, etc.

III. Concluding remarks

The central problem of emancipatory social theory of whatever sort is to identify forms of oppression in society and seek to understand the conditions for their transformation. Class and gender oppression remain two of the most salient axes of such theoretical efforts: class, because of its centrality to the problem of economic exploitation, and gender, because of its centrality to the problem of the subordination of women. Marxism and feminism are the two theoretical traditions that have devoted the most attention to understanding these oppressions. In the past a great deal of theoretical energy has been devoted to metatheoretical debates over the general priority to be given to one or the other of these clusters of causal processes. One of the accomplishments of the theoretical progress of recent years has been to move beyond such preoccupations. This does not mean that we must slide into the postmodernist mush of everything causing everything (or nothing causing anything). The rejection of grand metatheory means that the relative causal importance of class and gender depend upon the specific explananda under discussion. The agenda now is to get on with the messy business of empirically examining the ways in which class and gender intersect across a wide spectrum of social questions.