Class (in Place) Without Capitalism (in Space)?

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Abstract

Geoff Eley and Keith Nield embrace an institutional perspective *à la* Ira Katznelson, but they do so with a much stronger emphasis on popular alliance formation and social movements than Katznelson. Social history's role, in their vision, would consist of capturing the dynamics of stability and change in densely and intensively studied local contexts. It is the injustices embedded in such contexts that apparently feed these movements and alliances. Class is thus reduced to a microheuristic of hidden injuries and subaltern identities. However, the concept of social class can only help to articulate a position beyond formal institutionalism and the class language of bipolarity when it is wedded to a nonreductionist, nonessentialist, and nonfinalist theory of capitalism. Seen from this perspective, capitalism is a worldwide and world-embedded process of combined and uneven development that constantly assembles and disassembles the materials from which human communities are made. In short, if we want to rethink class in place, we need to rethink capitalism in space.

> In any given society we cannot understand the parts unless we understand their function and roles in relation to each other and in relation to the whole.
>
> E. P. Thompson (1978)

Geoff Eley and Keith Nield's "Farewell to the Working Class?" is a valid and important contribution to a long-standing and, in its present details, basically British discussion of social history, class, and culture that goes back to the formative years of the subdiscipline. Their piece is instructive for the wider context of research and debate. It is balanced, moderate, and principled, and makes a serious effort to bridge the divides between the culturalists/postmaterialists/poststructuralists, on the one hand, and the defenders of class perspectives, on the other.

But whatever its qualities, reading it makes me sad because this excellent essay underscores that the debate itself has long since turned inward and is becoming increasingly repetitive and stagnant. It is hard to avoid the feeling that its basic concepts are continuously recycled instead of reworked, its field of positions restated or traded instead of innovated, its implications for research and politics neither fruitful nor expanded.

Part of my sadness is apparently shared and conveyed by the authors themselves. They fail to hide their frustration with the shift toward intellectual history by former comrades such as Gareth Stedman Jones, Patrick Joyce, and (part-

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ly and differently) Joan Scott. The authors are painfully aware that any effort on their part will not matter much to the renegades. At the same time, they seem somehow to deplore having to admit retreat on class in the face of the culturalist arguments (which is what they basically do), even though Eley himself had already moved in that direction years ago. (Interestingly, he seems less willing to move on nowadays.[1]) There really is quite a peculiar brew of insights, politics, and emotions to be found here.

The practical upshot of their deliberations is by all means a reasonable and useful one: an embrace of the institutional perspective advocated earlier and convincingly by Ira Katznelson.[2] But Eley and Nield do so, as in their earlier work, with a much stronger emphasis on Antonio Gramsci, negotiation, social movements, popular pressure, popular coalitions, and experiences "on the ground" than Katznelson. They are more inclined toward a *problematique* of rainbow coalitions and popular fronts than of reformist social-democratic liberalism. The reason for this is not just political but also based on what they see as the basic assets of the social-historical method: its capacity for "capturing the dynamics of stability and change in densely and intensively studied local contexts" as well as its sensitivity to popular injustices and injuries that remain hidden from the conventional view from afar. This, apparently, is what is left of the earlier roots in class.

Most social historians of a mildly radical bent could probably live with this Gramscian institutionalism or even agree with it. However, it should be noted that by doing so social and labor history will become merely a populist interpellation of the national political history of what the anthropologist Robert Redfield has called Great Traditions. Not that Eley and Nield intend it to be so—far from it. But giving up on class—or, in any case, failing to pinpoint systematically its relevance beyond its heuristic capacity to alert us to all sorts of subordinate realities, subaltern identities, and hidden injustices—will inevitably lead to such a situation. This is a far cry from the bold History of Society that Eric Hobsbawm once advocated. One should therefore wonder whether the microperspective, if it is really basic to what social history has to offer, cannot be wedded to more ambitious visions of analyzing history, power, subjection, and resistance.

That is precisely what I want to contend here. If the only thing that is left from the class perspective is the micromethod plus the researcher's populist heartbeat, we have a recipe for failure. I agree that this microstrategy is a great tool, to some extent distinctive for social history (but not less so for anthropology and parts of sociology like community studies and biographical methods), and perhaps even essential (though not sufficient) for any critical human science. But it can only deliver on its promises if and when it is deployed in a context of big and basic questions and associated methodologies.

It is precisely in an effort to forge such a powerful conjunction of tools, questions, and methods (in other words, a program) that I claim we need class. We do not, of course, need the reductionist, essentialist, and teleological class construct that has been rightly criticized for so long by so many. But we do need a revised, updated, open, and contingent notion that is perhaps more a program

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of inquiry than a rigorous analytical concept; more a notion hinting at problems, interconnections, conjunctions than a clear-cut variable; more a theory that alerts us to elective affinities among disparate phenomena than a universal scheme with predetermined ends—in short, a theory that can help to suggest the common base of seemingly disparate phenomena in an identifiable process with identifiable actors, structures, and directions.

Incidentally but not accidentally, this requires a more sustained and more purposeful rethinking of class, capitalism, and the Marxist tradition than Eley and Nield or any of their opponents are apparently willing to do. It also requires looking more steadfastly out of the window and into the contemporary world where many important and momentous things are happening that will be neither visible with the cultural history methods of Eley and Nield's opponents nor seamlessly fitted to the national state-based perspective commonly employed by institutional analysts.

But before making my different case for class, I want to stress that the "class versus discourse and language" controversy in social history has its parallels in (sub)disciplines like anthropology, historical sociology, and urban sociology. These discussions are about the same problems of reductionism and essentialism in social thought. It is sad to see that the pressures of academic specialization and disciplinary routines apparently make it hard to look over the fence and into the kitchen of one's neighbors. In their essay, for all the ground it covers within European and American social history proper, Eley and Nield fail to discuss potentially seminal developments made elsewhere. Why, for example, don't they discuss the important materials in John R. Hall's *Reworking Class* (Ithaca, 1997), an edited collection they only mention for its jacket cover? While Eley and Nield are correct in pointing to wider societal developments such as the death of Fordism and Keynesianism and the present intensified wave of globalization in putting "the old class" out of work, a good part of the intellectual problems associated with it are surely home-grown. In its origin, the new social history was strongly interdisciplinary, linked with political science, historical sociology, continental and British Marxist political philosophy, anthropology, and the emergent field of cultural studies. Its establishment as a secure subdiscipline has taken away the need to find or maintain such interdisciplinary alliances and inspirations. But surely it has taken away some of its vitality too.

Class, as Eley and Nield rightly contend—in any case, as it was received by the new social history—at once embraced the whole causal chain of structure-consciousness-action and collapsed all the necessary distinctions and contingencies into a single potpourri. One way to liberate oneself from this fuzzy determinative totality was to complicate the class-in-itself/class-for-itself dialectic, as Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg have done.[3] Another way was setting human subjectivity free from any "base," "class position," or even "the social" in general. This was the way preferred by the poststructuralists and postmaterialists, Patrick Joyce among them, who started to concentrate on language and classification. The conjunction of anthropology and history also emerged here as well as the *Alltagsgeschichte* approach which, however, offered new radical

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thoughts about studying exploitation and dependency in return. Another way was to open up the base itself, for instance, by identifying ever more intermediary class locations, as in Erik Olin Wright's work or the historical work on the labor aristocracy. Criticizing the divide between public and private spheres in class theory was another important way to open up structure and bring gender relations and exploitation into view.

However, a set of problems emerged that only a few of the authors within these movements faced head on: first, how to get rid of the disabling reifications that were inherent in most of the basic concepts within the tradition (and the social science canon in general), such as "the economy," "production," "the social," "language," and, above all, the ideas of "the working class" and capitalism itself; and, second, how to substitute the associated scientific ideal of explaining complex social events through abstraction and reduction with methods that can deal with complexity and contingency.

Margaret Somers has recently emphasized and criticized the pervasive "naturalism" in the emergent social sciences of the nineteenth century.[4] This naturalism tended to render a thinglike (and therefore measurable) quality to all human phenomena and was developed as a reaction against the historicism from which "the moderns" wanted to emancipate themselves. This modernist project lay behind what Andrew Abbot has called "the variables approach," the modern positivist endeavor to measure the factor-weight of separate entities. Authors like Somers, Abbot, Ronald Aminzade, Charles Tilly, and Harrison White have been arguing strongly against seeing variables as fixed entities with determinate and lawlike causal hierarchies among them—indeed, against analyzing social life in terms of variables at all.[5] They rightly insist on the relationality and contingency of all human phenomena, both in time and space and among institutions and social subsectors. It is networks of relationships in time and space that we ought to study and not any fixed causations between discrete entities at any one moment. If that is true, the easy juxtapositions of "economy" versus "culture" and "language," or "identity" versus "interest," or the present versus the past, or the local versus the global should be banned from the level of ontology and methodology and be kept strictly within the circuit of the inevitable shorthand. The "new social history" has always been one of the crucial currents from which this relational criticism to conventional modernist ontology was fueled. But the growth of disciplinary boundaries has evidently obstructed the feedback loop. Much of the discussion about "the social," "language," and "class" within social history could have shifted gear if that had not been the case.

One could begin a very interesting discussion about whether or not this relational ontology shaped Karl Marx's original visions of capitalism, society, science, and politics. Derek Sayer, basing himself chiefly but not exclusively on the *Grundrisse,* has powerfully argued so.[6] Gerald Cohen, studying *Capital* more than the historical and philosophical texts, has insisted on the opposite (to Marx's merit, according to him).[7] It is important to note the different projects that have been discerned within Marx's voluminous and uneven *oeuvre:* first, a study of epochal change from feudalism to capitalism; second, a study of the

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economy in the capitalist epoch; and third, the most difficult and least developed task of studying the real dynamics of concrete capitalist social formations. Cohen's characterization is perhaps based more on the second of Marx's projects while Sayer has been leaning more toward the first and the third.

Whatever the Master really thought, this contingent, historicist, and relational methodology has serious implications for how we think about class and capitalism. It is from here, I propose, that a rethinking of our roots in class must proceed. On a functional and synchronic level, it becomes important to see that production and reproduction, class and culture are not distinct and separate entities but rather spheres and clusters of human relations that are continuously and inevitably implicated in each other, so that timeless determinative hierarchies between a thing called "base" and a separate thing called "superstructure" become totally unthinkable. Rather, they are different angles from which to look at the same socially structured whole, as are procreation, urbanism, state politics, law, and accumulation. In this relational vision, all these varied institutional settings and symbolic phenomena are steadily implied in acts of production, appropriation, and accumulation, because these acts simply cannot do without institutions and symbols. Of course, at any one moment in time, these concepts do refer to empirically differentiated clusters of relations, phenomena, and activities, the relations among which can be riddled with contradiction and friction. Making love in the manufacturing town of Eindhoven, the Netherlands, in the early twentieth century, which I studied extensively in my book *Expanding Class: Power and Everyday Politics in Industrial Communities, The Netherlands, 1850–1950* (Durham, 1997), was of course not the same as producing lamp bulbs in the local Philips outlays. The act felt different, it happened in different places as well as in different social settings, was potentially more rewarding and autonomous, and materialized according to different social rules. It even fundamentally contradicted the local regime of accumulation, sparking off a whole series of managerial and patriarchal actions in communities and factories. But when looked at on a longer time scale, making love in Eindhoven and producing commodities for an international market do become aspects of the same local ensemble of relations of accumulation, production, and reproduction. This ensemble encompassed the structures of family and kinship, gender, property, the management and accumulation problems of the Philips plants, the spatial organization of the region, and the urban realm of civic life and leisure. The elements of this configuration were interdependent, shaped each other, and showed strong elective affinities. It was a dynamic and structured whole, a specific landscape of modernity, a particular regional path to urban industrial life. This regional mode of accumulation and everyday life was predicated on determinate linkages with the wider nation and state and with other industrial locales abroad. These external linkages, on their turn, structured the capacities of local classes and put specific pressures on and offered certain possibilities to local social life. This local coloring had strong implications for everyday life and possible life projects for working-class men and women, as well as for possible local paths of social change in time. It exerted pressures and set limits that were clearly distinct

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from life in comparable settings such as in the American Midwest, the British Midlands, the German Ruhr, or the French Midi.

The most suggestive work in social history (and anthropology, urban sociology, etc.) has been able to trace such systematic interrelationships between capitalist accumulation, place, gender, culture, and politics, irrespective of whether they concentrated more on *X* or *Y*. It is precisely here that the micromethod becomes a powerful tool. It uniquely enables the researcher to trace such functional interconnections on the ground; in their everyday workings; in how they shape the daily regimes under which common people work, eat, love, and dream; in how people can connect to and disconnect from each other; and in how they relate and dissociate from their employers and superiors. Such studies have enormously deepened our notion of what exploitation can be and what empowerment can and cannot do. Key works in the new social history (as in anthropology, historical sociology, and urban sociology) have cleared the way for a more explicit relational awareness among practitioners of human science. Social historians should become more articulate about this collective achievement and proudly build on it.

Just as importantly but much less realized, a relational methodology shapes how we study capitalism as a process through and in time and space, or better as a process fundamentally based in the logistics of synchronized nonsimultaneity and spatial unevenness.[8] Capital, capitalist classes, and corporate actors are about timing and geography as much as about exploitation and control. As capitalism spread from its historical cores into new spaces, it became nested in societies whose prior properties became codetermining for both the nature of local life under capitalism and the functions it would perform within the division of labor as well as for the developmental outcomes and social possibilities in the next round. This is just as true for Europe, North America, and East Asia as it is for more peripheral locales. It follows that in explaining what happens on a local level we can no longer revert to "capital-logic" deductions but have to study path-dependent and interlinked local histories, fully embedded in time and space. The new social history has pointed the way by turning to local history and national comparison, but has it followed through all the way? I think not. The working-class formation approach has inspired a turn to local politics, movements, and identities to the neglect of studying embedded capitalism as a process and as a whole.

Capitalism in the abstract is a social process that continuously creates and recreates concrete, specific, and friction-prone linkages between particular places, and shapes idiosyncratic and contradictory ties between disparate human groups. Within capitalism in the abstract, the concrete and specific properties of such linkages shape situated and embodied life in human communities. As has been shown perhaps most consistently by *Marxisant* anthropologists such as Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz, but also by such authors as Michael Burawoy and Mike Davis, such networks of external linkages of cooperation, exchange, and, above all, competition become basic sets of resources for as well as obstacles against specific possibilities for local development and

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human life chances in all capitalist settings.[9] Local social and class relationships were always both a function of and a driving force behind such interlinkages in space and time.

If class nowadays can still inspire a social historical method that searches for the varied injuries and injustices in the situated and embodied everyday life of concrete communities of people, it must also develop the tools to trace and explain the temporal and spatial coordinates under which these communities come into being, and are structured, exploited, empowered, and disempowered. This is the wider field of force under which Eley and Nield's alliances and coalitions can be forged and which, in its local manifestations, inspires them. This wider field is often called capitalism. Our concern with class has over the past decades increasingly focused on movement, protest, culture, and accommodation on local or national levels. By so doing, we moved away from studying capitalism, its actors and real-life social ramifications, and overlooked its characteristic nexus of local production and global accumulation. The micromethod needs to be complemented by this global vision of capitalism as a worldwide, though "world-embedded," process.

Class analysis, therefore, must not become an interpretive endeavor, as the British sociologist Mike Savage has concluded in a discussion of recent work.[10] Nor should its rethinking start with contemplating the problem of identity (as against "interest"), as Margaret Somers has proposed in an otherwise important essay.[11] Neither do I think that Max Weber's individualized life chances should point the way, as John Hall has argued.[12] It must start with the relational, historical, and spatial rethinking of what capitalism is about, how it works, how and why it assembles and disassembles particular communities of workers, and what the consequences of such particularity within the process as a whole can be for human action, human relationships, and possible life projects. I advocate an eclectic and intensive, "multisited" effort to trace the intricate connections that link biography, family, and local politics with the relevant social networks of production and accumulation on all levels.[13] Instead of the medium-range studies on the local or national level that social historians mostly do, I propose the strongest possible link between the most intimate levels of everyday life and biography and the most distant and removed levels of the world system, time, and accumulation. Class-oriented analysis has to become a hermeneutic-spatial hopping back and forth between the local and the global. The interconnection of local and global histories—i.e., the class-based networks that make these histories and their connections happen and that live through them—need to become the center of attention.

The current acceleration of capital flows makes us painfully aware of the temporary and contingent nature of all capitalist territorial arrangements, the ensuing human settlements, and associated and highly fragile social pacts. Although world-systems theory was there and Third Worldism at the time reminded everyone of the global nature of capitalist processes, the new social history did not originate from a theoretical context that saw flows of capital and spatial linkages as a key property of what it set out to study. It may be hard to

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imagine nowadays, but the 1970s were a period in which the national state appeared as more central than ever. It was the function of the new social history to retrospectively excavate the local and existential roots of the national Fordist class alliances that were still (nominally?) reigning at the time and by so doing deepen their democratic potentials. These potentials have by now been killed and the alliances are more or less over.

Eley and Nield are of course more than aware of this. But why, then, not bring this momentous capitalist process, as well as the retrospective insights it generates, into the heart of our work? Sure, local movements, alliances and coalitions, hegemony, resistance, and negotiation *in situ* are the daily bread of working-class history, just as questions of gender and identity are. Resource mobilization, political opportunity structures, and public legacies for collective action are also crucial events for any study in the social history tradition. But we should strive to integrate into our narratives the wider context that produces all this huffing and puffing of history, has helped the relevant human communities to come into being, and is basic to what they are grappling with. To get at class (and I don't mean just work) and its highly varied experience, we need to recapture capitalism. To close with some remarks that are in fact the opening notes of another paper: In order to recapture capitalism, we need a more global view, we need more encompassing comparisons, we need longer time frames for study (why leave the postwar period to the sociologists?), we need more interdisciplinary cooperation, and, above all, a more radical imagination.

NOTES

1. At least in the introduction coauthored with Nicholas B. Dirks and Sherry B. Ortner to *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory,* ed. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton, 1994).

2. Ira Katznelson, "The Bourgeois Dimension: A Provocation About Institutions, Politics, and the Future of labor History," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 46 (1994):7–33.

3. Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg, eds., *Working Class Formation* (Princeton, 1985).

4. Margaret Somers, "Deconstructing and Reconstructing Class Formation Theory: Narrativity, Relational Analysis, and Social Theory," in *Reworking Class,* ed. John R. Hall (Ithaca, 1997).

5. Andrew Abbott, "From Causes to Events: Notes on Narrative Positivism," *Sociological Methods and Research* 20 (1992):428–55; Ronald Aminzade, "Historical Sociology and Time," *Sociological Methods and Research* 20 (1992):456–80; Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley, 1998); Harrison White, *Identity and Control: A Structural Theory of Social Action* (Princeton, 1992).

6. Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction* (Oxford, 1987).

7. Gerald Allan Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford, 1978).

8. I find the work of critical geographers very helpful here. See, for example, John Scott and Allan Storper, *Production, Work, Territory: The Geographical Anatomy of Industrial Capitalism* (Boston, 1986); Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London, 1989); Michael Storper and Richard Walker, *The Capitalist Imperative: Territory, Technology, and Industrial Growth* (Oxford, 1989); Andrew Sayer and Richard Walker, *The New Social Economy* (Oxford, 1992); and, of course, David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Baltimore, 1989).

9. For Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz, one could cite their whole *oeuvre.* Michael Burawoy, "From Capitalism to Capitalism via Socialism: The Odyssey of a Marxist Ethnographer, 1975–

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1995," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 50 (1996):77–99. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York, 1990). For some very useful formulations on space and class, see Dale Tomich, "World of Capital/Worlds of Labor," in *Reworking Class,* 287–313. See also Don Kalb, *Expanding Class: Power and Everyday Politics in Industrial Communities, The Netherlands, 1850–1950* (Durham, 1997). Social historians do not often read over the disciplinary frontiers, but I find the work of Gerald Sider and Hermann Rebell still very suggestive about how to conceptualize and approach space, accumulation, and local culture. See Sider, *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History* (Cambridge, 1986); Rebell, "Dispossession in the Communal Memory: An Alternative Narrative About Austria's Descent into Holocaust," *Focaal* 26/27 (1996):167–83.

10. Mike Savage, "Class Analysis and Its Futures," *Sociological Review* 42 (1994):531–48
11. Somers, "Deconstructing," 73–106.
12. John R. Hall, "The Reworking of Class Analysis," in *Reworking Class,* 1–41.
13. See Kalb, *Expanding Class.*

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