Bridging the Gap between New Social Movement Theory and Class

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The stance of new social movement theory toward class has often been one of suspicion, if not outright rejection (Scott 1990). New social movements emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, and appeared to be replacing labor as the subject of history, thereby simultaneously refuting and offering an alternative to Marxist class analysis. In the United States, new social movements were most visible in the form of civil rights and anti-Vietnam War protests during the 1960s and feminist, black power, gay rights, antinuclear, environmental, and welfare-rights protests during the 1970s and 1980s. The apparent strength of these movements seemed to confirm postwar mainstream (and often critical) social science’s theoretical postulates that class conflict was no longer the (or even a) central factor in explicating social conflict and that capitalism had developed the capacity to resolve its inner contradictions without the mediating variable of working class–based social revolution (Meszanos 1989).

What I seek to accomplish in this article are the following: (1) a critical examination of how and why new social movement theory departed from Marxist class analysis, (2) a focus on and critique of three objections to the latter commonly found in the new social movement paradigm, and (3) to demonstrate how an alternative conceptual framework that employs the language of class makes it possible to bridge the gaps between the two.
New Social Movement Theory

Despite the contemporary paradigm of unfettered global capitalism and the renewed elucidation of class polarization, mainstream and even left critical theorists still find it difficult to conceive of working class–based organization and resistance as the critical agent of social change in the future. If anything, the likelihood seems to be all the more minimized by virtue of the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe. At the same time, in light of the incapacity of new social movements to transform social relations without labor’s active participation (Navarro 1988; 1991, 54–6; Miliband 1989, 109–12), social movement theorists have been pushed to reconsider the relationship of class to social movements, in both theory and praxis. However, despite occasional rethinking about class and social movements that appears in new social movement theory, there remains nonetheless a resistance to the Marxist focus on working-class agency. This ambivalence toward class, as it has been conceptualized by Marxist class analysis, can be tracked to new social movement theory’s ties to Frankfurt School theory. In this respect, three prominent new social movement theorists—Antonio Melucci (1989), Klaus Eder (1993), and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1987)—are worth reviewing.

The Frankfurt School

New social movement theory has its roots in the Frankfurt School’s rejection of Marx’s class primacy thesis, which stresses the historically structured and strategically pivotal role of the working class in the struggle for social emancipation (Marcuse 1964; Habermas 1975; 1985, 338–55). While the Frankfurt School produced numerous theorists who applied critical theory to diverse fields, Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas have been most visibly influential on contemporary new social movement theorists (Scott 1990, 80). While both retained the Marxist critique of alienation under capitalism, nonetheless they contended that capitalism underwent a discernible sea change in the postwar era, one that distinguished it from the nineteenth-century industrialism that so much influenced Marx’s theorization of capitalism.

These two theorists drew on Daniel Bell’s The End of Ideology (1965), which proclaimed that capitalism was no longer characterized by class polarization. Instead, the working class was becoming progressively incorporated into middle-class consumer society, with less and less concern about material issues; hence the term “post-material society” (Bell 1973). Through the mechanism of the Fordist “social contract,” workers and their unions could be kept satisfied via collectively bargained pay raises and would give up their claim to social revolutionary agency. There was a clear rejection of Marx’s historical materialism by the proclaimers of a new, more “complex” postmaterialist capitalism. Since postwar capitalism could, through its own devices, soothe (to one degree or another) class-based antagonisms between labor and capital, workers and their unions acted in their own interests accordingly, namely by not resisting (openly) the Fordist paradigm of production. While perhaps during earlier eras of capitalist development workers had had clear, materially based motivations to organize and oppose capitalism, with the advent of the Fordist American Century, there was little if any reason for workers to oppose the logic of capitalist production. Culture, for the Frankfurt School, became a new and critical site of resistance as middle-class populations began to question the meaning of suburban lifestyles, the organization of urban life, traditional conformist and hierarchical modes of social relations associated with the former productivist-oriented regime of capitalist production, war-making projects, and so forth. Likewise, in lieu of resisting capitalism on the basis of one’s relation to the means of life, “individuals” in a postmaterial society mobilized oppositional movements around cultural identity–oriented, single-issue struggles.

For Marcuse, ideology was the main impediment to qualitative change of the social relations of production under the regime of postmaterial capitalism. In his view, “To the degree which freedom from want, the concrete substance of all freedom, is becoming a real possibility, the liberties which pertain to a state of lower productivity are losing their former content. Independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function in a society which seems increasingly capable of satisfying the needs of the individuals through the way it is organized” (1964, 1). While material needs were satisfied by a postmaterial capitalism, other desires for human liberation remained unmet and even more repressed in modern capitalist society. Consciousness of these desires and the role of capitalist production in repressing them would stimulate new forms of social rebellion, which had the potential to overthrow the dehumanizing suffocating of the human spirit engendered by technological fetishism and bureaucratic-instrumental rationality in advanced capitalist countries. The agents of rebellion, however, would not be traditional blue-collar workers, since they were largely bought off by capital and accepted all too willingly the need to conform to instrumental forms of rationality in return for their share of the collectively bargained pie. Rather, oppositional agents would consist of those for whom the cultural logic of postmaterial capitalism did not work, namely ethnic/gender/sexual “minorities,” youth, and populations of the third world (Marcuse 1969; 1972). Whether these social groups revolted would be determined not so much by material conditions as by their capacity to see through the limits of the rationality of “capitalist abundance” and to fight that logic despite their vested material interests in the reproduction of the system. At the core of revolt was, then, the need to break down the multifarious devices of social control available to capital (technology and commodity worship in advertising, media entertainment, meaningless newspeak, anticommunism, etc.) to prevent individuals from recognizing that they were becoming less and less human in the process of unquestioningly going through their life routines in the workplace, becoming what C. Wright Mills called “cheerful robots” (1959, 175). Jürgen Habermas theorized the types of crises that advanced capitalism faced and asked, “whither is economic crisis displaced?” (1975, 40).
Modern capitalism faces crises of administration, or legitimacy: Legitimation problems cannot be reduced to problems of capital realization. Because a class compromise has been made the foundation of reproduction, the state apparatus must fulfill its tasks in the economic system under the limiting condition that mass loyalty be simultaneously secured within the framework of a formal democracy and in accord with ruling universalistic value systems. These pressures of delegitimization can be mitigated only through structures of a depoliticized public realm. (58–9)

Habermas and his epigones asserted that while crises under Marx’s industrial capitalism were more directly laborer/capitalist in origin, under advanced capitalism the welfare state replaces the capitalist as the object of oppositional activity (O’Connor 1973; Offe 1972). So long as the state is able to avoid crises of legitimation, the reproduction of capitalist accumulation proceeds smoothly. Various non-class-based constituencies replace the working class—based movement of the past as the agent that can and will challenge the alienation created by instrumental rationality.

In the past decade or two, (new) conflicts have developed in advanced Western societies... They no longer flare up in domains of material production... Rather, these new conflicts arise in domains of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization... The issue is not primarily one of compensations that the welfare state can provide, but of defending and restoring endangered ways of life... The new conflicts are not limited by distribution problems but by questions having to do with the grammar of forms of life. (Habermas 1985, 392)

Alberto Melucci

While Marcuse and Habermas wrote from different angles on similar topics of concern, both shared a certain ideational focus, which emphasized class compromise and the need to locate new social actors who would oppose the logic or, better, the ideologies of capitalist production through struggles that were not based primarily on economic motivation. On this score, Alberto Melucci very much follows suit. As he asserts in his seminal Nomads of the Present, “In complex societies material production is increasingly replaced by the production of signs and social relations. Systemic conflicts centre on the ability of groups and individuals to control the conditions of their own action... Society’s capacity to produce information, communications and sociability depends upon an increasing level of self-reflexiveness and upon the self-reproduction of action itself” (1989, 45–6).

Melucci is concerned with social movements as agents of emancipation and the process through which they emerge. He seeks to capture the “network of relationships which constitutes the submerged reality of the movements before, during, and after events” (45). This feature it is perhaps the most refreshing part of his work since it rejects the widespread tendency in the social sciences to see a movement only when thousands of people are in the street engaged in some sort of “collective action.” Melucci recognizes that movements consist of reflexive social actors who are constantly reflecting on the meaning and strategies of their movement, and that often these interpretations explain the success or failure of movements. Or, put in another way, after the demonstration effect of an action, the organizing dynamic of a movement continues; unnoticed perhaps, but continuing nonetheless: “Because collective action questions the system’s structural logic, it is destined to reproduce itself beyond the forms of mediation that can interpret it.” (57)

Melucci contends that, in complex (i.e., advanced industrialized) societies, individuals have increasing amounts of resources available to them, which enable them to “assert and recognize themselves as individuals” (113). These resources include mass education and extended rights of citizenship. With them, individuals have increased capacities and desires to formulate their own sense of identity, one free of external state or corporate coercion. Discussing the ecological movement, Melucci writes, “Ecological problems not only affect individuals in so far as they belong to a group, a class or a nation; they also affect individuals as such. The protection of the species that can be assured only by a new equilibrium between individuals and nature is a problem that today affects the lives of everyone” (97).

Klaus Eder

Klaus Eder appears more willing to treat the category of class as yet viable and relevant to social movement struggles and development. In The New Politics of Class: Social Movements in Advanced Societies, at first glance he promises an integration of class analysis and new social movement theory.

Class action has always been seen as mediated by class consciousness. This consciousness was... seen as determined by class—and thus a circular argumentation emerged. The circularity has been avoided by the two options that were offered within this model: either by the collective consciousness of those acting together, or by the objective togetherness of actors given by their class position. This polarization has characterized Marxist discussions on class—without opening up a way out of the theoretical deadlock. (1993, 8)

Ideally, Eder would offer us a way out of this deadlock. His solution, however, is to highlight and insist on the centrality of the “middle classes” in new social movements who, by virtue of their resources and lifestyle, are opposed to the economistic-instrumental rationality of both the dominating and dominated classes. Eder wishes to reconstruct a discourse of class that conforms to the realities of contemporary, “complex” capitalism. He asserts that the classical Marxist concept of a bifurcated class structure, in which opposition to the social order will be structured by objective material interests, is no longer useful as a framework either to explicate or to strategize movements for social change (90–2). What is more helpful, rather, is to examine links between the present class structure in “complex societies” and cultural expressions of opposition to institutions that administer instrumental rationality. Which experiences of really existing and significant class cultures promise to be in the forefront of social movements that oppose the logic of instrumental rational-
Here, the alternative is clear: either one has a theory and, according to which this or that social formation is structured around a single hegemonic center, or one has a theory and, with any basis for privileging certain social formations over others, in the determination of whose character becomes meaningless... Fundamental differences in social relations cannot be logically deduced from the determination positions in the economic process (94-5).

That is, the central problem becomes the identification of “discursive conditions” that provide the foundation for the politics of the new social groups to come into existence beyond the “classless” superstructure. They contended, more particularly, that the terrain of social relations is not a fixed one, but that it can be changed by political action. This is a social movement perspective, which holds that social movements can and do change the social relations in which they operate.

The ecological crisis, then, presents an exciting opportunity for social movements and which experience a new level of collective political consciousness. By rejecting the traditional Marxian concept of class as a fixed and unchanging category, which defines the social relations of the capitalist mode of production, Marxists argue that social movements have the potential to challenge and change these relations. This is a social movement perspective, which holds that social movements can and do change the social relations in which they operate.

Although Laclau and Mouffe have been taken to task for their liberal reading of Marxist theory (Wood 1986, 67; Cens 1990, 35–86; Statte 1994), it remains helpful to see where they see their framework departing from Marx’s historical materialism and the implications for new social movement theory.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, there is a need for an alternative to a theory of historical materialism and the implications for new social movement theory. This is a social movement perspective, which holds that social movements can and do change the social relations in which they operate.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe

Laclau and Mouffe’s (1983) work on the role of social movements in the constitution of new social formations provides a framework for understanding the power relations at play in contemporary politics. This is a social movement perspective, which holds that social movements can and do change the social relations in which they operate.
“traditional” class-based movement struggles and “new social movements.” Many left and liberal academics and activists are attracted to Laclau and Mouffe’s analysis precisely because, as Barbara Epstein writes, “it speaks a language that has much more resonance for these people than Marxism ever could” (1990, 51).

Three Theses of New Social Movement Theory

Despite the apparent appeal, it is precisely the notion that classical Marxist class theory is unable to speak a language that is relevant (both strategically and morally) to the outwardly disparate and fragmented interests of participants in “new social movements” that I aim to challenge. Before embarking on that task, however, let us first consider some common challenges to classic class analysis found in the theoretical works of Melucci, Eder, and Laclau and Mouffe.

1. Social conditions of production have qualitatively changed since the days of Marx’s *Capital*, particularly since the postwar era, such that societies (in the advanced regions of the global capitalist political economy) are now “post-material.” The laws of capitalist development that Marx proclaimed internal to the logic of capitalist production, particularly the increasing proletarianization and impoverishment of working sectors of the population, are no longer at work.

2. A class compromise between labor and capital has been reached in the advanced regions of the postwar, global capitalist political economy. As a result, new non-working-class, cultural/identity-based social movements have become the main agents of social protest and change, replacing the traditional class-based movements of the past.

3. The “economic” logic of class-based movements is incompatible with what motivates new social movements, which accounts for the failure of class and new social movements to align. Furthermore, new social movement are (therefore) “naturally” middle class in composition.

In the following three sections I will attempt to demonstrate the problems, theoretically and empirically situated, with all three of the above theses.

Postmaterial Capitalism?

It is increasingly apparent that new social movement theorists who cling to the “postmaterial” society notion that objective material conditions are no longer focal issues around which opposition to the social relations of capitalist production can be organized appear, as Ellen Wood puts it, “ill equipped to confront the problems of the here and now” (1995, 46). For example, Melucci illuminates how as the capitalist political economy has developed, especially in the most advanced regions, the expansion of information technologies and media has rendered the choices and decisions that individuals face all the more complex. This phenomenon is closely linked not only to the development of new “information-based” technologies but also, and more critically, to the globalization of capitalist production, the political-economic effects of which, however, Melucci leaves out of his theoretical model. What the restructuring of the global political economy has generated, since roughly around the first oil shocks and the dismantling of Bretton Woods in the early 1970s, is what Brecher and Costello (1994a) as well as many other social scientists (Broad 1995; Piven and Cloward 1995; Palat 1996; Ross and Trachte 1990; Tilly 1995) now term the global “race to the bottom.”

In 1993, President Clinton unexpectedly acknowledged that there was a “global crisis of unemployment.” He noted “…[W]e have to figure out how to unlock the doors for people who are left behind in this new global economy.” In Europe and Canada unemployment has risen to 11%; it is at historic highs in Japan. In the US, unemployment remained near its recession peak after several years of “jobless recovery”; more than 60% of the new jobs created in 1993 were part-time. [For OECD’s 24 countries] the official unemployment rate is 8.5%. According to [UN] estimates, there are some 700 million people currently unemployed or underemployed in the developing world. (Brecher and Costello 1994a, 27)

For the working populations in newly industrialized countries (all the rave of development theorists in the 1980s), “development” have come to take on quite a unique meaning. Unlike its Western European and North American counterparts for whom development served as a foundation from which social democratic parties (or in the U.S. case, a liberal party, aligned with organized labor) could pressure the state to implement redistributive social programs, the East Asian newly industrialized countries model has, thus far, only been able to provide its working populations with development plus capital flight, minimal welfare-state reforms, repressive labor regimes that deny workers basic organizing rights, and urban environmental disaster zones (Brecher and Costello 1994a, 24; Deyo 1992; Palat 1996; Smith 1997). For working people in “Third World” nation-states, the ramifications of global “flexible accumulation” are all the more potentially devastating.

Almost 1/3rd of the population of developing countries, 1.3 billion people, live in absolute poverty—too poor to provide the minimum diet required for full functioning. It is argued that foreign investment will raise wages in poor countries. But a review of US corporate behavior abroad found that“rather than raising standards of living, American firms are more likely to be paying no better than local minimum wages” (Ong 1991, 26). In Indonesia—now a favorite spot for companies like Nike and Reebok—88% of woman earning the Indonesian minimum wage were malnourished. (Brecher and Costello 1994a, 24)

Women in the “third world” are most vulnerable and likely to be employed in labor-intensive industries that provide low wages, no job security or mobility, dangerous work conditions, and the like (Ong 1991).
Nor has the impact of global downracing stopped at the doorstep of the advanced regions of global capitalism. While between 1979 and 1989 the real annual pay of (U.S.) corporate chiefs rose by 19 percent, and 66 percent after taxes (Head 1996, 47), average real weekly earnings in the United States (which came to $300 in 1969, compared with $264.22 in 1990) continue to fall (Business Week 1995). In lieu of the middle-class way of life, so glorified as the ultimate refutation of Marxist class analysis in Daniel Bell’s The End Of Ideology (1965), the “middle classes” in advanced capitalist countries of the West see a future of what can only be described as progressive proletarianization and decreasing “autonomy” (Hutton 1996, 15–9). An article in the London Sunday Times comments on the situation of the British middle class, one which could well be applied to the rest of the advanced capitalist nation-states:

In the uncertainty of life in Britain today, one fact stands out: the middle classes are getting poorer. Nor is this a temporary phenomenon. In any future we can foresee, they will get even poorer... A decade ago, it was assumed the working class would slowly disappear as it fulfilled its aspirations and became absorbed into an enlarged middle class. Instead, the opposite has happened, with the middle classes being overtaken by the chronic uncertainty and worry that has always gone with working class life. (Gray 1994)

In the United States, since 1982, temping has increased two and a half times, such that it comprises two thirds of new private-sector jobs. The likelihood of poverty for families of part-time workers is six times greater than the national average. At the same time, hours worked by these same workers has actually increased, with a commensurate reduction in health insurance and other benefits (Brecher and Costello 1994a, 23).

Alas, however, although such empirical data demonstrate the thin ice on which much of new social movement theory skates when it accepts the premise of post-materialism, we are still left with a substantive challenge—namely, what is the relationship between class and new social movement constituencies? What does Marxist class analysis have to offer them? In answering these questions satisfactorily, perhaps we can finally reduce the hold that new social movement theory has over much of social science and activists.

The Marxist Class Analysis Alternative

One theorist who offers a number of noteworthy answers is the eco-Marxist James O’Connor, in an article on the “second contradiction of capitalism.” Synthesizing the works of Marx and Polanyi, O’Connor examines the notion of “conditions of production,” which include the personal, community, and “external” or environmental conditions of production. A condition of production “consists of everything that is treated as if it is a commodity even though it is not produced as a commodity in accordance with the law of value or law of markets” (1992, 1–2). Through such an inclusive definition, O’Connor aims to treat labor-power, land and nature, and urban organization as equally important categories and, in the process, bridge the gap between social movements and Marxist critique.

Engaging a traditional Marxist political economy framework, O’Connor contends that there are two contradictions of capitalism: “overproduction,” the natural drive on the part of capital to drive down wages and increase productivity to make up for falling rates of profit, and “underproduction,” or the costs incurred in that process from underrealization of surplus-value and/or costs on nature (e.g., ecological crises rendering production less and less profitable, let alone possible). The basic cause of the second contradiction is capitalism’s self-destructive appropriation and use of labor-power, space, and external nature or environment. The present-day crisis of health, education, and the family, the urban crisis, and the ecological crisis exemplify this self-destructiveness (4–5). Without imposing massive environmental havoc on the world’s working peoples, global capital would have been unable to attain the growth rates it did achieve, at least during its peak period before the oil shocks of the 1970s (4). Thus, social movements that arise in response to these unintended consequences of “growth” policies are intrinsically challenging capital’s capacity to be flexible. No less than traditional trade union–based movements, they are challenging capital and are therefore, theoretically speaking, quite capable of possessing a subjectivity within the framework of classical Marxist class analysis.

O’Connor rightly notes that new social movements face increasing surveillance and repression from the state and that, faced with such state/capital-sponsored hostility, it would be wise for them and working class–based movements to build alliances: “All the old issues once addressed by classical socialism—inequality, social injustice...—have reappeared... What better time for labor and the left, labor and the environmental and feminist movements to sublate themselves into a new eco-socialism, an eco-feminism, and eco-urbanism—in short a new movement that can change the history of the world? For the better, this time” (10). This appeal that both engage in some kind of reconciliation for the sake of survival does certainly contain more than a kernel of sensibility (Bellamy-Foster 1993). However, although O’Connor’s theorization of the second contradiction of capitalism poses a challenge to the contention that traditional Marxist political economy has little to offer new social movements, we are still left with some problems that remain, for the moment, unresolved. For example, is there any hope for a working class that has entered into a “class compromise”? More important, aren’t new social movements predominantly movements of the middle class? Finally, since much emphasis has been on “discourses,” does Marxist class analysis have an alternative to the discourse produced by new social movement theory, one that can help to bridge the gap between the two?

Class Compromise?

The idea that there has been a class compromise in effect between labor and capital in the advanced capitalist political economics since the postwar era began is one that holds a considerable amount of currency in much mainstream and critical sociology. Recent revisionist historical scholarship has reviewed the record of the actual
interaction between labor and capital during this era with some interesting findings, particularly with regard to the U.S. case, where the phenomenon of class compromise was thought to be most thoroughly institutionalized (Draper 1994; Dubovsky 1994; Fantasia 1988; Goldfield 1987; Levy 1994; Moody 1988; 41–69). While there does exist a strongly embedded business unionist ideology that has characterized the leadership of labor unions, especially since the 1950s, the idea that a compromise between labor and capital was harmoniously worked out during the postwar era, or in any era for that matter, seriously wipes out historical initiatives on the part of capital that made it all but unlikely that postwar labor in the United States could pursue a militant strategy against capital without paying a very heavy price. Even after the remarkable strike waves of the 1930s and 1940s, U.S. business was still able to pressure the state to attack labor via redhunting campaigns that resulted in exacerbating or helping to create fratricidal forms of factionalism. The end result, of course, came in the purges of the most militant (socialist, communist, and anarchist) labor activists and the legislative reversal of organizing rights originally secured under the Wagner Act, which culminated in the 1948 passage of the Taft-Hartley Act.

Taft Hartley went far beyond the wartime actions of the federal government. It not only curbed the strike power, but it curbed the union’s capacity to organize as well. Union membership declined . . . thereafter . . . and recovered only slowly, reaching 18.9 million in 1968. (Ats percentage of the total work force, union membership was lower in 1968 than in 1947. In the nineteen “right to work” states where compulsory open shop legislation is permitted by Taft Hartley, union membership averages only half the proportion in the other states. These are restriction that the unions bitterly opposed at the time, and that they have continued to oppose in the thirty years since the act passed. But without success. (Piven and Cloward 1977, 166–170, emphasis mine; cf. Fantasia 1988, 59–71; Goldfield 1987, 20)

The critical point here is that the notion that the U.S. working class has engaged in a discursively equal class compromise simply fails to capture the balance of class power that made possible that “compromise.” It also overlooks the role of earlier labor militancy in effecting changes in the social conditions of production, in a multitude of class and nonclass arenas (Lynd 1996). Indeed, the history of U.S. unionism has been marked by state repression of militant organized labor and support for more conservative leadership during every significant wave of strike activity and labor organizing (Dubofsky 1994, 31–40).

Furthermore, the incredible difficulty of organizing in the South, not a little impeded by the dominance of an economy based on cotton for export production that was intensely hostile to all kinds of unionization efforts of the sharecroppers who worked the fields (Anderson-Sherman and McAdam 1982), also contributed to the political weakness of labor whenever it sought to advance its interests in the legislative arena (Draper 1994). Quite possibly this factor, very much structured by objective material conditions of production, militated most significantly against the U.S. labor movement’s attempts to resemble its more unified and militant counterpart in Europe.

This is not to deny that consciousness or ideology had a hand in labor’s acceptance of the social contract of Fordism. Rather, I wish to stress that an essential view of the working class’s “interest” in entering into that contract fails to take into account unequal relations of class power that overdetermined that decision and, more important, misrepresents those “interests” as though they were etched in granite. Indeed, the unequal and coercive setting in which labor settled for gains in the past should indicate that the structurally unequal and antagonistic nature of the relationship between capital and labor in the United States has not changed, even if the latter’s capacity to extract concessions from capital, during certain junctures, occasionally experiences variation. Such considerations should at least caution us against accepting the first part of new social movement theory’s second thesis.

That thesis also asserts that social movements are the new agents of social change, picking up where the working class–based movements left off after the latter made their Faustian class compromise. There are several problems that make this claim worthy of critical interrogation. The present state of social movements, especially in the United States, as they are presently geared toward middle-class constituencies, is a considerably weak and ineffective one (Stout 1996). Two of the most prominent new social movements, namely the feminist (Burk and Hartman 1996; Ryan 1997; Segal 1991; Stable 1994, 1995) and environmental movements (Bellamy-Foster 1993), have suffered from their inability or even unwillingness to articulate their movements’ goals in ways that could potentially win over larger numbers of the disenfranchised working class (e.g., working-class poor women, the inner-city poor, loggers, and others). With the emergence of this dilemma, the drawbacks of new social movement theory have become much more immediate for new social movements.

The social movement operandi of the dominated forces has resulted in none of these movements achieving much. The United States has strong feminist . . . and ecological movements, but our women have fewer rights than those in societies with universal social programs and our environment is less protected . . . Progressive forces are currently pressuring the government to mandate parental leave without pay for childbirth, adoption, and/or sickness; the majority of developed capitalist countries already provide such benefits with pay. And . . . pollution levels in the US are higher than in other developed countries. (Navarro 1991, 54)

It is important to note that these criticisms of social movements, leveled by Navarro, are directed at their class politics. Such animadversions are no different from those that Marxist class analysis often directs at the U.S. labor movement leadership. This is very pertinent, especially when we consider new social movement theory’s suspicious stance toward the often critical views of new social movements held by Marxist class analysis. New social movement theory often takes such criticisms of new social movements (as middle class or liberal) to mean that Marxist class analysis is inherently opposed to these movements or aims, consciously or unconsciously, to
deviate from the economic forms of struggle morally. Furthermore, the critical stance on "class" and "class" as a concept has been taken to mean that it deviates from the struggle or is hostile to it. However, some of the most powerful critics of feminism (Nakamitsu 1996; Stabile 1994, 1995) and environmentalism (Bellamy 1993, 1995) articulate a position in class analysis that is supportive of Marxis who are clearly engaged with class analysis in their own work. This support is not necessarily a matter of the contribution which new social movements can make—or have already made—to the enrichment of the class movement as a whole, but that new social movements are not necessarily an essential part of the struggle against capitalism. 

To speak of new social movements is traditionally to neglect their history and the processes by which many of them have been formed and sustained. In the context of the struggle against capitalism, the role of new social movements in the construction of the class movement is not to be underestimated. New social movements have historically been an essential part of the struggle against capitalism. The role of new social movements in the construction of the class movement is not to be underestimated. New social movements have historically been an essential part of the struggle against capitalism. The role of new social movements in the construction of the class movement is not to be underestimated. New social movements have historically been an essential part of the struggle against capitalism. The role of new social movements in the construction of the class movement is not to be underestimated. 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An Alternative Language of Class

In a critical review of Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism, Diskin and Sandler argue (1993) that the rejection of specific versions of history that essentialize class (i.e., Marxist theory) has led to an overemphasis on the role of economic factors in social change. However, they assert that the overemphasis on economic determinism can lead to a neglect of political and ideological factors, which are also crucial in understanding social movements.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 1987) have argued that class can be understood as a discursive practice that defines social positions in relation to the opposition of capital and labor. This approach emphasizes the role of language and discourse in constructing social realities. Diskin and Sandler argue that this approach can be extended to provide a more nuanced understanding of class.

In this way, an alternative language of class can be constructed, which recognizes the role of ideological constructs in defining class positions. This approach allows for a more flexible understanding of class, which can be applied to a wider range of social movements, including those that are not strictly economic in nature.

The alternative language of class emphasizes the role of discourse and ideology in shaping social reality. This approach can help to broaden the understanding of class, making it more relevant to a wider range of social movements and contemporary issues.
Neither position helped from the vantage of Marxist class analysis. For one, new social movements did not challenge or overthrow capitalism. In the same vein, grassroots movements also failed to break out of the capitalist economy. The Poverty of Philosophy (1963, 172-3) criticizes capitalism and class analysis for failing to address the root causes of social movements. In its place, it promotes a more radical approach that involves organizing at the grassroots level and challenging the power structure.

Speaking the Language of Class

The Piedmont Peace Project: A New Social Movement

While the Poverty of Philosophy (1963, 172-3) criticizes capitalism and class analysis for failing to address the root causes of social movements, it promotes a more radical approach that involves organizing at the grassroots level and challenging the power structure.

The Piedmont Peace Project is an example of a new social movement that emerged in the 1980s. This movement was led by a grassroots organization that aimed to challenge the power structure and promote social change.

The Piedmont Peace Project was a grassroots organization that formed in response to the nuclear arms race. The organization was led by people who were concerned about the dangers of nuclear weapons and wanted to work towards a world free of nuclear weapons.

The Piedmont Peace Project was successful in mobilizing people and organizing protests. This led to a shift in public opinion and pressure on the government to take action.

The success of the Piedmont Peace Project highlighted the importance of grassroots organizing and the power of social movements. It also showed that new social movements can be effective in challenging the power structure and promoting social change.
type of appeal is not unlike another made to the alienated middle classes in advanced capitalist societies—namely, conversion to fundamentalist religions. Where Marxist class analysis sees class-based resistance built around objective, material self-interests and solidarity (or in language working people can relate to most directly, economic injustice), new social movement theory views emotional relations under capitalism as an impediment to seeing through the ideologies that cascade our everyday lives in this media information-saturated, postmaterial society. Hence new social movements’ constant battle to “raise consciousness,” which is apparently repressed and capable of being snapped out of (middle-class) individuals through appeals to a noninstrumental-oriented “good life,” the embraces of an essentialized, nature-bonding ethos, or appeals to rights.

In the concluding section of this article, I will look at an alternative new social movement theory organizing paradigm, namely the Piedmont Peace Project, a peace organization in North Carolina that is based in low-income, working-class communities. In Bridging the Class Divide and Other Lessons for Grassroots Organizing,9 its founder Linda Stout describes the frequent negative reactions, from traditionally middle-class–based peace organizations, that the Piedmont Peace Project initially encountered when, from the earliest stages of formation, it insisted on employing a language of class to organize around military spending. Stout contends that the classist language often employed by social movement organizers has been a major barrier to broadening (and strengthening) the base of progressive social movements.

When I first began my work with PPP, I often heard middle class people talking about wanting to include low income people and people of color in their organizations. At PPP we used to call this “just talk,” talk that acknowledged the importance of diversity but was never put into practice. We thought if people really wanted to include us, they would act differently . . . but then I began to see things differently. Because of my involvement with (some) folks in Boston, I started to realize that these people did want to be inclusive, but they just didn’t know how. (1996, 118

The language of this very passage is one that explodes the all-too-popular assumption that difference need be a barrier to class-based organizing. Stout instead seeks to develop a language that both recognizes and honors the varied languages employed by different groups while pursuing similar social justice–oriented goals. She contends that new social movement activists are prone to assume that poor communities do not understand complex, “abstract” national issues such as military spending, to which she counters that they often employ a class–biased language that fails to speak to wider (i.e., lower-income) constituencies’ actual knowledge base(s) (121). Indeed, they presume that differences of experience naturally lead to absolu-

9. I chose to discuss the Piedmont Peace Project in this paper because Stout speaks most directly to the issue of a language of class and new social movement organizing. For other equally illuminating discussions of class-based new social movement organizing as an alternative to non-class-identity-based organizing, see Anner (1996), Kadi (1996), and Mann (1991). See Brecher and Costello (1999) on examples of labor union alliances with community-based social movements.

As low income people, we bring to our organization a clear understanding of how to talk to other working-class people like ourselves. We bring an ability to make clear connections between local and national issues . . . Most middle-class people assume that the people at PPP are the “exceptions”—that we have skills and intelligence that are above those of low-income people. Middle class organizers . . . were surprised to discover that folks in our neighborhood paid close attention to national issues . . . We didn’t have to explain the connections to them. They already had made the link, while many middle class people miss those connections. Low income people understand that spending decisions of the government affect their lives directly because they experience it on a day-to-day basis. In fact, they know, even though they don’t always know that they know. (108–9)

Stout directly challenges the notion that difference should lead to an isolationist strategy of organizing. In fact, in her very insightful understanding of class language differences as “foreign languages,” she is insisting that middle-class organizers can learn working-class languages and that identity-related barriers are bridgeable. What new social movements need are “interpreters” between the different classes, a powerful notion that at once recognizes difference and similarity of interests. The interpreters that Stout seeks are those who already reside in low-income neighborhoods and who can relate national issues to the immediate concerns of low-income people (e.g., day care, housing, health care) in their own language and who likewise can translate low-income members’ interpretations back to middle-class activists. In the process, insights are made into how organizing that addresses class contradictions in capitalism is effective, even in middle-class communities.

One of the benefits of learning how to make these translations is that you may stumble upon an educational message that crosses class lines in both directions . . . During the . . . Gulf War, it was the job of two PPP staff people to try to understand the more complex issues being written about in the peace movement and to translate these issues into a language that the rest of us could understand . . . When we fully understood the issues, we made a video in our own language to use in our area . . . [It was] specifically created by and for low income folks, [but it] became an important educational tool in the middle class peace community. (112–3; emphasis added)

Moral appeals do comprise a part of the discursive practices of the Piedmont Peace Project’s class-based organizing. However, these moral appeals are quite unlike the standard peace movement’s abstractly moralistic antiwar proclamations, which tend to employ a discourse that is primarily oriented toward the middle class and which fail to acknowledge that for many working-class poor, their involvement in the war machine is tied less to patriotism than to economic opportunity. Their family members (should) resent a language that does not recognize that basic reality. The language of class embedded in the Piedmont Peace Project’s antiwar stance spoke to the effects that war has on the (disproportionately working class and minority) communities of those who are actually fighting the war.
Social Movements and Class

Finally, the Pediment Peace Project is an example of a class-based social movement that furthers the cause of peace. This project has been successful in promoting social justice by empowering people to take action against the forces of war and oppression. It is the process of empowering people to change their own lives and the world around them.

As an example of a class-based social movement, the Pediment Peace Project takes the interconnectivity of class and other forms of oppression into account. By employing a non-violent approach, the project is able to bring about positive change in society.

References


Restructuring, Flexibility, and the Politics of Workplace Subjectivity: A Worker Inquiry in the South African Car Industry

Franco Barchiesi

Recent shifts and changes in forms of industrial conflict and worker struggle in post-apartheid South Africa constitute a challenge for assumptions common in various theoretical perspectives about the development of worker behaviors, attitudes, and class consciousness. Many episodes of industrial action have developed as unpredictable events or unintended consequences of broader social, economic and productive changes in the “new,” democratic South Africa. As a result, management and unions alike have often been unprepared to manage worker resistance through existing organizational and ideological apparatuses.

Some authors emphasize in particular how the legitimation gained during the 1990s by the union organizations in South Africa as key players in political transition, industrial policymaking, macroeconomic debate, and collective bargaining at a central level is still matched by the permanence of what was called the “apartheid workplace regime” (Von Holdt 1995) in the factories. This is apparent in widespread authoritarian styles of management, abusive and discriminatory practices by middle-level supervisors, permanence of substantial wage differentials, lack of recognition of the skills of the African work force, and racially biased grading systems. After a massive nationwide strike in 1994 and recent prolonged episodes of industrial action at major companies (Toyota, Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz), the automobile industry has been one of the sectors most sensitive to these changes and contradictions (Bohmke and Desai 1996). Moreover, worker resistance has been heightened in this