

Getting Serious About Class Dynamics: Culture, Politics and Class

July 1, 2012

LABOR HISTORIANS have detailed how the structure of the workplace, the cultural aspects of community, and spatial patterning all impact class consciousness. From coal mining that paradigmatically has the workers living in the hollow and the bosses on the hill to the ethnic enclaves of steel town where different nationality/ethnic groups each occupied their own distinct neighborhoods with taverns, union halls and churches, socialization matters. Capital has learned the virtues, from its perspective, of replacing single River Rouge-like plants with a number of redundant smaller facilities located far from each other and pitting workers spatially distant from the easier solidarity that came from the traditional industrial concentration. It is not without interest that where labor can be tightly controlled as in Foxconn's huge plant at Shenzhen, China with its hundreds of thousands of workers the old industrial regime is possible. So long as the reserve army of potential workers is available, inhumane levels of exploitation can continue.

While in 1960 the most profitable American companies had international divisions and exported, they were basically U.S. companies. Today some of the most valuable American corporations like Apple don't employ many workers in the United States. International solidarity will be and is important. But the workers in each country have national and sectoral struggles to fight. It is only strong movements in particular countries that can offer solid support for struggles in other countries. One victory for the American labor movement is that after long term collaboration with the C.I.A. and U.S. Cold War policies, American labor has not only ended this shameful practice but, thanks to groups like Labor Against the War, has enlisted in honest solidarity work from what is objectively an anti-imperialist position.

The growth of the globally available labor force capital can remain a major obstacle to the advancement of class solidarity, given differences of language and culture. The tripling of the size of this workforce in recent decades with the entry of India and the former Communist countries into the international division of labor has been hard on formerly more protected workers in the advanced economies. But just as in response to bosses in mill towns bringing in strike breakers from different ethnicities or racial groups had to be overcome through class unity, the workers of the world will have to unite. But the primary focus of struggle remains at the national level. Even as we think globally we act locally, to coin a phrase.

Understanding the evolution of the working class in the United States (as well as elsewhere in a globalized capitalism) sensitizes us to the ongoing reformation of the class in this country in our time. The terrain has been harsh for some decades. The United Automobile Workers, once the most powerful union in America, has lost 80 percent of its members in the past three decades. It has had to acquiesce to contracts under which newly hired autoworkers make \$13-15 an hour doing the same work on the same assembly line as those members getting twice as much. As Bill Vlasic writes of two-tier pay, "What was once seen as a desperate move to prop up the struggling auto industry is now considered an integral part of its future." [1] Chrysler, which Clint Eastwood tells us is "back," expects the proportion of two-tier workers to rise from 13 percent to at least 25 percent by 2015. BNA, a business and legal publisher, estimates that 20 percent of U.S. workers in 2010 were covered by such two-tier wage and benefit provisions.

Another change is that when today's auto company hires a thousand new employees, it creates four times as many jobs for marketers, managers, car salesmen, and subcontract parts makers. In

the economy more broadly there are fewer secretaries and office clerks and more professionals and low level service sector workers. This bifurcation has political consequences, as does the sheer proportion of low-wage non-union jobs.

What has become most visible since the start of the Great Recession is the explosion of freelancers, including those with titles like "president" and "founder" of companies of which they are the sole employee. There are predictions that 40 percent of Americans will be self-employed at some point in their life. David Callahan, author of *Freelance Nation*, suggests that in the future "a greater number of workers will be on their own whether they like it or not, as corporations continue to shift toward 'just-in-time' labor practices — replacing salaried employees with temporary independent contractors." [2]

In thinking about class and politics the murky categories of culture and consciousness are important. They are shaped in significant measure by changes in the forces of production, of technology, and the way it is deployed and work organized — that is by the changing composition of jobs in the labor market. Paying attention to these changes and how they have changed the working class is my first topic. The second part of my discussion will include thinking about the 2012 Presidential election in class terms.

Restructuring Production, Reconstituting the Class

TODAY WHILE TRANSNATIONAL CAPITAL has grown more powerful, much of the U.S. labor force is employed in small establishments in the service sector that are often part of giant chains or segmented from others in offices where distinct hierarchies divide labor into separate fractions without obvious points of unity. These conditions disempower attempts at solidarity. We see this in the shift from manufacturing and blue collar work. In 1960 the largest employers in America in order of size were General Motors, the Bell System with its phone monopoly, Ford, General Electric (a G.E. that was overwhelmingly a manufacturing company before its finance divisions grew to make most of the company's money), and U.S. Steel. A half-century later Wal-Mart is the nation's largest employer followed by Kelly Services (the job placement firm), IBM (now a business service company), UPS (the parcel deliverer), McDonald's and Yum! (operator of Taco Bell, KFC, and Pizza Hut).

The number of employees working in the 2010 largest corporations is roughly twice that of the industrial giants of fifty years ago. But these workers are spread over vastly more numerous, smaller work sites. Employment in the former giants was characteristically for life; in today's low-wage non-union megacorps worker turnover is substantial and many are on temporary contracts and formally hired by subcontractors.

Seven of the ten occupations that are expected to see the greatest growth, according to the Department of Labor, are low-wage or very low-wage ones. This does not mean that personal and home care aides, for example, are not being organized but that without major political change, including serious labor law reform, we can expect income and wealth inequalities to continue to increase.

Serious attention is now being paid to a growing white underclass of unemployed and low waged whites, of the epidemic of methamphetamine destroying rural white poor communities and the economic impact of really existing capitalism on white people who thought since they weren't black this couldn't happen to them. As Nicholas Kristof writes: "Today, I fear we're facing a crisis in which a chunk of working-class America risks being calcified into an underclass, marked by drugs, despair, family decline, high incarceration rates, and a diminishing role of jobs and education as escalators of upward mobility. We need a national conversation about these dimensions of poverty..." [3] Income is

now a bigger factor behind the large gap in education than race — a big change over the years since Reagan became president in 1980.

The importance of contestation in the political arena brings us to the important work that needs to be more completely carried out by labor studies investigators breaking down the 59 percent of America that Michael Zweig tells us compose the working class majority.[4] The fractions of the class are not static but as I have indicated have changed dramatically over the decades of neoliberal globalism.

In approaching this task it is useful to start with Marx whose views on class in relationship to the politics of a particular historical conjuncture need to be better understood. Let us recall Marx's own multifaceted understanding of class — which I must say are not all that easy to separate out. To Marx, classes exist on a number of levels of analysis: the level of generality of class history, that of the era of capitalism, or of modern capitalism, and of the immediate political situation. Far from the certainties demonstrated by many Marxists who use the term class, I agree with Bertell Ollman's conclusion that Marx cannot escape the accusation of "having a litter of standards for class membership and of changing them without prior warning." [5]

In Marx's writing the same word can take on different meanings in different contexts. The word's meaning shifts because the relational context changes. Categories are interpenetrating and thus do not represent separate realities. The same group can be placed in different taxonomies depending on the question being asked, the level of social reality being explored. Ollman writes: "Marx conflates a number of social ties (relations between groups based on various standards) which are generally treated separately. He views them as interacting parts of an organic whole, the society in question." [6]

Most popular treatments of the topic focus on one of two ways Marx himself used the construct "class." He was concerned with the two great classes of a social formation: slaves and their masters, serfs and lords, workers and capitalists. But for our purposes here another usage is relevant. He also used the terms to mean class fractions or the "complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank," in the words of the *Manifesto*. These ranks become anachronistic as societies evolve. Capitalism is a dynamic system and so societies are in a constant state of change. The consciousness of individuals and the groupings of which they are a part, the way working people think about their problems, who their enemies and friends are — all of this changes. Some classes, or what are better called class fractions, cease to exist or become less important in the totality of a society, or they are restructured as the capitalism in which they exist undergoes new developments. New classes come into being. The definition of a class fraction in a particular mode of production in a given historical conjuncture depends on the question being asked and so the purpose of the social map being drawn and employed. In my introductory remarks I tried to convey what some of these important changes in our time have been.

In his political writings when Marx deals with the current events of his time, he examines the general beliefs of the different ranks of society. Marx made distinctions among small landowners and hereditary lords, petty bourgeois shopkeepers, captains of industry, a class of financiers, and so on. He analyzed the interests of each and how their material conditions influenced their worldview and political actions. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx produced the classic analysis of political struggle in which he correlated the interests of class fractions and political movements contesting for power, an analysis in which contingency, personality, and opportunism all figured. In that canonical work he delineates the groups opposing the Paris proletariat in 1848: "the aristocracy of finance, the industrial bourgeoisie, the middle class, the petty bourgeoisie, the army, the lumpen proletariat organized as the Mobile Guard, the intellectual lights, the clergy, and the rural population," and then discusses their various roles. He also notes in passing that "in the United

States of North America where... classes, indeed, already exist, they have not yet become fixed but continually change and interchange their elements in a constant state of flux. . . ." Classes continue to be in flux due to capitalism's dynamic changes through time. Intuitive politicians have always been sensitive to this and have assembled voting majorities for a top-down historic bloc by manipulating understandings of the categories of "them and us."

For the 30 years since Ronald Reagan became President, conservative politicians have done a pretty good job of misdirecting working class anger toward people they call "the liberal elite" of professionals and highly educated individuals whom the right has quite successfully stereotyped. The successful misdirection has meant that people who really have influence over the direction of the economy and government are hidden from view.

The Democrats as the party of reformist capitalism have enraged those working class whites who understood that they had in effect betrayed them in two ways, by their being too sensitive to racial minorities and in their support of feminism in defiance of traditional patriarchy, and on the other hand catering to transnational capital and international finance against the interests of working people by assisting offshoring with subsidies and treaty agreements.

Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy was based on an appreciation that the Democrats' effort to modernize the South would have a devastating impact on Southerners' loyalty to that party. The impact was felt beyond the South, and was consequential in the de-industrializing Midwest where factories were closing and manufacturing downsizing devastated communities. The strength of the religious right is in part a tribute to the women's movement and the support the employer class has given to expanding the labor pool by welcoming women to the workforce. The legislative support the Democrats gave was anathema to working class conservatives.

On globalization the Democrats, wedded to international capital, were not about to do anything significant to protect the jobs of American industrial workers. For one thing, they saw a more important constituency in the growing technical-professional classes which would compensate for the loss of the white working class voters. For another, to defend the industrial working class would not have been well received by those fractions of capital funding the party. At the same time many in the professional-technical stratum of the working class gained from the low cost of imports, from cheap immigrant labor, and were in occupations positively connected to the global economy and so opposed protection measures to help manufacturing.

Thomas Edsall has provocatively written:

For decades, Democrats have suffered continuous and increasingly severe losses among white voters. But preparations by Democratic operatives for the 2012 election make it clear for the first time that the party will explicitly abandon the white working class.

All pretense of trying to win a majority of the white working class has been effectively jettisoned in favor of cementing a center-left coalition made up, on the one hand, of voters who have gotten ahead on the basis of educational attainment — professors, artists, designers, editors, human resources managers, lawyers, librarians, social workers, teachers, and therapists — and a second, substantial constituency of lower-income voters who are disproportionately African-American and Hispanic.[7]

This seems too strong a formulation. Obama needs at least some of the battleground states of the Midwest/Rust Belt if he is to win re-election. Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin are six of the twelve states most likely to be the highly contested this election. Winning

white working class votes will not be easy given the sense of betrayal by the Democrats and the reactionary appeal of the Republicans on race, gender, and the need to support "job creators." We need to seriously ponder a reality in which the Republican Party has become the party of the white working class. That white working class voter support for Republican House candidates by a record-setting margin: 63-33 in 2010 is an ill omen for the Democrats in this election year. If we define working class voters as those with incomes between \$30,000 and \$70,000 with no college education, most of them voted for McCain in 2008 (52-46 according to a national exit poll). The 2010 election was far more dramatic. White working class voters went Republican by 30 points.

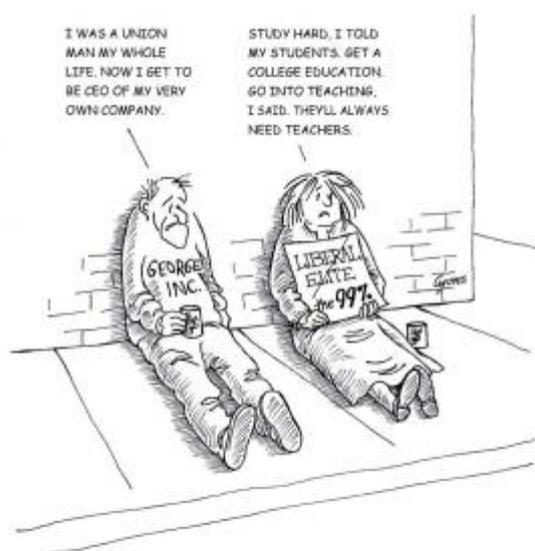
Despite recent positive trends in job creation the question remains: what if this crisis for working people continues into the middle future without any real improvement in the economic situation of working people here and in Europe and if the now clear trend to stagnation and falling wages, benefits, and worsening working conditions comes to be understood as the new normal? It will be harder to misdirect anger at the conservatives' traditional target, a so-called liberal elite. It is the case that this "elite" that many working class people with a high school education or less encounter are mostly lower level professionals with college degrees who in one way or another can be seen as not us, not ordinary people, not our friends. But when the financial sector crashed and the government rushed to bail out the bankers who had caused the mess, people began to think differently about who was the real elite. As Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich have written, the idea of the "liberal elite" created by conservatives could not survive the exposure of the real 1 percent, "by the discovery of the actual, Wall Street-based elite and their crimes. Compared with them, professionals and managers, no matter how annoying, were pikers. The doctor or school principal might be overbearing, the professor and the social worker might be condescending, but only the 1 percent took your house away." [8]

In Wisconsin we saw a tremendous outpouring of support from private sector unionists and other workers for college-educated public sector unionists who had been portrayed by Scott Walker and his cronies as a privileged elite living off the taxpayer. The solidarity showed by an incredibly large cross section of the working class — and not only in Wisconsin — is an emergent class understanding refuting the conservatives' worldview. The right, which has done so well misdirecting popular rage at Wall Street and capitalism onto working people and service recipients who did not cause the crisis but are made to bear its costs, is being challenged. An alternative left perspective redirects people to the failings of the so-called free market system at a time when global trends in economics and demography are undermining the illusions of a territorial United States they grew up with and is now a matter of nostalgia. Not only is there China and the rise of other once subject nations, but Republicans know in their gut that theirs is a demographically declining party. The GOP does poorly among younger voters, and it has little appeal to ethnic minorities who represent a rising share of the population. The native-born whites at the party's base worry that they are losing control of American society. But they are also learning that they never had it. The class analysis of the 1 percent/99 percent, even if overly crude, is politically effective and Wisconsin and Occupy have had their impacts.

Many workers will no doubt cling to the illusion of American exceptionalism; but as far as transnational capital and international finance are concerned all such exceptionalism is over. The transnationals consider the territorial United States a not very competitive production venue unless American workers continue to accept continuous draconian givebacks.

Indeed, as Robert McChesney writes: "The gap between the concerns of the masses and the solutions countenanced by the corporate-run political system are wider than at any point in generations. It is the defining political story of our times." [9] What the masses know at one level or another is that "capitalism is eating up our future." It is this knowledge that capitalism is the problem that has always motivated movements for revolutionary change.

In conclusion let me say that the very major disruptions — the relative decline in power of the United States in the global economy, the rise of China, demographic shifts and the expectation that the United States will be a majority minority society in a few decades, the acceptance of inter-marriage and of gay rights, the erosion of patriarchal norms in the number of college-educated women professionals, the downward mobility of working class white men, the growing income and wealth inequalities, the role of anonymous donor super-PACs — have unleashed a powerful rear guard active reaction in defense of white-skin privilege, patriarchy, and national chauvinism. Our task is to develop a usable class analysis in which the system itself comes into focus for people and the need for non-reformist reforms (understood as things working people need that are reasonable in their eyes and build working class consciousness) are widely put forward. The system either makes major concessions or reveals it will not or cannot meet such demands and perpetuates a situation of continued hardship for most working people. Such an answer speaks to the need for a post-capitalist society. Concessions that are of a non-reformist kind change the balance of class forces and help build the movement for further structural change to displace the system itself. I am not suggesting this is easy. But it is our job.



Footnotes

1. Bill Vlasic, "Detroit Sets Its Future on a Foundation of Two-Tier Wages," *New York Times*, September 12, 2011.
2. This is from Scott Shane and cited by David Callahan, "Freelance Nation," *The American Prospect*, March, 2012, p. 41.
3. Nicholas D. Kristof, "The White Underclass," *New York Times*, November 27, 2011.
4. Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, Second Edition, 2012). (p.3) Zweig defines classes "in large part based on the power and authority people have at work....A relative handful of people have great power to organize and direct

production, while a much larger number have almost no authority. In a capitalist society such as ours, the first group is the capitalist class, the second group is the working class....For all their differences, working class people share a common place in production, where they have relatively little control over the pace and content of their work, and aren't anybody's boss. They produce the wealth of nations, but receive from that wealth only what they can buy with the wages their employers pay them. When we add them all up, they account for over 60 percent of the labor force. They are the working class majority."

5. Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method*. (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 40.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Thomas B. Edsall, "The Future of the Obama Coalition, *New York Times*, November 27, 2011.

8. Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, "The Making of the American 99 Percent," *The Nation*, January 2, 2012, p. 19.

9. Robert W. McChesney, "Foreword" to Michael D. Yates, ed., *Wisconsin Uprising: Labor Fights Back* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010) pp. 15 and 17.