

DEMOCRACY AGAINST CAPITALISM: NOTES ON CLASS

In this post I described Ellen Meiksins Wood's view of class from Chapter 3 of *Democracy against Capitalism*. In this post I look more closely at two aspects of class that seem especially relevant.

1. The small number of classes. Wood pointed out that the concept of class has not received much elaboration. Basically, we can identify three classes, the working class, the capitalist class, and the artisan/small business/professional class. That seems inadequate to describe the class structure of the US. Are there more?

Class is based on social relations, including primarily the relation to the means of production. It's obvious that people have different levels of access to the means of production and different levels of control over use of the means of production. Meat cutters, Amazon warehouse workers, and the working class generally have no access and no control. At some point in a business hierarchy, that changes. People are given different access and different levels of control. At the top of each organization there are managers who have been given full access to the means of production and full control over their use. All of these higher-ups have control over assets, and more important, control over the people lower in the hierarchy.

It's hard to see how to use this to identify a nascent class among those with some degree of access and control, such as supervisory and managerial workers. Classes don't exist just because we can identify structural similarities. There has to be some way for them to connect across employers, so that they can see commonalities in their work lives and their

social relations above and below. More likely many supervisory workers identify as producers first and managers second, so that many supervisory workers would see themselves in the working class. That becomes less so as we move up the hierarchy, where people begin to identify more closely with those above them. I'm pretty sure that people at the top of the hierarchy identify with the capitalists. Thus, it's not likely that we will find other classes in this group.

Maybe a better view would be to identify classes based on actual antagonisms and conflicts. I'm not sure how that would work either. Maybe this difficulty explains why the concept of class has not been expanded.

But maybe it's not a crucial issue. There are about 126 million private full-time employees in the US. Non-farm production and non-supervisory employment was at 104.5 million. Adding in government and farm workers and others not included would increase that number, so that about 85% of full-time employees are production/non-supervisory workers. It's safe to assume that all part-time workers are in that category as well. If we take these groups as a proxy for the working class, we are probably safe in assuming that we are accounting for most of the population with our three categories.

2. Domination and hegemony.

Wood, following E.P. Thompson's *The Making Of The English Working Class*, says that the working class makes itself as workers experience the relations of production and the relations with other people of their class and of other classes. Once the working class becomes aware of itself as a class, it is able to struggle over the surplus value it creates, and against the system that enables the capitalists to seize all of the profits. She acknowledges the difficulties this poses, including the "people's own resistance to socialist politics". Kindle Loc. 1982.

She sees a trend in Western Marxism to downplay or even reject the role of the working class in changing the capitalist system, eventually leading to socialism. But she says that change through the working class is the only way to bring about a socialism that is consistent with democratic values and political realism. Kindle Loc. 2001.

Wood says that the alternative to the leadership of the working class offered by some Marxists is change through other groups, especially intellectuals. She flatly rejects that approach, quoting Thompson from *The Poverty of Theory* claiming that their premises are profoundly anti-democratic:

... Whether Frankfurt School or Althusser, they are marked by their very heavy emphasis upon the ineluctable weight of ideological modes of domination – domination which destroys every space for the initiative or creativity of the mass of the people – a domination from which only the enlightened minority or intellectuals can struggle free. ... it is a sad premise from which socialist theory should start (all men and women, except for us, are originally stupid) and one which is bound to lead on to pessimistic or authoritarian conclusions. Kindle Loc. 2006.

Pierre Bourdieu focused his life's work on the way systems of domination reproduce themselves, according to David Swartz in *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Here's Swartz' discussion of Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence:

Bourdieu understands ideology, or "symbolic violence," as the capacity to impose the means for comprehending and adapting to the social world by representing economic and political power in disguised, taken-for-granted forms. Symbolic systems exercise

symbolic power “only through the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it. In using the term “symbolic violence” Bourdieu stresses how the dominated accept as legitimate their own condition of domination. P. 89; cites omitted.

I discussed symbolic violence in neoliberalism here. Wood no doubt accepts the idea that capitalists, the dominant class, try to impose their ideology on the working class, and to create the “people’s own resistance to socialist politics”. Bourdieu doesn’t say that symbolic violence works all the time. People retain their agency; they can change their habitus, the way they are predisposed to understand society and their place in it.

It’s also possible to resist symbolic violence. For example, in *White Kids* Margaret Hagerman, emphasizes that affluent white kids are not blank slates, but actively participate in forming their own views on racism which may or may not align with the authority figures in their lives. In the same way, all of us can resist the attempts of the dominant class to control our understanding.

Wood says people can throw off the domination that symbolic violence tries to create. Again, she thinks that this is the only democratic and politically realistic way forward. Given the large number of workers and their voting power, that seems true. The hope is that people can see the facts in front of them, and that workers would eventually figure out that they are being dominated and exploited, and that the surplus they produce is being appropriated by the dominant class and that this is wrongful. Some groups of workers have realized this and acted. But most people, including most workers, just keep working without thinking about what’s happening to them.

Wood doesn’t make a lot of room for

intellectuals, including herself. Maybe their work is to produce a competing ideology that respects working people?