What happened to class?

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Received 2 April 1999; in revised form 27 November 1999

Abstract. While the question of social class contributed centrally to the emergence of social theory in geography in the 1970s and 1980s, it has recently fallen out of favour as a lens for viewing the social construction of space, place, and nature. The causes for this loss of class vision can be found partly in the rise of alternative political perspectives focusing on identity and emphasizing a cultural rather than economically rooted politics, but they also stem from weaknesses within late 20th-century Marxism itself. The vaguely classless politics that emerged from some strands of the 1960s movements, as well as very powerful reactions against the 1960s, have also contributed. But this reaction has now run its course, and we find ourselves without a sophisticated language of class precisely at the time when, globally, class is being reasserted with a vengeance. From the economic boom, then crisis (1997–99), then boom again in Asia to the reassertion of class in Mexico and Eastern Europe, or the dramatic class formation in postcolonial South Africa not to mention Blair's Britain or Clinton's United States, class represents a crucial political dimension of social difference. Multiculturalism comes to look like an apology for capitalist 'diversity' while politics in academic circles is increasingly equated with the liberal common denominator of morality. This is not a narrow back-to-class appeal, but rather an argument that we need to find a way of reintegrating class into the issues of identity and cultural politics that for very good reasons have occupied the political foreground in recent years.

A 1998 television advertisement in the United States featured cool teenagers in stylish gear—baggy jeans, tee shirts, tank tops—gyrating through a gritty urban landscape with maximal bodily attitude. The backbeat was rap and the deliberately cryptic 15-second spot was one of a series of 'social conscience ads' melding a multinational brand name's attire with deep social and political meaning. The message was diversity: Asian and black kids, white and Latino, male and female. The style was modern noir, jarringly black and white in a habitually splashy multicolour medium with movement and anticipation expressed via myriad shades and tones of grey. Against the images of bodily movement the screen began pulsating—Barbara Kruger style—the blocked words “RACE”, “GENDER”, “ETHNICITY”. I casually expected the voice-over to deliver some pat multiculturalism about respecting diversity, but it didn't. Instead there came a much more edgy rap about DIFFERENCE which could be read in rather contradictory ways. Difference was to be respected even celebrated—that was clear—but was it a difference of equals or unequals? Was it a difference of engaged political activism of the sort embodied in the best social justice movements? The brassy dancing in the streets made this plausible even likely. Or was it a celebration of difference that simply assumed equality across sharp identitarian lines, equality as a philosophical given unhinged from any social struggles that might achieve or protect equality and rights: difference, in fact, as separation—separate but equal? The deliberate choice of stylized, seemingly representative social identities—one of each flavour—and the equally discrete differences between clothing styles made this less palatable essentialism equally plausible. The advert was no call to antiracist or feminist street action, much as it absorbed the possibility of such a reading, and it made no mention of sexual preference.
Instead, the categories of racial, gender, and ethnic differences were being raised to ontological status and deployed as powerful, commercial, symbolic commodities. I had three different responses to this advert. The first was a certain muffled and surprised pride that somehow the categories of our arcane academic debates translated so quickly and so fully formed into such a prominent public role. Academics really do make a difference, I found myself musing. My second reaction was less jubilant and might well be summed up by the title of this paper: what happened to class? Class, it seemed, was the great unmentioned ‘difference’ in this global corporate projection of cool clothes, but on a moment’s reflection it seemed equally clear that class was inscribed throughout. The setting was a poor working-class neighborhood against which the clothes oozed with upwardly mobile promise, most explicitly in the case of the black kid whose race was subtly made to stand in for class difference even as his clothing expressed the most intense class aspiration. In this respect the advert seemed to mirror something about the present political terrain in the academic social sciences and humanities where race and gender, ethnicity—and sexuality—have significantly eclipsed a concern with class difference. My third response was less direct, less analytical. Such an effortless but keen ambivalence between a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ invocation of difference in the advert was extremely troubling. How could a seemingly progressive focus on identity differences simultaneously convey, as in a gestalt, an apparently opposite essentialism of race, gender, and ethnicity? This too seemed to ring true about academic discourse today, but the connection seemed much vaguer.

In this paper I want to argue that the nexus of cultural politics and identity politics that has so energetically framed a broad intellectual and political vision in the last two decades has begun to run out of steam and that this has become increasingly apparent in the tricky gestalt between a subversive progressivism and reactionary essentialism. Corporate capitalism has caught up with our categories and quite effortlessly leveraged their buyout. As Hal Foster (1996), in *The Return of the Real*, has concluded, regarding the battle for a critical artistic postmodernism, the battle was not lost. Rather “a worse thing happened”: we were “treated as a fashion, postmodernism became démodé” (page 206).

The same might well be said of the increasingly deracinated categories of cultural and political identity, and there is an increasingly urgent sense of the need to reinvent ourselves if the political drive that fomented a cultural politics is to continue fermenting ahead of the corporate harvester. In that process I want to argue for a critical reanalysis of class. In the first place, the period since the 1970s may well represent an era of unprecedented global class formation and restructuring, most spectacularly in Asia. Economic crisis in Asia, Russia, and Latin America after 1997 has significantly sharpened class divisions that had already become evident in student uprisings in Korea, the rise of the worker’s party in Brazil, wide support for the Zapatistas in Mexico, and (after the crisis) the toppling of President Suharto in Indonesia and the East Timorese revolt. But even in the more traditional cores of the capitalist economy, so-called globalization is dramatically remaking class relations at a time when the focus of much European and North American academic research has been directed elsewhere. In many ways our ability to see class, to think class, is blunted compared with one or two decades ago, even though, as with our diversity advert, class is thickly written through the cultural, political, and economic landscapes we interrogate. Class has manifestly not been treated as a corporate fashion, nor will it be. The lack of attention to class geographies puts us at a considerable advantage in dealing with these landscapes. Second, this is about changing the world as well as interpreting it. As my first response to the advert affirms, ideas can and do change the world, and so I take my lead from Francis Fox Piven (1999) who, concluding a critique of the dismantling of the US welfare system in the 1990s, claims that democracy depends on a re-understanding of class.
Two caveats should be made at the beginning. First, the call for a significant reacquaintance with questions of class in no way intended to eclipse the breadth of current work that takes class seriously, and I will obviously refer to some of that here. Rather my point is more self-reflexive, namely to ask the question of focus and marginality vis-à-vis recent academic trends and fashions. Second, as my reference to the Indonesian revolt should make amply clear, real world situations are very complex, and the actually existing compacts of power never adhere to neat lines of class or race or gender or any other social category. It would be a defensive misreading of my intent here, therefore, to dismiss it as a narrow ‘back to class’ move that seeks to shed what we have learned from the cultural turn and identity politics. Such would be a dramatically retrograde step. In fact, at the risk of overanticipation, of bending the stick back too early, it seems to me that one of the most important intellectual and political tasks of the near future, as we reinvent ourselves, will be to secure a strong practical and enduring sense of the very real reasons why an identity politics and a cultural intellectualism emerged in the first place. We would all lose, and the corporate purveyors of diversity would have won, if race and gender became “démodé”. This is in no way contradictory with the call that we again take serious account of class difference. Rather, “a viable challenge to the depredations of modern capitalism” will come from two kinds of struggles: “grassroots community and labour organizing revitalized by identity politics, and a new politics of identity that strives for identification with other communities of interest and especially with the poor and working class” (Anner, 1996, page 12).

Class and globalization (gardening and Indonesia)
In May 1998, at about the same time as the diversity advert appeared, a debate emerged on the British electronic list, “critical geography forum” (crit-geog-forum@mailbase.ac.uk), about the politics of gardening. It covered a lot of issues from environmental politics to the politics of access to nature and issues of gardening and colonialism, and it delved into discussions of weeds and strawberries, bugs and metaphors. More than fifty e-mails were posted in less than two weeks, but as the political content became increasingly arcane—nothing about actually changing the world—there were some gentle challenges as to why this issue and not others of global significance were preoccupying a list of avowedly ‘critical’ subscribers. Response to the challenge was quick and defensive: some insisted that list members would discuss anything they wanted to and others were free to do likewise; others justified gardening as necessarily political insofar as it was a vital dimension of life. As a participant, I had no doubt that there was a politics to gardening: at about this time the leading edge of antigen-trification struggles in New York’s Lower East Side, where some of my research is based, pitted community gardens in a bitter fight against the revanchist mayor. But like others I was struck that gardening was being anxiously essentialized as necessarily political, and that of all things, it was gardening that peaked people’s ‘political’ interest, even as a vicious, socially inspired Sudanese famine claimed hundreds of lives daily and a brave Indonesian revolt was about to bring down Suharto. Why did an initial serious inquiry about the politics of gardening seem to unleash such pent-up political response in a way that global events did not? Was invocation of the political merely a diversion, camouflaging the lack of any real political substance, as Clive Barnett (1998) seems to be suggesting more generally? Coming only a few months after the Inaugural Conference in International Critical Geography in Vancouver, where the issue of politics and geography was centrally on the agenda, the gardening debate prompted me to reappraise exactly what is political about ‘critical geography’. How did we get to this point?
The rise of identity politics in the last decades of the 20th century reflected very real shifts in the social and cultural economies of advanced capitalist societies. Deindustrialization and immigration; new employment in producer, consumer, and domestic services; burgeoning cultures of consumption; new economies of reproduction; the resegmentation of labour in myriad ways—all of these dramatic changes concentrated into a couple of decades have brought a jarring recalibration of class, race, and gender divisions in the social economy. The source of these shifts has been not only economic but political; the civil rights, feminist, and gay and lesbian movements after the 1960s have been as powerful sources of social change as any economic logic. Such shifts have had virtually ubiquitous effect, destabilizing millions of lives, together with deeply held assumptions about identity, and powerfully placing a range of noneconomic questions and historical injustices on the political agenda. Not surprisingly therefore, questions of identity and culture came to frame the concerns of social science at the end of the 20th century.

Yet the global picture is perhaps a little different. There is no question that issues of identity and culture have also flared globally but that is altogether different from declaring the obsolescence of class (Castells, 1997). In retrospect the ideology of a ‘postindustrial society’ should come to be seen as one of the grand conceits of ‘First World’ social science in the 20th century. (Whether it does or not presumably depends on who will have the authority in the early decades of the 21st century to write global histories.) But while many critical Western academics have spent the last two decades getting away from class, the global economy has experienced an unprecedented formation and restructuring of class, focused especially on Asia. Since the late 1960s, East and Southeast Asia especially—from China and Korea round to India and Pakistan—have undergone an industrial expansion unparalleled in human history. The industrial revolution of 18th century England, often treated as paradigmatic, pales by comparison. Quickly following and integral with the reconstruction of the Japanese economy after World War 2, the export-oriented industrial expansion in Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea, already underway in the 1960s, spread throughout the region in the 1970s. Let us take Indonesia as an example. Only 6.3% of the active population had industrial jobs in 1950 whereas by 1990 the percentage had more than doubled to 13.6%. That may not seem great, but in absolute terms it represents an increase from 4.8 million to 24.9 million workers (ILO, 1995a; UNESCO, 1973; 1997). By 1980 “transnational capital’s paradigmatic workers” (Salzinger, 1997, page 549)—women—were more likely to be employed in industry (12.4%) than men (11.9%). As industrial wages rose in response to political pressure in the 1980s, men’s industrial participation rates again overtook women’s as women increasingly replaced men in a restructuring service sector (ILO, 1995b). The agricultural sector employed almost 80% of the active population in 1950, today that figure is barely 50%, as agriculture has also been selectively industrialized.

The expansion of an Indonesian working class at the end of the 20th century embraced the agricultural and, more recently, the service sector, but it was most dramatic in industrial manufacturing. Investment in manufacturing accounted for only 0.6% of the gross domestic product in 1969 but by 1996 represented an astonishing 25.2% of a much larger economy. That the active percentage of the population employed in industry rose only from 10.2% to 13.6% (1990) suggests the extraordinary levels of economic exploitation, fueled by intensive technological and organizational innovation, that built the ‘Indonesian economic miracle’. And that almost 13% of women workers occupied manual jobs by 1990 compared with only 8.8% of men suggests that the exploitation of women lies at the centre of this process (ILO, 1995a). Zillah Eisenstein’s general conclusion is nowhere more apposite than in this
region: “Class exploitation seems to be back with a vengeance, and women and girls—especially those in third-world-south countries—appear to take the brunt of it” (1998, page 1).

Class is central to understanding the political revolt that led to the overthrow of Suharto in May 1998 as the economic miracle crumbled, but the story makes little sense if told through abstract categories of class separated from gender and race. Indonesia’s industrial revolution produced masses of wealth accumulated in the hands of a very small and very rich ruling class, a group of only a few thousand people around Suharto, and they wielded authoritarian power backed up by the military. But it also produced a rapidly growing middle class of small capitalists, professionals, managers, and government officials, and the expansion of a huge national university system. The latter operated simultaneously as a political safety valve channeling revolt away from the gross inequalities of Indonesian society and, in the eyes of many working-class and middle-class families, as the crucial vehicle of class aspiration and economic ambition. The global economic collapse of late 1997 and early 1998 decimated the Indonesian economy and demolished these ambitions as millions of previously expectant people found themselves crashing into poverty, and the obdurate and corrupt Suharto regime, variously squeezed and abetted by IMF dictates, was the immediate target. Students led the revolt with slogans such as: “Wanted: Rice. Sugar. Cooking Oil. Democracy” (Mydans, 1998). Largely unorganized or only haphazardly so, they were joined in the last days by large numbers of workers, and with a US military delegation recently in the country and the national military refusing a wholesale, bloody clampdown, the Suharto regime was eventually toppled. 1200 lives were lost; reports quickly emerged that Chinese entrepreneurs, who had largely sided with and been beneficiaries of Suharto’s rule, were singled out for attack; and it was generally believed that more than a hundred women, reportedly raped during the revolt, were victims of the Indonesian military.

The imbrication of class, race, and gender in the Indonesian miracle and revolt shows graphically the limits to the abstract theoretical concepts with which we inevitably wage social theory debates, and the unintended tyranny that hermetically separated concepts can exercise over political common sense if they remain too long or too far separated from real struggles. Class, race, and gender are theoretically different, one from the other, but only up to a point. The class struggle that toppled Suharto was and remains etched through with topologies of gender and race and was equally messy in its class contours: in fact, class lines and alliances barely coalesced in the struggle, a fact that was crucial in the grumbling resignation that met the Habibi regime replacing Suharto. It is in many ways an unfinished revolt: the gendered conditions of exploitation remain even more intensely in place during a partial post-1998 recovery (governed increasingly by the IMF and the US Treasury); the national ruling class remains very much in power (forced eventually to concede autonomy for the brutally repressed East Timorese ethnic minority); anti-Chinese racism still focuses much anticapitalist antagonism; and here as throughout the region prostitution has resurfaced in response to lost jobs and incomes. But the messiness of the Indonesian revolt is only a surprise if one is captured by the abstract categorical purity of gender, race, or class (for an ethnographically rooted critique see Fernandes, 1997). There are still more questions than answers about the political meaning of the Indonesian revolt, and these may play out in practice more than in theory.

Variations on the Indonesian economic experience (if not the extent of political revolt) were repeated throughout East and Southeast Asia after 1997 and they suggest an extraordinary re-formation of class structure in the last three decades. They are part of a larger global picture. Volatile shifts in class structure are also taking place in
Russia and Eastern Europe as previously state-capitalist regimes embrace the global market; poor women and girls are the major losers in the new capitalism, according to the United Nations (Olson, 1999). Likewise in Asia and Latin America. From Mexico to India there is an intensified gender inscription of class (and vice versa) (Cravey, 1997; 1998; Wright, 1997), and the racialization of labor segmentation is intensifying as a result of unprecedented global migration of labor (Kelley, 1997; Kwong, 1997). In post-apartheid South Africa class division within the black majority has been swift despite transparently class-interested nationalist attempts to preserve race as the privileged political discourses. Throughout Africa a vicious struggle is afoot to fit postcolonial categories of ethnic difference not only to discrete geographical lines on a map but into locally derived class categories and aspirations consistent with the global market.

The class restructuring in the wealthiest societies is no less obvious. By 1999 the wealthiest 1% of US society (2.7 million people) commanded a total income similar to the poorest 100 million. This represents a dramatic expansion of the economic gap between the ruling class and the poorest classes; in 1977 the richest 1% commanded an income equal ‘only’ to that of the poorest 49 million (Johnston, 1999). Urban, regional, and national economies are no longer so dependent on locally reproduced labor, and the state selectively withdraws from many social welfare functions, provoking a crisis of social reproduction (Katz, 1998a). The consequent reforging of social relations, locally and nationally, becomes a crucial piece of the globalization puzzle, and a consequent reemphasis on class among communities of color (Gregory, 1992) and immigrants (Kwong, 1997).

There is therefore, as Mike Davis (1990, page 104) once observed from his Los Angeles perch, an “internationalization of class formation”, but this is not always a smooth and predictable process. In an effort to ensure a politically orderly reforging of class, draconian policing by the state parallels the structural economic policing perpetrated by the IMF, World Bank, and World Trade Organization. From Nigeria to Malaysia, Thatcher’s Britain to Giuliani’s New York—perhaps most glaringly symbolized in the prison-industrial sector of the US economy—states have sharply reasserted political control as a strategic means of controlling immigrant, ethnic, as well as economically surplused populations (Gilmore, 1998; Hall, 1978; Smith, 1998). And yet, two years before the 1992 LA uprising, Davis argued that the “appalling destruction and misery within Los Angeles’s inner city areas... became the great non-issue of the 1980s while the impact of growth upon affluent neighborhoods occupied center-stage”. He detected what he called “a new class war... at the level of the built environment”, which was simultaneously a “continuation of the race war of the 1960s” (1990, pages 121, 228).

Davis’s depiction of destruction and misery as the great nonissue may stand as an allegory for the predicament of much academic discourse in the late 1980s and 1990s amidst what may turn out to be the most extraordinary social restructuring in global history to date. The illusion of classlessness, the refusal to take class seriously, is a luxury item available only in the wealthiest suburban enclaves of global capitalism. And it is there too that our carefully constructed politically correct arguments about multiculturalism have become anxious fodder for corporate advertising and commodification. So what happened to class?

The rise and fall of class

By the late 1970s, although participants hardly realized it at the time, radical and eventually Marxist work came to dominate the research frontier in human geography. Some of the most exciting work addressed questions of the geographies of capitalism at various scales—the urban and regional, national and global—and the elaborate
development of Marxist theory was based on a presumption and a politics that held class relations as central to the making and understanding of these geographies. Much of this work found the light of day in the pages of *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography*, founded by graduate students and young faculty at Clark University in 1969, initially produced by mimeo machine and until 1986 typed, printed, and mailed by a labor-intensive group of whomever could be cajoled into helping out. Intense discussion also took place around the Union of Socialist Geographers (USG), a group dominated by activist graduate students in Canada, the USA, and Britain, which thrived for most of the 1970s. As a perusal of early *Antipode* or of the USG Newsletter quickly reveals, analytical discussion of class evolved amidst a staggeringly eclectic concern with Black power and Western nationalisms, native Americans and remote sensing, feminism, community, cultures of nature (Donaldson, 1969; Blaut, 1969; Anderson, 1969; Goodey, 1970; Bunge, 1971; Doherty, 1973; Burnett, 1973; Hayford, 1974; Galois, 1976) as well as a healthy dose of self-reflexivity (Eichenbaum and Shaw, 1971), and much more. It was a heady time and the debates that swirled had a disturbingly familiar content from the vantage point of the present (Katz, 1999), even if the style seems occasionally arcane and lacking sophistication, but the vital historical point is that these venues represented the only place in geography where such debates, radical proposals, and avowedly political analyses, whether about class or race or gender, could get into print.

What no one in the early 1970s could even vaguely imagine was that a broadly radical intellectual agenda, focused on but not restricted to Marxist-inspired research, would come to dominate much of the research frontier on the cusp of the increasingly conservative 1980s. Marxism was inexplicably influential in the academy even as the political winds in the wider world blew in an entirely opposite direction. Radical scholarship was where many of the sharpest graduate students flocked. It is not that the positivist hegemons in the discipline had disappeared but there were many notable defections and, although increasingly old guard positivists still largely controlled the discipline's institutions, much of the intellectual excitement now lay elsewhere. It was a classic case of uneven intellectual development. Certainly other social sciences developed strong radical wings, but it is as if geography, long isolated from mainstream social theory (especially in the United States), had no immunity to the variants of radical intellectual work that increasingly attracted a new generation of scholars and activists. A recrudescent radical scholarship, eventually centered on Marxism, became more dominant in geography in the 1970s and early 1980s than in any of the other social sciences.

Younger geographers followed and absorbed the interdisciplinary debates over class at the end of the 1970s which threw up a broad range of class theories: Marxist, Weberian, new managerial, etc (Giddens, 1973; Saunders, 1981; Walker, 1979; Wright, 1978). But the centrality of class in this emerging radical tradition was at best short lived, and at worst (as a new generation of 'labor geographers' has argued) nonexistent. The displacement of class as an object of geographical inquiry or as a means to understand the social geography of the world came partly from direct challenges as competing social theories exploded in the 1980s. Feminist, antiracist, and gay and lesbian political movements all predated the 1980s but it was in that decade, alongside poststructuralism and postmodernism, that these movements exploded in theoretical creativity, insisting much as Marxism had done a decade earlier that they merited their own theoretical space. Within the context of a wider cultural turn, they sought either to negotiate a relationship with class theory or to deny it altogether, but the result was a shift in intellectual authority squarely away from the social sciences and political economy discourses and toward the humanities and cultural politics.
But the migration from class was not only a result of outside pressure. It resulted as much from internal discontent that inherited class categories were insufficient for contemporary analysis, a reluctance or inability to renovate class theory, and all too often the deployment of thuddingly inflexible notions of class. As other exciting research agendas opened up, with the wider politics moving decisively rightward, and as the new generation aged, there was as one critic aptly put it a “recoil from Marxism” (Cruz, 1996, page 20). A scholar such as Anthony Giddens, whose early reputation was largely based on *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, perhaps exemplifies the shift. From *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* in the early 1980s he moved successively toward treating *The Nation-state and Violence, Modernity and Self-identity*, and more recently *The Transformation of Intimacy* and *Beyond Right and Left* (1994). Or we might think about Donna Haraway whose formative early work connecting primate physiology and nature, labor and reproduction has given way to a concern with gender, technoscience, and race in which labor and class play only a minor role (Haraway, 1978a; 1978b; 1997). I refer to these authors not by way of criticism but simply to highlight the shifts that have occurred. Many of us, radicalized in the 1960s and 1970s, have parallel biographies. However that may be, it remains true that by the end of the 20th century, social scientific analyses that take class and capitalism seriously are as likely to draw hasty accusations of an errant essentialism or universalism, economism or determinism as they are to be taken seriously. “Class”, as one commentator has put it, now “regularly falls out of view” (Schudson, 1997, page 69).

A number of ingredients contributed to what Ellen Meiksins Wood (1986) early and perceptively identified as a “retreat from class” (see also Aronowitz, 1992). First, and perhaps most obviously, the increasing intellectual influence of Marxism and the resulting focus on class in the 1970s and early 1980s found itself increasingly at odds with a wider political context whose rightward lurch was best symbolized by the election of Thatcher, Reagan, and Kohl. More generally the New Left that emerged from the 1960s was at best ambivalent about class, a point driven home by Todd Gitlin’s (1995) quite anti-Marxist history of the period, and the social movements fuelling academic treatments of class were in broad retreat at the end of the 1970s. Academic radicalism, less and less connected to socialist movements, was further divorced from its vital creative social and political energy. The inherent instability of academic radicalism in a sea of conservatism made a rightward shift very likely if not inevitable, especially in the United States where McCarthyism had long since cut all but the thinnest threads connecting academic and working-class socialism. But this retreat was neither simple nor discrete; it affected Marxists and non-Marxists alike, and it has only intensified since the 1980s with the reinvention of imperialism at the global scale in the guise of neoliberalism, and the flood of erstwhile social democratic political parties toward a variously denoted ‘new middle’ (Germany) or ‘third way’ (Britain) in which class consciousness is sublimated beneath the familiarly American self-deception that we are all middle class now.

Attractive as the broad, overarching vision was that emanated from a radical critique, and powerful as the analytical dissection of capitalism was, the political implications of that critique and analysis did not always sit comfortably on a personal level. In the age of Reagan, Thatcher, and Kohl, what did it mean to think oneself a revolutionary? For many whose commitment was scholarly more than activist, the value of the analytical tools provided by Marxism was not in question, but they had to be developed separately from any corollary about political action. At the very least the field of political action had to be separated sufficiently from the revolutionary conclusions of Marxism to legitimate a wider range of political agency which, on the whole, no longer saw revolutionary transformation as achievable, realistic, or even
necessarily desirable. This is perhaps the best illustration of the way in which social context and personal commitment were deeply interwoven in the retreat from class. Other ingredients of a waning class consciousness in critical social science, eminated from within. Marxists failed to theorize critically the very real shifts in class structure that made ideologies of the ‘new middle’ or the ‘third way’ plausible. There was little academic payoff for doing so and the social and labor movements that would have been energized by such a knowledge were themselves retreating. Where are the definitive analyses of class structure in the West after deindustrialization and globalization, or of class structure in East Asia after industrialization and partial integration into the global core? But the success of the Marxist critique also contributed to the problem. The project that came together as radical geography had many different threads but perhaps most alluring was that for many it opened up ‘the big picture’. It was as irresistible as it was necessary. Armed with critiques of capitalism, racism, imperialism, patriarchy, environmental destruction, it was possible to begin to see how different dimensions of exploitation, oppression, and inhumanity, all written into the geographical landscapes, fitted together into an exhilarating interlocked whole. The ability to connect apparently disparate realities and events into a ‘big picture’ made radical geographical work theoretically as well as politically intoxicating against which traditional positivism seemed uninspiring. It is a patent fiction of the locality debates of the late 1980s that Marxist analysis could not handle the local, but it is equally true that the big picture was so absorbing that the necessary work of connecting global with local and mesoanalyses was not always pursued.

Perhaps the most striking internal failure of Marxist work in geography concerns the way that working-class agency was treated as a virtual black box. It has become a shibboleth that Marxism focused narrowly on class, but as a review of early Antipodes will quickly suggest, it would be cruelly reductionist to argue that socialists eschewed any concern with race, gender, or national liberation struggles in favour of workers. Ironic as it might seem, I want to argue that it was class subjectivity that Marxist work in geography most glaringly failed to embrace. This is very much the critique presented from within by a new generation of scholars attempting to build a ‘labor geography’ (Herod, 1994; 1997; 1998; Johns, 1998; Mitchell, 1996; Tufts, 1998; Vural, 1994). In retrospect, it is astonishing that Marxists could have left such a gaping lacuna in terms of class agency, although it clearly connects also to the lack of theoretical attention to changing class structures.

In other ways, the radical insurgency was a victim of its own success, and this suggests a third ingredient. As the early generation of young faculty members and graduate students matured in the 1980s and 1990s, they came to inherit—sometimes with relative ease, sometimes only as a result of significant academic struggles—positions of significant intellectual power. We were successfully, and largely willingly, professionalized. The establishment of a Socialist Geographers Specialty Group as part of the specialty group structure of the Association of American Geographers could never have happened without the intellectual force of Antipode or the organizational efficacy of the Union of Socialist Geographers, and yet it spelled the end of the USG as an independent force (Katz, 1999). Not just in the USA but throughout the English-speaking academy, it became increasingly clear in the 1980s that socialists and feminists could actually get tenure and rise to positions of some power. By the 1990s we even became chairs of departments, deans. But the power was always circumscribed and has remained so. To this day the major national geographical associations have generally escaped radical conquest—sometimes by extreme means, as in the 1996 merger of the Institute of British Geographers with the Royal Geographical Society—and there are numerous signs of a political backlash organized around more technocratic
visions, centred on specific disciplinary ambitions for GIS, and the search for closer collaboration with business interests. Still, the institutionalization of radical research in a period of increasingly tight academic job markets has clearly had the effect of integrating much potential disciplinary opposition within.

Cultural studies and identity politics
The intellectual and political excitement swirling around Marxist work into the 1980s eventually transferred to cultural studies and identity politics. As one participant has put it, “cultural studies” was formed in the “tension between the reductionist pressures of orthodox marxism and the idealist tendency to separate culture from social relations” (Clarke, 1991, page xv). Traditional histories point to the Birmingham School around Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and later Stuart Hall as the most enduring inspiration for cultural studies. A number of agendas were intertwined here, but the core intent was to explore the expression of working-class cultures in and through literary means. Cultural Studies’ definitive concern with ‘popular culture’ is a direct descendant of these early origins (compare Bettie, 1995).

The trans-Atlantic migration of cultural studies in the 1970s can reasonably be identified as a central episode in the recession of class in this genre (Clarke, 1991). Refracted through the lenses of US class ideologies, the notion of popular culture transmogrified socially as well as geographically. Popular culture, which in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s implied an explicit orientation to working-class cultures, became increasingly identified with middle-class consumer culture in a national context where middle class was a euphemism for classlessness (DeMott, 1990). As Parisian poststructuralism, philosophical psychologism, and architectural postmodernism all entered the social sciences in this same period, the Marxist ‘critique of ideology’ was replaced by discourse theory and the critique of representation, which carried far looser connections to the analysis of social relations. The unhinging of discourse and representation from class relations was for some a quite deliberate reaction to the intellectual stranglehold maintained by official communist parties over many left intellectuals, especially in Europe. For others it provided a more personal opportunity to disconnect social theory from political prescription. Again, the migration of these ideas across the Atlantic furthered a retreat from class more bluntly than in Paris or Bologna. “In the process, the earlier concern with class structure” was “decentred, both from within marxism and from without”:

“In its place are more differentiated and contradictory conceptions of cultural politics. It is in this context that the idea of popular culture has returned to a more central role in cultural studies. Minimally, popular culture has emerged as a term describing the field within which competing perspectives can locate their objects of study and which carries no specific weighting to any one set of social relations...” (Clarke, 1991, page 15).

The merits of broadening radical social theory from a powerful Marxist influence into a multidimensional cultural politics are difficult to contest especially in light of the political circumstances of the period. Many Marxists welcomed the opportunities for political and intellectual expansion represented by cultural studies and identity politics albeit in different kinds of ways—Stuart Hall, Nancy Hartsock, Ernesto Laclau, Stanley Aronowitz, for example—while others were clearly more skeptical. A discourse of inclusion in the best sense, cultural studies offered a vital platform for including within the academy people, politics, and ideas that were traditionally screened out. Not surprisingly, this has had the effect of expanding and changing the focus of research in many fields. All of this was expressed politically in terms of an identity politics which took as axiomatic not simply the demand for political inclusion
(nonacademic as much as academic) as a corrective to historical, identity-based exclusions, but the demand too for a relational epistemology supplanting assumptions of universal truth.

Much in the same way that Marxism came to have considerable authority over the research frontier by the early 1980s, the nexus of identity politics and cultural studies, centered in the humanities, came to enjoy a similar if not greater intellectual and political authority by the 1990s. Although the numbers often remain small and the career ladder still demonstrably hazardous, some feminist scholars are now deans, and the political call for inclusion is correspondingly blunted. In the United States the Department of African American Studies at Harvard, which includes Henry Louis Gates Jr, Anthony Appiah, Cornell West, and William Julius Wilson, is boosted in the popular press as a veritable cultural phenomenon—a department of public intellectuals—and the public attention and reverence accorded it now rivals that of the Princeton physics department or Chicago economics. Gay and lesbian studies programs are nowhere as prominent but nonetheless enjoy increasing institutional security. None of this is to suggest that the struggle for inclusion is won—it is not—or that the gains are evenly or widely distributed among all women, people of color, gays and lesbians, or that inclusion is no longer lubricated by tokenism. Nor is it meant to suggest that existing gains and victories are not vulnerable to backlash: while Latino and Chicano studies programs seem secure in some parts of the United States, there is also an attempt in some places to subsume them under more conservative Latin American Studies programs with a literary focus (Caban, 1998).

As Angela McRobbie (1997, page 1) delicately puts it, cultural studies and identity politics are now moving “into a much larger and more expansive institutional space”. While this success has eased entry into the academy for some and placed identity politics on a wider public agenda, it accentuates as much as dissolves the contradictions of power and marginality. While centers for Latino Studies or Women’s Studies are for many students and faculty a vital oasis from many of the oppressive and discriminatory assumptions and practices pervading other sectors of the university, they are also easy to ghettoize. While having gay or lesbian administrators or people of color in the dean’s chair represents a significant victory, as with radicals before them, it also comes at a cost—activists lost to administration whose critical politics finds diminished expression. At the same time, the success of cultural studies and identity politics has provoked a significant backlash in and against the academy. The post-cold-war attack on political correctness and the so-called ‘culture wars’ are the most obvious symptoms of the defensive traditionalism driving the backlash.

Success and backlash have also provoked critical reflection as the liberatory impulse of identity politics has met with frustration as much as fruition. First, the critique of universalism that helped to lever identity politics into place is increasingly challenged (Ahmad, 1998; Harvey, 1996) both in philosophical and in practical terms. At the very least, the systematic, universalist ambition of capitalism requires a conceptual language adequate to its critique (Lazarus et al, 1995). Second, the collective ambition to meld race, gender, class, and sexual preference into a unified (albeit internally differentiated) theoretical critique and political movement is now a mantra more than a reality, and in the wake of our collective failure to materialize such a movement, and in light of the broad academic divorce from activist struggles, identity quietly recedes from a group to an individual definition, and specific identities are increasingly hardened into separate pigeonholes. Afro-centrism, as a mirror image of Euro-centrism, is an obvious case in point, but it is not alone. As Anna Pollert (1996) has argued, when words such as ‘patriarchy’ and ‘masculinism’ are readily deployed as epithets unhinged from the rich theoretical analyses that spawned them, they become
‘reductionist’ and ‘mechanistic’ and have the effect of converting some aspects of feminist discourse into its own ‘grand narrative’. Abstract denunciations of masculinism are no more revealing than saying that capitalism is bad. This hardening of identity categories is anything but unchallenged but it has proceeded far enough to provoke an undercurrent of competition between different identities, each pitting their history of victimization against that of others in a rather unseemly scramble to establish superior political authority as a direct mapping of greater and more intense oppression.

This is a process that Brackette Williams (1993) has aptly criticized as a “competitive moralism of victimization”. Past immoralities have to be a basis of contemporary political ambition, but good politics are not the expression of such reductionist historical comparisons. The consequent threat of new fundamentalisms in supposedly progressive circles is an expression of the failure of a left politics, Marxist as much as identitarian. Haraway (1991, page 109) makes the point in a more positive vein and in language with collective applicability: “The politics of difference that feminists need to articulate must be rooted in a politics of experience that searches for specificity, heterogeneity, and connection through struggle, not through psychologistic, liberal appeals to each her own endless difference”.

The increasing confusion of politics and morality in the 1990s—the presumption that politics is simply the righting of moral wrongs—also needs to be addressed directly. Where Marx wrote his social ethics into his analytical critique of capitalist society—exploitation was simultaneously an analytically derived concept and an ethical one—the question of ethics has emerged in the 1990s as a direct expression of identity politics (Slack and Whitt, 1992). If such a move is motivated in part by the influence of environmental politics, and the animal rights movement whose politics are almost entirely circumscribed by ethical questions, it has developed a broader currency. To put it straightforwardly, animal rights radicalism notwithstanding, the conflation of an assumed moralism with politics is anything but a radical move, pointing instead back to a liberalism which, from the 18th century forward, always defined politics as the excrescence of morality and self-interest. There is no contradiction in the fact that the apparent justification for a recentering of ethics might come from diverse theoretical sources. Thus John Champagne, to take just one example, proposes a new approach to gay studies embracing a philosophy of ethics with its roots in Foucault. The collusion between individualism, liberalism, and ethics is very explicit. For Foucault, he says, “ethics refers not to morality but to ‘the care of the self’”. And he identifies “two strains of cultural criticism” informing the project: “the ‘liberal’ criticism that seeks to extend the Other a greater subjectivity, and the ‘ethical’ criticism that attempts to deploy the other toward a resistance to subjectivity” (Champagne, 1995, pages xxix, xxxiii).

The expanding confusion of ethics for politics marks a broad retreat to liberalism. For Barnett (1998, page 633), it is the “cultural turn” and the eventual reduction of culture into a shorthand for everything and nothing that “transforms politics into an act of ethical will and aesthetic discrimination” (see also Mitchell, 1995). In geography, this issue emerged most sharply in the discussion following the Inaugural International Conference in Critical Geography in Vancouver in 1997, and it will only become more visible. Where some argued that “critical geography defines you by your work, by your attitude to life, by your moral values and feelings about social injustice”, others responded that “a recourse to ethics” is not synonymous with politics (in Katz, 1998b, pages 268, 272). A critical politics certainly embraces a wide social morality but an individual ethics, collectively organized, falls far short of a sufficient collective politics. In the present conjuncture this insistence on the distinction between a more expansive politics and a narrower—if included—ethics is crucial. The effort to construct a politics of justice is well known but has not succeeded in establishing a theory
of justice that is simultaneously hinged to an analysis of social relations and flexible enough to vary across time and space with different political struggles (Fainstein, 1999; Merrifield and Swyngedouw, 1997; Young, 1990). In the resulting vacuum there is the very real danger that a confusion of ethics and politics would intensify rather than dissolve the ‘competitive moralism of victimization’.

None of this is to deny the constitutive role of ethics in politics or to proffer a certain kind of postmodern denial of the possibility of ethics. Rather it is to make a more contextual argument. On the one hand, many have come today to write off the very idea of revolutionary change or even the exercise of power as inherently ‘masculinist’; on the other, Haraway (Haraway and Harvey, 1995, page 519) expresses with typical vividness what many academics and activists feel intensely: “I think that the most difficult problem that I face, if I own up to it, is I have almost lost the imagination of what a world that isn’t capitalist could look like”. The imagination of postcapitalist worlds and the political organization and power necessary to make such visions a reality perforce involves ethical judgments but is neither circumscribed nor contained by them.

After multiculturalism

Widely embraced in the late 1980s as a means of arbitrating and negotiating different claims and identities in various social movements and political traditions, multiculturalism is increasingly revealed as a liberal extrapolation of identity politics beyond the integrity of its roots (Gordon and Newfield, 1996). At best it has become a celebration of ‘difference’ philosophically generalized and unhinged from the social realities and political struggles that establish social difference. Multiculturalism projects a kind of United Nations of different identities, each abstractly coequal in theory, but some more powerfully located than others in a broad geopolitics of identities. If it initially provided a hastily staked-out ideological peace-keeping force between different identities and successfully deflected a number of potential border skirmishes, the cost of this ideology was nonetheless a dramatic depoliticization of the signatories around admonitions of ‘diversity’ and ‘respect for difference’. As such, in the 1980s multiculturalism became official state ideology in previously European settler colonies such as Australia and Canada that were struggling with a political reassertion by first nations and indigenous peoples on the one hand and the implications of global social and economic flows on the other.

Katharyne Mitchell (1993) first brilliantly exposed the synergy between multiculturalism and what she calls “the united colors of capitalism”. She demonstrates how, in the context of rapid immigration by a wealthy upper middle class from Hong Kong, all the language of antiracism and multiculturalism “has been politically appropriated by individuals and institutions to facilitate international investment and capitalist development in Vancouver” (page 265). In an article whose title deliberately recalls Fredric Jameson’s (1984) critique of postmodernism, she shows how multiculturalism has been enlisted to “smooth racial friction and reduce resistance to the recent changes in the urban environment and experiences of everyday life”. More broadly, “the attempt to shape multiculturalism can be seen as an attempt to gain hegemonic control over concepts of race and nation in order to further expedite Vancouver’s integration into the international networks of global capitalism” (see also Cruz, 1996). Five years later, this critique was confirmed when the neoliberal critic Nathan Glazer, long a champion of conservative causes, published his own assessment that “we are all multiculturalists now” (Glazer, 1998). Horrified conservatives, recoiling from Glazer’s ‘defection’, failed to understand the shift that Glazer grasped only too well.
Also adapting Jameson’s title, Slavoj Žižek (1997) has launched the sharpest critique of multiculturalism as “the ideal form of ideology” for “global capitalism” (page 44). He amasses his own epithets—elitist, liberal, idealist:

“multiculturalism involves patronizing Eurocentric distance and/or respect for local cultures without roots in one’s own particular culture. In other words, multiculturalism is a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a ‘racism with a distance’—it ‘respects’ the Other’s identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed ‘authentic’ community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position” (page 44).

Žižek is unrelenting. Multiculturalism, he argues, is precisely the appropriate ideology for an organization of capitalist ownership and accumulation, markets and political interests that has split national boundaries asunder and needs to find a way of drawing in consumers from vastly different social and national origins. It was a glimmering of precisely this premonition, the fear that multiculturalism was tailor-made to convey the intense consumptionist ethic of multinational capitalism, that made me shudder as I watched the clothing advert—RACE, GENDER, ETHNICITY. Žižek:

“the problematic of multiculturalism—the hybrid coexistence of diverse cultural life-worlds—which imposes itself today is the form of appearance of its opposite, of the massive presence of capitalism as universal world system.... It is effectively as if, since the horizon of social imagination no longer allows us to entertain the eventual demise of capitalism—since, as we might put it, everybody silently accepts that capitalism is here to stay—critical energy has found a substitute outlet in fighting for cultural differences which leave the basic homogeneity of the capitalist world-system intact. So we are fighting our PC battles for the rights of ethnic minorities, of gays and lesbians, of different life-styles, and so on, while capitalism pursues its triumphant march—and today’s critical theory, in the guise of ‘cultural studies’, is doing the ultimate service to the unrestrained development of capitalism by actively participating in the ideological effort to render its massive presence invisible” (1997, page 46).

This is obviously provocative and deliberately so, seeming to indict cultural studies and identity politics along with multiculturalism (see also Readings, 1996). We might quarrel with the assumption of an untrammeled globalism already fully in place, or with the presentation of a multiculturalism devoid of any internal tension or inkling of its own dilemma, but it is difficult to deny the overall connection that Žižek identifies. His anger certainly lays down a gauntlet but an impassioned defense of identity politics does not entirely deflect the critique. For the issue, in the end, is not so much the specifics of identity but the means and ends of political struggles, including identity-based ones, against oppression.

Class and identity, ethics and politics

Let us take the case of gay and lesbian rights. I assume we can agree that discrimination against gays and lesbians, whether in terms of lifestyle, work, housing, or any other question of access to social resources, represents a moral and political injustice that should be immediately eliminated. We are also realistic enough to understand that a political movement and political struggle will be necessary to bring about such a result; clearly, too many powerful people have too much political, psychic, and even economic capital tied up in the defense of heteronormality to allow the normalization of homosexuality to pass without a struggle. But how is that struggle to be waged and for what ends? A struggle waged on the basis of the immorality of oppression has a powerful immediate political appeal, and depending on the vagaries of publicly legislated morality, might succeed in relaxing some of the systems of oppression that exist.
But to the extent that their complete dismantling must defeat highly entrenched systems of power and privilege that share other forms of oppression and exploitation as a condition of their power, substantial victory is unlikely without the practical recognition of the interconnectedness of these various forms of oppression and exploitation.

This sounds self-evident in theory, but in New York anti-AIDS struggles in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it turned out to be anything but self-evident. Across the political spectrum, AIDS activism spearheaded by ACT UP unquestionably represented the most imaginative and most successful political activism during this period in New York, but ACT UP eventually foundered on precisely the question of how aggressively and how broadly AIDS activism had to connect to a broader range of social struggles. A comparatively conservative group of affluent gay men who had from the start been major players in AIDS activism resisted broadening the movement’s political purview away from a focus on AIDS as a male gay issue; they resisted more than a token embrace of people of color, intravenous drug users, lesbians, working-class activists, or the issues that these groups pressed (Cohen, 1998; Hodges, 2000). The failure to acknowledge in practice that a successful AIDS struggle was dependent on such a collaborative activism, especially as the numbers of white gay HIV-positive men in the city began to level off, eventually spelled the demise of a successful political movement. Despite clear rhetorical recognition that AIDS was not simply a gay issue, they failed to match a focused moral outrage, so successfully mobilized, with an expanded political agenda and ambition.

The confusion of ethics and politics provides little alternative to the polar opposites of a liberal universalism and single-issue organizing. It fails to recognize that the solution to specific injustices—in this case a failure of the ruling classes adequately to target and resolve an AIDS crisis marked by a highly differentiated deadliness—depends on a much broader social mobilization insofar as the very elites who are the targets of activism and social change enjoy power across its entire range: economic, political, cultural, military. As the eventual demise of ACT UP demonstrated, it is folly to think that a narrowly scientific or political strategy could succeed without simultaneously challenging the most basic presumptions of cultural power and economic structure (Hodges, 2000).

In all of this there is nothing unique about AIDS organizing or about the politics of gay activism. One might make the same argument, for example, about homelessness. The work done by homeless service and advocacy movements is absolutely vital to prevent people from starving, freezing, or burning to death, but the solution to homelessness has to do with a much more systematic transformation of social relations. A social economy that distributes housing on the basis of private property and the ability to afford it creates the very category of homelessness, consonant with the reality of homelessness, and an antihomelessness movement that does not include as its eventual goal the dismantling of the private property system arbitrating such housing allocation is doomed to failure. This is in no way an argument for not organizing but rather for organizing politically in such a way that keeps the larger and more distant goals—“the imagination of what a world that isn’t capitalist could look like”, in Haraway’s words—centrally in focus. A similar argument can equally be made in terms of class and class movements which are in no way immune to a narrow single-issue focus. Socialist movements that perpetuated sexism and racism or any other form of social oppression are (and have been proven to be) self-defeating.

Much multiculturalism and many responses to competitive moralisms of victimization have fallen back on the assumption of a kind of moral equivalence among different oppressions and exploitations. That may be a reasonable philosophical nicety but as regards political strategy and organizing, it is surely fallacious. All struggles are
not equal: the translation from analysis to strategy is nowhere as simple. Different struggles bring very different kinds of outcomes, intended and otherwise. We might ask, for example, whether patriarchy and capitalism, as interwoven systems of oppression and exploitation, could countenance the end of oppression based on sexual preference. The answer is fairly clearly that, although the struggle for a democracy of sexual rights would quickly challenge extraordinary depths of social bigotry and specific interests, the denaturalization of heterosexuality in practice would not necessarily challenge the stability of capitalist exploitation and although it would obviously provide an alternative to the assumptions and practices of patriarchy it is not clear the extent to which this would prevent parallel coexistence of two different models of social reproduction.

In other words, the political issue is not one of moral equivalence but of contextual political possibility. At different times in different places oppression on the basis of sexual preference is more hinged or less hinged to other forms of oppression, and fighting this struggle brings with it different political possibilities. It is quite conceivable that a struggle for gay and lesbian rights in Scandinavia, for example, could today proceed a considerable way—indeed already has—without seriously disturbing correlated oppressions, but that the same may not be true in Guatemala. The political conclusion that follows is manifestly not that the struggle for gay and lesbian rights is irrelevant but that the struggle for sexual democracy by gay men in particular has the potential luxury of choosing to conceive itself in very limited terms focused on narrowly defined goals. It may of course choose otherwise, but the choice remains. Much the same conclusion could be drawn about a liberal, managerial environmentalism that prioritized ‘cleaning up the environment’ or saving threatened species above resolving the exploitative social relations that have rendered such mal-productions of nature the social norm. The last two decades have admirably demonstrated that a previously radical environmental politics are quite capable of being refashioned as an ‘establishment environmentalism’ and indeed as its own accumulation strategy (Katz, 1998c).

The same argument applies but is much harder to make about race, class, and gender. Oppression on the basis of race and gender are imbricated with economic exploitation rooted in class difference, and struggles to dismantle racial and gendered oppressions very quickly confront issues at the heart of the social economy: wage inequality (or the lack of wages altogether), working conditions (physical, social, and political), and the social and cultural ideologies that rationalize such inequalities. The argument is not that a narrow economic purview exhausts the analysis of race or gender, far from it. On the one hand, oppression is not universally functional and may over relatively long periods in specific places prove quite dysfunctional in economic terms. At the same time, the perpetuation of systems of racism and sexism in different cultures obviously involves intricate webs of recalcitrant social and cultural assumption that may be flexibly hinged to or unhinged from class. In the end, however, it is difficult to conceive of a society that perpetuates class exploitation without using existing racial and gender differences (and etching new ones) as channels for that exploitation; conversely, what would a racism or patriarchy look like that practised class equality? The question sounds almost absurd: capitalism without patriarchy and racism is certainly conceivable as an abstract philosophical possibility, but it is an empty set in political if not strictly mathematical terms.

Marx argued the importance of class because, as he put it, class exploitation is the social basis of surplus value extraction in a capitalist economy and therefore of capital accumulation and economic reproduction. In specific places at specific times, the working classes can comprise a diverse array of racial and ethnic groups as well as
specific combinations of men and women. The important issue here is that class for Marx is first and foremost a social category. It is the social relations of class that mobilize specific economic relations not the other way round, no matter how much the specific economic relations of capitalist society buttress and contribute to the reproduction of these social and political relations; it is the social relations that must be transformed if the political economy is to be opened for change. The working class—which usually comprises the majority of oppressed ethnicities and races, and the majority of women—in any contemporary society, is the crucial ingredient here precisely because, although workers sell their labour power as a commodity in an economic transaction, they retain the direct social and political power, attendant upon the collective refusal of work, to destroy the social economy, and provoke its replacement by something different. Only for the working class is the overthrow of this system of exploitation a collective good. This is a result which solidarity in narrowly race and gender terms is unable to achieve insofar as such interests incorporate radically opposite class interests.

Two reductionist conclusions are often made to follow from this argument. In the first place, it is often assumed that class is somehow philosophically or morally privileged in Marx's analysis. Such a misreading is not only erroneous but symptomatic of the very reductionism it seeks to eschew. To the extent that Marx privileges class, and the working class as a collective agent of revolutionary change, this represents a political rather than moral or philosophical judgment. The reduction of politics to the moral and the philosophical represents an analytical collapse redolent of modern liberalism not Marxism and it sets in train a whole freight of misreadings; Marx of course had anything but a liberal purview. Second, it is also widely inferred that, having identified revolutionary agency in the working class, Marx sees class as somehow fixed and social transformation as inevitable, guaranteed. It is this reading of Marx that removes nonclass agency from the political scene: revolution follows inexorably from the category of class. But again the idealism of this misreading derives more from contemporary political theory and practice than from Marx's texts. As even Wall Street brokers readily admitted on the eve of the 150-year anniversary of the Communist Manifesto, Marx's global analysis has been dramatically reaffirmed with the advent of 'globalization' (Cassidy, 1997), and this suggests that, although he dramatically underestimated the relative inertia of geography (the annihilation of space by time was only ever partial and rigorously uneven), he nonetheless understood with extraordinary perception the trajectory of capitalist development. A similar judgment may apply to his treatment of class. His optimism concerning class struggle may also be seen as an athletic vault out of his own historical context. He certainly paid comparatively scant attention to the messy business of political organization, but neither this lacuna nor even the failure of the Soviet Union as a working-class project (not in 1989 but by the mid-1920s) should be taken as a theoretical denial of class and class politics.

Conclusion

Some inevitably will choose to interpret this essay as a blanket rejection of identity politics and cultural politics in an effort to install a vulgar 'back to class' agenda. I hope others will take it somewhat more at face value. Tackling the “eclipse of a socialist imaginary”, Nancy Fraser best expresses a broadly shared ambition in terms of justice: “the project of transforming the deep structures of both political economy and culture appears to be the one over-arching programmatic orientation capable of doing justice to all current struggles against injustice. It alone does not assume a zero-sum game" (Fraser, 1997, pages 11, 32). The most vital question, at the same time as reviving class as a critical social and political lens, may be, as I suggested at the beginning, to prevent
the stick from being bent back too far. That involves keeping alive the memory of why feminist, antiracist, and lesbian and gay intellectual and political movements were vital in the first place while reevaluating how they fit into a broad ambition for dramatic social change on the cusp of the 21st century. That the renewed importance of class discourse is not at all inconsistent with an evolving politics of race, gender, and sexuality is easy to say but will be more difficult to practice, but there seems to be no alternative. ‘Back to class’ in any narrow sense is its own self-defeating cul-de-sac.

Success may depend on our ability to unpack the abstract theoretical categories of ‘difference’ in specific political context, and this is where I want to make an autobiographical point. There is a powerful foundational myth that Marxism is incapable of dealing with questions of social difference beyond a narrow concern for class, but this was never the case in my own experience. As a member of a small revolutionary socialist organization in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and of the long defunct Union of Socialist Geographers, my experience ran quite counter to this anti-Marxist mythology. It was not in university classrooms but inside these groups that I first learned about feminism and read and debated Simone de Beauvoir and Alexandra Kollantai, Sheila Rowbotham, and Nancy Chodorow, and it was inside these groups that C L R James and W E B Dubois, Carlos Fuentes, and Malcolm X became part of my political education. The picket lines and demonstrations we joined were against gay bashings or the Klan, antinuke or anti-US imperialism in central American, or we demanded protection and extension of abortion rights with the Reproductive Rights National Network (R2N2), or picketed in support of West Virginia miners and Ashtabula nurses.

At least for leftist academics of my generation, this political experience is far from uncommon. Feminists in the 1970s learned about race and class in feminist movements, reading groups and consciousness-raising groups; antiracist activists learned about class and gender politics inside antiracist, welfare rights, and anti-police-brutality organizations more than outside. Marxist no less than other organizations were the incubators of such political connections. Indeed, the lessons were learned sufficiently well that when the distant leadership of the socialist organization to which I belonged responded to the political downturn of the early 1980s by announcing a ‘back to class’ shift in which feminist, antiracist, antinuke, and anti-imperialist work—even, inexplicably, some rank-and-file organizing—was to be deemphasized, a faction fight ensued. Unwilling to truncate what we were building as an integrated socialist politics, and with feminism the crucial battleground—a number of us were expelled from the organization and many others simply left.

Eying the dismantling of the US welfare system under the alibi of globalization, Piven has argued that, while welfare ‘reform’ was carried out under the banner of a grand moral campaign, with single Africa-American mothers—‘welfare mothers’—as the primary target, the underlying logic was economic. Attacking welfare was a direct means of lowering the floor on wages at a time when the average ratio of chief executive officers’ ‘compensation’ to workers’ wages hit an extraordinary and unprecedented ratio of 200:1 (Piven, 1999). The campaign to dismantle welfare, ultimately successful at the behest of Bill Clinton and an obliging Republican Congress, succeeded because it juggled at the draw strings of all the ‘devils of American culture’. Class divisions, she continues, have become so deep in the last fifteen years precisely at a time when even left academics have been trying to escape from class. If we were not of synch in the early 1980s, pouting Marxist, feminist, and antiracist politics in a world dominated by Thatcher and Reagan, then by some strange irony we find ourselves oppositely out of synch at the end of the 20th century. As class pushes forcefully back onto the agenda—even in the United States where a dramatic upturn in organizing has occurred—we find ourselves without the language to make sense of this reality.
Piven also insists that this is no short-term project—the construction of true democracy (see also Wood, 1995). But contrary to the defeatism about politics that many of us occasionally feel, it is very much within the range of the possible. We need only look at the way in which the academic debates of the 1980s have been translated into government policy in the 1990s to appreciate the possibility of political change inspired from within academia. Not only is multiculturalism state policy in a number of places, including now South Africa, but in Britain, the amalgam of a struggling social democracy with academic postmodernism, which in the late 1980s gave us ‘New Times’ (Hall and Jaques, 1989), finds its deracinated political expression in the 1990s ‘New Labour Party’, their ‘Third Way’ (Giddens, 1994; Blair, 1998), and the neoliberal ‘New Deal’ (workfare) for the unemployed. Against such a political defeat coming hard on the heels of Thatcherism, it is easy to agree with Piven that this will indeed be a long-term project. Quite how large and long term a project is suggested in the insightful critique of one of capitalism’s biggest defenders and beneficiaries:

“Although I have made a fortune in the financial markets, I now fear that untrammeled intensification of laissez-faire capitalism and the spread of market values to all areas of life is endangering our open and democratic society. The main enemy of the open society, I believe, is no longer the communist but the capitalist threat.... Too much competition and too little cooperation can cause intolerable inequalities and instability.... The doctrine of laissez-faire capitalism holds that the common good is best served by the uninhibited pursuit of self-interest. Unless it is tempered by the recognition of a common interest that ought to take precedence over particular interests, our present system...is liable to breakdown” (Soros, 1997, pages 45, 48).

If capitalist breakdown already haunts George Soros’s political imagination, there ought to be space for it in ours too. It will not happen effortlessly under the weight of capitalism’s own obsolescence but by political movements that challenge the range of nasty assumptions on which it is built. The prospects for a collective reconstruction of the ‘common interest’ can be gauged by how these political movements coalesce to make the imagined possible.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank Eliza Darling, Cheryl Gowar, David Harvey, Andy Herod, Derrick Hodge, Cindi Katz, Don Mitchell, Katharyne Mitchell, Dick Peet, and Ida Susser who all in different ways commented on and contributed to the ideas here. I try not to state the obvious but in this case perhaps I ought to: responsibility for the arguments made remains mine.

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