

Is class a difference that makes a difference?

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The title of my paper surely sounds strange.¹ Statistics abound to reveal the intransigence and even enhancement of class differences across the industrialized world. There are few, if any, distinctions whose differential effects have been better recorded or empirically verified. So, at first sight, it would seem naïve even to be asking whether class makes a difference. Reading currently fashionable literature about difference, however, one might be forgiven for wondering about the significance of class because if it is even mentioned in the capacious lists of significant differences, it is rarely discussed further. Indeed much of my title's awkwardness arises from the fact that we are unaccustomed to addressing questions of class in the language of difference. It seems at best ironic. It is, then, in the context of this hiatus that I want to raise some questions about class in relation to what I shall call discourses of difference. The first part of my paper will sketch out these two terms as I shall be using them; the second will consider what happens when the former is articulated in terms of the latter.

Class

I want to begin by defining class as neutrally as possible. In particular, I do not want to start by situating myself on a Marxist or post-Marxist terrain² because of all the theoretical baggage this carries. Provisionally, then, I define class in the following way: *Class refers primarily to material differences between groups of persons, where these differences are stable over time and reproduced within a group whose membership is also relatively stable (i.e. it is not like a bus, a container for different individuals who simply pass through it). Material differences include measurable indices that can be summarized as life chances (income and wealth, job security, mortality rates etc.). In addition, although less crucially, these material differences sometimes correspond with cultural differences: values, perspectives, practices, self-identity. But the major phenomenon with which I want to associate class is that of structured economic inequality.*

This is the sort of definition that sociologists used to give, as for example in a standard introductory textbook published in 1981, which explained that (in Britain at least),

opportunities for health, long life, security, educational success, fulfilment at work and political influence are all unequally distributed in systematic ways. Values and patterns of behaviour are equally affected: for example, not only can social position strongly predict voting behaviour but also, some would claim, whether the person prefers to make love in the dark or with the light on!³

Few would confidently ascribe such predictive power and homogeneity to class today; yet, so far as its material indicators are concerned, these have actually become *more* pronounced over the past fifteen years or so⁴ – that is, during the period in which class has been discursively eclipsed in favour of difference. The recently published Rowntree Inquiry into Wealth and Income revealed a particularly marked widening of the gap between rich and poor in Britain, where since 1977 the proportion of the population with less than half the average income has trebled. Similar, if somewhat less dramatic, trends are also apparent in other developed countries.

Given this rather stark example of difference, how is it then to be articulated? This is the central question I want to address. For while on the one hand Marxist and sociological accounts seem anachronistic, on the other it is far from clear that the discourses of difference which are currently hegemonic in debates about diversity have the discursive resources to convey this stubborn and systematic economic division.

If class is primarily about economic inequality, then how are class divisions to be thought of? This is important, given the emphasis on boundaries and their porosity or policing by discourses of difference. The binary and antagonistic opposition favoured by Marxists, between proletariat and bourgeoisie, has long been

replaced in non-Marxist literature by more fragmented measures, based for example on type of work done, according to which populations are divided into A, B, C₁, C₂, D and E. Interestingly, the latter form of measure is favoured by researchers trying to establish class-based *attitudes* (that is, cultural diversity), such as voting or product preference. It distributes the population according to sheer difference without carrying political implications of conflict or hierarchy. This would also seem to be true of the fluidity favoured by post-modernists, which appears conducive to liberal claims that, rather than classes, there is a complex movement of mobile individuals.

Yet this would be to deny both empirical evidence of relatively stable patterns of inequality and a certain level of clotting that discourses of difference require, since they are also concerned about identity and its representation. If it is to be a politically significant difference, then, class needs to include some notion of both inertia and inequality. This criterion is met by social scientists (who still tend to believe that the real can be represented objectively), who are increasingly conveying class distinction in terms of an opposition between rich and poor, or the 'two-thirds/one-third' society as Britain is sometimes called.⁵ Despite the return to a binary formula, however, this is no dialectical schema and so, unlike Marxism, it inscribes no particular politics within it.

Given that difference is associated with politically radical demands against the status quo, it can be assumed for the purposes of this article that two classes have a special claim to being recognized as bearing significant difference: the underclass which is summoned as the one-third, or poor, above, and the working class as heir to anti-capitalist struggles for equality and non-exploitative labour. The growth of an underclass is probably the most marked development in recent times, and this has coincided with a decline in the traditional working class.

The underclass manifests itself as a motley group, but its diverse membership can be identified through its unemployment, or lack of secure employment, and the symptoms thereof. It includes significant numbers of single parents, pensioners, the disabled, ex-service personnel, young people, and certain ethnic minorities. Here poverty, with its deficit of objective life chances, cuts across other differences to render the underclass a marginalized and virtually disenfranchised group. Although the distinction between rich and poor is not equally distributed across other differences such as gender or race, it differentiates massively within them.

This distinction between an underclass and the rest of society, stratified according to productive employment or its lack, is to be distinguished from previous divisions

between working and middle class which depended on a person's role *within* production, although income levels were obviously involved there too. In fact at its lower levels, the working class today shades into the underclass – precisely where its working becomes unreliable or yields wages below a certain level. Theoretically, however, the working class, with its legacy of class struggle and organized political and economic activity, carries quite different connotations from the underclass. Its inequality and difference would almost certainly be articulated differently.

The eclipse of class

Given all the evidence of significant economic differences, which I am summarizing under the term 'class', why have these been marginalized within recent discourses of difference? By way of an introduction to the latter, I will suggest some reasons for this discursive eclipse.⁶

First, a range of economic and technological developments which are loosely summarized as post-Fordist or late capitalist has resulted in a fragmentation of traditional classes in terms of working conditions, incomes and attitudes. Much of this development is only uneven and prefigurative, but it has undoubtedly had a profound effect on what was identified, and often exhibited itself, as a relatively uniform working class under Fordism. Thus there appears to be a *de facto* splintering of class, as well as the growth of a marginal, almost pre-modern workforce which moves in and out of the underclass. At the same time, radical politics has itself diversified as subaltern groups have moved onto the scene. All these changes might be summarized as postmodern. They have tended to coincide with a more market-oriented politics, which has also promoted the discursive eclipse of class for ideological reasons, although it is unclear how far postmodernization serves as the cause or effect of this rightward turn.

Postmodernization has been accompanied by evidence that economic position no longer carries much political correspondence, rendering it less significant so far as political change and political theory are concerned. As Stuart Hall writes, 'any simple correspondence between "the political" and "the economic" is exactly what has now disintegrated – practically and theoretically. This has had the effect of throwing the language of politics more over to the cultural side of the equation.'⁷ It is this cultural bias that informs most recent debate about difference and which in itself renders class difficult to include.

Changes in the real, then, have been accompanied by discursive shifts. With the fracturing of class, interest has

shifted to other schisms, notably race and gender, followed by a whole range of lifestyle and identity diversities, all of which lend themselves to the more cultural focus. Moreover, equality has itself become suspect in so far as it is associated with sameness and imperialistic inclusion.

Discursive change has, in turn, coincided with the decline of Marxism, that instrument of class analysis and practice *par excellence*. At least part of this decline has been due to assaults from poststructuralism, which accuses it of offering a reductionist and economic account of social stratification and a class analysis suffused with a grand-narrative privileging of one class. While it is true that recent class fracturings would render such an account problematic anyway, it is the uniform and oppositional terminology of class that is accused of suppressing difference. Because discourses of difference have tended to constitute themselves through opposition to Marxism, however, their exponents have often gone out of their way to sideline class and to emphasize the novelty of their own approach and the differences they privilege.⁸

But while this strategy is historically understandable, is it not in danger of going too far in the other direction? Whatever the lacunae of Marxism, one consequence of its fall from grace has been that criticisms of it have tended to spill over into suspicions about class as such. For if Marxist analysis tended to reduce all difference to class difference, is there not something about class itself, and the very power of its social divisiveness, that tends to overwhelm other differences? The decentring of class, and of the materialist approach it involved, means, however, that economic differences have become largely invisible, or at least mute or marginal, in recent discourses of difference.⁹ I will now turn to these, to ask whether they must necessarily marginalize class and if they are even capable of representing it. It might, after all, be feasible simply to include economic disparities among the differences they discuss just by shifting the emphasis. But it is equally possible that there is a logic at work (a 'regime of truth') within them that misrepresents, or silences, this particular social fracture.

Discourses of difference

A variety of contemporary discourses could be placed under this heading: communitarian, radical or discursive democratic, poststructuralist and postmodern, as well as the more specific difference theories such as feminism or postcolonialism. Difference is here a heavily politicized term, since for all of them it implies power relations and strategies for change. They raise timely questions concerning the representation, citizenship and ethics of

diverse populations which must both coexist yet which are also increasingly resistant to the universalistic values and practices of the liberal state. But they also recognize that this politics involves power relations that circulate within culture where identities are forged.

At this stage, although as something of an aside, I want to raise some points concerning the broadly Habermasian solution to difference which has gained the support of many political theorists. In discursive democracy, differences are brought into the public sphere in order to negotiate agreed-upon procedures for establishing laws and policies, which will in turn reflect the differences that feed in through democratic discussion as long as this is fair, equal and undistorted by power. Tolerant, open debate, where others' differences are respected, and where compromises, if not consensus, are reached, has become a widespread ideal as a means of finessing difference. At one end of the spectrum this might incline towards a Rortyan model of public universals and private differences, but at the other it extends to a pluralism of negotiating and citizenship styles themselves.

However, because of the focus on cultural differences here, economic inequalities tend to be categorized as rights issues and thereby subsumed under a more traditional liberal universalism (such as that of Rawls). Welfare entitlements and social justice are wielded as if class were only a distributional question and one whose main struggles lie anyway in the past. There is a certain irony here, since one must surely entertain some scepticism regarding the liberal state's willingness or ability to respond to this particular difference more than any other. But the result is that economic inequality is bracketed out of discussions of difference. It may, of course, be that this is a unique kind of difference, but in that case a new discourse of political economy is surely required; one which would both respond to changes in class composition and accord the same level of attention to the reproduction of economically differentiated groupings, as discourses of difference do to the production of other identities and differences. In Habermasian terms, this would involve incursions deep into the steering media, those delinguistified systems where communicative action is precluded along with discursive resolutions.

But even if class were only one difference among others, it is hard to see how this particular difference would fit into the strategies and demands associated with cultural diversity, as for example when gender or ethnicity are invoked as alternative modes of negotiation because they speak in 'a different voice'. Moreover, because there are no theoretical resources here for

dealing with economic inequality at a structural level, it is difficult to see how the requisite free and equal discussion could occur. It may be a rather tedious point to make, but poverty robs groups of the economic and cultural capital needed for participation. And today, fragmentation is anyway more likely than solidarity to be a symptom of poverty, resulting in a lack of identity or shared conception of needs to be represented. Group, as well as discursive, representation of inequality thus remains a major challenge to radical democracy. Finally, while a focus on cultural diversity is conducive to a drift from politics to ethics, class surely disrupts this trend.

With the exception of communitarianism (which has its own logic of class exclusion), I will collect what I have called discourses of difference together according to the assumption that they are all informed in some way by poststructuralist models and ideas. These are very often attenuated and may receive little explicit acknowledgement, but a common language of difference, otherness and marginality testifies to what I would call a postmodern imaginary, which informs current debate. It is this framework that might or might not allow for the articulation of class as a difference that makes a difference.¹⁰

What, then, are the main landmarks within this discourse? I have identified six.

1. Identity and difference

The most important question today, Foucault suggests, is 'who are we?'¹¹ To answer this question is to lay claim to some identity, and to do this is to assert difference from others. There are various permutations at work here. Is identity a source of *empowerment* or of *oppression*? According to the former, identities are politically mobilized when they seek recognition and a voice (as women, for example, sought visibility and political representation); according to the latter, identities are constructed but typically imposed as a power strategy. In this second case they must be rejected or radically transformed (as feminists might reject the signifier 'woman', or the idea of 'all women', as patriarchal classifications). Although it might be claimed that an authentic identity is being misrecognized, this courts an unpopular essentialism, and a more typically postmodern move is to advertise the autonomous reconstruction of identity, one alive to its own internal diversity.

2. The Other and the marginalized

Here, identity means oppression rather than empowerment, in so far as the Other is constructed precisely to control and exclude groups (as lacking) as well as to reinforce the centre's identity. Edward Said's work on Orientalism is a good example of how this operates.¹²

Foucault defines the Other as 'that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to exorcize the interior danger) but by being shut away (in order to reduce its otherness).'¹³ It is a category intrinsically suffused with power, which imposes a binary structure on complex differences, the symptoms of which include marginalization and loss of autonomy for those designated Other.

3. Values: tolerance, respect, celebration

Whether identity is associated with empowerment or oppression, it is generally agreed that identities which are too strong or rigid endanger the political and cultural process, and this in turn implies certain values. Liberal values like tolerance and respect¹⁴ have especially revived in popularity, as congenial orientations that will massage the frictions between differences. In a more postmodern vein, theorists like Stephen White commend us positively to celebrate difference and to 'foster otherness'.¹⁵ He draws here on feminist orientations to caring and nurturing; to listening to concrete others. What more generally underpins antipathy to dogmatism is, however, a fourth aspect of the discourses of difference.

4. Openness/closure

If any value system governs these discourses, it is this, where openness is good and closure bad. Closed identities suggest a rigid distinction between self and other that implies hierarchy, marginalization and violence as well as constraint and repression. While some identity must be constructed if it is to claim cultural recognition or political representation, postmodernists always favour boundaries that are fluid and shifting, such that identities remain flexible and plural and their frontiers are readily traversed (such that transgression of rigid boundaries becomes the subversive act *par excellence*). Deferral and provisionality seem more appropriate than tolerance and respect, because they drive groups into circulation. This leads to two further characteristics of discourses of difference.

5. Différance

The model that underpins many of the assumptions about difference is a Derridean – that is, linguistic – one of *différance*. According to this, there are no positive identities or meanings, but only shifting, open and provisional nodules of unstable sense, caught in a restless play of signifiers in which identity is negatively inscribed through its relations with what it is not. Diverse identities, accordingly, are to be understood as structured like a language, and groups would ideally emulate this mobility.

Of course, if the analogy applied completely, there

would be no identities or recognizable differences. But just as we are condemned to communicate in a metaphysical symbolic that gives the illusion of stable meaning, such that glimpses and strategies of *différance* only subvert it by forcing recognition of the instability of meaning, so groups are obliged to claim identities; but, ideally, they do so in recognition of their open and provisional nature. As Iris Young has written of her ideal: 'groups do not stand in relationships of inclusion and exclusion, but overlap and intermingle without becoming homogeneous.'¹⁶ Although discourses of difference sometimes condemn class analysis for aspiring to transcend difference in classlessness, free-flowing differences arguably move in a similar direction, if via another route (discursive and deconstructive rather than dialectical and emancipatory).

6. The discursive and the real

It is perhaps the most typical characteristic of poststructuralism that it claims meaning as constructed and not objectively given. That is, although the existence of things is independent of language, they have meaning only in so far as they are discursively apprehended, this being the level at which power, but also empowerment, most significantly operates. This is why there is a rejection of political claims concerning some objective identity, or set of 'real needs', or privileged difference, which only require adequate representation, a bringing to truth. Not all discourses of difference subscribe to this ontology, but once the emphasis is on diversity it has a way of insinuating itself. Laclau and Mouffe illustrate this position well when they write that,

Every antagonism, left to itself, is a floating signifier, a 'wild' antagonism which does not predetermine the form in which it can be articulated to other elements in the social formation. (171)

When these authors speak of 'present industrial societies', they refer to the 'proliferation of widely different points of rupture' and the 'precarious character of all social identity', resulting in a 'blurring of frontiers' and revealing the '*constructed* character of the demarcating lines' (171).¹⁷

Discourses of difference applied to class

Having identified six typical characteristics of discourses of difference, I now want to see what happens if we apply them to class. Are they able to articulate this particular difference in a useful, politically galvanizing way, or does their own logic necessarily suppress, or misrepresent, economic difference?

1. Identity and difference

In so far as classes are defined in primarily economic terms, it follows that they do not define their struggles as cultural. If they seek a voice, it is to articulate their interests effectively and not to insinuate a novel style into debate. Even if economic hardship does not preclude entry into the public sphere, being given an open-minded hearing by others willing to recognize the particularity of its voice is hardly an efficacious strategy. For classes are not life-forms requesting recognition, and their demands are not reducible to ethics. Members do not ask 'who are we?' first, or even at all.

The underclass nevertheless exhibits a powerful *difference* in that its members are excluded in varying degrees from almost all the economic, political and cultural activity of their society. However, it is more problematic to ascribe an *identity* to it, since one of its distinctive marks is precisely a dearth of any shared qualities that might yield, or be celebrated as, a group identity. This is not to deny that other identities, such as religious or familial ties, might remain strong in some cases, but by its nature this is a class largely composed of rootless, alienated individuals who are not plugged into a shared culture, and certainly not one endemic to the underclass as such. Their major preoccupations must lie in survival; and, beyond this, what they share – and what identifies them as members of a class – is only the economic plight that statistics and everyday life monotonously reproduce.

In terms of demanding recognition for an authentic but suppressed identity,¹⁸ the underclass is thus a non-starter. It cannot feature in the discourses that privilege this struggle because it has no identity to be wielded with pride for which respect is demanded; it has no distinctive political style which democratic procedures might incorporate, and its needs are not of this order. Its reluctant members would surely not wish to construct an identity as underclass even if they had the autonomy and resources to do so. The underclass is not pressing from the margins to have its life-form represented, then, and it is inconceivable that it could anyway be democratically introduced to free, fair and efficacious debate without massive structural reorganizations of state, society and economy, on which discourses of difference have no real purchase.

Paradoxically, the more obviously economically motivated working class has a better claim to description in terms of identity. For it can lay claim to a tradition of solidarity and a cultural identity which the bourgeoisie generally denigrates. Working-class communities have often enjoyed a strong sense of their own speech patterns, music, rituals and history, for which respect and visibility

has been demanded. But even so, these have now been mainly integrated or ruined, and besides, it would be odd to foreground this politics at the expense of labour's struggles against exploitation and commodification, where a militancy beyond deliberative democracy and cultural transgression have been required. Nevertheless, the forging of a self-conscious identity, albeit one predicated on a recognition of objective conditions, did associate working-class identity with empowerment, whereas for the underclass identity is a sign rather of its oppression, and one which fits well under the second category of discourses of difference.

2. The Other and marginality

From the outside, the underclass looks like just the sort of marginalized, silenced and excluded group that discourses of difference invoke so effectively. Thus, besides the objective quantification of everyday deprivation, it can equally be presented as Other. Even Marx describes it as the “dangerous class”, the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society’.¹⁹ The identity ascribed to it is that of the underside and antithesis of respectable, hard-working society, although no dialectical progression is implied. According to the popular images of the two-thirds society, the underclass is a repository for everything it rejects and finds threatening: a morass of delinquents and criminals; the diseased and insane; the financially and sexually profligate; foreigners and travellers.

Although the poverty of low-paid members of the working class shades economically into the deprivations of the underclass, a distinction between the two remains important in this context of alterity. Giovanna Procacci has drawn attention to traditional distinctions between the productive poor, whom political economy addressed, and whose poverty was if anything discerned as an asset to the system, and paupers, who were subjected to a social economy that legitimized disciplinary procedures such as welfare, hygiene and education. In this latter case, she writes, ‘it is not poverty as the stigma of *inequality* that is combated, but pauperism understood as a cluster of behaviours, a carrier of *difference*.’²⁰ In other words, the poor but productive are already subjected to market discipline, whereas those who would be defined as members of the underclass are seen as avoiding any normalizing regime. In so far as they are constituted as a class that is Other, this is itself part of a strategy for social control, but one that is insidiously presented as aid.

From this perspective, discourses of difference do have significant political purchase. They alert us to power relations that work on the poor in addition to the economic. Moreover, they also reveal the ways in which

apparently radical strategies for helping the underclass can be used to discipline it and even to construct it. Its needs may themselves be part of this construction, and one that is used for disciplinary purposes. If, however, this aspect of construction is overemphasized, it then detracts from any objective indicator of underclass membership, and in particular from the shared reality of poverty which shows up in real deprivations such as disease and death, which are not just metaphors of moral panic or vehicles of power.

3. Tolerance, respect, celebration

Liberal virtues of tolerance and respect are patently inappropriate when it comes to class, and a celebration or fostering of difference becomes simply nonsensical. For economic inequality is patterned not as a plurality of horizontal diversities, but according to a vertical scale of more and less. No matter where individuals are positioned in this hierarchy, they can agree that while market economies endure it is better to be higher than lower. While a small and atypical part of the underclass might sacrifice resources for ‘quality of life’, for the vast majority it is precisely lack of that quality which is symptomatic of poverty, and it rarely makes sense to worsen one’s life chances on indices such as death rates, health, infant mortality, housing and income.

Respect for those on lower echelons is patronizing; tolerance for those above, irrelevant. Class differences cannot be presented as incommensurate cultures, each with its own values internal to it. Class is relational precisely because positions are allocated within a single economy where there are complex structural relations which tend to operate as a zero-sum game. In other words, this is a game of winners and losers, not an agonistic jousting. Rich and poor do not simply belong to separate groups, but are divided according to the requirements of a system where the gains of the better-off are often made at the expense of the worse-off. Capitalism needs a reserve army of producers, just as it needs poverty both as incentive and as a side-effect of cheap labour. It probably does not need an underclass, other than as a threat to the indigent, yet this is just the refuse it accumulates when life chances are distributed only according to its productionist scale of rewards.

This structural interdependence is evident as soon as ethical questions about distribution are introduced. Here it is not the postmodern spectre of relativism that threatens, but the very modern one of self-interest. However, it is precisely the latter that is most commonly invoked on the utilitarian ground that the rich cannot be insulated from the poor: effects leak and migrate. An underclass is bad for better-off individuals because it is threatening and unaesthetic; it is inimical to the collective

since it threatens breakdown of community, high taxation and economic underperformance.²¹ For the poor themselves, crime and delinquency may be a much more effective strategy than continence and democracy, and certainly more than tolerance and respect. Neither caring nor an open-mindedness towards the Other makes much sense here.

4. Openness/closure

Fluid boundaries would spell the end of class, if not of a wandering inequality. They may well be desirable as a goal, but if they are assumed as a model of existing societies they merely hide the extent to which class barriers are not readily traversed and remain relatively closed. If classes are fragmented and the site of multiple antagonisms in terms of members' identity, their membership is nevertheless fairly stable in terms of economic indicators. However, their members are neither participants in a 'bad' identity, in that they cling to it exclusively and rigidly, nor members of a 'good' group, in that they are open-minded and tolerant, willing to engage in free and open debate and ready to compromise through mutual understanding. And for the underclass, it is anyway the majority society that tries to seal up its boundaries so definitively, lest it contaminate or economically threaten the more privileged. It may be internally defined by its fragmented state, but this does not mean that its members enjoy postmodern mobility or the luxury of identity tourism.

5. Différance

Class is relational, but its dynamics cannot be understood according to the structures of linguistics (as a play of *différance*), as mobile and open. No matter how fragmented, it can never be reduced to a play of multiple and endlessly deferred differences. While increasingly fragmented classes might make their boundaries and distinctions more difficult to locate in terms of self-identity, then, class itself is not a postmodern (or liberal) phenomenon in that it will not and cannot resolve itself into either simple diversity or a mosaic of incommensurable but equally valuable differences. A political economy that explores class relations in terms of their hierarchy, fixity, closure and reproduction is surely more appropriate here.

6. The discursive and the real

Class is a problematic difference for discourses inspired by poststructuralism or radical anti-essentialism because even if it is pared down to no more than an index of structured economic inequality, this implies that: (1) there is a reality which can be represented objectively; (2) this reality exists

regardless of our discursive ability to articulate it; (3) its discursive representation should be evaluated according to how adequately it represents the real; (4) there is therefore an independent reality to be excavated from beneath appearances; and (5) in principle all could agree on the evidence regardless of their positioning or politics. To discover the requisite linkages, moreover, a systematic, holistic reading would be needed.

The whole drift of postmodern approaches has, however, been to deconstruct any stratum, such as the sexed or racial body, for which claims are made to objective status. Accordingly, identities no longer map onto anything real, since everything is discursively produced. Even in the modified form Laclau and Mouffe give it, class would still exist as no more than a 'wild' and mute antagonism, until it had been articulated. But what if economic indices of structured inequality are not matched by an appropriate articulation? Does this mean that this difference is thereby nullified so far as its recognition and rectification are concerned? Indeed, it is precisely this danger that I am exploring by juxtaposing discourses of difference with the statistics of class inequality. Yet can this consequence be avoided only by appealing to 'real' needs: needs which class members might not articulate themselves but which are ascribed to them by others? This is just what falls foul of radical democratic emphasis on the autonomy of groups to voice their own needs and identities, and it might indeed have sinister implications. But are the mute and gnawing pains of real deprivation not to be counted or politicized if they find no adequate means among the poor for self-representation? Are they not an imperative that persists regardless of the circulations and discontinuities of shifting regimes of truth? In this context class might no longer even be seen as the best way to present material inequality.

Class is equally problematic if it is presented in postmodern terms as performative. For, perhaps unlike gender, it cannot be reduced to its performances. Performing certain tasks and roles can be halted – for example, by striking or rioting – but it is the consequences of the activity, not the subversion of a style of performance, that is important. Unlike gender, class cannot be reduced to surface inscriptions of ritual and repetition, and it cannot be subverted by parody.²² It does not need denaturalizing since everyone agrees it is conventional. In many ways, then, I have come full circle back to my starting point, where I noticed the hiatus between economic indicators of massive material inequality on the one hand, and discourses of difference on the other.

Conclusion

It might be objected to my thesis regarding the overall inadequacy of the discourses of difference for articulating class difference that those discourses were never designed to address this particular cleavage but, on the contrary, to acknowledge the myriad cultural differences that circulate elsewhere. However, given the currently almost hegemonic status of the discourses of difference among those who lay claim to political radicalism, the result has been to silence economic difference as a significant form of differentiation. Moreover, these discourses have both undermined the theories that had previously articulated class and convey an erroneous impression that they have a capacity to accommodate diversities of all kinds. The result, unintended as it might be, is both to occlude class difference and to deny the necessity for some new, systematic articulation, perhaps a renewed political economy, that would be more adequate to the task.

An important aspect of this task is undoubtedly a renewal of social critique, and this surely requires some shift away from the current dominance of literary and cultural studies (as well as from a pervasive liberalism) back towards the social sciences. Before this can occur, however, some serious rethinking about theory and the status of objective, systematic analysis and of the empirical – the real – needs to be undertaken.

On the question of developing new discourses adequate to structured economic inequality, two points have emerged from my discussion which I would wish to emphasize. First, because of its weighty discursive legacy and the sociological shifts occurring in post-modernity, class may no longer be the best way to articulate material difference. Of course we might yet conclude that it is; but it is surely important at least to begin by assuming that some other signifier(s) might be more fecund in representing this matrix of causes and symptoms.

Second, it seems probable that diverse classes will need to be theorized differently and complexly and not only as differential positions vis-à-vis capitalist production. A systematic but non-totalizing theory is therefore required: perhaps some combination of Marx and Foucault or, in Habermasian terms, an analysis of steering media as well as life-world communication. In this context it is important to consider whether class represents a unique difference which requires its own discursive paraphernalia, or whether discourses of difference themselves need transforming so they can accommodate it. The danger is that the sort of debates which once led Marxist feminism into an impasse, regarding the relative significance of class and gender,

material and cultural factors, will repeat themselves here where reductionism or dualism threaten despite their unsatisfactory nature. But it is also important to keep in mind that class is never an autonomous difference, in so far as it cuts across other diversities like race and gender. From this perspective its discursive retrieval would be salutary for discourses like feminism, which have also been caught in the hegemonic shift towards questions of identity at the expense of economic analysis.

Finally, the points above suggest a purposeful distancing from Marx; yet, in reality, any invocation of class or its substitutes will have to settle its debts with Marxism, and it is perhaps inevitable that we will at least, as Derrida has recently expressed it, proceed in the spirit(s) of Marx. For if the latter's grand narrative has been reduced from emancipatory truth to oppressive fable, its method of reading and criticizing capitalism still privileges it as an instrument of social critique. Its analysis of alienation, exploitation, commodification and so on is a potent reminder that class is far more than a distributional question of social justice.

Given the massive and fatal consequences of poor life chances, it might be especially helpful to start by disentangling poststructuralists' pronouncements on the death of the subject from Marx's starting point, which is not some abstract post-Cartesian ego but real, sensuous, embodied persons with basic needs. Such is the challenge of those stubborn economic indices of structured material inequality.

Notes

1. A version of this article was first presented at the Philosophy and Social Science Conference at the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, May 1995. It has benefited from discussion among conference participants. In particular, I would like to thank Peter Dews, David Ingram, Lynne Segal, Nick Smith and Iris Young for their comments.
2. As for example Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe do in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London, 1985.
3. T. Bilton et al., *Introductory Sociology*, Macmillan, London, 1981, p. 44.
4. Research suggests that inequalities widened during the 1980s in Britain, New Zealand, Sweden, Japan, West Germany and the United States (*Guardian*, 10 February 1995, p. 7). Even Derrida asks 'what is one to think today of the imperturbable thoughtlessness that consists in singing the triumph of capitalism or of economic and political liberalism, ... the "end of the problem of social classes"?' Or again: 'never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity' (Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, Routledge, London, 1994, pp. 78, 85). Unemployment is the first of the ten 'plagues of the new world order' Derrida cites (p. 81).
5. For example, by Göran Therborn in S. Hall and M. Jacques, eds, *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics*

- in the 1990s, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1989.
6. I think there is also an argument to be made regarding context, but it is too complex for this article. Broadly, however, the particular differences that are focused on will vary according to context, and it would therefore be no accident that the eclipse of class coincides with the recent dominance of American political theorists in a context where class has never had the sort of resonance it finds in Europe, and especially in Britain. Given massive economic inequality in the United States, nevertheless, this would support my concluding comments that such inequality might require theorization in other terms. At the same time, American liberals have tended to be especially wary of the rise in national politics of Christian fundamentalism: a 'difference' whose demand for a voice might send even the most radical thinker scurrying to the safety of Rawlsian neutrality.
 7. Stuart Hall, in *New Times*, p. 121. Or, as Laclau and Mouffe put it in a specifically Marxist context, 'there is no logical connection whatsoever between positions in the relations of production and the mentality of the workers' (*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 84).
 8. See, for example, Anne Phillips, *Democracy and Difference*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 3–4, even though Phillips has generally remained unusually emphatic regarding class difference.
 9. A typical strategy is in fact to acknowledge class differences in passing, but then to remove them from the field of interest into another, rather traditional realm, where welfare and rights issues are played out in a fairly conventional liberal-democratic mode, under universalist notions of equality and rights. I think Habermas does this, for example, in his essay 'Struggles for Recognition in Constitutional States', *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1993.
 10. It may seem paradoxical to include discourse ethics under this poststructuralist rubric, given Habermas's attacks on the latter. But his interest in difference would nevertheless catch him within this postmodern imaginary; and, moreover, many of his sympathizers argue that a more radical appreciation of difference needs infusing into his work. Seyla Benhabib, Stephen White and Iris Young all, for example, introduce postmodern discourse into their own versions of discursive democracy.
 11. Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', Afterword in H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, eds, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Harvester-Wheatsheaf, Brighton, 1982, p. 212.
 12. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1978. See also Robert Young, *White Mythologies*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990; and Nancy Hartsock, 'Rethinking Modernism: Minority versus Majority Theories', *Cultural Critique*, Fall 1987, among others. Also Julia Kristeva, *Étrangers à nous mêmes*, Librairie Arthème Fayard, Paris, 1988.
 13. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Tavistock, London and New York, 1970, p. xxiv.
 14. Thus Habermas insists that dogmatic groups such as religious fundamentalists 'leave no room for reasonable disagreement', that is, 'a civilized dispute between convictions in which one party can recognize the others as parties to the dispute on authentic truths without having to sacrifice its own validity claim' ('Struggles for Recognition', p. 144). This kind of claim is, however, very problematic if applied to class.
 15. Stephen White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 109ff.
 16. Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1990.
 17. Laclau and Mouffe: 'there is no relation of oppression without the presence of a discursive "exterior" from which the discourse of subordination can be interrupted' (*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 154); 'the problem of the political is the problem of the institution of the social, that is, of the definition and articulation of social relations in a field criss-crossed with antagonism' (p. 153); 'The rejection of privileged points of rupture and the confluence of struggles into a unified political space, and the acceptance, on the contrary, of the plurality and indeterminacy of the social' (p. 152).
 18. The sort of struggle that Charles Taylor describes in *Multiculturalism and 'The Politics of Recognition'*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1992.
 19. Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, in R. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Norton, New York and London, 1978, p. 482.
 20. G. Procacci, 'Social Economy and the Government of Poverty', in G. Burchell et al., eds, *The Foucault Effect*, Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1991, p. 164. She adds that pauperism is 'a magma in which are fused all the dangers which beset the social order, shifting along unpredictable, untraceable channels of transmission and aggregation. It is insubordinate, hidden from the scrutinizing gaze of any governing instance. The definition of pauperism ... does not work essentially through economic categories; rather than a certain level of poverty, images of pauperism put the stress principally on feelings of fluidity and indefiniteness' (p. 158).
 21. It is this sort of logic, for example, that the Rowntree Report employs, rather than appealing to more altruistic or philanthropic ethics.
 22. The allusion here is, of course, to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, New York and London, 1989).

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