

# Western Philosophy of Social Science

## Lecture 8. Marx's theory of class and modern restatements

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# Popular politics and collective action

- Why do people sometimes come together as groups to mobilize around common goals?
- Why do events such as riots, uprisings, strikes, rebellions and revolutionary movements occur?
- What are the interests and motivations that lead people to engage in collective action?

# Marx's theory of class

- Marx offers a theory of political behavior based on the class structure of a given society. Serfs, slaves, peasants, and workers have an objective interest in engaging in collective action together.
- Structural: “class in itself”
- Subjective: “Class for itself”

# Structural theory of class

- Class defined as position within the economic structure; position within the property system
- The structural definition leads to the assumption that there are only a small number of classes – major and minor – corresponding to the major intersections of the property system.

# Class identity

- Class consciousness: an identity in which the agent explicitly considers himself as a member of a particular class
- Supported by traditions and social groupings.
- the material-social conditions of class identity
- The sociology of class consciousness formation
- Material conditions leading to specific features of consciousness and identity
- A crucial question: what are the microfoundations of class consciousness?

# Material circumstances

- Marx refers to some of the conditions that lead to class consciousness: proximity, similar working conditions, normal social interaction with people in similar circumstances.
- Circumstances of work and labor
- Other historians have noted the exceptional solidarity among workers in certain occupations: textiles, mines

# The simple theory

- Members of exploited groups will come to recognize the fact of their exploitation and their common interests with other members of the group.
- Members of the exploited group will come to see that they can improve their conditions through collective action.
- Members will have the motivational resources necessary to mobilize together.

# The simple theory ...

- Social movements based on class identity will arise to challenge existing exploitative property relations and political institutions.
- Rebellions are rational strategies of collective self-defense on the part of subordinate classes.

# Too simple ...

- This theory ignores social and individual factors that are crucial for the outcome.
- It is a macro-theory; it requires micro-foundations.
- The micro-foundations of class politics will need to identify other factors relevant to political consciousness and collective action.

# Class politics and rational actors

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- The theory of collective action (Mancur Olson) demonstrates that action in support of common purposes within a group of rational agents will be difficult to achieve.
- Public goods are defined as “goods available to every member of a group if available to any member of a group.” For example, television broadcasts.

# Class politics and rational actors

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- Private goods and “club” goods are easy to provide.
- Revolution and rebellion are public goods.
- Every agent has a private incentive to become a free rider
- Therefore, collective action problems impede solidarity

# Other bases of social consciousness

- More importantly, there are other social conditions that potentially give rise to group identities –
- Race, ethnic identity
- Gender
- Region and lineage
- Cross-cutting identities in many societies (e.g. United States)
- Great variation in degree of working class identity and solidarity across societies

# Other sources of material interests

- And there are other sources of material interests, and conflicts of material interests, that can produce group solidarities –
- Local, village, and regional interests
- Environmental interests
- Water and forest rights
- These are examples of material interests that bring groups into conflict but that do not correspond to social class alignments.
- Gender-based differences of power within the household and the society.

# Level of group aggregation

- Moreover, there are significant differences in material interests **within** a given class—e.g. the proletariat includes air traffic controllers and airport custodians.
- What is the basis of solidarity across the full regional and occupational diversity of a class?
- What are the mechanisms through which such solidarity might be cultivated?
- Not automatic!

# Other factors in popular politics

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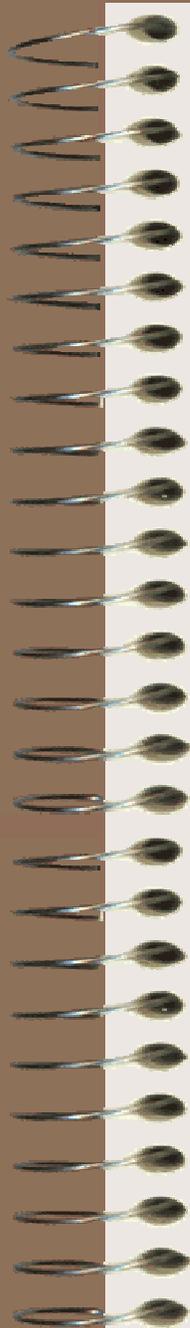
- The circumstances of group identity are only one out of a list of factors that influence collective action. Other factors –
- Political culture
- Traditions and repertoires of collective action
- Organizational resources
- Leadership
- Alliances with other groups in society

# Mechanisms of class identity formation

- We need to have an account of the microfoundations of class identity. What are the social institutions and practices through which class identities (sometimes) emerge? To what extent is this process historically contingent (highly!).
- Consider E. P. Thompson's great work, *The Making of the English Working Class*; and contrast with the French experience described by Charles Tilly and others.

# Is there a continuing role for Marx's theories of class?

- Is class relevant in analyzing social and economic change? Yes.
- Is class a complete theory of social mobilization and consciousness? No.
- There is nothing inevitable about the emergence of class as a salient political factor.
- But it is a potential basis for collective action and a fulcrum around which mobilization and organization can occur.

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