Class, Division of Labour and Employment in Space

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Class is arguably the single most crucial axis on which human life turns in the modern world, yet is at the same time one of the most difficult of social facts to grasp. Marx provided a powerful conception, rooted in the mode of production, with which to understand the class character of capitalist societies. This theory remains subject to doubt, however, because of persistent failure of vision in the face of a social reality that does not conform to tidy conceptual systems. Space is another fundamental dimension of human life, yet the geographic element in the social sciences has atrophied for want of a way in which spatial relations might comfortably be integrated into social theory. Fortunately, the recent revival of philosophical discourse in the social sciences, which seeks to conjoin 'theoretical realism' with so-called 'structuration theory', has rekindled the spirit of inquiry once known as dialectical materialism, while contributing much in the way of clarity and systematic development of basic tenets. This mode of thought offers a way out of the dead-ends to which class analysis and geography have come, although the refined tools of philosophy need to be fitted into the powerful machine of Marx's theory of capitalism in order for the analytic work to proceed.

Class analysis has been persistently stymied by four problems in social theory which can be fruitfully addressed by a dialectical materialist, or Marxist 'structurationist' approach. The first is that posed as the question of structure and agency, which is addressed in section I.

The second problem confronting class analysis is the stratification of the social world. Social systems consist of several layers of nested
and overlapping sub-systems with their own irreducible structures. The interplay of structure and agency is not a simple dualism between structural mechanism and contingent forces; real events are always the result of multiple ‘determinations’ or causes. While these can be ranked in importance, the study of other levels cannot be entirely left until after the problem of class has been solved, because these mediating systems help to create the problem in the first place. The principal conundrum of class analysis along these lines has been the conflation of class with division of labour. Therefore, in sections II, III and IV I attempt to sort out the differences between these two fundamental categories of social analysis.

The third problem to be confronted is the lodging of class in the mode of production. The social construction of class takes place in relation to the unfolding dynamics of social production and capital accumulation, which means that class analysis cannot be restricted to the realm of sociology. It goes hand in hand with the difficult work of building a framework for understanding the capitalist economy on the foundations laid down by Marx. I take up this issue in the discussion of class and division of labour, and continue it in the more detailed inquiry into the employment relation, in section V.

Fourth, the theory of class repeatedly bumps into the hard reality of space. The abstract, aspatial character of most Marxist conceptions of class has left a glaring hole which has been filled by classless theories of exploitation between centre and periphery, and the like. In section VI the geographic element is addressed as a necessary part of the meshing of class and division of labour in the workplace. It is argued that class in a structured and stratified capitalist world incorporates an irreducible spatial dimension.

Along the way I wish to counter two errors in the geographic study of classes. One is the fallacy of sequential ordering, or treating the use of space (location) as a problem to be addressed by pre-existing classes. This is the normal mode of analysis of industrial and social geography. It lacks any understanding of structuration, or of the incorporation of space into the process of class formation itself. The second error is of more recent vintage, and comes hard on the ‘rediscovery’ of space by many radical social scientists. This is the fallacy of decomposition, which regards the introduction of space as necessarily undermining classes as coherent social entities. This view lacks sufficient appreciation of the complexity and agency involved in class formation.