

How to stop paying lip-service to class—and why it won't happen¹

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Literary and cultural scholars now generally agree that where gender, ethnicity, and class are concerned, class for some decades has been bringing up the rear, not only in the attention it receives but also in the practical results of this attention as compared with the attention given gender and ethnicity. Many feel distressed by the imbalance and sometimes strive to correct it, and here I will argue that this is easier said than done in our intellectual situation of these recent decades. For it is not as if we have deliberately shied away from the subject of class for fear of being accused of fomenting class warfare. It is rather that our efforts have been discouraged or aborted because class continues to resist the analytical methods, categories, and vocabulary that have become hegemonic among us because they have proved so productive for gender and ethnicity while also keeping class invisible.

Gender and ethnicity, along with sexual orientation, post-coloniality, and other forms of difference, have been analyzed primarily as geographical sites of identity and oppression. But when you try to analyze class in that way, either you must resort to the conceptually problematic upper, middle, and lower, as sites whose origins, parameters, and persistence remain fundamentally inexplicable, or for all practical purposes you must come up empty. Class cannot be understood as a geographical site because, in the imperishable words of my marxist mentors, “class is an adjective, not a noun” (Resnick & Wolff 1997: 159). It is a particular form of the temporal process of human exploitation in the daily work that we do rather than our physical characteristics or political disempowerment. Class exploitation in all of its forms produces poverty, of course, and poverty can indeed be construed as a geographical site with its own problematic of identity and culture. But when we speak of the culture of poverty, we don't mean at

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all what we mean by the culture of women or of African-Americans or of postcolonial subjects, and whatever characteristics class may share coincidentally with gender and ethnicity as geographical sites, it is also a different kind of phenomenon.

My argument is then three-fold. First, the full bearing of class on our lives, literatures, and cultures can be grasped only through a marxian understanding of class, not as a fixed identity site but as a changing temporal process of producing, appropriating, and distributing surplus labor. This is the labor that every human community expends beyond what it needs minimally to reproduce itself, and throughout most of our history this surplus has been appropriated, distributed, and received by people other than those who perform the labor. Second, the only American marxists to have gained a significant voice in contemporary cultural studies are those like Fredric Jameson or Gayatri Spivak who have no analytical use for this conception of class and whose work leaves intact the methodological consensus by which class gets lip-service only. Third, gaining a voice on behalf of class as surplus labor would require us to disrupt this consensus and substantially revise the analytic categories and vocabulary that govern today's scholarship of identity and diversity. It would require us, for example, to deconstruct such terms as multiculturalism and post-colonialism, which confine our attention to the dynamics of abstract power as divorced from concrete labor. Or, to take a literary example, while canonical white male writers like Shakespeare, Dickens, and James have on occasion dramatized the cultural dynamics of class as surplus labor, whereas insurgent feminist, ethnic, and proletarian writers like Atwood, Morrison, and Olsen never have, a marxian class analysis would require us also to deconstruct the multicultural anti-canon (and curriculum) that we have concocted as an antidote to white male thinking. And in today's academy, deconstructions like these are not likely to happen.

1.

The concept of class as a labor process is not only avoided by many recent marxists but is also now unfamiliar to many non-marxists. Here I don't want to take it for granted, so let me begin by elucidating it briefly. The earliest sustainable human communities produced more than they needed minimally to survive, and two key questions throughout our

subsequent history have been how this surplus gets distributed and who gets to decide its distribution—which then lead to further questions such as what is minimally necessary to survive and who gets to decide that. But Marx’s aboriginal insight is that of surplus labor, and marxian scholarship during the past 150 years has produced compelling analyses of the different human experiences, feelings, and values created historically by such different ways of appropriating surplus labor as slavery, feudalism, and capitalism. In marxian accounts of the feudal class process, for example, farmers have direct access to the land and tools by which they not only reproduce themselves but also produce a surplus which is appropriated and distributed by the lords and priests to whom they feel a measure of fealty in return for protection of their bodies and souls. The power of lords and priests to coerce this surplus is simultaneously political, economic, and cultural: the public offices they hold authorize them to tax, tithe, and gouge with the ideological consent of the governed until the system breaks down.

Then in the class process specific to capitalism, neither farmers nor anyone else who must work for a living has immediate access to the means by which to reproduce themselves. They gain this access only by selling their labor power in return for a wage that is no longer determined by lords and priests but the “invisible hand” of an allegedly autonomous, self-regulating market independent of the people who inhabit it. Their economic bondage and political fealty have been severed from one another and replaced by, respectively, the economic freedom to sell their labor where they choose, which enables them ideologically to feel they can find work that will increase their share of the surplus they produce, and the political freedom of electoral suffrage, which enables them ideologically to feel they can find collective redress for the market’s systemic failure to be autonomous and self-regulating.

This account of class is of course over-simplified, especially in ignoring the temporal co-existence of multiple class processes (e.g., a family in which the husband is a capitalist wage-earner, the wife his feudal vassal, and their daughter an independent home cleaner who appropriates her own surplus), as well as the multiple overlappings of class with gender and ethnicity at their identity sites. But I hope it is sufficient to indicate a) that class is a labor process rather than an identity site, b) that it is more often than not invisible to its participants, c) that its different forms are transitory and evanescent in their capacity to

influence the formation of human identity, and d) that its present form throughout the world is overwhelmingly capitalist.

When class is viewed as a site like gender and ethnicity, African-American women factory workers at their site, for example, are said to experience differences of vocational or educational opportunity, of health care or child care, of income or self-concept, that produce different feminist agendas from those of white homemakers at their site or lesbian attorneys at theirs. Yet coextensive with such differences is a single experience common to the great majority of women at all three of these identity sites—that they perform surplus labor and that the product of this labor is appropriated and distributed, whether in the form of canned soup, the family laundry, or “billable hours,” without their having any say in how that is done.

This process has been for the most part as invisible to scholarship as to its participants. Differences in gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, along with those in occupation and income, are written on the body—in physiology, physiognomy, and pigmentation, in dress, ornament, and idelect, in body language itself—as material identities through which people become subject to domination and oppression. But capitalism’s relations of expropriation in which these people are compelled to participate, although themselves material relations, are not thus directly visible. They are a dirty secret to be theoretically inferred, and inferring them requires a different analysis than is ordinarily required to recognize gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation as sites of domination or oppression.

True, these have sometimes been theorized as social processes rather than identity sites, for example in Judith Butler’s, David Roediger’s, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s analyses of gendered, racialized, and gay identities as socially constructed. But their material embodiments exert a kind of downward pull on their theoretical status. The immediate otherness of appearance or behavior cries out to be humanly accepted even before it gets theorized and no matter how it gets theorized, whereas the otherness of class is initially more abstract and experientially mediated. Meanwhile, inasmuch as the different othernesses produced by the different class processes of slavery, feudalism, and capitalism have proven to be historically transitory, we can still credibly hope to abolish class altogether—just the opposite of what we hope for gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Slaves, vassals, and proletarians may need to be

celebrated for as long as class persists, but women, ethnics, and queers need to be celebrated not abolished always and everywhere.

When class is thus seen as an invisible process rather than a visible site, diversity and multiculturalism become a whole different story from the one in which we now take so much easy comfort. If I understand the claims of diversity, they are that every identity category, from women to African-Americans to Latin transsexuals, should enjoy the political benefit of equality before the law, the cultural benefit of equal access to (or total elimination of) the literary, musical, and artistic canons, and the economic benefit of equal pay for equal work. But this economic benefit is in a key respect incommensurate with the others. The opportunity to qualify for equal pay is only an opportunity to have your surplus labor appropriated at the same rate as everyone else's, and while this can be a big gain for you, it leaves intact capitalism's process of expropriating everyone in a way that a Voting Rights Act, or the disruption of artistic canons, do not leave intact either the polity or its culture.

2.

A second example more germane to literary study is the theoretical discourse of post-colonialism, which is conceptually a first cousin to multiculturalism, and which in most of its variants either avoids or renounces the concept of class as surplus labor. Postcolonial theory arguably provides the main impetus for the cultural studies movement that now dominates the humanities curriculum, and the epistemological basis of this new hegemony is what Aijaz Ahmad calls the post-condition—a theoretical condition common to post-structuralism, postmodernism, post-Fordism, post-nationalism, and post-marxism in their rejection of master narratives such as that of surplus labor persisting in identifiable configurations over lengths of time we can recognize as historical periods following each other in comprehensible succession.

The term "postcolonial" was evidently first used in connection with the post-WWII emergence from Western rule of independent national states in what was then called "The Third World." Not only did the geographical boundaries of these new states include diverse populations with different languages, literatures, music, and religions. The states themselves proved unable either to achieve economic independence or to sustain an authentic political independence. This twin failure is regularly

characterized by postcolonial theorists led by Homi K. Bhabha as a failure of both nationalism and marxism, which then left the deprived colonial subject to make her own way in a world now comprised primarily of discourse. Any agency she might find in trying to transcend the identity of Gayatri Spivak's subaltern, she exerted by migrating to the metropole of her former colonizer—either literally by moving to London or culturally by remaining in Mumbai or Kingston while striving to create anglophone fiction, music, or painting. Either way, her postcolonial struggle was to deploy her native resources so as to creolize the metropolitan imaginary in one or another of its signifying media—that is, to proliferate as many new cultural differences and identities as might exist among local communities in her native country or immigrant communities in the cities of the metropole. Language and culture became for her a stand-in for nation and class, and “heterogeneity” became a byword of postcolonial studies parallel to “diversity” in multicultural studies.

If I understand postcolonial theory here, it ignores two key features of pre-postmodern history. First, today's geographical and cultural migrations, in their manifold fissions and fusions, replicate those of Africans and Irish, Asians and Slavs, Latins and Middle Easterners to the United States during the last two centuries. We Americans have been there and done that, and our immigrants were inexorably incorporated into the slave, sharecropping, and proletarian class processes of the world's fastest growing and soon overpowering capitalist empire. Their political, artistic, and intellectual achievements—e.g., voting rights and *Brown vs. Board of Education*; blues and jazz; the theory of double-consciousness and the theory of Ebonics—were and are produced in conjunction with their massive immiseration by these class processes. Harriet Tubman, Zora Neale Hurston, and Thurgood Marshall appear on first-class postage stamps while the latest statistics indicate that one out of ten African-American males aged 18-26 is forming his identity in prison while immersed in the class process of slavery, and one out of four who are not in prison is forming his identity while immersed in capitalism's reserve army of the unemployed. Nor does America's 2008 election of a compassionate, sharp-minded, eloquent multicultural president show the least sign of changing that.

Second, this class immiseration is indiscriminately rampant today in London, Mumbai, and Kingston, irrespective of the movement of peoples

and proliferation of identities, because in our post-marxist era capitalism has spread across the globe in precisely the manner specified by surplus labor theory. The hand of the market is not just the figment of a master narrative written by Adam Smith or Karl Marx. It is also the material process through which postcolonial women are paid 74c for making a \$125 pair of shoes while postcolonial children by the million sleep in the streets and take their meals at garbage dumps.

Or as Alex Callinicos puts it on the plane of theory in his critique of Homi K. Bhabha,

The trouble with this line of argument is that Bhabha's analyses of colonial power are themselves so thoroughly imbricated with poststructuralist concepts...that they cannot provide any independent support for the claim there is a privileged relationship between these concepts and "colonial textuality." One rather has the feeling that some kind of card trick is going on: colonial discourse is invoked to give poststructuralism much needed political and historical content, but this discourse turns out to be itself a poststructuralist construct...This impression is reinforced when one notes the way in which Bhabha tends to rewrite the other texts...he discusses. So, for example, he concentrates on those aspects of Fanon's work which highlight "the psychoanalytic ambivalence of the Unconscious," rather than those that posit "a Hegelian-Marxist dialectic" ...pointing towards "the total transformation of Man and Society".... Again and again, the interest of various struggles against colonial domination turns out to be the way they instantiate "aporia," "ambivalence," "indeterminacy," and all the other items of the poststructuralist repertoire. Far from the experience of subjection and resistance to Western imperialism politicizing postmodernism, that experience is reduced [sic] to yet another variation on the well-worn theme of the endless flow of signification.

(1995: 106)

3.

Postcolonial theory now appears to be extending the grip of multicultural theory on the scholarship and curriculum of literature departments, and among the literary works being rendered invisible by this new hegemony are those that struggle, sometimes successfully, to represent class as surplus labor in form as well as theme. In *The Marxian Imagination* (2003) I analyze a baker's dozen of such works, and mention in passing perhaps a dozen more, whose fictional representations are formally centered on the human relations, feelings, and values produced or influenced by the experience of class as surplus labor. These works range from *King Lear* in 1606 to *The Poisonwood Bible* in 1998; their authors include Emily Bronte and Charles Dickens, Henry James and Edith

Wharton, Grace Lumpkin, William Faulkner, and Meridel Le Sueur—either canonical or putatively canonical writers stalking the same master narrative across nearly four centuries of white male curriculum. Here I limit myself to just one example, *The Poisonwood Bible*, and even then for no more than a sketch.

The mother and four daughters who narrate this novel tell how they were brought to the Congo by their Southern Baptist missionary patriarch just when that country's postcolonial hope was destroyed by the CIA assassination of its president Lumumba and installation of the puppet Mobutu; how the Reverend Nathan Price's baptizing the natives in a river habitat of crocodiles while also teaching them to plant crops alien to their soil led to the death of his youngest daughter, killed by a snake planted by an outraged shaman; and how his wife Orleanna then absconded with their remaining three daughters and returned to the US with one, while the other two, Rachel and Leah, married and remained in Africa to give this postcolonial novel its focus and coherence as also a novel of class.

Orleanna begins the narration as the guilt-ridden mother returned home, and among her first words to the reader are, "You'll say I walked across Africa with my wrists unshackled, and now I am one more soul walking free in a white skin, wearing some thread of the stolen goods: cotton or diamonds, freedom at the very least, prosperity" (1998: 9). Here at the outset this once-cowed wife holds herself personally responsible for participating, not only in her husband's religious mission of saving African souls but also her country's class mission of expropriating African labor. Her oldest daughter, Rachel, goes through three African marriages to white men variously engaged in this same mission, and she ends up in French Congo as the widowed proprietress of an elegant hotel catering to businessmen engaged in establishing the new infrastructure of expropriation

Her sister Leah marries the exquisitely tattooed village schoolteacher, Anatole Ngemba, a Lumumba activist who is in and out of Mobutu's jails for the remainder of the novel, while Leah is subject to both intermittent malaria and intermittent ostracism by the native people. They manage even so to join other families in starting an agricultural commune wherein to raise their three sons, and, precarious as that turns out to be in Mobutu's IMF economy, they return to the US in the hope of finding a new identity and future there. They enroll as graduate students

at Emory, Leah in agricultural engineering and Anatole in political science. But on their family walks in the streets of Atlanta, its citizens are horrified by Anatole's tattooed face beaming over his mongrel children, and Leah decides that "I can't drag a husband and sons into a life where their beauty will blossom and wither in darkness" (1998: 469). So they return to Zaire, where Anatole is again imprisoned and they consider moving to Angola once he is released—another postcolonial country just a step behind the Congo in having its independence destroyed by capitalism's need to immerse the entire world in its surplus labor process. Leah then assesses their Angolan prospects in the last pages given her:

No homeland I can claim as mine would blow up a struggling, distant country's hydroelectric dams and water pipes, inventing darkness and dysentery in the service of its ideals, and bury mines in every Angolan road that connected food with a hungry child. We've watched this war with our hearts in our throats, knowing what there is to lose. Another Congo. Another wasted chance running like poisoned water through Africa....

But with nothing else to hope for, we lean toward Angola, waiting, while the past grows heavy and our future narrows down to a crack in the door. (1998:503)

Her words come 490 pages after her mother's opening words to the reader, and mother and daughter together frame a narrative wherein postcolonial migration in either direction—from metropole to colony or vice versa—offers very little hope of new identities to be mediated through the hybridization of discourse. It offers instead a crack in the door for any remaining hope to escape the invisible hand of surplus labor in stultifying the formation of all identities. *The Poisonwood Bible* brings formally into focus a dynamic of class that multiculturalism and post-colonialism have found no way to identify, let alone to explain.

This feminist, multicultural, postcolonial novel of class was on the NYT bestseller list for over a year. It became a selection of Oprah Winfrey's Book Club, it led to the publication of Kingsolver's earlier books in a boxed set, and it produced a website, kingsolver.com. It created in short a large, popular, no-brow audience such as cultural radicals can only dream of for a novel that speaks to their ideals. Yet to my knowledge, *The Poisonwood Bible* made barely a ripple in English literature departments—nothing like the feminist wave once made by *Surfacing*, the postmodern wave made by *Gravity's Rainbow*, the African-American wave of *Beloved*, or the postcolonial wave of *The*

Satanic Verses. On the crest of those waves dozens of related novels became subject to study, and thousands of academic careers were spawned and sustained. But *The Poisonwood Bible* is to all appearances too traditionally humanistic, in producing a narrative of economic expropriation as well as ethnic, gender, and political oppression, to become a conference- or career-inspiring icon.

4.

This brings me finally to the most difficult and tentative part of my argument—that multiculturalism and post-colonialism have exhausted their capital without engaging class at a time when the American university is devoted as never before to commodifying their discourses and, in that process, reaffirming itself as what Louis Althusser called an ideological state apparatus.

Here before going further, let me enlarge on what I said at the outset, that during my academic lifetime the scholarship of multiculturalism has been liberating beyond what anyone now short of retirement can imagine. The methodological parochialism and ideological blindness of the old white male academy are certainly good riddance, and the justice achieved by multiculturalism has extended by leaps the life of the mind—for us who are in a position to lead that life. But for us the justice of multiculturalism lies within reach without reference to class. Not only can we attain it without having to confront the injustice of expropriation; it can also satisfy our political *amour propre* before we ever get to expropriation. Our universities, in turn, in modeling their prestige on corporations' market share, can make a mantra of diversity without risking market share—and, in so doing, interpellate us as scholar-subjects who evade class the more readily.

But people like me can also remember a time in American public life when there was serious public discussion (Keynesian and not Marxian), not only of equal opportunity and recognition, but also of full employment, universal health insurance, and a Guaranteed Annual Income (endorsed by President Nixon and passed by the US House of Representatives.) That was also a time when the discourse of class as surplus labor was widespread enough to occur sometimes in universities: Labor Studies was a recognized specialty in economics departments, political theory (including marxist theory) in political science

departments, the literature of class in English departments. These fields reflect a diversity in scholarship that has largely disappeared, along with any discussion of full employment or a guaranteed income, during just that time when multiculturalism and post-colonialism have ascended to curricular hegemony. (The University of Notre Dame's Department of Economics greeted the 21st century by successfully petitioning its administration to have its marxist members reassigned elsewhere, on the ground that surplus value theory isn't genuine economics, more or less in tandem with our literature departments' credentializing a vocabulary that for all practical purposes denies class a voice.)

Just as there used to be talk of surplus labor, full employment, and a guaranteed income even by Richard Nixon, so too the white male academy had its upside, in trying sometimes to identify the holistic relations between historical and aesthetic forms that embody master narratives—just as the multicultural academy has now found its downside by collapsing these narratives into the conjunctures at which post-isms arise without engaging class. I said at the outset that the scholarship of multiculturalism has not shied away from class by conscious choice. But what about unconscious choice? Is it too much to suggest in conclusion that the post-condition purges us of historical memory, including the memory of slavery-feudalism-capitalism as a coherent and irreversible evolutionary process, by subjecting our discourse to an epistemology that keeps class invisible? Insofar as studying class as the expropriation of surplus labor might rock the prestige boat at research universities, it must remain doubtful whether scholars at these universities can get beyond lip-service to class. For it is not just that the epistemology of the prevailing -isms has proved incapable of doing that. The alternative just might have to be a marxism whose talk of surplus labor as a historical master narrative is noxious to the metabolism of the research university as an ideological apparatus.

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