



URPE/AFEE at ASSA, January, 2015

“The Role of Class in Historical Analysis”

► Overarching questions:

1. What is the definition of class?
2. What determines class, material/objective or subjective/identity elements?
3. What does class determine, political coalitions, structure of society, structure of knowledge, economic dynamics?
4. Does “class struggle” influence the form of institutions, which then effects the path of further economic growth and cultural change?
5. How does class operate, rules of property, political influence, cultural expression, individual identities? What is the best method for studying class?
6. Is class a useful category? For which disciplines? At what level of analysis?



Theses on Capitalism and its Others

James Livingston

Rutgers University

ASSA, January 5, 2015



Proposal for a New Periodization of Capitalism

- Definition of capitalism as the “generalization of wage labor” to the point where “abstract social labor” becomes the norm
- Capitalism is the cause of social, political, and moral progress
- In this context, alienation and the universalization of exchange value are signs of such progress
- The search for profit, the “difference residing in a surplus of signs” has been a feature of market behavior since the beginning of recorded history, and so cannot distinguish capitalism; credit is a “sign of a sign” (pp. 2-3)
- What is unique to capitalism is not the commodity form, but its generalization to human labor and its rationalization



Role of Work



- Following Hegel and Marx, “consciousness is a function of work because it begins when the separation of the subject (active humanity) and object (nature) is acknowledged as unfinished (p. 4)
- This role of work helps account for the idealization of artisanal labor (*poiesis*) and the small holder, the self-made man (p. 13)
- Work is the site of “self-consciousness,” including the most abject forms of human labor (p. 13)
- The relation between subject and object is developed while enacted and experienced as a social phenomenon in the labor process
- This separation is completely posited only in the relation of wage labor and capital and provides for a “Hegelian principle of periodization”



Bourgeois Society

- ▶ Bourgeois society is simple commodity production, a trans-historical phenomenon, a component of every other mode of production (p. 11)
- ▶ Ancient bourgeois society was the foundation of classical republicanism, first in Athens and then Rome
- ▶ The foundation was a community of small farmers who were free and who owned their own land
- ▶ Bourgeois society is both ancient and modern, a transhistorical phenomenon
- ▶ It was the basis and ethical ideal of Athenian democracy in 5th and 4th century city-states, early modern Europe, colonial North America, and slave society of the antebellum South
- ▶ Bourgeois society provided the social basis and ethical ideal of resistance to corporate capitalism in the 1880s, known as “Populism” (p. 8)

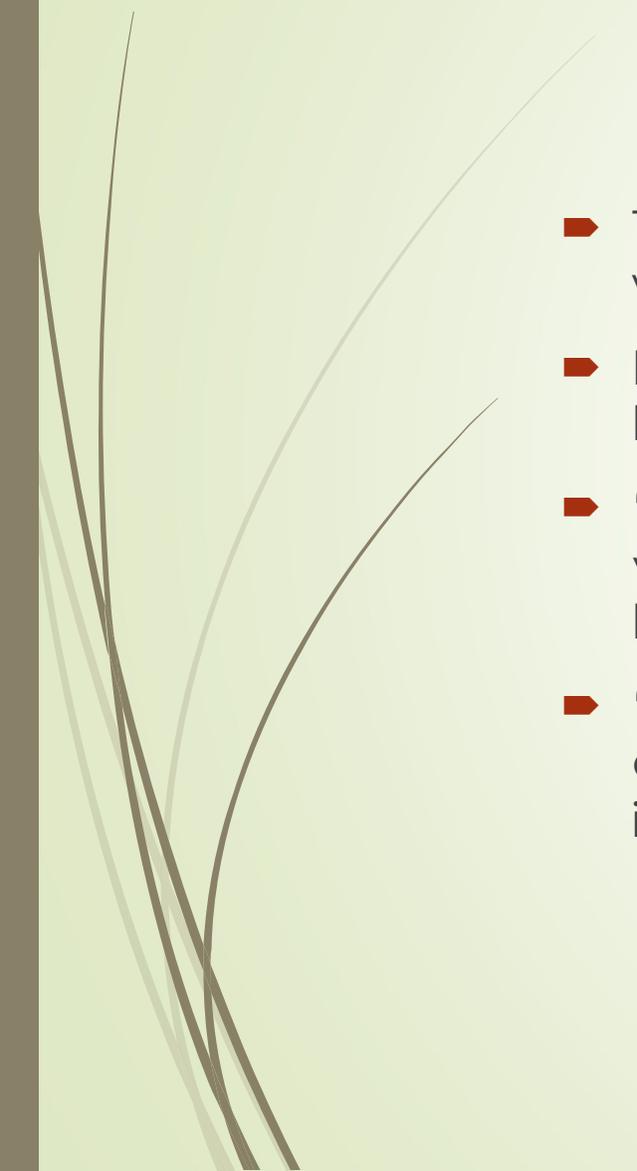


Role of the Household

- ▶ “The goal of bourgeois society is.... to recreate the material foundation and insignia of the self-determining personality, of the individual who owns himself and thereby functions as the *paterfamilias* who can fulfill the duties of a citizen”
- ▶ In this sense, slavery is consistent with bourgeois society (pp. 9-10)
- ▶ “Women enter society not as individuals but as bearers of specific familial roles and domestic obligations...subordinates of fathers, brothers, and husbands
- ▶ Containment of women’s sexuality within the boundaries of the family is of paramount importance with inherited property
- ▶ This familial relationship is revolutionized by the export of production from the household, and permits new thinking on “genuine selfhood” (pp. 10, 18)



Periodization of Capitalism

- ▶ The emergence of capitalism then occurs in the mid-nineteenth century with the development of the wage labor force
 - ▶ Early modern European city-states and antebellum Southern US were bourgeois societies, market economies, not capitalist
 - ▶ “Capitalism develops by differentiating between the capacity to produce value through work (labor-power) and the physical form of the person, the body” (pp. 16-17)
 - ▶ “The measurable or material manifestation of this gap was the growing difference steam-driven machines created between the exertions of the individual body and the output of a socialized labor process “ (p. 17)
- 

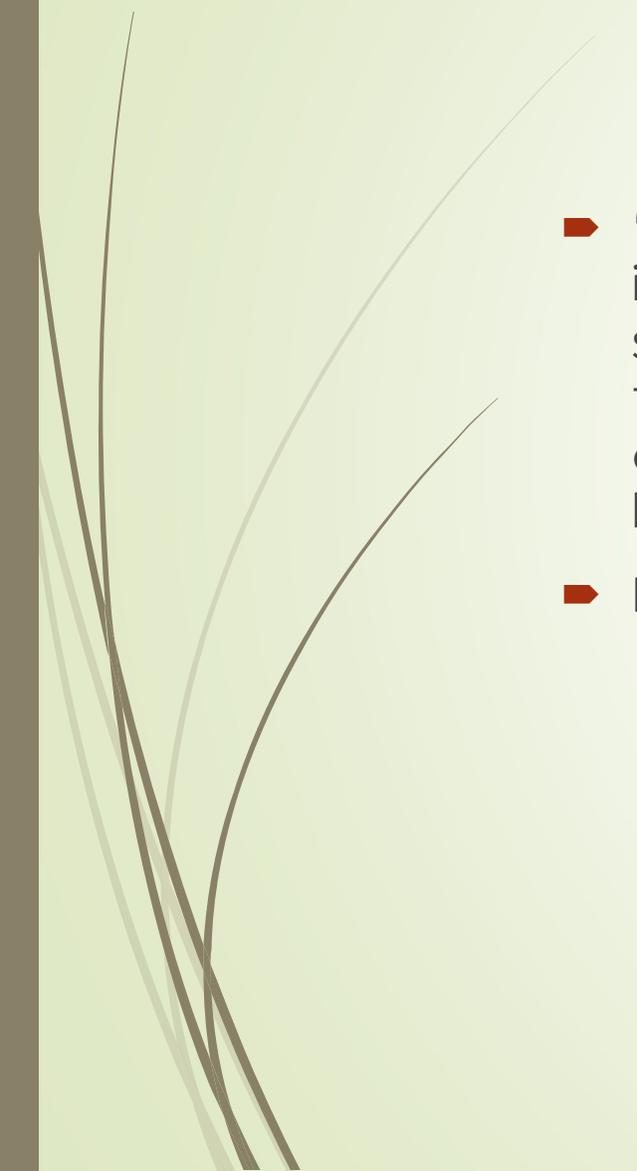


Emergence of the Working Class

- ▶ There is a development of the relationship among workers when the artisanal ideal is finally relinquished in the nineteenth century (p. 15) and a non-family relationship among workers is recognized (p. 18)
- ▶ As understood by Marx, with machinery and modern industry, the relation of active subject and inert object is changed; “the active agent in the goods production process now appeared to be the machines that the worker merely tended as watchman and regulator.”
- ▶ “With the articulation of class as the regulative principle of social relations... work is removed from the supervision of a patriarch with legal and the customary control of the worker’s body” (pp. 16, 18)
- ▶ The “increase of the proletariat” (Marx) *creates civil society* (p. 18), outside the firm and the family

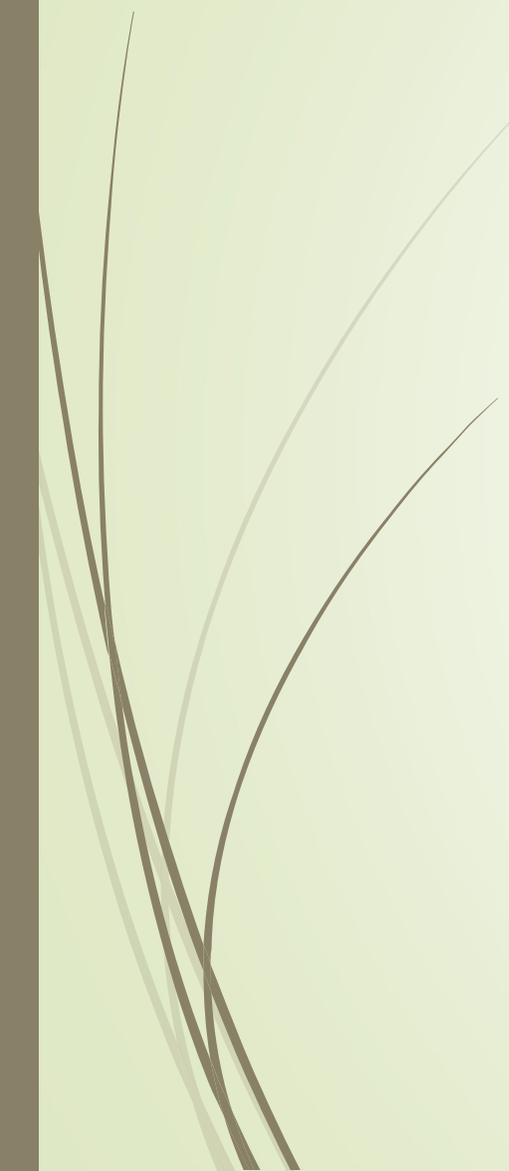


Confinement of Market Forces

- ▶ “Capitalism is, in this sense, a cross-class construction that evolves only insofar as its adherents are able to *confine market forces* to certain social spaces...unless wage laborers and their allies can establish clear limits on the scope of the commodity form...[and can] enforce a meaningful distinction between the value of their labor time and the worth of their lives” (pp. 17, 19)
 - ▶ In the absence of this distinction, as Hegel noted, workers are slaves.
- 



Uneven impact of the Development of a Global Market

- ▶ The world market had differential impact, intensifying the bondage of the work force in the Slave South and Eastern Europe, where there was a second serfdom (p. 20).
 - ▶ Within the South, there was an interregional slave trade along with an anti-capitalist culture and politics (p. 21)
- 



Transition from Proprietary to Corporate Capitalism

- ▶ With the development of the joint stock company, mentioned by both Smith and Marx, there was a separation of ownership and control
- ▶ This represented the “social death” of the capitalists, like the landed nobility in early modern England (pp. 22-24).
- ▶ With the bureaucratization and mechanization of the labor process, “labor-time ceases to function as a universal or reliable measure of value, and the production of value through work can no longer determine incomes and corresponding claims on goods” (p. 25).
- ▶ Consumer “culture’s promotion of ‘being through having’ seems to reverse the proper relation between active subjects and inert objects by emptying out the inner self” (pp. 25-26)



Beyond Capitalism

- ▶ Corporate capitalism contains socialist elements, taking on “regulatory functions that were hitherto the province of the state” (p. 26)
 - ▶ With the separation of ownership and control, there is a “dispersal of power” (pp. 27-28)
 - ▶ “Socialism is the heir to modern liberalism in defining civil society, not state-centered political participation, as the site of self-discovery and self-determination, and in valorizing individualism, not collectivism, as it is produced by voluntary association with others.” (p. 27)
 - ▶ “Cultural politics becomes increasingly pivotal” (p. 26)
- 



Conclusion

- ▶ “The transition to the ‘socialized mode of production’ which Marx saw as the product of joint stock companies and modern credit has been underway...for more than a century, thanks first to the triumph of proprietary capitalism over slavery and then to the emergence and consolidation of corporate capitalism in the US.” (p. 28)



Questions



- ▶ Explain the “surplus of signs” (pp. 2-3) and the application of that concept to other societies and cultures.
- ▶ Defining “bourgeois society” as simple commodity production (p. 11) avoids many issues, such as the institutional forms of “capital,” technology, monopoly power. Later you discuss the role of joint stockholder corporations (and might also consider multinational corporations). Is this included in the definition of “bourgeois society”?
- ▶ The development of “genuine selfhood” as based on bourgeois privacy (pp. 10, 18, 27) is like Habermas’ description of the “rational” bourgeois public sphere.....but does not account for the alienated forms of consumer culture (pp. 25-26)
- ▶ With financial institutions replacing the family in intergenerational transmission of property, what happens to the role of women?