

Guys:

This is a very important article. So, do not screw up by not studying it carefully.

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## **Bringing Classism into the Race & Gender Picture**

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*Abstract:* What's missing from our understanding of class oppression is an understanding of class oppression as "classism," as a system of social oppression that operates on multiple social levels and that embraces both structures and human agency. This paper seeks to expand our understanding by sketching out a multilevel analysis of class oppression as a social system that includes macro, meso, and micro levels, and includes both structures and human agency. It will examine how people come to occupy their class roles; how they learn their particular class outlook, mannerisms, behavior, and culture; and how the personal and social dynamics of class oppression are related to the larger macrostructures of class oppression and exploitation.

Oppression, whether based on gender, race, or class, takes place on multiple levels including the institutional (macro), intergroup (meso), and personal (micro) levels of social interaction. At all three levels structures and human agency are interactive, that is structures constrain the choices and actions of individuals while individual choice and action are at the same time determinant of structures. Yet rarely do we provide a multi-leveled or integrative analysis of any of these oppressions. Much of feminist analysis has tended to emphasize the personal dynamics of sexism, while many racial studies have tended to focus on the nature of inter-group prejudice and discrimination. Studies of class have for the most part emphasized the institutional basis of class oppression. Ferree & Hall (1996) in their survey of introductory sociology texts reach similar conclusions. More recently the class-based experiences of women and people of color have been brought into women's studies and racial/ethnic studies. These efforts have spawned the rapidly growing new field of race, class, and gender, a field that combines all three with emphasis on the intersections.

Despite the tremendous insights of these intellectual traditions into the nature of class oppression, we lack an understanding of class oppression as "classism," as a

system of social oppression that operates on multiple levels and that embraces both social structures and human agency. When viewed as a whole there are three shortcomings within the current work on class oppression. The macro structural insights into class oppression of Marxist sociologists, political economists, and historians are largely ignored in the newer race and gender studies. Ignoring the roots of class oppression in capitalist economic structures is like ignoring the structural basis of gender oppression in patriarchy or ignoring racial formations by focusing only on individual prejudice.

On the other hand, the insights of the newer race and gender studies into the personal and social dynamics of oppression and the role of culture have been largely ignored by those working within some Marxist traditions, particularly political economists. Kandal (1996) provides a cogent summary of the history of race and gender within the Marxist traditions, as well as the current retreat from class on the left. Leaving the personal and social experiences of people aside is like trying to change institutions while ignoring human agency and the personal dynamics of oppression. Finally, and with rare exceptions, most within all of these intellectual traditions, including Marxists, fail to identify class oppression as "classism," as a social system of oppression. This failure has meant an inadequate understanding of class oppression.

Unfortunately in the interdisciplinary work on race, gender, and class, class oppression has analytically often been the poor cousin in this trilogy in spite of the efforts of some (like the recently formed Race, Gender, & Class Section of the American Sociological Association) to make class more central. Even when class is explicitly addressed, the concept of classism rarely appears in the literature and when it does appear it is usually conceptually ill-defined. Although there seems to be a general commitment to the importance of class issues and experiences, the focus is often exclusively on the poor and often focused on people of color. Part of the invisibility of class in America can be attributed to a racial formation which has collapsed class-based discourses into race-based ones (Quadagno 1994)

One section of a widely used and otherwise good reader (Rothenberg 1995: Part II)

addresses racism, sexism, and "class difference" instead of classism. This is not just a matter of labeling preference; it reflects a lack of conceptual clarity which is then further compounded by the absence of a reading in this section dealing centrally with class oppression. In the section of this same reader dealing with the social construction of race, class, and gender the discussion of class is limited to the so-called "underclass." Such omissions are perhaps understandable when there is such a paucity of literature on classism and on the social construction of class identities.

Another study by a social psychologist that actually develops and utilizes the concept of classism, a rare instance in the literature which must be applauded, fails to structurally locate class oppression and focuses exclusively on the beliefs and behavior of the "middle class" towards the poor (Bullock 1995). This study is illuminating, but its focus on the middle class-poor reinforces the invisibility of the working class majority and the broader structures of class and class oppression. The absence of structurally based definitions of class characterizes much of the work on race, class, and gender which often tends to focus more on the subjective experience of class through personal narratives, oral histories, and ethnographies.

One of the best attempts to integrate race, class, and gender has been by historian Ronald Takaki, whose masterful weaving of the experiences of race, ethnicity, gender, and class in *A Different Mirror* has given us perhaps the best multicultural history of the U.S to date. Yet despite the economic-based struggles of working people that play such a powerful role in binding together the multicultural histories of Americans, the structures of class oppression are all but invisible in Takaki's work.

Classism, rooted in the capitalist macrolevel class structures of exploitation, pits humans against humans. In the dialectics of structure vs. agency, the macrolevel institutions of class exploitation and conflict clearly have a logic and dynamic of their own, independent of the wills of individuals who occupy positions within those structures, constraining what people can and cannot do. Understanding the class structure of capitalism and its class-based dynamics are critical to an

understanding of the class oppression of working men and women of all racial/ethnic groups.

Human agency is constrained by the macrolevel class structures of capitalism while at the same time determining (reproducing as well as transforming) those same structures. Understanding both the personal and social dynamics of class as a system of oppression and questions of human agency, voice, and identity are critical to fully grasping the phenomena of class oppression and class struggle. Only through such complex understandings will we be able to meet the challenge of race, gender, and class liberation and to create a society free of classism and based on racial and gender equality.

The purpose of this paper is to sketch out a multilevel analysis of class oppression as part of a social system of oppression (classism) that begins with a macro-level class analysis of capitalism and extends to the personal and social dynamics of class oppression. The analysis draws on studies (particularly ethnographies and personal narratives) from within the social sciences and humanities.

Although many different aspects of class oppression have been studied throughout the social sciences and humanities, they are scattered and there has been no attempt to bring them together in any systematic fashion or view them within a larger class framework of social oppression. Next, although the use of the term "classism" is starting to appear in oppression studies, it is rarely defined and is conceptually underdeveloped compared with the concepts of racism and sexism. Classism is uniquely defined and developed here.

Section I first presents a general definition of oppression as a multi-level social system, drawn from the most recent developments in oppression theory. Then the concept of classism is defined and developed providing the conceptual framework for the rest of the paper. Section II briefly summarizes the political economic (structural) basis of class oppression drawing on the work of political economists. Section III examines the inter-group dynamics of class oppression with an emphasis on class bigotry and prejudice. In Section IV the personal dynamics of

classism are examined with an emphasis on the process whereby classist beliefs, attitudes, and behavior are internalized in ways that insure that class members play out their socially expected class roles (social reproduction). Section V provides a multidimensional analysis of schooling and the key role it plays in reproducing classism. Finally, the implications of this multilevel analysis of class oppression are examined.

### **Class Oppression As a Social System**

Oppression can be defined as the "systematic, institutionalized mistreatment of one group of people by another for whatever reason" (Yamato 1995:66). Oppression takes place through a complex of "everyday practices, attitudes, assumptions, behaviors, and institutional rules" (Lott 1995:13). Interactions on the basis of such oppression are relational between oppressor and oppressed, mistreater and victim, dominant and subordinate.

Oppression operates on macro, meso, and micro levels, each interactive with the other. On the macro level oppression is a matter of collectivity -- of economic, social, political, and cultural/ideological institutions. At the meso level, oppression operates at the level of group interaction. The micro level is a matter of individuality and identity, our attitudes and interactions with others (Omi & Winant 1994: Ch 4; Ferree & Hall 1996). In other words, oppression operates on personal, inter-group, and cultural/institutional levels.

Both structure, the persistent patterns of social relations, and agency, the self-motivated actions of individuals, are operative on macro, meso, and micro social levels (Ferree & Hall 1996: 930). Depending upon the level, oppression manifests itself differently as aware and unaware prejudice (attitudes, stereotypes, and behavior), discrimination (power), and institutionalized oppression (control and social reproduction).

Classism can be defined as the systematic oppression of one group by another based on economic distinctions or, more accurately, one's position within the system of

production and distribution. According to Bowles and Gintis (1986), at the institutional level, "Structure allows socially consequential power to be employed against the wills and efforts of those affected thereby."

The primary relation of classism is economic exploitation and consists of squeezing as much labor out of workers as possible and appropriating a disproportionate share of the community's production (surplus product). Class economic exploitation includes the mistreatment of people on the job, forcing people to work long and hard under difficult and often dangerous conditions, and the denial of the democratic rights of people to control their own production / distribution process. In his working class memoir *Rivethed*, Ben Hamper captures the nature of class exploitation:

I was seven years old the first time I ever set foot inside an automobile factory. The occasion was Family Night at the old Fisher Body plant in Flint...If nothing else, this annual peepshow lent a whole world of credence to our father's daily grumble. The assembly line did indeed stink. The noise was very close to intolerable. The heat was one complete bastard...we found my old man down the trim line...We stood there for forty minutes or so, a miniature lifetime, and the pattern never changed. Car, windshield. Car, windshield. Drudgery piled atop drudgery. Cigarette to cigarette. Decades of rolling through the rafters, bones turning to dust, stubborn clocks gagging down flesh, another windshield, another cigarette, wars blinking on and off, thunderstorms muttering the alphabet, crows on power lines, asleep or dead, that mechanical octopus squirming against nothing, nothing, nothingness (Hamper 1991:1-2).

Although rooted in the economy, classism also extends to the social, political, and cultural spheres. Anthropologist Karen Sacks defines class as "membership in a community that is dependent upon waged-labor, but that is unable to subsist or reproduce by such labor alone" (Sacks 1989:543). One of the virtues of this community-based definition is that it allows us to view class oppression as part of a larger social system of oppression. Sacks's (1988) study of a union organizing drive at Duke Medical Center is an excellent integrated multilevel analysis of race,

gender, and class.

Like other forms of oppression, classism at the intergroup (meso) level consists of prejudice based on negative attitudes toward and classist stereotypes of working class people, and discrimination based on overt behaviors that distance, avoid, and/or exclude on the basis of class distinctions (Bullock 1995:119).

As Donna Langston states, class is also clearly a personal experience:

...as a result of the class you are born into and raised in, class is your understanding of the world and where you fit in; it's composed of ideas, behavior, attitudes, values, and language; class is how you think, feel, act, look, talk, move, walk; class is what stores you shop at, restaurants you eat in; class is the schools you attend, the education you attain; class is the very jobs you will work at throughout your adult life...We experience class at every level of our lives...In other words, class is socially constructed and all-encompassing. When we experience classism, it will be because of our lack of money...and because of the way we talk, think, act, move -- because of our culture (Langston 1995:112).

Class experience is an important part of our identity, who we are, how we are, and how we relate to others and how we see the world. (See the special issue "Race, Gender, & Class: Working Class Intellectual Voices" of *Race, Gender, & Class* 4(1) 1996.)

Class oppression ultimately rests upon a structure of rules and social conventions embodied in institutions, linguistic convention, unwritten custom, and legal practice (Bowles & Gintis 1996:94). Like any other oppression, classism exists because people "agree to" play by the rules. When people decide not to play by the rules or try to change the rules, they are confronted by a range of social responses from normative peer pressure to intervention by legal authorities to threats and use of physical violence by the dominant classes or those who act on their behalf, such as the police or military. The so-called "power" of the dominant classes rests upon

this structure of rules, the ideology of classism, and the threat or use of violence. Class exploitation, then, is part of a larger social system of class oppression called classism. Like other forms of oppression, classism operates on macro (institutional), meso (inter-group), and micro (individual) social levels.

### **The Economic Face of Class Oppression**

The primary institutional basis of classism is the economic system. Capitalism is structured on the basis of classes. The three key economic institutions that generate classes are private ownership, the hierarchical organization of capitalist factories and offices, and the capitalist division of labor. These three institutions produce a class-based system of domination and subordination between owners and those who do not own, between managers and those who are managed, and between professionals and those without professional credentials. These can be subsumed into two primary structural bases of class oppression:

1 - Capital Ownership: ownership of the means of production including the land, natural resources, equipment, machinery, factories, offices, farms, and other businesses. When it is in the hands of only a few people, such ownership yields structural or institutional power and control over those who do not own capital. Without access to the means of production, people are unable to survive economically and are placed at a structural disadvantage relative to owners.

2 - Command Positions within organizational hierarchies (managers, administrators) and in terms of educationally credentialed employees (professionals). Although they often serve at the discretion of owners and do not have ultimate power, managers and professionals often have legally enforceable and thus institutionalized command and authority over others.

Those who do not own and do not have command positions make up the working class majority who account for 73% of U.S. families. The capitalist owning class who owns and control the corporate sector represent 2% of families while the middle



class consists of those who own small businesses (13%) or occupy command positions based on hierarchical positions and/or professional credentials within the private or public sectors (12%)(Bowles & Edwards 1993:119). Capitalism is thus structured in a way that generates three primary classes: a capitalist class, a middle class, and working class. These classes are structurally opposed to each other creating a class system of power and authority, social domination and subordination, and economic exploitation. (Other relational class models can be substituted here if the reader prefers. (For a discussion of these class structures see Vanneman & Cannon [1987: Ch.4], Wright [1986], and Belkhir [1996].)

Within these class structures, domination has been extended historically by the use of segmented labor markets and internal labor markets that have separated workers on the basis of artificially created occupational structures and job ladders. Racial and gender differences have also been used to further divide and separate workers. In the face of class struggle, these divide and conquer strategies have been effective methods to split workers into competing groups that have maintained capitalist exploitation and rates of profit (Albelda, Drago, Shulman 1997: Ch 7-8).

The macrolevel institutional basis of class oppression goes beyond these economic structures. The capitalist mode of production also requires a system of noneconomic institutions and culture. The family, legal/judicial system, government, schools, church, mental health system, culture, and community organizations are all structured in ways that maintain and reproduce the capitalist mode of production and distribution. Although space does not permit a discussion here of these other institutional bases of class oppression (schooling will be discussed in Section V below), understanding the class-based (as well as other oppression-based) nature of these institutions, and the ways in which these reinforce, extend, and challenge class oppression, is important to a complete understanding of how classism works. (See for example Edwards, Reich, & Weisskopf 1986 and McNall, Levine, & Fantasia 1991.)

## **Inter-Group Dynamics**

Because capitalism lacks an overall coordinating mechanism, people are left on their own to compete for jobs, resources, and income. However, the interests of different economic classes are structured in such a way that their interests are often opposed and power is unequally distributed. Due to limited capital ownership and the limited availability of command positions, some people are able to claim a disproportionate share of the better jobs, resources, and incomes for themselves while denying them to others. The folk wisdom "them that has gits" captures these relationships poignantly.

This is, of course, the basis for economic exploitation and is at the root of all class oppression: the benefits to one class are often at the expense of other classes. It forms the basis for class conflict -- for inter-group relations among the three economic classes as they are pitted against each other and struggle for economic advantage, privilege, status and, as is often the case, economic survival. The extreme maldistribution of income and wealth distribution, shown below, reveals the profound degree of economic exploitation that takes place in capitalism.

The worsening of this distribution in recent years reflects a shift in the balance of power away from workers to the owning and middle classes, and away from the United States to the other national centers of capitalist accumulation. Explaining these shifting fortunes requires an understanding of the political economic dynamics of capitalism (see for example Bowles & Edwards 1993), particularly the most recent trends in globalization, deindustrialization, and the forces of economic destabilization (see for example Greider 1997). The effect of all this on the average working class family in the U.S. is shown dramatically below:

These distributional struggles form the underlying basis of classism. The actual content of class relations (class culture) is elitist, i.e., class oppression and privileges are defended on the basis of one person/group claiming to be more important, smarter, better, more deserving, more qualified, more productive, etc. than another person/group. These attitudes frame class behavior and thus inter-class social relations. The oppressed person/group (the working class) is viewed as less intelligent, less talented, inferior, and thus not worth very much. Such views

can be patronizing ("they are doing the best they can") or they can be vicious ("working class people are stupid, dirty, lazy, and uncivilized").

Carol Tarlen (1994:21), university clerical worker and writer, writes about what it was like growing up working class and being viewed through such a lens:

I am motivated by the pain and anger that comes from being rejected because of my class background. I want to prove to all those girls whose parents had `professional jobs'...the ones whose hair neatly curled into pageboys; who wore plaid knee-length pleated skirts and lambswool sweaters; the ones who quit associating with me when I said I lived in...the housing tract notorious for its Latino and Okie inhabitants; and especially the ones who assumed that having an old mattress on your front lawn was a sign of intellectual inferiority and moral degeneration -- I want to prove...that tough girls from the other side of the highway can't be shoved to the back of the classroom anymore, that we have lives filled with love, honor, imagination, risk. See me, I want to say, acknowledge my talent and intelligence.

Classist patterns and attitudes such as these are the source of much prejudice and have been used to denigrate and discriminate against working class people, and to rationalize current and past oppression of millions of people the world over. Widespread anti-union sentiments, attacks on welfare and the poor, and negative media stereotypes of working class people, especially TV sitcoms, are examples of classism in action. The work by Puette (1992) and Bullock (1995:127-130) discusses class bias and the media. Such individual classist beliefs and attitudes frame inter-class relations (behavior) and facilitate the systematic economic exploitation and oppression of working people. The objective structures of class oppression and exploitation require, on a subjective level, socially held classist beliefs and attitudes. On a social level, individually held beliefs are rooted in a cultural belief system, a classist ideology which rationalizes class oppression as just and equitable.

In the U.S. the ideology takes the form of a belief in individual achievement -- the myth that individuals rise on the basis of their own effort and ability. Success

honors those who make it and failure stigmatizes those who fail. Conservatives tend to emphasize moral failure, criticizing and scorning those who fail, while liberals tend to focus on deficiency, expressing pity and concern for those unfortunate enough to fail (Lewis 1978:10). Although east in terms of individuals and equal opportunities, this ideology is classist. It casts working class people as inferior and incompetent, middle and owning class people as superior, perhaps blessed by God. It allows people to rationalize and ignore class oppression, to see and understand the social universe as merely the result of individual interaction, and to view class oppression as "normal" and a "natural" part of a secular or divine order. The Bell Curve, the recent bestselling book by Herrnstein and Murray, is an attempt to renew and legitimate this view in the face of currently growing class and racial inequality and bigotry.

There are many powerful studies of gender and race supporting the position that while biology (nature) does play some role in explaining gender and racial differences, environment (culture) plays a far more powerful role in explaining social differences (Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Jaggar 1988: Part Two). Although studies on the causes of class differences are not as extensive, there is some evidence, and every reason to assume, that class inequality and class differences are not reflective of natural or innate differences, but are acquired and socially constructed (Argle 1994). Rather than being part of our innate nature, class differences are culturally constructed and socially enforced by classism.

### **Personal Dynamics of Classism**

At the personal or individual level, the internalization of classist beliefs, attitudes, and behavior is the result of a socializing and conditioning process which instills in individuals patterns of behavior, mannerisms, and beliefs that insure conformity to class roles (Jackins 1972; Barone 1995). Acting out or occupying these roles requires that we give up part of our uniquely human qualities, of choosing our own identities. It is here assumed that these inherent human qualities are our capacity to love, our power to take charge of our universe and affect change, our capacity for rational and intelligent thought, our ability to feel and be completely sensitive to

our own and each others humanity, and our capacity for joy and excitement. Occupying oppressive roles requires that we give up some of these human qualities.

We are given the choice as young children to play out our socially expected role(s), a painful process at best, or be punished. If you are female and act like a boy, or white and act black, or owning class and act working class, if you resist role conditioning, you risk humiliation and isolation, being ostracized and subjected to emotional and physical abuse. Material success and economic security are also held out as rewards in return for occupying oppressor roles, replacing genuine human needs with an artificially created materialism which serves both to keep people in their socially constructed roles and fuel capitalist profits. Role conditioning begins at birth, extends through young adulthood and is then reinforced throughout adulthood. When we are young we have little choice but to submit to conditioning and carry out our prescribed social roles.

We working-class people have been conditioned as children to be submissive, to devalue ourselves, to think we are ignorant compared to other people, to feel powerless, to settle for very little, to accept insecurity as an unavoidable fact of life, to feel 'lucky to have a job', and to despise ourselves and each other for not standing up for ourselves and each other and for giving in to violence at each other and to alcoholism (Jackins 1988:3).

Once conditioned into our respective socially constructed roles (most of us occupy multiple roles, e.g., white gay male working class or black heterosexual female middle class), much of our identity, behavior, actions, and interactions relate back to our socializing experiences as young children (See Barone [1995] for a more complete analysis of the ways these early experiences play themselves out later on in dominant/subordinate social relationships). This process is not without its own structural contradictions. Waites (1993) argues that the socialization and conditioning of females into socially constructed gender roles creates dilemmas and double binds.

For example, From birth, little girls are subjected to incessant but contradictory

messages about their sexuality...Be attractive, but not seductive; be noticeably feminine, but not provocative; be helpful, but not controlling (45-46).

Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan (1995) found similar kinds of dilemmas and double binds based on class, race, and gender in their study of a diverse group of adolescent females from working class families.

Role reproduction is further complicated by the "complex ways in which people mediate and respond to the interface between their own lived experiences and structures of domination and constraint" (MacLeod 1995:19). As a result cultures of resistance may develop alongside cultures of accommodation. Ethnographic studies show that while working class cultures of resistance have transformative potential they wind up reproducing class roles and structures (MacLeod 1995; Willis 1977).

Even though the structures of class oppression often overwhelm human agency, class struggle and resistance at the micro as well as other social levels is not entirely without effect. Nonetheless, given the generally reproductive outcomes, the contradictory structures of class conditioning and interplay of human agency will be ignored here. Additionally, in spite of the variability of individual working class patterns across race and gender, the focus here is on the more general working class patterns of identity, attitudes, behavior, and interaction.

As a result of social conditioning many of the working class internalize negative beliefs and stereotypes about themselves. We are bombarded daily with thousands of subtle and not so subtle messages about ourselves and others.

I remember the pain of being humiliated because I was a skinny child who was teased at school for wearing too small dresses and living in a trailer; or a recent humiliation when one of the faculty I work for gave me dirty look because I forgot to give her a message...I remember sitting at my receptionist's desk as two female faculty carried on a conversation literally over my head, discussing the private schools their children were attending, oblivious to my presence (Tarlen 1994: 21).

These classist messages have a powerful effect on people, making the social construction of reality appear as the natural state of human beings. Classism experienced on a daily basis by working class people reinforces class conditioning. Working class people tend to view themselves and be seen by others as not very smart, uneducated, inarticulate, poor leaders, lacking in ability, lazy, crude and uncivilized. But they view those in the middle and owning class as superior -- more intelligent and ambitious, with greater poise, self-confidence and leadership ability (Argle 1994:Ch 9). Judy Kujundzic (1988) speaks out about what it's like being working class:

What's hard about being working-class is never feeling like you're working class enough. Like you don't work hard enough or you're not funny enough...It's hard to speak up. It's hard to notice that you think real well and to go ahead and do it, not just freezing up even after you decide you're going to think and act...It's hard to notice how smart you are, that you think all the time...It's sometimes hard to remember how clever other working-class people are because they work real hard at covering it up and acting dumb whenever the situation seems like that's what's required...It's hard getting people to take action, to move against how they feel, to move as a group, although it can be done...The other thing about being working-class is the hopelessness, the sense that you know there are so many things wrong, and you can't figure out where to start to take them on and pull them down (67-68).

This is called internalized oppression and as a result many become resigned to their class fate and show deference to one's "betters." Members of oppressed groups are emotionally, physically, and spiritually abused until they begin to believe that oppression is their lot in life, that it is somehow deserved, natural, right, or conversely, that it does not exist (Yamato 1995:66). Clarissa Sligh, artist and photographer, shares her experience growing up working class:

...I began to notice that people who had more than us felt that because we had to scrape to get by, that they were better than us. I began to believe it too. Momma said they worked harder, had more than one job, and handled their

money better than us (Sligh 1994: 254).

Internalized oppression insures the perpetuation (reproduction) of the class system from one generation to the next. Suzanne Lipsky (1987) explains the power and role of internalized oppression:

Internalized racism has been the primary means by which we have been forced to perpetuate and `agree' to our own oppression. It has been a major factor preventing us, as black people, from realizing and putting into action the tremendous intelligence and power which in reality we possess.

Class oppression, like racism, requires that individuals internalize class domination and subordination and to the extent that we do we become resigned to our fates. Although there is mobility (up and down), class stability is the norm (MacLeod 1995; Mishel, Bernstein, & Schmitt 1996:97ff). Even those who fight back and rebel often wind up reproducing the very class system they are rebelling against (Willis 1977).

Owning class and middle class children are also conditioned in similar ways and generally internalize the belief that they are superior -- smarter, and better leaders -- and that working class people are inferior. These beliefs, and the attitudes and behaviors that accompany them, make up the classist oppressor pattern and insure that most middle and owning class young people will occupy middle and owning class positions. Middle class people have been placed in a precarious position between the owning class and the working class; they are both oppressed and oppressor, often plagued by feelings of inadequacy over work and productivity, guilt for complicity in oppression, and fear of falling and moral slippage. Underneath their pretenses, they have been hurt and held prisoner inside their humanly constricted and conditioned roles. Putting a happy face on it all often takes an extraordinary amount of energy, and it takes its toll, in spite of the generally held belief that they are living the "American Dream." (Ehrenreich [1990] provides a very insightful analysis of middle class angst).

Classism distorts the basic humanity and compromises the values of members of



the owning class as well. Although Marx recognized the alienation of the bourgeoisie, there are few contemporary studies of the harmful effects of class oppression on the dominant classes (Cookson & Persell 1986; Maccoby 1976; Coming Home 1996). However, there is a growing literature on the negative effects of racism on whites (Feagin & Vera 1995:Ch 5; Bowser & Hunt 1996) and sexism on men (Blood, Tuttle, & Lakey 1995; Irwin, Jackins & Kreiner 1992). Like racism and sexism, classism forces members of dominant classes into socially constructed roles that might benefit them from in material and other ways, separate them from many of their distinctively human qualities. In their study of elite private schools Cookson and Persell (1986) describe what they call the "prepping" process of upper class children:

...the systematic wearing down of individual identities into a single collective identity...What we found was a conspiracy of forces -- powerful institutional controls, peer pressures and personal resignation...In order to forge the prep personality, the schools rely on...strict discipline, shared rituals, and what we call 'deep structural regulation'.

Quite the opposite of places of privileges, these schools are oppressive, examples of what sociologists call "total institutions" where individual needs are completely subordinated to the goals of the institution. The human cost of owning class conditioning is high:

The psychological price of prepping includes a relinquishing of personal identity, a loss of innocence and a growth of cynicism. Having paid their dues, students who survive the rite of passage obtain membership in an elite group, which they embrace with a strong sense of psychological and social entitlement.

Cookson and Persell go on to conclude that the "structure of boarding school life prepares many students for a life as prisoners of their class" creating "generations of individuals, some of whom are crippled, rather than empowered, by privilege."

It is important to note that while class conditioning has negative effects on all classes, it is still a way of constructing owning and middle class dominance, creating people who will oppress others. Working class people have borne the brunt of class oppression both through the denial of the fruits of their labor (low and inadequate incomes, poverty, economic hardship) and through mistreatment both on and off the job (overwork, injuries, illness, death, oppressive work conditions, layoffs). Working class people experience on a daily basis subtle and overt class bigotry as they are confronted with middle and owning classist attitudes and behavior. Indeed, the repeated acting out of classism reinforces, across lifetimes, class oppression and the exploitation of working people, in the same way that sexism and racism enforce the oppression of women and people of color.

Other forms of oppression have been submerged in the preceding analysis of class. Within classes there are many important differences such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, nationality, occupation, and geographic location that make our subjective and objective experiences within classes sometimes very different from each other. This often makes class a very confusing experience and creates "fractured identities." It means that there is no single class perspective or standpoint, but rather multiple class perspectives. However, it is important not to lose sight of the overall class structure of exploitation and oppression within which these class differences play themselves out and which shape the choices of individuals. Equally important, the very structures of class oppression are also themselves shaped by race and gender oppression as independent forms of social domination.

### **Classism, Schooling, and Class Reproduction**

A key distinguishing quality of the owning class is that capital ownership can be inherited, whereas the command positions of the middle class cannot. Middle class youth often must become credentialed before they can obtain command positions. Of course, they have all the advantages that their class positions confer upon them -- money, confidence, good schools, social connections, and even nepotism. One of my middle-class college students wrote of her class background:

When I was six years old, my girl friends and I used to sit around and talk about where we would go to college. It wasn't a choice, we just knew that we would go to college and become professionals...When I graduate from college I will work for a large luxury hotel and will manage my own hotel someday (Student Paper).

This student's sense of middle class confidence and entitlement stands out; college and a successful professional career appear as a birthright, not something one must be diligent and lucky to achieve. Contrast this with a working class voice:

In 1980 I got a clerical job at a university...After twelve years, I was laid off [discarded as so much human excrement]. This job meant a lot to me, since I had no hope of ever getting 'professional' employment. Although I attended college, I never finished. I felt alienated from my middle-class peers. Writing papers was agony, because the linear, rational thinking required of them was impossible for someone with my background. Therefore, the working class for me is something there is no escape from. It's an eternal present as well as memory (Joseph 1995:137).

At the institutional level, the school system plays a predominant role in both the social conditioning process and the reproduction and legitimation of class inequality (MacLeod 1995; Willis 1977). Well documented are the "savage inequalities" of property-based school taxes which result in inferior schools in less wealthy working class communities (Kozol 1991). Additionally, next to the family, schools are perhaps the most important conditioning agent, holding out the promise of individual mobility while reinforcing expected social roles and insuring the success of the already successful. Within dominant cultural discourse, education is erroneously viewed as a sorting process where individuals with superior abilities do well academically and are rewarded with command positions and economic privileges. Individuals with inferior abilities or who are not motivated and do not work hard, do not do well in school and wind up in working class positions with low pay

and poor working conditions or without a job at all. Class inequality is thus rationalized as a meritocracy.

Jay MacLeod's now classic 1987 working class ethnography, *Ain't No Makin' It*, shows the fallacy of the belief that hard work and motivation always pay off. This study focuses on two groups of working class teens who live in the same housing project. The white Hallway Hangers, who see the system as rigged against them, refuse to go along; they aren't motivated, don't study, and rebel at every chance. The black Brothers, on the other hand, do all the right things; they are motivated, behave themselves, and have the right values for success. Yet both sets of teens wind up not making it. MacLeod explains:

Conservative and liberal commentators alike often contend that if the poor would only apply themselves, behave responsibly, and adopt bourgeois values, then they will propel themselves into the middle class. The Brothers follow the recipe quite closely but the outcomes are disappointing. They illustrate how rigid and durable the class structure is. Aspiration, application, and intelligence often fail to cut through the firm figurations of structural inequality...[The Brothers'] dreams of comfortable suburban bliss currently are dreams deferred, and likely to end up as dreams denied (1995: 241).

Perhaps the biggest fraud of all perpetuated by the school system is the underlying belief that individuals differ significantly in terms of innate intelligence (Blum 1978; Ryan 1981; Argyle 1994: Ch 4; Fischer et al 1996). School performance data show that on average working class children don't do as well in school as children of the middle or owning classes (Walsh & Witt 1985). Therefore, it is incorrectly assumed that they must not be as bright, smart, or intelligent. This emphasis on intellectual inequality lies at the heart of "higher" education which is structured and based on a whole set of classist, as well as racist and sexist, beliefs. The reality is that schools are systematically biased against working class students. Working class ways of knowing, seeing and being (often referred to as cultural capital) are systematically depreciated and invalidated in schools (MacLeod 1995:Ch 6). Education and much of what is taught is based on middle and owning class ways of knowing, seeing, and

being. Anthropologist and linguist Shirley Brice Heath (1983) has done an ethnographic study of two Southern working class communities and she documents these class (and race) based educational biases:

The school is not a neutral objective arena; it is an institution which has the goal of changing people's values, skills, and knowledge bases. Yet some portions of the population, such as [the middle and owning classes], bring with them to school linguistic and cultural capital accumulated through hundreds of thousands of occasions for practicing the skills and espousing the values the schools transmit. Long before reaching school, [such] children...have made the transition from home to the larger societal institutions which share the values, skills, and knowledge bases of the school. Their eventual positions of power in the school and the workplace are guaranteed by the conceptual structures which they have learned at home and which are reinforced in school and numerous other institutions (367-368).

According to language and literature professor Janet Zandy(1994):

Oral language (vocabulary, syntax, inflection, pronunciation, diction, exclamations, blessings, curses) is a giveaway class identity marker...Class marks not only our tongues, but also our bodies. Working-class people practice a language of the body that eludes theoretical textual studies. Working-class people do not have the quiet hands or the neutral faces of the privileged classes.

These class markers identify one's social and economic class background, making it difficult to hide one's class background or assimilate into another class or avoid class bigotry and prejudice let alone negotiate the educational terrain that relies on middle and owning class cultural capital.

Linguistic studies (MacLeod 1995: Ch 2; Argyle 1994: Ch 6) show that middle and owning class students, because they often come from a more isolated and individualistic environment, have to explain themselves, their positions, and ideas

at length because they cannot assume shared meaning. Everything has to be carefully explained and fully articulated to insure meaning for the listener. Working class students, on the other hand, often come from a more communal environment where they are more connected to others and where meaning is often shared through common experiences. They don't have to explain themselves at length and in such detail because they can assume the listener has a shared context and will understand. Working class use of language and ways of knowing are thus contextual and organic whereas middle and owning class are elaborated and linear. Schooling emphasizes the linguistic patterns and the kinds of thinking that white, middle and owning class patterns generate. Anyone whose linguistic patterns or thinking do not fit this norm or who have difficulty adapting to such norms are systematically depreciated and labeled inferior, slow, stupid, or learning disabled and are (de)graded and tracked accordingly.

Because of the inherent classist basis of schooling, working class students often perform poorly, while middle and upper class students do well. Ethnographic studies confirm these results and reveal the ways that middle and owning class behavioral norms are validated while working class norms are punished and invalidated in school (MacLeod 1995; Heath 1983). Many do not attempt to cross these class divides, choosing not to risk failure in what is sometimes perceived as a rigged game as the following statement from one of MacLeod's (1995) working class student interviews illustrates:

Shorty: Hey, you can't get no education around here unless you're fucking rich, y'know? You can't get no education...And you can't get a job once they find out where you come from. `You from Clarendon Heights? Oh shit. It's them kids again.'

Group loyalty is often valued more highly than upward mobility so there is resistance to being separated from one's class peers. Often individual survival is viewed as dependent upon membership in a group and group membership is valued more highly than individual mobility. The following exchange between MacLeod and another working class student illustrates this point:

Jinks: I'd say everyone more or less has the same attitudes toward school: fuck it. Except the bookworms—people who just don't hang around outside and drink, get high, who sit at home—they're the ones who get the education.

JM: And they just decided for themselves?

Jinks: Yup

JM: So why don't more [low income] people decide that way?

Jinks: Y'know what it is Jay? We all don't break away because we're too tight. Our friends are important to us. Fuck it. If we can't make it together, fuck it. Fuck it all(119).

Of course there are young people who in spite of these risks do cross school class boundaries. Many are not successful and blame themselves for failure (internalized oppression). For working class students, doing well in school means being bi-cultural and bi-lingual, and it often means a denial of one's self, culture, and people. Carol Faulkner (1994), a teacher at Lane Community College in Oregon, writes about college and the costs of becoming an academic:

A college education was never my birthright, but something I always knew I had to struggle to get. I was sixteen when my mother came to my school, pulled me out of history class, and told me the shop was closing. My father was already disabled by then, and I went back to class dazed with a picture in my head of having to forget college and go to work to support my parents as my father had done before me. It's hard to explain what getting an education has meant to me, but more and more I ask myself what good is it to have arrived if I have to pretend to be someone else when I get there. What I really want is to be accepted and respected for who I am within the academic community.

Many of the upwardly mobile working class find themselves with a foot in both worlds but do not feel at home in either world. Sennett's and Cobb's classic work, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, vividly portrays the personal costs experienced by upwardly mobile white working class people, the costs of class assimilation. Jake Ryan's and Charles Sackrey's (1984) collection of stories by academics from the working class, who like Carol Faulkner above have difficulty fitting in, reveals both the difficulty of assimilation as well as the classism on college and university campuses. One faculty member sums his experience up this way:

Being a working class academic is sometimes very lonely. It's difficult to relate to most colleagues, but it is also difficult to relate to working-class folks, who tend not to mast you since got to be a "Doctor" (Sackrey and Ryan 1984:257).

Although more difficult to identify than sexism or racism, given the existing low level of class awareness, classist patterns of behavior and attitudes among the faculty of college and universities, particularly more elite institutions, make it difficult for those with working class backgrounds to fit in. The same is true for students and more generally for others from the working class in other middle class settings (Tokarczyk and Fay 1993; Penelope 1994; Dews and Law 1995; Sandy 1994; and Barker & Belkhir 1996).

The middle classes in many ways are the standard bearers of U.S. culture and society. Most Americans dream of and aspire to middle class status and it is the middle class, at least the white heterosexual gentile middle class, that set the standards of "normality" by which most people are judged both in and out of school. Middle class standards of cleanliness, demeanor, quietness, pleasantness, hard work, and denial are examples of such behavioral norms or yardsticks. These norms are reinforced by the family, schools, and the mental health system of counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists (Foner & Alexander 1991). However, these standards or norms were not generated in a social vacuum; they are the characteristics and patterns of behavior required for middle class command positions (managers and professionals). Middle class standards are enforced by the



owning class whom the middle classes serve. According to sociologist Edna Bonacich:

In my view, middle class people (including myself) are essentially the sergeants of the system. We professionals and managers are paid by the wealthy and powerful, by corporations and the state, to keep things in order. Our role is one of maintaining the [class] system.... We are a semi-elite. We are given higher salaries, social status, better jobs, and better life chances as payment for our service to the system. If we were not useful to the power elite, they would not reward us (Bonacich 1989).

The interplay of class structure and human agency, and the interplay between macro, meso, and micro social levels, are quite complex. Classism, schooling, and the shunting of individuals into capitalist class structures preserves the illusion of just desserts while reproducing class structures and class oppression.

### **Summary and Implications**

Classism, rooted in the capitalist macrolevel class structures of economic exploitation, pits humans against humans. In the dialectics of structure versus agency, the macrolevel institutions of class exploitation and conflict clearly have a logic and dynamic of their own, independent of the wills of individuals who occupy positions within those institutions, constraining what people can and cannot do. Capitalist class macro-structures reach down into meso and micro social levels, constraining human agency at these levels as well.

The whole purpose of classism as an ideology is to justify past and continuing economic exploitation and alienation of the working class. It is not so much that people are in fundamental conflict with each other as it is that capitalism structures our personal and social relationships with each other in ways that are fundamentally in opposition. Without an essential understanding of these political economic structures of class exploitation and conflict, and the dynamics of class-based economic systems, our understanding of the nature of class oppression will

be very limited, as will our understanding of the class-based nature of women's oppression and the oppression of people of color.

However, while human agency is constrained by these class structures on macro, meso, and micro social levels, agency is at the same time determining (reproducing as well as transforming) those same structures. Historically the interplay of structure and agency is clear. People both create institutions and are created by them. The subjective basis of capitalist institutions is the patterned attitudes and behaviors of individuals. Like other forms of oppression, class oppression requires that people be socialized and conditioned to occupy and play out their respective class roles and participate in class oppression. These microlevel forces help to explain how individuals learn their particular class outlook, mannerisms, demeanor, and culture, indeed how individuals within classes think, choose, and act in the world.

At the macro social level, oppression appears to operate independent of human will or volition. In the dialectic of structure and agency, structure appears to win out over human agency. However, the subjective basis of these institutions and culture is the patterned behavior and attitudes of individuals. The same conditioned patterns that form much of the basis for our identity, attitudes, behavior, and interaction at the micro level also provide the underlying basis for macro level economic, social, and political institutions. The patterns or records materialize at this structural level and exist in a frozen, ordered state, as "products" of human creation.

Class patterns of thinking and behavior at the personal level hold classism in place at the inter-group mesolevel and account for the ongoing class bigotry and prejudice experienced by the working class. Pumping surplus labor out of workers (exploitation), the *raison d'être* of classism, could not happen without classism anymore than the oppression of people of color or women could exist without racism and sexism. The ongoing aware and unaware rehearsal of the patterns of class bigotry and prejudice serves to keep people locked into the system of class oppression, as "prisoners" of their class. Classism prevents people from creating a

society characterized by economic structures of cooperation and sharing.

Although all the implications of the analysis of classism sketched out here have yet to be worked out, a couple of preliminary observations can be made. At the most general level, this analysis provides a more inclusive, multilevel framework within which to view and understand class oppression as a social system of oppression. Defining and bringing classism into the picture allows us to see better some of the micro, meso, and macro level dimensions of class-based oppression, social domination, and reproduction/resistance by understanding these as part of a larger system of class oppression that is rooted in and based on economic exploitation. Bringing in a political economic analysis of class-based exploitation and the dynamics of the capitalist economy allows us to see beyond the individual stories of economic hardship (or success) by working women and men. Class is about more than "difference"; it is about the systematic economic exploitation and the appropriation of economic resources, about the structures of class oppression.

On the other hand, class is more than just economics. The personal and social dynamics of classism are equally important dimensions and are often missed by those who focus more narrowly on the macrostructures of class oppression. The lived experience of workers and their families, the subjective voices and experiences of working people, bring life and a new vibrancy to the more structural-based class research.

From a race, gender, and class perspective the analysis of classism provided here is incomplete because neither race or gender have been explicitly taken into account, even though many of the working class voices contained within these pages have been the voices of women and people of color. However, the task has been to explicitly extend our understanding of class and classism so that we might better understand that particular dimension of race, gender, and class oppression. Clearly all three are at play simultaneously on all three social levels, and as MacLeod (1995:248) has shown in his ethnography, each can magnify or mitigate the effects of the other. Class, as an independent mechanism, can have multiplicative effects on race and gender, as well as having interactive effects where class is intertwined

with race and gender.

Of course, what is true here from a class perspective also holds true from a race or gender perspective. While both race and gender are classed experiences, class is both a raced and gendered experience. Indeed, the structures of class oppression are affected by race and gender. For example, capitalism as a class-based mode of production can also be viewed as the latest stage of patriarchy where men have always dominated women no matter whether slavery, feudalism, or capitalism. Each of these class-based modes of production has provided the material basis for the domination of women (Al-Hibri 1981).

While it certainly does not make sense to rank these oppressions, depending upon the location, one or the other may be the more primary shaper of our experiences within particular social sites. Class may be a more primary shaper of our economic experiences even though those experiences are very much influenced by race and gender, while the family or community may be more influenced by race or gender even though class is not an irrelevant determinant of behavior within those sites (Wright 1997:Ch 6).

By viewing class oppression as a multilevel process where social structure and human agency interact, and where race, gender, and class interact, we can begin to see more clearly some of the complexities of the process of social reproduction/resistance and the ways that people are conditioned and socialized to participate as oppressor and oppressed within the institutions of capitalist class exploitation. Social contradictions abound on all social levels within the mode of production, within the capitalist system as a whole at other institutional sites such as the state, family, schools, or within capitalist culture, and in the social and personal dynamics of class oppression. Much more attention needs to be given to the exact nature of these social contradictions if we are to develop more effective political strategies and policies for class liberation. Ending class oppression will require more than just improving the standard of living of society's poorest citizens or a redistribution of income. It will also take more than just changing people's attitudes. Bringing class oppression to an end requires the elimination of classism

on all social levels including the macrolevel structures of capitalism. While class is primarily linked to exploitation and control over economic resources, and has a powerful influence on individual attitudes and actions on all social levels, people are not passive or indifferent in the face of such pressures.

The intellectual and political challenge is to understand and exploit both the oppositional and collaborative forces of human agency for radical reform and revolutionary social structural change. Structure and agency are clearly interactive across multiple levels, sites and locations as shown above in the analysis of schooling. Our failure to understand the personal and social dynamics of classism along with the dynamics of racism and sexism is perhaps one of the principle reasons for the failure of the left to organize and mobilize effective working class reform or revolutionary movements. This is one of the lessons of the feminist and anti-racism movements. Institutional changes are limited by changes in the attitudes and behavior of individuals. The slogan "the personal is political" applies with equal force to classism.

On a personal level fleeing ourselves (all classes) from classism requires reversing the conditioning process through healing the wounds of class oppression, reclaiming our past and present class experiences, and sorting out how classism presently and in the past prevents us from being ourselves, from shaping our own identities, and from having the kinds of relationships we want with all people. I can personally attest to the liberation value of the healing work that I have done within the International Reevaluation Co-Counseling Community, which provides a model of personal recovery and liberation from the effects of social conditioning and oppression (Jackins 1972).

Reversing class conditioning, particularly working class internalized oppression, is key to successful working class liberation. As scholar activists we are not immune to the larger social and cultural forces of classism, and are thus not free of classism, no matter how much we might champion working class liberation. We need to address the ways that we have personally internalized classism (and racism and sexism) and the way that classism (and racism and sexism) has shaped our own identities. This

means eliminating the elitism and arrogance than many of us have internalized. Of course, eliminating classism also requires that we take leadership to organize other members of our class and form alliances that cross class, gender, and racial boundaries in order to get rid of capitalism and create a classless system of production and distribution that is free of classism, free of racism, and free of sexism, and that is democratic, equitable, and humane.

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