Introduction: class and the new anthropological holism

Don Kalb

This book argues for the relevance of class perspectives and class language in anthropology and explores the nature of a broadly formulated anthropological approach to class. It shows the different ways in which ideas of class are presently being used by anthropologists, to what sort of questions they give rise, how they may serve as a program for exploration and discovery and how they can bolster the explanatory, comparativist and generalizing aspirations of the discipline, which many of the contributors to this collection find wanting. In being about class, this book also bolsters the sheer relevance of anthropology in an age in which the mother of all capitalisms seems to reign. In this Introduction I will consider class, capitalism, social science, anthropology and class again, and then describe the chapters that follow.

At first glance, the anthropological relevance of the idea of class must seem self-evident. Since Marx and Weber, class has been taken to be one of the key *explanatory* concepts of modern social thought (see Carrier this volume). As well, it was important to the thinking of those involved in the development of capitalism, liberalism, republicanism, socialism, social democracy, the labor movement and the welfare state, as well as of Soviet and Maoist modernizing and de-colonizing regimes. While people use "class" in different ways, commonly it refers to structural social divisions, and sees those divisions as influencing individual and collective behavior, cultural and political afflictions and social pathologies of modern and modernizing societies. A number of classes and class relationships are possible, but commonly the key classes are made up of those who hold substantial property and those who do not, and the key relationship is between them. It springs from the fact that, if they are to gain subsistence, those without property are obliged to sell their labor power to those with it, and from the fact that, if they are to generate wealth from what they own, those who have property are obliged to secure the labor power of others. This common core picture is complicated by the changing nature of subdivisions within these classes, and by the existence of surplus populations, those whose lives are not centered on the wage relationship but who seem to get by on the margins of modernity.

Exchanges between classes are not restricted to the transaction of labor power and pay. They also include rent for the use of property of various sorts, most obviously housing and land, but also patents or even money (in the form of interest), as well as the purchase of commodities produced by labor power for the profit of the owners of capital. There are also systematic differences in how classes are regulated and taxed by states, and in the likelihood that those within them will have the vote. As this suggests, great differences exist in the ability of classes to influence states and societies. With the urbanization that is characteristic of modernity, class has shaped the concentration and segregation of people and families into urban districts, which then attain a particular class character. Urban class divisions have also driven the emergence of discussions about the public sphere, public goods, public health and the like. Finally, there has been interest in how class is associated with different ideas and practices of kinship and family, gender, race and ethnicity. Though they were far from the first to talk about class, as part of their struggle to change the world Marx and Engels made it their lifelong project to point out how these issues were interrelated and came together in the question of class relations and the politics of class. And they stressed that these issues were not the incidental outcome of market processes, nor were they the product of morality or personal preference. Rather, they were the systematic consequence of the relations and processes inherent in the capitalist society that they described.

Capitalist modernization in the nineteenth century and later produced a proliferation of class notions, class connotations and ideas of class-structured social domains, which reflected the evolving and differentiating structure of modern societies and their systemic conflicts, often as self-reflections and critiques. Indeed, the modern notion of the social, and modern ideas of social explanation in general, pivoted on the idea of class more than perhaps anything else. Indeed, other notions proposed to capture the nature of the capitalist world, such as modernity, were part of the public and intellectual debates about the fact and idea of class.

While the historical and contemporary intellectual and political relevance of the idea of class is clear, its appeal to academics as the twentieth century progressed is less so. The continuing division of academic knowledge, first into disciplines and then into sub-disciplines, had never been good for class, which was conceived by both Marx and Weber more as a trans-disciplinary problematic than as a specialist subject and discipline. Turning class into an object of expert knowledge used to manage "the social question" turned it into a box amid other boxes: sanitized, measurable, reified and reduced to a mere category of income, education and occupational status. It was increasingly imagined as a line on a graph, an equation in a policy report or a correlation coefficient with significance level attached, and perennially subjected to efforts to turn its indicators – skills, education, income, residence,

status – into simple attributes of that other key symbol of modernity, the individual.

This is the class that the contemporary public, including most academics, knows about and finds boring. The class associated with Weber's iron cage of modern administration or Foucault's governmentality may have been interesting in the past, but in the closing decades of the twentieth century growing parts of the public in industrial societies found it inadequate for understanding social life. As always with class, this was, once again, an index of the evolving structure and self-reflection of societies, now purportedly edging to post-industrialism, post-Fordism, post-materialism, post-modernity, post-structuralism. Class, as Carbonella and Kasmir (this volume) remind us, was so firmly associated with the largely White and male Fordist industrial working class that, when industry began to fade from view, commentators often concluded that class itself was finally, and fortunately, disappearing.

These crumbling images of class were further obliterated by the rise of global neoliberalism, which knew only individual rational actors and their preferences, by the ongoing dissolution of the welfare state in the West and in particular by the collapse of "really existing socialism" in 1989–92. The implosion of Soviet regimes was taken to mark the bankruptcy of Marxian thought and of structuralist accounts of society and economy in general. In the 1990s and 2000s almost every publication on class in the West was about its obvious demise, whether for or against.

The death of the idea of class in the West was, however, contradicted by "really existing world history." Large populations and large areas in the Global South and East were being newly proletarianized (Kalb 2000, 2005, 2013, 2015); the majority of the world's population was urbanizing, indeed often "slummifying" (Davis 2007); the number of workers directly employed in the Western-dominated global factory was tripling (Kalb 2011); inequality and its related problems were increasing around the world; the financialization of capital, states and publics everywhere was causing increasing turbulence, insecurity and inequality (Arrighi 1994, 2000; Friedman 2003, this volume; Harvey 2003, 2005, 2010, 2012; Glynn 2007; Friedman and Friedman 2008a, 2008b; Kalb 2011). In short, hegemonic middle classes in the West and elsewhere, including their academic representatives, seem to have been afflicted by wholesale cognitive distortion, fed by various "methodological nationalisms" in official knowledges as well as a tangible, narcissistic self-obsession in their moment of triumph. A majority of the world's population was being subjected to an unleashed global capitalism in ways that resemble what happened in Europe in the nineteenth century. At the same time that this was happening, a key element of that century's thought, the idea of class, was being energetically rejected by the aspiring arrivistes in the West and elsewhere, who believed that they had transcended it.

The attractions of the idea of class were fading, but this was never total, as the existence of this volume attests. I now want to look at the changing nature and significance of class among anthropologists and other academics over the past few decades. In this, I adopt a loose definition of class, which allows me to reflect the ways that the people I describe use it.

Historians and sociologists: from the forward march of labour halted to *la misere du monde*

That changing nature and significance is most visible, and perhaps most consequential, in social history. Inspired by the work of authors such as E.P. Thompson (e.g. 1966, 1978b, 2009; Kaye and McClelland 1990), Eric Hobsbawm (e.g. 1964, 1969, 1984) and Charles Tilly (1968), "the new social history" had turned the making and remaking of classes into its defining object (see also Eley 2005; Dworkin 2007; Eley and Nield 2007).

It was the *new* social history because it refused the "boxing in" of the class concept, the core of its anti-scientistic mission. Thompson was most eloquent about this. For him, class was not about this position or that one, nor was it just about money. Rather, it was about social being, about moralities, about the nature of social relationships and about how people became aware of, publicly thought about and organized themselves against the social forces that were preventing the full flowering of their human capacities. The Chartist movements in England in the 1830s and 1840s were an example of how the English working class had made itself, not out of people's positions but out of their experience of their particular forms of social being, and in doing so helped Marx to talk about workers in "bourgeois society." At the same time, the new social historians approached class as an intimate sensation, a structure of feeling, a public identity and a collective process of making history, what Gavin Smith (this volume) calls "praxis." Thus, those historians took more seriously than other social researchers (perhaps with the exception of anthropologists) the feminist dictum that the political was by definition personal. Also, their work was programmatically interdisciplinary (for the conjunction of anthropology and history, see Kalb and Tak 2005). Characteristically, the new social history tended to study smaller regional and local areas, rather than whole countries, creating the same sort of sense of place that good ethnography offered. As well, it used popular literature and oral history to produce fairly dense and culturally thick analyses.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, however, Hobsbawm's (1978) "Forward march of labour" halted. This change in the world corresponded to change in the ways that historians studied class. The older interest in cultural textures shaped by class tended to give way to a culturalism that was wrapped in the language of post-structuralism and that increasingly relied on high literary sources. The

most influential publication encouraging this change was probably Gareth Stedman Jones's *Languages of Class* (1984), which reduced class to discourse and so transformed the social into a discursive event (other historians moved in a similar direction in somewhat different ways; for overviews, see Dworkin 2007; Eley and Nield 2007; for a comparison with revisionist work in anthropology, see Kalb 1993). Social explanation became increasingly suspect among historians, smacking of an obsolete Marxism or an unsophisticated structuralism. The argument that the social had to be articulated in language first for it to be perceived "out there" turned the social and people's perceptions of it into a discursive effect, rather than a lived reality.

While some argued for retaining at least a bit of the class heritage, the new social history lost much of its momentum in the 1990s and was displaced by the "new cultural history" (Hunt 1992).[1] This sort of shift in orientation occurred as well in cultural studies, which had arisen in the 1970s from the work of Raymond Williams (e.g. 1971, 1977, 2005) and Stuart Hall (e.g. Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hall *et al.*). Starting with a Gramscian–Marxian interpretation of capitalist society and its social and cultural contradictions (e.g. Willis 1977), it devolved into a post-structuralist study of discourse, often guided by a thin culturalist reading of Foucault. Similarly, the Subaltern Studies School (Guha and Spivak 1988), once a source of insightful work on class and culture, abandoned social explanation in favor of the problems of language, signification and cultural esssentialism (Chibber 2009, 2013).

In sociology there were similar intellectual trends, but the opposition to post-structuralist culturalism was more formidable. Rooted in quantitative methods and oriented toward welfare-state bureaucracies, the sub-field of occupational and stratification research kept an interest in class and class positions (see, e.g., Wright 1989, 1997; Lee and Turner 1996). However, those in these sub-fields increasingly were absorbed in technical discussions of categories, measurement and interpretation. Also, commonly they remained focused on those in formal employment and did not study the growing number of the unemployed and those employed informally. After André Gorz (1980) had said that they should bid *Farewell to the Working Class* and Alain Touraine (1988) had argued that the "new social movements" were driven by culture and identity rather than by class and material factors, class research in sociology generally tended to take a discursive or a subjectivist turn. As in history, this was signaled by a growing interest in consumption and the middle classes, which celebrated the mirage of the neoliberal epoch (Carrier 2012b; Kalb 2014). This, of course, reflected

[1] For a view from anthropology, see Kalb and Tak (2005). For an argument by one of the key advocates of culturalism in historical scholarship, see William Sewell (2005a). For a critical, retrospective reappraisal of culturalist history that draws on more materialist concerns, see Sewell (2005b).

some of the trends in the social structure and dominant discourses of Western societies themselves, as well as sociology's continued infatuation with Western countries as its prime focus. For those oriented toward the advanced welfare state, capitalism as a global force was hard to discern, and sociologists often invoked instead the sort of vision contained in things such as the knowledge economy, the creative economy or, minimally, the new economy.

However, scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu (esp. 1998, 1999) and Charles Tilly (1998, 2001a, 2001b) remained squarely focused on varieties of inequality and their structural bases, and so were aware of the need to rescue non-individualist methodologies. Tilly in particular advocated a focus on relational mechanisms and thought that anthropology, with its proclivity for close and situated observation, was well equipped to study them. Working in the more politicized French context, Bourdieu began to study the new class formation processes in France in the early 1990s and became more openly partisan (see, e.g., Bourdieu 1999). Unlike his earlier *Distinction* (1984), he embraced ethnography as a key method and the political–intellectual essay as his prime weapon. His main collaborator, Loïc Wacquant (2008, 2009), used ethnographic work on ghetto populations, the urban poor and the penitentiary state in the West to keep track of the costs of neoliberalism in Europe and North America.

Perhaps above all, however, it was the global ethnography of Michael Burawoy (1985, 2000, 2009) that kept a steadfast focus on capitalism, capitalist social changes and the worlds of workers. Exceptionally for sociology, his research interests and vision had always been broad, encompassing Southern Africa and Central and Eastern Europe. Also exceptionally for sociology, he remained explicitly concerned with the Marxian tradition. In addition, class has remained important in the work of Jan Breman (2004, 2008, 2010), with his ethnographic attention to "footloose labor" in India's neoliberal capitalist transformation, and of Guy Standing (2011), on "the precariat." This more leftist concern with class was encouraged by world-system theory, as the sustained work of authors such as Wallerstein and Arrighi helped to maintain a critical pressure on the discipline of sociology. It was encouraged as well by a disciplinary environment in which the New Economic Sociology was flourishing, in which research on the welfare state was discovering the growing number and increasing variety of people who were falling through the widening cracks of the neoliberal workfare system, in which urban studies was rediscovering social polarization and segregation and in which discussions about the varieties and trajectories of capitalism seemed to intensify.

Many of the sociologists concerned with class that I have mentioned engaged with anthropology and anthropologists; indeed, Breman and Burawoy refused to distinguish the two disciplines. This was not fortuitous. The re-appropriation of ethnographic methods by sociologists, in particular when coupled with a concern for what was happening outside the West, seems to have been an important

condition for the renewal of interest in the big questions of class broadly conceived. Significantly, against the historical background of a powerful wave of capitalist globalization and the splintering of class, it was the re-entanglement of culture and class in place and space that made those big questions interesting. This was, in a sense, the recapture of holism, this time concerned with the social and the structural as revealed in the relationship between the local and the global. Moreover, scholars seemed to hold that the structures at issue were linked in something like a system and that their existence and ordering could be explained. This marked a sharp break with the older postmodernism and postructuralism and their concern with cultural expression. Against that fragmentation, a sense of structured totality was re-emerging.

Anthropologists in search of an object, a theory and a method

Particularly in the American form that has been so influential, anthropology has tended to oscillate between a number of opposed movements. These include the movements for practice or for structure (especially Ortner 1984) and movements for local forms of knowledge or for global forms. As well, there has been an opposition between what might be called movements for culture and movements for class. The former, sometimes called cultural interpretivism, focus on understanding meanings and symbols within separate, and often small, cultures or groups; the latter, sometimes called political economy, focus on relationships of inequality within wider contexts of states, empires and world-systems. The boundary between these two sorts of movement is far from watertight, and crossing it is possible, though rarely safe. The most prominent anthropologists of the second half of the twentieth century, such as Wolf, Mintz, Godelier, Sahlins and Geertz, straddled that boundary while locating themselves primarily on one or the other side.

The difference between those two movements is not just a preference for idealist or materialist approaches. As well, it is about a preference for the synchronic study of smaller, bounded units of research or for the diachronic study of larger, hierarchically networked ones; associated with this is a difference in the conception of participant observation in research. Adherents of these two movements debated the spatial and temporal characteristics of their preferred units of analysis simultaneously with the relative importance of symbols and cognition as opposed to production and reproduction. Such combination of the issue of place and space with the question around culture and class occurred in debates within anthropology much more than in history and sociology, whose units of analysis were less in dispute. This, I will argue, proved to be central for the possibility of recapturing class under the conditions of emerging globalizing capitalism after 1989.

In the United States, the symbolic–interpretivist side long had the stronger institutional base. Before World War II, anthropology departments there shared a Boasian program focused on (indigenous) culture, and after the War the public image of anthropology was shaped by the work of the Culture and Personality School. In Parsons's influential attempt to impose order on the social sciences in the 1950s, culture, seen as norms and values, was assigned to cultural anthropology. In the course of the revolts of the 1960s and 1970s, anthropological political economy emerged, with a very different view of the field's scope (for overviews, see Nash 1981; Smith 1984; Roseberry 1988). Political economists were suspected of Marxist leanings of the "gut" sort that Firth (1972) described, as distinct from the "cerebral" Marxism of the French structuralists. Such suspicions were justified, as the label "political economy" was often an attempt, not very successful, to hide a Marxian kernel. While that political economy attracted supporters in the discipline, its significance declined during the rightward shift of the 1980s and 1990s, though it did not disappear. Cultural interpretivists continued to predominate.

Other histories would have been possible. Carbonella and Kasmir (this volume) remind us that Black, Italian, Polish and Anglo-Saxon workers were rebelling against exploitation and repression in American cities at the end of World War I. It was not necessary for American anthropologists to focus instead on the isolated reservations of the remaining Native Americans as the preferred bounded sites for the study of culture. In different terms, it was not necessary for so many anthropologists in the US to focus on "the savage slot" (Trouillot 1991), with its presumed neat boundaries and shared values, instead of investigating the intersections of race, ethnicity and class that were being played out in contested urban terrain. Certainly British social anthropology had a different trajectory, particularly after World War II. As Carrier (this volume) reminds us, Radcliffe-Brown emphasized the importance of transcending the local through comparison and generalization. The Manchester department and the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute began to study what had been left out of pre-War US anthropology: urbanization, labor markets, spatial networks, class and ethnicity. In doing this, they laid the foundations of the Manchester School and the extended case study (Evens and Handelman 2006).

The anthropological political economy that I have described emerged in the shadow of the urban rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s in its Western homelands and the anti-colonial revolutions in the Third World. Left-oriented anthropologists responded by developing analyses based on world-system and modes of production models derived from a Marxian tradition now interlaced with feminism and often focusing on peasants, peasant movements and possibilities for social transformation. Arguments about the development of underdevelopment and the articulation of modes of production flourished in the 1970s, following the work of Wallerstein, Gunder Frank and the French structural Marxists, and

later influenced by the work of E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. Reflecting the growing interest in these approaches, the works of Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg and Gramsci were translated and began to appear in the bibliographies of graduate students.

Culture was far from absent from their problematic, certainly not if the inspiration came from the British cultural Marxists and Gramsci, but it became problematized, world-historically embedded, dynamized, approached as a contested terrain rather then a consensual one (see, e.g., Sider 1986a). In building their models and understandings of culture, these anthropologists turned to the history and geography of world capitalism and Western imperialism, and asked how the people and places that they studied were inserted into those world histories of violence and exploitation. In this, they rejected the splendid isolates of an earlier anthropological imagination. Power, politics and history became the tools for analyzing culture and transformation. However, as illustrated by Wolf's *Europe and the People without History* (1997 [1982]), these tools were part of a vision inspired more by a class analysis of large-scale social change than by anything else. It was this that allowed researchers to relate what they saw in their fieldsites to global processes, history and explanatory general models. I note that the resulting studies were as yet rarely about the urban workers who attracted social historians in Europe and the US. Instead, they were about agricultural workers, small and middling peasants, swidden cultivators and mobile migratory groups, often approached via Gramsci's concept of subalterns. Anthropological perceptions of class, thus, kept a degree of distance from the canons of Marxism and labor in the West, while at the same time expanding their empirical and conceptual scope.

This state of affairs did not last. It was clear by the 1980s that the impetus of the rebellions of the 1970s was petering out. Global capitalism was getting stronger, and the associated neoliberal Washington Consensus was burying really existing socialism and Third World developmentalism under a mountain of debt and dependency. At the same time, academic departments in the West stopped adding tenured faculty and started hiring contract lecturers. The surge in anthropological political economy, like Hobsbawm's forward march of labor, went into reverse. In anthropology, especially in the US, culturalism was ascendant once more, as was the case in history as well. This was the culturalism of Geertzian hermeneutics, disconnected from his more historical and comparative work. The growing influence of this hermeneutics helped to reinstate synchronic studies of small places as the distinctive anthropological method, marginalizing the more historical and larger-scale frames that the political economists had used.

Whatever macroscopic, diachronic and exploratory energies survived the rise of Geertz's synchronic culturalism were pushed to further irrelevance by the rise of postmodernism in the middle of the 1980s. Much of the

discipline retreated to micro-ideography, often based only on people's talk, a retreat justified by radical post-structuralism, *nouvelle vague* existentialism and postmodernist condemnation of grand narratives of the "end of history" type. With the denial of system, history and theory, the ambition to explain or even see spatio-temporal or relational logics collapsed, and the discipline increasingly retreated to the semiotic interpretation of what people said. As a result, all that anthropologists had to offer as an intellectual product was the Native's Point of View, what people themselves think. And this product was being offered elsewhere, as history, sociology and cultural studies underwent their own subjectivist, discursive and culturalist movements (Carrier 2012a; Smith 2014).

By the close of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the dominance of this culturalist approach was beginning to unravel. Postmodernist quietism was losing its appeal. This was marked by George Marcus's (2008: 2) unhappy observation that the discipline is "in suspension," with "no new ideas and none on the horizon" and with "no indication that its traditional stock of knowledge shows any signs of revitalization." Neoliberal faith in free markets looked foolish, as spreading financial deception and fraud accompanied the systemic descent into crisis. This was marked by the words of Alan Greenspan, arch-passivist head of the Federal Reserve while the system was unraveling. Famously, he expressed his "shocked disbelief" that, when left to itself, the financial sector made such a mess of things.

How is the unraveling of that postmodernist and neoliberal dominance likely to appear in anthropology? At this point this Introduction becomes partisan. The respected investor Warren Buffet spoke of class conflict, when he said that there has been class warfare and that his class won (Stein 2006). The Occupy Wall Street movement spoke of class, with its invocation of the 1 percent and the 99 percent, which was repeated around the world by people protesting against government policies that promised support for capital and austerity for citizens. What did we get from anthropology? Amidst the implosion of the European project under the weight of financial crisis, the consequent perversion of its democracies and the accelerated neoliberal slashing of the remnants of welfare, European anthropologists convened in Paris to discuss nothing less than "Uncertainty and disquiet" (EASA conference, July 2012). Canadian anthropologists, meanwhile, were meeting to reflect on "The unexpected" (CAS conference, April 2012). Things can be worse: the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness gathered to inquire about "Plants and consciousness" (SAC conference, February 2012), while Oxford University Press's sponsorship of the American Anthropological Association meeting in 2011 was dedicated to pondering "What it means to be human." These are not signs of a discipline anxious to escape from its culturalist reveries and engage with the larger scales and longer terms of political economy.