Farewell to the Category-Producing Class?

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Abstract

The essay focuses on two points: First, Eley and Nield's emphasis on micropolitics, discourse, and diverse forms of affinity is stimulating and essential but inadequate to the task of understanding when and how the category of working class is useful. Such a task also requires nuanced analysis of interactions on a large scale and at long distance, of control of material resources, and of centralizing institutions. Second, their identity-centered vision of politics is too constraining to make clear the multiple forms of political imagination, connection, and mobilization or to figure out the extent as well as the limits of power.

In the 1990s, it is plausible to ask if one can bid farewell to the working class, but it would be absurd to ask if one can bid farewell to capitalism. The reverse was once the case: Some intellectuals imagined a world without capitalism and thought the working class would bring it about. I doubt Karl Marx could have dreamed of the new question in the worst of his nightmares. Class, to him, was produced by primitive accumulation, by the relentless drive of capitalism to produce surplus value, and by the reproduction of the social relations that had divided society into bourgeoisie and a proletariat. Capitalism, unlike other systems of power and exploitation, masked the very class relations that were at its core: Power and exploitation now appeared as relations among things, as the market. If indeed we have arrived at a world in which capitalism is economically and politically unassailable—and if the working class has disappeared—then capitalist development has closed an ideological circle.[1]

People are still selling their labor power in fields and factories. They produce all those wonderful commodities whose multiple, shifting, and contested cultural meanings scholars like to write about these days. What sorts of questions are we to ask about these producers? Are we to pass over some dimensions of their lives as if they were uninteresting or so obvious that the historian of the 1990s can take them for granted?

Geoff Eley and Keith Nield have had the courage to ask for a truce in the Left's culture wars, to recognize that social history and cultural history should be read against each other. Their intervention is salutary, a reminder that one can both use and examine categories and analyze discursive and social processes in the same framework. My response is in the same spirit, and if it emphasizes what they leave out it is in an effort to widen the conversation still further. I focus on two points: First, Eley and Nield's emphasis on micropolitics, discourse,

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and diverse forms of affinity is stimulating and essential but inadequate to the task of understanding when and how the category of working class is useful. Such a task also requires nuanced analysis of interactions on a large scale and at long distance, of control of material resources, and of centralizing institutions. Second, Eley and Nield's identity-centered vision of politics is too constraining to make clear the multiple forms of political imagination, connection, and mobilization or to figure out the extent as well as the limits of power.

Their piece reads like a plea for E. P. Thompson and Joan Scott to sit down together to discuss what is complementary in their differing approaches. Antonio Gramsci is invited as is Michel Foucault, but they did not think to ask Karl Marx. While both emphasizing the cultural production of class and criticizing the excesses of certain culturalist arguments, they feel obligated to say, "It doesn't mean that economics . . . and social history . . . are not to be studied." A curiously negative way to put it. That workers—male or female, English or Bengali—produced something, entered labor markets because of certain constraints and aspirations, and were under particular disciplinary structures apparently can be assumed. I should think, however, that recent trends to look critically at old givens should lead to a reexamination of social and economic questions, in the same vein as Eley and Nield pursue the relationship of neighborhood, gender, and political mobilization.

Unless that is done, it is not clear why what Eley and Nield are writing about should be called "class" and not at all why it should be called "working." They are perfectly correct to say that "the history of class is inseparable from the history of the category" or that talking about class is to make "discursive claims about the social world." To speak of class is to make claims about the social world in terms of people's relations to the means of production or in terms of particular ways of experiencing market relations. What makes such claims seem *plausible* to them? Why does the idea of a collectivity of workers make sense of experience or suggest a program of action? The flaws of the deterministic ideas that Eley and Nield rightly debunk—that a "single essential condition" follows from the capital-labor relation, that "objective" conditions produce given political formations—should not cause us to shunt aside examination of capital-labor relations in all their complexity.

Eley and Nield would not advocate that, but they do not help us to put together such questions with their concern for culture and discourse. And I find it hard to agree with them that "class discursively understood . . . is a better starting point for the study of class formation than the classical ones of economics and social structure," not because I would reverse the priorities, but because any assertion of priority is much less fruitful than analysis of the dynamic relationship of discourse and actually experienced structures.

Capital—as Marx made clear—is capital and not mere wealth because its uses are conceived of in certain ways. Money and capital are just as obviously not *purely* discursive phenomenon. Anybody can imagine or talk about a particular form of social and economic order; some have more means than others to bring it about.

To Eley and Nield, the antidote to the "old" overemphasis on big, all-determining structures seems to be small units of social connectedness: the "microphysics" of power, "histories of the everyday," "family," and "neighborhood." Certainly, important work has been done along these lines, and it has enriched the study of class. But why privilege the "small"? Capitalism doesn't make sense in spatial confines; its linkages—while not all-embracing as the overused metaphor of "global" implies—cross oceans, and the place of "class" in political imagination is part of that ocean-crossing history, too.

The authors are disarmingly careful about stepping outside of their expertise in European history. The problem is that a European working-class history is hard to confine to a place called Europe. Understanding large-scale processes is extremely difficult. World-systems theory has, for instance, given us a mechanical picture of different labor forms in different parts of the world, assuming the systematicity and functionality of a capitalist world system. Students looking for "proletarianization" around the world have pushed diverse patterns into a single, stifling narrative or else explained deviation from it on the basis of certain "lacks" of non-European workers, attributable to their backwardness or to the effects of colonization. These approaches won't do. Capitalism, as Sonya Rose emphasizes, does not produce the "quintessential worker."[2] But it does produce workers.

Marx has something to offer here. His analysis of primitive accumulation was messy: The logic of capital cannot explain it, since it was this that created capital. This history is replete with construction and contingency: about the meanings attached to commodities and about the acts of state coercion and legalistic legitimation that made it possible and defensible to separate producers from the means of production. Geoff Eley has himself argued in compelling fashion that there is no model process of capitalist transition that societies outside of England were unable to quite live up to, but rather particular processes of accumulation (of which England was but one), caught up in particular politics, struggles, and regimes of inequality.[3] Students of labor in Africa have also learned how difficult it was for conquerors to make good the seizure of land, to determine the work rhythms of African workers, to ensure that the right working class was reproduced for the changing needs of capital. As in Thompson's England, much of the story is about people struggling *not* to be a working class, struggles that were not without consequences. Whether early or late, capitalists and states couldn't act as if "pure" capitalism existed but instead had to adjust to more complex realities.[4]

What men and women, Africans or Asians, brought to the labor market, the workplace, neighborhood, and nation was varied. But if Zulu in nineteenth-century South Africa could set certain limits to their own exploitation, they were still confronting capitalism in all its specificity, and also in its more elusive capacity, to make certain forms of discipline appear as "normal." Londoners or Berliners did not have to think about Zulu ideas of social organization or social justice.[5] The power of capitalist expansion was indeed to shape terms of debate as well as forms of discipline, but neither power was a total one. Colonization

was as complex and as problematic as capitalist expansion, so that analysis of the production of "difference" is a story of the frustrations of conquerors not getting their way as much as their success in promoting a vision of "oriental" or "primitive" populations.

For the leaders of social movements in Africa or Asia, positioning the oppressions and interests of workers in relation to "universal" and "international" categories was both empowering and disempowering. It provided languages for making claims—which might even win concrete benefits and alter expectations—but it risked effacing that which was distinctive and above all occluding where the "universal" came from. But the universal not only came from somewhere; it was pulled in different directions; it was reshaped in struggle.[6] We are not faced with a dichotomous choice between a universal process producing the quintessential worker with his/her quintessential politics and myriad stories of distinct communities and particular discourses. Neither the singular story nor the myriad stories have very much to say about the world as it actually exists.

In 1938, C. L. R. James put both exploitation and the mobilization against it into the same framework. He argued not only that slave labor in eighteenth-century French Caribbean sugar plantations followed a "modern" organization—a ramified division of labor, strict time discipline, year-round coordination of tasks, and control of residence as well as workplace—but that opposition to this organization was also transnational and made use of a repertoire of currently available ideas. The French Revolution was still going on when the slave revolt of 1791 began, as black sailors transmitted the latest news from Paris, and "Jacobin" ideas of universal rights and citizenship were seized and turned against planters who were themselves trying to make claims for rights as colonial citizens. Some fifty years later, Michel-Rolph Trouillot would emphasize that not all Haitian rebels were Jacobins, that others had brought a different political imagination with them from Africa and redeployed it in new ways in Haiti.[7] The point, however, is that economic structures and discursive formations cross long distances, but are nonetheless specific and bounded, following particular networks of affiliation, confronting specific institutions of imperial power, flourishing in some conjunctures and marginalized in others.

The category of "working class" acquired its saliency in early nineteenth-century Europe not simply in relation to "community" or to struggles over gender roles or to ideologies of Englishness or of artisanal corporatism—although all those considerations are important. The Haitian revolution and controversies over slavery forced an empire-wide perspective into debates in Europe. Some have argued that slave labor and wage labor are two forms of production under capitalism—whose systemic power arises from the particular way it brought these forms into relation with one another.[8] But ideologically and politically, the distinction became crucial precisely during the years covered by E. P. Thompson: English workers who did not see why artisanal privileges, community regulations, and paternalistic relations with elites should bow before the market would not be convinced by arguments that slavery was perfectly all right, too. In Eley and Nield's terms, there was considerable contestation over cate-

gories: Would "wage slavery" become a ruling metaphor, sweeping West Indian slavery and English wage labor into the same classification, or would "slavery" be clearly separated—and rendered excisable—from other forms of labor? In the antislavery movement, both approaches could be heard from different participants. The one that received the sanction of Parliament in 1833 was the conservative one, which defined slavery precisely and distinguished it from wage labor.[9]

At the same time as a narrowing definition of wage laborers became available to a ruling class, the people who worked for wages could use their definition as a basis to make claims. The opening and narrowing of debate helped to make it easier to make claims in terms of a white working class, indeed a white, male working class.[10] Yet the universalistic language of political economy also shaped a means of talking about labor independent of specific cultural idioms and particular localities. This language both revealed and masked the process of capitalist development—but such idioms meant little unless it resonated with what workers, whether in Liverpool or Calcutta, saw around them.

Another set of imaginative possibilities came out of the trans-Atlantic slavery controversy: Abolitionism was a precedent for future mobilizations that crossed borders and oceans, which defined the British Empire or the French Empire as a unit of moral discourse and which tried to encourage adherents to think empathetically about those who were linguistically, physically, and culturally different without trying to turn empathy into identity. Such precedents would be followed by anticolonial movements, by antiapartheid networks around the world, by international women's mobilizations, by environmentalists, and by opponents of the use of sweatshop labor in East Asia for commodities sold in the United States. The marking of social categories and the opening of lines of connection that transcend "difference" are dialectically related processes.

Defining a *working* class was indeed a political process, and it took place not just in relation to communities in England or in France, but in relation to imperial structures and the interrelated economies of sugar, cotton, and shipping. Capitalism was as local as community, and radical politics was as "global" as capitalism. There is too much structure in this story for an argument that discourse is a "better starting point." And those structures have too far a reach to fit a framework that privileges micropolitics. Institutions of states and the imagined space of empires were parts of the story whose importance needs to be spelled out. Economic and political power cannot be adequately perceived if one's vision is limited to a micro- or macrolevel; power is above all lumpy, dense in some locations and thin in others. Without giving careful attention to what constitutes that lumpiness, it is not clear why a social category can be plausibly understood as "class" and meaningfully understood as "working."

The text of Eley and Nield is above all an essay about politics: about the possibilities of seizing space and using it to imagine collectivities and to render them capable of action. They are critical of a politics that derives from a presumption that the working class constitutes a single social location. Yet they are surprisingly singular and confident about what politics really is and must

be: "Politics is the effort at domesticating the infinitude of identity." Politics is a "drive for coherence, to produce consistency and completeness." It is about "what has to happen before individuals and groups can organize their multiple and complex relations to the world into a strongly centered political identity capable of motivating action." And in our time period—apparently more so than any other—"the reconfiguring of identities and shifting terms of political affiliation, which delaminate citizens from accustomed and previously secure social locations, are the inescapable starting point for thinking about politics."[11]

But *must* politics be about searches for coherence and identity? On this point, Eley and Nield do not enrich our understanding of politics but impoverish it. Politics is also about getting people who have little in common to act on the basis of what they do share. This could mean interest group mobilization, or it could mean an interactive process that transforms both networks and discourses and hence the way interests and affinities are perceived.[12] Politics can be about patronage and clientalism, as brokers build pyramidal structures that connect people not with each other but with the patron. Networks and patronage systems are not necessarily prettier than class or ethnic politics, but they are politics and they cannot be reduced to identity.[13]

Let me illustrate with a South African example, a liberation struggle of the late twentieth century. The Eley-Nield thesis privileges analytically (although not normatively) what might be called the "Buthelezi" model of politics over the "Mandela" model. Mangosuthu Buthelezi tried to bring (in Eley-Nield language) "coherence" and "completeness" to people's sense of Zuluness and to make Zulu into a solidaristic unit that could "negotiate" within South Africa for structures that could maintain such coherence. Although building on the efforts of earlier Zulu cultural entrepreneurs, Buthelezi faced the uneven degree to which people's connections and affinities could be contained within Zuluness. His "identity" logic worked better among young, male, oscillatory migrants than among people who spent long periods in urban wage labor. As a result, his movement had to police the exit option, using local authorities' power over land allocation to demand adherence from migrant workers and fostering (with secret help from the apartheid police) gangs that committed violence against Zulu who supported Buthelezi's rivals. That was what "coherence" and "identity" required.[14]

The "Mandela" strategy goes back before Nelson Mandela: In rural parts of the Eastern Cape in the early twentieth century, a wide variety of political forms existed: the politics of chiefship conducted in local idioms; Christian movements appealing for justice in religious language transmitted by white and African-American missionaries mediated through indigenous churches; Garveyite movements linked to African-American and Pan-Africanist organizations via seaports, sailors, and other work-centered connections; and constitutionalist movements emphasizing liberal democratic ideals espoused by villagers with education and urban linkages.[15] From the 1940s, the African National Congress (ANC) became more oriented toward workers and working-class families, but its ideology became more focused on South African nationality. In the worst

years in the 1960s and 1970s, it drew on African connections beyond its borders—its base was in African exile—and it benefited from international issue networks, via the labor movement and networks of antiapartheid advocates, with beliefs ranging from liberal to Christian to socialist to Pan-Africanist. In the 1980s, a political breakthrough came from a "social movement unionism," which both developed from and went beyond class rhetoric and class organization.[16]

The ANC's ability to act depended more on mobilizing contingent affinity than on demanding singularity within South Africa. Abroad, it countered the white elite's attempt to use its own linkages—based on "Western civilization," Christianity, commerce, and symbols of bourgeois consumption—with a campaign that won the battle of international linkages for the antiapartheid side and demoralized South African whites. It mobilized different forms of action and enthusiasm without demanding coherence and completeness from South Africans, let alone from African allies or others. The ANC was not on the side of the angels: Its youth gangs (the "comrades") could be as violent as Buthelezi's, and since liberation it has compromised linkages to socialist friends overseas and acted xenophobically in relation to southern Africans with whom it was once closely connected. That too is what politics is about—much more than identity.

The identity model can be—as has been the case in numerous contexts—used successfully to make legitimate claims on behalf of a variety of groups in quest of some form of recognition, and the network model can lead to cross-ethnic, pyramidal gangs that smuggle diamonds and guns and terrorize wide and diverse regions (as in Sierra Leone, Liberia, northern Uganda). And in South Africa, as elsewhere, the strength of one sort of movement has often been to draw on elements of the other. But these complexities are all the more reason not to confine political imagination to a search for coherence and completeness.

It is clear enough what Eley and Nield have in mind: that in Europe at a certain moment socialist politics was conducted as if identity were fixed and that identity centered on the working class. That moment has passed and they see later politics as also about identity, but identities of different sorts. The former—and presumably the latter—had "a far richer sociology" than the discourse allowed. But the discourse may have been richer, too. Eley and Nield are shrinking the "socialist politics" of the early twentieth century, for example, by playing down the social-democratic side in favor of communist or workerist versions and not quite getting to the politics that moved certain aspects of the welfare state onto the agenda. Female activists, for example, sometimes won concrete benefits for women by working with pronatalist networks—at the expense of enshrining the category of "mother" in the discourse. Such acts of privileging certain useable categories while bracketing others is also politics, and it creates dynamics that may lead to either further openings or further closures.[17] So I wonder if the eagerness of Eley and Nield to emphasize the reconfigurations of the late twentieth century doesn't depend on overdefining the social locatedness of an earlier era. Some actors, then, might have acted as if the working class were a clearly constituted entity with an historical mission of leading the world to lib-

eration, but not all did. Some actors today may act as if bringing coherence to gender or ethnic identity will produce some sort of liberation, but not all do. To see the era 1880–1920 as the golden age of class and 1980–2000 as an era when class relations are submerged amid floating and shifting "identities" does not get to the bottom of the struggles of either era—in Europe, let alone the rest of the world.[18] Emphasizing the range of political imagination in an earlier era—and analyzing how and why different forms were enabled and others excluded—should help us see the possibilities that are open today, as well as the constraints on realizing them.

Eley and Nield are right: The category-producing class is here to stay. So is the working class. The impetus behind the critical and historical examination of categories can well be applied to the study of capital accumulation, labor markets, and work discipline—in the late twentieth century as well as the late nineteenth. Such processes are necessarily specific—as well as contingent and contested—but they are also large scale and interactive. It would be too bad if a reaction against the "meta" leads to a shying away from the "mega," for capitalism can only be understood by moving back and forth between many specificities and the connections among them. Critical theory will be much less critical if it disarms itself in the face of the historical processes—complex and contradictory as they have been—that have shaped inequality and exploitation in the past and the present. Meanwhile, the achievements of recent scholarship—particularly that on gender, race, and ethnicity—can do far more than reproduce a singular association of politics with identity the way a rigid Marxism linked politics with class. Eley and Nield's call for an emphasis on historical processes over social locatedness is valid in more ways than their text lets on. The problem for historians is to explore the past with a vision wide enough to appreciate multiple forms of social connections and imagination and to recognize power and exploitation where they are constituted, with all their limits, contingencies, and vulnerabilities to new forms of imagination and connection.

NOTES

1. My thanks to Molly Nolan and Jane Burbank for comments on a previous draft of this essay.

2. Sonya O. Rose, "Class Formation and the Quintessential Worker," in *Reworking Class,* ed. John R. Hall (Ithaca, NY, 1997), 133–168. The inadequacy of the "lack" model has been emphasized by the Subaltern Studies collective.

3. Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society in Nineteenth Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984). In his chapter, "The Modern Theory of Colonization," in *Capital,* Volume I, trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling (Chicago, 1906), 838–848, Karl Marx argued that far from simply spreading and generalizing itself, capital in North American and other colonies encountered big spaces and diverse social relations, so that the colonist kept defining his autonomy, not his subordination to capital. He saw this as proof of his main argument about Europe "that capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons, established by the instrumentality of things."

4. Dipesh Chakrabarty distinguishes "abstract" labor from "real" labor. Commodification allows for economic interaction across difference, but reducing all transaction to nothing but

commodity relations emphasizes the abstract—pushing workers into a universal idiom that diminishes their specificity. I would emphasize the continual tension between the two in labor politics; the general and the specific both have their uses. See Chakrabarty's "Marx After Marxism: History, Subalternity and Difference," *Meanjin* 52 (1993):421–434.

5. Keletso Atkins, *The Moon is Dead! Give Me My Money!: The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843–1900* (Portsmouth, NH, 1993).

6. For a fuller argument, see my "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History," *American Historical Review* 99 (1994):1516–1545, and *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996).

7. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York, 1963); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *The Silences of the Past: The Power and the Production of History* (Boston, 1995).

8. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, 1982). Theorists from Adam Smith to Robert Brenner have argued for the superiority of wage-labor production. Whatever the validity of such arguments at an abstract level, they do not explain how slavery was actually abolished. Left to economic logic, there would still be sectors of the capitalist economy where slave labor is rational.

9. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770–1823* (Ithaca, 1975); Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1987); Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore, 1990); Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Geneaologies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1990).

10. On gender and race in the constitution of "free" labor, see Thomas Holt, "The Essence of the Contract: The Articulation of Race, Gender, and Political Economy in British Emancipation Policy, 1838–1866," in Frederick Cooper, Thomas Holt, and Rebecca Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill, forthcoming), and Pamela Scully, *Liberating the Family? Gender and British Slave Emancipation in the Rural Western Cape, South Africa, 1823–1853* (Portsmouth, NH, 1997).

11. Eley and Nield, like most scholars today, insist that identities are constructed and fluid. Such arguments run into a problem similar to that faced by E. P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), where he wanted to show how the working class made itself, but never doubted that what was made was the working class. Constructivist arguments often emphasize fluidity and indeterminacy, in which case it is not clear why it was gender or race that was made, or else ask the question backward, starting with the present-day category that was historically produced, thereby missing all the other sorts of affinities and commonalities. Eley and Nield's contention that politics is necessarily about domesticating identities either lets identity be so vague than any affinity that is the object of politics makes it an identity—which is tautological—or identity must be defined independently of politics, which Eley and Nield could not do within constructivist logic.

12. Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY, 1998).

13. For a classic study of network politics, see Jeremy Boissevain, *Friends of Friends: Networks, Manipulators and Coalitions* (Oxford, 1974), and for a recent example, Sandra T. Barnes, *Patrons and Power: Creating a Political Community in Metropolitan Lagos* (Bloomington, 1986).

14. Anthony Minaar, ed., *Patterns of Violence: Case Studies of Conflict in Natal* (Pretoria, 1992), and William Beinart, Terence Ranger, and Rob Turrell, eds., "Political Violence in Southern Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18 (1992).

15. William Beinart and Colin Bundy, *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa* (Berkeley, 1987).

16. Gay Seidman, *Manufacturing Militance: Workers' Movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970–1985* (Berkeley, 1994).

17. Karen Offen, "Depopulation, Nationalism and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France," *American Historical Review* 89 (1984):648–76; Peter Baldwin, *The Politics of Social Solidarity: Class Bases of the European Welfare State 1875–1975* (Cambridge, 1990), and Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914–1945* (Cambridge, 1993).

18. For more on conceptual difficulties with the identity concept, see Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond Identity," *Theory and Society* 29 (2000):1–47.