Chapter 20

Concepts of Class in Contemporary Economic Geography

David Sadler

The cultural turn in human geography, the re-configuration of the "economic" in economic geography (Thrift and Olds, 1996), and the challenges of postmodern and poststructuralist approaches to social science more generally, posed particularly acute problems for the use of "class" as an explanatory concept in economic geography during the 1990s. This was especially notable given that economic geography had been so fundamental in the evolution of Marxist (that is, class-centered) approaches to human geography during the 1970s and 1980s. This chapter summarizes some of these contributions, and explores some of the reasons for and implications of the limited engagement with class as an explanatory concept within economic geography during recent debates.

The chapter starts with a re-appraisal (or perhaps more accurately a re-statement) of the salient features of class as conceptualized within the classical Weberian and Marxist traditions. It then goes on to examine some of the insights brought by the work within economic geography in the 1970s and 1980s which drew heavily on (and began to contribute to) Marxist class theory. This section exemplifies these contributions and their political implications through a consideration of the class-based campaigns in defense of place, and against closures in a number of major industries, which proliferated in Western Europe and North America during the 1980s. The limits to these campaigns, and the issues that they opened up, are also addressed. Third, I describe recent attempts to re-place class in economic geography, which have sought to de-center class yet retain some of the concept's explanatory value. This section also suggests that such accounts could benefit from paying greater attention to the significance of history and the role of political strategy. The chapter concludes by questioning whether class remains of significant actual or potential relevance to contemporary economic geography, or whether it is destined to remain forever silenced.

Classical Conceptions of Class

In essence, the difference between the classical Weberian and Marxist traditions of class, which have been so influential in social science, comes down to an insistence

upon the properties of individuals versus the structural relationships embodied in production. A Weberian perspective emphasizes the role of classes as groups or collections of particular qualities and attributes (such as income or occupation) held in a contingent fashion by individuals. A Marxist viewpoint stresses the way in which the relationship between individuals is structured through the process of producing goods or delivering services. This is not the place in which to enter into a detailed exposition of the relative merits of Weberian and Marxist class theory, however. Rather, because of the centrality of the latter to debates within economic geography over the last two decades, and because I want to suggest that there are still merits to such an analytical framework, the rest of this section focuses on the specific contribution of, and debates around, Marxist conceptions of class in economic geography.

From a Marxist perspective, a key feature of the capitalist system of production is its separation into two classes, capital and labor. Capital is able to appropriate a surplus from the work of labor through ownership of the means of production, whilst labor possesses little more than an ability to perform paid work (see Swyngedouw, this volume). This surplus, or profit, has to be re-invested in further activities if the individual capitalist is not to be overtaken by competitors. In this view of history, there are limits to the long-term stability of the system as a whole, which are set by the contradictory nature of the relationship between the classes. Whilst capital needs labor-power, it also needs to replace it with (more efficient) machinery, creating unemployment. Thus the interests of capital and labor are frequently in conflict. While capital may seem to have the upper hand, its own strategy creates unintended consequences leading to economic crises which in time become increasingly generalized and widespread (Harvey, 1982).

There are of course many variants to this highly simplified Marxist account of class relations, and there have also been many different strands of criticism. At one level the original theory is teleological – it imputes an inevitable trajectory to human existence, even if both practical experience and intellectual debate suggest that there are in fact many different alternative paths. It is functionalist, in that society is held to develop in a certain way because that route is necessary for its existence. Some versions of Marxism are deeply structural, and offer only a limited role for human agency and human consciousness (see, for instance, Althusser, 1969), although others are more sensitive to individual and historical circumstances (see, for instance, Thompson, 1963) – and much of the debate reviewed below relates precisely to this question. Perhaps the key contribution of a Marxist perspective on class is its recognition of the linkages between individualized expressions and experiences of power and inequality, and broader system-wide processes. This was fundamental to the radical movement within human geography (and economic geography in particular) which developed from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s (see Cloke et al., 1991, pp. 28–56).

It was in this period that some of the most productive work in economic geography within a broadly Marxist perspective took place. Such research took class relations as a central starting point in explaining patterns and processes of uneven development within and between cities and regions, and (what were often described at the time as) the continued underdevelopment of the Third World and the legacies of imperialism. In some ways these years could be regarded as the highpoint of

Marxist class-based analyses within economic geography. By the end of the 1980s, however, it was apparent that the tensions created through engagement with social theory – and in particular the challenges posed by postmodernism's disavowal of broader structures – had led to fractious disagreement amongst Marxist economic geographers. This was evident if nothing else in the growing frequency of calls for re-establishment of a collective agenda, as cracks and fissures became increasingly evident in an earlier consensus (see, for instance, Walker, 1989). A body of theory often criticized for its "closed" assumptions – its limited accessibility to alternative ideas – faced a radical challenge in the 1990s, and – I would suggest – proved to be slow to adapt to new times and new intellectual concerns. Thus politically charged concepts of class which had gained a ready audience in the 1980s just as quickly fell from the agenda in the subsequent decade.

Class-centered Approaches to Economic Geography in the 1970s and 1980s: Production, Regional Development, and the Defense of Place

In some ways the decline of politically charged concepts of class was unfortunate, for many useful insights were gained during the period in which Marxist class analysis was commonplace in economic geography. In the course of the 1970s and 1980s, some of the most significant advances within human geography involved engagement with the relationship between systems of production and processes of uneven regional development. I focus on these here (in an admittedly partial fashion) in order to demonstrate some of the contributions made by Marxist-based class analysis to economic geography, and the contributions of geography to class analysis (similar arguments could also be advanced for other strands of research to do with urbanization, development, and imperialism). I argue in this section that Marxist class analysis brought to economic geography a fuller understanding of the implications of class-based contradictions and conflicts within capitalism as a system of production. It also enabled recognition of the social nature of production, involving questions to do with the deployment of labor, its engagement with management, and the range of occupational and technical divisions that might arise within the class of labor in the process of production. In turn, a geographical perspective enhanced Marxist class analysis through a focus on the role of space both in shaping class consciousness and in potentially dividing workers from each other.

The concern with regional inequality was in part a response to the new phase of the global economy ushered in by the recessionary slump of the mid 1970s. It was increasingly recognized that the organization of production was integrally related to questions of location, and that particular local and regional trajectories could only be understood as part of a broader national and international dynamic. At just the same time as the world was becoming economically more inter-connected, so place was ever more clearly of growing significance. Rather than simply conquering space and diffusing development (as earlier formulations would have it), capital was seeking new and more sophisticated means of exploiting and reinforcing the specificities of places, while integrating them into global processes.

One line of enquiry focused on the significance of capitalism as a mode of production, and sought to theorize in the abstract the uneven development of capitalist relations of production. For instance, Harvey (1982) developed a Marxist

theory of capitalist crisis with three levels. The first rested upon the fundamental contradiction between capital and labor, and the tendency for capital's strategies of technical change to result in a falling rate of profit (Rigby, this volume). In the second, the financial credit system was a means of (temporarily) resolving such contradictions in the process of production, by guaranteeing the availability of capital for future rather than present use. Ultimately, however – so it was suggested – the financial system could only internalize capitalism's tendency to crisis. The third level introduced a specifically geographical aspect. In this account, the contradictions of capitalism were open to a "spatial fix" (as well as the temporal one through credit) in which geographical expansion into new regions ameliorated crisis tendencies. In this way capitalism was capable of "switching" crises from one region to another, with potentially devastating effects for those people and places left behind. The problem for capitalism as a system of production, however, was that such switches created geographic inertia. Investment in places at one point of time represented fixed capital, which became a barrier to future change. The growth of productive forces therefore increasingly acted as a barrier to rapid geographic restructuring, even though the latter became increasingly necessary. The more the forces of inertia prevailed, the deeper would be the regional impacts at moments of "switching." In this fashion, regional crises would tend to build to global crisis.

Harvey's work was significant for incorporating space into Marxist theorizations of crisis, and in emphasizing the significance of historical–geographical materialism. It was, however, highly abstract and separated from immediate political practice (though see Harvey, 1984). Another strand of enquiry of equal importance to economic geography in this period focused on the connections between the class-based social relations of production and the spatial composition of the economy, epitomized in Massey's (1984) "spatial divisions of labor." Production was seen as an essentially social process, reflecting the class-based hierarchies of decisionmaking and control to be found in large firms. The organization of production within particular factories and offices, in particular places and regions, results from decisions about the training and deployment of labor, and the degree of mechanization. Such choices created specific demands for certain attributes of labor. Within the consumer electronics industry, for example, there was a marked variation between the attributes required for high-level research and development functions at one extreme, and for the routinized tasks of factory-based assembly of mass-produced components on the other. In turn, the supplies of different kinds of labor were temporally and spatially variable, reflecting local labor market characteristics, which stemmed from distinctive regional growth paths.

As a consequence, different kinds of activities from the same firm or economic sector would be located in different places, creating spatial divisions of labor within firms, and often reinforcing differences between places. Attention thus focused on the formation of regional industrial structures through successive rounds or layers of investment, each of which took place on the basis of the legacies of previous layers. This geological analogy opened up several debates, including the primacy attached to economic process, and the extent and nature of the engagement between different rounds of investment (see, for instance, Sadler, 1992). For example, it was clear that production took place on an uneven plane and that decisions about the location of investment would only be taken in the light of a (perhaps partial) knowledge of

previous place- and region-specific development paths. As spatially mobile capital sought new locations, management would take into consideration the legacies of prior industries in a region in terms of its workforce's skill characteristics, levels of unionization, and so on. Thus regions with industries in decline might be seen as potential sources of reserves of labor, although precisely which characteristics were attractive to new investors, and which were seen as disincentives to such investment, remained a matter for investigation.

In addition to such applications of Marxist class theory to improve the understanding of the processes behind urban and regional economic restructuring, economic geographers also paid attention to how geography affects the formation and cohesion of economic classes. Two broadly different kinds of contributions can be identified. First, the cohesion of classes (or indeed any social movement) does not just depend on sharing a common set of characteristics but also on being conscious of this. Solidarity involves developing a common consciousness that can overcome difficulties facing collective action, and economic geographers have shown how space can facilitate this. Since the construction of a collective identity depends on communication, the national formation of working-class solidarity – described for example by Thompson (1963) – requires, and should follow, the geographical development of communications systems which are central to the economic geographical landscape (Thrift and Williams, 1987). In addition, the regional agglomeration of large industrial factories and workshops where workers could come together and share their experiences, for example, in the old manufacturing belt of the United States, facilitates a corresponding regional agglomeration of strikes and union activity (Earle, 1992). Finally, on a local level, the traditionally strong nature of working-class solidarity (and the formation of working-class culture) in mining villages reflects their status as highly cohesive and often geographically isolated places based on a single industry and employer.

Second, it was argued that the geographical differentiation of the economy can undermine the cohesion of economic classes. In this view, solidarity between capitalists and workers in the same place, in opposition to workers and capitalists in other places, can arise because of processes of geographically uneven development which allow those residing in one place to prosper at the expense of those living in other places (Harris, 1983; Sheppard and Barnes, 1990; Urry, 1981). Such class-based alliances undermine the cohesion within classes, meaning that paying attention to geography greatly adds to the sophistication of class analysis. The existence of geographical differences in class consciousness (and identity) adds to the social complexity of classes long recognized in Marxist sociology – where in some contemporary accounts, classes are no longer treated as homogeneous categories which result solely from production processes.

Such research brought significant insight to the relationships between class, place, and space as organized through processes of production. In particular, the recognition that production was a social process took economic geography into closer contact with work in industrial sociology on the ways in which factory and office life was constructed through managerial strategies of consensus-building and conflict, involving engagement with the institutions of organized labor (see, for instance, Beynon, 1984). Some of these insights were also deeply political, representing an awareness of the extent to which the economy (and economic geography) is politically

constituted. This can be illustrated through a brief consideration of the significance of the class-based campaigns in defense of place that grew in frequency in a number of old industrial regions during the 1980s.

Class-based campaigns in defense of place

During the 1980s, rapid large-scale contraction took place in many of the traditional bases of employment in Western Europe and North America, including coal-mining, iron and steel production, and shipbuilding. The extent of these closures, and the depth of their impact on places that had grown up around these industries, were such as to call into question the future existence of whole communities. Faced with this situation, many proposed closures became the focus of powerful and broad-based campaigns of opposition. These anti-closure movements were built on specific forms of expression of attachment to place – in the sense of settings for human existence – and to class, in the sense of preservation of the opportunity for waged labor (see Hudson and Sadler, 1983, 1986).

Few of the campaigns were successful in preventing closure, partly because of the extent to which national states intervened with both coercive measures (in the form of socially-legitimate force) and consensus-building policies, such as promises of alternative employment creation, superficially attractive terms for withdrawal from the labor market through early retirement, and opportunities for re-training. The campaigns were nonetheless deeply significant, both politically – as key moments in the restructuring of vast swathes of economic activity – and theoretically. In steel towns as far apart as Youngstown in the USA and Longwy in France, and in the coal fields of Britain, for example (see Beynon, 1985; Buss and Redburn, 1983), place and class were starkly revealed as fundamental constituents of economic activity and social life.

Much of the theoretical debate concerned the ways in which those different expressions of identity – attachment to region/community and to class – coexisted (see also Fitzgerald, 1991). In the interpretation of anti-closure campaigns it was necessary to adopt a more differentiated concept of class structure than a simple dichotomy between capital and labor; one which took into account competition *within* classes (although it was notable that practically all anti-closure campaigns were organized in support of the preservation of waged labor, rather than in opposition to the principle). In this way, the possibility of territorially-constituted alliances *between* fractions of locally-bound capital and labor was opened up. This was frequently evident in the ways in which opposition to large-scale closures drew upon support from small businesses and place-specific employers' organizations, although the pattern of coalitions was not always so straightforward. For instance, Herod (1991) described a case in which union leaders supported closure by stifling community-based opposition, whereas the strongly pro-business Governor of West Virginia sought to prevent closure. These and other forms of place-bound alliance can be interpreted in terms of different forms of dependence upon place (see Cox and Mair, 1991), signifying the extent to which the interests of particular class actors are necessarily bound up with those of the place in question at any particular point in time.

Territorial differences within the class of labor were significant to the outcome of many anti-closure campaigns. It was impossible to understand the year-long

1984–85 miners' strike in Britain without taking into account the divide between workers in different parts of the country, for example. That is not to argue, however, that territory and class should be seen as competing bases of social organization. Superficially there might appear to have been a choice between defending place (via specific cross-class alliances) and betraying class (via campaigns through which workers sought to preserve *their* mine or steelworks at the expense of some other mine or steelworks). In practice, I would argue, that is a false opposition. What these campaigns revealed instead was that class interests, organization, and practices are *always* formulated with respect to particular territories and places. Space cannot be added to class as an afterthought; the two are mutually constituted. The task of analysis is therefore to investigate how this happens; the political choices are to do with its preconditions and implications.

Class in Economic Geography in the 1990s

More recently, concepts of class have figured much less centrally on the agenda of economic geography. Research has focused on new and different questions from those of the production-led debates of the 1970s and 1980s, whilst there was also a conscious (and deliberately provocative) challenge to the relevance of Marxist class-based analysis. To take just one prominent example of the latter, Saunders and Williams (1986) complained that a new orthodoxy had emerged in urban geographic research, which over-emphasized the role of class. There was a reluctance, they argued, to accept that class might not be of primary significance in everyday life, or that there might be analytically distinct bases of domination and conflict in society of which class was only one (see also the response by Smith, 1987a).

The turn away from Marxist conceptions of class in economic geography in the 1990s had much to do with developments within human geography and social science in general. Poststructuralist approaches proliferated alongside a concern with identity, postmodernism ushered in an era where broader structures were ruled to be inconsequential, and feminist critiques brought into question many central tenets of previous accounts – and this is not to mention (only through lack of space) other currents such as postcolonialism. These developments have often loosely been labeled part of the "cultural turn" within human geography, on which there has been much debate already, perhaps even before the turn has begun to near completion (cf. Barnett, 1998).

One of the most direct challenges to class theory came from poststructuralism (Gibson-Graham, this volume). As Barnes (1998, p. 96) put it:

> . . . for poststructuralists, there is no coherent, sovereign individual, there is only a world of differences, of socially constituted identities that are multiple and complex. It is not class politics, but identity politics, and fought out not in the sphere of production but in the sphere of culture where those identities are forged.

As he went on to argue, such an ontological shift not only carried a very different view of the nature of society, but also a contrasting perspective on the role of academic enquiry. For (modernist) Marxists the role of the intellectual is as an ally of the working class, helping to reveal its material interests. For postmodernists, the

academy (and not the factory or office as sites of production) becomes the arena of emancipatory politics.

Particularly significant in this regard is the work of Gibson and Graham (cf. Gibson and Graham, 1992; Gibson-Graham, 1996; Graham, 1990). Their poststructuralist Marxism has sought to break down the divide between poststructuralism and Marxism. It has explored three separate but related aspects of political economy in an attempt to re-position Marxism and class theory within geography: anti-essentialism, over-determination, and discursive constructions of the economy.

Essentialism is the intellectual presumption that complex realities are reducible to simple, or essential, realities. A key feature of the poststructuralist critique is that Marxism assigns such an essential property to "the economy," or more specifically to the labor process under capitalism, as something which both underlies the social system as a whole and is "out there" waiting to be uncovered. Such a view has been challenged both for its economic determinism – its attribution of causal primacy to economic process – and for its epistemological reduction of a complex and changing system to knowable essences or properties. (Teleology, introduced earlier in this chapter, is a specific form of essentialism in which the world is seen as governed by a grand design, the essence of historical progress.) It has been argued, however, that it is possible to construct an anti-essentialist Marxism with class as a focus – an entry-point for enquiry – but without attributing the status of universal explanation for everything to class theory (see Graham, 1990). Such an anti-essentialist Marxism involves conscious recognition of the validity of alternative entry-points for enquiry (Gibson and Graham, 1992, p. 114):

> We do not wish to contribute to another Marxist knowledge that justifies itself by claiming that class is more fundamental or influential than other aspects of society and that, therefore, a knowledge of class has more explanatory power than other knowledges. Historically, such attempts to marginalise or demote other social processes and perspectives have created irresolvable conflicts and antagonisms between Marxism and other discourses of social transformation.

This acceptance remains of key significance to a more open Marxism within economic geography.

An anti-essentialist and open Marxism is also built on the concept of over-determination: the recognition that each and every social process is uniquely constituted as the effect of all other processes. This carries implications for the way in which the research process is conceptualized, because there are no simple causes that can be identified behind a phenomenon. Each starting point for the process of theoretical development – class, gender, ethnicity, or whatever – will not necessarily produce a *better* understanding (partly because validation criteria are internal to each theoretical framework rather than a function of its relationship to the real world), but a *different* understanding (Graham, 1990, pp. 58–9). In other words, theory is not an activity that clarifies how reality works, but becomes one of the many processes that constitute social life, producing particular knowledges that are necessarily specific and fragmentary.

Class remains central to this project, although precisely how it is conceptualized is itself problematic – and therein lie some of the problems associated with formulating

a response to the critique of poststructuralism. In earlier work, Gibson and Graham (1992) argued that class should be understood in relation to social *processes* of exploitation, and that individuals should be seen as capable of participating in multiple class processes. This stress on class as process lay at the heart of the classical Marxist tradition (see above). In subsequent work, however, "re-positioning" class partly involved a view of class as a means of situating individuals into categories, rather than a structural property (cf. Gibson-Graham 1997, p. 90). This later account of class as a concept highlights relationships to property ownership, control over the labor process, exploitation, and organizational capacity, and argues that the problems with this "classification" arise if an individual occupies contradictory positions (for instance as both self-employed and an employee in a part-time job). In this way "class" becomes in part a category into which individuals could be allocated, one among many possible sources of differentiation – thereby eliding into a framework akin to that of classical Weberianism. These distinctions are more than purely semantic, and they inform the chapter's concluding remarks.

The third key feature of this body of work is its concern with the discursive representation of the economy. The extent to which the contemporary economy is "knowable" and therefore amenable to rational decisionmaking processes has been explored elsewhere (Thrift, 1996). For Gibson-Graham (1996, 1997) however, the key discursive problem is political economy's assumption of a single, unified, capitalist totality. They argue that much work in economic geography over the past two decades has involved the construction of a geography of "sameness" and of "class homogeneity," because it emphasizes an economic landscape dominated by capitalism in which non-capitalist class processes are disregarded or downplayed. This discourse has been created through an acceptance of alternative development projects built around the essentialist and masculinist construction of a prosperous (post-Fordist) capitalism as the only route to a non-capitalist alternative. They conclude that only by changing the framework will it become possible to visualize "the end of capitalism (as we knew it)."

These contributions to the debate on Marxist class theory have been significant, sustained, and productive. They have helped formulate a de-centered view of class identity, and an account of the economy that recognizes its multiply-fractured nature. They have enabled connections to be made between class theory and other entry-points into the process of understanding the world. Explicit recognition that class struggle is not the only motor of social change, and that the militaristic image of a unified collectivity of labor perpetually engaged in class warfare with industrial capital is itself of questionable relevance to the contemporary economy, are important advances. Much remains to be done, however.

Few would deny the deceptive power today of discourses proclaiming capitalist hegemony, and recent work has begun to address the discursive construction of the economy and our ways of knowing it. For instance, Schoenberger (1998) explored how the discursive strategies of others affected her own discursive constructions and how these, in turn, affected the material work of academic research. In other words, she engaged with debates about discourse as it affects the relationship between knowing the world and what goes on in the world. The meaning and use of the concept "competitiveness" were explored in two contexts – Nike's

dependence on low-wage Asian labor for the manufacture of atheletic shoes, and the living wage campaign in Baltimore. In both cases, the hegemonic discourse of competitiveness opened up a terrain of legitimacy for some kinds of research and closed off other possibilities (such as the extent to which Baltimore's fundamental social problem was one of widespread poverty, or Nike's capacity to make profits even if Asian workers were paid at or close to US wage levels). In so doing, the need to examine academic discourse more closely was made all too apparent, particularly in terms of the way in which an "economic" discourse cemented into place, and drew strength from, the power of the discipline of economics and its influence on policymakers (compare Peck, 1999, who suggests that geographers' attention to local detail restricts the discipline's influence upon policy at a time when economists hold the key – but simple – ideas, or discursive representations, that are congruent with those of business). The implications of this for class theory are significant, for such an "economic" discourse is self-evidently ideological and reinforces the position of particular class interests.

Others have also recently begun to question the desirability of the retreat from Marxist class theory. For instance Castree (1999) seeks to lay the foundations for a renewed political economy, in an essay that reflects on the critiques of Gibson-Graham (1996) and Sayer (1995a), and lays out an "after-modern" Marxist politics of class. This involves recognizing that individuals occupy multiple class positions, and that the fashioning of a class identity is distinct from a structurally-assigned class position. In part the latter is a reaffirmation of Marx's classical distinction between class-in-itself (the objective interests of a class) and class-for-itself (the ability of a class to recognize, and act on, such interests), a distinction central to earlier debates over a body of theory known as rational choice Marxism (see Barnes and Sheppard, 1992).

Perhaps the most fundamental contribution from the debates of the last decade is the recognition that it is possible to retain a Marxist focus on class as one – but not necessarily the only – entry-point for enquiry within economic geography. It is possible to interrogate the ways in which class relations interact and intersect with other aspects of social existence, such as gender, ethnicity, and attachment to place (see for instance Hadjimichalis and Sadler, 1995). To take just one recent example: Gregson et al. (1999) graphically unpacked the diversity of forms of employment in Europe by examining the ways in which "work" (and particularly "atypical" categories of work such as seasonal, part-time, and self-employed) assumed different meanings in different contexts. "Work" therefore can be seen as a series of negotiated and culturally embedded practices, thereby exemplifying the utility of exploring the connections between economic and cultural processes.

At the same time, the continued significance of capitalist class processes, and their implications, should not go unremarked. Even though the economy has become much more differentiated in the later years of the twentieth century, it is presently – and increasingly, on a global scale – capitalist. Yet the class relations of capitalist society are not reproduced automatically. It could be argued that the process of globalization – the shifting flow of capital – is as much a sign of capital's weakness, its inability to subordinate labor, as it is a sign of strength, thereby opening up many different kinds of political opportunity (Holloway, 1995). Whilst it is one thing to recognize such difference, however, it is quite another to treat it in itself as a

potential force of transformation. Below, therefore, I focus on the continued potential of class processes, as one amongst many possible sources of social transformation. Two issues are of significance in this context: the place of history, and the role of political strategy.

The place of history

Marxist class analysis is grounded in the principles of historical–geographical materialism. It is based on the premise that an understanding of processes of social transformation and change can only be achieved through analyses of concrete situations of class struggle, which occur in particular times and places, not necessarily of labor's own choosing. Thus a class-based perspective needs to take into account not just the role of geography, nor that of history in isolation, but of the simultaneous co-existence of place and time. This necessitates engagement with debates about the relationship between history and geography. Four different senses in which history has been conceived in human geography were identified by Driver (1988): a series of legacies, an evolutionary motor, a source of agency, and a grounding for theory. He concluded that it was time to bring history back in to the heart of human geography, as an essential part of doing the subject. Such a clarion call has many merits, particularly in the present context.

Informative insights can be gained here from ideas that might at first sight seem tangential, within the field of historical sociology, and in particular in the work of Abrams (1982). He argued that over a period of some 30 years the gap between so-called "empirical" history and "theoretical" sociology (as the two were frequently labeled) had narrowed, as both disciplines increasingly focused on a common project, the problem of *structuring*. Such a claim was exemplified by consideration of Thompson's (1963) view of class as relationship and process rather than object – the way in which the machine of society worked once it was set in motion. As Abrams (1982, p. xiii) put it:

> Appreciation of the historicity of class, of class as a relationship enacted in time (with equal stress on all four of those words) is simply not a form of wisdom private to the historian. Nor are the larger insights that time exists in motion and that society is the time-machine working. Sociologists and historians alike need to understand how that maddeningly non-mechanical machine works if the puzzle of human agency is to be resolved.

The core of my argument here is that for "sociologists," we could – and should – just as well read "geographers" into the above. That is to say, understanding the way in which the "machine" of society works is a task that requires appreciation of both its temporal and spatial situatedness. Historical–geographical materialism provides a means of exploring the dynamics of place as an ever-changing construct of class-based relationships. In this time-centered sociology, Abrams duly acknowledged the early work of Giddens (for instance, 1979). Whilst much of Giddens' later work on structuration theory has found its way into human geography, it is unfortunate that some of these earlier insights developed within historical sociology – in particular on the role of history as process – have not yet received as much recognition within human geography in general, and economic geography in particular.

Political strategy

There is little new in the (still-frequent) proclamation that an era of class-based politics has been replaced by a different political order. In a celebrated phrase, Gorz (1982) bid farewell to the working class many years ago (in a book whose title, as has frequently been observed, carried two very different meanings). As Wills and Lee (1997, p. xvi, emphasis added) argued, however, "in the shift away from classical political economy, questions of *political agency* have seemingly been overlooked." In this they were in accord with Sayer (1995b, pp. 79, 82), who commented that a "softer," more pluralist Marxism had emerged following debates with feminism, postmodernism, and new social movement theorists, but that a negative consequence of this was:

> . . . a neglect of basic questions of political economy at the core of Marxism, both in terms of abstract theorising about how capitalism works, and theorising about possible alternative systems. . . . The crisis of Marxism has much to do with the fact that it has become increasingly apparent that even if the problems are structural and present in all versions of the game, it hasn't got a clue as to what would constitute a better game. Postmarxists are torn between criticising the structure of the game and criticising the particular ways individuals and institutions play it.

Thus a problem to be addressed remains that of alternative class-based strategies for, and ways of interpreting, the economy.

Key questions of such political practice were evident in the debate over localities research in the mid to late 1980s, on which much has been written already (see Massey, 1991). The questions remain of significance, however, and for that reason alone it is appropriate to review some of the issues raised then. For instance, Smith (1987b) argued that the problem with such research was that it had become about specified places in and of themselves (partly revisiting earlier debates within geography's disciplinary history concerning its "exceptionalist" attention to the detailed study of particular places and regions, bereft of broader theoretical implications). This criticism had a political significance. There was a prospect that emphasis on the local might lead to "economic microsurgery" (Cochrane, 1987): tinkering with the workings of the economy at a small scale, but neglecting the system as a whole.

In part such criticisms were well-placed, as left-of-center political practice at this time seemed increasingly to resort to the local in the face of the national electoral successes of neo-liberal ideologies. In part, however, they failed to recognize the differences within (what was loosely labeled as) "localities research," for some of this research *did* seek to connect the local with the national and the global, and to explore the class implications of these connections (see, for instance, Beynon et al., 1994). Such a task remains conceptually unfinished, however, and it is addressed further in the concluding comments below.

This section has explored the ways in which the use of Marxist class theory in economic geography was challenged by alternative critiques such as poststructuralism, postmodernism, and feminism during the 1990s. The response to these challenges has been examined through a review of the work of Gibson, Graham, and

Gibson-Graham, focusing on three features: anti-essentialism, over-determination, and discourse. It has been argued that class remains of (under-utilized) significance as an explanatory concept within economic geography, and that two questions warrant further consideration in this regard: the role of history, and the nature of political strategy. The concluding section of this chapter goes on to expand these comments in the light of the earlier review of the achievements within economic geography enabled through the insights brought by Marxist class theory during the 1970s and 1980s.

Concluding Comments

At this point it is appropriate to summarize my own position with respect to the debates reviewed in the previous section. Firstly, the recognition that it is possible to construct an anti-essentialist Marxist theory of class is significant for enabling a more open dialogue between Marxism and other traditions of critical enquiry – some emergent, others longer-established. Secondly, the conceptual framework of over-determination is valuable in so far as it situates class within a broader range of social processes, and encourages exploration of the connections within and between these. The problem remains however of evaluating the merits of different entry-points for academic enquiry, not just in terms of their own internal validity, but also of the extent to which they enable a meaningful story to be told. One view would argue that this is an ineligible question: that in a relativist world, it is not necessary or legitimate to assess the competing claims of different entry-points, precisely because they are not competing. I would hold, however, that there are criteria by which the validity of different entry-points can be established, and that these are in part ethical and in part political.

Thirdly, I have suggested above that it is possible to incorporate a recognition of the significance of discourse without accepting the full implications of Gibson-Graham's (1996) argument in *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, by reviewing in brief the work of Schoenberger (1998) (and note that her more substantive work on *The Cultural Crisis of the Firm* could also be seen in this light – Schoenberger, 1997). That is to say, I argue that whilst an awareness of the need to challenge hegemonic discourse is a *necessary* condition for transformation, it is not a *sufficient* one, in the sense of automatically enabling such transformation to take place. In part this brings the argument back to the question of political strategy, and to the role of academic enquiry. I would argue that it is necessary to bring class back in – the ongoing class history of real places and of their ever-changing relationship to, and constitution within, broader economic processes (see, for instance, Allen et al., 1998).

These issues can be exemplified with respect to the debate on space and time partly triggered by Harvey's (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity*. In this, Harvey sought to argue that postmodernism could be seen as a particular condition of historical–geographical materialism that was characterized by space–time compression, in which the speed-up of economic change had overcome spatial barriers, whilst generating an increased fragmentation and differentiation amongst places that had led to militant neo-particularism, an intensified association with the local. Thus Harvey sought to interpret postmodernism as a condition of social existence in which time had transformed space. For Massey, (1992), however, the

manner of the emergence of space into the theoretical agenda of social science more generally was problematic, in that the concept had been de-politicized. Drawing on feminist critiques of dualism, she argued that space was *not* something to be defined in opposition to time, but rather should be conceptualized as the simultaneous co-existence of social interrelations at all scales, from the local to the global. This simultaneity is not static, but ceaselessly changing. Such an approach is akin to that envisioned here, enabling class and place to be seen as central elements in an explanatory framework for social transformation.

These insights have partly informed more recent work, which has stressed the way in which scale is a socially-produced and contested process (see, for instance, Swyngedouw, 1997). There is no necessary association between any given process and a particular scale: rather, the way in which that process is scaled is part of the simultaneity of coexistence captured by over-determination. So in interpreting the politics of anti-closure campaigns in the 1980s, for instance, it is necessary to explore the ways in which class (and other) interests were articulated with respect to place at a range of different spatial scales. This interpretation is only possible through a framework that conceptualizes class as process – as dynamic and ongoing – and one grounded in history, not just of any one place but of the changing web that connects different scales.

Thus it is still possible to think about a world in which class is a significant process, albeit in ways very different from earlier formulations. The need for class-based interpretations in economic geography is still starkly evident in the harsh impact on those places left behind by the ebb and flow of capital around the world (see, for example, Dandaneau, 1996). It is productive to explore the connections between class and other processes. Class as an explanatory concept might have been sidelined during the 1990s, but it has by no means been silenced.

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