

## Is Class a Useful Category of Historical Analysis in the Study of Early Modern Society?

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The discipline of class analysis has been suffering under sustained criticism since the late 1970s and 1980s. In failing to adequately analyse the postmodern, post-industrial western world, the largely structuralist accounts of Marxist and post-Marxist theorists have been discredited and the specificity of class analysis to the industrial era has been highlighted.<sup>1</sup> While such debates fall outside of the remit of this essay, their consequence, discrediting the field of class analysis as an all-encompassing theory, lends itself to its central theme: that class is a wholly inappropriate category of historical analysis regarding early modern society as it conflates non-class-based systems of social hierarchy with class. This point shall be demonstrated through the analysis of social history, sociology and linguistics and shall be in three sections, first the analysis of class-based discourse, secondly the theoretical conceptions of class derived from the analysis of other eras and finally the specific attempts of social historians to attribute class analysis to the early modern period. Together these analyses will demonstrate that any attempt to marry early modern society with class analysis are either empirically or conceptually flawed.

The incompatibility of early modern social history and the category of class is at first apparent in the absence of 'class' and its subsidiary terminology

from the era's discourse. Briggs' analysis demonstrates clearly that the language of class emerged specifically in the political, economic and social context of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>2</sup> While some dispute exists over the exact periodization of the emergence of certain terms such as 'Working Class' and 'Middle Class', and which specific factors brought them into discourse, a far more pertinent dispute can be drawn out by contrasting Briggs' analysis to that of Wrightson. Wrightson, in an attempt to challenge the idea of the "birth of class" in the Industrial Revolution, seeks to reconcile the early modern informal language of 'sorts' with traditional class analysis.<sup>3</sup>

Much of Wrightson's analysis is dependent, like Briggs, on the mutability of society and the discursive change this produced, suggesting that the language of sorts emerged from the inadequacies of the formal language of orders to represent an increasingly antagonistic and exclusive social structure.<sup>4</sup> Throughout his analysis, Wrightson attempts to demonstrate that the language of sorts, increasingly a language of disassociation rather than differentiation, represents a growing common identity and increasingly similar interests within social groups.<sup>5</sup> This attempt at demonstrating a 'class consciousness' within the sorts falls flat given Wrightson's preoccupation with elite sources.

<sup>1</sup> T.N. Clark and S.M. Lipset, 'Are Social Classes Dying?', *International Sociology*, Vol.6, No.4, (1991), p.397 and U. Beck and E. Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalised Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*, SAGE Publications, London (2002), p.30.

<sup>2</sup> A. Briggs, 'The Language of 'Class' In Early Nineteenth-Century England' in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History*, Macmillan, London (first 1960), (1967), pp.43, 45, 47-8, 52-3.

<sup>3</sup> K. Wrightson, 'Sorts of People' in J. Barry and C. Brooks (eds.), *The Middling Sort of People Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800*, Macmillan, (1994), pp. 29-31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 34, 37-8, 41.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 38, 48.

While it may be true, as he suggests, that the language of the elite regarding the non-elite seemed increasingly condemnatory rather than descriptive, this does nothing more than demonstrate an elite and therefore minority understanding of a dichotomous or tripartite ordering of society.

In his attempt to equate the discourse of sorts with the discourse of class, Wrightson has not only reproduced elite perceptions of society but has failed to see two glaring logical errors in his analysis which can be highlighted in contrast to the assessments of Briggs and Jones. Firstly, Wrightson's suggestion that the language of sorts emerged in discourse because of its unique suitedness to describe a changing society contrasts directly with his suggestion that the language of sorts was, "perpetuated in a new terminology" of class in the following period.<sup>6</sup> Wrightson is implying that 'sort' and 'class' are synonymous terms with the latter adding nothing to the former's meaning. Not only does this seem anachronistic but breaks from the logic employed by both Wrightson and Briggs to explain the emergence of new terms in social discourse as a result of social change. Moreover, Jones' linguistic analysis, drawing on the work of Saussure, demonstrates that social historians generally work within a romanticised understanding of language which fails to appreciate its materiality and, "the impossibility of abstracting experience from the language which structures its articulation."<sup>7</sup> Wrightson's assertion of a class-based consciousness within sorts of people, despite it not being expressed in those terms, falls firmly within this criticism. The logical flaws of Wrightson demonstrate early modern class analysis to be an anachronism. This is not to say that social hierarchies did not exist in early modern England, nor to say that they were unrelated to the classes that developed in subsequent eras.

But, as this analysis of discourse has shown, and as shall be subsequently corroborated in other sections, the attribution of class to the early modern period is simply a conflation of class relations with non-class-based, hierarchical social structures.

Now that it has been shown that analyses of discourse fail to demonstrate the existence of social class in early modern England, this section will analyse general theories of class which seek to extend class analysis through history on an objective, conceptual basis rather than a discursive one. Perhaps the most extreme of these is that offered by Foster who supposes the innate and inert class consciousness of labouring people, only to be made 'active' by an intellectual vanguard.<sup>8</sup> The Leninist dichotomy of vanguard and mass plays into the broader theme of Marxist teleology which has been widely discredited in recent years. Giddens offers one such criticism, suggesting that, "where such views do not amount to false functionalist 'explanations', they are simply inconsistent with empirical data."<sup>9</sup> Giddens' principal point is that the totalising elements of structuralist accounts of class are fundamentally incompatible with the empirical reality of immensely diverse social change.

While Giddens' criticism of structuralism is a valid one, better accounting for social variation than Foster, he himself is an advocate of the idea that the agrarian societies which he describes are fundamentally, "class-divided societies."<sup>10</sup> A number of theorists are proponents of similar, more moderate, approaches to class theory. Thompson is one of the best known of these moderate theorists. Avoiding the principally economic and social analysis of class offered by the strictures of Marxism, Thompson instead advocates regarding class as something akin to popular culture.<sup>11</sup> Thompson therefore suggests that classes can be discerned,

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> G. S. Jones, *Languages of Class Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (first 1983), (1993), p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> C. Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution*, Basil Blackwell Publisher Limited, Oxford (1982) p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, Polity Press in Association with Blackwell Publishing Ltd. Cambridge (first 1984), (2009), p. 249.

<sup>10</sup> D. Jary and J. Jary, (eds.), 'class-divided society' in, *Collins dictionary of sociology*, (4th ed.), Collins, London.

<sup>11</sup> C. Calhoun, 'The Question of Class Struggle', pp. 32-3.

and the conceptual apparatus of class be applied, to a period before its emergence in discourse.<sup>12</sup> Malcolmson adopts a similar position, emphasising the exclusivity of popular and elite cultures and their wholly different identities through the eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup> These theories are somewhat compelling, the emphasis both theorists place on ritual and collective action seem to be represented in a good deal of early modern social behaviour. Where both Thompson and Malcolmson fall short, however, is that in suggesting that class consciousness is expressed through collective cultural behaviours, their analysis fundamentally devalues theories of class consciousness in later eras. As Calhoun highlights, Thompson's logic that class-conscious activity is not ordered by concepts of class but rather by cultural relations and symbols necessarily leads to the debasement of the idea that class consciousness can be founded in class analysis.<sup>14</sup> As the analysis of Briggs' work in the previous section has shown, key to the development of class and class consciousness during the Industrial Revolution was a class-based discourse and logical conceptualisations. The conceptual attempts of both Malcolmson and Thompson to translate the strictures of class analysis to the early modern period through a cultural conception of class are therefore highly flawed. Once again, the theorists presented here have anachronistically asserted a class-based ordering of early modern society in a conceptually problematic way, essentially nullifying our more empirically supported understanding of the origins of class consciousness in industrial periods. It is therefore clear that these conceptual attempts to assert an ill-fitting class ordering into the early modern period fail to truly appreciate the era's social reality as a distinct type of classless hierarchy.

Attempts made by social historians to directly apply class analysis to the early modern period largely differ from the conceptual works previously discussed, even though they are often laden with abstract conceptions of class, insofar as they are primarily based in the analysis of the early

modern period. They therefore go beyond the work of the discussed theorists, who attempt to develop theories of class which can then be applied backwards in time, in explicitly stating, with relevant empirical evidence, that class analysis is fruitful in early modern England. Laslett's work on the period seems to generally overcome the criticisms raised against the previously mentioned conceptual analyses of class. His hypothesis is that the early modern world had only one class, the gentry, and that all other people were organized into 'status groups'.<sup>15</sup> In this analysis Laslett proposes a social ordering fundamentally different to subsequent eras which overcomes the anachronisms of both the discursive and conceptual analyses. Despite this, Laslett's work is also unconvincing. Having been written in the mid-1960s, prior to the expansion of social history into the analysis of the agency of subordinate social groups, his understanding is limited by a lack of relevant primary material and secondary literature. As such Laslett, much like Wrightson in his analysis of discourse, serves only to perpetuate minority elite perceptions, echoing the views of figures such as Sir Thomas Smith in stating that, "to count at all as an active agent in the record... you had to have the status of a gentleman".<sup>16</sup> In the express denial of agency to subordinate groups Laslett now stands against the immense contradictory evidence of modern social history, the result of which is the complete undermining of his partly class-based analysis.

No such criticism can be raised against the early work of Wood on the miners of the Peak Country. This has an overtly plebeian focus and attempts to demonstrate the potential for class-based organisation within a locality, contradicting the suggestions of Wrightson and Laslett that class identity and consciousness require homogeneity on a national scale.<sup>17</sup> This analysis of class within a locality seems highly convincing initially, especially given Wrightson's characterisation of the early modern English locality as a, "relatively complete social situation".<sup>18</sup> However, it is within Wood's claim that class is

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. xi.

<sup>13</sup> R.W. Malcolmson, *Life and Labour in England 1700-1780*, Hutchinson & Co. Ltd, London (1981), pp. 82, 93-6, 106-7.

<sup>14</sup> C. Calhoun, 'The Question of Class Struggle', p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> P. Laslett, *The World We Have Lost - further explored*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London (first 1965), (1983) pp. 22-3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp. 22-4 and K. Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680*, (first 1982), Routledge, (London, 2003), pp. 72-3.

<sup>18</sup> K. Wrightson, 'English Society', p.72.

reducible to the locality that his understanding of early modern class-based social ordering can be challenged.<sup>19</sup> By extending the logic through which Wood reduces class from a national to a local phenomenon to its necessary conclusion it can be seen to be problematic. While his analysis convincingly demonstrates a free miner identity, his insistence that identities and common practices on a local level be considered formative antecedents to class raises questions over the class status of other groups with shared economic and social positions. The potential for such specificity in class analysis to belittle the utility of the class concept as a discerning tool for historical study has been demonstrated by Reddy's assessments of both Ste Croix and Foster. Reddy highlights the analytical extremity of Ste Croix and Foster who argue that there may exist gendered and intra-familial class divisions, given the distinctive economic and social roles each play.<sup>20</sup> A logic such as this reduces the language and categories of class to a position of such low utility as to be almost unusable in real terms, where an individual can occupy many class positions based on innumerable social factors.<sup>21</sup> Far simpler than this is to avoid a class-based understanding of early modern social relations, not to deny the idea of collective identity as with the free miners of the Peak, but to better appreciate and conceptualise early modern social relations as they really were. Social exclusivity and community were facts of social existence as Wood well demonstrates, but his logic of class ends with it becoming an entirely incomprehensible category of analysis.

Attempts to apply class categorization to the early modern period, be they related to discourse, objective theorisations of what constitutes class or empirical analyses of social relations in the period itself are all essentially problematic. The increasing tendency towards a strictly class-based understanding of early modern English society seems to have emerged from the recent scholarly focus on the political agency of subordinate groups and the explosion of corroborating primary material. The

increasingly apparent parallels between the political antagonism of the early modern era and of later, expressly class-based periods, invites analysis in these terms. This essay therefore hopes to inspire a turn away from such analysis, to demonstrate the irreconcilability of class analysis and early modern society by highlighting their essential incompatibility. It is hoped that in doing so our understanding of subordinate agency and political activity can be reframed into a more suitable system of social analysis which relies on non-class-based hierarchy. Freed from the conceptual constraints of class terminology, a more fluid and representative system of early modern social relations could well be introduced.



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<sup>19</sup> A. Wood, *The politics of social conflict: The Peak Country, 1520-1770*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1999), pp. 8-9, 318.

<sup>20</sup> W.M. Reddy, 'The Concept of Class', in M.L. Bush (ed.), *Social Orders & Social Classes in Europe Since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification*, Longman Group UK Limited, Harlow (1992) pp.19-20.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 17-8.

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