

# introduction

## Class Matters

DOI: 10.4324/9780203905104-1

Everywhere we turn in our daily lives in this nation we are confronted with the widening gap between rich and poor. Whether it is the homeless person we walk by as we go about daily chores in urban areas, the beggars whose cups tinkle with the sound of a few coins, the middle-class family member or friend who faces unemployment due to cutbacks, plant closings, or relocation, or the increased cost of food and housing, we are all aware of class. Yet there is no organized class struggle, no daily in-your-face critique of capitalist greed that stimulates thought and action—critique, reform, and revolution.

As a nation we have become passive, refusing to act responsibly toward the more than thirty-eight million citizens who live in poverty here and the working masses who labor long and hard but still have difficulty making ends meet. The rich are getting richer. And the poor are falling by the wayside. At times it seems no one cares. Citizens in the middle who live comfortable lives, luxurious lives in relation to the rest of the world, often fear that challenging classism will be their downfall, that simply by expressing concern for the poor they will end up like them, lacking the basic necessities of life. Defensively, they turn their backs on the poor and look to the rich for answers, convinced that the good life can exist only when there is material affluence.

More and more, our nation is becoming class-segregated. The poor live with and among the poor—confined in gated communities without adequate shelter, food, or health care—the victims of predatory greed. More and more poor communities all over the country look like war zones, with boarded-up bombed-out buildings, with either the evidence of gunfire everywhere or the vacant silence of unsatisfied hunger. In some neighborhoods, residents must wear name tags to gain entrance to housing projects, gated camps that are property of the nation-state. No one safeguards the interests of citizens there; they are soon to be the victims of class genocide. This is the passive way our country confronts the poor and indigent, leaving them to die from street warfare, sugar, alcohol, and drug addiction, AIDS, and/or starvation.

The rich, along with their upper-class neighbors, also live in gated communities where they zealously protect their class interests—their way of life—by surveillance, by security forces, by direct links to the police, so that all danger can be kept at bay. Strangers entering these neighborhoods who look like they do not belong, meaning that they are the wrong color and/or have the appearance of being lower class, are stopped and vetted. In my affluent neighborhood in Greenwich Village, I am often stopped by shopkeepers and asked where I work, whose children do I keep, the message being you must not live here—you do not look like you belong. To look young and black is to not belong. Affluence, they believe, is always white. At times when I wander around my neighborhood staring at the dark-skinned nannies, hearing the accents that identify them as immigrants still, I remember this is the world a plantation economy produces—a world where some are bound and others are free, a world of extremes.

Most folks in my predominately white neighborhood see themselves as open-minded; they believe in justice and support the right causes. More often than not, they are social liberals and fiscal conservatives. They may believe in recognizing multiculturalism and celebrating diversity (our neighborhood is full of white gay men and straight white people who have at least one black, Asian, or Hispanic friend), but when it comes to money and class they want to protect what they have, to perpetuate and reproduce it—they want more. The fact that they have so much while others have so little does not cause moral anguish, for they see their good fortune as a sign they are chosen, special, deserving. It enhances their feeling of prosperity and well-being to know everyone cannot live as they do. They scoff at overzealous liberals who are prone to feeling guilty. Downward mobility is a thing of the past; in today's world of affluence, the message is “You got it, flaunt it.”

When longtime small family businesses close down because the rents are too high and yet another high-priced gift shop or hair salon opens, they may feel regret but understand this to be the price of economic progress—the price of real estate constantly zooming upward in cost. They have no memories of the days when the West Village was the home of struggling artists, musicians, and poets, a sanctuary for the sexually free and transgressive, a place of rebellion. They have no memory of days when black females could not rent a room or flat here because white folks saw us all, no matter our class, as prostitutes—as bad news. Nowadays we can have the keys to the big house as long as we are coming to clean and do childcare. Neighbors tell me the lack of diversity has nothing to do with racism, it's just a matter of class.

They really believe all black people are poor no matter how many times they laugh at Bill Cosby, salute Colin Powell, mimic Will Smith, dance to Brandy and Whitney Houston, or cheer on Michael Jordan. Yet when the rich black people come to live where they live, they worry that class does not matter enough, for those black folks might have some poor relatives, and there goes the neighborhood. Like the taxi drivers who won't stop because blackness means you are on your way out of the city to Brooklyn—to places that are not safe. They lump all black people together. If rich black people come into the neighborhood, then poor black people will not be far behind.

Black folks with money think about class more than most people do in this society. They know that most of the white people around them believe all black people are poor, even the ones with fancy suits and tailored shirts wearing Rolex watches and carrying leather briefcases. Poverty in the white mind is always primarily black. Even though the white poor are many, living in suburbs and rural areas, they remain invisible. The black poor are everywhere, or so many white people think.

When I am shopping in Barneys, a fancy department store in my neighborhood, and a well-dressed white woman turns to me—even though I am wearing a coat, carrying my handbag, and chatting with a similarly dressed friend—seeking assistance from the first available shopgirl and demands my help, I wonder who and what she sees looking at me. From her perspective she thinks she knows who has class power, who has the right to shop here; the look of the poor and working class is always different from her own. Even if we had been dressed alike she would have looked past attire to see the face of the underprivileged she has been taught to recognize.

In my neighborhood everyone believes the face of poverty is black. The white poor blend in, the black poor stand out. Homeless black males entertain, sing songs, tell jokes, or court attention with kind phrases hoping for money in their cup. Usually white homeless men mumble to themselves or sit silent,

a cardboard sign naming their economic pain, separated when they seek help in the mainstream world. At the end of the day black and white indigents often pool earnings, sit side by side, sharing the same bottle, breaking the same bread. At the end of the day they inhabit a world where race and class no longer mean very much.

My other home is in a small midwestern town, a liberal place in the conservative state of Ohio, a state where the Nazi party is growing strong and flags hang in the windows of the patriotic haves and have-nots. It is a racially integrated town, a town with a progressive history, and there is still a neighborly world of caring and sharing. Here, class segregation has been imported from the outside, from a professional-managerial academic class who have come in from northern cities and west coast states and have raised property values. Still, neighborhoods in our small town have greater class and racial diversity than most places in the United States. Racism and sexism exist here, as everywhere. A changing class reality that destabilizes and in some cases will irrevocably alter individual lives is the political shift that threatens. Like everywhere in the Midwest plants are closing; small universities and community colleges are cutting back; full-time employees are “let go” and part-time help is fast becoming a national norm. Class is the pressing issue, but it is not talked about.

The closest most folks can come to talking about class in this nation is to talk about money. For so long everyone has wanted to hold on to the belief that the United States is a class-free society—that anyone who works hard enough can make it to the top. Few people stop to think that in a class-free society there would be no top. While it has always been obvious that some folks have more money than other folks, class difference and classism are rarely overtly apparent, or they are not acknowledged when present. The evils of racism and, much later, sexism, were easier to identify and challenge than the evils of classism. We live in a society where the poor have no public voice. No wonder it has taken so long for many citizens to recognize class—to become class conscious.

Racial solidarity, particularly the solidarity of whiteness, has historically always been used to obscure class, to make the white poor see their interests as one with the world of white privilege. Similarly, the black poor have always been told that class can never matter as much as race. Nowadays the black and white poor know better. They are not so easily duped by an appeal to unquestioned racial identification and solidarity, but they are still uncertain about what all the changes mean; they are uncertain about where they stand.

This uncertainty is shared by those who are not poor, but who could be poor tomorrow if jobs are lost. They, too, are afraid to say how much class matters. While the poor are offered addiction as a way to escape thinking too much, working people are encouraged to shop. Consumer culture silences working people and the middle classes. They are busy buying or planning to buy. Although their fragile hold on economic self-sufficiency is slipping, they still cling to the dream of a class-free society where everyone can make it to the top. They are afraid to face the significance of dwindling resources, the high cost of education, housing, and health care. They are afraid to think too deeply about class.

At the end of the day the threat of class warfare, of class struggle, is just too dangerous to face. The neat binary categories of white and black or male and female are not there when it comes to class. How will they identify the enemy. How will they know who to fear or who to challenge. They cannot see the changing face of global labor—the faces of the women and children whom transnational white supremacist capitalist patriarchy exploits at home and abroad to do dirty work for little pay. They do not

speak the languages of the immigrants, male and female, who work here in the meat industry, in clothing sweat-shops, as farmworkers, as cooks and busboys, as nannies and domestic workers. Even though the conservative rich daily exploit mass media to teach them that immigrants are the threat, that welfare is the threat, they are starting to wonder about who really profits from poverty, about where the money goes. And whether they like it or not, one day they will have to face the reality: this is not a class-free society.

Oftentimes I too am afraid to think and write about class. I began my journey to class consciousness as a college student learning about the politics of the American left, reading Marx, Fanon, Gramsci, Memmi, the little red book, and so on. But when my studies ended, I still felt my language to be inadequate. I still found it difficult to make sense of class in relation to race and gender. Even now the intellectual left in this nation looks down on anyone who does not speak the chosen jargon. The domain of academic and/or intellectual discourse about class is still mostly white, mostly male. While a few women get to have their say, most of the time men do not really listen. Most leftist men will not fully recognize the left politics of revolutionary feminism\_ to them class remains the only issue. Within revolutionary feminism a class analysis matters, but so does an analysis of race and gender.

Class matters. Race and gender can be used as screens to deflect attention away from the harsh realities class politics exposes. Clearly, just when we should all be paying attention to class, using race and gender to understand and explain its new dimensions, society, even our government, says let's talk about race and racial injustice. It is impossible to talk meaningfully about ending racism without talking about class. Let us not be duped. Let us not be led by spectacles like the O.J.Simpson trial to believe a mass media, which has always betrayed the cause of racial justice, to think that it was all about race, or it was about gender. Let us acknowledge that first and foremost it was about class and the interlocking nature of race, sex, and class. Let's face the reality that if O.J.Simpson had been poor or even lower-middle class there would have been no media attention. Justice was never the central issue. Our nation's tabloid passion to know about the lives of the rich made class the starting point. It began with money and became a media spectacle that made more money—another case of the rich getting richer. The Simpson trial is credited with upping the GNP by two hundred million dollars. Racism and sexism can be exploited in the interests of class power. Yet no one wants to talk about class. It is not sexy or cute. Better to make it seem that justice is class-free—that what happened to O.J. could happen to any working man.

It has been difficult for black folks to talk about class. Acknowledging class difference destabilizes the notion that racism affects us all in equal ways. It disturbs the illusion of racial solidarity among blacks, used by those individuals with class power to ensure that their class interests will be protected even as they transcend race behind the scenes. When William Julius Wilson first published *The Declining Significance of Race*, his title enraged many readers, especially black folks. Without reading the book, they thought he was saying that race did not matter when what he was prophetically arguing, albeit from a conservative and sometimes liberal standpoint, was that our nation is fast becoming a place where class matters as much as race and oftentimes more.

Feminist theorists acknowledged the overwhelming significance of the interlocking systems of race, gender, and class long before men decided to talk more about these issues together. Yet mainstream culture, particularly mass media, was not willing to tune into a radical political discourse that was not

privileging one issue over the other. Class is still often kept separate from race. And while race is often linked with gender, we still lack an ongoing collective public discourse that puts the three together in ways that illuminate for everyone how our nation is organized and what our class politics really are. Women of all races and black people of both genders are fast filling up the ranks of the poor and disenfranchised. It is in our interest to face the issue of class, to become more conscious, to know better so that we can know how best to struggle for economic justice.

I began to write about class in an effort to clarify my own personal journey from a working-class background to the world of affluence, in an effort to be more class conscious. It has been useful to begin with class and work from there. In much of my other work, I have chosen gender or race as a starting point. I choose class now because I believe class warfare will be our nation's fate if we do not collectively challenge classism, if we do not attend to the widening gap between rich and poor, the haves and have-nots. This class conflict is already racialized and gendered. It is already creating division and separation. If the citizens of this nation want to live in a society that is class-free, then we must first work to create an economic system that is just. To work for change, we need to know where we stand.