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REVIEW OF *HOW CLASS WORKS: POWER AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT*

By Stanley Aronowitz  
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Those of us in the academy who desire change found inspiration in *The Knowledge Factory*, Stanley Aronowitz's timely confirmation that the corporate university not only bureaucratizes academic culture but commodifies being (since the student is a proletarian who pays for a uniform in order to work and then a strategy for accreditation and tenure). *How Class Works: Power and Social Movement* is in many ways a necessary addendum to *The Knowledge Factory* and the more recent *Last Good Job in America*, though larger in scope than either of these titles. Audacious, really, since Aronowitz's comprehensive, contextual class theory would rewrite history itself as the struggle for social formation rather than the struggle between economic classes. There is, in other words, more to transformation than owners versus workers. His method is a "cartography" that systemically maps social movement through a unified field of economics, politics, ecology, and culture. Class still drives history but class is any group vying for power and effecting change: labor organizations, civil rights groups, feminists, and environmentalists all become ruling classes when their demands shape history. Consequently, Aronowitz's dialectics emphasize horizontal contingency rather than vertical teleology. A working class at any given moment in "space-time" is unlike any before it and never divorced from the politics permitting its formation. The "political directorate that administers the institutions of rule" is therefore as important as the relations of production that comply (106). Such an encompassing venture certainly risks oversight, even for a proven polymath like Aronowitz—not to mention streamlining for argument's sake (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri had success attempting a similar project in *Empire*, but at least part of their thesis is compromised by an uncompromising nation-state). Yet in the end we find the author to be among the influential, reflective activists he so convincingly extols:

Grounded in an adversarial political culture revolutionary awareness typically arises after the fact, a retrospective summing up by the ideologists and by the activists of what actually occurred during the insurgency. In turn . . . these interpretations tend to become a social force if they are incorporated into ritual and public education and are mythologized in the stories that participants tell to others, especially their young. For this reason the importance of who controls historical narratives cannot be underestimated. They are the main components of political culture, which conditions the character and scope of subsequent struggles. (40)

This *post festum* unmasking of materiality reveals what could be seen as the book's tacit pragmatism (Jamesian rather than bureaucratic), where, for example, reflection reifies past contingencies as current resistance. Hence, the division between event and interpretation would seemingly return us to theory-praxis duality if not for the fact that Aronowitz's textualizing is activism.

2. Perhaps *How Class Works*' greatest strength lies in Aronowitz's demiurgic donning of so many hats without getting too comfortable with any one. When, for instance, he introduces himself as a reconstructed Marxist, we anticipate a Bourdieuan Aronowitz. Reconstruction maintains that the orthodoxy upholding a dialectical history or a history contingent upon the clash of two central antagonistic classes is unfit. Class can no longer be the static, *a priori* entity described in *Capital* and other seminal texts but must instead admit a dynamic, infinite grid of social relations. E. P. Thompson, an important source for Aronowitz, hinted at this revision forty years ago in his brilliant analysis of the English working class: "[W]e cannot understand class unless we see it as a social and cultural formation, arising from processes which can only be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period" (11). Within such dynamism lies history's catalyst: the myriad cultural, economic, and political forces that shape the struggle for social formation. Bourdieu's "multidimensional social space" is a seemingly appropriate alternative to the traditional view that freezes formation and resistance at the factory floor. Since class struggle concerns itself with symbolic distribution (the cultural superstructure that includes fashion and art) as well as material distribution, both cultural and economic capital account for relations across a fathomless tensor of social movement (50). Bourdieu's class model is vast, inclusive, and touted here as worthwhile, yet in its privileging of economics loses itself to a "deft determinism" that denies the full extent of history's complexity and uncertainty, a logic that Aronowitz sees as self-defeating.

3. From a Foucauldian perspective, understanding class relations entails shifting from the relatively high level of abstraction addressed by Marx and Engel's larger categories toward relations of power in all its domains, including the power to construct historical memory (58-59). While Aronowitz does acknowledge several Marxist predictions that have come true—e.g. independent artisans have been replaced by skilled wage workers, individual farmers by agricultural corporations, and grocery stores by mega market chains—he sees in small business stubbornness, the emergent managerial class, intellectual labor, and information technology enough reason to problematize the conventional proletarian-capitalist paradigm. So contrary to *Manifesto*'s assertion that the gradations within classes disappear with the rise of the middle class (92), *How Class Works* reads late-capitalism's social surplus everywhere—often in the capacities of a subaltern class that includes freelance artists, writers, and graduate students who tune in and drop outside the wage-labor system, augmenting what is typically understood as the "axis of power/powerlessness."

4. Such marginal, flexible subjectivities (and there is a sad pun working here) challenge Marxist orthodoxy in a way succinctly noted by Nick Dyer-Witheford in *Cyber-Marx*: "the importance attributed by Marxists to class—that is, location within relationships of production—is dissolved in favor of concepts of social identity as decentered, transitory, and heterogeneous" (167). Furthermore, the playing field in which these subalterns interact with larger powers is the very nexus where "transnational" influence is felt, a vibrant "local context" of regional social groups that mediate global authority (Aronowitz, *Class* 61). Discursivity now appears substantiated when subalterns exert their influence even though they don't fit into the traditional scheme—"knowledge, not labor, become[s] the linchpin of power" (162). Aronowitz does maintain some faith in postmodernism, particularly in the capacity of language and discourse to constitute social relations, evidenced by the extended quote above and his regard for the Frankfurt School and Foucault. (If, in fact, the "political and cultural unconscious can be articulated only retrospectively," it is because the retrospective glance improves our chances of stepping outside hegemony's imprisonment [53, 58].) But he cautions us that in its campaign against essentialism (here, materialism's *a priori* status), postmodernism also kills the utopian pulse underwriting resistance—utopianism itself becomes relegated to an antiquated, authoritarian Stalinism while the working class is always-already "integrated into the power system" (158). Even if Laclau and Mouffe's influential effort to divorce social movements from labor and class finds narratological legitimacy (tactically replacing localized class struggle with mutable bio-entities so that, à la Habermas, only "democracy" matters), it fails the worker with its retreat from emancipatory vision. Moreover, with all its ostensible humanitarianism, liberatory skepticism, and open-arm relativism, postmodernism has been appropriated by globalization as its religion. "Plurality" becomes a sanctified identarian reduction serving a market logic that depends on difference, while "pluralism"—writ small as American exceptionalism—perpetuates

the myth of classlessness by preaching the separation of politics and class. Political factions are "typically coalitions of disparate interest groups" (99) with few connections to class. If, then, Aronowitz's cartography permits poststructuralist ontology, it is only when social inequality and stigma are *in some sense* class bound, "objectified in material production, in the practice of everyday life" (53).

5. Everyday life necessarily involves environmental interplay. Aronowitz's thesis suggests that space is created through social formation and that the new space involves our manipulation of our environment, or nature converted for living—for capital. Labor itself, as Marx once wrote, is the transformation of all nature—human and otherwise—so the "ecological question [becomes] a class question" (172). Marxism's all-encompassing materialism—human beings *are* nature, and they do make history—must admit social labor and social activity's modification of that which has typically been considered beyond our reach—e.g. sunsets, precipitation, and topography. And environmental crisis knows no favorites: global warming, water pollution, and deforestation affect all regardless of economic status. Yet capitalism dismisses environmentalism because the "market is the only measure of social, cultural, and economic value"; ecological interests are hostile to market strategies; and capitalism depends upon continual growth and expansion, especially since the "compulsion to accumulate is innate" (175). Environmentalist power, in turn, responds by accepting economic growth but demanding regulations; by maintaining that nature, too, has inalienable rights (this thinking is perhaps best exemplified in Peter Singer's version of utilitarianism); and through social ecology's contention that ecological domination is implicated in human domination (196). As for the latter, Aronowitz cites Lewis Mumford, whose *Technics and Civilization* first defined social ecology and suggested that nature must be courted, not conquered. Readers will find this review of Mumford's work particularly telling since capitalism's tendency to abstract humanity begins with its usurping of the physical environment. Workers are degraded as environments are starved—debased to humanity's other.

6. *How Class Works* covers so much ground, so quickly, that we are never really sure of its hero. The answer must lie in how one defines history. Does one accept that the vast arrangement of social forces functioning on the workplace's peripheries *also* contributes to transformation—that is, to the same degree of what comes of the proletarian-capitalist dialectic? Or should these frequent and various struggles for formation be classified as the late Stephen Jay Gould often did challenges to Darwinian orthodoxy, as byproducts of the main event itself? If Aronowitz can commit to qualified reduction—e.g. racial inequality is borne in economics but there are very real cultures emanating; class formation is history's catalyst but class is any movement that struggles—why couldn't Marx? Aronowitz, interestingly enough, attempts this answer in his earlier, influential *False Promises*, stating that Marx himself permitted less "mechanical categories" and insisted that the working class "must be comprehended in terms of its social and political activity" (12). As Terry Eagleton eloquently puts it, though the *Manifesto* explicitly states that the downfall of the bourgeoisie is inevitable, there is room for contingency—Marx, too, would reject "that the historical modes of production would follow each other in some rigidly determined way" (47). Yet at the same time, if prior attempts at communism have failed, it is likely because those nations that attempted it were *leaping over* capitalism, bypassing the very economic system that enables the socialist state in the first place. Capitalism's "material and spiritual wealth" is requisite for a healthy communism, while laborers gain consciousness and solidarity by working through and then refusing capitalism's tyranny (42-43). Lukács, similarly, reminds us that earlier economic schemes such as feudalism would not yield social self-consciousness since man's relations were "primarily natural" and unorganized (19). In any case, Aronowitz's *enemy* is certainly easier to spot: globalization's intellectual, the neoliberal Francis Fukuyama who declares the Hegelian death knell to history, utopia, and social self-consciousness.

7. At least some of *How Class Works* is already "incorporated" and "mythologized" in the activist project, and there are moments when we wonder if Aronowitz's audience is an upper-division student first embarking on labor's extensive story or an advanced theoretician who can easily manage "space-time" in a physics-free setting (the cartography itself is *rhetorically* interdisciplinary, often requiring leaps and

bounds), but the book's rich historicism, radical reconstruction, and underlying sense of urgency make it an important contribution.

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