

## **Class, Culture and The Self**

There are two basic questions I wish to explore: One, what is the relationship between social class and personal identity? Can class-consciousness or heritage be as significant as racial or ethnic identity? Two, to what extent is class culturally determined or dependent on something other than socio-economic conditions? Is it enough to define privilege or the lack thereof strictly in terms of material wealth? Or, are class identifications more complex, variable and subtle?

I've been curious about questions like this for years and, more recently, have become frustrated with terms like "multiculturalism" and "diversity" because I'm never quite sure what they mean. More specifically, when such language shows up in mission statements, with institutional policies claiming to "respect" or "promote" them, I can't help wondering what this entails in practice. Clearly, we have a long way to go in addressing problems of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. However, class differences and the misunderstandings that arise out of them are rarely mentioned. Regardless, I do not have solutions to offer. Nor can I provide clear and distinct definitions for "class" or "culture," and I certainly don't pretend to have advice for institutional policy-makers. Rather, I merely want to show how complex these concepts can be and to consider what is at stake when personal identity is at issue. Ultimately, my aim is simply to encourage conversation on class, culture, identity and diversity, for frank and open discussion is needed now as much as ever. I also think that class matters and, in fact, can be highly significant in defining who one is, or where and how she fits into a social hierarchy -- that is, class-consciousness can be as important to a sense of self as religion or spirituality, cultural and linguistic heritage, gender identity or sexual orientation, and should not be ignored. So, if multiculturalism and diversity are principles worth embracing, how might class be relevant?

What is noticeable about Barack Obama's presidency is that one man can be both "too black" -- due to his coloring, his spouse and her family and his choice of church -- as well as "too white," given his mother's ethnic heritage, his middle-class background and educational credentials. So, what matters most? That the president of

the United States is usually identified as a black man? Or, that he was raised by his white mother and grandparents and had access to private education? How does he characterize himself and why doesn't this always coincide with the way others describe him? Also, what counts most when it comes to Justice Sonia Sotomayor's identity? Is her presence on the bench significant because she's only the third woman to serve, or because she's the first Puerto Rican? Perhaps what is noteworthy is that she was raised by a working mother in a Bronx housing project and is a "dental bill debtor"? **(1)** Because class is frequently conflated with race or ethnicity, assumptions about someone else's identity are often left unexamined and there is a tendency to *misidentify* people based on relatively superficial characteristics. Whether or not President Obama and Justice Sotomayor can provide satisfying answers to these questions, I hope to present some food for thought. **(2)**

In order to explore this further, I will be using the work of Franz Boas and Alain Locke on "race," "human types" and "culture." I will also refer to Pierre Bourdieu who offers a complex account of "class" and distinguishes three forms of "capital."

Nearly a century ago, Boas and Locke criticized static concepts of race and ethnicity as deeply problematic. More specifically, both argued that social relationships, culture and environment say more about "human types" than race, and that it is less constant and more complex than previously believed. **(3)**

After noticing a "decided plasticity of human types," Boas claims,

the mental make-up of a certain type of man may be considerably influenced by his social and geographical environment...mental manifestations depend to a great extent upon the social group in which each individual grows up (Bernasconi, pp. 87-8).

Even physiological differences may be environmentally determined given that, "numerous investigations...have been made on the proportions of the body of the well-to-do and of the poor [and] all show characteristic differences." (Bernasconi, p.85) There is nothing particularly surprising about this today -- links between poverty,

obesity, diabetes, etc. have since been well documented. However, what is still rarely acknowledged is the extent to which a "social and geographical environment" is affected by economic conditions and the ways in which that influences one's "mental make-up." For example, neighborhoods are characterized as "good" or "nice" vis-a-vis "tough" or "bad" -- terms which are almost always synonymous with "rich" and "poor," respectively. So, where are the philosophical articles which explore what these terms mean or consider the consequences of such conditions on personal identity? Since "the self" has been a central issue for philosophy for centuries, why don't philosophers devote more time to reflecting on the cultural significance of class and its implications?

Boas also points out that cultural distinctions can be observed between rural and urban peoples. Namely, "that the change in type which has been observed in America is...analogous to the difference of type that has been observed in Europe in a comparison between the urban population and rural population" (Bernasconi, p. 88). In other words, environmental and geographical conditions have proven to be more significant than racial characteristics in determining who one is or to which "human type" he belongs. In conclusion, "[t]he old idea of absolute stability of human types must...be given up" (Bernasconi, p. 88). Boas admits that a lot more research needs to be done, but understanding human persons and responding to questions of identity requires the rethinking of fundamental assumptions about race, ethnicity and culture.

Locke defends an even more dynamic position -- that is, "far from being constants, [race and culture] are variables, and in the majority of instances not even paired variables." (Bernasconi, p.89) His findings destroy fundamental assumptions that insist on linking race to culture or attempt to reduce one to the other. This does not mean that race is meaningless or that it matters not at all. Rather, his position is more subtle in as much as it,

does not deny that race *stands for* significant social characters and culture-traits or represents *in given historical contexts* characteristic differentiations of culture-types. However, it does insist against the assumption of any such constancy, historical or intrinsic, as would make it possible to posit an organic connection between them and to argue on such grounds the determination of one by the other" (Bernasconi, p. 90, my italics).

Not only does Locke notice the symbolic aspect of race, he directly confronts its historical origins and current significance. Specifically, who one is, how she identifies herself or is identified by others, depends upon specific social, cultural and environmental conditions. Moreover, Locke relies on terms like "culture-type" or "social race," to distinguish his position from those based on biological or physiological difference, and insists that "blood intermixture is only one of the conducive conditions to cultural assimilation." On this view, instead of regarding culture as expressive of race, "race by this interpretation is regarded as itself a culture product." In examining different sociological studies, he concludes that, "the best procedure would be to substitute for the term *race* the term *culture-group*." (Bernasconi, pp. 94-5, his italics)

Here's a specific case in point: I remain very close to a proud Puerto Rican man. He has long blonde hair, green eyes and light skin, so almost no one identifies him as Latino. Native Spanish speakers hear that distinctive slang, and still question his heritage; while native English-speakers listen to his accent and continue to express doubts about his ethnic identity. I too was skeptical when we first met and insisted that he was "faking" the accent. "You look like a stereotypical California surfer," I said derisively. His response: "Yeah, I surfed too...*in Puerto Rico!*" To most, it quickly became apparent that he was not white or Anglo-American. So, "what" was he and how did he identify himself? He had grown up extremely poor in a crime-ridden San Juan neighborhood. He was highly intelligent, hard to control and utterly uninterested in formal education. (I often teased him about being "illiterate in two languages," and we found it hilarious that he needed me to correct notes he'd written in Spanish.) Most of his friends were black. But, those who were Puerto Rican never identified themselves that way and they did not regard him as ethnically or culturally different. As they explained it, "white" and "black" in Puerto Rico refer to class distinctions not racial ones. These terms have nothing to do with skin or hair color, or any other physical characteristics. Rather, who or "what" one is depended on the neighborhood in which he grew up. And, in New York City, just about anyone with a modicum of Puerto Rican heritage identifies him/herself as *boricua*. Moreover, in the United States nearly everyone identifies as "middle-class," regardless of his/her actual socio-

economic status and that is generally true of Puerto Ricans as well -- no one wants to be considered "white" (i.e., wealthy and spoiled) or "black" (i.e., destitute and low-class). So, given what Locke says, should *boricuas* be considered a distinct culture-group? And, how should "culture-group" be defined?

In response to the last question, Locke's position is somewhat circular and difficult to pin down:

[T]he evidence shows most cultures to be highly composite. Sometimes there seems to be a race relatively pure physically with a considerably mixed culture, sometimes, perhaps more frequently, a highly mixed race with a relatively fused culture. But in the large majority of cases the culture is only to be explained as the resultant of the meeting and reciprocal influence of several culture strains, several ethnic contributions. Such facts nullify two of the most prevalent popular and scientific fallacies, the ascription of a total culture to any one ethnic strain, and the interpretation of culture in terms of the intrinsic rather than the fusion values of its various constituent elements. (Bernasconi, p. 96)

Simply stated, cultures are complexly constituted or constructed. Moreover, they are subject to historical, geographical and environmental (i.e., *extrinsic*) conditions. Like Boas, Locke's approach is more critical than theory-building. In this case, he is arguing that two popular yet fallacious assumptions must be rejected entirely -- specifically, the idea that any "total culture" can be directly ascribed to a single "ethnic strain" and that culture in general can be explained in terms of discrete "intrinsic" elements.

Locke recognizes that a lot of corrective work needs to be done in order to properly understand culture or account for cultural differences. Thus, he concludes by describing a procedure that should be less prone to the errors and distortions of standard methodologies. First, a given culture should be analyzed and described,

in terms of its own culture-elements, second, its organic interpretation in terms of its own intrinsic values as a vital mode of living, combined if possible with *an historical account of its development and derivation*, and then finally and not till then its assignment to culture-type and interpretation as a *stage of culture*. (Bernasconi, p. 99, my italics)

Since Locke and Boas both acknowledge the historicity of concepts

like race, ethnicity and culture, why not do the same for class-consciousness and personal identity? Assuming that it's possible to, at least provisionally, define a culture-group, how might class-groups or types be identified and distinguished?

To understand one of the ways in which class, culture and identity intersect, consider what Bourdieu says about "capital" or "accumulated labor." **(4)** Specifically,

[it] can present itself in three fundamental guises: as *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications; and as *social capital*, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of a title of nobility (Richardson, p. 243, his italics).

Simply put, distinguishing class status may be as difficult as identifying a culture-group. Whether one is privileged or not depends not only on *how much* capital he owns but on *what kind* he possesses. One may be rich in culture -- for instance, multilingual, well-read and highly educated -- but economically and socially disadvantaged. On the other hand, there are plenty of examples of people for whom the situation is reversed. Namely, those who are economically advantaged and socially connected, but utterly lacking in cultural capital -- as my rather poor but quite cultured Chinese grandfather would say, those are the individuals who "have *no class*." Property ownership, level of education and social standing are all significant and each contributes to the ways in which "self" and class are understood. However, economic capital alone can be immediately liquidated or quickly converted into money. The other two, social connections and educational qualifications, are convertible if and only if "certain conditions" prevail. So, how significant are educational credentials in relation to class identity, and what are the necessary conditions for its accumulation and conversion?

According to Bourdieu, cultural capital also has three forms or "guises." It exists,

in the *embodied* state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and

body; in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.)...; in the *institutionalized* state, a form of objectification...[for instance] educational qualifications (Richardson, p. 243).

What is most salient for personal identity is "embodied cultural capital" for it is most intimately tied to oneself. However, it is the hardest to convert because of the time it takes to cultivate and transmit. Simply put, the accumulation of cultural capital "costs time, time which must be invested personally...it cannot be done second hand" (Richardson, p. 244). Given Bourdieu's analogy, embodied cultural capital is like "a muscular physique or a suntan" -- namely, personal characteristics that are physical rather than intellectual and take time to acquire. Moreover, this kind of capital "cannot be transmitted instantaneously (unlike money, property rights, or even titles of nobility) by gift or bequest, purchase or exchange" (Richardson, p. 245). Thus, some kinds of capital are irreducibly *mine*. For instance, my native dialect or earned educational credentials depend on personal capacities -- like memory -- or my own lived experience and cannot be passed on like money or property. In fact, according to Bourdieu, cultural capital can be so much a part of oneself that it declines and dies with the individual. Differently stated, some kinds of capital are as mortal as the human body:

Because it is thus linked...to the person in his biological singularity...it defies the old, deep-rooted distinction the Greek jurists made between inherited properties (*ta patroa*) and acquired properties (*epikteta*), i.e., those which an individual adds to his heritage" (Richardson, p. 245).

Finally, "because the social conditions of the transmission and acquisition of cultural capital are more disguised than those of economic capital," it tends to go unrecognized as such. Instead, we judge others based on what Bourdieu calls the "commonsense view" which "sees academic success or failure as a effect of natural aptitudes..." (Richardson, p. 243). What is ignored is the "logic of transmission and accumulation" which is conditioned by the time needed for acquisition. Therein lies another "biological" aspect of capital: "Differences in the cultural capital possessed by the family imply differences first in the age at which the work of transmission and accumulation begins -- the limiting case being full use of the time *biologically* available..." (Richardson, p. 246-7, my italics). For

example, if I have to spend all my waking hours working in order to eat or insure that my basic physiological needs are met, there is little time to read literature, study science or pursue a college degree. In conclusion,

the length of time for which a given individual can prolong his acquisition process depends on the length of time for which his family can provide him with the free time, i.e., time free from economic necessity, which is the precondition for the initial accumulation... (Richardson, p. 247).

This is where the link, between economic and cultural capital, is most evident. Moreover, it demonstrates that it is not necessarily a mistake to conflate the two. Specifically, those who are born into economically privileged families have the “free time” to earn educational qualifications -- cultural capital that may later be transformed into economic capital. It explains why education is considered so significant to class identity, why working parents are willing to sacrifice their own time to provide opportunities for their children. The hope is that the next generation will be able to put cultural capital to use and obtain greater economic security. In other words, “time *is* money.” Finally, just as the poor are ever conscious that they lack economic capital and financial security so too are most working folk aware that time is limited. Perhaps this explains why my own parents, immigrants who remained economically disadvantaged almost their entire lives, frequently admonished us that, “life is short” and they’ve “no time for bullshit!” For better or worse, this consciousness that time is not something to be “wasted,” along with the general unwillingness to put up with nonsense, defined who we were as a family and remains part of our cultural legacy.

I will finish with one last anecdote and another reference to personal experience:

Years ago, I was friendly with a Pakistani woman who had had grown up in an upper-class, suburb and had changed her name to “Lisa.” She was usually described as “South Asian” and she resented it. She’d get irritated if anyone tried to speak to her in Urdu, even though it was the language she spoke with her family and she was fluent in it. After she married a fifth generation Scottish-American, I teased her by asking if she had, “always felt like a blond-haired, blue-eyed



cheerleader." "Yeah, pretty much!" she replied. Although we both laughed over it, I wondered how her parents would have felt. Since then, she's reassumed her given name and wholeheartedly embraces her familial language and cultural heritage.

I've had my own experience with "culture shock" but it's not always clear what the source is. Is it regional or because I relocated from densely populated, urban environments to rural, small town living? Is it due to a change in class status after I earned a graduate degree? Or, because I'd lived most of my life surrounded by non-native English speakers with distinct national origins and now live in a relatively homogeneous, "mono-cultural" community? I suspect it's a little of each but whether or not each of these differences makes a difference depends on circumstances. Living in New York and Los Angeles, my parents immigrant backgrounds were virtually irrelevant. I also remained oblivious of my family's class status as long as I was among those who'd had similar experiences. As for my educational credentials and the cultural capital I managed to accumulate, I am only self-conscious about this when I return to a childhood neighborhood or am among my husband's people -- manual laborers who keep confusing philosophy with psychology. Finally, it never occurred to me that a distinction between rural and urban peoples actually existed until I found myself living far from a major metropolitan center -- that is, I only identify as a "city girl" when I'm not in one. This reminds me of something a friend of my father's once said -- a Jewish man so secular he'd never heard of Yom Kippur! As he put it, "I only feel like a Jew when I'm surrounded by anti-Semites!"

What I wish to underscore is that the particular circumstances in which one finds herself affects her sense of self -- that is, context counts. Like Locke, Boas and Bourdieu, I too see culture, class and identity as complex and dynamic rather than static or stable. And, while I understand the current fascination with genetic heritage, I can't help thinking that it matters far less than one's own personal narrative, family history, economic status and geographic origins. Moreover, I believe that critical inquiry and dialogue must continue. Each of us needs to question our own assumptions and ask questions of others, since an individual's sense of self can be in conflict with the ways others describe him. Class too can be a part of personal identity as much as national origin, ethnic background,

linguistic heritage, religion, spirituality, sexuality, etc. However, if this is correct, class-consciousness is closer to sexual orientation than gender or ethnic identity. Since one's socio-economic status or level of education is largely invisible, identifying as "low-class" can be as painful as being "outed" as gay, especially if the dominant culture is unsympathetic or of a different type.

In conclusion, I think everyone is "multicultural," to some degree and in different respects, for each of us has a diverse ethnic heritage and relatively complex personal history. Static categories of race, ethnicity, class and culture are overly simplistic and can be completely inappropriate when it comes to identifying who or "what" someone is. And, determining which defining characteristics are most significant almost always depends on context. It also seems that a commitment to diversity will always involve some collateral damage. In other words, hurt feelings, offended sensibilities and misunderstandings are an unavoidable consequence of colliding cultural differences. Nonetheless, the pain of these encounters can be mitigated and there is a lot to learn, about ourselves and each other, that would be otherwise impossible. As I constantly remind my students, philosophy is not for the timid -- neither is a commitment to multiculturalism and diversity!

