

Theoretical Perspectives on Class Consciousness: From Karl Marx to Louis Althusser

Journal of Society in Kashmir
11(1) 170-177

ISSN: 2249-667X

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<http://sociology.uok.edu.in/Files/c2d3b27>

8-4cf7-49a5-9525-

af5e352f2900/Journal/d75acedb-df45-4cd2-

b337-14f238e62cad.pdf

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Abstract

Class-consciousness is often defined as politically expressed economic group-interest of a class. However the concept of working class-consciousness is very complex so cannot be defined by a single dimension or by a single theory because it is manifested in various ways. However, the researchers have made various attempts to clarify the different dimensions and put forward various theories of class consciousness. This paper attempts to analyze these theoretical perspectives on class consciousness by different people at different times and spaces.

Keywords

Class, Class consciousness, theory, trade union, worker

Introduction

Industrialization has affected every society and classes in one or the other way. From its very inception industrialization has resulted in conflict between the employers and workers. The apathy of the employers towards their workers compelled workers to organize themselves under unions to demand for their rights. Trade unions are an expression of polarization of workers against the powerful managers in the capitalist society. Thus trade unions have emerged as an important organization in the class struggle between the employers and workers which have invited the attention of thinkers. As various social, economic, political, historical and cultural factors have shaped the development of class consciousness the views of thinkers have also evolved along these lines.

To Marx, class-consciousness means politically expressed economic group-interest of a class. This subjective awareness implies that the

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members of a class perceive their class as different from other class; that they develop a feeling of identification with members of the same class and a feeling of difference and opposition to the other class; and that they possess a capacity to act collectively to pursue collective interests of their class (Patel, 1994). There have been various attempts to put forward the dimensions of class-consciousness. But the concept of working class-consciousness is very complex so cannot be defined by a single dimension because it is manifested in various ways. However, the researchers have made various attempts to clarify the different dimensions of class consciousness. Oscar Glantz observes class-consciousness means more than mere awareness of economic position. Glantz identifies two dimensions to measure class-consciousness (i) allegiance: self-identification with one's class, and (ii) orientation: (a) favorable orientation to one's class and (b) unfavorable orientation to the opposite class (Glantz, 1958). According to Lazarsfeld, the class consciousness has four dimensions: (i) symbolic or emotional (ii) distrust of class enemies (iii) all-embracing lifestyle, and (iv) political militancy (Lazarsfeld, 1972). Leggett identified four dimensions for measuring the working-class consciousness (i) class verbalization: tendency to discuss issues in class terms (ii) skepticism: belief that wealth is distributed mainly to benefit the middle classes (iii) militancy: a disposition to engage aggressively in action to advance the interests of one's own class and (iv) egalitarianism: favoring a redistribution of wealth in such a way that each individual would have the same amount (Legget, 1964). From this analysis of class consciousness two important dimensions of the class consciousness can thus be identified namely class solidarity and class opposition. Moreover many theories have been put forth to understand how far trade unions could channelize workers consciousness, are trade unions merely a pressure group which represents a portion of citizens who have a distinct set of economic interests; or still, do they play the role of disintegrator with or without the intention to strive for a new form of society.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

Marx and Engels have put forward the idea of class which revolves around the process of class struggle. The immediate aim of trade union, according to them, is to protect the interests of the workers. While economic conditions transform the mass of people into workers, this mass is only a class-in itself and not yet a class-for-itself. It transforms into a subjective class when a set of values and beliefs emerges along with an organization (trade union) to represent and realize the objective interests of the working class (Marx, 1976). Thus workers life and work situation such as exploitation, appropriation of surplus value by capitalists,

deprivation, periodic unemployment poverty, etc. help in facilitating the consciousness. Thus a mass of workers comes together and forms the class consciously. They argue that the workers join trade unions because it is in the nature of human beings not to surrender before the economic oppression (Engels, 1958). Marx believes that trade unions are the means for the uniting the working class and an important manifestation of class consciousness to overthrow the capitalist class (Marx, 1976). Marx and Engels had what Hyman (1971) calls an “optimistic’ view on trade unions, which they did not relinquish despite their occasional disappointments in their later life.

Richard Hyman

Richard Hyman has a different view as far as trade unions as a facilitator in the formation of class consciousness is concerned. His argument is sometimes more inclined to Marx and Engels but at other times to Lenin. Hyman claims that the limits of trade union consciousness can vary markedly between different historical contexts and can shift radically with only a brief passage of time. In this context he sees trade unions as part of the problem as well as solution thereof. Trade unions can be obstacle in the formation of class consciousness and the same time can act as a facilitator in the formation of class consciousness (Hyman 2001). Trade unions can be obstacle because they can easily get integrated into the capitalist system working in the capitalist system. At the same trade unions can be viewed as a starting point for the formation of class consciousness because any socialistic movement has its genesis in the production process. As for Hyman, although he agrees that there can be no clear answer to the question of ‘in what sense can unions be regarded as agencies of class struggle, of resistance to capitalism? For ‘trade unionism itself is deeply ambiguous and contradictory’ and acknowledges that while ‘while trade unions can never become fully anti-capitalist organizations, socialists can help strengthen their anti-capitalistic tendencies (Hyman 1989). Despite their competent analyses of capitalism, in the context of trade relations the Marx-Engels and Hyman theoretical perspective neglected the organizational aspects of unions.

Eric Hobsbawm

A contemporary view equivalent to that of Lenin is found in Hobsbawm. He criticizes the modern labor movement in England because it confined itself to the immediate economic needs. Thus limited scope of trade unions to demand economic benefits can be termed as trade union consciousness which is compatible with the capitalist system (Hobsbawm, 1967). Like Lenin he also differentiates between class

consciousness and political consciousness. But this theory is criticized on the ground that wages struggle constitutes an important and essential part of the working class struggle (Kelly, 1988). It is apparent that the Leninist does not see the trade unions as an autonomous organization. Rather, the real significance of the Leninist view lies, in the fact that the trade union behavior shall be studied in connection with the influence of its ideology and nature of its leadership.

Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb

The view of Sydney and Beatrice on trade unions can be best be summarized as industrial reformism. In fact they do not see trade unions as a revolutionary institution; they tend to consider them to be ultimate organization for protecting the workers interest in the capitalist society. They argued that the goals of trade union is not limited to economical but also political in nature. The trade unions have two important goals; one short term and other long term. The short term goal is the day to day struggle in demanding better wages and managing of working hours. As far as long term goal of the trade union is concerned it is the abolition of the capitalist society. According to webs trade union is “a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving of the working wages” (Webb, 1884). Thus trade union is a continuous association which has a potential to transform into the labour movement. The webbian perspective is based on an almost mechanical view on both historical and decision making process. Therefore it can be concluded, although webbian perspective grants trade unions the role of social reformer, in this given role trade unions are supposed to play its role within the capitalistic system without even questioning it.

Antonio Gramsci

Gramsci is the one who held the most pessimistic view on trade union as far as their role in revolutionary movement is concerned. Gramsci believed that unions are fire extinguisher on revolution, thus having pessimistic view about the potential of trade unions. In fact he had no hope in the revolutionary potential of trade unions due to their origin, ideology, structure and function (Gramsci, 1978). According to him the origin of trade union is very capitalist because it establishes the monopoly on the commodity. The trade union is based on the bureaucratic institutional hierarchy where the machines and bureaucracy destroys the creative spirit of the worker.

Frank Tannenbaum

Tannenbaum believes that the birthplace of the trade union movement is the shop, the factory, the mine and the industry. The existing conditions have already formed the trade organizations only to be announced by the workers or a leader. He believes that the trade union movement is the result of the machine (Tannenbaum, 1921). He says that the trade union is the social group which provides platform for the organized expression to workers in modern industry. Frank further states that machine will break the society into pieces according to their job. Frank believes that the trade union is such kind of an organization which gives the expression to the group life of the modern industry (Singh 2012).

Gyorgy Luckas

Luckas understands class consciousness to mean the appropriate and rational reaction imputed to a particular typical position in the process of production. Actions by individuals of one class are ultimately defined by its consciousness of its economic interests versus other classes, i.e. by its relation to the elements of the totality. In Capitalist society the bourgeois class gives the total meaning of unity by its ideology considered as if it represents the interests of the whole society. However, Lukacs argues, this is a false consciousness because it represents in actuality the interests of only one segment and not the totality.

John Goldthrope and David Lockwood

They have put forward the theory of emergence of new working class which is different from the traditional working class as well as middle class. It indicates that neither a high degree of (typically middle-class) status consciousness nor (traditional proletariat) class consciousness exist among the new working class. It rejected the liberal claims of embourgeoisement and neo-Marxist hopes for revolutionary potential of "new working class". Goldthrope contended that formation of trade unions reflect the economic rationality of the workers and implying nothing in the way of discontent that can be channeled in the direction of revolutionary objectives.

Selig Pearlman

Pearlman has opined that the European workers formed the trade unions due to the scarcity of labour. Later when they sensed abundance they became job conscious whereas American workers, first sensed abundance and became job conscious and then there was scarcity of labour which made them class consciousness thus formed trade unions. According to Pearlman the genuine trade unions are bread and butter trade unions and the genuine trade unionists are inherently bread and butter trade

unionists. If they go beyond that it is not what the constitution of trade union demands but because some outside influence some intellectual, idealist, or some social reformer wants them to do so (Pearlman, 1970). He argues many workers in Europe have stepped beyond this job conscious bread and butter unionism into class conscious political trade unionism. It is only because of outside influences, whereas American unions have demonstrated how free they are from those outside influences. He believes that the genuine trade unions would continue to demand the bread and butter for the workers. This theory is also known as scarcity conscious of manual workers. He rejected the idea of class consciousness as an explanation for the origin of the trade union movement but substituted it with what he called job consciousness.

Michael Mann

Michael Mann argues that a subjective-objective dichotomy does not actually exist. There is a unity between the subjective and objective factors of the revolution. According to him when the subjective elements are undeveloped, the objective elements must be so as well (Mann, 1973). Thus, the absence of a revolutionary consciousness is indication of the absence of a revolutionary situation. It seems clear that the subjective conditions are directly proportionate to the revolutionary situation. This does not deny that over time the objective conditions may become more suitable; it is only to assert that this process is not linear. Periods of crisis accentuates the process of revolution in the society. According to Mann development of capitalism by itself would not produce the subjective factors or a revolutionary consciousness (Ibid, 1973). It can be in other words said that Mann believes that the highest form of capitalism will lead to the revolutionary consciousness which seem to be problematic hypothesis (Thomson, 1974).

Louis Althusser

According to Louis Althusser the ideological apparatus can be properly described as belonging to the state, even if they are formally separated from the state. He believes that the state actually has two components: the repressive state apparatus, including the army, the police, and the courts, which directly enforce class rule, and the ideological state apparatus (ISA), which maintains complicity and identity with class society (Ryder, 2014). Althusser believes that the private sphere of family life is included in the scope of the state, because its function is to maintain and develop an ideology, thereby psychologically insisting on and participating in

class society. Althusser argues that ideology has a profound relationship with subjective experience. What he meant was that the inherent practices and beliefs of ideology produced a sense of identity. Our conscious experience of the world and personality are always related to the influence of the social system that nurtures and educates us. In addition, the essence of ideology is to conceal this essentially artificial and imposed nature. Rather than treating our direct experiences as conditional, they seem to be "free" or obvious explanations of the world. Althusser's point of view is that the economy is fundamentally constituted by exploitation, and such exploitation always creates conflicts. Ideology is a secondary structure that strives to ensure the continuation of the capitalist mode of production and to make the working class continue to persevere in the system that oppresses them. However, he believes that ideology cannot maintain uninterrupted rule because it is produced by a machine trapped in a material class society. Since these institutions are related to labor, they cannot be completely owned and controlled by capitalist countries, nor can they be completely reconciled into a unified social whole. Therefore, ideology carries proletarian values and bourgeois domination. The distorted proletarian element in the capitalist ideology can be strengthened and clarified, and the entire edifice can be overthrown in the course of the revolution. But because personal experience always consists of ideology, this liberation process must always be part of the commitment to working class activities, not as a break between the individual and the delusion and conformity.

Conclusion

The above discussion points to the fact that the role of trade unions has been variably disputed besides that the class consciousness can be expressed in several ways as well by identifying several dimensions. Above theories provide much needed clarity in the sense that the trade unions work to perpetuate the existing system but also operate to undermine it. Trade unions oscillated between these contradictory functions. Trade unions as an institution do not challenge the existence of capitalist society based on class division. Thus trade unions by themselves produce only a sectoral base for socialist movement and associating class consciousness with trade unions at the expense of other factors may not be a right approach. At the same time trade unions are produced and reproduced by social conditions thus cannot be totally assimilated into the capitalist society, to the point of disappearing as a differential force at all. Though there is no unanimity on the political nature of the trade unions in the above mentioned theories however most

of these theories agree on the economic nature of the trade unions. The trade unions mostly are concerned with the economic interests of the workers and they rarely concern itself with the overthrowing of capitalist system as a whole. Many of the above discussed theories thus differentiate between the trade union consciousness and the class consciousness on the basis of interests central to the trade unions. But most of these theories confirm the fact that the trade unions to a large extent channelize the workers consciousness at the economic level. It is pertinent to mention here that the trade unions can facilitate the formation of class consciousness but at the same time it can be obstacle for such formation. Trade unions can easily get influenced by the management and get integrated in the capitalist system. But at the same time formation of trade unions can be viewed as a starting phase of the class consciousness. Althusser's point of view is that the economy is fundamentally constituted by exploitation, and such exploitation always creates conflicts. Ideology is a secondary structure that strives to ensure the continuation of the capitalist mode of production and to make the working class continue to persevere in the system that oppresses them.

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