

***Class and Politics in USA***

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Class is almost an effervescent concept, hence the difficulty in its quantification. Politics though somewhat easier to grasp, is quite a robust and energetic activity; one that includes a myriad of activities— voting, standing for elections and even hosting fundraising dinners.

In the contemporary analysis of politics, the concept of class had had an erratic connotation. There was a time, in the 1950s and the early 1960s when the dominant approach to politics was pluralism, and class played, at best, a marginal role in the explanations of political phenomena. Political outcomes in democratic societies were viewed as results of the interplay of cross-cutting forces interacting in an environment of negotiations, coalition-building and consensus-formation. Some of the organised interest groups like unions and business associations were based in constituencies with a particular class character, yet they never received special ‘class’ status.

With the revival of Marxist interpretations in the social sciences, during the period between the late 1960s through the early 1980s, the study of class became the core of many an analysis of state and politics. Class was taken seriously and accorded an importance in the analysis of politics even by scholars, whose theoretical perspective was not based on class. It was in the course of the 1980s, as US national politics took on a predominantly manifest class character, that the academic popularity of class analysis as a framework for attempting to understand politics steadily declined, but by no means to the ‘trivial’ status accorded to it in the 1950s survived.

**Concept of Class**

The word ‘class’ can be used to designate a variety of quite distinct theoretical concepts. Here it is necessary to distinguish between gradational and relational class concepts. For many, ‘class’ has merely been a way of identifying strata (mainly keeping income distribution in mind) in an economy. These gradational classes are simply rungs on the ladder of inequalities. (Subaltern theorists and scholars disagree with this classification). Thus, the references in US contemporary politics to ‘middle class taxpayers’ can be replaced with ‘middle income taxpayers’.

For others, especially for those following the Marxist or Weberian theoretical traditions, the concept of class does not designate the levels of income as such, but rather the nature of the underlying social relations, which generate such outcomes. In this relational class concept, capitalists and workers do not simply differ in the amount of income they acquire, but also in the means through which they acquire that income.

Both gradational and relational concepts of class may be applied in the analysis of politics. Many deploy the gradational concept to examine the different political attitudes of the rich, the middle class and the poor. Relational concepts on the other hand are anchored in the causal mechanisms that generate the gradational inequalities. Analyzing the determinants of political behaviour in terms of relational class digs deeper into the causal process, identifying categories of actors who live in real interactive social relations to each other.

The 'poor', 'middle' and the 'rich' are arbitrary divisions on a continuum, which may not necessarily systematically interact with each other. Building the concepts of class around these 'grades' alone cannot assist the study of the formation of organized collectives engaged in political action. It must also be noted that Weberians characterize class in terms of market relations; while Marxists define them by social relations of production. Scholars in both traditions however acknowledge the importance of variety of social categories, loosely labeled the new 'middle-class(es)'— professionals, managers and executives, bureaucratic officials and perhaps highly educated white collar employees, who do not fit neatly into the polarised relations between capitalists and workers. These new class structures clubbed as the tertiary sector emerged along with economic and technological changes in the society and they further blur the lines among classes.

## **Class in USA**

The absence of class in USA is a widespread popular 'belief'. Americans assert that either classes are non-existent or they believe and claim that they belong to the great middle class. Close scrutiny of American political historians reveals that most of them are oblivious to any interconnections between politics and class, while the few who take account of them tend to attribute trivial significance to the relationship. This attitude towards class itself is a manifestation of a more inclusive American belief in what scholars call 'American exceptionalism'. Most Americans are convinced that the New World is and always has been different from, and more innocent and egalitarian than the Old. Yet for all undeniable singularity of American history where it has been unique, the evidence is abundant that classes, class lines and distinctions of status did exist as they have existed elsewhere in the modern world.

It is difficult to categorize American class in Weberian and Marxist lines because Americans do not seem to share a common consciousness, divided as they have been by

race, ethnicity, religion, income, and type and prestige of occupation. The families and individuals that constitute a distinctive class in USA, are roughly similar in a number of significant aspects: their levels of wealth, their means of achieving it, the prestige, quality and relative abrasiveness of these means, their style of living, including their uses of leisure, their social repute (resting among other things, on their racial, ethnic and religious identity, the kind and prestige of schooling they provide to their young, the organizations to which they belong and the role they play in these organizations), the standing of the social circle within which they move and with which they are intimate (and how long have they held such standings), and the influence and power they command in their own and in the larger American community. In differentiating Americans by class, it seems sensible to speak not of capitalists and a working class, but rather of upper, middle and lower classes, with each of these categories in turn subdivided into upper and lower segments. There is no suggestion here that the six level hierarchical structure does the explaining perfectly, no categorization can do full justice to the complexities that actually abound in life.

The precise ingredients of upper class membership were quite different in Thomas Jefferson's America from what they were in J. Pierrepont Morgan's a century later. Yet in one era as in the other, an exclusive, fabulously wealthy, numerically miniscule, and socially and politically powerful class was significant element of the American social order.

The six level structure is flexible enough to absorb the changes that inevitably overtake the ranking of particular indicators over the course of time, while effectively accounting for the social gulf that separates groups of American families from one another at all times. In view of the dissimilarities in life-style and 'world view' of those at the upper and lower levels of the wage earning category, it seems inappropriate to speak of a single working class in America, let alone of a single working class outlook.

Class has controlled the quality and the quantity of the food that the Americans eat, the clothes that they wear, their household furnishings and all their other possessions, the attractiveness or lack thereof of their homes and neighbourhoods, the very air they breathe, the extent of their leisure and the kind of uses to which it is put, whether or not they have to work, and whether their work is fatiguing, demoralizing, and irksome, or attractive and fulfilling. It determines their social universe and their sexual behaviour, the quality of their marriages, and their fertility. The quality of education and the 'socialization experiences' of their children have been found to vary significantly according to their families' social classes, resulting in dissimilar characteristics, meaning ultimately different positions as adults in society.

A swift glance at American history makes clear; that class and status distinctions emerged during the nation's colonial beginnings and have subsequently retained their importance, notwithstanding the modifications inevitably produced by time.

## **Class structures in early America**

This was the time of the three great geographical sections— New England, the ‘middle colonies’ and the south. Class differences vitally affected societies in each area. An upper crust emerged, whatever the topography, the crops, the labour system, or chief industries of a locale or a region. The ‘better sort’ as they liked to describe themselves, were richer and more envied and powerful by far than the ‘meaner sort’ below. Whether their affluence was due to slaves and landownership as was true of the Izards, Draytons, and Middletons in South Carolina and the Bryds, Carters and Carys of Virginia; to land, livestock and commerce as was true of Llyods, Pembertons, Norrises in Pennsylvania and Van Rensselaers, DePeysters and Beekmans in New York; or to land, fishing, shipbuilding and commerce as was true of Jacksons, Cabots and Crowninsheilds in New England<sup>1</sup>— the small colonial upper-upper class lived lives dramatically unlike those experienced by the small proprietors and business people, the professionals and clerks, the skilled artisans and farmers, the labourers and indentured servants, and black slaves who composed the great bulk of American society. And whatever else it accomplished, the American Revolution did not undermine the class system nor did it weaken the barriers between the classes that had been erected in the colonial era.

## **Class lines until the civil war**

The Jacksonian era is often described as the ‘era of the common man’ or the ‘age of egalitarianism’, because of a long enduring conventional scholarly wisdom that in the pre-civil war decades, class lines were the hardest to detect, that class barriers were easily surmounted and the upper crust hold over power was almost negligible. Alexis de Tocqueville’s ‘Democracy in America’ published in 1835 and 1840 is taken as gospel by most students, but its egalitarian portrait may be more based on logic and hearsay not factual evidence, as most critics point out.

Wealth was most unequally distributed in this period; huge commercial fortunes in the north and landed fortunes in the south, combined with the marginal incomes earned by artisans and farmers produced a skewed distribution in which the richest one-hundredth of the nation’s families owned more than one-third of the wealth and the richest tenth owned more than four-fifths. For all his possession of the suffrage and the right to hold office, the common man rarely infiltrated the entrenched mechanisms that in most places controlled the major parties and policy making.

## **Social mobility in the Golden Age**

The emergence of a triumphant or mature industrialism in the decades after the Civil War inevitably modified the class order and its operations, but did nothing to reduce the gulfs between the classes or the impact of class on American political and economic life. At one end of the scale, fortunes of unprecedented magnitude were converted into lifestyles,

dwellings and furnishings of almost ridiculous proportions, flaunted in accord with materialistic values that flourished during what Mark Twain called the 'Gilded Age'. At the other end of the scale, growing armies of industrial labour, swelled by an influx of non-English speaking, largely docile and desperately needy immigrants settled for conditions both in and out of shops that rarely met the minimal standards of living. Nor did the farmers fare well under the 'new industrial order', as the 'populist revolt' made dramatically clear.

### **Class in the Twentieth Century**

The US in the twentieth century became finally and irreversibly an urban society— a society whose perfected transportation and communication network paved the way to the creation of a 'national upper class'. Robert S. Lynd<sup>2</sup> has argued in an incisive criticism of the work of C. Wright Mills<sup>3</sup> and others that the concept of elites (or even of some power elite) as a substitute for the class concept is an illusory one; and that even in America there is dominant class which is at the center and the source of meaningful community power, and of which the various elites are only branches and tributaries. There was also a reverse trend at this time of describing the American society as classless. Classless does not mean in the American ideal 'an absence of rank, class, power and prestige, more exactly it means a class system that is casteless and therefore characterized by greater mobility and interpenetration between classes'.<sup>4</sup>

### **Contemporary attitudes toward classes**

If persons inhabiting the lower levels of the social hierarchy are today able to do certain things and enjoy benefits that were once unknown to them, these facts have not caused social stratification to disappear or the wall dividing classes from one another to crumble. Sharp disparities of wealth, life-style, prestige and influence remain. Yet if the American class structure and the relative contentment of those occupying its lower echelons are to be understood, it is important not to underestimate the significance of absolute improvements in the lives of these people. In contrast to many other societies, America wears its class system lightly and unobtrusively. It is not insignificant that Americans experienced no titled aristocracy, that they feel no need formally to refer to a hereditary privileged group in their midst, that they believe that meritocracy rather than aristocracy increasingly determines high place not only in entertainment fields, the arts and the professions, but in what may be called the worldly affairs as well. No less significant is however, the continued operations of class in USA.

### **Impact on American politics**

Robert Alford and Roger Freidland<sup>5</sup> have elaborated a tripartite typology of 'levels of power' that is useful in the examination of the causal role of class on politics.

1.Situational power— This is the characteristic form of power analyzed in various behavioral studies of power. They are the power relations of direct command and obedience among actors, as in Max Weber's celebrated definition of power as the ability of one actor to get another to do something in the face of resistance.

2.Institutional power— There are different institutional settings, which shape the decision-making agenda in ways that serve the interests of particular groups. This excludes certain alternatives from a decision-making agenda without actually commanding a specific behaviour, as in situational power. This is at times referred to as 'negative power' or the 'second face of power'.

3.Systemic power— This level of power is perhaps the most conceptually difficult to define and contentious. It is to the power to realise one's interests by virtue of the overall structure of a social system rather than by commanding the behaviour of others, or controlling the agendas of specific organisations.

Scholars today argue not over the irrelevance of class to the analysis of political phenomena, but over how important class might be in politics. Critics of class analysis employ the tactic of class reductionism, which is; the allusion that political phenomena (state policies, institutional properties, political behaviour and party strategies etc.) cannot be fully explained by class-based causal processes. Defenders, on the other hand, attack their critics for claiming that political phenomena are completely autonomous thus and independent of class determinants. Both these positions are not absolute. Even relatively orthodox Marxist scholars introduce many non-class factors in their explanations of state policy and for that, they are not, guilty of class reductionism. The most state-centered critics of class analysis admit that class relations play some role in shaping political outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

Class and political behaviour are probably not as closely associated in the United States as in some other Anglo-American countries. The parties in United States are not explicitly linked to class organisations and do not appeal for support on the basis of class. Both political parties and the later phenomena of third parties in the US are essentially issue based. Yet on general terms, it can be safely stated that, the working middle class supports Democrats, while Republicans have the upper class well-to-do people in their clique. The electorate sees the parties, as linked to specific class interest and undoubtedly most people vote in accordance with an image of the parties as representing their economic interests. A number of characteristics of American society and its political system undoubtedly reduce the relation of class and vote. The enormous size of the country, its division into fifty states with some real degree of sovereignty, its tremendous ethnic and religious diversity, combined with the decentralised party structure, all reduce

the salience of national class divisions as the main basis for party cleavage. Thus class divisions still exist and divide the parties distinctly. In spite of it, class is largely absent in political discourse and plays a minimal role, if at all, in politics. This is a measure of the degree of economic and political integration the American nation has achieved.

### **Endnotes**

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