

Eric J. Weiner

Review Essay

How Class Works
by Stanley Aronowitz

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“Who is middle class?” I ask. Ninety-five percent of all my students—undergraduate and graduate—inevitably raise their hands high in the air.

“Who works?” They stay raised.

“Who carries credit card or other kinds of dept?” Hands, unanimously, reach for the heavens.

“Who has control over her/his work and her/his workplace?” Every arm goes limp, mirroring the impotency that characterizes the powerlessness of so many in today’s neoliberal workforce.

In his most recent book, *How Class Works*, Stanley Aronowitz’s breadth of historical knowledge can at times be overwhelming. Rewriting, revising, and interrogating the history of unions and unionization; economic and social policy; social, political and cultural theory; and the affects of individuals and organizations in the long-ago erased historical events that have helped shape our present condition as well as condition the shape of our future, Aronowitz situates himself in the tradition of other organic oppositional intellectuals. Along with C. Wright Mills, Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, Audrey Lourde, Herbert Marcuse, and Cornell West, among others, he does the kind of work oppositional intellectuals should do: “The intellectual opposition contests the main narrative on several planes: for one, it proposes a past different from that promulgated by the leading institutions of collective memory, chiefly, the book, the school, and popular media. For another, it elaborates a cultural and social imagination that contradicts prevailing common sense” (p. 200).

Thinking against the grain of commonsense in which income determines one's place on the grid of social class, Aronowitz argues persuasively that the working class is distinguished neither by what it earns nor by its power to consume material goods, but rather by "its lack of relative power over the terms and conditions of employment, relative power because unions do make a difference" (p. 26). The importance of rewriting the narrative of class from the perspective of working class and democratic interests in our current conjunction is to disrupt the hegemonic narrative that on one hand erases class struggle and class formation as important social, political, and historical actors while on the other positions the interests of global finance as the same as working class and democratic interests. Rewriting historical narratives effectively decouples truth from the operations of power, making knowledge more than an instrument of ideology and myth. Radicalizing historical memory, in this context, is intimately connected to resurrecting the buried and erased "crude struggle" for material things that animates class struggle (p. 199). History for Aronowitz, like knowledge for Michele Foucault, is about cutting; cutting open and cutting through the veil of power.

Aronowitz begins with a radical theoretical reconceptualization of class theory. He argues that neo-Marxist and other functionalist theories of class formation failed to consider the historicity of social class. As such, social class was described and understood as the stratification of economic and social indicators. The actors of social class might (or might not) move around the board, but in all cases, whether Karl Marx's notorious two, Talcott Parson's "income grid", or even Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of cultural capital, social class has been fixed theoretically in a pre-determined spatial reality, thereby ignoring the historicity of class formation and "class power":

Many from marxist and nonmarxist persuasions stipulate the power of the ruling class over economic, political, and ideological relations, but, in their practical activity engage in the same work of social cartography—their work is making maps—even if their maps differ in details. What is often supposedly marxist or radical about these maps is that, unlike mainstream sociology, interlocking networks between the political and economic directorates are revealed, which explicitly or tacitly constitute a critique of

the traditional liberal separation of corporate power and the state. But both become classifications and draw up charts that show where social groups are placed in atemporal social grids (p 48-49).

In contrast, Aronowitz's radical theory of class suggests that time should no longer be considered a function of space but instead "presupposes that space is produced by the activity of social formations and as a function of time" (p. 52). This simple, yet important intervention into how class is theorized situates history as the embodiment of class struggle and fractured class interests. Time, or more accurately the movement of time, signals not only the dynamic condition of historical memory, but the futurity of change as well. Beyond a politics of hope, Aronowitz's "diachronic" framing of class formation situates the activities of social movements as modalities of class struggle and class formation. The activity of these social formations, made up of the combined activity of social movements as they struggle over class formation, have historically shaped political and cultural life through direct action, such as strikes, sit-ins, rallies, and, in extreme cases, violent uprising.

Additionally, Aronowitz argues for "sundering the traditional sociological distinction between class and social movement..." (p. 52). As such "genuine social movements are struggles over class formation when they pose new questions concerning the conduct of institutional and everyday life and entail new arrangements" (p. 52). From this perspective, groups that attempt to gain access and acquire social power within existing social structures should not be considered social movements. Only when "a new configuration of the power situation" is established through direct action can the entities be considered a genuine social movement (p. 53).

Aronowitz is aware of the legacy of Leftist exclusions, pointing explicitly to the racism, homophobia, and misogyny that animated much of the worker discourse of the 20th century. By arguing that genuine social movements are struggles over class formations he is not ignoring the fact that many social movements are born out of our "bio-identities". Rather, quoting Stuart Hall, he argues that "social movements are the modality in which class politics are enacted" (p. 141). Both worker and bio-identity movements, according to Aronowitz, "insist on their absolute separation from class politics" (p. 141). "Lacking the concept of the unity of social

and cultural divisions around the axis of power, they cannot grasp the notion of modality and must present difference in terms of irreconcilable binaries” (p. 141). Binary thinking, of course, reinforces exclusionary thinking, just as it oversimplifies the complexity of class struggle and identity formation. To illustrate his point, Aronowitz argues that women’s suffrage was the result of labor recognizing that voting rights for women were, in fact, a class issue. “It was only when these apparently separate movements of labor and women joined, took to the streets, and, through intense direct action as a public discussion, captured public opinion that sections of the liberal middle class and intelligentsia became convinced it was in their interest to support these demands and the ruling bourgeoisie yielded” (p. 143).

Directly critiquing Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, as well as Judith Butler and Joan Scott for dismissing the categories of class and labor in their “postmodern” theories of bio-identity and social movements Aronowitz writes,

...the effect of their postmodern theory was to provide a new version of political liberalism. For by affirming the primacy of human rights and by their renunciation of class formation and class struggle they had deprived themselves and the movements they extolled of the levers of power, except those of incremental reform. Moreover, by renouncing class analysis and substituting the indeterminate plurality of struggles based largely on bio-identities, they were unable to answer the question, What issues are worth fighting for? (p. 159).

Aronowitz also expresses dismay at labor’s hostility to feminist movement, black liberation struggles, and the gay and lesbian fight for sexual justice. Arguing that labor’s union with America’s global expansion seriously corrupted its institutional culture, he writes that “the mainstream of American Labor either sat out the 1960s or actively sided with the government and corporations in promoting war aims and, in consequence, fought against protestors. Equally important organized Labor remained a bastion of conventional morality in the face of the emergence of the visible demands for sexual freedom by women and gays” (p. 160).

Taken together, these critical interventions into Labor ideology and the ideology of postmodern theories of social movements suggests the need to take a more complex accounting of the relationship among and between class struggles and movements of identification. The fact is bio-identity movements have “succeeded, to a degree, in changing the lives of millions...,” while they simultaneously have left millions behind. Aronowitz notes that with all the success of feminist movement and civil rights,

joblessness among women remains higher than that of men; their living and working conditions tend, in growing numbers, to veer toward economic and social disaster...Similarly, legal rights to education and employment notwithstanding, the most basic program of the black freedom movement remains a distant shore even as the black professional, managerial, and technical fractions have grown...Unemployment among blacks remains twice that of whites, millions are stuck in deindustrialized urban areas where wages revolving around federal minimum wage still predominate and schools have become the institutional sites of the stigmata to ensure that most black youth will remain poor (p. 169-170).

These fractions of the bio-identity movements will be forever left behind, he argues, unless “movements struggle on a class basis—which invariably entails playing the zero sum game...” (p. 170).

The second axiom that frames Aronowitz’s reconceptualization of class theory “is that social integration is the result of a process of struggle and presupposes disintegration of the prior social arrangements, a process that is theoretical as much as an empirical question” (p. 56). Here Aronowitz questions the myth of consensus, bringing to light the reality that what appears to be an “unstable truce” brought on by the ruling formation’s granting of “substantial concessions to the subordinate classes” might be no more than an articulation of fear and repression. The myth of consensus makes invisible asymmetrical relations of power and thus narrates a story of “social peace”, the ruling formation of capitalist relations being the benefactor of “social integration” (p. 57).

In order for subordinated groups to challenge the hegemony of ruling formations of capitalist relations they are required, according to Aronowitz who draws significantly from Marx here, to “enter into ‘manifold relations with one another’ and that they have the means of communication to form a ‘unity’” (p. 57). Class formation, in this context, is made manifest when social formations become self-organizing and self-representing. Moreover, it must operate at the level of culture and community.

The third and final organizing axiom of Aronowitz’s thesis on class formation has to do with theory itself. In short, “class theory must account for itself” (p. 62). In other words, theory generally and class theory specifically is, itself, historical. “Ideas,” writes Aronowitz “do not have an independent history” (p. 62). Ideas are more than intellectual articulations of a past, present, and future; they are “feelings structured” around the brutal specificities of time/space. As such, “the political and cultural unconscious can be articulated only retrospectively” (p. 53).

A SIGNIFICANT PART OF *HOW CLASS WORKS* IS COMPRISED of a trenchant historical accounting of class struggle and class formations throughout the 20th century. The challenge of reviewing a book like this is making a decision as to what part of this historical narrative I should bring attention to. Inevitably, what I think is of import will not necessarily be of note to other readers of this review. But more than a challenge of subjectivity or import, reviewing Aronowitz’s historical narrative is challenging because it is organic. As such, one action is explicitly tied to many others, and vice versa. To dissect this type of historical account is to sever history into parts; people, events, sayings, documents, wars, moments, etc. Severing history into separate and distinct parts is a tool of domination, perpetuating social myths through exclusion and celebration. Aronowitz’s organic narrative resists such a method, offering a nuanced and specific temporal map that is, nevertheless, incapable of telling the whole story. But the story he does tell is compelling, complex, and, quite often, against the grain of official knowledge. At the risk of doing what I just warned against, I have chosen a few “events” that I believe hold some significance if for only the reason that they were instrumental in helping establish our current ruling formation of class relations.

Aronowitz describes the 1920s as the beginning of consumer society, which, of course, coincided with Fordism (p.67-69). According to Aronowitz, Fordism was “perhaps the most effective deterrent to the development of class politics in the 1920s” (p. 67). The Ford Motor Company, as is well known, developed the self moving assembly line which made work unbearably repetitive, but maybe more importantly, wrenched away control from the workers over the pace of their work. The assembly line also made mass production a reality of capital relations. “Mass production entailed mass consumption” (p. 68). So Ford, according to Aronowitz, convinced banks to extend credit to consumers.

The extension of credit was no less than revolutionary in how it shifted emphasis from production to consumption. As such,

...work was seen as a means to the end of buying more goods, as activity that came to fill up workers’ free time. The wheels for the shift were greased by the expansion of the credit system, once reserved for business and professional people who could put up property as collateral to secure their loans...With the mass automobile and the one-family home came a vastly expanded highway system that enabled millions of Americans to spend more time on the road (p. 69).

Along with mass production and the emergence of a consumer society, the 1920s introduced “a new industrial bureaucracy of managers, engineers, and administrative and clerical employees in large and medium corporations” (p. 69). Arising from this new credit system and production technologies were banks, consumer finance corporations, and retail establishments. In combination with the steady flow of new immigrants and rising minimum wages, there was a boom in educational jobs (p. 69). Aronowitz marks these developments as the impetus for the creation of a “new class of white collar employee tied closely to corporations and to local governments” (p. 69).

During this time, Fascism in Germany was beginning to take hold of the political imagination. Aronowitz argues that because the German Left “disdained and feared the new middle class of salaried employees” that the

new white collar, without real ideological alternatives, fell prey to “right wing demagogues who exhorted them to rise from their situation of anonymity and victimization and enter history by joining the fascist revolt” (p. 70). Fascism offered this new political class “hope for dignity through the components of fascist ideology: populism, racial purity, and national pride” (p. 71).

Unfortunately, the discourses of Marxist and liberal thought fell back on the belief that fascism was the antithesis of liberal democratic capitalism instead of its exaggeration. This prevented a way of understanding the effects of integration of the working and middle class into mass society “whose two essential elements were consumerism and the triumph of irrationalism in forms such as mass hysteria, anti-Semitism, and patriotism” (p. 71-72). Traditional spatial maps were insufficient, according to Horkeimer and Adorno, to account for this process of integration. They insisted

that studies which focused on fixing the social location of intermediate strata within the established social structure had missed the forest for the trees: the problem was whether the traditional paradigm of a society arranged by a class grid was adequate to understand the contemporary transformation of capitalism (p. 72).

We might ask the same questions now regarding how class paradigms within neoliberal discourse positions the notion of class struggle and class formation as well as class oppression as the shadowy articulations of the remnants of Soviet style communism or China’s version of totalitarianism instead of the rational outcome of market-based systems on one hand and representative democracies on the other. This articulation creates not only the possibility of a growing disparity between the impoverished and the powerful, but turns “revolutionary futurity, the best moment of utopian thought...into its opposite: communism is no longer identified with freedom, but with scarcity and even slavery, economic and social equality with totalitarianism” (p. 75).

The New Deal is the other historical referent in the long chain of correlates that I will discuss. Aronowitz rewrites the official history of the New Deal by showing, in incredible detail, the undeniable tenacity of

labor to fight for “industrial democracy” in spite of caustic governmental resistance, AFL concessions on proportional representation, and the establishment of the National Labor Relations Act, the Wagner Act and Social Security. Instead of reading the Wagner Act and Social Security as productive concessions to labor, Aronowitz sees these concessions as articulations of authoritarian political structures. These initiatives, from this perspective, restricted “labor’s ability to employ a wide array of weapons to advance its interests...” (p. 80). The power of Aronowitz’s narrative is not found in the success or failure of these struggles, but rather in the animation and “rememory” of class struggle and class formation. Aronowitz writes,

At the turn of the decade [1930], the state of the opposition offered few grounds for hope that corporate capital’s domination of the workplace and the political culture could be effectively challenged. Unions were on the defensive, and many had been reduced to shells. In response to increased pressure from southern employers to increase productivity in order to buttress sagging profits, textile strikes in 1929 at the large Loray mill in Gastonia, North Carolina, in Marion, North Carolina, and in Elizabethton, Tennessee, displayed a high degree of courage and militancy by southern textile workers, whom both experts and many union officials had believed to be docile and antiunion. The Marion and Gastonia strikes were assisted by Socialist and Communist organizers, respectively, and this gave employers, as they sought government assistance to defeat the strikes, the excuse to brand the walkouts a red conspiracy. Plagued by an avalanche of court injunctions, jailing of strike leaders, ruthless firings of union activists, the deployment of local and state police, and lack of support from the official labor movement, the resistance was overwhelmed (p. 76).

Both Hoover and Roosevelt were guilty of ignoring mass protests and Hoover went as far as firing, under the direction of Gen. Douglas McArthur, on protestors. One year later, in March 1930, in two dozen cities, Aronowitz reports that “more than a million unemployed rallied and marched for unemployment insurance, immediate relief, and public funds

for job creation; and in 1932 the Ex-Serviceman's League marched on Washington demanding the federal government make good on its pledge to pay a veteran's bonus that had been deferred since 1918" (p. 77). Incredibly, these veterans—who fought for the U.S., were fired upon by U.S. troops for demanding what was rightly theirs. Equally troubling is the fact that this history is rarely, if ever, invoked in our children's history books or in the national discourse about freedom and patriotism.

In response to labor's insurgency, the Wagner Act, introduced by Sen. Robert F. Wagner, and supported by the AFL leadership and Roosevelt, established a "framework for labor peace" (p. 79). It effectively created a juridical framework from which labor, corporate ownership, and government could negotiate differences. Hoping to quell the recent acts of mass insurgency, the Wagner Act imposed a kind of administrative rationality on class struggle, thereby neutering what had become labor's most important weapon in fighting for industrial democracy, namely direct action outside the formal and acceptable parameters of juridical restraint. Aronowitz writes,

AFL president William Green hailed the Wagner Act as "labor's magna carta"...While it would take more than two years for the Supreme Court to dispose of constitutional challenges to the law...the fact that the events of 1933-37 that shaped labor relations for the most of the remainder of the century occurred outside the framework of the law remains a hidden story save for a few radical labor activists, historians, and legal experts...[Green's] declaration about the significance of the law became the main story that was repeated by many of his industrial union adversaries, by the leading text books, and by historians of the New Deal. The workers themselves got little credit for the wave of organizing that preceded and followed the act. Despite widespread strikes and factory occupations in almost every major industrial center, the accepted narrative was that labor was flat on its back before the law's administration and unions grew only within the frame of the Roosevelt coalition and the New Deal. (p. 80-81).

Against the hegemony of neoliberal ideologists and end of ideology prophets and profiteers, understanding class formation and class struggle in theoretical, historical and practical terms, according to Aronowitz, is the interpretive key to comprehending “the truly climatic changes in the shape of global societies since the early 1970s” (p. 27). For it is through class formation and class struggle that history *becomes* historical; the reclamation of history’s historicity is about no less than the ability to imagine a future that is significantly different from its present incarnation. This is not to say, in resurrecting the discourse of class struggle and class formation from the ashes of modernity, that Aronowitz reduces social change to the function of economies nor is it true that he erases the power of social movements, such as those based on race, gender, sexuality, and disability to challenge and transform dominant social formations. But in the end, Aronowitz believes that modern societies are experiencing a “crisis of the intellect” in which we are collectively unable to think beyond the ideological parameters of acceptable possibilities (p. 224). As a globalized society we are marked by a conflation of time and space; the future too often looks and feels exactly like the present. Consequently, what *is* has taken on the burden of futurity and has become what shall be. This dystopian condition should not be read as a permanent condition. On the contrary, it

is a time for analysis and speculation as much as organization and protest, a time when people have a chance to theorize the new situations, to identify the coming agents of change without entertaining the illusion that they can predict with any certainty either what will occur or who the actors will be. It is a time to speak out about the future that is not yet probable, although eminently possible (p. 230).

As Aronowitz points out, “Capital and other powerful forces are not fated to win...The ability of ruling groups to impose their domination depends to a large degree on whether an alliance of differentially situated social groups emerges to oppose them” (p. 61).

The pedagogical implications of his diachronic theory of class are three-fold. First, class consciousness should be developed around the axis of power and not salary, job title, or job skills/responsibilities. When power/powerlessness over the conditions of work is the referent for social

class, solidarities can be formed across our bio-identities and work spaces and in the service of class interest. At the university, for example, faculty might be taught to see themselves in solidarity with physical plant workers and secretarial staff. Instead of positioning themselves against people who struggle to democratize their industrial space, faculty, in terms of the power they have over administrators, governmental officials, and/or alumni, should begin to see the similarities between their situations and those who might occupy a different economic level. If my “middle-class” students were taught to evaluate their class position in terms of their power to control their work and mode of production as opposed to how much they consumed, they might begin to feel a sense of connection with others who struggle with similar levels of powerlessness. As it stands, they feel connected to people who do, in fact, have control over many aspects of their working lives. This leads them to form alliances—if only at the affective level—with people whose interests might be antithetical to their own.

Second, history should be taught not only across disciplines, but must be reclaimed and rewritten by those marginalized and victimized by the prerogative of the victorious. Historical memory, in its official guise, is the clearest articulation of hegemony. Rewriting, reclaiming, revising, and interrogating should become the pedagogical tools of historical excavation. We need to be leery of those who would encourage our consent to give up these democratic practices in light of the attack on the World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001. Quoting Walter Benjamin, Aronowitz writes, “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception, but the rule. We must attain a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight” (p. 224). History, as I said earlier, should be about cutting, not covering; it should be resurrected as a form of critical consciousness, where the past is realigned to a future that we can imagine, feel, and anticipate with great excitement and hope.

Lastly, we should be increasingly concerned about and pedagogically responsive to the imaginative inertia that characterizes much thinking today, both by students, teachers, politicians, scholars, and intellectuals. If we cannot think radically, then we assuredly will be unable to radically act. I would suggest that the imagination be thought of as a tool of both reflection and projection. Through creative reflection, the possibility exists

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to examine where we have been, who we are, and why we have evolved as we have. In the context of projection, imagination plays a role in reaching toward an unknown. Although improbable in their realization, projecting ideas about what should be gives us a goal to fight towards. Freedom, in this sense, is not a retreat from responsibility, but is rather its goal.

Although Aronowitz's last chapter argues that utopia is on hold, his book represents an attempt to resurrect utopian thinking in a way that avoids overly romantic gestures to revolution or abstract narratives of hope and possibility. For him, utopian thinking is imaginative thinking that has practical implications for structural transformation. While his ideas are not a blueprint for structural change, class struggle or class formation, they do provide a new history and theory of class upon which to build a more humane and ecologically sustainable future.

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