

“The working class history: chronicle of a failed farewell—a comment on Durrenberger and Doukas’ Class in the USA”

Julia Soul¹ 

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Abstract

The comment considers the article by Durrenberger and Doukas as part of a broader field of research focused on class relationships. It points to identify key theoretical and epistemological topics emerging from recent theoretical discussions, retrieving some Latin American labor anthropology and labor history insights.

Keywords Class · Labor anthropology · Labor history

In recent years, the repeatedly announced “working class extinction” has started to be questioned by social researchers from different fields. A set of theoretical essays and articles retrieves a broad definition of this notion in order to understand its explanatory power; the epistemological debates around it and the causes of its invisibility, both as an analytical concept and as a social category able to organize the social experience of subordination (Carrier and Kalb 2015; Carbonella and Kasmir 2014; Durrenberger 2001). Class in the USA, the article by Paul Durrenberger and Dimitra Doukas feeds this stream, pointing at the same time to the academic context and the historical processes that explain class invisibility in the USA. They consider this invisibility as the result of a complex historical process, embracing at least three issues: the hegemonic ideology of meritocratic individualism and the role of social anthropologists in its production and reproduction; the continued warfare against organized labor unfolded through legal, practical, and ideological means; and the “cultural revolution” aimed to replace the *gospel of work* by the *gospel of wealth*, claiming for capital as the creator of wealth. Finally, they advocate for an ethnography incorporating “place and history in a distinctive class-specific local culture” (p20) as key explanatory issues of

✉ Julia Soul
mjsoul@gmail.com

¹ CONICET-Centro de Estudios e Investigaciones Laborales, Saavedra 15 4th floor, C1083ACA Buenos Aires, Argentina

social memories and conservative behavior rather than for one aiming to show “native’s point of view.” These are powerful and welcomed statements for a social research field strongly focused on the study of social meanings in themselves decoupled from the material conditions of existence. They provide some key points to discuss an anthropological approach to class relationships in times of globalization.

In the first place, they refer to the role played by local and particular processes in the making of the working class. Pointing to the succession of struggles against “corporate capitalism,” Durrenberger and Doukas remind us that under capitalist production class struggle unfolds as a set of particular processes of dispossession (of means of life) which in turn mean the subsumption of dispossessed groups to capitalist reproduction. The development of those processes is inherently uneven because they include different social groups. Latin American labor ethnographies and labor history strongly confirm constitutive unevenness and diversity of working classes configuration and consequently “the need for incorporating place and history” in the research of working classes.

Thus, if US capitalism unfolded through manufacturing capital concentration at the expense of small owners, and these are the political roots of anti-monopolist ideology as a distinctive feature of US working classes goals and demands; Latin American capitalism developed mainly through land and natural resource dispossession since colonial times. De Souza Martins (1979); Katz (1980); Sábato (1989); Cardoso and Pérez Brignoli (1979) discussed the manifold dispossession/subsumption processes through which Latin American peasants have turned into agricultural laborers in the context of uneven processes of transition to capitalism. Since the last decades of the nineteenth century, crews of migrant workers were incorporated to the working classes shaping new cleavages in labor markets and communities. Sariego Rodríguez (1988); Neiburg (1988); Lobato (2001) among others have focused their research on ethnic and gender boundaries as constituting features of the early twentieth century manufacturing and extractive workers’ collectives. Leite Lopes (1978) discusses the key break between temporal and permanent workforce in sugar mills in the North of Brazil as one of the main explanations for sugar workers’ social and political dynamics. The list could continue, but the fact is that despite this diversity, this period is crossed by the emergence of “classist” dynamics of organization (unions, neighbors associations, and political parties) and conflict (strikes, urban movements, and rural revolts) constituting influent labor movements at the beginning of the century.

Being aware of the diversity and unevenness depicted by classic working class, ethnographies and social history are important in order to understand the current epistemological devices underlying class invisibility. The same diversity that was once considered inherent to working classes configuration by the 1980s and 1990s started to be conceptualized like the proof of the inexistence of a social subject called “working class.” This process concerns academic debates and its social articulations. In this sense, Durrenberger and Doukas remind us of the role played by anthropologists—and social researchers I shall add—in the reproduction of class invisibility, as for they are “distracting attention to salient dimensions of identity of which people are more aware—race, gender, and sexual orientation” (p 3). The so called “politics of identity” approach splits off particular features from a total social experience which is undoubtedly constituted by the form in that the individual or group’s work is subsumed by a general social dynamic. Stressing fragmentation rather than unevenness is a key to epistemological position supporting class invisibility in anthropological research.

The need for a historical perspective of those particular struggles is another issue retrieved by Durrenberger and Doukas which is a main point for a class approach to social processes. In fact,

the historical approach is a basic device to understand “uniformity” and “homogeneity” as the historical outcome of a process of organization of the working class rather than as class essential attributes. The prevailing postmodernist academic common sense assumption that is made of uniformity and homogeneity essential attributes of the working class leads to the academic misunderstanding that is seen in the mutation of the so called “Fordist” working class, the disappearance of *the* working class (Kasmir and Carbonella 2014) and to take the fall of US manufacture as the fall of labor (Durrenberger and Doukas). The rising of these common sense assumptions coincided with the capitalist advance against labor through neoliberal globalization and restructuring policies; one of whose outcomes was the expansion of subsumption relations to a broad array of particular forms—from classic wage labor to family or cooperative labor, self-employment and informal relations, and petty capitalists. This expansion fed the notion of *fragmentation* and divergent cultures and interests, obscuring the fact of the connections between those non-classic proletarians and the “classic waged” population increase.

Hence, the paradox between an academic realm where dominant trends neglect and deny “class perspective” (and the very notions of system or history) in order to understand contemporary cultural processes, and a “real” increasingly capitalist social world, with most of its population subordinated to capitalist development and to growing inequality and instability, rises up. The uselessness of “natives’ point of view”—as the distinctive feature of anthropological knowledge—to explain the growing inequalities and the worse living conditions of subordinated groups and classes has been remarked by some anthropologists as an argument for an approach able to include the class perspective as one capable of bringing structural processes and relationships into the production of anthropological knowledge (Menendez 2010; Kalb 2015).

In this sense, a class approach involving history and struggle differs from what Meiksins Wood (Meiksins Wood 1995) calls the notion of “class as stratification” and points to a theoretical concept of class as the result of social relations and social practices. As Durrenberger and Doukas describe, capitalism unfolds through investment and disinvestment dynamics underlying the configuration of particular and local struggles, related not only to strict labor relationships but also to the configuration of the domestic realm as a consumption goal, and of the urban dynamics as one that expels workers and attracts speculators. This interest in the making of working classes as a multiple process embracing production, distribution, circulation, and consumption features converges with two theoretical trends: workers’ social history, with Thompson (1963) as its main inspirer and the social anthropology in both of its versions of culturalism and political economy, with Wolf (1982) as another key author.

To conclude, there are some common assumptions underlying the current *class* notion debate that is worth summarizing here: We understand *class* not only as an analytical tool but also as a concrete configuration of social relationships of dispossession and labor subsumption. Classes “happen” in the realm of social experience or praxis, shaped through struggle of communities and workers’ collectives. Class struggle is, therefore, a key notion to understand historical processes. Lastly, the notion of *classes* as inherently uneven and diverse parts of a “structured whole” allows us to understand workers’ practices in their historical significance (Gilli and Kasmir 2016). Such a perspective is the cornerstone to understand the distinctive features of social classes under capitalism, as much as the broad array of forms of labor subsumption through which it unfolds. Durrenberger and Doukas strongly contribute to the unfolding of this approach stating the need for a deep research about US working classes in order to comprehend their current practices and cultural configurations.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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