This is the published version of a chapter published in *Thinking with Beverley Skeggs*.

Citation for the original published chapter:

Renewing class theory?: exploitation, individualization and culture.
In: Annika Olsson (ed.), *Thinking with Beverley Skeggs* (pp. 21-28). Stockholm: Centre for Gender Studies, Stockholm University
Centrum för genusstudiers skriftserie

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:diva-95236
Renewing Class Theory? Exploitation, Individualization and Culture

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Many scholars would agree that in the last decades the concept of class has lost its central place in the ‘sociological toolbox’. As a consequence, some even see class as a ‘zombie category’ (Beck and Rutherford 2002) – as an outdated, modernist concept that is inadequate for understanding contemporary Western societies. Within this context, Beverley Skeggs’ work has been seminal in putting class ‘back on the map’, not least within feminist theory. In this essay I will discuss her work in relation to two critical issues for class theory.

The first is the alleged weakening of class awareness or class identification among people (Bottero 2004; Grusky and Weeden 2001). Here the argument is that people today seldom relate to one another explicitly in class terms, or construct their identities, self-worth, and status around class. Some have claimed that this is due to class structures breaking down as part of a process of individualization and increased reflexivity where diverse forms of individualized lifestyles replace collective class identities (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1991).

The second problem for class theory is about explaining how and why class is fundamentally bound up with the notions of conflict, exploitation, struggle, and interest. Marx’s labour theory of value – the idea that the bourgeoisie exploit the proletariat by generating surplus value from the labour of the latter – has been refuted since long and alternative accounts of exploitation (Roemer 1982; Sørensen 2000; Wright 1985) have been subjected to both internal and external critique (Roemer 1982; Savage 2000; Savage et al. 2005; Skeggs 2004; Sørensen 2000). In what
follows I will first present Skeggs’ approach to class, and then her analysis of class in relation to the issues of individualization and exploitation. The essay concludes with a discussion of Skeggs’ contributions to these two issues, and it also offers a few critical remarks.

Skeggs’ Conception of Class

Skeggs has a Foucauldian approach to class in the sense that she focuses on ‘how particular discourses and technologies make classed selves’ through both ‘productive constitution’ and ‘processes of exclusion’ (2004: 6). Drawing on Butler and Bourdieu, she stresses the performative character of class, and like the latter, how class (and other) categorizations and their boundaries are the products of symbolic struggles.

Skeggs focuses on how four processes – inscription, evaluation, exchange, and perspective – construct classed selves. Inscription is a process where certain characteristics become ‘marked’ or ‘fixed’ upon bodies, and thus differently valued. It is ‘about making through marking’ (2004: 12). Classed inscriptions are intimately bound up with other forms of inscription, such as race, gender, and sexuality. For instance, in popular culture, ‘cool’ is inscribed on black, working-class, male bodies as a natural attribute, and which puts strict limitations on them, since cool also denotes danger and criminality. Conversely, white people can appropriate cool as a mobile resource to be ‘played with’ as it is not marked upon them as an inherent characteristic.

Evaluation is a process where certain value standards become institutionalized. Here Skeggs stresses the moral aspects of valuing – that it is about worth. Value attribution takes place within different systems of exchange (economic, moral, cultural, and symbolic). She argues that an analysis of class cannot be limited to economic exchange (production or labour market relations), one also needs to focus on the moral, cultural and symbolic systems of exchange within which it is constructed.
To do this, Skeggs critically appropriates Bourdieu’s notion of the symbolic economy, including the four metaphors of capital – economic, cultural, social and symbolic. According to this model, what is valued becomes legitimated and part of the dominant categorizations. But Skeggs rightly criticises Bourdieu for focusing exclusively on exchange-value without making room for use-value, i.e. the way things may matter to and be a resource for people beyond a commodity logic (Skeggs 2004b, 2004c). Her argument is that Bourdieu fails to grasp the fact that some cultural resources may have local use-value for the person possessing them but might not be convertible and exchanged in a larger system of exchange. Yet, the same cultural resources may acquire exchange-value when appropriated by another group. Thus, the notion of ‘cool’ has far greater potential exchange-value for whites than for blacks.

Moreover, the construction of class is always bound up with what Skeggs calls perspective, that is, how class is known and how knowledge positions are formed, something which always works in the interests of powerful groups. This means that certain forms of knowledge, i.e. representations, are constructed while others are excluded. However, perspectives are seldom explicitly expressed in class terms but often articulated in highly mediated ways, e.g. through cultural and economic categories. As a consequence, Skeggs argues, perspectives/interests are continually being misrecognized.

**Individualization and the Disidentification of Class**

Drawing on her own and others’ research, Skeggs argues that the last decades have seen a restructuring of class relations: class is now principally constructed in the realm of culture rather than in the economic sphere. In this section I will discuss this argument in relation to processes and theories of individualization. Skeggs (2004) argues that the increasing importance of culture
in class formation (and in class struggle) can serve to explain the displacement of class and its marginalized position within academia. Theorists, such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), argue that individualization processes are breaking down traditional class structures. This leads to increased reflexivity among people to choose and to construct their identities. While reflexivity is described by Beck and Giddens as a universal process, Skeggs argues that it only reflects their own middle-class experiences.

In this sense, reflexivity is a highly classed phenomenon since it is mainly middle-class people who have access to the cultural resources and thus the agency to construct reflexive selves (Skeggs 2002). For instance, reality television programmes, such as Ibiza Uncovered, The Villa and Sex on the Beach, do not display the kind of choosing, reflexive self as conceptualized by Beck and Giddens, but, on the contrary, very excessive and unreflected behaviour. Thus these programmes work to construct and identify classed and gendered differences (see Wood and Skeggs 2004).

Moreover, although individualization means that collective class identities have been eroded, this does not mean that class no longer informs people’s life world. In her seminal ethnography of working-class women in the Midlands, Skeggs (1997) shows how the dis-identification of class itself is a classed process, which is also strongly gendered. The women in her study actively resisted being categorized as ‘working-class women’ since this was perceived to be a highly stigmatized position connoting bad taste and manners as well as social problems. Skeggs (2004) also argues that the displacement of class takes place in political discourses, such as those of social exclusion and the underclass. In sum, Skeggs argues that theories and processes of individualization and reflexivity are not part of the disintegration of class but rather classed processes in which cultural categorization and distinction have come to play the central role.
Culture and Exploitation

The centrality of culture in constituting class is also shown in how exploitation and class struggle are expressed. One way of this is how the working class is represented in popular culture. There are two processes at work here. The first is that the middle class draws boundaries against the working class, resulting in a devaluation of the culture of the latter. Working-class culture is represented as, among other things, excessive, vulgar, hedonistic, unmodern, escapist, dangerous, unruly, and without shame (see Skeggs 2004: 96–118). The second process at work is that the middle class exploits working-class culture by creating exchange value (cultural and economic resources) from what is use-value for the latter. This involves, on the one hand, what Skeggs calls propertizing, namely the appropriation of working-class culture in the construction of middle-class selves. She argues that there has been a shift in so far as certain aspects of working-class culture have been revalued and are now perceived to be ‘worth plundering’. One such aspect is the hedonism associated with the working class: from connoting excess and irresponsibility it has become incorporated into middle-class lifestyles in the form of ‘calculated hedonism’ (Skeggs 2004: 104).

Moreover, there is also an exploitation of working-class culture through the generation of economic resources in capitalist markets. Signifying authenticity, working-class culture has been used to brand products through the marketing of experience and affect (e.g. ‘genuine experiences’). In a similar vein, fashion designers appropriate aspects of working-class culture. As she puts it, ‘Fashion designers have long been attached to a white trash aesthetic as it gives them a way of doing sexuality with femininity, extending the type and range of femininity to open out new markets, offering something “different”’ (2004: 96).

Skeggs (2004) claims that middle-class culture is very much based on propertizing, that is, ‘stealing’ the cultural elements of the working class (and others). In contrast, the latter is being
excluded from many exchange relationships, and its culture is therefore built more around use-values, such as loyalty, honour and fairness.

But the working class is not a passive recipient of middle-class exploitation. The former also adopts strategies, distinction and resistance against the latter, e.g. in the form of anti-pretentiousness and through ‘taking the piss’ (Skeggs 2004; see also 1997). Yet Skeggs is quick to point out that the working class seldom has the channels, influence, power, or symbolic capital to succeed in the resistance. As a consequence, resistance ultimately ‘works as a mechanism to keep the working-class in place’ (Skeggs 2004: 114).

We can see that Skeggs paints a picture where a central element in class formation is through exploitation of working-class culture and where class struggle takes place mainly in the cultural realm. As she writes: ‘class struggle becomes not just about the entitlement to the labour of others but the entitlement to their culture, feelings, affect and dispositions. This is a very intimate form of exploitation’ (Skeggs 2005: 63).

Concluding Discussion

Evaluating Skeggs’ account, I would argue that she presents a sophisticated response to the two challenges to class theory – the dilemmas of individualization and exploitation – discussed in this essay. The disidentification of class is itself a highly classed process entailing exploitative social relations mainly through cultural means. And developing an understanding of class in the light of the cultural turn she brings in affect, values and the symbolic realm into class theory. Yet, there are a few tensions in her work.

One is, as Bottero (2004) notes, that, although she moves away from the traditional way of conceptualizing classes as antagonistic collectivities, sometimes her analysis slips into this kind of notion. The old Marxist image of society composed of two classes acting in their respective interests springs to mind.
Perhaps the increased differentiation and complexity within and among classes within contemporary Western societies could be emphasized more.

Furthermore, Skeggs’ analysis of the middle class has a somewhat one-sided focus on exchange-value (although this may be a rhetorical point on her part). Like in Bourdieu’s work, this implies a notion of human behaviour as governed by instrumental interests. Skeggs (2004: 187) herself denies this being the case, claiming that her analysis just happens to reflect how middle-class selves currently are formed.

But I would like a greater focus on the use-value in ‘middle-class’ culture, and more generally, on the creativity of action. For instance, while Skeggs claims that fashion designers appropriate white trash aesthetics in order to ‘open up new markets’, she also denigrates, I believe, how fashion and aesthetics have great use-value for many of them. It is clear from McRobbie’s study (1998) of British high-fashion designers that most of her interviewees showed great passion and non-instrumental motives in their work, seeing fashion design as art rather than simply business. Many of them put in an enormous amount of work while experiencing severe financial pressures. In sum, Skeggs’ work on class is a rich resource, which future research would do well to draw on, develop, and critically engage with.

References


