

LOUANN WURST AND ROBERT K. FITTS

Introduction: Why Confront Class?

At a luncheon with a dozen colleagues from other universities recently, I found myself alone questioning the statement "Everyone knows the working class is dead"! "How can that be," I asked, "when there are people serving us lunch here, washing dishes, and cooking in a hot kitchen behind those doors? Don't you mean that class relations have shifted globally and nationally and that it is harder for academics to discuss class issues according to traditional terms"? The immediate silence around the table showed that the directness of this challenge was perceived as rude—or was it the class knowledge that was unsayable? (Rimstead 1996:126).

The word "class" is fraught with unpleasing associations, so that to linger upon it is apt to be interpreted as the symptom of a perverted mind and a jaundiced spirit (R. H. Tawney quoted in Fussell 1983:1-2).

There is a long-standing convention that any treatise on class must begin with a statement of the complexity of the issue. We see no reason to flaunt this tradition. Class is immeasurably confounded in a morass of literature, much of which is contradictory. On one hand we learn that "class is dead;" that class has been the dominant organizing concept in sociology, but class is no longer pertinent in the post-modern world (Pakulski and Waters 1996). On the other hand, scholars argue that class has always been denied in American society and scholarship, and that class and class relations are rarely discussed openly. As the above two quotes illustrate, such discussions of class, either in our studies or everyday life, are often considered inappropriate, and even down-right rude.

Rather than explaining away this confusion, as naivete, misunderstanding, or whatever, the first task of confronting class is to realize that these contradictions stem from very different usages of the concept. Wright (1994, 1997) divides these different conceptions into what he calls gradational and relational views of class. In a gradational view, classes are seen as fixed rungs on a

ladder of inequality, as in strata within an income distribution, occupation structure or status variations (Wright 1994:89). These are gradational views since distinctions are based on the relative quantity of resources (income, education, occupational prestige) that individuals receive (Fantasia 1988:13). In reality, these gradational views see class not as a means of explaining social structure or organization, but are rather "descriptions of the specific circumstances of individuals" (Zavarzadeh 1995:53).

In contrast, relational views stem from Weberian and Marxian traditions and use class to designate the nature of the underlying social relations (Wright 1994:89). That is, a class "is defined by virtue of the social relations which link it to other class locations" (Wright 1997:30). Marxist notions of class hinge on the relations of production in society, where exploitative social relations exist between those who own and control the means of production and those who supply the labor power necessary for production (Fantasia 1988:13).

These different conceptions underlie the seemingly contradictory statements that "class is dead" and "class has always been denied." Scholars who utilize a gradational conception of class claim that "class is dead" as an explanatory framework since other concepts or identities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, region, nationalism, consumption, have become more fundamental to understanding modern society (Zavarzadeh 1995:48). In short, today other kinds of difference are more important than class.

The claim that class has seldom been confronted refers to a relational view of class. The avoidance of class as social relations is not restricted to politicians or the media, but extends to academia as well (Domhoff 1983; Ehrenreich 1989; Aronowitz 1996). With the exception of a handful of scholars who explicitly adopt a marxist perspective, few archaeologists focus on class development or relations. Among the goals of historical archaeology is explaining the development of the modern world and current social relations. Thus, the development of the modern

class system should be the focus of many historical archaeological studies. Yet, it is not. Generally, archaeologists are still avoiding this complex but essential topic; we would argue that to truly understand the social relations of the historic modern period, we can no longer afford to ignore class.

A brief summary of how historical archaeologists have used class helps to clarify these issues. Rather than confront class, many historical archaeologists have concentrated on socio-economic status. Most studies of socio-economic status employ one of two general methods. One method stems from the prehistoric archaeologists' association of exotic goods with high status individuals. These studies focus on the amount of high-cost objects found in an assemblage (Stone 1970; Herman et al. 1975). The classic example of this approach is Gary Wheeler Stone's (1970) attempt to correlate the presence of porcelain with wealth and occupation in 18th-century Suffolk County, Massachusetts, probates. Although Stone relates porcelain to the adoption of the custom of taking tea, most studies do not relate luxury items to class-specific behavior, nor do they consider that "luxury items" may have alternative meanings to different classes.

Historical archaeologists have also tried to associate class as status with material culture by calculating the amount of money spent to purchase the items recovered in archaeological assemblages. Studies employing this method are known as "models of consumer choice" (Spencer-Wood 1987a). Although occasionally scholars have examined faunal remains (Schulz and Gust 1983; Singer 1987) and gravestones (Clark 1987), the vast majority of consumer choice studies focus on ceramics (Garrow 1987; Henry 1987; LeeDecker et al. 1987; Shephard 1987; Spencer-Wood 1987b; Spencer-Wood and Heberling 1987). The focus on ceramics stems both from their abundance on archaeological sites and from the pioneering work of George Miller. Miller (1980, 1991) examined pottery manufacturers' price lists, merchant account books, and bills of sales to determine the approximate value of 19th-

century British refined earthenwares. He concluded that comparing ceramics recovered from archaeological sites to these values would allow "sites to be scaled in terms of their expenditure on ceramics" (Miller 1980:15).

Miller's article initiated a frenzy of studies attempting to relate the value of ceramic assemblages with status. At first, many archaeologists treated this as an objective measure of socio-economic status; however, it soon became apparent that the correlation between ceramics and status was far from simple (Klein 1991:77). For example, studies showed that household size and structure (LeeDecker et al. 1987), and ceramic availability (Brighton 1996) greatly affected the types of ceramics purchased. Noting that ceramics comprised a small percentage of a household's expenses when compared to the cost of housing, food, and other forms of material culture, some scholars even suggested that the focus on ceramics as indicators of wealth was misguided (Friedlander 1991:27; LeeDecker 1991).

Although these critiques are significant improvements over earlier studies, few of the authors questioned the underlying assumption that equates economic wealth with social class. Scholars who concentrate on equating socio-economic levels with the cost of archaeological assemblages treat material culture as passive indicators of wealth. Thus the socio-economic status approach in historical archaeology is a gradational view that sees class as a static, unchanging classification of reified persons and social roles.

Relational views of class in historical archaeology are somewhat more difficult to find (Paynter 1988; McGuire 1988, 1991). Particularly since they are just as likely to avoid the term "class." One example of this trend is the emphasis on dominance and resistance (Paynter and McGuire 1991). As Paynter and McGuire (1991:1) state, the archaeology of inequality "emphasizes the struggles among members of society over the exercise of social power." This emphasis on power relations and inequality fits nicely with a relational definition of class that focuses

on the struggle between social groups over the means of production. Paynter and McGuire (1991), and the associated articles in *The Archaeology of Inequality*, persuasively argue for a relational view of class although most of the discussion is framed around the concepts of power and inequality rather than class.

The irony of the “dominance and resistance” approach is that others utilize these terms in a model that more closely mirrors a gradational approach. A common strategy stemming from the dominance and resistance approach has been to identify sites or assemblages associated with two different groups, say workers and managers, and then compare the material record. If they appear different, the conclusion is that the workers were resisting the dominant culture; if the material culture of these groups is similar, it is assumed that, rather than resist the dominant norms, they “actively” emulated them. This benign affirmation of difference downplays the vital relational emphasis on conflict.

Several historical archaeologists have proceeded using a more sophisticated approach to dominance and resistance. Mary Beaudry, Lauren Cook, and Stephen Mrozowski (1991) focus on class-specific ideologies in their study of the Boot Mills complex in Lowell, Massachusetts. They argue that class relations are best examined by focusing on how groups accept, reject, alter, and manipulate these ideologies. Material culture plays an active role in this process as the symbols that people use to support or reject specific ideologies. Thus, for archaeologists the goal is to understand how people manipulated the meanings of artifacts as part and parcel of the negotiation of class relations.

The articles in this volume are an effort to augment and expand the existing, meager, dialogue on class in historical archaeology. Most of these papers were first presented at the session *The Archaeology of Class* held at the 1997 Conference on Historical Archaeology in Corpus Cristi, Texas. Our goal has not been to present a definitive statement on what the archaeology of class should be; the authors do not always ex-

plicitly discuss or define class in a theoretical sense. Indeed, the articles offer a variety of different approaches to class; strains of both gradational and relational approaches can be found throughout.

Instead of arguing for a unified or “right” view of class, these articles represent case studies that demonstrate the advantages of putting class at the center of our analyses. Through these studies, all of the authors challenge common sense understandings of class. The authors included here reject the common notion that class is restricted to the workplace (Gibb 1996). For example, Paul Reckner and Stephen Brighton define class as the social relations involved in production, but through their discussion of temperance rhetoric, show that these class relations permeate all aspects of everyday life. Fitts and Wall both argue that class relations imbue all aspects of middle-class life, including the most “cultural” and “symbolic” behaviors involved in manners and deportment.

Many of the authors move beyond conceptions that see class as a rigid dualism between owners and workers or elites and non-elites. LouAnn Wurst argues that class can be used as an analytical concept that operates on many scales and thus can be used to tease out the complexity of the social relations of everyday life. In particular contexts ranging from the household to the community, class relations are more complex than any dualism can convey. James Garman and Paul Russo also move away from the rigid class dualism by focusing on the underclass living and working at the “poorhouse” in Smithfield, Rhode Island. Their analysis demonstrates that the material conditions of the poorhouse inmates can not be understood without also considering the elite patrons of that institution.

The authors also reject the assertion that “class is dead” since other aspects of social identity have assumed greater importance. Several of the articles presented here deal with the relationship between race, gender, and ethnicity. Paul Mullins examines the complicated interconnection between class and race in late-19th and early-

20th-century Annapolis, Maryland. He focuses on how racism helped shape African-Americans' participation in the national consumer culture, and argues that the analytical categories of race and class cannot be easily separated during this time period. Mullins's study points out the difficulties that can arise from a simplistic equation between consumption patterns of wealth or social class. James Delle also focuses on the intersection of class and race. By adopting a more traditional Marxist view of class as the relations of production, Delle focuses on how class is materialized in the landscapes of 19th-century coffee plantations in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica.

Diana Wall confronts the connections between gender and class by examining how women from middle-class and working-class contexts in 19th century Manhattan constructed domesticity, a concept intimately connected to the rise of the middle class. Robert Fitts also utilizes the concept of domesticity in his study of mid-19th-century Brooklyn, New York. Fitts argues that domesticity included a specific set of social behaviors that were actively used by the middle class to mark class boundaries.

Heather Griggs tackles the relationship between class and ethnicity among the residents of New York's notorious Five Points slum. Through the analysis of bank records and archaeological data, Griggs shows that class differences existed within a single ethnic community. Her analysis raises questions about the common archaeological approach that searches for "index fossils" that can be used to identify ethnicity. Finally, many of the authors would agree that class is not only relevant for the study of the past, but that it is vitally important to confront class in our own world of the present. This position is clearly articulated by Randall McGuire and Mark Walker, who show that class is a topic that should concern all archaeologists. McGuire and Walker define class in terms of relations of production. They use this approach to examine the contemporary class structure operating in both

academic and cultural resource management archaeologies. While many readers may find McGuire and Walker's conclusions uncomfortable and controversial, we feel that this article should be seriously considered by all archaeologists regardless of where they work.

These articles provide a variety of models and approaches that allow archaeologists to confront class. Hopefully, they will help archaeologists move away from static models of socio-economic status to more dynamic approaches that will illuminate the complex intersection of material culture and class interaction. Our goal has been to make this volume an opening parry to help move the study of class into mainstream discourse. If these articles stimulate a discussion that compels historical archaeologists to confront class, we will be satisfied.

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LOUANN WURST
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
COLLEGE AT BROCKPORT
BROCKPORT, NY 14420

ROBERT K. FITTS
JOHN MILNER ASSOCIATES, INC.
200 EAST END AVENUE APT 2M
NEW YORK, NY 10128