

understand the social world in terms of *classing* the population objectively in terms of their relative control over valued resources (broadly or narrowly defined¹), this supposedly implying a subjective element expressed through their elective affinity (see, e.g., Goldthorpe and Hope 1974). In distinguishing this from a political understanding I come close to Rancière's (1999) distinction between *police* and *politics*. The one refers to the normative arena of debates and negotiations around the exercise of authorized power: the ruse of reason that can justify inequality. The other refers to situations in which effective demands are made for the real practice of a principle of radical equality.

Looking at the history of the twentieth century, we may well take the view that... "ordinary" citizens, classes... have come together to force... the state and its institutions (schools, the legal and political systems) to civilize themselves - that is to say... to represent the world to themselves as a shared space in which they have their place. (Balibar 2002: 33)

Class in the first case is a way of describing social inequality as an existing (possibly unavoidable) state of being. But if we take this other, political, view, then class is an emergent phenomenon arising from the refusal to accept this social order. Far from an understanding of the subject in terms of being, it implies recognition that, inseparable from social practice, subjectivity is inherently a process of becoming.²

We can witness many instances of this kind of practice that are individual and situationally specific, but I reserve the term praxis for the emergence of a collective subject that has historical purchase, "history" in the sense of the making of history. Here I am departing from Rancière (whose focus anyway is not class). Balibar concludes the observation quoted above by noting that the historical trajectory he is describing "would never have got off the ground... without autonomous 'practices of the self' being constantly invented by those making up [the] multitude."

I call this the dimension of *class potential*. But to get at both the possible catalysts for praxis and also its effective outcome, we need to attend to the conjunctural features of the relevant social formation. We need to be able to trace the link between the contradictions that arise in the unfolding reproduction or transformation of different forms of capitalism on the one hand, and on the other cooperative and conflictual forms and practices. This allows us to explore the conditions of class that allow opportunities for praxis.

1. For example, Marx's understanding of "capital" refers to a quite specific form of value, while Bourdieu's (1990) relies on a variety of forms.

2. I am not referring here to the much-cited distinction between "a class in itself" and "a class for itself". Following Thompson (1978a), I find it hard to see how a class can be for itself in some *a posteriori* version of a hitherto inarticulate "thing."

4 Through a class darkly, but then face to face: praxis through the lens of class

Gavin Smith

Anthropologists have long been concerned with the relationship between themselves as inquiring intellectuals and the people they study. In the course of my own career the issue has taken on an extra wrinkle, as the people anthropologists studied increasingly (albeit unevenly) began to engage in the making of history - not just their own local history, but often their sense of being part of a broader current in which ordinary people became a force in History (Grimshaw and Hart 1994; Smith 1999). Some anthropologists were especially interested in pursuing this shift (e.g. Wolf 1969) and others were less so (e.g. Geertz 1973). However, irrespective of anthropologists' responses, this shift from being the objects of anthropological gaze to being the subjects of history introduced a tension in what hitherto had been simply a rather charming discussion in the Senior Common Room. I will call it the conversation over the intimacy of ethnography versus the detachment of theory. What I mean by this is the extent to which we might learn from the intricacy of situated descriptions and interpretations versus the extent to which our monographs should seek out forms, processes and tendencies of use above and beyond the contingencies and specificities of a time and a place.

Surely the very scale at which anthropologists do their fieldwork mitigates against leaping to broad conclusions. Yet if political engagement becomes important for anthropologists, at least some stretching beyond the local, the contingent, the specific seems called for. We might take as an example class formation and its causes and consequences. This is an issue that the left has regarded as crucial in the understanding of political leverage, what I will here call "praxis." Yet, caught within that conversation between ethnography and theory, many anthropologists have been tempted to leave class aside. By contrast, I argue that, insofar as the left's interest in class is always about praxis, about people becoming the subjects of their own history, and insofar as the "autonomous practices of the self" (see below) are very much what ethnography can expose, then ethnographic study has much to offer to our understanding of class.

In contradistinction to a sociological understanding of class, then, I will argue here for a political understanding. By the former I mean a project to

This conditionality of class has to do with the fact that class is about the simultaneous mutual dependence and conflict that are inherent in capitalist relations of production: first the separation of those who control property from those who have labor power, and then their re-combining at the site of productive work.³ The division of the fruits of production, between those who provide tools and those who provide energy, is arrived at through a process of struggle between the two. Over time these divisions may attain a kind of normative expectation and even some kind of legal endorsement, but Marx's point was that underlying such division is the balance of forces. "Hence, in the history of capitalist production, the establishment of a norm . . . presents itself as . . . a struggle between collective capital, i.e. the class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e. the working class" (Marx 1976 [1867]: 342-44).

As we do ethnographic work, the challenge for this political way of understanding capitalist society in class terms is to uncover the possible ways in which the autonomous practices of the self could be transformed into the collective agency of historical praxis. These autonomous practices of the self are precisely what the situated descriptions and interpretations of ethnography are well suited to presenting. So, in fact, the transformation I am describing is simultaneously the intellectual one from dense ethnographic narrative to the tendencies and processes of more broadly applicable theory, and the political transformation from the isolated and situated practices of the person toward the praxis of the collective subject.

Two stories

To illustrate what this transformation might induce, I present two stories, one from each of two fieldsites. I have done most of my fieldwork in two overlapping periods, the first in the central highlands of Peru (1972-85) and the second in the coastal littoral of the Alicante region of Spain called the Bajo Segura (1978-96). Superficially, the first seems more amenable to thinking in terms generally associated with class, while the second does not. But this is only a superficial interpretation.

The first fieldwork took place during the final two years of a successful collective struggle to secure a massive area of highland pasture from the dominant haciendas, and I undertook that research explicitly to study the history of what at the time was a quite well-known example of rural rebellion in Peru (see Hobsbawm 1974). One unexpected finding had to do with the character of the

³ It will become clear that the particular way in which I understand class analysis makes many of the principles of class relations applicable to a range of social interactions among kin, community and so on. Adapting Marx's (1976 [1867]: 1019-38) distinction, we might distinguish these in terms of the formal and the real exploitation of labor.

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participants in this rebellion. The region of Huasicancha had been infamous for its rebelliousness at least since the days of the war with Chile from 1879 to 1884 (see Smith 1989), and I expected to find a strong sense of localized solidarity. However, the research revealed that the success of the struggle was at least in part the result of participation by people linked across areas well beyond the site of the struggle itself, and by no means were those links confined to people relying on rural livelihoods (those usually glossed as "peasants").

So, when I came to choose a second fieldsite I was especially interested in whether this kind of collective praxis could be found elsewhere. The issue could be posed in terms of a question about class. What had surprised me in Peru was that people who saw themselves as being exploited through a variety of social relationships (in discussion these people commonly saw their condition in terms of forms of exploitation) nonetheless combined in a collective struggle to secure the crucial means of production for arable farming: pasture. So, for the second project I sought a situation in which there was a fairly long history of working-class relations across town and country and across sectors of the economy, for this would allow me to explore the nature of the links among these heterogeneous working people.

I will begin with a story from the first fieldsite and then turn to the second.

Central Highland, Peru - Sabino 1930s

It is hard to know how to begin the first one, about Sabino Jacinto. It needs a back-story. That has to do with seeing a movie years ago by Francesco Rosi, *Salvatore Giuliano*, the famous Sicilian bandit. The manner in which the film was made had fascinated me, with its weird mix of actual newsreel, documentary and dramatized genres, and its almost aggressively neutrality. It had sunk into my mind as "a movie," so I was especially struck when the name arose again, first in Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* (1959) and then in his *Bandits* (1969). Those who have read the former will recall that the book is written as a series of chapters, each of which is a step forward (now entirely unfashionable!) toward more sophisticated forms of rebellion. It begins with bandits, and a key figure is Turi: Giuliano.

So, living with highland farmers in the midst of a rebellion around 1970, I was increasingly fascinated by stories of an ancient loner living in a *choza* (hut) at the end of a canyon up in the mountains, who had once been a bandit and subsequently led the first successful campaign to recover land from the dominant haciendas. Many times I tried to arrange a visit to his *choza*, but he remained elusive. It became a running joke among the *huasicanchinos*. In the cemetery on *Todos Santos* (All Saints' Day) an old woman came up to me, leading a younger woman by the hand. "Here," she said, "this is Sabino's granddaughter. You should marry her. Then she would take you to him." Another

old woman pushed past her, this time with another young woman, "No marry this one. She's much better looking and she can cook." And there was a round of vigorous laughter, for this was part of the ceremonies of *Todos Santos* when older women try to get younger ones married off. One dark and stormy night (really) I was drinking with some friends when a young man came in drenched and apparently in some panic. "Sabino is dying," he said. "He wants to speak to you." I was taken by horse up the canyon to his home, where I recorded his gravelly voice between his gasps for breath.

That is the story. The rest is more like an addendum, oddly enough bringing us back to Hobbawm. In an article on peasant land occupations in Peru, he (1974: 137) quotes an administrator of one of the haciendas writing that the campaign "has been thought up, they tell me, by one Sabino or Sabini Román,⁴ who used to work on [Hacienda] Inghuasi and who has recently been made *alcalde* [mayor]."

In his teens Sabino had killed a hacienda employee in an argument, and for some years had lost himself in the mountains as a result. A skilled pastoralist with extensive knowledge of the *puna*, he occasionally worked for one or other of the haciendas as well as accumulating livestock for himself and his extended family. In the late 1930s, now among the elders of the community of Huascancha, he led a collective "invasion" to occupy land supposedly owned by the Tucle and Rio de la Virgen haciendas. According to his own account in subsequent months, he was accused of being a communist, imprisoned in Lima, where he was beaten with a rubber hose, bribed to sign a statement that he refers to as *un canto* and planted with political leaflets he could not himself read. He ends this chapter of his life "*He sido loco saliendo de la carcel* [I left the prison crazy]" (Smith 1989: 181).

Sabino Jacinto and his immediate kin remained on the land that was eventually settled on Huascancha by the haciendas. In the community records of 1937 a member of the community is recorded as complaining, "One day he [Jacinto] tells me he commands here; the next day he says to me, 'Uncle? Don't call me uncle. I am no uncle of yours'" (Smith 1989: 180). In the years following the settlement Sabino was often to be found working for one or other of the neighboring haciendas.

Bajo Segura, Spain – Alicia 1978

I want to turn now to a different time and a strikingly different setting, though there is a play here too about being an uncle one minute and not the next.

⁴ "Román" is almost certainly a confusion with (Martín) Ramos, a younger spokesperson for the campaign (see Smith 1989: 251).

The outcome, however, is quite different, perhaps as a result of what Bourdieu would call an entirely different habitus.

In the Bajo Segura in the 1970s there were viable commercial farms, many of them producing horticultural products such as artichokes, melons and tomatoes, as well as the famous Valencian oranges and lemons. And alongside them, in amongst them if you like, were small manufacturing enterprises producing rugs, shoes, toys and so on. Many families had a foot in both kinds of work, and while this meant experience of both farming and working on machinery in regimented workshops for some, the fact that jobbing homework was widespread meant that the rationale of manufacturing existed within the domestic arena too.

And, just as the current situation was a product of a particular historical past in central Peru, so here too. The interweaving of manufacturing and agriculture went back a long way, especially to the fact that agricultural crops had long been processed on site: esparto grass into ropes, sails, fishing nets and sandals; silk cocoons into silk; grapes into wine.

Yet, coming into this setting as I did at the end of the 1970s, rendering the landscape in class terms was not as immediately obvious as it had been in Peru. In many ways this could be explained by reference to the class literature itself. If class has to do with the experience of collective work and the clear distinction between the factory owner and disciplined workers, then neither of these features was obvious in the Bajo Segura. And yet I do not think it was my dogmatic Marxism that dissuaded me from quickly throwing out this inconvenient concept, faced with the beehive of multiple work activities and social relations of production that surrounded me. Rather, I think it would be hard for any anthropologist to live in that area and not be aware of the central role of class relations in people's lives, but now along a different plane. That was the role played by the flow of the value of their work away from these people in a complicated and shifting process; in other words, some form or other of exploitation in the technical sense. It is true that the term "exploitation" could be heard only in the talk of union organizers and social scientists. But one would have to be an especially dull ethnographer not to sense that a vast part of people's conversations revolved precisely around the winding and erratic paths taken by the flow of value: its escape from one site, its holing up in another for a time, its slipping away again, as well as the elusive mysteries of its accumulation elsewhere.

As the story begins, I was walking back from the *guardaría* where I had dropped off my daughter for the day. Walking with me was Alicia, who was on her way home after chatting to her friend who ran the daycare center (see Narotzky and Smith 2006: 78 ff.). I told her who I was. She laughed and said, "I know who you are. You're the guy who listens to my Dad talking about the old *fincas*, like a communicant listening to the priest. If you want to know about that stuff, you should be talking to Uncle Ciriaco." I knew that Alicia spent the

bulk of her day as a homemaker doing a variety of unskilled jobs that she got from her Uncle Fernando, a work distributor for the local shoe factories, and I was more interested in infiltrating myself into her work day and chatting to her while she worked than seeking out old Tio Ciriaco, who would talk to me any time.

I spent a few hours with Alicia that day, and managed to drop by casually from time to time to carry on our conversations. As the various people in her domestic life passed through the setting of her homework – one or other of her younger brothers, her mother, her father and so on – so conversation would turn to them. One day it was her Uncle Fernando who came up for discussion. She told me “He says I’m lucky he lets me have the work. He could be giving it to others. When I started out . . . perhaps then he was right. But now he gives me the hardest jobs and comes by late in the week with extra work he hasn’t managed to get others to do.” I had heard variations on this theme time and again from women involved in various kinds of homework, and the figure could have been an uncle, a father, an aunt or simply a close friend. The use of intimacy as the lever of exploitation in sweated labor is the way I thought of it.

I did not see Alicia for a while. The next time we met was at a local soccer game. She was with some friends, who were teasing one another, laughing and exchanging local gossip. I paused long enough to catch the brunt of one or two teasing comments, and was about to move off. Then Fernando walked past. The laughter stopped and Alicia tried to turn away enough not to make eye contact, but not enough to be openly rude. Fernando made a remark about her unreliability and walked on. I must have looked surprised at how this encounter had turned out, because Alicia waited for him to be a suitable distance away and then, turning away from her friends and dropping the lightness of tone suited to a leisurely afternoon, she put one hand on her hip and said to me “I told him I’d had enough. He said I could find work elsewhere, so that’s what I’m doing.”

As with Sabino’s case, there is a back-story here. First of all, Alicia was the latest in a series of generations of her family for whom kin terms such as “uncle” (Tio Ciriaco was in fact her grandfather) were deeply embedded in the social economics of livelihood, commercialized or otherwise. So, her grandfather, Tio Ciriaco, had found his work through his own father who, in turn, had found his job as a coach-driver for a local landlord through his mother, the wet-nurse for one of the landlord’s children. Second, though not herself a participant, Alicia had friends among a group of women who had helped me with a project. In vain I had been trying to administer a small questionnaire to homeworkers. It was mostly about factual issues, such as their household composition, how long they had taken work in and so on; there were also some questions that sought their ideas of what it meant to help somebody, what it

meant to work with or for somebody and so on. I had almost given up on the questionnaire when a neighbor who had responded to one of my first attempts offered to help me out. I needed that help for two reasons. First, women tended to be far too busy during the daytime to attend to what seemed to them to be an irrelevant and, indeed, disconnected set of questions. Second, each individual success in my quest seemed to be my final one. Unlike the case with a compact worksite, the dispersal of homeworkers made it hard to follow one interview with another. Returning home one evening with a bunch of empty pages in hand, I had complained about this to my neighbor. She responded with impatience about my ineptitude, grabbed the bunch of forms and said she would pass them through a network for people to fill out themselves.

A couple of weeks later I found myself in a heated encounter with two or three women. As the questionnaire rolled through the kitchens and patios, what started as small discussions with one another about how to answer this or that question had mushroomed into a lively debate about where being helpful began and where being taken advantage of left off. This in turn flowed into the issue of what one might call work and what one might call, well, something else. Fortunately, by the time I was confronted with all this things had gone from one state to its opposite. The women who had cornered me, now joined by my neighbor, described it like this. At first neighbors and friends had become highly sensitized to what they were asking of each other and doing for each other. Then they had begun to talk about the same issues with respect to the work distributors. Eventually, a group of eleven women had decided to meet with the three most relevant work distributors to discuss “issues.”

All these women were married and had children, and since Alicia was only at the stage of saving for her marriage chest she was not among them. However, she was quite aware of them, and my guess is that when the hand went to her hip and she turned to tell me that she no longer took work from her uncle, she was aware of the discussions that had revolved around the rolling questionnaire.

Stories such as this are the stuff of my “information.” They provide me with what I know about my ethnography, but they also provide an almost infinite set of referents, reminders, emotions and so on, as they touch on what I think I know of these things. For me, the ethnographer, their chaotic density almost works against the temptations of any broad conclusions. Yet, in some way or other, I want them to help me understand what use class analysis might be, mostly by challenging the way I think about class and praxis. What I especially want to think about here is the way in which we can cross scales of social interaction and practice while still employing the features of class analysis. So, I will begin by applying class analysis to the stories and their settings at a rather broad scale, perhaps less directly linked to the immediacy of fieldwork and experience: in this sense, the more obscure face of class – “Through a

class darkly." Only after that will I try to understand these stories in a more embedded ethnographic way — "... and then face to face."

Through a class darkly ...

I want to focus on the way that the two cases I have presented draw us to two essential elements of class, one conditional and one potential. The conditional one has to do with a particular kind of society, one in which various ways of laying claim to, and controlling, property are used as the means for directing the flow of value from the people who produce it to the people who accumulate it. This is the actual or concrete element of class relations, and it can be found in the everyday, small-scale practices of work. Then there is a second element, which is the potential element and hence the political element. It has to do with the willed intervention of agency into the making of history to modify its unfolding: in a word, praxis.

It is worth noting that both of these elements involve development and control. In the first element, value has to be developed through *technique* and its flow has to be controlled to direct it back to the capitalist. In the second element, the one of potential, praxis has to develop where other forces hinder it doing so: some element of control by and of the collective must occur. Taken together in this way, this is surely the beginning of a way for constructing a bridge between (micro) practices and (macro) praxis.

In the Peruvian case, the way in which the *hacendada* used control of land to extract value from local people employed as shepherds, as well as the way in which monopolization of this pasture prevented people from using their labor for their own benefit, was clear. This applied not only to local residents, but also to migrants. Many of them were engaged in volatile livelihoods beyond the region, and used livestock as a form of security. So they too were related to the *hacendada* through this land. Moreover, initially at least, these practices of livelihood are closely tied to the praxis of resistance. Yet the contingency of this particular history sets the limits on just how macro things were. Though much talk in the region referred in general to *campesinos* versus landlords, this actual struggle pitted a quite clearly bounded group of *campesinos* against quite specific landlords. This means that there are limits to referring to what is happening here as an expression of class. It may be that the very intensity of the solidarity I witnessed, which is what David Harvey (1995: 71), following Raymond Williams, called "militant particularism" or what Hobsbawm (personal communication) called "idiosyncratic rural resistance," worked against a broader class collectivity.

As I said, in the Spanish case the first element of class relations appeared to be confusing and complex, while evidence that some kind of collective intervention might shift the conditions of history was likewise obscure. But

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two things need to be said about this. The first is that the daily practices we observe in fieldwork may be too circumscribed to capture the scale at which the exploitative relations that frame class exist. The second is that class relations have a history: a history of the specificity of the everyday ways in which property relates to labor so as to produce and channel value, and a history of what I would call "the balance of forces." In Bajo Segura the very form that livelihood took was itself a product of the kind of oppression that shaped the labor process at the micro level and destroyed praxis at the macro level through a period preceding fieldwork, the period of the Franco dictatorship (Narotzky and Smith 2006).

So these are my initial reflections on "what class has to do with it." However, I think that it is a mistake to begin one's thinking about class in this rather academic way. Instead, before one can decide how to frame a question about the world in terms of class, one needs to think about what one is trying to do with one's life, what one is trying to avoid — physical labor perhaps, the hazards of uncertainty, the indignity of failure. And if this kind of reflection is, as Bourdieu (2000) so eloquently insists, a baseline for doing a sociology of ourselves, it might also be a similar baseline for understanding the practical activity of the people we study.

... And then face to face

If we go back to the distinction I made at the outset, between the ethnographic urge and the urge toward broader theory, then these ethnographic stories seem to disturb an academic kind of class analysis. But this does not mean that they stand in contrast to, or even against, the principles of such an analysis. Rather, as I said earlier, class analysis implies a concern with praxis and history, or perhaps better put, praxis *against* history. Each of these stories shows elements of defiance toward the present that is the heart of that opposition. In each of these stories, participants willfully bracket certain elements of what is happening, the better to make sense of what they *can* make happen: Alicia's denial of her uncle's invoking a kin tie; Sabino too, but for different reasons. So while the stories do disturb the tendency toward some kind of ordered symmetry in a broader analysis, I propose that the understanding of what is happening in these two small items of evidence would be severely limited if we failed to understand them in terms of class.

It is often said, or at least it used often to be said, that class is all about relationships. A class does not sit alone; it is made by the force of its opposed class. This may or may not be so, but to think of class in this way we need to go back one step further. The unfolding of our potential, the development of what we might be against the reality of what we currently are, is a struggle against the conditions that exist in the present, in order to make them into new possibilities.

This is as true for personal subjectivity as it is for collective identity. Practical work is precisely about destroying what currently exists in order to make it what needs to exist. In this work, some relations have to be created, others constrained or confronted, and through this process personal and collective forms *develop* (in Hegel's sense). Our understanding of ourselves as coherent actors with agency (as opposed to fragmented subjects with pathologies) emerges through what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) called the dialogical interaction that occurs in these relations: *among* those with whom we identify toward our individual and collective subjectivity; and *against* the force of conditions that arise as a result of the practices of others.

I need to rehearse all this because the individual agency of the *picaresque* actor is often, and especially in ethnographic narrative, set against the emergence of collective forms of struggle. But there is always a tension between the emergence of particularistic senses of personal individuality and the *doxa* of collective membership. And the reverse is also true, and often forgotten: the development of the self is inconceivable without this process of the practical struggle to make one's agency affect the world, and the necessity, in doing so, of engaging in dialogical relationships with others that effectively develop the social person.

The puzzle then, when we try to understand the role of class at the level of what I am calling "ethnography," is not addressed by contrasting descriptions of moments when "class" supposedly arises, and others when the people that interest us appear to be fragmented into isolated individuals. Rather, if we take as fundamental that social being is nothing but social practice, and that social practice is inconceivable without the dialogics of social relations, then it is clear that we must pursue that understanding differently. At the level of ethnography, we need to uncover different things. One of these is the elements of practical work that have the effect of consecrating what *is*. Another is those moments of crisis, disturbance and the like, in which practice can go forward only by destroying not just the immediacy of the present (the undernourished sheep that has to be pastured, the shoe that has to be soled) but also by destroying the very social configuration that is responsible for the conditions of that present (the conditions of pasturage or of shoe production). Clearly this is an issue of scale, in a number of ways. Alicia's reconfiguration of the jobber-worker relation away from its kin framing is not the same as Sabino and his associates' occupation of property controlled by a legally recognized hacienda.

Class analysis necessarily involves not the ranking or nesting of scales, but their interweaving. They are the scales of interaction and practice that produce society as capitalist on the one hand, and on the other the various scales of counterforces that arise within and beyond those relations. Class, that is, has to do with a dialectical tension arising from the contradictions inherent in the

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relations of capitalist reproduction and the way in which those tensions are transmitted into the forming of social subjects, subjects who are themselves engaged in creative practices within and against the conditions of their present. The challenge for analysis is to explore the way that one of these dimensions is translated into another under specific historical conditions.

Seen from this perspective, what can we learn from these stories? To begin with, we need to recognize that they are short, selective descriptions mostly at the level of the kind of social interaction that I associate with fieldwork. That is, they are not sweeping narratives of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, and they are not, for example, discussions of the current financial crisis that seek to explain elements that are not understandable simply at the level of experience: of home-owner's loss or of the dreamworld of derivatives traders. In noting this rather obvious fact, we acknowledge that social reality can be addressed at different scales both of time and of space, Alicia's work and family relations in 1978 versus the long decline of an empire, and at different depths, that of appearance and experience versus that of the underlying requirements of social reproduction that have their own elementary structures and inevitable tensions.

Anthropologists are frequently frustrated by the grand conclusions social analysts draw, especially those associated with policy. Those analysts are ignorant of the contingencies and complexities that we have, perforce, encountered in our own long engagement with ground-level practices and relationships. Nevertheless, what evidence at this level allows us to conclude has its own constraints. This is still more the case when it is presented, as I have done here, in the form of small stories or vignettes. Put another way, this particular form of evidence inflects the broader narrative that becomes a chapter (in this case) or possibly an entire monograph.⁵

Even so, I have chosen to see what we can learn from applying the notion of class to stories of this kind, as well as seeing what we can learn about the way class works by testing it against these stories. The cases here are not especially exemplary. Nor, after a fine exercise in deconstruction, will they

⁵ In using stories here, I am following in a long tradition in anthropology and cultural history. Different people use such stories for different purposes, so the reader needs to approach them with caution. If the purpose is to illustrate and back up an argument, then certain wiles are involved in the process of selection. This is not quite the same as when stories are used as a theatrical device, as many writers do with initial stories. An especially spectacular case of this is in Robert Darnton's (1984) *The Great Cat Massacre*. There we are told a most extraordinary tale, surely in the realm of fantasy, and the charm of the subsequent exposition is that everything falls into place. We thus find ourselves Darnton's ally in interpretation, happy to be (almost) as perspicacious as he. A third possibility is to have the story act as the play, for which the ethnographer is the theatre critic. Here, the author first recounts an especially interesting story told by one or more of the people who are the objects of the monograph, and then interprets it for the reader. So, the author acts as both playwright and critical theorist. Especially fruitful uses of stories can be found in the work of Portelli (1985, 1991, 1997) and Sider (1986b, 2003).

reveal some hidden secret. Still less are they simply accumulated stories from the informant's point of view.

Yet these stories about the engagement of an agent in a social-relational practice do expose the way in which both the agent and the practice are always incomplete, always at a moment of potentiality. If this is so, then any critical analysis or engagement with that moment must address the degree to which that incompleteness is simply incidental and contingent, or is potentially a step toward shifting the prevailing conditions of possibility. Addressing this question means tracing the ways in which the autonomous practices of the self are articulated with other scales and levels of the social world: the interactions with those with whom we identify; the counterforce of those who restrict possibilities; the logics of reproduction and transformation specific to the kind of society in which they are embedded.

While it is no doubt true that my long-standing concern with class analysis shapes the way I have presented these stories, I intentionally wrote them down before thinking about how they might be viewed in terms of class. As I said at the outset, my particular concern is to explore the territory between the autonomous practices of the self and the potential for collective praxis.⁶ My purpose is only to propose possible points where tensions in the relational practices of work may have the potential to lead to elements of historical praxis. But this is a tentative exercise in method in order to see how we might interpret this evidence in terms of class, and I will not consider how those potentials may work themselves out in each of the two cases (but see Smith 1989; Narotzky and Smith 2006). Nonetheless, we can make some observations.

There are two especially provocative thresholds in Sabino's story. Hobsbawm (1959) has discussed the role of social banditry in crystallizing subaltern people's immanent critique of prevailing social conditions. The long history of these people's resistance to the haciendas, which goes back at least as far as the War of the Pacific (1879–83) (see Smith 1989), suggests that Sabino's confrontations were themselves a product of an already-existing collective refusal of the givenness of existing conditions. Superficially, Sabino's story can be seen as explaining local people's ability to rebel in terms of his charisma, a view supported by the fact that this story was known by everybody from childhood onward. But Sabino himself was a product of the dialogical interactions that characterized the community he lived in, and his story is both a further moment of that dialogue and also a powerful, condensed message about the threshold between the personal and familial practice of

⁶ In a chapter on individual *ladino* acts of dissent, Charles Hale writes, "As individual acts, these sensibilities have important contextual and aggregate effects, but they generally lack the transformative power achieved through organized collective action [What I would call 'praxis']" (Hale 2006: 170, emphasis added). His exploration of this issue throughout his book, while pre-eminently about what he calls "racial ambivalence," parallels my own discussion here.

making a living, and the accompanying need to catalyze a moment of collective praxis to press against the conditions that were making such a living ever less possible.

There is a second threshold along the lines of what I have called the simultaneity of conflict and dependency that is essential to a class relationship. That is marked by Sabino's shifting in and out of relationships to the community and to the hacienda. We know that, both before the initiative of the 1930s and afterwards, he was especially sought by the hacienda for his skills: extensive knowledge of local topography, ability to shift herds of livestock quickly and strategically, control over family retainers and so on. We know too that he was identified as a troublemaker around the same time, no doubt at least partly precisely because of those skills. It is almost as though the ability to produce value was what put Sabino in demand as an employee and also underlay his potential to disrupt the production and flow of value. While, from the hacienda administration's point of view, this had largely to do with the person of Sabino as an individual, the evidence suggests otherwise. Not only was his ability to resist the hacienda dependent upon his position within the collective body of the community and his ability to mobilize it, but his value as an employee relied both on what he had learned through his life among these people and on the extent to which he could mobilize household and extended-family members to act as *huacchilleros* (and in other roles) on the hacienda.

There is a significant gap between the events of the story and its telling here. This makes its role as a story quite different from Alicia's, which contains her own story about how she discarded her uncle and which relies on the many narratives I gathered from her over time. It is then, after all, really my own story about Alicia, recorded pretty much over the time it was happening. There is quite a lot we learn about class praxis from the Peru story that we cannot, I think, relate to Alicia's story. That is because Sabino's story itself played a significant part in the constitution of individual and collective subjects; versions of Sabino's account, and many others in multiple variations, circulated among urban and rural participants throughout the political campaign that I studied in the field (Smith 1991a, 1997). In spite of this difference, however, we see a persistent worrying away at what previous moments of popular intervention in the making of history might uncover. This seems an important element of what we are trying to reveal about the potential for current collective praxis. Narotzky and I (Narotzky and Smith 2006; Smith 2008) have argued that it is the absence of those previous moments in Alicia's story that account for that story's lack of politics, in Rancière's use of the term. This reflects his observation that "There is . . . an essential link between memory, history and democracy. Democratic struggles always occur as reiterations of previous inscriptions of equality" (quoted by Deranty 2003: 153).

History was important to people in the Bajo Segura, but it was of a particular sort. Debate in the public sphere continually took up issues around the interpretation of the Republic, the Civil War, the period of Franco and the *pacto de silencio* of the Transition. Importantly, however, these debates were formulated around the need for a neat ending to the past, for a completion. Those debates appear to promise organic integralism, but only through discussions among those claiming to be representatives of the people – not of *all* the people; only of those who accept the present in these highly contained, closed-up terms.

Understood thus, history either removes the collective praxis of people as a force in its making, or condemns every moment of their temporary victories to instances of violent and misguided barbarism (Smith 2011). It is not surprising, therefore, that is hard for the people of the Bajo Segura to find in such a history a plot that is of much interest to them. The stories I have presented here can be interpreted along such lines, but also they can be given a much stronger interpretation. Even though Alicia's rejection of exploitation through kin ties was situationally specific and microscopic, it nevertheless was an instance of autonomous practices of the self. Yet it takes place in real material conditions that will affect its longer-term possibilities, material conditions that are not given but are the outcome of the balance of forces that for some time have been directed against class as a collective subject of history. And if, as I have argued, the formation of collective groups and of personal self-consciousness are interrelated, then it follows that fragmented collectivities will also produce fragmented persons, or perhaps better put, a-social persons. In other words, the mundane practices of making a living are dialectically tied to collective praxis in the constitution of the social subject.

I do not suggest that these kinds of observation are especially well grounded or that they are of specific political use for the situations I have discussed. My purpose is simply to show that we can subject relationships and practices across a range of scales to a kind of interpretation that rests on a dialectical understanding of social phenomena in terms of always incomplete force and counterforce. These phenomena are not all of a kind or always amenable to stories of people interacting in the course of their workaday lives to produce what anthropologists sometimes call their "culture." Rather, we need to attend to different levels and scales of social phenomena, for it is only by trying to address the difficult question of the specificity of their articulation at a given time and through history that we as social analysts can make a political contribution to what will enhance the potential of praxis.

Conclusion

In most current writing that refers to class, there is rarely any clear sense of which of its multiple uses is being employed. Indeed, we usually find a kind of generic use in which the author assumes the reader will accept any of a bundle

Through a class darkly, but then face to face

of possible meanings. In my case, taking class seriously requires accepting Marx's epistemology: an understanding of society as a historical process in which social forms emerge dialectically out of tensions and contradictions in the process of social reproduction. As the basis for an understanding of class, this lies uneasily with class understood as a static description of the empirical features of sociological categories of people. It is often the confusion of these two uses of "class" that allows people to dismiss the approach arising from Marx's epistemology.

A fundamental contradiction that arises in our society results from the garnering of value through the use of property on the one hand, and the translation of value through the sale of labor power on the other. This contradiction produces the tension between how much should go to the controllers and how much to the producers, and while this is a valid observation it does not provide a valid basis for the description of empirical social groups. Any attempt to test it by relating it to the principles of empirical class categories simply obscures what we can usefully learn from a Marxist epistemology.

This is not to say that structural features and empirical class groups are unconnected. If they were unconnected, then there would be no political point in my telling the stories of Sabino and Alicia. However, that connection cannot be made by a simplistic leap from the dialectical and historical production of social forms to the allotment of people to categories based on their social function and hence their elective affinities. Rather, now as it always has been, the challenge is to try to explore the ways in which these material tensions over the historical course of social reproduction through generations of people are transmitted, via experience, to people's actual praxis as social agents.

I hope my use of praxis has made clear how unhelpful notions of "class consciousness" are in this regard. There is no such thing as an a-historical, a-social individual (or collective) who is endowed with consciousness and engages in some kind of agency. Rather, the subject is constituted from the start through practice, which is always interactive and always shaped by the historical and social position of those who engage in it. I entitled my first book *Livelihood and Resistance* for a reason. From no insight of my own, but rather as a result of the acute and distressing struggles I had observed in the field, the challenge was to break down the line between the practical everyday work of securing a livelihood and the historically fragile business of protecting or securing the conditions that make that livelihood possible: that is to say, praxis.⁷

⁷ Gramsci seems to work precisely across this divide. Unlike Thompson, for him the line between daily practice or practical sense, and historical praxis or organic ideology, is thoroughly problematized. A perpetual challenge for Gramsci was to make possible the bridge between one apparently contingent and localized experience and another, so as to "unify a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events," as Thompson (1966: 8) puts it. The intellectual played a crucial role in this task, together with the dogged work of organization (see Smith 1999, 2004; Gramsci 2000).

Seen in this way, there is no reason why we cannot explore quite microscopic inter-relational practices in terms of class. Moreover, by doing so, we might find a means of identifying politically useful moments when daily practice seeds historical praxis, just as we already know that it was prior historical praxis that provided the bedrock for daily practice.

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5 Walmart, American consumer-citizenship and the erasure of class

Jane Collins

Since the 1980s, the giant retailer Walmart has emerged as an icon of capitalist success, if not always of corporate virtue. Its size and highly effective business model have made it a revolutionary force in the retail sector. But as it has become a ubiquitous presence in everyday life in the United States and many other countries, it has also circulated a radical new discourse of economic citizenship, one that draws on historically popular understandings of the “consumer-citizen” but flattens and reworks them for new purposes. Walmart’s discourse downplays the relationships of individuals to work and class, but highlights their identity as consumers who must choose between high prices and low wages. This chapter draws out the elements of Walmart’s new model of consumer-citizenship and contrasts it with older Keynesian and labor-union versions of the concept. While acknowledging the effectiveness of Walmart’s efforts in purveying this new understanding, it points to fissures that emerged during the global recession of 2008–09 and that gained public attention during Walmart workers’ protests in late 2012.

The late twentieth century was a time of global economic change, as corporations and their allies worked to dismantle the Keynesian frameworks that had been designed to stabilize employment and to balance production and consumption. The undoing of these bargains was accompanied by struggle over such fundamental issues as the role of the state in the economy, the responsibilities of employers to workers and the meaning of citizenship. As Friedman notes in his chapter in this volume, this dismantling entailed a reconfiguration of class relations. Walmart’s reworking of consumer-citizenship occurred within, and formed part of, this larger shift. As Lizabeth Cohen (2003) and others have shown, the idea of consumer-citizenship in the USA encapsulates a dense set of relationships among citizens, the state and employers, as well as a complex set of ideas about “the market.” Examining the fate of the concept of the consumer-citizen thus provides a window into the reconfiguration of these relationships and ideas in key periods.

Walmart has played a greater role than any other corporation in shaping ideas about the consumer-citizen in the USA since the 1980s. Walmart is the leading retailer in the USA, where it serves 20 percent of demand in the sector.