

**Pedagogical Possibilities of *Class in Culture***

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**Review of: Ebert, Teresa, L. and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh (2008) *Class in Culture*.  
Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 221 pages.**

This is not a conventional book review. My goal is not to assess, evaluate, and discuss the scholarly merit of the book. Rather, I intend to reason the importance of reading and teaching *Class in Culture* as a Marxist-feminist educator. It is not customary to include such a book on the syllabi of adult education courses. This is the case in spite of the fact that in order to teach adult education from critical or radical perspectives, one has to venture into and borrow from other disciplines, in particular feminist studies, cultural studies, post-colonial and anti-racism studies. In the last two decades, I have relied heavily on theoretical and methodological debates in these disciplines, though rarely to my complete epistemological satisfaction.

Reading *Class in Culture* made me think again about the sources of my intellectual dissonance with much of theoretical debates in recent decades. Why do I find ‘meaning’ in certain modes of analysis and dismiss others as conformist, or to use Allman’s sharp articulation, as ‘uncritical/reproductive’? In this review, therefore, I will first attend to these questions by glancing at my own theoretical/political trajectory, to be followed by highlighting ideas that I have harvested from Ebert and Zavarzadeh, and finally end by pointing to the pedagogical possibilities in *Class in Culture*.

### **The Theoretical Turn**

*Class in Culture* illustrates the authors’ capacity to engage carefully and read compendiously in the diverse fields of literary criticism, cultural studies, media studies, feminism, sociology of knowledge, history, and political science far beyond my specialization. Therefore, I have decided to review the book alongside my personal Marxist-feminist intellectual and political pursuits to animate some of the key conceptual claims of this perspective. During the last three decades, I have witnessed the decline and, more recently, gradual re-emergence of Marxist analysis. It is still not customary to teach Marxism or introduce historical materialism in the curricula of adult education. Reading *Class in Culture* persuaded me to rethink the process of my resistance and *survival* in the wake of the onslaught on dialectical and historical materialism. I agree with Ebert and Zavarzadeh’s premise that “[W]riting about class is unlike writing about any other cultural and social issue because it involves the writing itself: writing about

class is itself a class practice” (p. xv). To say it differently, centering class in our thinking and practice is a component of class struggle. Class is both ubiquitous and, theoretically, indispensable.

It was in the mid-1980s, while doing graduate work at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, that I gradually discerned the emerging theoretical turn. This was after leaving Iran in the wake of a defeated revolution, a doctoral thesis unfinished, and a campus gone politically and intellectually conservative. All of this was too hard to comprehend. Like thousands of other Iranian students, I had left the campus in 1979 to join the Revolution, and like many others, those who survived, was forced into exile in 1983.

I went to the University of Illinois in 1977 in pursuit of my graduate study on a campus that hosted one of the most radical and active chapters of the World Confederation of Iranian Students (CIS). CIS was the most organized and radical student organization in the US and Europe with branches in a number of Asian countries, too. The impact of CIS radicalism on the US and European student movements has been noted by many (for a survey, see Matin-Asgari).

This political reversal, the conservatism I sensed in 1984, coincided with the rise of new theoretical debates on all sorts of ‘postality,’ the term Ebert and Zavarzadeh use for various theoretical positions prefixed with “post-.” By the mid-80s, when I was talking about the relationship between state, ideology, class, and struggle, I would be warned that the state was ‘withering away’ and ‘ideology’ was less significant than ‘identity.’ This turn showed up in the defense of my doctoral thesis, which demonstrated the centrality of the state in the Islamization of higher education by Iran’s theocratic regime. My research, I was told, was too ‘state-centrist’ at the expense of eclipsing the ‘agency’ and ‘power’ of other social actors. The history of student movement, its struggle against the shah, the struggle of faculty and students for university autonomy, their struggle for decolonizing education, for academic freedom, and for a new system of higher education—all detailed in my thesis—did not count as ‘agency’ enough. The expectation

was to reduce the state to a trifle, even in this case which focused on the reform of higher education as a component of Islamic state-building and nation-building. The state should have been pushed to the corner if only because Marxism puts it at the center.

Taking refuge in other disciplines, mainly feminist studies, was hardly a relief. Feminist analysis was immersed in the culture-based claims of ‘agency.’ In this intellectual milieu, there was no place for historicization or a radical critique of Third Worldism, nationalism, religion, or fundamentalism. I was left with a ‘cautious’ critique of fragmented, dehistoricized, and de-radicalized feminism that was undermining the achievements of the feminism of the 1960s-1970s. I felt that I was being plunged into my particular ethnic, national, religious or local identity attire. However, in my understanding, my feminist consciousness was not the product of my nation, region, family, language, religion or ethnic group. It was/is, rather, the outcome of the rise of feminist knowledge, the internationalization of women’s struggles against patriarchy, and understanding patriarchy as a universal form of women’s oppression manifested in particular cultural, regional, and social relations. I, therefore, resented nativist, cultural relativist, nationalist, or subalternist treatments of feminism as a derivative discourse, that is, Western, not fit for non-Western societies. In short, resisting the rising tide of cultural, discursive, or identitarian knowledge production was swimming against a strong current.

Two things helped me to resist this intellectual and political offensive. First was the version of Marxism that I had learned. I learned Marxism in the context of anti-imperialist struggles, which allowed me to navigate deeper and broader in the range of debates, authors, histories, countries and conflicting political agendas. This diverse and in-motion knowledge of Marxism revealed many mechanical, un-dialectical, deterministic, Eurocentric, and mainly ‘white-male-centric’ readings of Marx and Marxism. Second was encountering Ebert’s seminal work on *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire and Labor in Late Capitalism* (hereafter *Ludic Feminism*). In the section below, I will begin, first, with the influence of *Ludic Feminism* on my work and second, will illustrate how the reading of this book opened possibilities for revisiting

Marx in the wake of postality while studying her *Class in Culture* reaffirmed the indispensability of the concept in understanding society and history.

### **Encountering *Ludic Feminism***

Liberal feminism was able, after two centuries of struggles by women and men of all persuasions (anarchist, socialist, communist, secular, religious), to impose on the institution of the patriarchal state a regime of constitutional and legal equality between the two genders. It is now at the end of its historical project. However, now that we need, more than ever, radical feminist movements to go beyond the liberal project, liberalism finds a new life in theoretical positions that carry the prefix *post-* as Ebert has effectively argued in *Ludic Feminism*. While patriarchal violence has increased and expanded throughout the world, *post-al* positions raise questions about the validity of the very categories of ‘woman’ or ‘patriarchy.’ For instance, the fear of ‘totalization,’ ‘essentialization’ and ‘dichotomization’ has hindered some feminists from boldly confronting the collusion of fundamentalism and imperialism, the link between globalization, militarization and the ‘re-traditionalization’ of gender relations. Inspired by Ebert’s historical materialist frame of feminist analysis, I developed a critique of cultural relativist positions on ‘Islamic Feminism’ (Mojab, 2001) where I argued in favour of treating the universality and particularity of patriarchal relations dialectically. Viewed from this perspective, I concurred with Ebert that the paranoia of ‘ludic feminists’ about dichotomies, binarisms, or totalizations amounts to a full surrender to the rule of patriarchal (neo)liberalism.

The dialectical materialist approach in *Ludic Feminism*, repeated in the “Gender after Class” chapter of *Class in Culture*, gave me the intellectual stamina to revisit my earlier reading of Marxist theory and dig out some key concepts such as class, relations of production, forces of production, mode of production, base and superstructure, and even read more on philosophical notions of dialectics, epistemology and ontology, and matter and consciousness. In this revisit, I realized the significance of my earlier encounters with Marxism in the student movement including reading and debate groups on key texts such as *Capital*, *The German Ideology*, and *Grundrisse*. The challenge was how to bring

this knowledge to adult education classes, considering the liberal/conservative monopolies of knowledge in academia.

Since 9/11, students enter our classes in search of a deeper understanding of the conditions of capitalism at its imperialist stage, a condition in which cyclical financial crisis contributes and deepens the poverty gap globally; where militarization, war, and occupation are means of expansion and further conquest; where pillaging human and natural resources of the world is called ‘development’, ‘human capital’ or ‘cultural capital’; where violence against women, native peoples, and people of color are legitimized under the name of ‘culture’, ‘community’, ‘family’, ‘religion’, and ‘morality.’ Students know something is not right about this world; some have even taken individual steps in redressing these problems; they live an ‘honourable’ life and are committed to the well-being of fellow humans and the planet, peace in communities, neighbourhoods, and on streets; they volunteer to provide social safety for youth, homeless people, or refugees. Nonetheless, they remain perplexed, often exhausted and disillusioned, about the persistence of inequality and injustice. The theoretical explanations offered by poststructuralist and postmodernist perspectives have added to their epistemological confusion and ontological doubts. Many students, in particular members of ‘marginalized’ or ‘subaltern’ groups, are enchanted by the possibilities opened up to them by notions such as ‘contingency’, ‘fluidity’, ‘tentativeness’, ‘locality’, and ‘identity.’ As a Marxist-feminist educator, it is an arduous task to pull these students up from the comfort of ‘self-gazing’ to the point of locating the ‘self’ in the messy social relations around them. In *Ludic Feminism*, Ebert argues that feminist theory should reclaim the radical knowledge production where ‘difference’ could be explained and analyzed in connection to the materiality of social relations and envision a political project of radical social transformation of capitalism.

To move students beyond the uncritical engagement with notions of ‘self’, ‘identity’ and ‘difference’ to notions of social relations and material differences requires retrieving ‘class’ and doing class analysis. In *Class in Culture* Ebert and Zavarzadeh remind us that “...intellectuals may leave class alone but class will not leave intellectuals alone” (p.

xvii). Since the 1990s, some academics in the field of adult education have taken up the analytic of class and have produced brilliant fresh analyses. The contributions of Paula Allman and Glen Rikowski, among others, are noteworthy. These Marxist educators have renewed the dialectical, historical materialist understanding of class in capitalism. Rikowski, for instance, argues (2001) that

Class theory is an aspect of the exploration of the constitution of capitalism that is premised upon a project for its abolition. It is an integral part of Marxism as a theory *against* capitalist society, and not just a theory *of* it. Class theory is therefore concerned with the *abolition* of class (Marx's position) and the opening up of human history from the desolation of its pre-history.... Class is a critical concept when it is used as an element in the critique of capital, *and the critique of itself* -- of its own social existence (emphasis in original).

*Class in Culture* adds to this body of radical thinking by urging us to expand our analysis beyond cultural politics to class analysis. But why should we be interested in theorizing class?

### **‘Class’ in *Class in Culture***

The eviction of ‘class’ from social theory came with the installation of ‘culture’ in its stead. Within this theoretical framework, the oppression, exploitation and resistance of women around the world are either ignored or explained through the lens of culture, particularly religion. Reading through the pages of *Class in Culture*, it is difficult not to see such culturalist positions as simplistic and reductionist. The chapters of the book reveal the omnipresence of class in culture and in all social relations. The reader feels, in reading the book’s critique of post-al theorists, that ignoring class is itself a class position. The authors do not conflate class and culture, or class and politics, and neither do they see them as independent phenomena. Their approach is dialectical.

Let’s admit, as the book does, that social theory, in its current culturalist phase, is both inadequate and conformist; it is a return to or re-affirmation of an ancient frame of reference which Marx and Engels called philosophical ‘idealism’, a worldview with no

interest in posing an alternative to the capitalist socio-economic formation. Let's also admit that Marxist theory, both materialist and class-centered, allows us not only to interpret the world more adequately but also to transform it. Still understanding class has been a challenge in Marxist theory and practice. I will begin by outlining the struggle within Marxist theory and end by locating *Class and Culture* in the history of this theoretical struggle.

The concept of class is *the* cornerstone of Marxist theory. While Marx and Engels engaged in class analysis in all their writing, they never produced a monographic work on the topic. It is well known that Marx actually devoted the last chapter of the last volume of *Capital* to "classes" but did not finish it. Still, while struggling with this concept, Marx made a number of important theoretical claims about classes, which many of his followers failed to grasp. For Marx, class, like capital, was not a *thing* but a social relation. Rooted in this claim is another crucial one – the literary and political representatives of a class are not necessarily members of that class. Marx did not confer on the proletariat the role of the 'grave-digger' of capitalism because this class was more conscious, more militant or braver than peasants or other social groups. This role was, rather, due to the fact that this class is the only one that does not depend on ownership of property, and as such it is the only class that can be the social base for building a classless society. Equally significant was the claim that social classes and class struggle prevail throughout the entire long era of socialism, and in building communism the proletariat will abolish itself as a class.

Drawing on the insights of Marx and Engels, Lenin critiqued the 'economistic' understandings of class prevalent in the communist movement of Russia. He argued that members of the working class cannot arrive at class consciousness through their everyday, economic, struggles. Consciousness about the role of their class in history, the nature of capital, and the need to replace capitalism by communism comes only through theoretical knowledge, which cannot be gained on the basis of the experience of exploitation or struggles for better working conditions. Lenin also emphasized that the



Soviet Union was a class society and classes and class struggle shape the entire era of socialism.

There were important theoretical advances in the course of the socialist revolution in China, which many Western students of Marxism, including the authors of the book, ignore. Mao, building on Marx and Lenin, laid emphasis on a crucial difference between bourgeois and socialist revolutions. In the former (e.g. in England and France), social relations of capitalism emerged spontaneously before the new bourgeois class assumed power. With the assumption of state power, the mission of the bourgeoisie was to consolidate, rather than create, the capitalist system by harmonizing the feudal superstructure, especially the state, with the capitalist economic base. By contrast, socialism does not emerge spontaneously out of capitalist relations of production. It has to be built through conscious intervention, i.e., socio-economic planning, education, culture, political mobilization, organizing, etc. all of which depend on theoretical understanding. In other words, the economic base of socialism is built through the superstructure. The party and the state are themselves inevitably sites of struggle between those who advocate a capitalist road and a socialist road. In line with Marx's claim cited above, Mao argued that a person's political and ideological line, rather than her belonging to a class, determines where she stands in class struggles. A party of workers, peasants or other toiling masses can be as bourgeois as a party of capitalists. Even, a communist party will be, dialectically speaking, 'the unity and struggle of opposites,' i.e., bourgeois and socialist lines. The major goal of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76) was, in fact, to prevent the restoration of capitalism, as it had happened in the USSR, and to advance the construction of socialism. Mao considered socialist China a class society and predicted the possibility that 'capitalist roaders' within the party might assume power and restore capitalism as it actually happened in 1976.

These theorizations of class are often ignored in the literature on Marxism. Non-Marxist social scientists interested in social stratification usually understand class in terms of employment relations. This understanding, rooted in Weber, aims at improving relations

of stratification rather than replacing them with non-stratified social relations. Some sociologists reject the very idea of class, declare its death, and underscore stratification on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender and other social cleavages. These theorizations rarely see a connection between class and politics or class and ideas.

*Class and Culture* takes us to spaces where few suspect the presence of classes and classed regimes of truth. Taking their analysis to intriguing places and excruciating sites such as Abu Ghraib, 9/11, eating, abortion, e-education, or the movie *A Beautiful Mind*, Ebert and Zavarzadeh warn us that “[T]his is not a book of information; it is a book of critique” (p. x). However, while reading the book, I did not have to recall this warning. Even when there is information about individuals, events, particular cultural entities, etc., the book engages in theoretical struggle. In reading every page, I feel that class is indispensable in social theory, in teaching, and in the struggle to build a better world. Ebert and Zavarzadeh argue (p. 4) that

Getting class out of culture, which is the environment of everyday life, produces the illusion that there are no classes and everyone lives freely, without any constraints. It produces the myth that “you can achieve anything you want.” Making class visible in everyday life, on the other hand, makes people aware that class is the enemy of human freedom because freedom is not simply freedom of speech or association, or freedom before the law, or even freedom from oppression. It is freedom from exploitation, freedom from subordination to the division of labor. *This means freedom begins with freedom from necessity*, only after one’s needs are met: “the true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it” – “the realm of necessity” (Marx, *Capital III*, 959).

One can see in this excerpt that Marxist theory, far from understanding class as a question of employment or income, negates the class system rooted in such a division of labor. It is also obvious that Marxist analysis depends on a complex set of dialectical opposites such as necessity/freedom, base/superstructure, matter/consciousness, subject/object, epistemology/ontology, base/superstructure, and much more. These are not binaries, dichotomies, or dualisms, although dualistic understandings are not lacking even among Marxists. The two opposites exist not separately but in ‘unity and struggle.’ Matter

transforms into consciousness, as Mao emphasized, and consciousness into matter. Marxism treats the relationship between matter and consciousness as the ‘fundamental question of philosophy.’ And the most principal form of consciousness is theoretical understanding:

The role of the intellectual is most clearly marked by the Marxist tradition in which the intellectual is the person whose work is aimed at producing a theoretical consciousness. Theoretical consciousness in Red Feminism draws on Lenin’s argument and its restatement by Lukacs. Lenin regards this function—the production of a theoretical consciousness—to be so important that he writes... “without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement. This idea cannot be insisted upon too strongly at a time when the fashionable preaching of opportunism goes hand in hand with an infatuation for the narrowest forms of practical activity” (p. 147).

This is a crucial departure from positivist/empiricist regimes of knowledge production as well as digression from more radical approaches such as Cultural Historical Activity Theory. It is in fact a central claim of Marxism that theory does not simply derive from practice or experience. In the absence of a dialectical approach to theory/practice, pedagogy remains strictly within the boundaries set by capitalism. Here is how Ebert and Zavarzadeh (p. xviii) reveal the ideological garb of not only phenomenology but all positivist knowledge:

Our goal has been to go beyond the phenomenology of capitalism and contribute to a development of class consciousness not by appealing to people’s “lived experience” but through a theoretical analysis that demonstrates that “This ‘lived experience’ is not a given, given by a pure ‘reality’, but the spontaneous ‘lived experience’ of ideology in its peculiar relations to the real” (Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* 223). The emphasis on “theory” in the book is grounded in the certainty that “without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement” (Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?* 369). *Class in Culture*, therefore, is not a descriptive resignification but an explanation—a causal analysis at a time when causal relations are, like class itself, declared dead.

Ebert and Zavarzadeh, here and in other works (including Ebert’s *The Task of Cultural Critique*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2009), offer a challenge to all educators:

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what consciousness are you bringing to your classrooms, workshops, curricula, libraries, and research projects? Are you guardians of the old world or architects of its alternatives? Who will educate the educators? When will students rise up? Which side are you on?

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