Uses and Abuses of Class Separatism

The past year has seen the continuation of the debates in the DSA around questions of class, identity and strategy. In this article, David I. Backer argues against a class separatism which would reduce questions of identity to those of class, and argues for a new perspective which is attentive to both the structures and the experience of capitalist society.
They’re calling it “The Article.” Just before Christmas *The New Republic* published Miguel Salazar’s “Does DSA Have a Race Problem?” Almost immediately, a flurry of responses came out from different streams of socialist thinking within the organization, most notably the Campaign for a Better Philly DSA’s “How to address PDSA’s Race Problem.” In contrast, the tendency formerly known as Momentum published “What the TNR Got Wrong about DSA” at their website *The Call*.

Slightly after these two came out, Common Dreams published Adolph Reed’s “Which Side are you on?” A kind of intellectual grandfather to *The Call*, Reed set a conceptual backdrop for The Article. He laid out a choice of sides: either you’re on the side of race reductionism or class reductionism; identity politics or class politics; ineffective particularist organizing or meaningful and universal mass organizing.

The impasse between race and class Reed trots out will be recognisable to anyone familiar with the debates over how to think about organizing the working class across differences that have taken place in recent years. It’s this tangle I want to approach yet again here because, like always, there’s a lot at stake. If organizers can figure out how to get at the working class’s diversity in a way that mobilizes the class, we have a better shot at shifting the balance of forces in our society towards a social formation that works for us all.

No blog post from an intellectual will do this of course. It’s organizers on the ground seeing what works and what doesn’t—finding out what’s strategically correct and incorrect—that will know how exactly to shift the balance. But ideas can help. I’ve been doing some organizing in Philadelphia Democratic Socialists of America, as well as tracking the ideas emerging from that practice, so this essay is both a reflection from and on the front. More specifically, I intend it as an assessment of the forces at work in The Article, an attempt to address whatever it is that’s making DSAers capitalize its letters.

In a previous essay on race and class reductionism, I called the concept Reed articulates in Common Dreams, which others have called a false dichotomy, a separatist concept of class. I know the term separatism recalls past separatist movements around race and gender, but I want to use the term somewhat differently: both to name a conception of relations of production and the organizing practices which manifest it on the contemporary socialist scene.
organizing practices which manifest it on the contemporary socialist scene. This essay expands on the theme of class separatism, since I think it’s the concept operating in The Call, and might be the very concept of DSA’s “race problem.”

**Relations of Production**

As Marxists in capitalist economies, we all want to change relations of production. There’s no disagreement about what we’re aiming at: weakening and subordinating the capitalist ways people relate to one another and the environment when making our lives together. The hot question is how these capitalist relations of production hold and how we can weaken them.

Louis Althusser wrote forty years ago that there’s still a lot of thinking that needs to be done about relations of production. It shows. The disagreements at play in The Article rely on ambiguity about what relations of production are and how socialists can change them. So let’s dig a little.

Reading Marx’s economic writings, specifically *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, I’ve come to the conclusion that there are at least two necessary and sufficient elements in a relation of production. There’s a structural element and an individual element. The structural element is in the relation itself (externally-facing), like a ratio, for example, and the individual element is in how people experience and live the relation (internally-facing). Nancy Fraser’s distinction between distribution and recognition is a good example of each element. Recognition is a kind of experience of a relation of production, while distribution is a kind of structural relation that holds among people and environments whether they experience it or not.

The wage relation is a paradigm case of a relation of production. It’s got structural elements, like the exploitative difference between amounts paid to workers compared to profits made by capitalists. It also has experiential elements, like how workers live their wage relations depending on their race, gender, nationality, sexuality, ability. Neither element is sufficient on its own for the relation of production. Neither is dependent on the other. Neither is a function of the other. Both are necessary and sufficient for the relation of production.
Some might say that the individual element is a function of the structural element, where the experience of a relation of production is dependent on the structural element. Some say for example that the base determines the superstructures in Marxist theory (economism, eg). Others might say the individual element is the essence of the structural element, prioritizing the “warm” elements of alienation over the “cold” elements of exploitation as Ernst Bloch wrote.

I think both of these miss a key point. An essence or function account separates the two equal elements of relations of production, creating a priority of one over the other. These positions claim, a priori, that one of the elements of a relation of production is more salient, powerful, crucial, important, serious. But, this is a mistake. If you agree that a relation of production is both structural and individual—that both are necessary and sufficient for a relation of production—you can’t claim that one or the other has any priority by definition. To understand a relation of production you have to account for both elements by definition.

Of course, any particular relation of production may feature certain elements more prominently than others and good organizers assess those features correctly given their conjunctures. But that assessment is based on a posteriori observation, trial and error and lessons learned while organizing, not determined beforehand by definition.

**Class Separatism**

Now we can say something about class separatism. Class separatists separate out the structural element of relations of production, name it “class”, and then distinguish this element of relations of production from the individual elements, calling them “identity”. Given the above account of relations of production, you can already see that this distinction doesn’t make sense because structural and individual elements are both necessary and sufficient for relations of production. Separating identity from class is bad class analysis. But it’s been impactful on the left recently in the United States, so let’s explore the position.
First, notice that class separatism isn’t class reductionism. I don’t think a separatist concept of relations of production warrants the term class reductionism because class separatism is a weak concept of class. Class reductionists would know better. Second, there are two kinds of class separatism that I’ve noticed. The first is a priori and the second is a posteriori.

A priori class separatists say that only the structural element of a relation of production is necessary for a relation of production. Some very barebones people might say that the structural element is sufficient too, but most would take the more popular stance that structural elements are insufficient for understanding relations of production because you need the individual elements for the “whole picture.” Of course, they say, individual experience is important. Either way, the a priori class separatist takes issue with the idea that individual elements are necessary elements of relations of production. They separate out the structural element, naming it “class”, and give it conceptual priority over the individual elements, which (like liberals, tragically) they call “identity.” These a priori class separatists work on discourse and are typically academics writing articles and advising on strategy. Vivek Chibber, in “Rescuing Class from the Cultural Turn” is a case study of a priori class separatism. Reed in Common Dreams is another: “class” is separate from other kinds of political concerns, like “identity”. As Reed asks, “which side are you on?” He separates out “class” from other social elements gives it more political weight than individual elements.

A posteriori class separatists are different. They don’t care much for theory, or at least they only read their chosen theorists enough to justify their organizing decisions. When they organize, their practices separate out the structural element of relations of production and organize accordingly. They separate out “mass” organizing from “particularistic” organizing, favoring the former and denouncing the latter as “identitarian.” If you ever hear someone say that their campaign issue is a “universal” issue, and they don’t want to have other “particular” issues confuse, divide, or muddle their work, you know you’re dealing with an a posteriori class separatist. (See for instance Momentum tendency’s critique of the Campaign for a Better Philly DSA’s proposal to create a diversity committee.)
Either way, if you separate out the structural elements of relations of production and call them “class”, you’re separating out the structural element from relations of production and making it necessary. You are therefore a class separatist. It’s a kind of class essentialism. But the word class here should technically be in quotation marks. In that previous piece on class reductionism, I argued that separating the structural element from a relation of production isn’t a concept of class at all since it only gives part of the picture of relations of production. So class separatists are really “class” separatists.

**Uses and Abuses**

When it comes to the conjuncture right now in the United States, class separatism has been useful. It has made a difference in the social formation, no doubt. First, class separatism draws clear lines of demarcation between liberals and socialists. Progressive and centrist liberals tend to hide or apologize for the structural elements of relations of production. They neutralize structural critiques of capital to preserve it, mobilizing individual critiques in some cases to undermine threats to capital. Thus Hillary Clinton versus Bernie Sanders and the famous *line* about the banks and racism. Being a class separatist draws a clear line: it says, in no uncertain terms, don’t pull that bullshit anymore. We want structural differences in social life not just individual ones. We want distribution, don’t just offer us recognition!

I can’t stress enough how important drawing this line of demarcation with liberals is. It’s clear, simple, and appealing given our situation post-2008 financial crisis, after Barack Obama’s presidency. Occupy Wall Street drew this line very well as a movement organizing in the wake of that crisis. *Jacobin* magazine has made effective interventions in the media when pushing this line. Bernie Sanders has been untiring in drawing this line. Yet *Jacobin* and Bernie get criticised when that line (don’t just give us recognition, give us distribution!) sounds like class separatism. When calling for structural change, it sometimes happens that organizers get suspicious of *any* individual demand, or anything that sounds like recognition, because it neutralizes structural demands by definition. This suspicion can also arise when organizers put aside individual demands in favor of structural ones, when individual demands aren’t held in equal political esteem as individual demands, or when there’s...
mention of a dichotomy between individual and structural demands. The Bernie Bro, conjured by the Clinton campaign in 2016 (but not altogether unmoored from some realities in US socialism) is a character that slips into these kinds of class separatism.

In addition to drawing lines of demarcation, because class separatism prioritizes the structural element of relations of production, it’s also helpful in clarifying when idealism gets in the way of materialism. Individual elements tend towards the experiential, and sometimes when prioritizing them the structural (because it’s structural) gets lost. Recognition has limits. It becomes easier to, as Judge Judy used to say, pee on my leg and tell me it’s raining—when prioritizing the individual elements of relations of production. Or, in Clinton’s terms, just focusing on racial recognition while we let the banks rip everyone off isn’t a viable solution.

Liberals are skilled at leveraging individual elements of relations of production against structural elements to make the working class feel recognized without any distributional changes. They’ll rail against racism, for instance, and maintain that capitalism means freedom for us all. Class separatists are helpful because they focus primarily on the material, distributional part of this sham. They’re great at calling out liberals. But they forget that the relation of production in Judge Judy’s aphorism is both the fact that we’re being told it’s raining and the fact that our legs are getting peed on. It’s that there’s racism and the banks are ripping us off. It’s both, and class separatists miss a key feature of the situation when they react to neoliberals like Clinton (and see ghosts of that Clintonism everywhere, even among their comrades!) and say it’s one or the other.

Finally, class separatism is useful because, at least in the United States conjuncture at this moment, the structural elements of our relations of production are non-partisan. Structural demands don’t easily fall along Democratic or Republican Party lines. These demands cut across urban, suburban, and rural contexts. They clearly affect people in every region of the country. Class separatists can appeal across these contexts. Bernie Sanders’s campaign is a great example. The Non-Partisan League in North Dakota is too. Class separatists can mobilize these structural issues across contexts and that is
However, class separatists make a big mistake (maybe their biggest) when they think that structural elements cut across individual elements of relations of production. The way Black women live unequal housing relations is different than indigenous men, queer immigrants, or a straight white people. But class separatists go way too far and think that these individual elements of relations of production (which they tragically call “identity” just like liberals do) need not be foregrounded and given equal political weight in their thinking and organizing. Of course structural elements of relations of production, like rent prices or mold, cut across so many differences. But these elements don’t cut across individual differences. The structural elements are lived through the individual elements. The individual differences are muscles to the structural bones in relations of production. If we try to cut across these muscles, we lose our movement power.

Class Unity

Class unifiers, as opposed to the class separatists I’ve described, take a different tack. They give equal weight to individual and structural elements of relations of production in their organizing practice, thinking and writing. Like Nikil Pal Singh, I’m convinced by Stuart Hall’s formulation that race is “the modality in which class is ‘lived,’ the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and ‘fought through’.” But I’d like to repurpose this a bit: to a class unifier, the structural element is “lived through” the individual element in a relation of production. Bianca Cunningham, co-chair of the New York City Democratic Socialists of America, exemplifies this position in Salazar’s article:

_Bianca Cunningham, who...helped found DSA’s Afrosocialist caucus, agrees with Momentum leaders like [Melissa] Naschek and [Jeremy] Gong that universal policies like Medicare-for-All and free higher education would disproportionately benefit people of color, but argues that they are not sold that way by the mostly white membership rallying behind them. “You have to take that extra step,” she said, “and do more to engage with that community specifically around their own needs and experiences.”_
The “extra step” is class unity organizing: engaging with specific communities around their own needs and experiences, and keeping the individual elements as necessary and sufficient for the relations of production you’re trying to change. This class unity position is much better for a number of reasons. On materialist grounds, a relation of production really-actually-materially holds between people and the environment in uneven ways, and we need to keep this in mind when organizing the working class. Keeanga Yamhatta-Taylor spoke to this at Verso’s Race, Class, and the Left today event with Asad Haider, asking Haider “in this country in particular...if [it’s] true that the agent of change in history is the working class, then how does it overcome the divisions: immigrant status, racial classification, gender, religion, on and on and on—how does the working class become an agent unto itself when it’s so divided by identity and other social categories?”.

Haider answered that Marx wrote extensively on the question of British colonialism in Ireland, claiming that there couldn’t be a working class revolution in England until there was Irish independence precisely because of the divisions in that social formation at the time: “the fact of Irish subordination would make it impossible to have class unity,” so that division had to be addressed with an explicit policy to get class unity. Haider continued to claim that, to replace our existing society with an “organization of egalitarian human life...every form of domination, exclusion, and servitude has to be opposed.” Kate Cairns and I tried to articulate how thinking pedagogically helps make this point concrete for organizers in a piece on movement pedagogy.

It may surprise some, but the labor historian Kim Moody, in his 2000 pamphlet for Solidarity called “The Rank-and-File Strategy,” explicitly rejected class separatism.

We want to make it clear that we do not proceed from some faceless, raceless, neutered idea of the working class. We endorse the thoughts of the Caribbean revolutionary Aimé Césaire who rejected the crude Stalinist version of class “universality” held by the French Communist Party when he resigned in 1955. In his resignation letter he wrote, “I have a different idea of a universal. It is a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particularities there are, the deepening of
each particular, the coexistence of them all.” Nowhere does diversity shape the particularities of the working class more than in the U.S. Nowhere is this diversity more central to the divisions, diversions, and strengths experienced by working class people in different ways. No where do working class people see themselves and one another in such different, usually distorted, ways. The prism of race, in particular, is highly distorting of class perceptions, even though in different ways for different groups—although it is also a source of class strength for many people of color. Indeed, the problems and potential of diversity is a theme we will return to again and again as we address questions of consciousness and organization.

Moody is a class unifier, not a class separatist (though many in what was formerly called the Momentum tendency in DSA champion Moody’s rank-and-file strategy). On a recent episode of The Dig with Dan Denvir, Melinda Cooper put the class unity position in a different way, saying that “identity politics is a way of doing any kind of politics, including class politics.” While she keeps the distinction between identity and class, she moves beyond it to show how the former is a way of doing the latter—that they’re both part of the relations of production we’re trying to change. Social reproduction theorists like Sue Ferguson and David McNally have been explicit about how social reproduction theory is a way of thinking through class unity, merging Marxism and intersectionality into an integrated whole.

Class unity is better on historical grounds too, both in organizing and broader social history. After fifty years of New Left critique of class separatism, we should learn and move forward with a synthesis rather than a reaction to these critiques. After so many years of organizing against oppressions and marginalizations to great effect, such movements and organizers should be given credit where it’s due rather than put down as ineffective or mistaken. (The way Reed and The Call critique the Combahee River Collective, as Melissa Naschek does in her review of Haider’s Mistaken Identity is one such unhelpful reaction.) In broader historical terms, changing the relations of production in the United States requires keeping in mind, with equal priority, their individual and structural elements. You can’t change the class system in this country without changing the other relatively autonomous systems through which it’s lived.
To do that, organizers and theorists should be class unifiers and give equal weight to individual and structural elements of the relations of production we seek to change. Class separatists don’t do this, to our greater peril on the left—do we really want more articles like the one in The New Republic? Why leave ourselves open to such obvious and impactful critiques? Who would (or even could!) separate being from doing, as Reed might say? Relations of production are both being and doing and our organizing should reflect this. What we need now is class unity organizing and not another version of separatism.

A couple personal examples of how a class unity perspective matters when organizing. I’m a rank-and-file member of the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculty, which held its first strike of 5,000 faculty in 2016 across the state of Pennsylvania. During the semester we have a table at the student center every week where we talk about unions with students, faculty, and staff. We’re trying to get the word out about unions post-Janus. Separating out students’ “ascriptive identities” from the unified relations of production they struggle with as people who work, go into debt, and try to find jobs would be a weak class analysis going into this kind of organizing. As the chair of the external organizing committee, I’d be doing my members a disservice by organizing with that mindset. As a socialist, I’d be diluting my Marxist analysis. In general, it’d be a lost cause if I tried to build solidarity and organize if my concept of class told me that I shouldn’t consider relations like race or gender as being necessary and sufficient for the relations of production I’m trying to change, particularly when I’m talking with students of color about labor.

As another example, I went out knocking doors to help to pilot a Stomp Out Slumlords campaign in Philadelphia with Philly DSA’s amazing Housing Justice Committee and the Local Initiative/Local Action Committee (or LILAC). When it comes to the relations of housing that workers in Philly struggle within—the awful conditions that landlords make them suffer—I saw firsthand how these relations are shot through with race relations. It’d be a big organizing mistake to think that the neighborhoods we were walking around didn’t have totally different relations of production from mine. The kind of talking and listening we do when building power among workers to know their rights and fight against terrible landlords who have taken advantage of them requires that
we understand those relations of housing. In our attempt to block and then shift the force those relations of housing exert in society, so they go in the workers’ favor, to build power with tenants as organizers, we have to understand the relations of production we’re struggling in and against as being having individual and structural elements.

**Which Side Are You On, Separatism or Unity?**

There are uses and abuses of class separatism. It draws clear lines of demarcation, helps sort the ideal from the material, and finds issues that cut across a lot of differences. But it gets abused, and the abuse is rooted in its mistake about relations of production. My contention, having done this assessment of class separatism, is that *the abuses are actually a feature, not a bug*, in class separatism as a concept of relations of production. Individual and structural elements are each necessary and sufficient elements of relations of production. The trouble starts when organizers and intellectuals place more weight on one rather than the other. That’s exactly what Salazar is pointing out in The Article: one tendency of the DSA is class separatist.

But there are other tendencies, and we’re building DSA so it can get better at *class unity organizing*. Actually changing relations of production requires this class unity organizing, not separatism. We should give both structural and individual elements equal weight when organizing to change relations of production. It’s really hard. It may take awhile. It may take some humility, some listening, and admitting you don’t exactly know the composition of a relation of production in a certain context. And class separatists, understandably excited about how palatable structural demands have become, may not want to take the time. They may not want to admit the equal importance of individual elements of relations of production. But if we’re to take fullest advantage of this moment, they really have to start trying. There are only going to be more (and less fair) Articles. If we don’t take a class unity path as we organize, we’re going to lose.

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