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Class consciousness in a mature neoliberal society: Evidence from Chile



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ABSTRACT

Class consciousness is a central element of the sociological analysis of class inequality. It indicates the mechanisms through which inequality creates subjective-level outcomes as dissimilar class identities and material interests. Despite its importance, class consciousness has been largely unexamined in current neoliberal society. With a few exceptions, the basic sociological question of how inequality brings about consequences at the subjective level has not been addressed in recent research. In this paper I address this question by analyzing the patterns of class consciousness in Chile. To do so, I examine how class location and class origins (as indicator of class experiences) shape the two main components of class consciousness: class identity and class interests. The results suggest that the identity component depends on both class experiences and class position, as well as on the way that the latter creates subjective experiences of economic inequality (i.e. inequality in individual resources). On the other hand, the second component of class consciousness—oppositional class interests—depends on both class experiences and class location, and on the way in which the latter brings about subjective experiences of opposition in the terrain of the relations of production.

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1. Introduction

The concept of class consciousness is a central component in sociological analyses of social inequality. In fact, class consciousness is key to understanding the mechanisms through which class inequality leads to class conflict in capitalist societies. From Marx onwards, class consciousness has been studied by analyzing the process through which a class becomes aware of its interests and, thereby, acts in the political arena against other classes' interests (cf. Lukács, 1971 [1923]; Marx, 1978 [1852]). In Latin America, class consciousness tended to be examined in contexts

marked by the growth of strong working-class movements that became the social basis of important projects of socialist transformation—see, for example, the well-known study of class consciousness among Chilean workers in Huachipato and Lota led by Di Tella, Brams, Reynaud, and Touraine (1967) a few years before the election of Salvador Allende in 1970. It is not surprising, therefore, that after decades of political repression, economic restructuring (i.e. the arrival of neoliberal policies), and the practical absence of class politics, class consciousness has been relegated to a marginal area within the analysis of inequality and political conflict in Latin America. Nor is it surprising that since the 1980s, most scholarly research focused on the way that neoliberal policies transformed the class structure in the region (cf. CEPAL, 2006; Filgueira, 2007; Franco, León, & Atria, 2007; Franco, Hopenhayn, & León, 2010; Klein and Tokman, 2000; Pérez Sainz et al., 2007; Portes and

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Hoffmann, 2003; Weller, 2004), disregarding the question of how such a transformation could have brought about results at the subjective level—e.g. by producing different types of class identities or antagonistic material interests.

The exclusive focus on the objective expressions of inequality has been even more marked in scholarship on Chile. Chile is a country characterized not only by the presence of the most mature neoliberal regime in Latin America, but also by the paradoxical coexistence between high rates of economic growth and one of the highest levels of social inequality in the region (Torche, 2005). These high levels of inequality in Chile have implied not only the establishment of marked class-based differences in people's life chances (Espinoza, 2006; Wormald and Torche, 2004), but also the creation of a sociopolitical scenario defined by a huge imbalance of power between capital and labor (Barrett, 2001; Frank, 2004). In this context, several scholars have examined how both the working and the middle classes have tried to re-actualize their collective identity after the consolidation of the neoliberal regime (cf. Leiva, 2012; Mendez and Gayo, 2007; Mendez, 2008; Winn, 2004). Surprisingly, the concept of class-consciousness has been missing in all these investigations. Thus, despite the paradoxical scenario observed in the country, the question of how class leads to dissimilar and even antagonistic interests has been largely unexplored during the last three decades. In doing so, scholarly debates have not addressed one of the most basic and relevant questions in sociology, namely: how class inequality determines subjective mechanisms—e.g. class-based sociopolitical orientations—that may facilitate collective action and, thereby, the development of class-based political conflicts.

In this paper I address this question by analyzing the patterns of class consciousness in current Chilean society. In other words, rather than analyzing how class leads to social conflict, in this paper I address a more basic but fundamental question, namely: how class leads to variations in people's class consciousness. To do so, I integrate into the same framework the "processual" (cf. Steinberg, 1999; Thompson, 1966) and the "structural" (cf. Western, 1999; Wright, 1985) approaches to class, and examine how class consciousness—understood as the subjective awareness people have of their *class identity* and their *oppositional class interests*—is shaped by class location and class-experiences (expressed, for instance, in people's class origin).

The results of the analysis tend to support, although with some important modifications, previous investigations' findings regarding how class identity and class interests are shaped by class experiences and class location (cf. Wright and Shin, 1988). In current Chilean society class consciousness is significantly affected by class position and class experiences (measured as class origin). According to the data, the first component of class consciousness—class identity—depends on both class experiences and class position, as well as on the way that the latter creates subjective experiences of economic inequality (i.e. inequality in individual resources). The second component—oppositional class interests—depends, on the other hand, on both class experiences and class location, and on the way in which the latter brings about subjective experiences of opposition in the terrain of the relations of production. This

suggests that despite the *classless scenario* observed in Chile—i.e. a sociopolitical context seemingly devoid of class politics—class-related factors as class origin and class position are still a salient foundation for dissimilar identities and oppositional consciousness.

2. Debates on class consciousness, its definition, and its determinants

2.1. *The concept of class consciousness*

In sociology, the concept of class consciousness is key to understanding the mechanisms through which class inequality leads to class conflict in capitalist societies (Giddens, 1973; Mann, 1973; Marx, 1978 [1852]; Parkin, 1979; Przeworski, 1977; Wright, 1985). Despite its analytical importance, there is no precise definition of class consciousness or agreement on how to study it in empirical research.

Based on Marx's general statements on class consciousness, some scholars have defined class consciousness by emphasizing its *cultural* attributes. For instance, the English historian Thompson (1966) argues that working class consciousness has to be described as the "cultural definition" of the workers' economic-productive experiences: "Class consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms" (1966: 10). Thompson's framework emphasizes several features of class consciousness that allow us to explain the process of class formation—i.e. the process wherein classes become collective actors aware of their interests. The principal virtue of this framework is that working-class formation is understood not as the mechanical consequence of any sort of "objective class structure", but rather as the cultural process through which workers become aware of their class situation. In fact, whereas for Thompson the concept of experience appears—due to their economic origin—as always determined by structural mechanisms, class consciousness presents more uncertain features. In other words, although Thompson recognizes that there is a *logic* in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar class experiences, he also emphasizes that there is no way to predicate any law to characterize the development of a given type of class consciousness. "Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in *just* the same way" (p. 10).

On the basis of this idea, Thompson rejects the definition of social classes as an objective "thing" from which we can deduce the "correct" type of class-consciousness if such a "thing" becomes aware of its position and real interests. The definition of class as a "thing" denies for Thompson the fact that class is a relationship. Consequently, such a definition overlooks the existence of class as a *historical phenomenon*; that is, as a process in which people define historically and in cultural terms their experiences. In simpler words, classes do not exist at a given point of history or outside it. They exist only *through* history.

Although very influential, Thompson's conceptualization of class consciousness is not the only definition that exists in the Marxist analysis of class. A different

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