

# *T*RANS- HUMANITIES

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**Title : Transitional Selves and the Question of Class Consciousness**

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Source : *Trans-Humanities*, Vol. 7 No. 1 (2014), pp. 71–93

Published by : Ewha Womans University Press

URL : <http://eiheng.ewha.ac.kr/page.asp?pageid=book10&pagenum=060600>

Online ISSN : 2383-9899

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# Transitional Selves and the Question of Class Consciousness

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## I. Introduction

Paradoxical as it may seem, the reified conditions of class-divided society or the condition of being in capital produces the opposite effect – that of an apparent classlessness. It is somewhat a truism of late capitalism to attribute everything to the commodity form, where being a consumer is no longer a moral condemnation or distinction, but a universal condition of being. In Raymond Williams’ description, “Not only in received ideologies but also in working people’s description of their own lives, there is a displacement of class relations from their necessary centrality” to “a real loosening of class markers as well as a particular style of consumption” (*The Long Revolution* 352–53). He adds that this has nothing whatever to do with any fundamental alterations in relations between classes or the ownership of capital. If anything, this apparent feeling of classlessness is brought about by the proletarianizing tendencies in late capitalism, in which more and more people are either reduced to subsistence wages or have lost the job security of a previous age despite higher incomes. How do we understand both, this apparent loosening of class bonds and its continued grip over society? Does this imply that class subjectivities operate in more subtle ways despite the naked dominance of the economic over the cultural? And if the economic and the cultural have collapsed so greatly in postmodernism, then how much sense does it make to talk about class in cultural terms?<sup>1</sup> How does *habitus* or “structure of feeling,” categories that were invented in the early 1950s and 1960s to measure distinction or the variable

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1. “The bare fact of separation itself indicates that the consciousness of the proletariat is still fettered by reification. And if the proletariat finds the economic inhumanity to which it is subjected easier to understand than the political, and the political easier than the cultural, then all these separations point to the extent of the still unconquered power of capitalist forms of life in the proletariat itself” (Lukács 76–77).

texture of the internalised everyday consciousness across classes, apply now? Can distinctions between classes be expressed in terms of the demarcation of *habitus*? Are these terms flexible enough to explain the changes in the way we understand work and working class identity today?

It seems that “precarity” or a fundamental insecurity of working conditions tends to define our approach to labour today rather than the orthodox Marxist idea of wage labor. The discussion of labor under the sign of precarity is able to cover a much wider range of working cultures, starting from the informal sector wageless workers to entrepreneurs or self-employed business firms to artistic and intellectual labour. The focus in this paper on the early debates about late capitalism is intended to historicize the questions we ask about class consciousness today.

In this paper, I take two very different working class autobiographical texts from late 20<sup>th</sup> century England (one of them in part fictional) – Raymond Williams’ *Border Country* (1960) and Caroline Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1987) – to interrogate the meaning of class as both identity and self-transcending location. The conceptual tools – *habitus* and “structure of feeling” – are used to understand the processes of class (trans)formation both through and beyond the experience of self-fashioning or upward mobility. Donald Winnicott’s concept of the transitional object, or what it means to realize or use oneself as object as much as subject is a key methodological tool in this study. The argument of the paper then hinges on the importance of establishing a link between the reified aspects of class formation (the identitarian aspects) and its revolutionary potentials (when it is truly able to externalize itself as part of a concrete generality). While the former would suggest a mode of being determined in and through capital even when it takes a decidedly oppositional identity, the latter would presume the dissolution of identity itself, a collectivization of self that is thoroughly pitted against the preservation of identity in any cultural or sociological sense. Through an exploration of these varied tools, the paper attempts to understand the contradictory registers of what might be the same question across the humanities – how to breach the gap between the subject and object, the self and the world?

The reason for choosing these two semi/fictional autobiographies is because they seem to occupy a transitional space between the old militant notion of labor that was clearly demarcated and the new orientation in which the condition of labor is all-pervasive. The two texts are dealt selectively in so far as they are pertinent to the discussion of self in class and class in self;

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Steedman's book allows for a much more direct treatment of the subject but without Williams, we would not have the horizon in which the question of class consciousness becomes truly objective, and not merely a relative value. Williams underpins the defeat or irrelevance of the traditional and heroic working class through the Marxist idea of a dialectical totality, otherwise posed in popular discourse as the triumph of a post-ideological universe where class distinctions have become *passé*.

According to the classical Marxist view, "class consciousness is identical with neither the psychological consciousness of individual members of the proletariat, nor with the (mass-psychological) consciousness of the proletariat as a whole; but the historical role of the class," which is to "point forward to the dialectical contradictions and the internal dissolution of pure class society" (Lukács 58–59). Here the subjective role of class is posed in terms of a concrete objectivity. Building on this understanding, I want to explore the possibility of a psychoanalytic understanding of class-based attitudes or dispositions as distinct from class-consciousness as psychology. This will lead us away from a fixed and narrow understanding of the appropriate local or historical conditions that alone are adequate to a correct mobilization of class consciousness. For instance, what are the possible parallels between what Lukács says about the critical standpoint of the proletariat (through its relatively greater grasp of totality and contradictions), and the Winnicottian version of the reality principle, in which the subjective object becomes the objective subject, learning to exist in a world of objects and reaping benefits from them?

In *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott demonstrates that the feeling of omnipotence created in early infancy can interfere with the reality principle if it does not evolve into a stage of play involving frustration, destruction and subsequent mastery. More often than not, he gives the example of bourgeois children to suggest an over-attachment to the magical feeling of omnipotence. This leads to an aversion to externalizing their selves, and transitioning to a world in which they could be objectified for others' use, just as they objectify the world around them. In contrast, the working class, owing to its better adaptation to incomplete needs or needs that remain unfulfilled, could be considered as better able to make the transition from the magical state of omnipotence (where the object is always in a state of perfect control) to the usage of objects in the real world, to make it work for itself. Conversely, one could also argue that the crippling environmental provisions, the diminished care of working class habitat, could also make it difficult for a working class

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child to attain that initial stage of omnipotence, which is absolutely crucial to affect any transition at all.

The theoretical claim of better object relations among the working class may thus be an empirically bogus one. Keeping that in mind, it would still be worthwhile to pursue the hypothesis of a working class consciousness that is more attuned to demystification. I will outline some of the very basic assumptions underlying this difference inscribed in a working class *habitus* (further elaborated later). For instance, cramped living conditions do not allow for fantasy and the secret life in the way it does for bourgeois children. Again, they do associate aggressive impulses with negative values. In other words, there is much more respect for violence as a mode of survival. Clearly, the reference to use of objects here seeks to separate usage from the instrumentality of exchange relations. Nor is it akin to accumulation or consolidation of self via the ownership of property. Instead, use implies the destructive impulse, the ability to constantly direct anger at an external world, which is not prepared to fulfill one's needs. Accumulation of cultural experiences is the classic principle that animates the bourgeois self in the *Bildungsroman*. The development of the capacity for the use of objects in the destructive sense then points to a kind of counter-*bildungs* or counter-cultural offensive. This would seem to tally with Marx's formulation in *The Communist Manifesto*:

All the preceding classes that got the upper hand, sought to fortify their already-acquired status by subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation. The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby every other previous mode of appropriation. (Lukács 71–72)

Lukács further elaborates that unlike the bourgeoisie whose correct statements about particular situations are rendered false when faced with the whole of society, “the proletariat *always aspires towards the truth* even in its false consciousness and its substantive errors” (72). The proletariat is the only class capable of a grasp of totality, the ability to see society from the centre. However, it cannot liberate itself as a class without simultaneously abolishing class society as such. For that reason its consciousness “must both lay bare the nature of society and achieve an increasingly inward fusion of theory and practice” (70). This means that class-consciousness is less a matter of

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self-realization than self-annihilation. But until such a state of consciousness/destruction is achieved, what one is left with is a false consciousness that has a negative life. How do we differentiate the false consciousness of the proletariat from the false consciousness of the bourgeoisie?

## II. Particular Use Values

False consciousness is not merely the creation and service of false needs, but also the disavowal of one's real needs. According to Raymond Williams, people need much more than consumer goods. For the satisfaction of human needs, and to better enjoy commodities, one needs roads, hospitals, schools, and quiet. These are identified as social needs and seen to interfere with the enjoyment of private fantasies, since their association with taxation and deprivation is too deeply ingrained. Similarly, the sale of beer and washing machines through the subliminal association of primary personal feelings indicates that these objects are far from the luxury items they are made out to be. It must be that there are not enough washing machines and not enough beer, and that is why they need validating through fantasy (*Politics of Modernism* 185).

A discussion of use values from the point of view of the capacity to use things could throw a refreshing light on the way in which the communist possibility is immanent. If a working class experience or upbringing equipped one with the capacity to use objects in the Winnicottian sense of strengthening the reality principle, from object relating to object use, would it not translate working class life into an already achieved socialist utopia? On the contrary, this capacity is blocked precisely due to the graded deprivation built into capitalism. There are two contradictory ways of looking at the problem of class consciousness then – either a realization of that which is already incipient in the working class, a positive capacity for use of objects and externalization (satisfaction of human needs not merely the needs of this or that group or isolated needs), or a clear rupture with its reified consciousness since the commodity fetish prevents real use. The former would imply a human subject (however abstract) with a potential for revolutionary historical transformation, and the latter would mean a break with the very concept of humanity itself, as we know it (or have known it). In so far as we are concerned here with the problem of retaining human subjectivity, we must stick to identifying those human productive powers that are relevant to such a transformation.

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that she is, she can't bring herself to entirely rely on the myths, which are nevertheless used to make sense of her predicament. She is acutely aware of the gap between myths and history. She detests the ahistorical feminist re-workings of myths such as Adrienne Rich's spin on the myth of Demeter and Persephone, because of its inability to account for the freak cases. But far from faulting myths for not being inclusive enough, the complaint is against universalist claims that distort the rich particularity of specific realities such as hers in which there is no love lost between mother and daughter.

The task of writing the mother's history is not an act of recalling, but a self-narration, since her childhood is the mother's past. This childhood is moreover visited so often that it has become a living archive. Childhood as an embodied living past, which makes the social buried past accessible, shares something with Bourdieu's *habitus*, defined as a set of dispositions in a given social actor in response to a given social field. These dispositions are inculcated in early childhood so as to become almost second nature or reflex, surviving in a sedimented form through different life locations. *Habitus* then enables an analytic focus on the discrete bits of personal history, which can be put together to make a living archive of the life-world that constituted childhood.

The mother's working class *habitus* is responsible for the feelings of worthlessness in the daughter. At the same time, there is a lesson of endurance and strength, of making the best out of the little you have: "I sometimes find myself thinking that if the worst comes to the worst, I can always earn a living by my hands; I can scrub, clean, cook and sew: all you have in the end is your labour" (Steedman 43). Apart from the anxiety patterns she has inherited from the mother, it is this characterization of herself as labour power which is interesting. The commodification of her personality in terms of her capacity to labour does not liberate her from the curse of feeling unwanted, but pushes her further into reification. It is not deprivation or class inequities but envy, usually associated with a middle class consumerist *habitus* that dominates the narrative.

Right in the beginning, the writer alerts us to the fact that it is difficult to present envy as a part of working class traditions since the dominant left discourses have characterized envy as apolitical or accommodative of consumer capitalism. We have noted earlier that, for Williams, while envy is intrinsic to working class culture, it is not shaped by apolitical or status-quoist motivations. Virginia Woolf characterizes working class women as concerned with "the narrow plot of acquisitiveness and desire" in a review of a

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collection of working-class women's autobiographical writings titled *Life As We Have Known It* (1931) (Fox 25). But in Steedman, these desires take on a more intensified and problematic political consciousness, one that refuses to observe the boundaries between bourgeois and working class forms of reification. Steedman complicates the assumption that a *habitus* constitutes a singular set of responses to the unified field, and shows the manifold relations that are at work in any given field. This means that it would not make sense to talk merely of primary dispositions. For Williams, on the other hand, the aspirational set of desires or envy is a late or secondary sedimentation. In other words, the problem seems to be one in which either we imagine *habitus* as a primary reflex, the kind of practical consciousness that steers or oversees all later inputs, or see it as made redundant by the overwhelming power of ideology in which the unified field splits asunder.

Let us take a look at the mother's efforts to acquire new class markers such as changing her accent, dressing in ways that mask her working class profile, the high-heeled black suede shoes and the adoption of an alternative faddist lifestyle. While the daughter sees these as pretentious, unwittingly she suggests that these responses may be coming from something more deeply internal. A *habitus* incorporates:

... a practical *mimesis* which implies an overall relation of identification and has nothing in common with an *imitation* that would presuppose a conscious effort to reproduce a gesture, an utterance or an object explicitly constituted as a model – and the process of reproduction – a practical reactivation that is opposed to both memory and knowledge – tend to take place below the level of consciousness, expression and the reflexive distance which these presuppose. ... [The body] does not represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, it *enacts* the past, bringing it back to life. What is 'learned by the body' is not something one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is. (Bourdieu 73, emphasis original)

It is clear that the dispositions embodied as *habitus* go beyond the more or less conscious 'representation of self.' The mother's adoption of Food Reform, herbalism and the new age discourses of the body are presented as desperate efforts to acquire a middle class status. If she is putting on an act as is suggested by the daughter, her aspirations are not internal to her. But if we follow

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Williams who locates working class actions as stemming from embedded structures of feelings, the actions of the mother could also be seen as part of a re-articulation of a primary *habitus*, which in this case would be the need to economize. For instance, the mother allowing the four year old to breast feed is recognized both as a concession to the new-fangled pedagogical imperative to liberate children from Victorian notions of bodily shame as much as an indulgence which is free. Similarly encouraging the girls to walk the streets in their nightgowns and with rollers in their hair can be seen both as a product of a newly acquired “trendiness” as much as the reactivation of an older *habitus* in which the street is an extension of one’s home.

By differentiating between the internal and external aspects of the mother’s behaviour, we posit a gap between practical consciousness and ideology. A practical consciousness is more worthy of the working class consciousness and justified in the Williams’s sense since it demonstrates a capacity for the use of objects and genuine urge for the satisfaction of needs. Ideology, on the other hand, precisely through creating isolated use values, interpellates subjects into its vampirish embrace, with no redeeming standpoint of critique.

The daughter shows that the mother has only a projective identity, consciously and assiduously picked up from the discursive domain of the radio programmes and women’s magazines. Her primary internal unconscious or her sense of belonging to a specific working class milieu is subservient to this projective identity. Ideology completely cannibalizes the unconscious such that there can be no field-specific or class-specific individual unconscious remaining. All we have are bits and pieces, picked up from here and there. For instance, the portrait of her as a promiscuous working class mother does not square with the mother’s disavowals of pleasure which in turn conflicts with her avowals of a liberal persona. Her claim to good motherhood flows from a refusal to enjoyment. While the father is shown as carrying on with his serial monogamy, the mother is absolutely chaste. Sex is strictly meant for reproductive purposes.

The essentially contradictory nature of her desires forces us to ask if the internal *habitus* is really prior to ideology. If the layers of sedimented lived experiences or productive capacities across generations make up the historical aggregate of working class consciousness, what kind of autonomy is reserved for this alternative tradition vis-a-vis the ideological/aspirational structure of capitalism? If the working class consciousness is merely residual, how can it resist the contradictory structure of capital, which allows the residual relative

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autonomy within its social apparatus? In other words, the social machinery that is capital becomes effective precisely through an instrumentalization of its contradictory parts, the market as well as the non-market, the ideological and the non-ideological. The working class core even at its strongest is ultimately swallowed up by its logic.

As we find, even as the daughter is caught in an unhappy consciousness, she is reasonably equipped with the aggressive instincts of a practical self. This becomes visible in her project of discrediting the mother. Only by destroying the mother can she find release from the sense of illegitimacy inherited from the mother's bad politics. Her desperate need for legitimacy completely duplicates the mother's false consciousness. But by destroying her, she is able to arrive at a more objective picture of the political reality of envy in working class lives. She is able to use the mother. The concluding section of Steedman's book pursues the objective sources of the mother's envy and resentment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century traditions of popular radicalism. Burnley, the mother's hometown, was at the centre of widespread circulation of radical thought and radical rhetoric in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: "Political radicalism spoke to and for those outside the gate ... in many women by the fact of their working in an industry in which they dominated numerically, but in which they were still only women (paid less wages than men for the same labour), ... radicalism was fuelled by the substructure of envy and exclusion" (Steedman 120–21). It is this not-so-glorious past of radicalism that could be seen to underpin the mother's rank sense of unfairness. But this could also be seen as the historian's animation of the past through questions that serve her own vested interests.

The gendered perspective is a counter to the working class male narratives of the 1950s, namely Jeremy Seabrook's *Working Class Childhood* (1982) and Richard Hoggart's celebrated *Uses of Literacy* (1959), which are written from an escapee's point of view and import nostalgic middle class ideas of what the working class should be or look like. She finds in these accounts a total lack of any continuation of the present in the past, a frozen account of working class life recaptured through the lens of an unwavering and unproblematic unitary working class consciousness. What is a source of great dismay to Steedman is the portrait of a class without any complications or psychological richness. It is as if one's material deprivation is an index of psychological poverty, tantamount to an ineligibility to use the autobiographical "I". The working class are either seen as the passive dupes of middle class culture or as stock heroic figures such as the scholarship boy who made it or "the mum, the formidable and eternal

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mum, virago, domestic law giver, comforter and martyr” (Steedman 100) of Seabrook’s description. And yet her need to continue with the project of a working class subjectivity that is psychologically more nuanced undermines her attempts to unravel the same unremitting reification. However, she suggests a different track to class politics, which might be worth pursuing.

Class-consciousness is located in one’s earliest childhood when one is outside the active process of production. At this stage, whatever is imbibed is internalized as part of someone else’s narrative, mainly the primary care giver. Class is not seen as an objective criterion depending on one’s father’s employment and the kind of housing one lives in, but an internally negotiated knowledge derived from a sense of unfairness or guilt a mother might have transmitted to her children. The material force of envy and resentment (relating through objects) as reified determinants of class-consciousness are then posited against Wilhelm Reich’s dismissal of envy as a dynamic force in history, since envy by definition is relative. Envy as seen by Steedman possesses the disruptive power necessary to extend the objective limits and boundaries of working class life. However subversive, that seems to be limited to gaining a complex subjectivity. But the significant point about what Steedman is saying (whether or not she draws the same conclusions) is that destructive energies are located in reified relations itself rather than anything outside or beyond it.

One of the key working class experiences the book attests to is a perverse learning – a truth that contradicts the law or is contrary to what the rules suggest. But such a learning curve can be extremely painful or debilitating if this same knowledge is reflected back from each confrontation with the law. It can only aggravate the sense of illegitimacy and precarity that being outside the law implies. Envy and resentment contribute no doubt to the compounding sense of negativity, but can they lead to the self-abolition of the dispossessed classes?

Steedman talks about a series of primary moments of dispossession that leave her without any sense of self: a first loss, a first dislocation, and a first lie. These are all situated in the post-symbolic social space, not in the imaginary formative period. This is significant because the mother’s claims of being a good mother belong to the period of the imaginary, the time of perfect fusion whereas the deprivation is dated to a later symbolic moment. Ironically, the social environment of the welfare state that compensates individual deprivation by pouring vitamins, milk, orange juice and medicines down their poor throats is not an adequate deterrent to this loss of self either. Neither

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the mother nor the state is able to provide her with a positive self-image. The daughter's negativity bears the exclusive imprint of the non-nurturing woman who does not want to become a mother. While for a bourgeois feminist pedagogy grounded in affirmation, this negative self-image is tragic, but from the perspective of the critique of labour in capital,<sup>3</sup> this contradictoriness is productive since it points beyond the ambivalence of reified relations which entails the recognition that you can be wanted as well as resented, loved as well as seen as a financial burden. It also introduces the important recognition that love alone is not enough. Nor are material comforts sufficient in themselves. One needs a landscape that can activate both, and no mother by herself would be able to actualize both.

## VIII. Conclusion

How do we understand Lukács' 1920 claim that false consciousness in the working class is different from the false consciousness in the bourgeoisie? While there is no comparable working class one may refer to in the present, to test this hypothesis, it is only through a "hard, detailed inquiry and negotiation" of the reified relations that constitute the condition of labour in capitalism that one can even begin to investigate "the aspiration to truth," that negative capability claimed for the proletariat. Without access to their history, sociology and psychology, the objective and reified landscape in which the working class exists, it is not possible to move forward. A large part of the migrant labour population today is indeed more invested in what appears to be Williams' pre-political communitarian *habitus*, given the withdrawal of the state from welfare or its brutal attacks on workers' movements. The increasing of working class stakes in the community within neoliberalism is not about the reactionary or revolutionary character of the working class but of the reserves

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3. This is Postone's formulation of Lukács's (traditional Marxism's) formulation of critique from the standpoint of labour. According to Postone, the labour whose standpoint is posited as critique, is a transhistorical subject identified with the production of wealth and society, nothing to do with the historically determinate labour of capitalism, mired in reified relations, and hence hindered from realizing itself as subject in the first place. The standpoint of labour presumes that alienation lies outside of labour, and the process of class consciousness entails realization and fulfillment of labour (the realization of capitalist totality) instead of overcoming it (43–83).

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they have been forced to cultivate in a repressive regime.

As far as Steedman is concerned, the fetish for the image and a drive based subjectivity or consumerism seems to be a universal condition, not sparing the working class. At the same time, she is able to demonstrate much more decisively than Williams that both the drive based violence of the commodity form, and the revolutionary destructive instinct (the capacity to use objects), are underpinned by the common currents of scarcity and frustration. This seems to abolish the necessity of marking out bourgeois false consciousness from working class false consciousness, yet even here the totality offered is grounded in a specific vantage point.

These two apparently different conclusions derived from the two working class testimonials may seem to be caught in a relationship of antinomy – one valorizing the standpoint of labour, the other critiquing labour – yet the common strand which unites both texts is a search for an objective landscape in which the reified components of working class subjectivity such as doubt, inadequacy, precarity, illegitimacy, envy, resentment, abstractions can become the grounds for a utopian scenario in which the working class no longer need to be assessed in terms of their separate virtues of solidarity, community, collective strength and self-sacrifice.





Received: 10 November 2013  
Reviewed: 17 December 2013  
Accepted: 15 January 2014