

Society for the Anthropology of Work

ANGELA JANCIOUS, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

"Class" returns as an increasingly central topic in anthropology. Last year, SAW collaborated on an *AN* theme issue addressing the topic of class. And this year "Class and Consciousness" was one of our invited AAA meeting sessions. In this month's column, Tracy Duvall argues that the ambiguity of the concept of class may outweigh its usefulness. What are your own thoughts? Contact Angela Jancious (jancious@ohio.edu) to contribute to a forthcoming SAW column.

Is "Class" a Useful Analytical Category?

By Tracy M Duvall (Georgia Gwinnett C)

If we use *class* to refer to economic relationships, we should carefully consider its utility. How does grouping people in this way improve our analysis? Researchers too often take the existence of "class" as a matter of faith, even though its character has been debated for more than a century.

While performing ethnographic research in Mazatlán, Mexico, I had three different landlords. As *landlords*, their lives included similar activities, pressures and enticements. If I were to focus on the landlording aspect of their lives, would it improve my analysis to group them in the same class? Indeed, after studying many landlords, I might ascertain that most shared certain outlooks, plausibly springing from their occupation. All might, for example, think of renters as suckers ripe for exploitation (one certainly did). But defining this "class" would first have to be verified via research. Identifying two or three larger, oppositional classes would likewise require verification. Ultimately, after comparing landlords cross-culturally, perhaps I would theorize that all had vampirelike tendencies and assess whether landlording instilled this outlook.

However, to assume a connection between "class" and "ideology" leads to inaccurate lumping. As a crude test, I surveyed members of an *ejido* in Sonora, Mexico. No matter how otherwise uniform the "group" was (ie, similar ages, birthplaces, and marital, parental and economic statuses), variability among individuals remained high. This diversity included their attitudes toward the privatization and partitioning of their government-owned, collectively controlled land.

Going back to those three landlords, whom we lumped together as a "landlord class," tremendous differences separated them. One was a widow and the two others were married men. One was wealthy, another struggled to maintain an upper-middle-income status and the third simply struggled. Two had considerable formal education and had traveled extensively, whereas the other had not. And the households of the two male landlords had at least one other source of income. So how important was the label of



One of Duvall's apartments, in Mazatlán, Mexico Photo courtesy Tracy Duvall

landlord class for understanding these individuals? Were there actually two classes—wealthy landlords and poor landlords? Secure and insecure landlords? Their political affiliations certainly did not flow directly from being landlords, as the poorest and wealthiest supported the conservative National Action Party (PAN), and the upper-middle-income landlord was an ousted Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) bureaucrat.

Referring to these individuals as members of a *landlord class* would require so many caveats that my audience should wonder about the term's utility. Mazatlecos complicated matters further by dividing people into two, or sometimes three, "classes," emphasizing a polarization between the "middle" and "popular" classes. These local categorizations shared many of the same limitations as academic uses of *class*. To Mazatlecos, the basic division was between the relatively rich and the relatively poor, regardless of whether wealth came from trafficking illegal narcotics, selling jewelry, working in an office or fishing. For rich and poor alike, almost all income was insecure, and thus individuals often combined occupations. In short, local uses of *class*—and most academic ones—obscured the considerable economic mobility and similar aspirations, strategies, and close personal ties that existed across "classes" in Mazatlán. They created a sense that these so-called groups were distinguishable, when, in fact, with further questioning, most Mazatlecos acknowledged complex continua of economic power and tastes.

This incomplete glance at divisions among Mazatlecos suggests multiple ways of dividing

"class": by wealth, by economic stability, by occupation, by political ideology and affiliation, and by aspirations. And, although statistical correspondences may exist, none of these "classes" automatically entails the other. To divide Mazatlecos a priori into two or three classes, especially inherently oppositional ones, overly reduces our understanding of the complexity of people's lives. And it distorts these lives to fit a dubious master narrative.

It is hypothetically possible, but very unlikely, that the term *class* can be rescued from its history. So I favor using more-specific terms that carry limited meanings (eg, *day laborer*). This approach could help us to critically explore how people develop and live with ideologies of "class," while building comparative analyses based on our particular ethnographic insights.

Please send SAW column contribution ideas to Angela Jancious (jancious@ohio.edu).

Society for Cultural Anthropology

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SAC to Meet in Long Beach

Make your plans to attend the spring conference, to be held on board the historic *Queen Mary* ship in Long Beach from May 9–10, 2008. The conference theme is "Ethics, Aesthetics, Politics."