Class Identities and Cultural Practices: New Debates on Recent Theories

Sinif Kimlikleri ve Kültürel Pratikler: Çağdaş Sinif Kuramında Öne Çıkan Tartışmalar

Meltem KARADAĞ
Gaziantep University

Abstract

It has been claimed that class analysis cannot explain contemporary social hierarchy and new forms of cultural alignments. The recent works of class theorists, on the other hand, reject the arguments of the “death of class,” instead propose a modification of class theory with an emphasis on culture and identity. Drawing on Beverly Skeggs and Mike Savage’s studies among this group, the paper argues that including cultural formations into class theory these studies bring along a new perspective to the subject. In a recent study with Bennett et al. Culture, Class, Distinction (2008) Savage focuses on cultural dimension of class in contemporary Britain. However, the article questions the way the study explains people’s experiences of class in their everyday life. Indeed, the paper argues that Savage and Bennett et al.’s work gives a vague explanation of class identities and cannot explain questions about the everyday practices of class and identity. This is not to deny that the pattern of class and culture has been changed, rather the paper urges us to consider how relations of class are made and re-made within everyday life and how this effects class identity.

Keywords: Class identities, cultural class analysis, consumption

Özet


Anahtar Kelimeler: Sinif kimlikleri, kültürel sinif analizi, tüketim

Introduction

There has been a growth of interest on non-economic forms of social division that go along with an increased focus on culture and consumption. Postmodern theorists argue that increasing individualization accompanied by the rise of new sources of social identities represents the death of class. According to Pakulski contemporary social hierarchy reflects the divisions based on race, gender, citizenship, and the distribution of political power, rather than class. Indeed, for Pakulski (2005: 152-153) material inequality no longer gives rise to class communities, whilst a shift from class inequalities to complex inequality has taken place. Within this perspective, contemporary societies are highly unequal and individualized in a classless way. With special emphasis on individualization, Beck (2005:

---

1 Assoc. Prof. Dr., Gaziantep University, Dept. of Sociology, meltemkaradag@gmail.com

also sees contemporary society as highly unequal but classlessly individualized. He argues that social identities relate increasingly to differences in lifestyles and gender, ethnicity, sexuality, physical disability, age and race. Under the conditions of reflexive modernity members of these groups attempt to gain political power, hence, they construct their own biographies and identities (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 40). Beck (2005: 88) claims this new forms of social identity reflects the 'individualisation' of class structure associated with the dissolution of the close link that formerly existed between class and culture.

Similarly, a terminological shift has also taken place from the discussion of the relationship between class and status through traditional status-based styles of life to a discussion of class subjectivities through lifestyles which are pluralistic, precarious and do not indicate any fixed social standards (Scott, 2002: 33-34). As Scott explains, Weber, without making a distinction between 'styles of life' and 'lifestyles,' identifies the totality of a group's whole way of life as their 'styles of life.' Weber argued that these styles of life are clearly linked to a person's status, but in some circumstances they are determined by specific class relations. Indeed, for Weber 'status groupings' reflect forms of social affiliation. On the other hand, in recent studies on cultural consumption and practices the term 'lifestyle' is used to indicate contemporary consumerism and its fluid, precarious, and transient character.

Skeggs and Savage's new accounts on cultural and social formations in class analysis show if new bases of social identity and cultural alignments are to be studied there is still a need to study the links between class location and social identities. Indeed, studies on the impact of class on cultural practices and taste show the significance of class on identity, cultural taste, practices, and attitudes. As Savage and Devine (2000: 193,196) emphasized there is a need to explore how 'in various settings of social life, processes of inequality are produced and reproduced routinely and how this involves both economic and cultural practices.' Hence, these new accounts indicate how Beck and the critics of class analysis overstate the declining impact of class on social identity. They argue that the decline of class solidarity in no way implies that class is disappearing. On the contrary, Skeggs' (2001) study shows how despite the dissolution of class solidarity, people are still sensitive to class differences.

Drawing on recent studies on culture and class the question of the link between class and culture, and to what extent class shapes cultural habits and taste will be explored in the next section. Secondly, this article looks at Skeggs' and Savage's studies as an alternative analysis to explain how class is significant within the practices of everyday life, and subjectivity. The third section argues how Savage's recent study on class and taste in the UK leave questions about the everyday practices of class and identity unanswered.

**Cultural Practices and Taste and Class Analysis**

Recent studies on cultural consumption and practice show the relationship between class, everyday practices, consumption, and taste. Both qualitative and quantitative studies whose focus ranges from the impact of class on parenting or schooling to leisure and consumption practices show the significance of class on cultural taste, practices, and attitudes. For instance, research on practices of childrearing and attitudes toward education shows differences between working class and middle class parenting. In a series of works from The State Nobility (1998) to Distinction (2000) Bourdieu shows how the family's class and class culture is important in the accumulation and transmission of cultural capital. Drawing on empirical studies of subjective experience of class, Sayer (2005: 127) argues that practices of childrearing and attitudes toward education differ by class. Citing the works of Valerie Walkerdin and Helen Lucy, he states that in Britain, middle class mothers spend much of their time involved in their children's education while working class mothers are not keen to intervene with their children's studies. A parallel account is offered by Devine (2004: 16) in her comparative study of social mobility in America and Britain. Devine indicates how parents who went to the top universities and colleges mobilize their cultural resources for their children so that they do well in school and go into higher education as well.

Similarly, research on consumption and leisure practices indicates classed patterns of cultural taste and practice. As for the relevance of practices of consumption to social distinction and collectivities in contemporary society, Cheng et al. (2007) analyses the practices of eating in the UK using time diary data from 1975 and 2000. Whereas postmodern theorists argue the progressive disconnection of cultural difference from economic position, and the erosion of identifiable social divisions, according to Cheng
et al. (2007: 53) evidence about food shows that new social divisions are emerging that reflect re-structuring rather than fragmentation. While the data indicates some weakening in the effect of traditional socio-economic factors in food consumption, consumer practices show the emergence of new social divisions. The process is not de-coupling of cultural differences from socio-economic background, but rather a restructuring. While economic capital has little effect on the allocation of time to eating practices, the highly educated spend more of their time eating. Indeed, Cheng et al. point out Blow, Leicester and Oldfield’s (2004) study on changing spending practices for eating out in the UK. They note that it is the rich and the highly educated who are engaged in leisurely and expensive meals when they dine out. Judging by the amount of money allocated by the most affluent, and by the time allocated by the possessors of higher cultural capital, Cheng et al. (2007: 52-53) posits that going out for eating has become a source of social distinction and symbolically important in the UK.

Similarly, using Geometric Data Analysis (GDA) and Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) Le Roux et.al (2008) argue that class boundaries are drawn along cultural taste. This study shows an empirical overlap between class and cultural practices. The data indicate that there is a strong division between professionals and the working class in cultural practices. While professionals spend less time watching television and they spend more time visiting art galleries or museums, the working class spend more time watching television and the majority of them do not attend cultural events. Moreover, the television program preferences of professionals are different from the working class in that they prefer current affairs programs to soap operas. Hence, the study shows how class divisions are still significant and relevant in the UK and how they play an important role in determining cultural divisions (Le Roux et al., 2008: 1064-1066).

The above studies indicate a close link between class, parenting, and cultural consumption and they show that parenting, education, and consumption practices reflect the classed nature of social and cultural practices. If, as these studies indicate, there is a systematic pattern of cultural taste and practice and this is closely connected with social class then a new question arises; is social identity still bound up with class? Or how do people define their own identities? Indeed, both Skeggs and Savage emphasize the existence of class patterns of cultural practices and taste. The main issue for Skeggs’ and Savage’s studies is the lack of clear cut class identities, despite persisting inequality of income. Skeggs emphasizes the change in the class identities in her qualitative analysis and identifies this process for working class as ‘class dis-identification’. Savage’s position on this issue is rather uncertain. While Savage’s studies show a concern for issues of cultural identity, his latest study cannot explain how class informs subjectively everyday practices of individuals.

**Skeggs and Savage on Cultural Class Analysis**

Recent studies on class identity show if contemporary social identities are to be studied there is still a need to facilitate the toolbox of class analysis (Skeggs, 2001; Savage et al., 2001). Within these studies, however, a terminological shift has taken place. Indeed, these studies try to overcome the problems that previous class studies could not. The discussion of class subjectivities as ‘identity’ has replaced discussions of class subjectivities as ‘consciousness.’ While the former implies an imagery of class belonging without people’s self-identification and understanding of their social world, the latter indicates people’s awareness of shared interests, class-related culture and positions under which they

---

2 Nevertheless, Chan and Goldthorpe (2007), in their study of the impact of class on cultural practices, propose a very different understanding of cultural consumption patterns. They argue that the connection between class and cultural practices is modest. Yet, they identify symbolic struggles in cultural consumption that generate collectivities and they place a strong conceptual distinction between class and status at the heart of their analysis. Following Weber they argue that taste should be considered in relation to status rather than class. Chan and Goldthorpe’s (2007) analysis, which draws a sharp distinction between class and status, and Le Roux et al. (2008)’s research are not only distinct because they use different measurement models. There is a major difference between the two approaches indicated above. While Chan and Goldthorpe (2007:3) emphasize that they focus specifically on evidence of cultural consumption rather than taste, Le Roux et al. (2008:1054) concentrate on both the participation of cultural activities and taste so that expressions, and likes and dislikes are considered. Le Roux et al. (2008:1054) is right to argue that both signifying objects and signifying practice needs to be considered. Indeed, considering Holt (1997), Tampubolon (2008: 406-407) argues that even if people consume the same objects the modes of appreciation of those objects may vary according to the social structure. Similarly, Petersen and Kern (1996:904), in their study of cultural consumption in the US, also assessed the ‘way’ items of consumption are understood rather than on ‘what’ one consumes.
live. The study of class consciousness gives a priority to the study of dimensions related to work-based relations. The studies of class identity, on the other hand, are keen to draw on different dimensions such as schooling, parenting, leisure and consumption in the study of class subjectivity (Surridge, 2007:207-208). This indicates the ‘classed nature of social and cultural practices’ rather than ‘self-consciousness claims to class identity’ (Bottero: 990)³.

Similarly, Skeggs recognizes the absence of explicit class identities, but she regards class as significant in identity formation. For Skeggs, lay denials of class are the result of class process. Within this perspective the absence of class identities is taken as evidence of class. Skeggs (2001: 94-95), for example, indicates that the women in her working class sample tend to ‘dis-identify’ themselves as working class. With the ‘pathologized’ representations of the working class culture, working class women unwillingly identify themselves with working class identity. Indeed, Skeggs explains female working class dis-identification with stigmatization and devaluation of working class culture. Moreover, Skeggs’ study of class identity also indicates that there may be awareness in working class people to overcome the obstacles that are imposed on them. They may, for instance, struggle to change their own habits. Skeggs’ (2001) studies on working class women in Middlesbrough highlights working class women’s struggles for respectability. As Sayer (2005:205) indicates these women are aware that they are judged more severely than middle class women. Labeled dirty, dangerous and without value, working class women deny representing their position. For working class women, class is tied up with conceptions of respectability which working class women think they lack due to their class. Hence, the label ‘working class’ is experienced by the women as exclusion and is a negative source of identity (Skeggs, 2001: 74). Skeggs indicates that they put forth an effort not to be recognized as working class through attending college courses. Attending these courses would provide them with an escape from the real working class; to change their own habitus, to gain respectability and to be different (Skeggs, 2001: 76). Hence, college courses offered working class women an opportunity to gain some status and personal value through their cultural capital. This struggle for respect can be seen in interviews with both the mothers and their daughters through their emphasis on improvement. Interviews indicate that mothers show concern for their daughters’ improvement upon their lives while daughters want to improve their appearance, their body, their mind, their flat, their relationships and their future (Skeggs, 2001: 59, 76,82).

Savage (2000) in his studies seeks to renew class analysis, not by ignoring the dissolution of class consciousness, but by arguing that class process operates through individualized differentiation. According to Savage individualisation do not indicate the death of class, but rather reflects a shift in how class operates. He argues that while collective identities are weak, people continue to define their individual identities through relational comparisons with members of other classes. Indeed, Savage describes the ‘social change in Britain as an example of the reforming of class cultures around individualized axes’ (Savage, 2000:xiii). However, in a recent study with Bennett et al. (2008: 252) on ‘the existence of systematic patterns of cultural taste and practice’ in Britain; Savage indicates that middle class people do not define their individual identities in ways which involve relational comparisons with members of working class. They indicate that the middle class share more or less the same taste and common activities with the working class. Consequently, the working class is not related with a distinctive set of cultural practices. Still, they argue that this tendency do not indicate that working class are invisible, but rather the accounts of working class people reflect their hesitations and detachment (Bennette et al., 2008: 253).

Class Identification

Throughout his recent study Savage, together with Bennette et al. (2008), posits a new perspective that undermines class identities. While in his previous studies he focused on cultural identity and considered it in relation to class analysis, in Culture, Class, Distinction, Savage and Bennette et al. (2008) develop a class analysis that cannot explain the role of class on people’s experience of inequalities. Indeed, in a previous study with Devine, he recognizes that people do not identify themselves with class, but argues that they perform classed social and cultural practices. Furthermore, in his book Class Analysis and Social Transformation Savage (2000: xiii) argued that even though

---

³ See also Bottero (2004) as she argues that this newer generation of class theorists retains aspects of traditional class theory.
collective class identities are weak, 'people continue to define their own individual identities in ways which inevitably involve relational comparisons with members of various social classes'. Hence, Savage in his previous studies recognized the change in class identities with an emphasis on individualised classed cultures and class identities. This form of class theory locates individualised social and cultural practices and identities to collective class cultures and class identity. However, while Savage emphasizes individualized class cultures, he indicates how people continue to define their identities comparison with other classes.

Nevertheless, in a recent study titled Culture, Class, Distinction, Savage and Bennette et al. (2008:252) argue that the culture of working class is not distinctive that middle class do not need to define their culture in relation to working class. This argument clearly does not consider any subjective struggle between working class and middle class, thus, the question of subjectivity and identity. Hence, cultural practice is explained to some extend in relation to class, and subjectivities and people's experience of inequalities are undermined. Indeed, contrary to old class model of middle class versus working class oppositions, cultural distinctions are characterized as relative and contextual.

Moreover, Bottero (2004) argues that moral distinctions like contrasting competences of self-assurance of middle class with unease of working class are also contextual. For instance not only working class feels unease and discomfort, but sections of middle classes also feel cultural shame and discomfort when they interact with higher social groups (Bottero, 2004:993). According to Bottero, when individualized differentiation is included in class analysis, the term 'class' must be used only for 'explicitly 'classed' discourses which emerge when organizational cultures, social networks, or politicized representations combine to create perceptions of social identity and social division in specifically 'economic' terms (Bottero, 2004: 1000).

However, within this perspective what is unanalyzed is how working class and middle class conceive, and live 'discomfort' differently. Indeed, a wealth of studies show that as a dimension of class identity such competences would be related to social class (Skeggs,2001; Sayer, 2005; Casey, 2010). Hence, accounts of contextual feature of cultural and moral distinction overlooks how class is experienced and struggled over and how it shapes our experiences and our evaluations of others. In a recent study, Casey (2010) shows how middle classes remake and redefine cultural distinctions that boundaries and cleavages are tightened and refined. Examining two contemporary cultural examples; Gambling Bill and February 2005 riots at IKEA, Casey (2010: 228) argues that consumer practices of middle class represent cultural coherence and solidarity. Considering Gambling Bill, Casey (2010:233) indicates that middle class constantly constructs an image of working class as weak, dangerous and wasteful. Furthermore, in the example of the IKEA riots, Casey argues how the practice of bargain itself is an arena of symbolic struggles. It is not just buying a product cheap, but it is important how to consume it in the right context. While mass shopping at IKEA is not an appropriate context for middle classes, being informed about bargain products via the design magazines and then buying this product is considered as respectful (Casey, 2010:235-236).

In casting classed identities as relative, theorists such as Bottero and Savage ignore class identities, and retain a class analysis without class identities. Abandoning class as a form of identity, Savage's work becomes an effort to allocate cultural preferences, practices and taste in relation to attributes such as occupation and education. However, Skeggs (2001:75) in her book Formations of Class and Gender emphasizes the importance of considering 'how class informs the production of subjectivity' in class analysis. She argues that this involves both 'an analysis of subjective construction' and 'an examination of how inequalities are consolidated, reproduced and lived as power relations'. Sayer (2005), referencing Skeggs also rightly emphasizes how the subjective and moral experiences of class are important. Underlining the moral significance of class, Sayer argues that sociological studies needs to unveil the matters of class to people's lives. However, discussing working class participation of legitimate culture Savage and Bennette et al. (2008: 212) argues that this is better be understood with 'detachment' rather than 'exclusion' as they indicate that working class do not feel as excluded. Moreover, Savage and Bennette et al. (2008: 212) indicates the lack of substantial clash of cultures between middle and working classes. According to Savage and Bennett et al. (2008: 212) the diffusion of working class communities, the spread of omnivorousness and the defusing of distinctively working-class politics would have fostered a weak sense of class identity.
The intention here is not to conservatively deny that social change is not occurring and the formation of classes has not changed, but to argue that there is still a need to explain how it is lived. As an illustration we can take an interview from Savage and Bennette et al.’s Culture, Class, Distinction, where skilled manual working class informants identify good taste and discuss eating out. One of the interviewees define good taste as follows:

Fine wines and just having the money, I think good taste is just having the money to go to a really posh restaurant where they get their food in fresh. Rather than, when you go to a pub it’s all frozen (Bennette et al., 2008: 209).

Analysing this interview Savage and Bennette et al. (2008: 212) indicate that the informants were aware of classifications along taste, and they were also aware of ‘politics of classification’ that they indicated to being judged. Nevertheless, Savage and Bennette et al. (2008: 212) argue that this kind of identification can be seen only among skilled manual workers while the rest of the working class identify themselves as detached rather than being excluded. Referencing Runciman’s arguments on the working class in the 1960’s, Savage and Bennette et al. (2008:212), conclude that ‘there is a faint awareness that legitimate culture is attributed a special value and commands advantages.’ Still, non-manual worker working class member’s relation with legitimate culture may indicate awareness of the experience of hierarchy that ‘detachment’ can be considered in relation to this awareness. Most notably, in Culture, Class, Distinction, Savage and Bennette et al. (2008: 251) concluded that there is a systematic pattern of cultural taste and practice. If cultural inequalities are still persisting, then working and middle class subjectivities and identifications of cultural inequalities need more explanation. Indeed, as discussed before Skeggs explains in her study on working class women that female working class dis-identify with the working class culture due to the stigmatization and devaluation of working class culture by the legitimate culture. Even though individualisation is central in the formation of class and cultural identity, the hidden forms of awareness of classifications and judgments along taste and class still need to be explained in detail.

Conclusion

Critics of class theory claim that economic inequality no longer gives rise to class collectivities as individualization has undermined the relationship that existed between class and cultural identity. Class, in this argument, is outdated while voluntarism, or the idea that individuals are free to choose their life styles, is emphasized. Within this climate studies of a newer generation of theorists such as Skeggs, Savage and Devine, rejecting the arguments of ‘death of class’, offered a reformulated class theory that capture the ‘cultural turn’ in sociology away from the traditional understanding of class. Skeggs (2001) emphasized the centrality of class in everyday lives of working class indicating their daily struggle to attain respectability. Savage while criticizing the centrality of the economic in class analysis, argues to include cultural formation into study of class. Together with Devine, Savage (2000:196) defines ‘culturalist class analysis’ as an analysis that shows how ‘in various settings of social life, process of inequality are produced and reproduced routinely and how this involves both economic and cultural practices’.

In a recent study with Bennett et.al (2008), Savage focuses on the pattern of cultural consumption in the UK. In Culture, Class, Distinction, Savage (Bennette et al., 2008) identifies classed cultural distinctions as relative. The article argues that by doing this Savage (Bennette et al., 2008) ignores hierarchical distinctions and difference, and any form of relational comparisons, hence he ignores class identities. Criticizing Savage by putting more emphasis on individualized differentiation is not to conservatively deny that oppositional class cultures and explicit class identities are weakening. The objective, then, is to trace out the ways in which inequalities of class and boundaries are reconstructed, and the ways individuals experience class inequalities through their relationships and practices.

References