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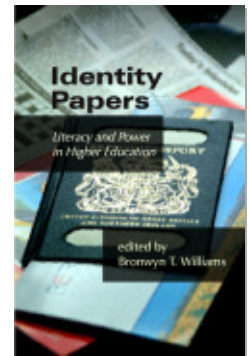
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SOCIAL CLASS AS DISCOURSE

The Construction of Subjectivities in English

James T. Zebroski

What saved my butt was reading. I loved it. ...If I was propelled from behind by fear of my Dad, I was pulled ahead by the written word.

—Garger 1995

If this were a story about gender identity, then I would be transgendered. But since this is a story about class, and this is America, I cannot be transclassed.... Acceptance of one's own class identity, like the acceptance of one's sexual identity, is—despite what those who decry the use of labels insist—freeing. Rather than limiting one to what one label (lesbian, working class) states, it expands the realm of the personal experience.

—Brownworth 1997

During the last week of June in 1970, I stepped onto a college campus for the first time in my life. I was 18 and I had come to Ohio State that week for freshman orientation. I had come to Columbus from Warren, about 160 miles to the northeast, on a Greyhound bus. I had never seen the Ohio State campus before except in the photographs included in the brochures and catalogues that the university sent when I expressed interest in applying. I had decided to go to Ohio State because a year earlier I had read somewhere, probably in the local newspapers, that OSU at that time was second only to Harvard in the amount of financial aid that it gave out. Once accepted in December I received a form called the Parents Confidential Financial Statement, a bureaucratic document required if one wanted to apply for financial aid which I knew was my only hope for actually going to OSU. This Parents Confidential Statement created one of the first conflicts that I can recall between the working-class discourses that I was desperate to escape and the middle-class discourses I would do *nearly anything* to join but was not yet a part of. *Nearly anything* included having a big fight with my Dad about this form. My father was anxious that I stay at home and work—ideally

in a factory as nearly all my friends did who were not on their way to Vietnam. Jobs in factories in 1970 were plentiful and paid extremely well. The sort of work one did in factories was not only understood and valued by my father but also by nearly everyone else I knew in my town. I was supposed to work in the factory, save that money by living at home, and go either to the local branch of Kent State which was in Warren or to Youngstown State which was about twenty minutes away. We had perfectly good universities in the area; there was no good reason to spend a lot of money to go away.

But I had decided I was leaving Warren and the factories and my father's control no matter what I had to do to do that. I had already registered for the draft in May as a conscientious objector; if that were my fate, at least I'd get out of Warren. I was seriously considering the priesthood back then as another escape route, but had serious doubts about celibacy. My determination to leave Warren was not at all untypical of my generation. Unlike our current generation of undergrads, there was precedent and cultural encouragement of sorts back in 1970 for people from my generation to break ties with family. There was a generation gap and it was easier to ally yourself with people your own age. Still, the desperation to leave Warren was about more than that and my father could smell it and he didn't like it.

The Parents Confidential Statement asked the parent of the student applying for financial aid to provide intimate details about the family's income, savings, property, expenses, and deductions. My father was aghast. He saw this as a serious invasion of his privacy—which it was. Only the Internal Revenue Service and maybe God knew about my father's financial business; not even my mother was privy. So here comes this young punk—my father's term for an eighteen-year-old male who think he knows it all—telling him to write all this deeply personal information down to send it off to complete strangers.

There was resistance. There was yelling. There was hollering. My father, after postponing it as long as he could, grudgingly agreed to provide this information, but instructed the young punk to first fill in all the nonconfidential info. So the young punk did that. I thought I'd use all my developing vocabulary skills to gussy up the language a bit, to make it a bit classier. Instead of simply writing "worker" or "factory worker" or even my father's usual "employee of Packard Electric" in the blank for occupation, I wrote *laborer*. A good word, I thought. A little fancy. A bit British. A word that covered up the reality that Dad worked in a factory.

A word that I never had used before in my life. My father read this and went ballistic.

My father was as angry as I had seen him and I didn't know why so he gave me a little lecture about how in his world—in what I am calling his discourse—laborer meant a manual worker. Someone who did whatever was left, someone who was several levels below a factory worker in prestige not to mention pay. A ditch digger was laborer. Father was not happy that I apparently had such a low estimate of his work and of him. Actually, I didn't have a clue about exactly what he did and even less of a clue about the discourse of laborers. I was just trying to enter a new discourse—a bit prematurely.

We got through it obviously. Three years later father told mother that that was actually pretty smart of me to get all of this financial aid, to get a free ride to a college like Ohio State. My mother passed the word on to me. That is how language worked in my family.

One last word about that June trip to freshman orientation at Ohio State. As soon as I actually got to campus and saw it, I was shocked. It was beautiful. I simply had not envisioned a college campus, especially one with 50,000 students, as park. Trees and huge open spaces and benches and squirrels. Where I came from schools including colleges looked more like prisons than parks. The second thing I began to see that hadn't been in my conception of university were all the buildings with fancy red tile roofs. I mean the place looked like pictures I had seen of Southern California. The only buildings that even had tile roofs in Warren were the county courthouse and Greek Orthodox church. The third thing that stands out in my memory was the fact that the campus was completely closed and barricaded after the anti-Vietnam, post-Kent State riots of the spring. Buildings still had broken windows from the riots. The taxi driver asked if I had an ID and when I told him I did not, he said they wouldn't let me on campus. The security person in the booth at the entrance to the Oval checked, and they let me in.

Now what I want to do in the rest of this essay is to focus on the discourse of social class behind this incident, but also behind our discussions of class and identity in composition and rhetoric. The next section delineates six differing, conflicting discourses that position us and in large measure shape the way we think, talk, and act on social class. After describing these conflicting discourses which work to constitute social class in composition and rhetoric, I will consider some of the implications of such a discursive view of social class.

THE DISCOURSES OF SOCIAL CLASS

By discourse, I mean the power of language practices to constitute their object. I am obviously following the lead here of Michel Foucault in his *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), but also acknowledge the work of Jim Berlin, Lester Faigley, Susan Miller, and to a lesser extent Patricia Bizzell and David Bartholomae. The shortest and most precise description of the discourse of discourse, of the varied ways the term discourse is used, can be found in David Jolliffe's (2001) entry on 'Discourse' in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* (101–3). In that entry, Jolliffe notes that discourse means (1) a passage of language, (2) a passage of language that reflects a group's practices, and (3) the power of language to influence and constrain in a group. This talk works within this third view. Discourse is a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements. Norman Fairclough, cited in Jolliffe, states that "[d]iscourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning" (102). So discourses not only create by constructing, but also by excluding, by making invisible, by prohibiting, by silencing.

The discourses of social class then create the forms within which social class can appear and they create the range of possible identities which can emerge from the discourse.

In reflecting on my earlier class narrative, I can say that in 1970 a discourse of class shaped my idea of university, making some notions unlikely. Parks and tile roofs and financial aid were not in my discourse. Their absence made these things difficult for me to imagine. The idea that I might go the next step and apply to many colleges and barter for the best financial aid package was also absent from my discourse, nearly unthinkable. Even though one of my closest friends was going to Harvard, the very idea that I might apply there was alien even to my border discourse. That discourse made invisible a whole network of subsidies to the middle class in higher education. Even in graduate school, I had to learn too late to be of help about fellowships. The clash of social class discourses that occurred with the Parents Confidential Statement shows that the working-class discourse in which I was raised was not singular or sealed shut, but it also showed me that translating across these discourses was extremely difficult. For one thing, if you take up that role of translator across discourses you in some important ways become invisible to your family and your old friends—my mother does not have a clue what I do at work or at conferences like this and doesn't really want

to know—but you also risk becoming invisible in important ways to the your professors and new middle- and upper-class friends. As I will detail at the end of this chapter, this is one reason why witness narratives are so crucial. They break the silence created by the discourses.

Now the discourse of social class is not singular. There are many class discourses. When we talk about social class, I hear at least six differing and often contradictory discourses. Once you enter any one of these discourses, your lines of argument, your key words, your values, not to mention your subject position and identities, are relatively established, at least at the start. One of the reasons it is so difficult to talk about social class in America is because these discourses of social class are relatively discrete and we often are simply in different universes of discourse in class discussions.

THE DISCOURSE OF POSITION

Social class in this discourse is a position in a hierarchy determined by some external and often easily quantifiable factor like income, education, and occupation.

The Parents Confidential Statement is the perfect example of this as was my father's lesson on laborers. Yet I also think this construction of social class was part of what my father was resisting. For him being working class was NOT about income or education or occupation alone. It was about social relations. The discourse of position is the ruling discourse on social class in America and so we should not be surprised that if we enter this discourse that it is extremely difficult to make class distinctions. In this discourse, we all mostly turn out to be middle class. This is then the discourse of the popular media. And when we euphemistically talk about "first generation college" students we too are in this discourse. Almost all scholars of social class in America address this discourse because it is so powerful, even when they do not locate themselves in it. Michael Zweig (2000) for instance in his new book *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* begins from a social relation discourse of class, but attempts to use that discourse to analyze the US Department of Labor's exhaustive data on occupation stratification. Doing so allows him to argue that 62 percent of Americans are in the working class.

THE DISCOURSE OF SOCIAL RELATIONS

Social class in this discourse is about power relations between people and groups of people. Traditionally, it has focused on what groups have power in the production process in the economy. Adam Smith, Karl

Marx, and many others argue that profit is produced by the workers. But then how to explain the bulging middle? G. William Domhoff (1998) takes one approach by defining and examining what he, after C. Wright Mills, calls the “ruling” class in America. He says,

On top of the gradually merging layers of blue- and white-collar workers who comprise the working class and makes up 85–90 percent of the population, there sits a very small social upper class which comprises at most 0.5 percent of the population and has a very different lifestyle and source of income from the rest of us. Many Americans are not even aware of the existence of this upper class. They are used to thinking of the highly paid and visible doctors, architects, television actors, corporate managers, writers, and governmental officials and experts who stand between the working class and the upper class as the highest level of the social pecking order. ... But the “rich” are not a handful of discontented eccentrics, jetsetters, and jaded scions who have been pushed aside by the rise of corporations and governmental bureaucracies. They are instead full fledged members of a thriving social class which is as alive and well as it has ever been. (3–4)

Also, Erik Olin Wright (1985) in his book *Classes* locates his argument in a social relations discourse, and discusses contradictory class positions and making an important place for a wide range of credentialed and uncredentialed supervisors and managers in his theory of class. The discourse of social relations sees the world in us/them terms, pitting the numerous little people against the few rulers. The social relations discourse of class was the one my father felt most comfortable in. It is the discourse that emphasizes “what we have in common” and therefore is most useful in uniting people and in organizing them.

THE DISCOURSE OF WORK AND THE WORKPLACE

A little secret. If you want to talk with someone about social class and he or she is reluctant to talk about social class, move the conversation to work and the workplace. This is especially true now because as Jim Berlin, David Harvey, Richard Ohmann, and others have shown us we are living through a great transformation of capitalism that began about 1971 and is still ongoing called flexible accumulation or a post-Fordist regime of capitalism. Almost everyone has a horror story to share about the new workplace.

The discourse of work and the workplace focuses on social interaction and social stratification at work. It focuses on the changes in everything from technology to character that are occurring at work.

The Joseph Harris–James Sledd debate within our own profession is one good example of this discourse. Downing, Hurlbert, and Mathieu's (2002) recent volume *Beyond English Inc.: Curricular Reform in a Global Economy* and Eileen Schell's (1997) *Gypsy Academics and Mother Teachers* are others.

Composition and rhetoric is classed not simply in its appropriation of post-Fordist methods, among them the hiring of contingent labor. It is classed in its teaching, its scholarship, and in its professional practice. I have much more to say about this, but for now, let me just note that this discussion can begin with the facts of our employment—how many classes do we teach and how many students do we have each term. Not coincidentally, heavy loads correlate with colleges that have large numbers of students from the working class. By the way, I teach a 4:4 load at Capital and I have 73 students this term. Such facts are part of the social structure in composition and rhetoric.

THE DISCOURSE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

In this discourse, social class is the cultural heritage, the way of life—what we think, say, do—that is created, preserved, treasured, and passed down by folk in the working class. It is a discourse of value and of everyday life.

The cultural heritage discourse is the discourse that folks from the working class exercise the most control over, so it should not be surprising to see so many academics from the working class turn to this discourse. It makes a kind of sense to both researcher and researched. Julie Lindquist's (2002) new *A Place to Stand: Politics and Persuasion in a Working Class Bar* and Robert Bruno's (1999) *Steelworker Alley: How Class Works in Youngstown* are just two rigorous, respectful, and imaginative examples of the importance of cultural heritage discourse of class in academic work. Of course, *Coming to Class: Pedagogy and the Social Class of Teachers* (Shepard, McMillan, and Tate 1998) and *This Fine Place So Far From Home* (Dews and Law 1995) are by now classics of this discourse and its genre. Though these two books are classics of the discourse of cultural heritage, they also draw heavily on the discourse of witness, more about which later.

Most of working-class studies is currently engaged with this discourse. Among the people very interested in class as cultural heritage are creative writers. There has been a virtual renaissance over the last decade or so of creative writers from the working-class publishing poems, stories, novels, creative nonfiction on this heritage. Jim Daniels has certainly

been a leader in this. Following the lead long ago of people like Tillie Olsen (1978) and her book *Silences*, new presses have emerged including Bottom Dog Press, which has printed a variety of volumes including *Getting By: Stories of Working Class Lives* (Shevin and Smith 1996). Kent State University Press publishes a good deal working-class cultural heritage materials including the photography of James Jeffrey Higgins (1999), *Images of the Rust Belt*. And the Center for Working Class Studies at Youngstown State, the first institute of its kind in the United States devoted to working-class studies, has an important function of preserving what is becoming a vanishing way of life in the Mahoning and Shenango valleys and beyond.

THE DISCOURSE OF INDIVIDUAL AFFILIATION

In my analysis, I wanted to leave room for the pervasive American resistance or ambivalence to social class. I also wanted to acknowledge that there are no social class police enforcing your identity. I think this is an important enough phenomenon to warrant its own discourse, the discourse of individual affiliation which includes the ability to disidentify and reidentify as an individual with a class. To the person who says I am not from the working class, I say fine. In this discourse, you can choose to identify (or dis- identify) with whatever class you want. After all, my disidentification with my working-class cultural heritage when I was 18 made it easier at that time for me to imagine leaving home and going away to a place like Ohio State. However, to accept the discourse of individual class affiliation does not necessarily mean one must accept a Horatio Alger rags to riches narrative. To be sure, that genre fits here, but so do lots of genres which resist that utopian view. Acceptance of the effects of this discourse does not mitigate the other discourses. In fact, quite the contrary. The discourse of individual affiliation fits nicely and reinforces positivistic measures of social class, that is, the discourse of position.

THE DISCOURSE OF WITNESS

The final discourse of social class is also difficult to see, to analyze, and to study. It is far from evident. The discourse of witness is unlike the other discourses in that it is not at all about persuasion. The other discourses are very rhetorical in that effects are created on those who have been persuaded to locate themselves within the discourse. The aim of the discourse of witness, however, is most clearly not to persuade or to inform or to change someone. Its effects on others are either subtle or

nonexistent. The discourse of witness is a speech act performative—a witness is created by witnessing, nothing more. This discourse says something like “I witness to the working class.” Now someone else may well shape that witness for persuasive purposes, but the witnessing itself is not done primarily or at all to change someone’s mind. Witnessing sometimes is done for or to a higher power, perhaps what Mikhail Bakhtin called the hero of discourse—to God or Science or History.. But I am not convinced that this discourse of witness is always done for some higher power. I am obviously drawing on religious and legal analogies here, but both of them break down fairly quickly. The discourse of social class that witnesses says something like “I am here. We are here. We exist whether you like that or not, whether you acknowledge us or not, whether you even hear us or not. We are here especially if you silence us and make us invisible.”

Surprised by the large number of gay and lesbian contributors to their book on social class, Dews and Law (1995) in *This Fine Place So Far From Home* theorize a resemblance between the stories in their book and coming out stories in the gay community. They say,

While our gender and race identities, comparatively stable and usually marked by readily visible signs, always sends messages whether we intend them or not, our class identity is a good deal less stable and marked by signs more easily concealed. In order to claim working class identity in a context that presumes middle class homogeneity, we must *do* something. I, like the authors, ...had to choose to disclose myself, a politically charged gesture for which the university has few opportunities; it in fact actively discourages such disclosure. In terms of self disclosure, working class autobiography is like gay and lesbian identity politics which is also threatening to the “standards” and “discipline” of the essentially conservative institution. (6)

There is something like that, something like a social class coming out story, that runs all through these other discourses of social class. It is a bit like Queer Nation’s chant—“We’re Here. We’re Queer. Get used to it.” Sort of “We’re Here. We’re Working Class. Get Used to it.” The discourse of witness breaks the class silence.

CLASS AS DISCOURSE IN LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

So what does all of the work we have done on the concept of social class as a discourse do for us? I think the concept of social class as discourse helps us in the following ways.

First, approaching class as discourse brings us back to what we all know best—language and the ways that language constitutes culture and identity. While I do think it is important to acknowledge and to understand the economic, political, anthropological, and sociological aspects of social class in the United States, I think that what English teachers bring to this conversation is our strong expertise and experience with language. Properly speaking, social class can only be approached in English as discourse since that is what our professional object is. This does not at all mean that we need to reduce social class to discourse. There are clearly other aspects of social class that other disciplines can better address than we.

A corollary of this is that when we view social class as discourse we can connect up our scholarship with others in and out of the department who use discourse theory to analyze text. We can draw on Foucault to Fairclough and many others. So this approach plays to the strength of the humanities.

Second, such an approach deconstructs the binary that usually accompanies identity politics or identity studies—that we shall either celebrate heritage or critique that positioning. The approach to social class as discourse argues for neither a celebration of heritage nor a critique of ideology, but for a study of the social and individual *in* language acts. Jane Hindman (2001) and Richard Miller (1996) provide a methodology for doing precisely this in our classrooms. Let also add that when we understand social class as discourse, we avoid the entire difficulty of the totalized and totalizing subject which can be appropriated for oppressive purposes. I think the likelihood of this happening in a culture like ours where social class has always been the least acceptable discourse is so low as to be not a consideration. Nevertheless, for those who are so concerned, appropriating Foucault's concept of discourse, most experts would agree, has built in safeguards against this totalizing tendency. These safeguards deriving from Foucault's counter-totalizing redefinition of power as local and positive.

Third, a discursive construal of social class acknowledges the “workplace” discourse post-Fordism in the academy and especially in composition and rhetoric. Our jobs and our professions are classed. Given nearly irresistible post-Fordist economic pressures on academe, we need to consider that there may be good reason to locate composition within the humanities within English. Poovey (2001) presents a very strong argument for this saying,

The only way we can evaluate the effects of the market's penetration into the university in terms other than the market's own is to assert some basis for evaluation that repudiates market logic and refuses market language...I want to call this normative alternative "the humanities." I do so not because disciplines in the humanities necessarily or inevitably perform critique, but because, as a sector of the university least amenable to commodification, the humanities may be the only site where such an alternative may survive. (11)

Fourth, viewing social class as discourse reemphasizes geneologies, that is, the writing and revising of histories of English and of composition and rhetoric in terms of the working classes. Composition has been largely constructed through discourses our students, especially those from the working class, over the last forty years, far more than by the great ideas and hero scholars that fill our official histories. We need to write these counter histories. Dixon (1991) provides at least a start in his book *A Schooling in 'English'*. We must publicly acknowledge the heavy debt composition has to colleges of education, to their teachers and students, who, of all departments on campus, most heavily represent the working class.

Fifth, social class as discourse presents a rationale and opportunity for "studying up" the social ladder. In 1988 at the MLA Right to Literacy conference, I noted, "I like Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) *Ways With Words*, but perhaps it is time to complement that volume with a parallel in-depth study of how Wall Street financiers create community and use literacy. We need to match our vast literature on the life of oppressed communities with a critical study of life and literacy in oppressor communities." Given the huge corporate scandals of recent years involving Enron, Worldcom., Tyco, and many others, this proposal seems even more crucial and relevant now as in 1988. I am still waiting for such critical scholarship. Let me add that these scandals ought to be cause for the champions of professional writing in composition and rhetoric to justify their approaches showing us how they do not simply reproduce a corrupt post-Fordist society.

Sixth, starting with social class as discourse, we can understand the *dual need* to teach the conventions of ruling discourse *and* critique those conventions through new forms. A recent RTE study by Penrose suggests that first-generation college students leave university *not* because they perform poorly in academic literacy or get low grades, but rather

because they are dissatisfied by a university that does not seem to see them as a legitimate part of the academic community. *We must teach genres which open up a space for student experience*, that acknowledges their legitimate contributions. Forms like creative nonfiction, ethnographic writing, and multigenre projects are not nice supplements or alternatives to academic discourse; they are central if students are going to find form for their experience and stay in university.

Let me conclude by asserting that I see nothing in the discourse theory that I am proposing in this essay that takes away or abolishes agency. Indeed, discourse theory acknowledges the complexities of real agency. We can know of our agency in part through acknowledging the agencies of others on us. This is one of the functions of witness discourse, not so much to have effects on others in any short-term easy to identify way, but to trace out the agencies of others in our lives on us. Every time we speak of the effects of other persons on us, we speak of the potential agency that we have in a collective with others.¹