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Reflections on Theorising Class in Arabic-Speaking Countries

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Of the many hurdles I encountered during my PhD research, developing a conceptualisation of class that can be considered of relevance to Jordan in specific, and to Arabic-speaking contexts more broadly, was perhaps the most arduous. This article provides reflections on my experience carrying out research that explored the intersectionality of class and gender and its influence on women's economic activities in Amman, Jordan. For my PhD research, I initially adopted a Marxist feminist framework, which allowed me to explore women's lived realities and how class influences their lives differently. This piece, however, draws on both my PhD research and further research I carried out following my PhD with non-normative people[1] in different Arabic-speaking contexts. Here, I aim to take the argument of using a Marxist feminist framework further through shedding light on the particularity of the experiences of women and non-normative people within multiple systems of oppression, especially in how they are positioned in relation to their class, gender performance and non-normativity. This piece also aims to challenge the simplistic understanding of women and non-normative people's class through that of their families and households. Instead, I argue that patriarchal gender structures influence the positionality of women and non-normative people in relation to their class within their families and households. I also argue that this necessitates an approach that treats them as of a "different" class vis-à-vis their families.

For my PhD research, I was mainly interested in looking at "work" carried out by women for the purpose of generating income. This is not to undermine the work carried out by women that does not directly generate income, like care and domestic work. However, my research sought to specifically understand women's access to the labour market, income-generating activities inside and outside the household, and access to employment. Conceptualisations around women's labour should take into account women's involvement in the "informal" and/or "formal" means of production, as many women are engaged in economic activities, but those are not always considered "work" per se. Women's domestic labour is crucial for "the functioning of the economic system" (Beneria and Sen, 1997: 48), and is also important for the welfare and livelihoods of their families. This also applies to non-normative people, as many of them, and particularly trans people, often undertake work that is seasonal, informal, and insecure. For this particular research, I have also understood class not only in relation to access to economic capital, but also in relation to cultural capital, which manifests itself in life styles, educational attainment, type of economic activities, and social status. Both aspects of class, economic and cultural, are under-conceptualised in Arabic-speaking countries. In addition to that, several barriers, such as accessibility and funding to research into class in the region, exist, making conversations about such concepts only accessible through western academic institutions.

Moreover, the experiences of women are mainly explained through one system of oppression, as if women were a homogenous group influenced by patriarchy in similar ways. I have noticed, through my research, that literature produced by academia and non-governmental organisations on women's economic activities in Arabic-speaking countries often fails to account for differences between women in relation to class, and often overlooks the cultural capital dimensions of class. As Devine and Savage (2000: 194-6) explain:

[1] I define non-normativity as not abiding by heteronormative and/or patriarchal gender and sexual expectations, including but not limited to self-identified LGBTQ people.

> Exploring the embeddedness of the economic in the cultural and vice versa may be a useful way forward – the economic and the cultural are implicated in the production of class and other inequalities, the economic should be brought back into class analysis, although not the economic in a narrow sense but as a set of practices that are imbued with cultural meanings and experiences.

To understand the intersectionality of class and gender, it is important to look into the different dimensions of class – cultural and capital, particularly because expected gender roles are very much linked to and shaped by class relations. In other words, the gender performance expected of women and non-normative people vary across classes, and thus the manifestations of patriarchy itself as a structure differs and is shaped by both cultural and economic dimensions of class. I interviewed a non-normative person who self-identifies as coming from an upper-middle class background in Jordan; he said to me: "I feel suffocated by my family, because I am always pushed to abide by their culture of respectability and appropriateness. I feel that I am pushed to pursue work I would not necessarily enjoy, to be able to fit and live up to their lifestyle and standards." A woman who self-identifies as belonging to a similar background confided: "my family would not just let me work in a low status job. This is also because of my family's name. As you probably know we are a well-known family in Jordan, and if people know that I am working in an unsuitable position, this would affect their image and prestige." This demonstrates that class positionality produces different gendered experiences for women and non-normative people. Therefore, understanding the different dimensions of class aids us in exploring how patriarchal structures intersect with class in different ways, even shaping gender expectations differently. This echoes Skeggs' (2005) theorisation that the focus should shift from solely studying economic class, to exploring both cultural and economic class analyses:

> class is defined as a cultural property (something that is owned by the person as an attitude or attribute) and this is read back into practices, so that people learn not only what they are worth symbolically (socially and economically), but also how their cultural practices come to have (or not) a worth and value for others. (Skeggs, 2005: 48-9)

In her study of white working-class women in England, Skeggs (1997) explores what it means to be both a "woman" and "working class." She adopts Bourdieu's approach to class, seeing it in terms of both economic and cultural capital, and uses it to clarify the intersections between class and gender. Although she does not explicitly state that her work is focused on the intersectionality of class and gender, she provides a useful account of the ways in which working class white women struggle for respectability as well (Skeggs, 1997). In other words, the "labels" attached to class are not only influenced by the economic aspects of class, but also the cultural ones. For instance, a woman I interviewed and who self-identified as of an impoverished economic background said: "I clean offices but my children do not know about it. I try to hide my work as a cleaner; I do not want anyone to know about it. I do not want anyone to insult them [her children] or humiliate them, because my work is not considered honourable or respectable."

Class divisions "find expression in terms of power, income, wealth, responsibility, 'life chances', style and quality of life, and everything else that makes up the texture of existence" (Miliband, 1989: 25). Class, however, should not only be measured through categorising people according to occupation, wealth or income (Crompton, 2008). Studying class should also take into account "understanding the mechanisms

that produce class inequalities" (Savage et al., 2005: 31). Furthermore, looking at class in terms of economic capital is not enough, because it does not explain the "role of culture (of practices and taste) in the structuring of class" (Savage et al., 2005: 40). Langston (1995: 101-2) also defines class through culture by saying:

> class is your understanding of the world and where you fit in; it's composed of ideas, behaviour, attitudes, values, and language; class is how you think, feel, act, dress, talk, move, walk; class is what stores you shop at, restaurants you eat in; class is the schools you attend, the education you attain; class is the very jobs you will work at throughout your adult life.

In addition to these considerations around class, it is important to demonstrate how women and non-normative people have differential class within the family structure itself, and that understanding the intersectionality of class and gender must take all of these aspects into account. The family and households must be understood as the "locus of struggle," where our first experiences of production and distribution take place, and where conflict may be created. Afshar (1985) argues that the family unit is the place where women's subordination is clearly seen. She adds that "mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives are subject to the intense operation of the moral economy of kinship which controls women and their work" (Afshar, 1985: xiv). Through this lens, gender relations are understood in terms of production and reproduction within and outside the household, where capitalism and patriarchy intersect and affect our gendered experiences (Hartmann, 1981). It is, thus, important to acknowledge that patriarchy creates class divisions within the same families and households. Both pieces of research have demonstrated that when looking at class and gender and their intersections, it is important to define patriarchy, from a Marxist feminist perspective, as:

> A set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchal relations between men and solidarity among them, which enables them in turn to dominate women. The material base of patriarchy is men's control over women's labour power. That control is maintained by excluding women from access to necessary economically productive resources and by restricting women's sexuality. (Cockburn, 1985, as cited in Phizacklea, 1988: 17-18)

This patriarchy, as defined above, in turn, excludes some non-normative people from access to economic resources and restricts their sexuality. During several interviews with non-normative people and women from Arabic-speaking countries, many of them expressed being threatened or having experienced punishments by their families, particularly in relation to access to economic resources and restrictions over their sexuality. Discriminatory practices such as depriving women and non-normative people from inheritance, pocket money and allowances, and access to other economic resources are common as a way to pressure women and non-normative people to abide by their classed gender expectations and ascribed gender roles, and to restrict their sexualities. For example, during an interview with a self-identified queer woman in Palestine, she stated: "my father stopped giving me a monthly allowance because I decided to move from home and live with a woman." A self-identified queer man said: "when my family found some pictures of me with my partner, they decided to deprive me from inheritance, unless I marry a woman."

These examples demonstrate that women and non-normative people occupy a differential class within their families; they do not have the same access to resources, and class hierarchies exist within the same household as well. Therefore, it is important for the advancement of the study of class within Arabic-speaking countries to unravel and explore class hierarchies that operate on the level of the household. Heterosexist, heteronormative nuclear families and households are the arena where production, reproduction, and consumption occur between multiple actors. It is the place where decisions are made in relation to the division of labour and distribution of resources. It is also where gendered and sexed hierarchies operate to suppress conflicting interests and preferences, to maintain classed concepts of "respectability" and "appropriateness." Despite the fact that they occupy differential classes and access to economic resources inside the households, this economic punishment does not exempt women and non-normative people from the expectation of conforming to values of "appropriateness" and "respectability" outside their households. In other words, the cultural dimension of class hierarchies remains in operation outside the family unit.

Conceptualising class in terms of its materialist aspects alone fails to acknowledge the differential experiences of women and non-normative people within class structures. For instance, when economic class mobility takes place and women or non-normative people earn more or have more access to economic resources outside their households, gender ideologies that support their subordination and their status as of different class are sustained (Kabeer, 1997). In her study on Sikh women in Britain, Bhachu (1988) argues that women's access to money improves their situation within the household and gives them the chance to do as they please with their earnings (Bhachu, 1988). Others have added that women's income generating activities give them power over decision-making inside the household when they contribute financially to it (Allen and Wolkowitz, 1987). However, Kabeer (1997) explains that although many scholars have found that cash and earning give women relative power in the household, others have considered gendered ideologies around roles resilient, and that patriarchal ideologies prevail (Kabeer, 1997). Vogler (2005) proposes that money plays a significant role in shaping intra-household relations, and that it has a great influence on the allocation of power between household members (Vogler, 2005). However, this allocation of power is still governed by patriarchal gender ideologies, which pressures women and non-normative people into roles and performances that are oppressive due to their class generally and their cultural class in particular.

This piece aimed to start a conversation around class and gender and their intersection in Arabic-speaking countries shaping people's lived realities differently. It suggests that it is not viable to produce knowledge about women and non-normative people, without recognising that capitalism and patriarchy cannot be separated from each other and must always be treated as part and parcel of the systems of oppression that shape our experiences as both women and non-normative people. Whereas this piece focuses on intra-household gender and class relations, such conceptualisations need to also be extended to class outside the household. Although women and non-normative people may be considered a class of their own within their households, it is important to note that the intersectionality of class and gender may manifest itself differently in the public sphere. Standards of appropriateness and respectability that accompany economic and cultural capital are also often valued beyond the household. People with access to cultural and economic capital within one community can be seen as more "respectable" vis-à-vis "less respectable others," who have less access to economic and cultural power, as the research I engaged in with non-normative people in different countries across the Arabic-speaking regions showed.

In many cases, non-normative people with privileged access to economic and cultural capital end up reinforcing this intersection between class and patriarchy, recreating oppressions similar to the ones they had struggled against at home. A discussion on class, therefore, should encompass the various spheres inhabited by non-normative people and their specificities, expanding our understanding of normativity beyond its gender and sexual confines and into class structures.

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