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Looking More into Our Economic Class: Makings of a Standpoint

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SPECIAL FORUM

Looking More into our Economic Class: Makings of a Standpoint

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My background is middle class, but from the beginning of my academic career I have been told to hide my economic class identity in order to fit in better with those in my academic circle. Many of the conversations we have in academia revolve around older, white men of the upper-class position. The other economic classes do not have a voice in these conversations that happen in the academy. The reason for this is students and faculty, who are middle or working class, are presumed incompetent within the academy. Presumed incompetence constrains economic classes that do not fall into the upper class and elite; the idea behind this concept is that assumptions are made that middle and working classes are less intelligent or not worthy of what academia has to offer. Such presumptions create stereotypes of gender, race, and class that place economic constraints upon many within academia. Looking more into economic class restraints through a feminist standpoint helps expose the issues surrounding presumed incompetence and how we can begin to push forward in our understanding of how this hinders those within academia.

Social class is still something that remains so invisible that working-class academics can choose whether and when to reveal it. Even if you hide it, unlike your middle-class and upper-middle-class peers, you will see the ghost of class which haunts the academy. (Anthony 2012, 305)

In my experience, even the middle class faces some of these “ghosts of class” which haunt our academic circles. I have had to make changes in how I discuss or express my economic class background in order to fit in with those around me. This does not mean that those from the middle class experience everything that those from a working-class economic background do. There are issues that the working class has to take on that the middle class does not experience. Even so, the middle class also falls victim to the ghost of presumed incompetence which haunts the academy, just as the working class does. Everyone is expected to listen to “the academy’s siren call” and adhere to its class expectations (312), but these same expectations often diminish the backgrounds of many academics, such as myself. We all fall victim to the older, white upper-class males who are deciding the conversations in academia. As feminist scholars, we must address this presumed incompetence and work to push against it and understand how class affects everyone. We cannot disregard peers because of their economic class backgrounds.

These same discussions surrounding presumed incompetence extend to women within academia. Women’s lives are shaped by the ideologies and economic constructs that are revolving around them. Not until college, did I recognize the extreme amount of pressure put upon the performance of class. I also did

not begin to understand the extent that women are pushed to prove themselves. Women are inherently seen as less competent in the academic world, a stereotype that needs to be changed. As I learn more about how this affects others and myself within academia, I am driven to resist some of the expectations pressed upon me within academic circles. Why are working and middle-class academics considered to not possess the qualities needed to contribute to the conversations of academia? Why are women in the academy not given the same opportunities as older, white men?

Society as a whole, and academia specifically, diminishes women's worth based on inequitable relationships of gender. This extends to her economic worth, whether her economic background is one that provides her stability or not. Presumed incompetence ensures those of working or middle-class backgrounds are seen to be less worthy of a position in academia because they may have to work additional jobs or provide for a family. Feminist standpoint reveals that we can "descent further into materiality to an epistemological level at which [we] can better understand both why patriarchal institutions and ideologies take such perverse and deadly forms" (Hartsock 1983, 368). Researching and engaging more with class can reveal how and why our society has been systematically constructing areas of separation within academia to divide and constrain women. We need to view these divides and constraints within and between all classes, including how the middle class is affected in the contemporary moment. We need to challenge the belief that the middle class does not have to deal with economic, social, or family problems.

In US culture, people often regard someone based on stereotypically informed prejudices about how we perceive others class backgrounds. In academia, the working class is told,

After some years of experience in the academy, you will automatically act and in many ways be middle class. However, the claim of your own class of origin on your identity never really goes away. (Anthony 2012, 301)

Additionally, academics stereotype middle-class academics as having few or no identity and inequity issues of their own. The middle class also has to negotiate academia for themselves and face pressures to "perform their class," but these struggles tend to be ignored in discussion of class in academia. Middle-class performances are hindering and are in connection with that of the working class. Without looking at the complexity of class, we miss many of the constraints placed upon women through academic structures. This is a perversion that we, as feminists, need to begin to realize and overcome. For example, my work ethic is no less than that of someone of a different economic class than my own, yet I have had many discussions with other women from different classes about how my class makes it so I could never understand them or what they have gone through. This issue has come up more than once in my own academic career, leading to me questioning why I should feel pressure to hide my own means in order to fit in, as well as why class is not discussed as an agent of pressure or means of presumed incompetence. Why does this still happen? My positionality still locates me at a disadvantage within our patriarchal world system and academic structures. I still must constantly watch my words and language to appear that I belong with those around me.

This mirrors some of the discussions that feminist scholars have in our own circles as well, as we place groups into specific categories. Language becomes a weapon and speech a means through which we judge who and what is different. We need to "see each person as a unique individual with his or her own talents and needs" within academia (Powell 2013, 55). Class needs to be discussed in a variety of ways amongst a diversity of people so we can begin to learn about each other and support one another throughout our academic experiences. Without doing so, we are still positioned as opposites to one another, instead of building an academic structure that can work for everyone. My middle-class

experience provides me with a different outlook on academia and is one that should not be diminished. Presumed incompetence also hinders my own experience in academia because I am still not of the upper-class-elite academics. Working and middle-class academics should be working together to address elitism in academia. Once we can begin to tear down these walls, conversations on breaking down other stereotypes surrounding the academy can begin. We need to fight to remove the belief that women, minorities, and those not of an elite class are unqualified within academic circles.

Women are already divided by a presumed incompetence, one that starts in our everyday world and then continues into the workplace. We are already pushed into specific boxes and told to adhere to those stereotypes placed upon us. Women “are always differentiated by race, class, age, education, religion, ethnicity, and urban/rural residence, all of which affect the nature and extent to which they are included in the national embrace” (Sinha 2004, 259). Scholars emphasize these identifying intersections of women are differentiated by the state, but we differentiate each other on a daily basis. Why? We often ignore how we participate in these modes of difference. Without understanding how all classes fit into these stereotypes of women in academia, there is a gap in understanding how academics push stereotypes. There needs to be more discussion about economic classes for feminist scholars to gain more understanding of standpoints, and how these play into our experiences. “Coming to a feminist consciousness” involves “the experience of coming to know the truth about oneself and one’s society” (Bartky 1975, 437). Our feminist and academic circles should not be placing someone into a specific box just because of their economic class background. We need to further break down stereotypes together.

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