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Boycotts, Birkenstocks, and Brunch: An Exploration of Class Solidarity and Wealth

Ariel Hasak-Lowy

A Boycott by Jewish Housewives

In the early 1900s, union density grew in many neighborhoods of New York City as the labor movement grew. In the Lower East Side many young Jewish women became organizers of their own garment shop floors out of a need for better working conditions. The union density in these neighborhoods led further exposure to everyone living in the community, whether or not they belonged to a union. Newspapers such as the *Jewish Daily Forward* targeted Jewish women through writing in Yiddish and sharing tales of socialism and trade union theory in order to bring these women into the labor struggle. Staple commodity prices and house costs grew, forcing everyone in these neighborhoods to work together to ensure access to affordable food and housing. Jewish women were the leaders of their houses, being the ones who interacted with the landlords and bought the grocery were the first ones to understand the impact of the rising prices.

In May of 1902, the price of kosher meat rose by fifty percent, proving to be completely unaffordable. With no other options, housewives called for a boycott of kosher meat. Thousands of women marched in the street, smashing shop windows and throwing meat lit on fire at police officers. The *New York Times* called the women rioters and a

‘dangerous class’ and seventy women were arrested.¹ Obviously, the public was starting to see these women as a threat, and the housewives were starting to see the power they held when organized together. Housewives patrolled butcher shops making sure no one broke the boycott and went to synagogues to share the importance of the boycott. By June, the price of kosher meat had dropped back to fourteen cents and the boycott ended.² This boycott proved to producers and shop owners that these housewives held immense power and understood they could enforce change when in solidarity with each other.

This powerful example of housewives organizing in the past help me imagine a future where we - students, workers, friends and families - build powerful lasting networks of solidarity. But, it currently feels far away from our current reality. The struggle for solidarity among workers has a long and powerful legacy. As we continue to work, labor, and spend money, the analysis the general public has connected to those actions has minimized. The unionized workforce has been cut in half in the last 40 years. Currently 11.6% of workers are unionized as opposed to

¹ Feldberg, Michael. "Jews in America: The Kosher Meat Boycott." *Jewish Virtual Library*. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-kosher-meat-boycott-of-1902>.

² Hyman, Paula E. "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: The New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902." *American Jewish History* 70, no. 1 (1980): 91-105.

27% in 1976.³ As labor organizing and unionization efforts have become less mainstream and successful, we have moved away from class politics and moved toward a focus on other identity politics.⁴ The practice of analyzing racial and gendered identity has become a central conversation and thought process for many including myself through mass media, social movements, and my educational process. But, as I spent more time around communities invested in the labor movement, I wondered why class consciousness has become detached from many current day solidarity efforts. In this paper, I will work to analyze the barriers and challenges that stand between our communities gaining a greater class consciousness.

In order to imagine a new future, adrienne marie brown suggests writing it into existence, truly understanding what you would put in place of our current systems and realities, the large and small scale changes. In my vision, inspired by adrienne marie brown, pleasure would become valued and accessible for all workers.⁵ Every job would allow for rest and relaxation to be enjoyed in order to sustain themselves and the work they do. Bridging the gap of what labor is valued and seen as important enough to deserve pleasure would require a redistribution of wealth. One

can only feel pleasure and relaxation if they know their basic needs are met. Some of the things they must have are: a safe and stable home to live in, healthy food to eat for them and their loved ones, clothing to meet the needs of their daily activities (durable shoes, clothes for winter and summer, etc), a reliable mode of transportation to and from work, accessible childcare and the ability to choose how to spend their pregnancy and post birth period. However, in order to reach that reality, lower class communities need to have a much higher income, while currently the only communities with an increase in their incomes are upper class communities. As wealthy communities gain more wealth, poorer communities don't, since 1980 the ratio between lower class and upper class incomes has risen 39%, with upper classes incomes currently 12.6 times higher than lower class average incomes.⁶ I want to analyze how I have been socialized to understand my class identity. How I have been trained to hold on to my attained and unearned wealth, while acquiring more. My imagination and questioning will work to encapsulate the systemic changes as well as the personal changes that stand before us. Because we must understand that we cannot disconnect our personal practices and actions from the larger vision of change.

Many scholars, organizers, and workers have worked to understand how to evaluate class consciousness. Rick Fantasia writes in *Cultures of Solidarity* about these

³ Heidi Shierholz "The number of workers represented by a union held steady in 2019, while union membership fell" *Economic Policy Institute*, January 22, 2020.

⁴ Roedl, Kendra (2020) "Speculations on Solidarity: From Fordism to the Gig Economy," *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

⁵ adrienne marie brown, *Getting Curious*, podcast audio, 2020.

⁶ Horowitz, et al., "Trends in income and wealth inequality" *Pew Research Center*, January 9, 2020.

conversations and queries.⁷ Sociologists have conducted survey after survey trying to understand the scale of class consciousness at a specific time. But, there are many flaws with this approach, understanding how workers think is only helpful to a certain extent. To approach this question more holistically Fantasia discusses the concept of praxis. While ideology is important, it only becomes truly actualized when linked to one's actions. Using this framework, we know that consciousness is made up of analyzing beliefs in connection to one's actions. Meaning, worker and class solidarity can only come from a collective's actions *and* beliefs working together. When this solidarity comes together as a collaboration between people, their thoughts and actions create a shared consciousness.

Currently, our society is deeply embedded by capitalism and neoliberalism. These systems have fully shaped the world of labor we are currently living in. The free market's race to attain as much wealth as possible has created a completely disconnected workforce. Internally, capitalism has taught us that our value only comes from how productive we are, with no consideration for the circumstances and obstacles we experience. Capitalism's focus on individual competition against each other informs how we build relationships. We have been socialized to see others as values that can be extracted and consumed. Being constantly surrounded by these values and lessons leads

⁷ Fantasia, Rick. *Cultures of solidarity: Consciousness, action, and contemporary American workers*. (Univ of California Press) 1989.

to a powerful fracture in our ability to connect with each other. In order to build any sort of interpersonal class solidarity, we have to work through any internalized understanding that the only way to gain more wealth is from the loss of others.

Externally, capitalism has created a labor structure where workers are treated as replaceable parts with the sole purpose of completing tasks for consumers. The consumer often never comes in contact with anyone who worked to create their desired product. This model is supported by on-demand purchases through our phones and computers on databases like Uber Eats and Amazon.⁸ New technology in stores to limit interaction such as self check-out at grocery stores or ordering your Starbucks order on an app, makes the consumer able to spend money and get their product without ever having to interact or speak to a worker at the store. This lack of interaction erases any need to confront your consumption patterns and the labor practices necessary to produce your desired products. It is easier for consumers to avoid thinking about the lives of workers and the conditions they exist within if no physical interaction ever happens. The disconnection between individuals in our daily lives makes potential solidarity and consciousness much farther away. Changing how we relate and act towards others when consuming and producing is a large task when we are so deeply surrounded by the spell of capitalism. But enacting these changes will lead to a new reality of connection and support.

⁸ Roedl, Kendra (2020)

Another powerful obstacle in the way of class solidarity is the norms of capitalism that motivate people to keep their financial matters secret and individual. Because capitalism is motivated by individualism and competition, we have been socialized to believe we succeed financially only when we work alone in order to accumulate as much wealth as possible. Sharing your struggles and further relying on others for support is seen as a weakness in the codes of capitalism. As a way to explore how we have been socialized to understand and reproduce this capitalistic ideology, I turned to my housemates to have a conversation about class and wealth. We sat around our dining room table on Saturday morning to eat bacon, challah french toast, and hash browns. I drew on my own experiences and observations as well as my study of labor and American culture to create three guiding questions:

How were you trained to understand your class identity?

How were you trained to hold on and/or acquire more wealth?

How were you trained to share, spread support financially or otherwise, and enact values of solidarity?

First, to situate you among the people in the conversation. The house is made up of four seniors at Macalester, a private liberal arts institution. Three of the people are white and one is Asian American and Costa Rican American. Three are cisgender women and one is a transgender man. Three of us are Jewish and one is Atheist/Christian. We vary from lower class to upper class. We were all

born in the US and each have one younger sister. I'll explain our conversation through presenting common themes that came up in our discussion.

Cultural Anxieties

One of the first things to come up was how our cultural backgrounds impact the way our families discuss and interact with wealth. Even if our families are solidly upper middle class now, the anxieties from past generations stick strongly. Moving to America as a poor immigrant (examples came from China and Holland), the wealth-based anxiety remains through the attainment of wealth. Growing up in Jewish families, the past trauma leads many families to hoard wealth, resources, food, in fear of economic collapse. It's challenging to acknowledge these actions as they are now attached to stereotypes about each community, but we acknowledge that these stereotypes are based in some truth. Being a part of an immigrant group that has experienced economic prosperity while many haven't presents real challenges that need to be addressed. Our communities have many conversations and changes to make in order to address the ways we can move past our racist and classist tendencies to support communities past our own. Many families feel accomplished enough to have gotten their family to the middle class, but this assimilation supports and buys into whiteness while leaving other communities in dramatically undersupported through the scarcity that capitalism creates.

Whiteness

We discussed how our whiteness impacts our proximity to wealth and privilege. Whiteness allows most families to collect wealth for many more generations than Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, who face systemic racism and barriers to building back up generational wealth. One person has been able to trace their family's history all the way back to their Polish family immigrating to America as European settlers moved westward, as in the genocide and erasure of many Indigenous communities and tribes. The privilege is apparent just in the ability to trace back records that far. Through those historical documents, it showed that they had been given land by the government to live and farm on. This experience as the beginning to a family's experience in America starts off a family with immense generational wealth that keeps a family economically stable in a way that Black and Brown communities do not have. So, even without looking at the income of families today, whiteness almost always provides some sort of generational wealth that situated white families as upper class due to their privilege within institutional and structural systems.

The structural privilege of whiteness also serves a barrier to solidarity between lower class white people and communities of color. In one family who is white and lower class, it seems harder for them to understand their responsibility to give reparations. It is a struggle for them to see themselves as part of the problem when they too struggle financially. People said that it seemed like a

pattern between lower middle class white people, that they struggled to understand how their racial privilege impacted their experience with wealth. Upper class communities have systematically and historically set up lower class white people to feel like they belong enough to a bourgeois class enough to feel connected more to their fellow white people (even if they are separated greatly in wealth) than their fellow lower class members, even if they hold different racial identities.

Conceptualizing Class through Childhood

One of the topics we spent the longest on was how our journey of understanding class happened through our childhood. We felt like there was a time at the beginning of our childhood where you thought that your lifestyle was normal and the same as everyone else's. When you are going to elementary school, you socialize freely with others, not focused on judging and labeling others based on any differences. But then, as you grow older and form more solid friend groups, they often are with people who are similar to you in some way or live by you, living in similar houses with fairly similar lifestyles. But it's also challenging as you grow up and start to compare yourself to others and try to understand where you stand, the class identity of your family might also be changing without you knowing. One person reflected on how her family got wealthier as they grew up. There were signs like they moved houses, started going out to dinner more, and she got

the Birkenstocks she always wanted (more on that later). But in a lot of ways they still acted similarly than they did before, because of the cultural anxieties mentioned earlier. But that change was less obvious at the time than it is now.

Many of our parents kept our financial standings secret from us. It was hard to understand if we were poor or rich, or what that even meant. One family didn't want to share with their children that they were struggling financially. They made chores like shopping at the Dollar Store and thrift stores a fun treat, masking those as class markers. However, while growing up in institutions like schools and afterschool programs, wealth was reflected back to them through daily events such as Free and Reduced Lunch and after school programs discussing scholarships with them. But parents wouldn't discuss or share their income for forms for school. This shame projected onto their wealth made it harder for them to form solidarity with others. And when their lower-class identity was acknowledged, the parents would turn to their high levels of education as a marker of wealth that other lower class families did not have. This family seemed to be relating to their wealth as "temporarily embarrassed millionaires", a lie that keeps lower-class people caught up in the myth of capitalism.

Someone else felt that they and most other people were middle-class. Especially because there were clearly richer people in their school, people who lived on the lake in mansions. But they started to realize recently that even their family was extremely wealthy in relation to greater

American society. Not realizing that growing up in a wealthy city, even the upper middle class families were immensely wealthy compared to most communities in the country. But, the lack of understanding makes one think that they aren't that different than others, or that this is an "average" lifestyle. When truly the wealth in communities like those are hoarding wealth in ways that must change if any sort of restructuring of labor and class is to exist. This redistribution is technically not a sacrifice, because you are giving up wealth that you did not earn, that was given to you at the expense of workers and communities whom you see as disposable and indispensable.

Markers of Wealth and Prejudices

Through the media and people around us, we all found that we desired things that seemed to be markers of wealth. A couple of us discussed Birkenstocks sandals as a desire of ours for many years. There were also the fancy grocery stores that we begged our parents to go to. Each person could think of a different thing that was a marker of wealth in their community. If you shopped at the co-op or not, if you have cable or not, and so on. As kids we were learning to distinguish differences in people's class identities. We also learned markers of being lower class. We all cited the experience of watching "Super Size Me" in Health class, a 2003 movie where a white man eats McDonalds exclusively for thirty days to show the negative impact of fast food on the body. There didn't seem to be many takeaways besides drilling classist prejudices into our head that people who ate

fast food didn't care about their body. No one led us in a discussion about why fast food was invented or why so many working families do not earn enough money to afford healthier options or have the time to prepare their own meals. Instead, we formed prejudices like these without fully knowing, and only were forced to interact with those when we entered new environments. Coming to college and entering a new community that has a new diversity of people than in previous communities led to new questions and thoughts about wealth. The communities most of us come from don't have much variation. We don't know what prejudices we are forming because they are uplifted and reinforced in the communities that teach us. Existing in these communities of homogeneity will do nothing to support working with others and building solidarity across different class identities.

Capitalism

This conversation among friends ended where most of ours do, wondering about the impact of capitalism on our lives. The dominant ideology of capitalism is so powerful and feels hard to break out of, especially on your own. It feels much easier to stray away from capitalist norms when you are doing so with others. We understand that all of our families have enough, we have always had a roof over our heads, food on the table, felt safe, and able to invest in luxuries from time to time, but all of us are still stressed and anxious about wealth. These anxieties make it much harder to feel comfortable sharing wealth, when we are taught the smartest

thing to do is hold onto all of it, while accumulating more. But we know that it feels easier when you're rebelling against capitalism with others. Our house works to follow a model of a cooperative. We buy household items together and share chores and labor around the house together. We try to distribute labor evenly, and split up expenses in a way that feels equitable based on what each person can contribute.

But we also discussed how it's hard to figure out solutions to supporting a change away from capitalism. This summer there was a lot of content that stemmed from the uprisings here in Minneapolis after George Floyd was murdered. Mass movements pushed forward ideas about redistributing wealth. It challenged all of us to grapple with how much wealth we have to give away. When we felt nervous if we were giving away too much we often knew it was still not enough. We knew that giving away twenty dollars here and there wasn't enough or sustainable to make large systemic change. But, we feel that if enough people across the country were invested in this that it would make an impact. We knew that it would also feel better to do when a large group of others were committed as well. We struggled to pinpoint the exact direction we wanted a revolution to follow. We knew nationalized socialism was a possible solution, but also knew that the national government might never be able to support full liberation. Anarchism could also serve as an answer, with enough small mutual aid networks working to support each other,

capitalism could be disempowered.⁹ We certainly didn't really know, but it felt like we knew a lot already, and it is exciting to think how we could move forward.

* * * *

Participating in this discussion with my housemates made me reflect back on the ideas of praxis. Having a conversation about wealth with others is in itself busting out of the codes capitalism enforces onto us and that we reproduce. These small practices of having conversations and sharing the labor in a home shift our collective praxis. Fantasia refers to Marx's reflection on how working cooperatively is a capitalistic rebellion all on its own,

“To Marx, that workers associat[ion] means that they create new bonds and links among themselves, that they come out of the isolation and loneliness imposed on them by capitalist society. . . .The association of workers in their meetings and groups is by itself a most revolutionary act, for it changes both reality and the workers themselves. This association creates other directedness and mutuality. . . .The act and process of association, by changing the worker and his world offers a glimpse into future society.”¹⁰

So coming out of this exploration, it is clear to me that one way forward is working to change any part of your daily action to align further with your values. These changes

will be easiest when working in partnership with others who see these values as important. These actions of solidarity and mutuality are a threat to capitalism. Which is why unionization efforts are deeply fought against by corporations, and greater pushes for socialism are often stopped by acts of violence by the government. These systems of oppressions continue because power holders enforce them, and many of us reproduce these systems in our daily lives through our practices. But it is clear that when we shift our practices and the way we build relationships, capitalism cannot remain as dominant in our collective lives. If we felt truly connected to our coworkers and valued the work we did, capitalism would be altered, our class consciousness would be changed.

Capitalism itself has created such distinct class identities, with the belief that these distinctions reflect the fact that whatever amount of wealth one has is directly linked to that person's productivity and value. Labor structures meld to support and upkeep these dramatic gaps in wealth and keep workers distanced from each other in order to prevent any sort of solidarity. If our society were to shift in order to show value and care for all work, our class system would inherently change with it. Capitalism would not exist if all work had value and all workers were cared for. I do not know exactly what systems would emerge and how redistribution of wealth and labor would happen, but I do believe that it is crucial to continue challenging themselves and others to work towards this future, focused on care and liberation for all.

⁹ Spade, Dean. *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during this Crisis (and the Next)*. Verso Books, 2020.

¹⁰ Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity*, 10.

adrienne marie brown writes in her book *Pleasure Activism* about the power of relationships and writes, “Liberated relationships are one of the ways we actually create abundant justice, the understanding that there is enough attention, care, resource, and connection for all of us to access belonging, to be in our dignity, and to be safe in community.”¹¹ When we work to build powerful relationships with others, and work together to change our daily practices, we can continue on our journey to build greater solidarity and consciousness. We can begin with questions like these:

How have I been socialized to understand my class identity? How do I enact my politics in my daily actions? What do I see when I imagine a future focused on liberation? How am I working with my community to build that future?

While there are infinite changes to make, and extremely large structural changes, I believe that personal and relational changes are vital in supporting the broader ideological and structural changes we are working towards. I find inspiration in the “radical gratitude spell by adrienne marie brown:

you are a miracle walking
i greet you with wonder
in a world which seeks to own
your joy and your imagination
you have chosen to be free,
every day, as a practice.

...

you are enough
your work is enough
you are needed
your work is sacred
you are here
and i am grateful¹²

¹¹ adrienne marie brown. *Pleasure activism: The politics of feeling good*. AK Press, 2019. 407.

¹² Radical Gratitude Spell. adrienne marie brown, *Pleasure Activism*, 2019. 405.