
Research Papers



A Study of Identity Crisis: Position of Foremen in the Class Structure

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Abstract

The central objective of this research paper is to study the identity crisis in a class comprising of foremen category of workers in Textile Mills in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. This research paper presents the problem under study within the Marxian framework. Karl Marx observes class in terms of the extent to which an individual or social group has control over the means of production. From his point of view, class is a group of people with a specific relationship to the means of production. The present paper attempts to find out the position of foremen in the class structure, as their class position is complex in one way or another.

They are controlling the laborers at the shop-floor as well as controlled by the management. The role of foremen in extracting surplus value is also unquestionable. Thus, they also seem to be rendering their service to protect the interests of the management. But, on the other hand, they are paid low and given a status, which is rather anomalous, because they neither identify themselves with the supervisors or with the laborers, but largely controlled by the management. So, they cannot claim themselves as equivalent with the supervisors on the one hand and would not like to be identified with laborers on the other hand. Thus their identity in the class structure is ambivalent from the Marxian perspective. The present paper attempts to prove it with the help of certain case studies and logical reasoning.

KEYWORDS: Foremen, Class, Identity, Marx, Weber

Introduction

Social class in its contemporary understanding was primarily defined by European

scholars. The concept emerged in the backdrop of Industrial Revolution which decayed the older mystiques of stratification by promoting the antagonism between rich and poor. This antagonism assumed shape in the term class. During the period of industrial revolution, stratification was discussed in terms of inequality rather than of opposing social classes. The word 'class' meaning economic and social position of groups of people is of recent origin. Its present day use dates from the mid 18th century. Its roots are from the Latin word *classis*, referring to the six orders the Romans were divided into for the purpose of taxation. In the course of time, the concept of class also fitted in with changes brought about by industrial society. It gained wide currency with early industrialization in the first half of the 19th century (Jeremy, 2005). In many areas of stratification, the definition of strata is likely to be different and more inclusive than that of class.

There are several ways in which class is

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understood in sociological literature. The usage of this term in different ways facilitates the emergence of various theoretical perspectives. Marshall (1996) argues that all forms of class analysis are rooted firmly in the sphere of production relations. Though the concept of class is a contested terrain, there is a widespread agreement as to what classes are in broad terms. Classes are considered as sets of structural positions. Breen and David (1995) are of the opinion that these structural positions are defined by social relationships within markets, especially within labour markets and firms. For them, the importance of class stems from its ability of linking individuals and households to the economic order of production. Richard Centers (1949) goes a step ahead and considers class as men's part of ego, a feeling on their part of belongingness to something. According to Karunanithi (1983), the term social class in its general sense means any division or portion of a population marked off from the rest by different criterion such as income, occupation, education, prestige and status. Mostly, class positions are allocated on the basis of occupational title, location within the organizational hierarchies of paid work, or some other such attributes pertaining to employment. All the above definitions of class would help us to understand the broader way in which class could be defined as well as opens up a starting point for class analysis.

Anomalous Status

Case studies about the position of foremen in relation to the position of supervisors and their relationship with the management and workers in the present paper developed under the Marxian framework would help to identify the anomalous position of the foremen. It also shows that the Marxian idea of production relations is better to locate their position as anomalous in the class structure rather than the Weberian one of market situation. But, it is noted that Weberian conception of class can be used to link the income and status of their position with class structure.

It is noted that the position of workers in mills is different from the position of foremen in it with reference to their class. The foremen as a class exercise control over the workers. In response to it, the workers show their respect to the foremen who are to them like the supervisors in terms of power in the shop-floor. Therefore, the workers do not normally identify themselves with the foremen within and outside the shop-floor. Another reason for this is that the foremen

obviously protect the interests of the management rather than safeguarding the interests of the workers. Moreover they move with the workers restrictively and also keep distance from them as they form a part of industrial bureaucracy.

The following case showcases the problems they face because of their ambiguous position in the class structure. A foreman says:

Case: I

We have to adjust ourselves with the management and workers. We don't know any thing about our class position. Sometimes we join with the shop-floor workers at times of strike. At the same time, we have to protect the interests of the management. In number of occasions, I have to quarrel with the workers in order to fulfill the wishes of the management.

It is noticed that one of the reasons for the separation of foremen from other shop-floor workers is that the former continue to demonstrate their power over later in the process of production. In this regard, they have to serve the interests of the management in terms of benefiting it by the way of extracting surplus value from the workers. From the Marxian point of conception, as the foremen serve the interests of the management, they may not get into the process of proletarianization and therefore cannot be considered workers. The following case shows how the foremen turn to be helpful to the management by extracting more work and thereby earning more profit to the management. However, their hidden interest is to sustain their survival by projecting themselves as management men in the production process.

Case II

I have to be meticulous in extracting more work from the shop-floor workers in order to benefit the management. If I do so, the management will recognize me; otherwise the supervisors put me in a critical situation to face unwanted consequences. Therefore, I have to satisfy the supervisors and the management by protecting their interests. If I do so, I will get recognition and promotion over a short period of time. Sometimes, I need to overtax the workers with extra work. While doing so, they would pick up quarrel with me. Though their arguments are based on justification, I would not yield to their pressure and deal with them sternly.

From the Weberian point of view, foremen form a separate class as they are vested with power in spite of their anomalous status and income more or less equal to the income of an experienced worker. It is therefore considered from the Marxian

point of view that the foremen fall under exploiting class irrespective of their position in the production relations. Presumably, they will move to the capitalist class over a period of time. On the contrary, from weberian point of view, they form a class based on their power in the production relations, which clearly distinguish them from the working class, which is numerically predominant in the production relations. But the reality is that the class of foremen is rather anomalous as it identifies with neither the supervisors nor the workers. They show their loyalty to the management, but they approach labor unions to get their problems solved in the production relations.

The following case represents the resentment of foremen over the management, as their remuneration is very low. They are also conscious of the lower status assigned to them by the management.

Case III

I am working sincerely for the benefits of management. Several times I had to enter into oral conflicts with the shop-floor workers to protect the interest of the management. The management promised me to give promotion and increment considering my sincerity. But, their promise still remains a dream. I am getting a low income, which is not sufficient to eke out my economic life. I am shouldering heavy workload with a hope of getting those benefits from the management.

The above case shows that the foremen need to protect the interests of the management for their survival. Though they work for the management to get more profit, their interests are largely emerged from their need for survival. But, the foremen are in one way or another exploited by the management by not giving them increment and promotion. They are on the one hand serving the interests of the capitalists within the social relations of production and on the other hand, they are exploited by the management.

The foremen would execute their work after taking directs from the supervisors. As for as the shop-floor is concerned, the workers have close access to the foremen, their immediate bosses. Therefore, they are afraid of them rather than the supervisors. Foremen deal with the workers meticulously and put them to work sincerely and carefully. But, unlike the supervisors, they do not have close access to the management. They have to approach the management through the supervisors. Hence they prefer to keep cordial relationship with

supervisors to discharge their functions with ease. In spite of this, they may not get due recognition from their management as the supervisors project themselves to the management as the sole responsible for discipline and work culture among the shop-floor workers. Many times, this results the workers to develop a strong feeling among them that supervisors put them in a disadvantaged position.

The following case of a foreman substantiates the above points.

Case IV

I am working under the supervision my senior in the factory. He is also aged more than me. I am in a position to satisfy him for my promotion. I occasionally speed up the shop-floor workers by using his name. However, supervisors have more respect and the workers fear about them. Some time, I had to obey the instructions of the supervisors in the process of production, though some of their instructions are not technologically sufficient. I too scare about the supervisors as they have more access to the management than that of us.

The ambivalence in the class location of foremen is strengthened as the class location of supervisors themselves is also under question. From the foremen's point of view, supervisors have more access to the management. But, this alone is not sufficient to consider supervisors as a class close to the management. According to the Marxian view of class, the fundamental class division is between the buyers and sellers of labor power. But, the foremen and supervisors cannot be classified by using this dictum of Marx as they are acting both as the buyers and sellers of labor power. They are buying the labor power of the workers by extracting work from them and at the same time selling their own labor to the management in the same process.

Though the foremen are the senior most workers, their participation in union activities is rather insignificant. The reason is that they want themselves to keep distance from the workers as they virtually form a class or occupational category apart. The association between unionization of foremen and their proletarianization is also studied to a certain extent. It is observed that their unionization may vary with type, size, and ownership of establishment. The association between unionization and proletarianization is not clear. The present study also analyzed the class location of foremen using their tendency of unionization. From the cases studied, it is observed that though the foremen are unionized in one way or

another, their activity inside the union is rather calm or neutral. They are not openly opposing the management and also not ready to be themselves away from the other manual workers at the shop-floor.

Among the cases interviewed, the following case explained more appropriate points, which are useful to analyze class location of foremen interns of their activity inside the union.

Case V

I am a member of a union since I joined as a mastery (foreman) in this factory. I have to pretend as an active member in the union to satisfy my co-workers in the shop-floor. But the reality is harsh in a way that I should not take part seriously in the union activities because the management would easily identify me as a rebel. Some foremen are also the members of other unions for name sake, but they continue to support the views of the management. Sometimes we need to openly oppose the views or demands of the workers mainly to show our support to the management.

Only a limited number of foremen have membership in the labour unions which is all along supporting the management. Moreover, in general they do not indulge in anti-management activities even in critical situations. Especially, they do not participate in strikes or agitations organized by unions against the management. They are always keen on safeguarding the interest of the management. Neither they openly support the demands of the workers nor do they sympathize with the workers for their problems in the shop-floor. They are therefore addressed by the workers as 'management men'. It is therefore, evident that even in the union activities they remain to be ambivalent and unorganized. However they continue to be the members of various unions mainly for their job protection at times of crisis.

It is also attempted to analyze the variations in the salaries of the foremen with regard to their control functions in the production process. It is observed that the management is not ready to recognize foremen as an operating unit in the control functions of capital. Rather, their importance if any in the control functions of capital is hidden and there by not allowing the foremen to feel themselves being an important unit in the process of production or close to the management.

The following case represents how the foremen are treated by the management as well as by the shop-floor workers.

Case VI

I am deprived of certain privileges that the supervisors could enjoy. The management is treating me as a machine, but I am a man with emotions and feelings. If I were close to the workers, they would not obey me. So, I always keep distance from them in the shop-floor as well as outside the factory. If I do not do so, I may not get respect from them. As my position lies between the management and workers, it does not assume any important place.

Thus it is evident that foremen do not identify themselves with the management or with the shop-floor workers. But, they have to represent their grievances to the management along with the shop-floor workers through labor welfare officer or unions.

It is also relevant to mention the interaction between the foremen and other employees of the mills. The foremen are normally the senior most workers of the mill. They supervise the workers during production process. The workers on the shop-floor are under the direct control of the foremen who are their immediate bosses. They are bestowed with the power of controlling the workers during work. Though, the foremen are below the supervisors in terms their rank, they perform most of the supervising work. They report all the work details of a shift and work related problems to the supervisors. The workers often approach the foremen for solving work related problems. Moreover, they directly deal with the workers during work hours. Hence the workers and the foremen have the chance to interact right from the beginning of a shift to its end.

The foremen are vested with more powers than that of the workers. For instance, the foremen can punish the workers whose performance is not up to their expectations. They also have the power of levying fines. On some occasions, they ask the workers to go on leave without salary if not performed up to the mark. In some cases, they consult with their higher authorities before going for such punishments. But in most of the time, the higher authorities permit the foremen to proceed with their decision. Sometimes, a biased foreman can project a worker as a hard and sincere one or as an idle and dishonest one to their super-ordinates like supervisors or managers. In a similar way, the foremen also report the activities of workers to the management through the supervisors. Thus, in one way or another, the foremen are vested with more powers than the shop-floor workers.

By and large, the workers also fear the

foremen. They want to be in the list of good workers of the foremen by showing their obedience outwardly. The foremen, on occasions, taking this to their advantage, exercise their power over the workers during working hours. They also use their power even outside the mills to get favours from the workers. For instance, they assign the workers with their domestic and related works during leisure time. The latter also oblige to attend to such works to get the favour of the foremen. Thus, though the foremen who are basically workers, but project themselves as a separate category distinct from the workers.

Thus the relationship between the workers and foremen is more oriented to works in the shop-floor than anything else and is normally a strained one. For instance, most of the workers opine that they do not have cordial relationship with their foremen. On the other hand, those workers who maintain cordial relationship with the foremen are in way or another meet the personal or domestic needs of their foremen to get their favour in work related matters. Thus the strained relationship between the workers and foremen also makes the latter to form a distinct group different from the workers. Especially

Conclusion

Foremen are considered as the agents of management. They help the management to implement its interests in the shop-floor. Thus, their interests are to serve the interests of the management in the social relations of production. Moreover, they help the management for surplus production by extracting work from the workers at shop-floor. In terms of their interest and nature of work, they are not the working class according to the Marxian conception. On the other hand, they are paid lower than that of supervisors and other managerial staff. Their occupational status is also lower than that of supervisors. Moreover, they are under the pressure of management to extract work from the workers. They have no decision making power like other managerial staff. Therefore, according to the Weberian conception of class, they are working class in terms of their income, status and power in the mills. It is thus concluded that the class position of foremen is anomalous. They are not polarized either to the capitalist or to the working class. From the case studies conducted, it is also observed that they are both the buyers and sellers of labor power. They can not align in any group despite their involvement in the activities of both the management and workers.

Thus the present study reveals that the

foremen neither identify themselves with the shop-floor workers nor with the supervisors and managers. Their reluctance to join with the workers on the one hand and inability in terms of income, power and occupational status to associate themselves with the supervisors on the other hand make their position ambiguous. Peter Armstrong (1983) in his study among the employees of a shoe factory in the Greater Manchester area found that the position of supervisors is ambiguous. In the present study, it is found that the condition of the foremen rather than the supervisors in the mills is same as the condition of supervisors studied by him.

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