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## Book Review: Classed Intersections: Spaces, Selves, Knowledges

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***Classed Intersections: Spaces, Selves, Knowledges.* 2010. Yvette Taylor, Ed,  
Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Surrey, England, 272 pp (Hard cover), \$60.**

Reviewed By Josephine Kiamba<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that we live in a classed society although how class is perceived or conceptualized differs from one society to another. Demographers and sociologists have looked at class from a socio-economic perspective where a population is classified as either lower, middle or upper class based on employment, income or material wealth. African countries by virtue of their contact with Western societies through colonial governments and missionaries inherited a class system that comprised of small educated elite, the middle class and the low class. However, these are narrow conceptions of class or social stratification. Class is much deeper and a whole lot of other factors come into play. But can we see class? An interesting perspective is given by Kuhn 1995(p98) as cited by McDermott (2010) in chapter 10 of the book under review, who states that, 'Class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your psyche, at the very core of your being.'

While it is not difficult to recognize the existence of class in any society, it is not something that people wish to discuss openly and there is a sense that many societies (except those with distinct class systems such as India) wish it away. In the UK, there is frequent reference to the working class and the middle class and the book under review presents numerous examples of the UK as a classed society meaning that class distinctions prevail.

However, there have been efforts (on the political front) in the UK and USA to declassify society, or make class invisible. In fact one wonders whether class distinctions are relevant in a country that wants to promote social justice and equity since class distinctions may only serve to marginalize certain groups.

The book 'Classed Intersections', edited by Yvette Taylor is a collection of works from academics and practitioners, many of whom are sociologists. They not only present an in-depth analysis of class but also illustrate its complexity. The book deviates from the dominant paradigms drawn from Marxist and Weberian theories and examines other dimensions (often ignored) that intersect with the standard class categories. New theories are being advanced that map class onto gender, generation, ethnicity, sexuality and disability, among other variables and in this way, class analysis is much more enriched.

There is recognition that class categories as we know and use them are flawed. On the other hand, even if some element of classlessness exists (at least superficially), this does not necessary mean a class-neutral society in the lived experiences. From interviews carried out by the authors in various settings, there is evidence to show that working class lived experiences are different from those of the middle class. It appears that other underlying factors intersect with traditional notions of the 'working class', be it family upbringing, or the culture, which serve to shape the individual's interests and values.

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Throughout the book, there is a constant reminder that class still matters that academics and researchers need to acknowledge social class in the analysis and understanding of people, cultures and sub-cultures within population groups. What is probably challenging, though not addressed in the book is the extent to which these new dimensions on class are widely accepted or used in disaggregation of data in research and population surveys. Most important is how or what methods can be used to help determine social class using these new dimensions.

Several authors bring interesting gender dimensions in the discussion on class which are useful in the gender equality debate and in gender studies. Also different in this book is the extensive coverage of sexuality and sex relations especially with regard to homosexuality and social class. In the African context, discussions and literature on lesbian and Gay lives is limited, partly because this sexual orientation is still a heavily contested subject. Even in the USA, where one expects greater acceptance and tolerance of other sexual orientations, there is a high level of anti gay bullying/attacks, and a surge in suicidal attempts and suicides among young gay people.

The authors support their arguments with empirical evidence from qualitative studies carried out in the UK. Throughout the book, there is emphasis on the working class in the literary debate and in the selection of case studies, but it would have helped to have more comparative evidence from the middle class.

The book is divided into three parts each interrogating different class intersections. Each section has four different articles which contribute to the section's overall class theme. In part 1, 'Class, the self and the space in-between', sets the tone of the book and lays out the basic fundamentals about class. Sue Parker, in chapter 1 examines class productions. She observes that class categories as we know them are flawed if used to analyze de-traditionalized societies. Traditional methods of class analysis were limited to looking at income, wealth and employment. This is true to a large extent and unfortunately, this view has not changed. As a result, there have been few studies that examine class from different dimensions.

In Chapter 2 Paul Wakeling writes about the 'working class academic', an interesting concept given that traditionally, we have never ascribed class to academics. Academics are generally viewed as an elite group and as such are nothing less than middle class or class neutral. However, the academic profession is no longer the preserve of a few, and academics are just part of the labor market (almost wage laborers) and indistinguishable from other employees. Working class, though the academic may seem, they still have a powerbase that the typical working class do not have, and the author states that knowledge is their powerbase. There may be no such thing as a working class academic but it is clear from the discussion in this chapter that class is not dead.

Chapter 3 and 4 are closely linked. Chapter 3 conflates ethnicity, gender, and social class. It discusses how class divisions may affect access to and experience of higher education by young women particularly from working class backgrounds, while chapter 4 explores similar issues but factors in the interactions between ethnicity and the Muslim faith, a dynamic that further complicates social class especially for those in UK and other Western Countries. An interesting observation is that the women saw themselves first and foremost as members of a faith group (Muslim) rather than the ethnic group, an illustration of the extent to which the Muslim faith is internalized and worked into class and culture.

Part 2, 'Mapping class: Location, distinction and belonging' is an in-depth analysis of the effects of a classed society, the stereotypes that have become reality for many, in terms of the classed spaces/ locations, the identities created and the identity crises experienced by those caught in between---a rather socially tight rope. In Chapter 5, the authors Gidley and Rooke show the effect of associating certain locations with certain classes, in this case the working class, or even the underclass. While class distinction is not openly verbalized, certain actions, labels, or terms used to characterize people or certain areas serve to distinguish and separate people.

Emma Clavering, in chapter 6 goes on to expose the experiences of the marginalized people and how they cope. Once again, the phenomenon of being caught in two spaces, 'betwixt and between' two social classes is explored by presenting the case of 'lone'/single mothers, and particularly those on state welfare who seem to be most vulnerable to marginalization. The chapter looks at the women's struggles in their effort to 'fit' in the areas in which they live. The presentation of a feminine perspective on classed lives not only adds to gender literature but to a greater understanding of class in modern day living.

In Chapter 7 Kirsteen Paton writes about 'making working class neighborhoods posh?'. She explores class from the context of gentrification and uses examples of towns/cities in the UK. By its nature gentrification does sift the high/middle class from the low class as economic ability is at the root of this change process. Gentrification is viewed as a way to control, maintain and sustain decent neighborhoods. However gentrification can further marginalize less powerful groups but this is not the focus of the chapter.

The larger debate is about where you live and its influence on identity construction. We know that where you live speaks volumes in terms of the socio economic status or class one belongs to and cities almost invariably are divided into distinguishable classed neighborhoods. Choice of residence is now a big thing in human settlement patterns and the middle class and the wealthy choose to stay far away from the poor or low class, something that may not auger well for proponents of mixed developments. The subject matter in this chapter ties well with the issues raised in chapter 5 and is relevant for sociologists, economists and geographers with an urban bias, urban/town planners and housing development practitioners.

Chapter 8 by Yvette Taylor is a further examination of location as an important identifier of class, but Taylor chooses to show how geography, sexuality and class intersect by focusing on gay and lesbian parents (as opposed to traditional families). The author suggests that 'non-normal' sexualities or same sex parents are marginalized, or do not fit comfortably in the average neighborhood but have the ability to generate their own associations and networks much more than traditional families. Gay and Lesbian individuals and families in the middle class fair better than those in the working class in their ability to generate social capital. Unfortunately it is the kind of social capital that seems to be incessantly used to reproduce privilege and inequality.

People locate and re-locate in search of 'friendly areas, with middle class parents enjoying the benefit of choice to a greater extent. The author shows that mixed middle class settings facilitate a sense of belonging, while working class neighborhoods on the other hand are still traditional and have homophobic attitudes.

In part 3 'Transformations and Intersections', the book continues to delve into sexuality, and expose the reader to the intricacies of same-sex relationships. Mark Casey in Chapter 9 shows the intersections between class, gender, and sexuality primarily but also race, and age, by examining gay travel and tourism. It is interesting to note that gay travel and tourism is gendered and racialised, with your typical gay tourist being male, young, professional and white. The text suggests that lesbian tourism is not visible and that women suffer both sexism and homophobia, thus limiting their mobility. This is quite some food for thought. There is some discussion of these aspects and some of the claims are somewhat substantiated in the chapter but some researchable topics also emerge. It is certainly an interesting subject for discussion in cultural tourism and leisure studies.

Elizabeth Mcdermott, in chapter 10, explores class and the making of the sexual self and particularly with regard to same sex relations and shows the difficulty of self identification for same sex relationships- the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) lives. In the UK, as in other Western societies, there is greater acceptance of same sex relations, and yet the young people identifying as gay, or lesbian still experience suicidal tendencies and attempts. Mcdermott argues that class influences have been largely ignored in looking at the mental and psychological effects of the sexual identification process. The author illustrates that middle class women fair better as they have the choice and self-determining reflexivity for reconstructing self as lesbian. For the reader, substantive issues are raised that should trigger further research.

In Chapter 11, Dana Wilson-Kovacs gives an everyday life perspective on class and sexual intimacy. This chapter, unlike the previous two that focused on gay and lesbian lives, examines sexual identities within heterosexual relationships. Sexual intimacy is not an easy subject to deal with as it is in the private sphere. Secondly, capturing class is not easy either, as individuals, as shown in this chapter, often make effort to conceal disreputable class origins. The chapter shows how individuals attribute certain tastes, behaviors and values to socio-economic positions and align themselves with people of similar behaviors or tastes. Despite the sensitivity of the subject, the author manages to illustrate the interconnections between heterosexuality, class and gender in the staging of intimate events.

The last chapter of the book is an analysis of the intersections between class and gender and specifically examines the interconnectedness between women's employment and motherhood. The notion of work and family is extensively covered in literature to the extent that popular belief has problematised women's (mothers') employment. In this chapter, Jo Armstrong, through extensive in-depth interviews with a select group of working class women found that women approached their work and motherhood with a 'matter-of-fact attitude'. For them the roles are intimately connected and more or less taken for granted, a phenomenon that is more so among working class women because they do not have the luxury (social, economic and cultural capital) to make alternative choices.

'Classed Intersections', is not your everyday sociological text on class studies and challenges conventional thinking on the subject. The topics are captivating and well researched. However, it is difficult to see what side of the argument many of the authors have taken. While the writers are all drawn from the UK, the book is relevant for those readers around the world interested in class studies. However, it is also not your typical

introductory text and is recommended as additional reading in the senior level of undergraduate or prescribed for post graduate work. The text is suitable for academics in sociology and its sub-disciplines, but is also relevant for any student of social science (economics, social work, political science, urban planning, and gender studies) engaged in class or gender analysis. The book challenges researchers and postgraduate students to explore classed intersections in other contexts.