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Social class

Social class can be approached in a variety of ways. Approaches inspired by Marx, Weber and Bourdieu (among others) attempt to explain social change and organization in a community of people with different cultural capital, occupations, life chances and relationships to the means of production. In light of ongoing debates about the concept of class it is important to note the influence of our own social context on the role of class as an analytic category in studies of the ancient world: the very debate about the relevance of class is part of class struggle. Cold War divisions associated the very idea of class with Stalinism and together with it rejected all forms of Marxism. Class also raises issues of self-worth and inequality, so discussion of it can be uncomfortable and acrimonious. It is thus convenient that class has increasingly been viewed as irrelevant despite (or because of) the consolidation of class power over the past two generations.¹ Perhaps as a result of these factors there has been little serious engagement with the concept of class in discussions of comedy.

Class expresses the relationship among competing social groups with opposed interests. While class struggle can be open (i.e. fighting in the streets), it often occurs at the level of ideas and values. It thus involves ideology, by which I refer to a type of representation aimed at validating and/or defending the values and social position of a particular group, while at the same time attempting to neutralize oppositional claims through denigration or incorporation.² Ideology embodies the interests of opposed classes, thus making for an unstable and complex set of representations. The

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¹ See Wright (2005) for different types of class analysis. Continued relevance of class: see e.g., Harvey (2004), (2005); Zizek (2000). As Hooks (2000) 1 notes, unlike race and gender, class has become an 'uncool subject'.

² See Gramsci (in Hoare and Smith (1971) 52–61 and *passim*); Jameson (1971) 380–85, (1981) 288–92; see further Rose (2006). The influential studies of Ehrenberg (1962) and Ste Croix (1972) are poor on issues of ideology.

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effect of the potential (re)combination of social values can support the status quo or reconfigure social hierarchy. Ideology aims but is not guaranteed to reproduce dominant values.

Athens had its share of class struggle. A wealthy minority controlled the majority of land – one of the primary means of production – and officials forswore its redistribution ([Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 56.2; cf. *Dem.* 24.149). Public funds were increasingly distributed through state pay and welfare, but the vast gulf separating rich from poor was contested.³ Although all citizens shared political equality – itself subject to intense class warfare among the traditional elite and the radical *dêmos* – it existed alongside pervasive economic inequality. This separation of legal/political rights from property relations and class differences was a central paradox. The dominant public response was to appropriate aristocratic values (e.g., ‘nobility of birth’), but there were complications.⁴ Some members of the elite supported the policies of the ‘radical’ democracy, thereby demonstrating that ideology was not defined by class identity alone. Some professional workers celebrated values of industry, labour and technical skill in direct contrast to elite views of labourers as failed men unsuited for citizenship. Non-agricultural labour was in fact a significant part of the economy: despite the importance of farming, one-third of the citizen population and up to half of the total population may have worked as craftsmen or merchants.⁵ Across a broad spectrum of society, elite ideology was dominant, but a set of values in varying intensity and in opposition to the idea of the ‘noble *dêmos*’ (i.e. fully assimilating aristocratic values) emerged without ultimately becoming hegemonic.

The audiences of Aristophanes and Menander

People came to the theatre with all kinds of ideological baggage. As a way to define more precisely comedy’s engagement with class, I discuss briefly the controversial subject of audience composition. As a self-aware genre conscious of its performative context, comedy often contained references to spectators’ roles and appeals to class interests. This was strategic, since the meaning and reception of drama ultimately resides in the spectators’ minds.

³ Ownership of land: FoxHall (2002), (2007); Osborne (1992); van Wees (2001); cf. Hanson (1995) 181–7; Morris (2000) 140–1. Class struggle in Athens: Rose (1999); Roselli (2007) 90–106.

⁴ Economic inequalities: Raaflaub (1996); *dêmos*’ appropriation of elite values: Donlan (1980) 113–53; Ober (1989) 259–70.

⁵ Discussion of labour and manufacturing: Harris (2002a); Mattingly and Salmon (2001); shape of the ancient economy: Bresson (2000), (2007), (2008); Davies (2007); Möller (2007).

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Despite the existence of ten official judges, spectators are generally recognized in Aristophanes as quasi-arbiters of dramatic competitions (e.g., *Birds* 440f., *Assembly Women* 1140–62). The overlapping of victory for the characters/chorus with victory for the performers in the competition (e.g., *Knights* 589–94), and the festive denouement with processions (*Frogs*, *Wealth*), feasts (*Assembly Women*), and weddings (*Birds*, *Peace*) were performative strategies designed to bridge the world of the play with the world of the festival. The effect was to jump-start the (anticipated) communal celebration of the performance's victory. Although there are wedding festivities in Menander, little attempt is made to enmesh the spectators in the performance. While Menander exhorts the audience to applaud and join in a prayer to Victory (e.g., *Dys.* 965–9, *Samia* 733–7), these formulaic exhortations are located exclusively at the end of plays: the victory coda functions like a curtain call. While there is much evidence for slaves, metics and foreigners as spectators, Aristophanes – unlike Menander – incorporates their presence into the performance (*Wasps* 78f.; *Peace* 45f.).⁶ Aristophanes also singles out spectators in terms of their profession (*Peace* 543–55; *Plut.* 406f.), and with the majority of metics (and many slaves) working in non-agricultural jobs these solicitations equally target non-citizens. Openly soliciting the interests of spectators – a challenging job in light of their changing tastes (*Knights* 516) – was an important part of the dramatic competition. But differences between Aristophanes and Menander suggest a gradual diminution of explicit concern for the spectators' role during the performance in light of changing historical conditions and tastes. Decreased interest in directly addressing spectators in terms of social class was likely connected with Menander's attention to ethical character.

When the audience is directly addressed, comedy generally refers to *male* spectators but suggestively speaks of 'everybody else' (e.g., *Assembly Women* 1144f., *Sam.* 733f.).⁷ The question of women in the audience has been subject to intense debate, but past scholarship has focused on the propriety of female attendance and evaluated dramatic performances in terms of civic or ritual functions. Since the evidence itself is somewhat inconclusive, much depends on how the question is framed. When viewed as a civic event, the theatre has no room for women; when viewed in terms of its ritual components, there is room for women.⁸ However, a singular focus on a

⁶ See Csapo and Slater (1995) 286–305; Spineto (2005) 277–92 for non-citizen spectators.

⁷ *Lys.* 1043–53 may include an address to women: see Henderson (1991b) 139f.

⁸ The debate starts in the Enlightenment: see Katz (1998). Drama as a civic event: Goldhill (1994); studies emphasizing ritual aspects: Henderson (1991b); Podlecki (1990); Sourvinou-Inwood (2003) 177–84. For a more 'holistic' approach see Schnurr-Redford (1995) 225–40; Spineto (2005) 292–315.

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ritual or a civic frame is problematic, as theatre incorporates different aspects of society simultaneously, and women's ritual roles were understood in terms of their 'quasi-political' dimension. Crucially, there is *no evidence* for prohibitions against women attending the theatre (as there were for some athletic competitions). Class matters much here: while elite ideals may have circumscribed outdoor activities of some wealthy women, many poor women regularly worked outside the home (e.g., in the *agora*).⁹ Attending performances would be another kind of public experience familiar to most poor women.

Much of the direct evidence for female spectators comes from Aristophanes and Plato – two slippery sources. While the same comic passages (e.g., *Peace* 965f., *Birds* 794f.) have been used to support both the presence and absence of women, it is perhaps best to note that Aristophanes sometimes makes an issue of women's presence/absence. His playful and casual engagement with the very idea of female spectators likely reflects an audience conscious that it had become a contested issue: Aristophanes' slippery treatment may result from the politicization of women's presence. For Plato's references to female spectators form part of a broader attack on Athens' radical democracy (e.g., *Grg.* 502d, *Resp.* 577c).¹⁰ His criticisms of degenerate audiences consisting of women, slaves and poor citizens use the presence of women as a sign of cultural collapse caused by radical democracy and lower class ('mob') rule. It is thus most probable that women were in the audience, but their presence was affected by spatial arrangements in theatres.

The size and layout of the theatre had a major impact on audience composition. Traditional estimates for the size of the auditorium (*theatron*) in the fifth-century Theatre of Dionysus posit around 17,000 spectators, but recent studies more plausibly suggest a capacity of about 8,000.¹¹ This represents an even smaller percentage of a population consisting of 40,000–60,000 citizens out of a total of 250,000–400,000 people, the majority of whom were slaves, poor farmers and labourers.¹² Since a fee was charged for a seat on the benches in the *theatron*, it likely affected the number of women and the poor in the official seating area. To be sure, some of the spectators were wealthy, but fees did not keep poor citizens away.¹³ There were

⁹ For women's ritual roles see e.g., Goff (2004); women's labour: Brock (1994).

¹⁰ See further Roselli (2007) 111–13.

¹¹ Traditional estimate: Moretti (1999–2000); revised estimate: Goette (2007).

¹² See Akrigg (2007) for demographic changes. Small number of wealthy families: Davies (1981) 9–37; Rhodes (1982); van Wees (2001).

¹³ Spectators mostly wealthy: Bowie (1998); Sommerstein (1997). For a more socially stratified audience see Rehm (2002) 50; Revermann (2006b); and Roselli (2011). Wealthy women in the *theatron*: Plut. *Phoc.* 19.2–3; cf. Pl. *Leg.* 658d.

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distributions of state funds to citizens for the purpose of attending dramatic festivals (i.e. *theôrika*), but the date of their introduction is contested. The current consensus favours a date around 350, but there is good evidence for ad hoc distributions starting earlier in the fifth century – perhaps even as early as the late 460s.¹⁴ While the existence of entrance fees could be circumvented through *theôrika*, these distributions did not guarantee a sizeable presence of poor citizens in the *theatron* for every festival but crucially left open the possibility that for any particular festival *theôrika* would be approved by the *dêmos*.

The presence of non-official and free viewing spaces could, however, guarantee the presence of the poor (citizens, metics and slaves) and (most probably) women. The construction of theatres in ancient Greece on the sides of hills created a natural viewing space above the *theatron*. Thus, the topography of many theatres would easily accommodate spectators on the hillside. One such viewing area located in Athens above the benches in the *theatron* was the so-called ‘view from the poplar’. Cratinus (fr. 372) mentions this location in perhaps what was a direct address to these spectators.¹⁵ From this spot metics, slaves and women, who were not eligible for *theôrika*, and poor citizens, who used *theôrika* for other purposes, could watch for free. With a total audience of about 15,000 (including both official and unofficial locations), the poor would likely have made up at least half of it, if not more. This is reflected in elite criticism of the lower class theatre ‘mob’. The idea of the poor and indiscriminate masses, to whom Aristophanes was believed to appeal (e.g., Plut. *Comp. Ar. et Men.* 853a), determining the outcome of a dramatic competition or a play’s content was anathema to conservative critics (e.g., Pl. *Leg.* 700c–701b).¹⁶

Changes in theatre spaces and in the requirements for citizenship in the fourth century altered this picture of the theatre audience. Wooden benches were replaced by stone seating, and the *theatron* in the Theater of Dionysus was extended right up to the Acropolis’ fortification walls. The new stone theatre held around 17,000 (paying) spectators and eliminated free viewing spaces; similar expansions took place in deme theatres (e.g., Thorikos). In addition to remapping the spectators’ space, political changes redefined the social class and ideology of the citizen body. While citizenship was extended to those born of two Athenian parents after 451/50, regardless of social class, the Macedonian-backed oligarchy in 322 limited citizenship to those

¹⁴ For fifth-century *theôrika* see Roselli (2009); Wilson (2011) 38–43. Cf. Rhodes (1993) 514; Ruschenbusch (1979).

¹⁵ See Scullion (1994) 55–7 for references to the ‘view from the poplar’; Goette (2007) offers a useful overview of the archaeology of the theatre in Athens.

¹⁶ See further Csapo (2000) 129–33.

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possessing at least 2,000 drachmas (in 317 it was lowered to 1,000 drachmas). As a result, more than 12,000 former citizens were driven out as ‘troublemakers and warmongers’, and the disenfranchised Athenians who remained suffered ‘hardship and disgrace’ (Diod. 18.18.4–5; Plut. *Phoc.* 28.4).¹⁷ Not only were there changes in the social structure, the rich likely got richer with an increased concentration of land in fewer hands. While theoric distributions were regularized by about 350, there is some evidence that entrance fees increased (Hyp. *Dem* 26; Philoch. *FGrHist* 328 F33); and in 322 *theōrika* were most likely abolished under the oligarchs. Attending performances may have become more difficult for the poor and perhaps women.¹⁸

There were broad shifts in the constitution of the audience. While restrictions on citizenship and mass emigrations of the poor physically reshaped the population, changes in popular taste, as reflected in the plays and in the archaeological record, demonstrate a waning interest in the overt politicization of comic performances and more sympathy for ethical issues.¹⁹ These changes affected the audience’s relationship with theatre in the later fourth century and suggest a reconfiguration of ideological divisions. In light of the elimination of free viewing spaces, the monetization of the audience and the diffusion of elite values, appealing to refined sensibilities became increasingly important (cf. *Ar. Eth. Nic.* 1128a25–7).²⁰

Social class in comedy

Comedy is keenly attuned to social stratification, and the genre – much like tragedy and satyr drama – had a productive role in elaborating class struggle.²¹ But comedy does not make an issue of all forms of exploitation. While the discourse of freedom and equality existed alongside widespread slavery, comic representations of class struggle focus more on differences among the free. However, this politicized version of social class is not static: in Aristophanes characters forthrightly address unequal economic conditions as a public/social problem, while in Menander a more circumscribed

¹⁷ Economic and political changes: Habicht (1997); Oliver (2007). Financial requirements for citizenship were likely abolished in 307, but there is no direct evidence.

¹⁸ Separate seating for some women is, however, suggested: Alexis’ *Gynaikokratia* (fr. 41); *Σ Assembly Women* 21. There is, again, no direct evidence for the abolition of *theōrika*.

¹⁹ Discussion of archaeological evidence: Green (1994) 76–88; Webster *et al.* (1995) 53–76. See Csapo (2000) on the changes in dominant comic styles.

²⁰ But Hellenistic comedy did preserve ‘popular’ (and thus ‘low’) performance traditions: Hunter (2002).

²¹ Discussion of class in tragedy: e.g., Griffith (1995); Rose (1992); Roselli (2007); in satyr drama: e.g., Griffith (2005a).

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representation of class struggle emerges in tandem with changing social conditions.

Working class heroes

Aristophanes' heroes are typically commoners exhibiting demotic rather than elite sympathies, and often set off a chain reaction which interrogates class relations.²² Dicaeopolis in *Acharnians* is a complex example combining concern over economic inequality with public policy. The disgruntled peasant borrows the costume of a beggar from one of Euripides' tragic heroes (Telephus) and with this as a disguise asks to speak about important public matters (notably against the war). Since the spectre of Telephus' poverty is reported to make the conditions of the poor seem bearable (Timocles fr. 6.9–11), Dicaeopolis' use of Telephus' rags may have found a sympathetic response (see *Ach.* 384). But as in the Euripidean model, Dicaeopolis' status and right to political participation is contested: the chorus and the general, Lamachus, question whether this beggar should be able to speak out (562, 593). While Dicaeopolis' lowly status compromises his social standing and thus presents one side of a debate in Athens concerning the right of the poor to participate in the governing of the city (e.g., Thuc. 8.65.3; Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.48), Dicaeopolis asserts that even a beggar is a useful citizen (595f.). This voice from below defends higher pay for lower-class rowers in the fleet (161f.) and critiques the high rates of state pay for elected office holders among the elite (e.g., Lamachus), while complaining that the hard-working poor have no access to such 'cushy' jobs (598–619). Dicaeopolis thus brings out some of the class issues associated with war, which is elsewhere portrayed as dividing the citizenry into rich and poor (e.g., *Assembly Women* 197; cf. *Knights* 912). What unites the community is exchange in the market. For the comic hero's yearning for the countryside, where there is no buying and selling but where all is produced of its own accord (33f.), takes material form in the money-based *agora* he sets up (e.g., 898f., 906, 957f.). The comic plan is realized in a 'market utopia' described in terms of the Golden Age (976), thus fulfilling the commoner's utopian desires.

The contested role of the lower classes in shaping economic and political policy reaches its apogee in comic representations of 'demagogues' or leaders of the radical *dêmos*. While there appears to be little political comedy in Menander, the *ad hominem* focus on political leaders was a defining trait

²² See Henderson (1990), (1993), (1998) on the vantage point of the commoner and the promotion of the *dêmos*' sovereignty.

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of Old Comedy.²³ Plays centred on individual demagogues (e.g., Cleon, Hyperbolus) stress their associations with the *agora* and its lower class ‘hucksters’ (e.g., *Knights* 128–45), while portraying their family origins as poor, servile and foreign. However, these leaders were Athenian citizens and were relatively wealthy. Insinuation of low birth and slave origins was strategic, as it suggests politicians were somehow no longer poor. This rise in social class could be attributed to graft and misuse of state funds (e.g., *Knights* 1218f.; *Plut.* 567f.); such charges were widely aired (e.g., *Lys.* 25–7).²⁴ As noted above, the threat of the consolidation of class power by elected officials, most of whom were drawn from wealthy families, was a concern for Dicaeopolis. Among the traditional elite, these charges underscored the unsuitability of demagogues to lead (cf. *Thuc.* 2.65).²⁵

These politicians were flashpoints of ideological struggle. Their portrayal as merchants and craftsmen united them with the perceived supporters of the radical democracy; some may have affected lower class traits to appeal to the urban poor. Paphlagon, a comic version of Cleon, is thus surrounded by leather-sellers, honey-sellers and cheese-sellers (*Knights* 852f.), and as their patron he ‘feeds’ the people (255f.) through prosecutions of the wealthy (326). Paphlagon’s/Cleon’s threats (913–26) to make his opponents liable for military expenses (e.g., trierarchs) suggest a recognized form of class warfare (cf. *Peace* 639) by redistributing private wealth to the community.²⁶ Hyperbolus is portrayed as part of a bread-seller’s family in Hermippus’ *Breadsellers* (see fr. 209), and his ‘low urban style’ of speech in comedy aligned him with the urban poor.²⁷ The lower classes become politicized with such men as leaders: an elite critic of Cleon is branded by the poor as a pro-Spartan tyrant for barring poor citizens from exercising the laws of the city (*Wasps* 463–70; cf. *Lys.* 620f.). Such responses from the poor in comedy may have appeared to the conservative elite as bitter parody (see *Ar. Rh.* 1408b24), since many of them opposed the political participation of lower class citizens.²⁸ While elite views on demagogues surface in their comic representation as ‘vulgar’ and ‘stupid’ sellers (especially in *Knights*), the murder of Hyperbolus and Cleophon for partisan reasons by oligarchs reflects

²³ Politics in Menander and New Comedy: Lape (2004); Major (1997); social class of demagogues: Connor (1971); Davies (1981) 38–87; Henderson (1990).

²⁴ Cleon was allegedly fined for taking bribes to lower tribute payments (*Σ Ach.* 5–8), thus diverting funds from the state: see Carawan (1990).

²⁵ See further Henderson (1990), (1998).

²⁶ With their public influence such men as Cleon would have been in a position to carry out these threats; see Gabrielsen (1994) 73–8 for the appointment of trierarchs.

²⁷ Linguistic portrayal of Hyperbolus: Platon’s *Hyperbolus* fr. 183. See Colvin (1999) 282, (2000) 290.

²⁸ E.g., *Pl. Leg.* 741a–42b; *Ar. Pol.* 1321a26–29; *Xen. Oec.* 4.3.

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more than feelings of alienation (Thuc. 8.73.3; *Lys.* 30.10–13). Nonetheless, the re-election of Cleon as general in the weeks following the performance of *Knights* and the *dêmos*' continued reliance on like-minded leaders attest to their valued role among the 'commoners' beyond the theatre (see Ps.-Xen. *Ath. Pol.* 2.19).

In terms of ideology, comedy is not univocal and thus does not endorse a singular set of values.²⁹ While these leaders are to be driven out of the city (*Peace* 1319), there is some recognition of their 'usefulness' (*Knights* 977–84). In *Knights* the demise of Paphlagon/Cleon and the swift rise to political power by a poor but clever merchant, Sausage-Seller, with the aid of the aristocratic knights provide a symbolic model of a merchant-as-politician who does not steal from the *dêmos* (1214–28). The idea of proles as politicians is celebrated, but there is some apprehension in the adoption of elite values by the working classes, for without Paphlagon/Cleon the city has no state pay, no law-courts and no youths in the *agora*. There are clear costs associated with endorsing elite values (e.g., *Knights* 579f.).³⁰ Little wonder the poor are portrayed in comedy as alarmed at the slightest sign of trouble from the elite.

The ease with which commoners can out-manoeuvre elite politicians is potentially appealing with its social levelling of commoner and elite. Comedy's erasure of social divisions suggests a misrecognition of class distinctions that could be liberating to many while nonetheless favourable to elite hegemony. Despite the dominant role of the elite in shaping values in the polis, there are signs that some were promoting a different conception of the role of (poor) workers: literary and archeological evidence points to the emergent self-promotion of citizens and metics as craftsmen (*banausoi*).³¹ While elite criticism of some politicians as 'working class' denigrated their economic policies and political style, such criticism in comedy could equally (perhaps more so in light of audience composition) be viewed as a satiric version of the complaints levelled at the radical *dêmos* (and its leaders) by the traditional elite (see *Peace* 184–8). By airing critical views of demagogues while appealing to supporters of the radical *dêmos*, comedy also engaged with changing perceptions about lower-class workers and their politicization. Contested ideas about social class and politics are useful tools when

²⁹ *Contra* e.g., Ehrenberg (1962); Lind (1990); Schareika (1978); Ste Croix (1972).

Henderson (1990), (1998) stresses the promotion of democratic values in Old Comedy but claims that the poets championed more traditional (i.e. less radical) leaders.

³⁰ See further Wohl (2002) 105–23; cf. Rosenbloom (2002), (2004) 332–9; Sommerstein (2000).

³¹ A detailed study of this phenomenon is a *desideratum*. For some discussion see Himmelmann (1994) 23–48; Kosmopoulou (2002); Osborne (2000); Vidale (2002).

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engaging in class struggle on the ideological plane – precisely where comedy intervened.

Representing class relations

‘Working class’ comic heroes are microcosms of class conflict, which can be expanded in terms of the contrasting conditions of rich and poor. In Aristophanes, the living conditions of the poor revolve around access to food, the price of commodities, meagre wages, decrepit lodgings, and concern over abuse by the wealthy (e.g., *Ach.* 792f.; *Wasps* 252f.; *Assembly Women* 422–6). The sweeping measures that are put forward as potential remedies elaborate the contentiousness of the economic status quo. Similar concerns over food and wages are found in Menander (e.g., *Dys.* 280–98; *Her.* 27–36), but poverty becomes a condition to be remedied by private solutions, notably marriage. The representation of class differences in Menander is further inflected by ethical concerns: according to the poor, it is best to minimize witnesses of one’s poverty by staying out of sight in the countryside (*Geôrgos* 77–81).

Various factors affect economic conditions. While the immigration of people from the countryside into the city at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War swelled the numbers of the poor (*Knights* 792f.; cf. Thuc. 2.14–17), impoverished conditions associated with farmers surface frequently in comedy. Market fluctuations caused the immiseration of some craftsmen and the enrichment of others (*Peace* 1158–264; cf. *Pl.* 823–958). Changes in the fortunes of different professionals led to jealousy (*Peace* 547), and mocking a craftsman’s business losses (1212) is understood as an attack on his social standing (i.e. *hybris*: 1229, 1264). More dire was the loss of civic status through debt – a real source of anxiety for the poor, who could be forced to work as debt-bondsmen (*Nub.* 240f.; Men. *Her.* 35f.).³² Changes to the political regime in Athens under Macedonian rule contributed to a reconfiguring of economic values. In addition to the many (professional) toadies and parasites (i.e. lackeys of the wealthy) in Menander, working class professionals are presented as dependent on the rich for employment.³³ A Thracian waiter hired by a wealthy family (see *Sam.* 289) is bitter about lost wages and displaces his economic frustrations onto a Phrygian slave (*Aspis* 232–45). Cooks are common characters, as they play an important role in the many feasts (often at weddings) sponsored by the rich. Their attention to

³² Debt-bondage: Harris (2002b). Economic conditions reflected in Aristophanes: Spielvögel (2001).

³³ See Krieter-Spiro (1997); Harvey (2000) 369–414. Nesselrath (1990) 280–330 discusses slaves and professionals in ‘Middle’ Comedy.

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business (*Dys.* 665; *Sam.* 287f.) could appear as overzealousness denigrated by their wealthy employers (*Men. fr.* 409). Comic portrayal of cooks as poor professionals is itself topical in New Comedy (*Adesp. fr.* 1093.222f.).

What the poor lack and perhaps desire is represented by the wealthy and a lifestyle associated with consumption and privilege. Entire plays were based on wealthy individuals. Callias, who inherited his riches, is mocked in passing by Aristophanes (e.g., *Birds* 284f., *Assembly Women* 810f.) but is the main topic in Eupolis' *Flatterers*, where he is satirized for his spendthrift ways. In Menander the wealthy are fictional characters who wear fancy cloaks, throw big parties, give huge dowries, and strikingly have no illness – in short, their life is just a 'nap' (*Phasma* 34–43). Such characteristics as long hair, purple robes, a love of horses, warm baths, symposia, golden jewelry, exotic pets, flute-girls, courtesans, attendance at *gymnasia*, education, and flamboyant tastes in food distinguish the wealthy from the multitude in comedy.³⁴ These traits also served as flashpoints of ideological struggle. For example, long hair could be symbolic of elite privilege (*Knights* 579f.), while indicating anti-democratic sentiment (*Lys.* 561–4; *Wasps* 463–70, cf. 1317). This coiffure was popular among aristocratic knights – *kaloikagathoi* ('fine and good/noble men') – envisioned as allied with the clever among the spectators and the Sausage-Seller (*Knights* 225–29). Siding with the ordinary Sausage-Seller against Paphlagon/Cleon in *Knights* is bundled together with the spectators' pleasurable affiliation with the (long-haired) elite and the clever.³⁵ Long hair was a contested selling point in the construction of the demotic desire to be elite.

While some of the elite fashioned themselves as *kaloikagathoi*, Aristophanes uses the term both as a description of social class (e.g., *Nub.* 797) and in jest (e.g., *Knights* 733f., *Nub.* 101).³⁶ Despite the occasionally more balanced treatment of aristocrats, Aristophanes generally ridicules wealthy men for their wastefulness (e.g., Leogoras, Morychus), effeminacy (e.g., Cleisthenes, Alcibiades), and mistresses (e.g., Philonides), among other things.³⁷ Even what appears as straightforward endorsement of the elite (e.g., *Frogs* 687–737) is tempered with a sting in the tail: nobility means knowing how to drink and fuck (740). Although sources of wealth vary in comedy (e.g., trade, agriculture, banking, commodity production, inheritance) in Aristophanes theft and graft receive more attention; in Menander the

³⁴ Cf. Fisher (2000) on the class-based contradictions in representations of drinking and eating in Old Comedy. *Mousikê* is another site of ideological struggle connected with a rise in professional performers and changing economics in the theatre (e.g., the portrayal of Euripides in *Frogs*); see further Csapo (2004).

³⁵ See further Wohl (2002) 108–10. ³⁶ See Dover (1974) 41–5; Heath (1987) 29f.

³⁷ For comic references to these individuals see Sommerstein (1996).

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wealthy are portrayed more sympathetically, particularly for their role in the community (see below). Descriptions of the wealthy embody both their exceptional social status and the contradictory desires and resentment of the poor.

Comic representations of social class differ in striking ways. The world-view of Menander's professionals is limited to their next job for the rich, but Aristophanes' merchants also reflect the emergent politicization of urban labourers ready to defend their rights and livelihood against the elite (e.g., *Women at the Thesmophoria* 445–58; *Wasps* 488–99). In Menander professionals are carefully differentiated: costumes identified them socially between elite and slave in terms of grotesque features, and linguistic portrayal distinguished working class from elite with a variety of subtle touches (Plut. *Mor.* 853c–e). In Aristophanes the levelling off of class differences among the citizenry made it easier to misrecognize the effects of class while contributing to a more egalitarian view, with poor workers testing the limits of this equality and participating in economic and political debates. The intensified legibility of social class in Menander's plays, performed in the changed political conditions of Hellenistic Greece, rendered a hierarchically stratified society more favourable to elite hegemony.³⁸

Addressing economic inequality

Attempts to remedy unequal economic relations are generally divided between public and private measures with some ideas taking an explicitly utopian turn. In Aristophanes' *Wealth* the plight of the poor is resolved by mass enrichment. The plan is to restore the eyesight of the blind god, Wealth, so that he can shun the wicked and enrich the good. The play describes in detail the horrors of poverty (e.g., 535–47) and the contradictions between political rights and the unequal distribution of wealth (e.g., 28–31, 489–96). One questionable objection to the plan (made by Poverty herself) is that craftsmen and farmers would cease to work if they were wealthy (511–14, 525f.). Poverty's hair-splitting between the relative poverty of the 'poor' (*penêtes*) and 'beggars' (*ptôchoi*) may have been ideologically useful in obscuring social conditions by differentiating the two groups (548–56), but Chremylus has no truck with this.³⁹ This 'moderate' citizen (245) is unwilling to accept a subordinate economic position in a city where one's life chances are determined by money. The play's successful

³⁸ See Csapo (2002) 142–7 for comic characters' language and costume; cf. Krieter-Spiro (1997) on Menander's linguistic portrayal. Despite Aristophanes' social levelling, attention to 'barbarian' ethnicity is common; see Hall (2006) 225–54.

³⁹ Distinctions and similarities between 'beggars' and the 'poor': Rosivach 1991.

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utopian scheme is connected with Golden Age fantasies and the eradication of class differences.⁴⁰

In *Assembly Women* a similarly radical idea resolves economic inequality. The equal distribution of all resources – in brief, communism (590–610) – is achieved by women posing as citizen males and taking control of the city. Although there are objections to the women’s utopian plans (746–1111), as in the case of *Wealth*, these are not straightforward condemnations; in fact, one character accepts that communism is now the law (759) and notes that others are compliant (805).⁴¹ Many scholarly discussions, based on *a priori* assumptions about the poet’s conservative views, have dismissed these utopian desires as impractical and viewed Aristophanes as ridiculing such schemes.⁴² Surely it is important to note both support for and opposition to economic reforms built into these plays. Opposed views not only appeal to spectators/groups with competing interests; the articulation of economic equality from within a culture dominated by elite values unavoidably bears the marks of the struggle between dominant and oppositional ideologies.

State pay was another contentious issue in the debate over redistribution of public funds. Pay for service in the courts (*dikastikon*) began at a moment of intense factional strife around 460 at one or two obols and was increased to three obols by Cleon around 425. This would have constituted a subsistence wage for a small family.⁴³ Assembly pay was introduced after 403 at one obol and was quickly raised to three obols – again by demagogues. These forms of state pay were perceived to encourage political participation among the urban poor, and as a result they were bitterly opposed by the traditional elite (e.g., Thuc. 8.65.3; *Ath. Pol.* 29.5). Comedy in turn elaborates these competing views in its treatment of state payments. Some citizens are happy with Assembly pay, as it is equivalent to a bushel of wheat (*Assembly Women* 547f.). A more ambivalent spin connects increases in the *dikastikon* with demands by the urban poor (see *Knights* 797f.), who are described as using the courts to redistribute private wealth to the *dēmos* (*Wasps* 549–53, 626f.). More direct criticisms are also raised: those lowly ‘wage earners’ (*Assembly Women* 310) who collect Assembly pay should be killed (185f.),

⁴⁰ See DuBois (2006); Ruffell (2000); and Ruffell, Chapter 10 on ancient utopias.

⁴¹ See further Ruffell (2006) 83–4, 93–8.

⁴² For *Wealth* see e.g., Bowie (1993) 268–91; Konstan (1995) 75–90; McGlew (1997); Olson (1990); for *Assembly Women* see e.g., Foley (1982); Saïd (1979). Cf. Sommerstein (1984) for changes in the poet’s outlook in the late plays. For more nuanced views see Ruffell (2006); Tordoff (2007).

⁴³ Increase in *dikastikon*: Σ *Wasps* 88a, 300b; cf. *Ach.* 657. *Dikastikon* as a living wage: Markle (1985). Since the courts did not meet everyday, these funds were not always available.

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and urban workers now so eager to participate and collect their pay are denigrated.

Comic treatment of the democratic court system in *Wasps* is equally ambivalent. According to the conservative Bdelycleon, most of the state funds are stolen by elite politicians (*Wasps* 655–64, 691f.), hence the low level of remuneration for jurors. With service in the courts viewed as a form of slavery (682) and wage labour (712), Bdelycleon's solution is to institute a private court in his house for his father, Philocleon. State pay is replaced by private pay, as the chorus of poor jurors willingly withdraws from the public courts (726, 887f.). But this is not a simple condemnation of the democratic court system:⁴⁴ in the new private court Philocleon is easily – and obviously – deceived (992) into voting against the interests of the poor (909; cf. 917) and acquits the more conservative defendant supported by Bdelycleon. While both court systems are mocked, replacing the democratic court with a form of private, even familial, patronage appears problematic. Ambivalence in the comic representation of state pay and the courts is an attention-grabbing effect of the articulation of dominant and oppositional views. Social divisions are expressed through parody and criticism, while a case is made for redistributing state funds to the benefit of the poor (e.g., 304f., 605–18).

The use of gender to express economic inequality in *Assembly Women* raises additional issues. On account of the women's pale complexions, when disguised as male citizens they appear as shoe-makers (385), whose work inside limits their exposure to the sun. This detail dovetails with the perceived support of urban professionals (as a collective) for more radical economic measures (cf. 277f., 432). Despite the humour involved with cross-dressed women, the image of 'feminine' (male) citizens also overlaps with the representation of workers in conservative texts as worthless and unmanly (i.e. as women: Xen. *Oec.* 4.2–3); some wealthy men in fact refrained from speaking in the Assembly, since it was hijacked by urban workers (Xen. *Mem.* 3.7.6). To the conservative elite, political conditions depicted in the play may have reflected the dangers of radical democracy, but these 'women on top' humorously, and less threateningly, displace the spectre of the politicized urban *dêmos*.⁴⁵ The enactment of communism by *women* lacking political rights nevertheless tackles the paradox of political equality alongside economic inequality.

⁴⁴ Olson (1996); cf. Ste Croix (1972) 362; Konstan (1995) 15–28.

⁴⁵ See Konstan (1995) 56 for a different kind of displacement from class to gender in *Lysistrata*. The idea of 'women on top' was later used to articulate discontent with distributions of power in Early Modern Europe: see Davis (1975).

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Gender and class also overlap in the representation of female merchants, who articulate the concerns of the urban poor and the sentiments of the radical democracy.⁴⁶ A widowed Garland-Seller complains about poor market conditions: she cannot feed her children, and as she needs to make money she cannot participate in festivals (*Women at the Thesmophoria* 445–58). In *Wasps*, after Bdelycleon's disastrous attempt to educate Philocleon in the art of proper sympotic behaviour, Philocleon attacks a female bread-seller (1388–98). The *nouveau riche's* (1309) abusive treatment of the merchant is countered by her reliance on the rule of law to protect her: she summons him to appear before the market-controllers (*agoranomoi*) with Chaerephon as her witness (1406f.). This mixing of class with gender portrays the considerable role of women in the economy while also allowing for the expression of class antagonism by a politicized collective, albeit one represented by those possessing only a quasi-political status.

In contrast with Aristophanes, the possibility of modifying economic conditions is more circumscribed in Menander. Personal assistance is one way to redistribute resources. The contingent nature of wealth as a gift of fortune forms part of an argument for the rich to distribute their wealth (*Dys.* 799–812): it is to be used generously to help the poor, since one may need a favour from others in the future. While self-interested charity may serve to unite rich and poor or suggest a view of wealth based on equal opportunity through fate, it is difficult not to discern the patronage of the extremely wealthy.⁴⁷ Whereas greed and a disregard for family in pursuit of wealth is ridiculed (e.g., Smikrines in *Aspis*), the rich can manifest their good character by giving away some of their wealth (*Dys.* 800) – not by altering (unequal) economic conditions. Liturgies function in a similar fashion. As a kind of 'taxation' on the rich to fund public projects, liturgies bolster the elite's repute in Menander (e.g., *Samia* 13f.); in Aristophanes, however, a view from below stresses the cheapness of liturgists (e.g., *Ach.* 1150; cf. Antiphanes fr. 202). Crucially, liturgies did not directly address the conditions of the poor but did provide an arena for the production of cultural capital benefiting the elite. Discussion of the 'good' uses of wealth in Menander, even with the expectation among the poor that the wealthy 'look down' at them (e.g., *Dys.* 286), situates social class within an ethical frame that obscures a more politicized view of poverty.

In the absence of ideas (utopian or otherwise) to change the face of society to benefit the poor, relations with wealthy families appear as a partial

⁴⁶ See Henderson (1987a) 121f., (2000) 140–3.

⁴⁷ Cf. Lape (2004) 129–33; see also Wiles (1984); Hoffmann (1998). Casson (1976) argues that Menander represented the 'millionaires' of his day.

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solution in Menander. Since many of his plays involve aspects of mistaken identity, recognition of citizen status, and ultimately marriage with the bestowal of a large dowry, the (apparently) low social status of some women and men can be corrected in the course of a play. There are indications that certain differences in social class were seen as unwelcome in a marriage (e.g., *Peir.* 710), and not all unequal unions succeed (*Plokion* fr. 297). But when plots of misrecognized social/civic status do succeed, the mistaken identity of female characters plays a central role.⁴⁸ Since natural merit and virtue (and fate!) rescue these individual women from the underclass, the narrative suggests a potentially progressive spin with a lower class character's rise from rags to riches. But many of these women are *restored* to their rightful status: they were misrecognized elite/citizens all along. This detail undercuts the potential subversion of dominant values, for the special value of (apparently) lower class *individuals* is separated from the taint of their (mistaken) social class. This narrative of misrecognized identity, modelled on Euripidean tragedy (e.g., *Ion*), reinforces differences in social class (e.g., *Men at Arbitration* 320–33) unlike the appropriation of Euripides' *Telephus* in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* for the purpose of contesting class distinctions.

Whereas Menander's wedding participants are generally restored to elite status, the numerous urban professionals are not. Their financial problems are resolved through more work. Marriage feasts celebrated by wealthy families were big business (see *Methê* fr. 218) and provided a consistent source of income for cooks and their attendants (e.g., *Aspis* 223f.). In this regard, the wealthy served a valuable economic role in the polis. In contrast with Aristophanes, lower class workers in Menander are less outspoken about the connections between political and social conditions (see *Dys.* 482f.). When a commoner complains that the wealthy should be concerned about the price of wheat for the sake of the poor, it is worth noting that he asks for pardon in expressing his feelings (*Phasma* 26–43). In Menander, inequalities based on social class are addressed through personal interactions with the wealthy, and results do vary.

Menander's emphasis on ethical character, while ultimately supporting elite ideology, nonetheless suggests a certain equality that elides class differences. When the wealthy Sostratus attempts to win a girl's hand in marriage by *pretending* to be a poor farmer (*Dys.* 368–92), the real peasant claims that this act reveals Sostratus' true nature: although rich he was still willing to lower himself to the level of the poor (767f.). The scene hints at a

⁴⁸ See Traill (2008) on women's social status. Not all brides come from wealthy families (e.g., Philoumene in *The Sicyonians*), but they generally become wealthy through marriage. See Lape (2004) for marriage as a means to reproduce democratic values.

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broader, more egalitarian, conception of character defined by one's nature. But it is notably a rich man who is praised by a peasant, and external signs of class still validate the idea of wealth as something deserved (775).⁴⁹ As in the case of mistaken identity plots, references to a poor man's 'nobility' differentiate him from his social class (e.g., *Dys.* 723; cf. *Samia* 141f.). Such poor men (and women) either are revealed to be elite by birth or support elite values, and this diffusion of aristocratic ideology throughout society mystifies unequal economic relations.⁵⁰ In another case, a slave raising an exposed child of noble parentage fears that if the child is raised by working folk, he will feel disdain and after realizing his true nature undertake noble actions (*Men at Arbitration* 320–5). Ultimately, the child is rescued from slavery (see 468f.) and reunited with his 'true' social class/parents. A 'noble' character can be had by all, but only certain slaves and peasants are destined to have their 'true' class and citizen status revealed.

The plight of the majority of slaves remains an extreme model of class exploitation, which comedy was less interested in exploring. While poor citizens are imagined as free from labour in Aristophanes' utopian schemes, slaves are still needed physically to work and ideologically to support divisions between slave and free (*Plut.* 517f., *Assembly Women* 652; cf. *Crates Animals* fr. 16).⁵¹ Slaves are also employed in the explanation and organization (particularly in Menander) of the comic plot (e.g., *Wasps*; *Aspis*). Despite their physical presence and identifiable stage business, slaves are often silent, as in the beginning of *Peace* (see 656f.); at times they are only signalled by rebukes from their masters (e.g., *Peace* 256; *Samia* 104f.). Although manumission (*Men at Arbitration* 538–48) and naturalization as citizens (*Frogs* 693f.) were possible for a tiny percentage of slaves, nearly all remained objects with no rights over themselves or their children (e.g., *Plut.* 6f.; *Men at Arbitration* 1072f.) – a fact reflected in comedy's frequent jokes about abusing and beating slaves (see *Peace* 742–7). In *Frogs* the potential challenges to the notion of slavery through the exchanging of costumes and social identities between Xanthias and his master, Dionysus, are limited by reference to the anomalous enfranchisement of slaves who fought at Arginusae (33f., cf. 190–3) and perhaps contained by the slaves' acceptance of servitude (743–55, 813). Some slaves even appear docile and trustworthy

⁴⁹ See Rosivach (2001); cf. Lape (2004) especially 121–9. See further Hofmeister (1997); Konstan (1995) especially 96–106; Masaracchia (1981).

⁵⁰ The disinterest in differentiating spectators by social class in Menander (see above) exhibits similar ideological effects as this interest in ethical character.

⁵¹ Slaves in comedy: see e.g., Dover (1972) 204–8; DuBois (2003) 117–30 and *passim*; Hall (2006) 231–41; Olson (1989); Wiles (1991) *passim*; for a rosier picture of slavery: Krieter-Spiro (1997); Sommerstein (2009) 136–54.

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(e.g., Sosias and Xanthias in *Wasps*): these ‘good’ slaves support an idealized view of slavery from the perspective of slave-owners.

In terms of class struggle, refusal to understand commands, work slow-downs and escape (where possible) were options, but slaves’ fundamental lack of position in the polis prevented them from challenging the effects of class domination in the political realm.⁵² Comedy’s representation of class struggle appears more concerned with the overlapping of economics and politics, where the poor become a political entity and encounter resistance in Aristophanes or where elite values foreclose oppositional ideologies in Menander. There is little recognition of the paradox of slavery, which is legitimized rather than critiqued. The varying degrees to which the dominant ideology was challenged and interrupted determined the ways in which class struggle played out before comic audiences.

Further reading

For a brief, historical overview of the concept of class see Day (2001); its moral significance is explored in Sayer (2005). The complex meanings of the concept of ideology are helpfully parsed in Eagleton (2007), but Williams (1977) remains helpful. Economic conditions in Athens (and beyond) are surveyed in a number of the essays in Scheidel *et al.* (2007) and in Bresson (2007), (2008); changes in society and culture in the fifth and fourth centuries are discussed in the essays in Osborne (2007). In terms of the theatre audience, the brief overview in Csapo and Slater (1995) remains useful, but see the comprehensive study in Roselli (2011). While there has been little serious engagement with class struggle in general, valuable orientation can be found in Konstan (1994), Rose (1992), Ste Croix (1981), and Vernant (1980). Lape (2004) and Traill (2008) provide useful discussion of the connections between social and political issues in Menander, while Akrigg and Tordoff (2013) focus on the figure of the slave in comedy. In most respects, however, the study of Greek comedy and class remains to be written.

⁵² In Classical Athens we hear from one real slave working in a foundry, Lesis, who requests that a better form of slave labour be found for him: see Harris (2006) 271–9. The more than 20,000 slaves who escaped servitude during the Peloponnesian War (Thuc. 7.27.5) made no political claims, but the threat of slave revolts remained a concern: Cartledge (1985).