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## Towards a Theory of Poverty: Rethinking »Race, Gender, Class« in (American) Cultural Studies

- Gavin Jones, *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2008. XVI, 228 S. [Preis: EUR 36,99]. ISBN: 978-0-691-12753-8.

### 1. Context: »Class«

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the field of literary and cultural studies has turned to a re-examination of the category of »class«. Cora Kaplan's January 2000 special issue of *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)* on *Rereading Class* and bell hooks's stocktaking *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000) were only the first contributions to a debate that has accelerated considerably over the past three to four years. The German American Studies Association's 2010 conference theme of »American Economies«, a conference on »Transformations: Theorizing Race & Class in the 21st Century« held at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies in June of this year, and a forthcoming special issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies* entitled *Beyond the Culturalization of Class* testify to the currency of »class« in the German academic context, too. The interest in the category of »class« gathered full momentum – on this as well as on the other side of the Atlantic – in the wake of two signal events: first, the publication of Walter Benn Michaels's polemic attack on the academic left's embrace of identity politics in *The Trouble With Diversity* in 2006, and second, the global economic crisis beginning to unfold in the fall of 2008. In his study *American Hungers*, Gavin Jones answers – timely, nuancedly, and in pathbreaking ways – to the challenges that both Michaels's theoretical argument and economic reality pose to literary scholars committed to a progressive political agenda.

Michaels's polemic targets the way in which cultural studies has conceptualized class as a cultural category, or as a question of identity. He argues that by viewing class as equivalent to race, and thus as a social construction, and by asserting that class membership is determined by which social class a person identifies with, left academics »accomplish[...] the magical trick of redistributing wealth without actually transferring any money« (197) and thus successfully protect their upper middle-class economic privileges. To correct this analytic myopia, and to right its social consequences, Michaels calls on cultural studies scholars – as well as on politicians and society at large – to focus on material inequality in American life and to stop focusing on cultural diversity and questions of identity. Michaels's unabashed iconoclasm and his obvious relish in the intellectual brilliance of his own argument has led many scholars to dismiss his intervention as »a profusion of cynicism incompatible with any serious political agenda«, as Alan Wolfe wrote, and to refuse engaging with Michaels's argument altogether. Gavin Jones, instead, is in dialogue with Michaels – footnoting Michaels's more academic forerunner to his popular polemic, *The Shape of the Signifier* (2004) – when he observes that »An overwhelming interest in oppressed subject positions has tended to evade the problem of economic inequality by centering social marginalization on the cultural identity of the marginalized« (7). Yet, where Michaels is sweeping, Jones is meticulous; where Michaels projects monolithic positions in academia and politics, Jones differentiates; and where Michaels's possibly earnest call for rethinking left politics becomes submerged in self-serving diabolical wit, Jones calmly rethinks. *American Hungers* constitutes a complex response to

the questions that Michaels never answers: How do we as literary and cultural critics proceed if we do take seriously the insight that class is not equivalent to culturally and socially constructed identities? How does this insight change the way we theorize the category of class?

Jones refocuses our thinking about class in a simple but very effective way: he makes poverty – and not class – his »organizing frame of inquiry« (149). In doing so, he pinpoints that which is the problem of the classed society and disallows its circumvention: the problem is not that there are different classes, but that the classed society produces deprivation and suffering. By recognizing poverty as more central than class, Jones simultaneously addresses the most urgent problem societies are facing during the ongoing economic crisis and offers ways of understanding it through discourse.

## **2. Theory: »Poverty«**

Jones defines poverty as »socioeconomic suffering«. Socioeconomic suffering, he states, »gets at the peculiar dialectics of poverty as a category – its position between material and nonmaterial, objective and subjective criteria« (3). However, he is not content with simply and vaguely posing, as cultural studies parlance would readily allow him to do, that poverty is located »at the intersection« of the material and non-material. Jones instead truly treats poverty in its material and non-material aspects as »dialectical« – not only in his theoretical introductory chapter, but also consistently so in his ensuing close readings. The way in which he elucidates the relationship between the planes of the material and non-material, between the objective and measurable and the subjective and non-measurable is what is most innovative in his theorizing. To do justice to this dialectics – and hence to the complexity of poverty – is what will prove to be most challenging for scholars who apply Jones's category of poverty in their analyses of texts.

Viewing poverty as *socioeconomic* suffering, Jones argues, makes poverty a »primarily material and economic« state of lack that is structured by social power, and that »is physical at its extreme, returning ultimately to the body as the site that bears the marks, the damage, of being poor«. As such, poverty becomes measurable and objective; it becomes a state of being circumscribed by the lack of nourishment and shelter, and by common numerical thresholds such as relative and absolute poverty lines. Yet, if poverty is thus marked on the body, it is »always as much subjective as it is objective«. It is in the material, physical body of the poor individual where the »materiality of need [...] opens into the nonmaterial areas of psychology, emotion, and culture« (3). Jones's analyses always start out with looking at material and physical foundations of suffering and then turn to the social and cultural contexts as well as the emotions that always shape the specific experience of suffering. He focuses on disentangling the material and nonmaterial, and at the same time pays attention to the ways in which the material and nonmaterial collapse, or do not collapse, to the ways, that is, in which the material and nonmaterial sharpen or alleviate the individual's experience of suffering.

Jones's firm grounding of the category of poverty in the dialectics of the material and non-material, of the economic and the cultural, bring the following return: first, it allows for analyses of »classed« states of being that neither simply ignore culture and identity (as Walter Benn Michaels in his iconoclasm would have it) nor displace the economic dimensions of these »classed« states of being by psychocultural ones (as happens frequently with regard to race and gender, as Jones convincingly demonstrates in his detailed overview of recent scholarship on class). Second, Jones's dialectics of poverty frames poverty as a category that cuts across class while exploring the different ways and degrees in which material deprivation and

cultural and individual factors bring about suffering for differently »classed« individuals. It is thus a category that can envision individuals of all classes to move in and out of states of socioeconomic suffering and thus de-essentializes class. It provides us with a model which, because of its dialectical nature, can encompass kinds of suffering that are determined by material and non-material factors to differing degrees, and that yet never loses sight of poverty's economic foundations. Jones is certainly not alone in this attempt to move Marxist scholarship beyond the base-superstructure model and make it productive in the twenty-first century, as, for example, Eric Schocket's insistence on »class as process« in his 2006 monograph *Vanishing Moments* may serve to illustrate. However, Jones's dialectic category of poverty is an abstraction from a close analysis of texts, and not a category that embodies the scholar's pre-textual desire for the reality of social mobility and that serves to detect such mobility in texts that grapple with poverty.

### 3. Readings: »Hungers«

Jones explores texts that confront »head-on the tensions involved in producing discursive richness from analyses of poorness, particularly within an American cultural and political context«(19) in three distinct historical periods. In Part One, he studies Henry David Thoreau's and Rebecca Harding Davis's vis-à-vis Henry Melville's explorations of poverty. Thoreau and Davis serve as examples of how conceptions of poverty as »pauperism« confuse causes and effects of poverty, and how even differentiated accounts of poverty are always in danger of tipping over into blaming the individual and representing them as complicit with his or her condition. Melville, on the other hand, is shown to confront and grapple with exactly this culturalization of poverty that his contemporaries can be said to engage in, especially in *Redburn*, *Israel Potter*, *Pierre*, and sketches of the mid-1850s. Melville, according to Jones, first recognizes how the socioeconomic and the cultural are linked in poverty, and how this link makes the representation of poverty difficult. In Part Two, Jones considers Dreiser's treatment of the paradox involved in white male Americans' belief in upward mobility and the persistence of poverty even among this supposedly advantaged group; Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* serves as a counterpart to *Sister Carrie* and is analyzed with regard to the way in which poverty affects women in specifically gendered economic and psychological ways. The genres of the documentary (Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*) and the autobiography (Wright's *Black Boy*) during the Depression are the focus of the third and last part of the book. While Jones looks primarily at the dialectics of poverty and gender in his second part, he looks at the dialectics of poverty and race in his last part.

One point of criticism of Jones' study might be that he could have used the title of his book more productively, and link the poor, starving body and hence the material conditions of suffering even more closely and more explicitly to its cultural and psychological causes. Until page 109, where the reader learns that the original title of Wright's autobiography was *American Hunger* instead of *Black Boy*, the motivation for and origins of Jones's title remain unclear, and even when Jones discusses the theme, or even category, of »hunger« in *Black Boy*, he does not link it explicitly to his own title. Jones here does not only give away a nice »hook« that would immediately link his dialectic model of poverty to a literary representation and exploration of this dialectic and to the national specificity of representations of poverty that this model applies to. Rather, it appears that the term »poverty« in his study functions the same way that »hunger« does in Wright's autobiography, and »hunger« – I believe – would, even for Jones, be the more appropriate term by which to catch the merging of the visceral and the intellectual, the bodily and the psychological, the measurable and the non-measurable. While a reconfiguration of the category of »class« through the category of »hunger« instead

of »poverty« might be strategically unsound because »hunger« might seem even further removed within the context of theories of class, a discussion of the concept of »hunger(s)« in the introductory chapter would have been welcome.

#### 4. Conclusion: »Literature«

*American Hungers* focuses on U.S. literature from the 1840s to 1945 and takes account of historical developments in the form and content of poverty discourse. What makes Jones's study extraordinary is not only its power of balance and differentiation with regard to poverty as a social and historical phenomenon, but also its insistence that poverty in discourse must be recognized in its aesthetic dimensions as well. Jones never forgets that – while the texts he analyzes engage both with the social reality of poverty and with their own difficulties in representing poverty – he is looking at literature or, at representations. Literary scholars who are committed to a progressive politics often seem caught between a political Scylla and an analytical Charybdis in their pursuit to bring economic inequality back onto a national/academic agenda: to act politically, or at least to affect direct social change, they must leave their metier, as Walter Benn Michaels does when he turns to an analysis of university politics or Evo Morales' inauguration ceremony and reinvents himself as a public intellectual – a political Scylla that is not for everyone to happily choose. Jones shows, instead, what literary critics in their own field can do with Michaels's polemic – and where the limits of the politicalness of literary studies are. The analytical Charybdis that politically committed scholars are in danger of being devoured by is that of confusing the levels of representation and the real world, of mistaking literature for life. Jones always steers clear of that danger and constantly reflects that he is dealing with representations – and ends up being the more political for it.

Jones literary »theory of poverty« must be considered one of the most groundbreaking and at the same time nuanced interventions into theories of class. His theory of poverty as a state of being dialectically shaped by economic, structural and non-material, individual conditions challenges us to recognize representations of poverty in their entire complexity. Implicitly only, he also challenges us to interrogate the complexities of poverty in the real world – and possibly act upon our insights.

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