

**Lecture 16**  
**Sociology 621**  
**November 9, 2005**

**RATIONALITY, SOLIDARITY AND CLASS STRUGGLE**

**Solidarity As An Element In Class Formation**

Solidarity is one of the pivotal aspects of class formation, particularly for subordinate classes. As I will define it, *solidarity refers to the willingness of individual members of a class to support the collective struggles of the class*. This includes both active participation -- such as joining a strike -- and what could be termed passive support -- such as not crossing a picket line. In both cases, solidarity implies a willingness on the part of individuals to bear certain kinds of individual costs in order to achieve some kind of collectively desirable goal.

The capacity for workers to struggle for their class interests against capitalists hinges centrally on their ability to maintain solidarity. As Claus Offe argues, the central resource of working class organizations engaged in struggle is people: their time, their energy, their ability to labor and withhold labor. While financial resources of working class parties and unions may also be important, the fundamental basis of working class power is the ability to mobilize people for collective action, and this depends to a significant degree on solidarity. Understanding more systematically exactly what solidarity is and what conditions sustain or undermine it, therefore, is one of the central problems in the study of class formation.

**I. Solidarity and the free-rider problem**

Jon Elster argues that solidarity should be understood as a particular solution to what is generally called the “free rider problem.” Collective action is problematic whenever for each potential participant, there is a cost in participating in the collective action and the result of the collective action is a “public good” which can be enjoyed by participants and non-participants alike. In these circumstances, every rational agent is tempted to be a *free rider*. Thus workers in a firm may have an acknowledged interest in the successful outcome of a strike, but, in view of the costs of participation, none may have an interest in personally contributing to a successful outcome, particularly since no one person’s participation will make a difference in the outcome. If all individuals reason in this way, then all will free ride and the public good will not be produced. In these circumstances, individual utility maximizing will have produced an outcome worse (in terms of each agent’s interests) than could have come about had individuals not individually maximized utility.

This kind of situation is a specific example, applied to the problem of collective action, of the “prisoner’s dilemma” game we discussed in the last lecture.

Examples of these sorts of dilemmas occur constantly in history. The “tragedy of the commons”, where each individual abuses a commonly held resource in pursuit of individual advantage with the result that everyone’s ability to benefit from the resource is reduced, is not just a theoretical story told to illustrate a point, but a pervasive historical experience as well. Social movements are constantly faced with difficulties in getting potential participants to accept the sacrifices of struggle, given that each individual’s participation is unlikely to make a decisive difference in the outcome and, if the movement succeeds, the benefits will accrue to nonparticipants as well.

Yet, class struggles and other popular social movements involving considerable sacrifice on the part of participants occur throughout history. People do not universally choose to free ride on other people’s efforts. Understanding how this occurs, Elster argues, is the heart of understanding solidarity.

### 1 The formal structure of the free-rider problem

To see how Elster develops this analysis of solidarity, it will be helpful to lay out the details of the free rider problem somewhat more formally. Imagine a strategic game involving two actors, “me” and “everyone else”. Each of these actors faces a simple strategic choice: whether to participate in a collective action or to abstain. For any pair of choices, there is a specific pay-off to each of the actors. The pay-offs faced by “me” are represented in the matrix below:

		EVERYONE ELSE	
		Cooperates	Defects
“ME”	Cooperates	A	C
	Defects	B	D

2. Three quantities defined by this table are particularly important in Elster’s analysis:

A-D: *the gain from cooperation*, i.e. the difference between what the individual gets if everyone (including the single individual) cooperates versus everyone abstains.

B-A: *the gain from free-riding*, i.e. the difference between what the individual gets by abstaining while everyone else cooperates versus what that individual gets if he/she participates along with everyone else. Note: if my individual participation significantly affects the probability of success B-A could be negative.

D-C: *the loss from unilateralism*, i.e. the loss the individual experiences by being the only person to participate in the struggle (sometimes also called the “sucker penalty”).

### 3. The PD preference ordering:

If individuals are selfish and rational, then their preference ordering for these strategic pairs is **BADC**. (i.e. “Me” prefers B over A, A over D and D over C). This preference ordering represents the classic free-rider problem. “Clearly,” Elster writes,

“whatever anyone else does, it is in my interest to abstain. If all others engage in collective action, I can get the free rider benefit by abstaining, and if everyone else abstains I can avoid the loss from unilateralism by abstaining too. Since the reasoning applies to each agent . . . all will decide to abstain and no collective action will be forthcoming.” (*Making Sense of Marx*, p.360).

The strategic action dilemma arises because while every individual actor prefers alternative A to D -- universal cooperation to universal abstention -- they end up with cell D since they all prefer B to A. But working class solidarity, conceived as a generalized disposition of workers to cooperate as a class, has existed in varying degrees in different times and places; and it is of paramount importance to Marxian theory and practice to comprehend this phenomenon and, so far as possible, to determine the conditions for its fuller realization.

### 4. A false solution

It might seem that this problem of free-riding in collective struggles can be avoided by trying to explain class struggle in terms of the strictly *collective benefit* to the group that accrues from the struggle, without reference to individuals. Working class struggle occurs and takes the forms it does, it might be thought, because it is in the collective interests of the working class as such. This kind of answer is unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, and most importantly, it basically begs the question, since individuals *do* make choices to participate or not participate in struggles and this needs explaining. Secondly, if specifying the collective interests in an outcome were sufficient to explain individual participation, then the theoretical problem becomes why collective actions so often do not occur even though the group as a whole would benefit from them.

The task, then, is to explain why individuals choose to participate in struggles in spite of the material pay-offs illustrated in the above matrix. Elster argues that such explanations should proceed through the following steps: “first, assume that behaviour is both rational and self-interested; if this does not work, assume at least rationality; only if this is unsuccessful too should one assume that individual participation in collective action is irrational.” (*Making Sense of Marx*, p.359). This order is not meant to prejudge the substantive question of which kind of explanation is best. It could well be that individual participations in collective actions are

generally deeply irrational. As I argued in section 6.1, however, heuristically the best strategy in general for producing explanations of strategic interactions is to move through these steps.

## II. Solutions to the free rider problem in collective actions

### 1. *Collective Action with Rational, Selfish Actors.*

Given the pay-off matrix above, how is collective action possible *if* each individual is selfish and rational? The solution Elster discusses under these assumptions is to treat the game as an *indefinite sequence of games* (or what is called an “iterative” game) rather than a one-shot affair. When the game is played many times, actors begin to take into consideration the likely response of other actors in *future* moves in the game to their *present* choices. Strategies, in short, *begin to have a temporal dimension to them.*

For example, each actor may adopt the meta-strategy of “tit for tat” -- always choosing the same strategy as the opponent did in the previous game. It is known that when the game is continually replayed, players who employ cooperative strategies at least some of the time generally do better than those who do not. It has therefore been suggested by some theorists (eg. Robert Axelrod in *The Evolution of Cooperation*, New York: Basic Books, 1984) that cooperative strategies will tend to evolve through selection -- in much the way that Darwin hypothesized evolution through selection for fitness. Elster is skeptical about the prospects for stably overcoming the free-rider problem through this route, so long as self-interest remains preeminent and defection is an overriding temptation. It is apparently for this reason that in explaining class formation, he privileges changes in “consciousness” which alter the preferences of the actors.

### 2. *Collective Action with Rational, Nonselish Agents: conditional altruism & assurance game*

The premise of the free-rider problem was that the preference ordering of individuals facing the pay-off matrix above was BADC, that is, that they would prefer to reap the benefits of struggle without paying the costs. There is no reason, however, for people necessarily to have radically selfish preference orderings of this kind. People may derive positive utility from gains that accrue to others, not simply from their own individual gains. Where such altruistic values are in place, the free-rider gain (B-A in the pay-off matrix) could completely disappear, and thus the overall preference ordering may be **ABDC** rather than BADC.

One way of seeing how altruistic values would shift the pay-off matrix is by imposing a guilt-fine for being a free-rider. Simply valuing the welfare of others would not be sufficient to induce participation since one’s own participation would still make such a little difference in the likely outcome of the struggle compared to the individual cost of participation. What altruism -- genuinely valuing the welfare of others -- does, however, is make people feel guilty for being a

free-rider, and this changes the relative magnitude of the pay-offs. In such situations, cooperation may appear as a solution to the game.

This change of preference ordering, however, does not reduce the loss from unilateralism, the costs an individual faces by “being a sucker” and engaging in struggle when “everyone else” abstains. Even without the free-rider gains, therefore, individuals will not *individually* choose to engage in collective action (because of the losses from unilateralism) unless they are confident that others will cooperate as well (i.e. they prefer D, universal abstention, to C, being a sucker and suffering the loss of unilateralism). This implies:

*even where people hold genuinely altruistic values, collective action requires significant information about what other people will do.*

Nonselfish, rational behavior, will therefore generally take the form of *conditional* altruism rather than *unconditional* altruism: each individual prefers to cooperate if and only if the others can be expected to do likewise. (This is called an “Assurance Game”: you cooperate if you have assurance that others will do so as well).

**Elster’s Punchline:** *Conditional altruism constitutes the essential content of class solidarity.*

Class solidarity will be high when two conditions are met:

- (a) the preference ordering of conditional altruism is deeply held by most workers, and
- (b) the information conditions are present such that each worker has reasonable confidence that other workers will participate in the struggle.

### 3. *Collective Action with Irrational Agents.*

There are many ways in which “irrationality” may enter into an explanation of collective action. Individuals may decide to participate in collective actions because of the irrational belief that their personal participation will actually make an important difference in the probability of success. Or they may participate out of rage, in which they make no calculations at all of the consequences or the effectiveness of their action. Or they may participate because of “wishful thinking” about the likely personal costs of participation (eg. subjectively underestimating the probability of being killed or wounded in a battle).

Whether these kinds of irrational beliefs and motivations play a large or small role in explaining actual class formation and class struggle is an empirical question. They are not needed, however, to define solidarity itself. Solidarity is not a willingness to make personal sacrifices for the common good based on irrational beliefs or motivations, but rather a rational strategy for realizing certain values given rational expectations of the behavior of others.

### III. Social Conditions for Solidarity

The reason for elaborating the concept of solidarity as a particular kind of solution to the free rider problem is not simply for the sake of a more rigorous definition. Rather, this characterization of the strategic action problem of class solidarity is important because it helps to focus our attention on the likely factors that could explain the variability across time and place in solidarity.

The claim that conditional altruism is the essential content of solidarity implies that the determinants of solidarity can be broken down into two primary categories: those determinants which directly shape the preference orderings of workers, and those which affect the information conditions necessary for conditional altruistic preferences to be translated into collective action. The various social factors commonly treated as important determinants of solidarity can be analyzed in these terms. Let us look briefly at three of these: the concentration and interdependence of workers in production, the stability of working class communities, and the role of leadership and organization.

#### 1 *Concentration and Interdependence of Workers.*

Marx emphasized the importance of the increasing concentration of workers in large factories and their growing interdependence within the labor process for increasing the likelihood of solidaristic struggles. How do these social structural changes work through the mechanisms discussed above?

Increasing interdependence, it can be argued, is likely to have a particularly important effect on the preference orderings of workers, increasing the extent to which workers care about each other. Interdependence acts as a counterforce to the competitive pressures of the labor market, pressures which underwrite selfish preference orderings. Marx certainly felt that competition undermined solidarity of workers. In a passage from the *German Ideology* quoted by Elster, Marx writes, "Competition separated individuals from one another, not only the bourgeoisie but still more the workers, in spite of the fact that it brings them together" (quoted on p.355 in *Making Sense of Marx*). The division of labor within production and the accompanying interdependence of workers in what Marx sometimes calls the "Collective Worker", would tend to produce preferences in which the welfare of coworkers became important.

Increasing concentration in large factories, on the other hand, is an important determinant of solidarity not simply because it may change workers' preferences, but also because of its impact on the information conditions for struggle. In contrast to small holding peasants dispersed throughout the countryside or workers in small shops, the concentration of workers in large factories facilitates communication among them and increases each worker's ability to predict the behavior of others. Since conditional altruism will lead to active solidarity only when workers are reasonably confident that other workers will join the struggle, concentration facilitates solidarity by increasing the knowledge workers have of each other.

## 2 Community

The stability of working class communities bears strongly on both conditions for solidarity. Conditional altruistic preferences do not fall from heaven; they are created and reproduced through the lived experience of reciprocities of helping and sharing in times of distress and need. Such experiences are likely to be more pervasive in communities which are basically class homogeneous than communities which have deep cleavages within them. They are also likely to be more pervasive when there is a long time horizon in which people experience such reciprocities, particularly where individual experiences are extended intergenerationally and become part of “historical memory”. Suburbanization, fragmentation of communities, high residence turnover and geographical mobility, are likely to atomize preferences and reinforce egoism by breaking this historical memory of past reciprocities and reducing the individual experiences of helping and sharing.

Community structures also affect the information conditions of struggle. It takes time for people to get to know their neighbors, to be able to predict their responses to particular conditions. Newcomers to communities are often hesitant to be active participants in struggles, not just because they may care less for their neighbors, but because they have less reason to trust them (and be trusted). If there is high levels of mobility in communities, therefore, it will be harder for people to have the necessary confidence in the good faith of others to decide to participate in collective struggles.

## 3 Leadership, activists and organization.

Marxists, particularly since Lenin, have always argued for the importance of formal organization and leadership in class struggle. The spontaneous collective actions of workers can never, by themselves, achieve sufficient coherence and capacity to transform capitalism; leadership and organization must be added to those struggles to make them effective.

In addition to the obvious importance of leadership for sheer coordination of struggle, Elster emphasizes two other roles for leadership which bear directly on our analysis of solidarity: first, the effects of leadership and organization on the information conditions for collective struggle; and second, the potential importance of a core of unconditional altruists within a social movement for the movement to reach the necessary threshold for wider participation.

Leadership and organization play a particularly vital role in facilitating predictability and knowledge among potential participants in collective struggle. Elster writes:

If one individual knows and is trusted by one hundred people, he can create the information conditions by two hundred transactions -- first asking each of them about their willingness to join the collective action and then telling each about the willingness of everyone else. By contrast, bilateral communication between the hundred will require about five thousand acts

of communication. The information gains from leadership can be quite substantial. (*Making Sense of Marx*, p.366-367.)

Leadership and organization thus provides potential participants with an indirect communication network essential to convincing them that they will not be “suckers” in a collective action struggle.

A second important role for leaders, or perhaps what could more generally be called activists, revolves around the preference orderings needed for class formation. In our discussion so far we have characterized solidarity as “conditional altruism” in which individuals are willing to cooperate in collective struggles so long as they are assured that others are willing to participate as well. The *conditionality of conditional altruism*, however, should be regarded as a *variable* rather than an absolute. The threshold level of expectation of other people’s participation, therefore, may vary considerably across a population of potential participants. Some individual’s will only participate if they are confident virtually everyone else will participate; others will participate so long as they know they would at least have a small group of comrades in struggle. *Unconditional* altruists are then the limiting case: people who are willing to participate in the collective action regardless of anyone else’s participation.

This variability of participation threshold creates the possibility for activists to create snowball effects in collective struggles:

a hard core of unconditional cooperators may make it easier for others to join . . . One may imagine a snowball effect, where a hard core of 5 per cent unconditional cooperators attract another 10 per cent who need at least 5 per cent already participating, thus making it possible to attract another 30 per cent who need at least 15 per cent cooperators, etc. (*Making Sense of Marx*, p.364.)

Leadership and organization thus not only coordinate action and facilitate communication, but may provide the necessary motivations to allow a process of solidarity activation to occur.

Imagine = concentric circles of participation thresholds: leadership core, cadre, active masses, passive masses. Cadre are pivotal in this process: they are the bridge between leadership and masses in a movement.