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PART I

Debates and definitions

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Orientations to the analysis of class in Britain

This book is about the nature of the British working class and, in particular, the relations between skilled and non-skilled manual workers. It will be argued that an internal division of the manual working class around the axis of skill has been a central feature of market and work relations in Britain between the mid-nineteenth century and the mid-1960's. The research will also examine whether the structuration of the British manual working class around the axis of skill in the market and at work has been translated into equivalent 'social' boundaries in the non-economic sphere. The choice of subject matter and of approach derives from an interest in the nature of the British class structure and a conviction that many misconceptions exist in the sociological and social-historical literature concerning the development of that class structure. Two major sources of these misconceptions will be subject to critical scrutiny in the next two chapters, which examine the debates about the traditional working class and the labour aristocracy.

My interest in the development of the British class structure is one shared by many social scientists. Indeed, the arguments and evidence in this work should be seen in the context of the debate about the nature of the working class that has been and continues to be one of the dominant areas of sociological inquiry in Britain. Doubtless the political culture of contemporary Britain helps to foster such interests. Certainly the Fabian socialist tradition and, recently, neo-Marxism have helped sustain an academic interest in class, but such an interest also remains a central feature of British political discourse. There is, furthermore, amongst sociologists, a persistent tendency to talk about *the changing nature of the contemporary class structure*. Lockwood, in his seminal article in 1960, went in search of the new working class and the *Affluent Worker* team located it. Roberts *et al.* (1977) have discovered a fragmentation of the British working class, whereas Braverman (1974) suggests a strong tendency for an increasing 'homogenization' of the American working class and goes on to argue that

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this process is being repeated in all advanced capitalist societies. It was my belief when I embarked upon this research that much of the imagery of changes in the British class structure was mythical, the empirical evidence for many assertions scanty and contradictory, and that there was a cavalier approach to the appropriation of evidence into arguments. In particular, when it came to a discussion of the nature of the British class structure before 1939, there was an over-reliance on a very small number of authors.[1] It appeared as if every sociologist of class had read E.P. Thompson (1963) and Eric Hobsbawm (1964) but not their critics. One of the main thrusts of this research is to present an empirical examination of the British working class over a lengthy period and in particular to see whether there has been a significant bifurcation of the manual working class around the axis of skill and, if there has, to assess whether it had changed fundamentally between the 1850's and 1960's. The evidence is historical because the questions posed concern changes over time. However, the underlying rationale remains sociological, in as much as it is hoped that the results and their interpretation will assist a re-orientation of British sociological analyses of class.

Two main strands can be discerned within academic discourse on class in Britain. The first emphasizes the study of class consciousness, whilst the other lays emphasis on the study of *class structure*. This research lies in the latter tradition because, as will be argued in this chapter, the literature on class consciousness contains serious limitations. Furthermore, the study of class consciousness in Britain itself involves two distinct theoretical elements. Both of them – Marxism and structural-functionalism – will be examined, their affinities as explanatory systems revealed, and their modes of analysis criticized. The arena of overlap can be seen partly as a product of the general answers provided by each theoretical system to an ancient question in social theory: the problem of order.

For Marxist theory the problem of order involves an answer to the question of why capitalism has not been overthrown. The topic of capitalist stability is a perennial difficulty for Marxist intellectual systems as a result of the teleological assumptions within Marx's works.[2] Such teleology is a persistent feature of Marxist theorizing and takes the form of asserting that modern societal development follows a progressive movement towards socialism. The schema is an old one but nonetheless popular and involves the progressive evolution of the triad: feudalism–capitalism–socialism. The agency of revolutionary transformation from feudalism to capitalism is the bourgeoisie, and in the case of capitalism to socialism, it is the class that the industrial bourgeoisie creates through factory production, the industrial proletariat. This latter development embodies the fundamental contradiction within the capitalist system, that between capital and labour.

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The teleological assumptions that lie behind Marxist theorizing can be seen in the currency of terms like *state monopoly capitalism: the final stage* and *late capitalism,* both of which suggest the imminent demise of the capitalist system. Even the French structural Marxists, who have been most vociferous in their denunciation of teleological versions of Marxism, fall prey to its attractions when engaged in their 'concrete' investigations of the 'current situation'.[3]

Teleological accounts are central to Marxism because they provide, amongst other things, the theoretical underpinnings that guarantee the final success of socialism. Clearly, this provides useful ideological support for Marxist political parties and intellectuals since it vindicates the ultimate correctness of their diagnoses. However, the central difficulties of this Marxist teleology are well known. State socialist societies have not resulted from the mass action of the urban factory proletariat but from the action of the peasantry in alliance with certain sections of the urban working class. For from the development of mature capitalism producing socialist revolution, it would appear that it is the periods of immediate dislocation associated with early capitalist industrialization, or those immediately succeeding defeat in war, that produce revolutionary socialist situations. The working classes of advanced capitalist societies are not revolutionary, nor even strongly socialist for the most part.

Nevertheless, the main point about these central dilemmas for Marxist theorizing is that answers to the problem of order have been located predominantly at the level of class consciousness. This has taken the form of the consolidation of the remarks made by Marx in such places as *The Poverty of Philosophy,*[4] *The German Ideology*[5] (with Engels) and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*[6] into a major conceptual scheme for class analyses. The main component of the model lies in the distinction between class-in-itself ('Klasse an sich') and class-for-itself ('Klasse für sich'). According to this model capitalism refers to a social system which contains, as its defining characteristic, a class of sellers of labour power. Capitalism must produce such a class – the proletariat – because it is an objective category of capitalism itself. However, this objective class-in-itself only becomes a class-for-itself endowed with revolutionary class consciousness through the medium of class struggle. These struggles, economic, political and ideological, produce class consciousness, but this can be delayed or misdirected by false consciousness.[7] Hence, the answer provided by this model to the problem of the apparent stability of advanced capitalism is that the proletariat has failed to recognize its real interests. Such false consciousness is portrayed as the result of bourgeois manipulation and hegemony, but both of these are seen as temporary phenomena. Such mechanisms as the tendency for the rate of profit to fall[8] must

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inevitably destroy 'bourgeois' illusions[9] since capitalism will, in the long term, fall prey to a terminal crisis and the long-awaited revolution will occur. It is evident that the generation of such a theory is not unrelated to the dominance of Leninist thinking amongst Western Marxist political parties with their emphasis on the 'Party' as a vanguard guiding the proletariat in its struggles towards a growing appreciation of the desirability of overthrowing the capitalist system. A basic assumption is that revolutions require the existence of an already constituted self-conscious revolutionary force armed with the relevant theoretical tools necessary to effect a practical revolutionary transformation. As a model of revolution, this is highly debatable,[10] but the important point to grasp is that the institutionalization of the class-in-itself/class-for-itself model has produced a strong tendency to focus class analysis in terms of the determinants of (false) class consciousness. Other aspects of class structure – in particular the 'objective' category class-in-itself – are seen as unproblematic. As a corollary, the answers to the problem of capitalist stability are focused at the level of class consciousness and specifically in terms of those elements that prevent the proletariat from perceiving its 'real' interests.

The tendency to focus class analysis on the problem of obstacles to class consciousness has affected a wide array of sociological and social historical analyses. The shared assumption of these models of social change is that revolutions are a function of radical class consciousness. Indeed, radicalization and the development of revolutionary class consciousness are often synonymous within this discourse. Nevertheless, despite the plethora of competing analyses such accounts share a similar formal explanatory structure as can be seen when they are catalogued into six sets of arguments:

Normative integration

There are two main versions of this argument.

Normative dislocation. Revolutionary class consciousness or radicalism is most likely in the period of 'anomie' between the disappearance of the 'Gemeinschaft' relations of agrarian society and the institutionalization and internalization of the norms of 'Gesellschaft' society. In other words, the working class only possesses revolutionary class consciousness in the immediate period of the transition from pre-industrial to industrial capitalism. Examples of this thesis can be found in Trotsky (1934), Bendix (1974), Kerr (1973) and Giddens (1973).

Normative lag. Revolutionary class consciousness or radicalism is most likely in the period when the working class is excluded from citizenship

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rights. Put another way, the working class engenders revolutionary class consciousness when the 'feudal', legal remnants of estate society persist in excluding it from nominal social equality. This argument is strongly associated with writings of T.H. Marshall (1963).

The presence of a bourgeois revolutionary tradition

Revolutionary class consciousness or radicalism is only likely if there has been a successful bourgeois revolution. The emphasis is on the revolutionary legacy of such features as a 'totalizing ideology' and a tradition of revolutionary combat. These views have been expressed lucidly by Perry Anderson (1965) and mark the rationale behind the role of the *New Left Review* in Britain in providing a surrogate revolutionary tradition. However, there is another version of this theme to be found in Parkin (1971) and in Goldthorpe and Lockwood *et al* (1969) all of whom argue that the decline of working class militancy in Britain is a function of the emasculation of the existent radical tradition by the leadership of the Labour Party. Both versions, the academic and the New Left, emphasize the need for revolutionary or radical class consciousness to be imported into the working class in an orthodox Leninist fashion. In the case of Parkin and Goldthorpe and Lockwood *et al.*, the impulse came originally from the Labour Party, whereas for Anderson it derives from the bourgeois revolutionary legacy.

Affluence

There are two main versions of this argument.

Revolutionary class consciousness or radicalism is only likely under conditions of mass misery such as pervasive poverty or widespread unemployment. Conversely, rising real standards of living weaken the revolutionary or radical impulse. This is a view held by much modernization literature, particularly the 'convergence' school. In Britain, it was extremely popular in the period of post-war affluence and was elaborated by writers like Zweig (1961), Crosland (1960) and, in the United States, from a rather different point of view, by Marcuse (1964).

Revolutionary class consciousness or radicalism is associated with conditions of falling real incomes after a preceding period of rising affluence. Historians like Labrousse (1933) and social psychologists like Gurr (1971) argue that revolutionary consciousness emerges in the immediate period of falling incomes after a sustained expansion of wealth and expectations.

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Opportunity

Revolutionary class consciousness or radicalism is a feature of 'closed' social systems, where social mobility is 'blocked'. From the opposite angle, social mobility can be seen as a safety valve permitting the most able and, it is held, the most militant, potentially, to ascend the social hierarchy. This thesis received its classic elaboration in the works of Pareto (1968) and of Sorokin (1927), but contemporary versions can also be found in Parkin (1971).

Technology

There are also two opposite kinds of argument here.

Revolutionary class consciousness or radicalism is prevalent within mass production systems. With the increasing tendency towards new forms of automative technology, alienation and, concomitantly, militant class attitudes, will wither away. These ideas stem from the works of writers like Galbraith (1967) and Blauner (1964).

Revolutionary class consciousness or radicalism is associated with automative technology. The increasing contradiction between scientific–technical rationality and capitalist irrationality leads workers in technologically-sophisticated modern industries, like petro-chemicals, to a revolutionary assessment of their role. This argument is strongly associated with French theorists of the 'new' working class, like Mallet (1963) and Touraine (1966 and 1969), and has been examined empirically recently by Gallie (1978) and Low-Beer (1978).

Skill

Here we encounter two diametrically opposed theses.

The 'labour aristocracy'. Revolutionary class consciousness or radicalism is pervasive only when the working class is homogeneous. However, this homogeneity is fragmented when a skilled labour aristocracy develops within the working class. There are various versions of this general argument to be found in writers such as Engels (1953), Lenin (1971), Hobsbawm (1964), Foster (1974 and 1976) and Gray (1976). Whilst disagreeing over the precise date when a labour aristocracy can be said to emerge and over its exact social composition, all these writers argue that the emergence of sectional divisions within the working class reduces the putative level of militant working class consciousness. Furthermore, they argue that the decline of the labour aristocracy will help promote, once again, radical working class consciousness.

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The 'militant craftsman'. For labour aristocrat theorists, skilled manual workers are generally seen as conservative, quiescent and dominant within working class institutions and culture. Whilst agreeing with the salience of the social distinction between skilled and non-skilled, writers in the 'militant craftsman' tradition like Montgomery (1976), Lucas (1976), Comfort (1966), Moss (1976), Hinton (1973), Williams (1975 and 1976) and Shorter and Tilly (1974), all argue that skilled manual workers have, at certain moments, constituted a revolutionary vanguard in the major capitalist societies. They further advance the thesis that with the progressive de-skilling of the labour force as a result of capitalist rationalization the working class will become homogeneous and relatively quiescent in terms of militant consciousness.

In conclusion, the Marxist problematic of the determinants of revolutionary class consciousness has intersected with a great number of sociological analyses of radicalism, not all of which are directly Marxist but which can be interpreted as 'Marxisant'.[11] As can be seen, the general problematic of obstacles to proletarian revolutionary class consciousness or determinants of working class radicalism can produce diametrically opposed empirical arguments. However, the central point here concerns not their empirical validity but their common properties as forms of argument. In general, all the arguments suffer from relatively simplistic models of social change. Specifically, they tend to contract societal developments into a pristine, dichotomous mould which has the form of saying that:

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} x & \longrightarrow & y & \longrightarrow & z \\ \text{not-}x & \longrightarrow & \text{not-}y & \longrightarrow & \text{not-}z \end{array}$$

The assumption is that x (structural variable) leads to y (class consciousness) which itself produces z (class action). Conversely, structural obstacle (not-x) leads to false consciousness (not-y) which produces false action or action contrary to real interests (not-z). The objections to these models are several. It would appear as if diametrically opposed empirical outcomes can be derived from the same set of structural variables. This suggests that either the chronology of the arguments is imprecise or that the relationship between structure and consciousness is not quite as simple as these models would imply. In addition, the sets of variables that can be adduced to explain the non-existence of revolutionary class consciousness are multiple and could, in principle, be almost infinite. The general problem is that the structure which is held to effect class consciousness appears to be highly complex. Furthermore, the arguments listed earlier appear to operate in a

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discursive vacuum: it would appear as if the authors believe that to supply a variable to explain a non-event is a sufficient explanation, but the plurality of contenders for the title of efficient cause suggests that these correlations are not full explanations at all. It is, therefore, the contention of this chapter that these models of social change are dubious and that they share certain affinities with arguments located within the structural-functionalist analysis of class consciousness. However, this cannot be established until a detailed examination of the structural-functionalist framework has been undertaken.

The problem of order within structural-functionalist theory involves the general question of societal integration. Interest is focused on answers to such questions as what it is that holds the social system together and why it does not collapse. A basic assumption of this school is that without the cementing power of social forces, society itself would be impossible. The central image of structural-functionalism is of an unstable system held together in a precarious equilibrium. The mechanism that guarantees continuity is the internalization of societal values by individual members and the mutual orientation of their conduct into stable systems of action. The external arena of constraint is embodied in value systems and consequently societal stability is seen as a function of the successful internalization of these values. It is value consensus that guarantees societal integration. The notion of consensus has been notoriously difficult to define precisely within the structural-functionalist tradition and even within the work of its major theorist – Talcott Parsons. Does consensus refer to a factual consensus, a systemic strain towards general value consonance or an approximate consensus of either a systemic or factual kind? The difficulties centre around the relationships between 'system' as an heuristic theoretical tool and 'system' as an existing set of social relationships. Nevertheless, this ambiguity at the centre of structural-functionalist theorizing has been, in many respects, one of its main strengths as a theoretical framework, because it has permitted the generation of a whole range of propositions about the nature of contemporary value systems. At one extreme, it has provided the basis for the 'convergence' theorists, who argue that the logic of industrialism requires, and has produced, a universal value system in the industrialized world.[12] At the other, it has given support to Daniel Bell (1977), who argues that societal equilibrium in advanced capitalist societies is the result of the systemic tension between the differing value systems connected with the economic, political and cultural sub-systems. However, the central point about this structural-functionalist framework with regard to British class analysis is that it has supported a mode of conceptualizing social class in terms of its constitution as evaluations by individual members of society. If the problem of order is

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located in terms of the internalization of values, then class stability must be a function of the general consensus over relative rewards.

The emphasis on evaluation as the key conception within structural-functionalist stratification theory is clear from the works of Parsons. In 'An Analytical Approach to the Theory of Social Stratification', Parsons wrote that 'There is, in any given social system, an actual system of ranking in terms of moral evaluation. But this implies in some sense an integrated set of standards according to which evaluations are, or are supposed to be made' (1949, p.71). It was such theoretical sentiments that underpinned the original prestige inquiry conducted by the National Opinion Research Center in 1947 (1953). This study of the relative prestige accorded to a set of ninety occupations by a cross-section of the American public both appeared to give empirical support for the existence of a common value system and prompted a series of parallel inquiries in many other countries.[13] The apparent similarity in the results of these cross-national inquiries provided the empirical cornerstone for the functionalist theory of stratification. Both the original proponents of the theory, Davis and Moore (1945), and its major popularizer, Barber (1957), argued that the empirical similarities in outcomes of relative occupational prestige across different societies provided the basis for the functional theory of stratification. Davis and Moore claimed that the universal nature of evaluations of stratification must be a result of the universal necessity for stratification according to relative functional importance, while Barber stated that 'If, as we have said, there must be a pretty large degree of congruence between the functionally important roles in a society and its system of values then we should expect societies with the same kinds of functionally important roles will evaluate these roles in the same way' (Barber, 1957, p. 5).

It is unnecessary to demonstrate the theoretical and methodological weaknesses of the functional theory of stratification or the 'structural convergence' argument about invariant prestige. What is important to emphasize is that structural-functionalism, in its response to its question of societal integration, posed the answer in terms of general popular perceptions of stratification or, to use terminology avoided by Parsons *et al.*, but appropriate in a British context, 'consciousness of class'.

It was alleged attitudinal consensus of 'consciousness of class' that was challenged increasingly in the 1950's, particularly by European social scientists. The work of Centers (1959) in the U.S.A. on the different class attitudes held by the middle and working classes was accompanied by studies in Europe from Willmott and Young (1956), Bott (1957), Popitz (1957), Willener (1957), and ultimately by Lockwood's seminal article in 1960. This tradition, with increasing sophistication, attempted to demolish the assumption of consensus held by American structural-functionalists

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