

1 Class analysis

The empirical research in this book covers a wide range of substantive topics: from friendship patterns and class mobility to housework and class consciousness. What unites the topics is not a preoccupation with a common object of explanation, but rather a common explanatory factor: class. This is what class analysis attempts to do – explore the relationship between class and all sorts of social phenomena. This does not mean, of course, that class will be of explanatory importance for everything. Indeed, as we will discover, in some of the analyses of this book class turns out not to be a particularly powerful factor. Class analysis does not imply a commitment to the thesis that all social phenomena can be explained primarily in terms of class, or even that class is always an important determinant. Rather, class analysis is based on the conviction that class is a pervasive social cause and thus it is worth exploring its ramifications for many social phenomena. This implies deepening our understanding of the limits of what class can explain as well as of the processes through which class helps to determine what it does explain.

Understood in this way, class analysis is what might be called an “independent variable” specialty. It is a discipline like endocrinology in medicine. If you are an endocrinologist you are allowed to study a vast array of problems – sexuality, personality, growth, disease processes, etc. – in addition to the internal functioning of the endocrine system, so long as you explore the relationship between the endocrine system and those explananda. Endocrinology is monogamous in its explanatory variable – the hormone system – but promiscuous in its dependent variables. Furthermore, in endocrinology it is not an embarrassment to discover that for some problems under investigation hormones turn out not to be very important. It is an advance in our

2 Class counts

knowledge of endocrinology to know what hormones do not explain as well as to know what they do. Oncology, in contrast, is a dependent variable discipline. As an oncologist you can study any conceivable cause of cancer – toxins, genetics, viruses, even psychological states. Oncology is monogamous in its dependent variable but promiscuous in its independent variables. And, in oncology, it is not an embarrassment to discover that certain potential causes of cancer turn out to be not very important.

The most elaborated and systematic theoretical framework for class analysis is found in the Marxist tradition. Whatever one might think of its scientific adequacy, classical Marxism is an ambitious and elegant theoretical project in which class analysis was thought to provide the most fundamental explanations of what can be termed the epochal trajectory of human history. The aphorism “class struggle is the motor of history” captures this idea. In effect, the Marxist theory of history – or what is commonly called “historical materialism” – is like a medical theory which combined endocrinology and oncology by arguing that hormonal mechanisms provide the central explanations (“the motor”) for the dynamic development (“history”) of cancers. The argument of classical historical materialism was never that everything that happens in history is explainable by class analysis, although many critics of Marxism have accused Marxists of proposing such a monocausal theory. The claim is more restricted, yet still ambitious: that the overall trajectory of historical development can be explained by a properly constructed class analysis.¹

Many, perhaps most, contemporary Marxist scholars have pulled back from these grandiose claims of orthodox historical materialism. While the idea that history has a comprehensible structure and that the dynamics of capitalism are fraught with contradictions that point toward a socialist future may form part of the intellectual backdrop to

¹ As in all aspects of Marxism there is, needless to say, much dispute about the degree of determinism implied by class analysis within historical materialism. Some people argue that Marx was never an economic determinist at all; others argue that he defended a specific form of economic and class determinism, one which was grounded in assumptions of human agency. In any event, whether the analysis is deterministic or not, class analysis is at the core of the explanations of epochal historical trajectories in Marx. For the most sophisticated and profound account of historical materialism as a serious, explanatory theory, see G.A. Cohen (1978). For some important clarifications and amendments to the arguments in this book, see Cohen (1988). For a general assessment of the claims of historical materialism and the prospects for its reconstruction, see Wright, Levine and Sober (1992).

Marxist scholarship, most actual research brackets these ideas and, instead, focusses on the ways in which class affects various aspects of social life. Class analysis thus becomes the core of a wide-ranging agenda of research on the causes and consequences of class relations.

Marxist-inspired class analysis, of course, is not the only way of studying class. There is also Weberian-inspired class analysis, stratification-inspired class analysis, eclectic common sense class analysis. Before embarking on the specific empirical agenda of this book, therefore, we need to clarify the basic contours of the class concept which will be used in the analyses. In particular, we need to clarify the concept of *class structure*, since this plays such a pivotal role in class analysis. This is the basic objective of this chapter.

The concept of “class structure” is only one element in class analysis. Other conceptual elements include *class formation* (the formation of classes into collectively organized actors), *class struggle* (the practices of actors for the realization of class interests) and *class consciousness* (the understanding of actors of their class interests). The task of class analysis is not simply to understand class structure and its effects, but to understand the interconnections among all these elements and their consequences for other aspects of social life.

In chapter 13 we will explore a general model of the interconnections among these elements. The discussion in this chapter will be restricted to the problem of class structure. This is not because I believe that class structure is always the most important explanatory principle within class analysis. It could certainly be the case, for example, that the variation in class formations across time and place in capitalist societies may be a more important determinant of variations in state policies than variations in the class structures associated with those class formations. Rather, I initially focus on class structure because it remains *conceptually* pivotal to clarifying the overall logic of class analysis. To speak of *class formation* or *class struggle* as opposed to simply *group formation* or *struggle* implies that we have a definition of “class” and know what it means to describe a collective actor as an instance of class formation, or a conflict as a class conflict instead of some other sort of conflict. The assumption here is that the concept of class structure imparts the essential content of the adjective “class” when it is appended to “formation,” “consciousness,” and “struggle.” Class formation is the formation of collective actors organized around class interests within class structures; class struggle is the struggle between such collectively

4 Class counts

organized actors over class interests; class consciousness is the understanding by people within a class of their class interests. In each case one must already have a definition of class structure before the other concepts can be fully specified. Elaborating a coherent concept of class structure, therefore, is an important conceptual precondition for developing a satisfactory theory of the relationship between class structure, class formation and class struggle.

1.1 The parable of the shmoo

A story from the *Li'l Abner* comic strips from the late 1940s will help to set the stage for the discussion of the concept of class structure.² Here is the situation of the episode: Li'l Abner, a resident of the hill-billy community of Dogpatch, discovers a strange and wonderful creature, the "shmoo," and brings a herd of them back to Dogpatch. The shmoo's sole desire in life is to please humans by transforming itself into the material things human beings need. They do not provide humans with luxuries, but only with the basic necessities of life. If you are hungry, they can become ham and eggs, but not caviar. What's more, they multiply rapidly so you never run out of them. They are thus of little value to the wealthy, but of great value to the poor. In effect, the shmoo restores humanity to the Garden of Eden. When God banished Adam and Eve from Paradise for their sins, one of their harshest punishments was that from then on they and their descendants were forced to "earn their bread by the sweat of their brows." The shmoo relieves people of this necessity and thus taps a deep fantasy in Western culture.

In the episode from *Li'l Abner* reproduced below, a manager working for a rich capitalist, P.U., does a study to identify the poorest place in America in order to hire the cheapest labor for a new factory. The place turns out to be Dogpatch. P.U. and the manager come to Dogpatch to recruit employees for the new factory. The story unfolds in a sequence of comic strips from 1948 (Al Capp 1992: 134–136):

² The use of these episodes from *Li'l Abner* as an illustration for the moral critique of capitalism was introduced to me by the British philosopher G. A. Cohen in a lecture he gave on British television in August 1986.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55646-0 - Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis

Erik Olin Wright

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The presence of shmoos is thus a serious threat to both class relations and gender relations. Workers are more difficult to recruit for toilsome labor and no longer have to accept “guff” and indignities from their bosses. Women are no longer economically dependent on men and thus do not have to put up with sexist treatment.³

In the episodes that follow, P.U. and his henchman organize a campaign to destroy the shmoo. They are largely successful, and its sinister influence is stopped. American capitalism can continue, unthreatened by the specter of the Garden of Eden.

The saga of the shmoo helps to clarify the sense in which the interests of workers and capitalists are deeply antagonistic, one of the core ideas of Marxist class analysis. How do shmoos affect the material interests of people in these two classes?⁴ This depends upon the level

³ Given the prevailing ideologies of the time, it is quite remarkable that Al Capp indicated the implications of the shmoo for gender domination. The implications for workers, after all, fell neatly within the theoretical arguments of Marxism which, in the 1940s, were quite familiar to many intellectuals. The feminist critique of male domination was much less familiar.

⁴ By “material interests” here I simply mean the interests people have in their material standard of living, understood as the package of toil, consumption and leisure. Material interests are thus not interests in maximizing consumption *per se*, but rather interests in the trade-offs between toil, leisure and consumption. Material interests, as I will discuss them here, also excludes purely status goods – goods which get their value strictly from being enjoyed by only a few people. If the interests of capitalists are not simply to have high material standards of living, but to have *higher* standards of living than others in order to have higher status, then they would be opposed to shmoos even if shmoos provided people with every conceivable luxury. I am also excluding from “material interests” such things as the desire for domination for its own sake. Material interests are thus simply the interests one has in one’s own standard of living. For a more extended discussion of the problem of material interests see Wright (1989a: 280–288).

6 Class counts

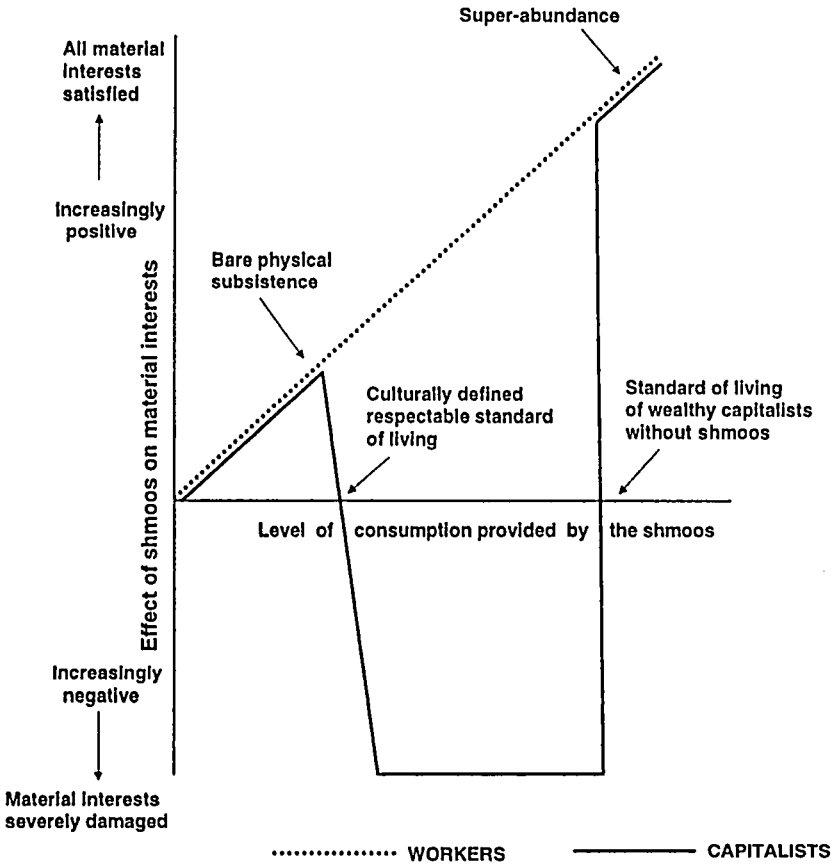


Figure 1.1 *How shmooos of different capacities affect the interests of workers and capitalists*

of generosity of the shmoo as indicated in Figure 1.1. If the shmoo provides less than bare physical subsistence, it probably has a positive effect on the material interests of both workers and capitalists. For workers it makes their lives a little bit less precarious; for capitalists, such sub-subsistence shmooos could be considered a subsidy to the wage bill. All other things being equal, capitalists can pay lower wages if part of the subsistence of workers is provided outside of the market.⁵ At the other extreme, if shmooos provide for superabundance, gratifying every material desire of humans from basic necessities to the

⁵ Housewives might be considered a kind of quasi-shmoo providing “free” goods at less than a subsistence level (since a worker’s family cannot live exclusively on the labor of the housewife).

most expensive luxuries, then they would also positively serve the material interests of capitalists. Between these two extremes, however, the impact of the shmoo on the material interests of the two classes diverges. The welfare of workers is continuously improved as the generosity of shmoo increases, whereas for capitalists, after a point, their material interests are adversely affected. Once shmoo provides workers with a respectable standard of living, workers no longer have to work in order to live at an acceptable standard. As P.U.'s manager states in panic, "Do you realize what the shmoo means? Nobody'll have to work hard any more!!" This does not mean, of course, that no workers would be willing to work for an employer. Work fills many needs for people besides simply providing earnings, and in any case, so long as the shmoo does not provide superabundance, many people will have consumption desires beyond the shmoo level of provision. Nevertheless, workers would be in a much more powerful bargaining position with modestly generous shmoo at home, and it will be more difficult, in P.U.'s words, to get them to "do the long, dreary, back-breaking labor at our canning factories."⁶

As a result of these differences in the impact of the shmoo on the material interests of workers and capitalists, people in these two classes have very different preferences with respect to the fate of the shmoo. Consider four possible distributions of modestly generous shmoo: everyone gets a shmoo; only capitalists get shmoo; only workers get shmoo; and the shmoo is destroyed so no one gets them. Table 1.1 indicates the preference orderings for the fate of modestly generous shmoo on the assumption that both workers and capitalists are rational and only interested in their own material welfare.⁷ They are thus neither altruistic nor spiteful. For capitalists,

⁶ There is an interesting difference in the analysis of the effect of the shmoo offered by the Dogpatch resident and by P.U.'s manager. The Dogpatch resident proclaims, "But nobody whut's got shmoo has t'work any more," whereas the manager declares, "Nobody'll have to work *hard* anymore." The manager understands that the issue is the extraction of labor effort – exploitation – not simply getting people to show up for "work." The Dogpatchian only identifies an effect in the *labor market*; the manager identifies an effect in the *labor process*. To state the matter sociologically, the Dogpatchian provides a Weberian analysis, the manager a Marxist one.

⁷ These preference orderings also assume homogeneous attributes among capitalists and workers. If there are big capitalists and small capitalists, or skilled workers and unskilled workers, then the preference orderings might get much more complicated. Highly skilled workers, for example, might benefit more from a supply of cheap goods produced by unskilled workers without shmoo than by an improved living standard with shmoo.

8 Class counts

Table 1.1. Rank ordering of preferences for the fate of the shmoo by class location

Rank order	Capitalist class	Working class
1	Only capitalists get shmoos	Everyone gets shmoos
2	Destroy the shmoos	Only workers get shmoos
3	Everyone gets shmoos	Only capitalists get shmoos
4	Only workers get shmoos	Destroy the shmoo

their first preference is that they alone get the shmoos, since they would obviously be slightly better off with shmoos than without them. Their second preference is that no one gets them. They would rather have the shmoo be destroyed than everyone get one. For workers, in contrast, their first preference is that everyone gets the shmoos. Workers will be slightly better off if capitalists have shmoos as well as workers, since this will mean that capitalists will have slightly more funds available for investment (because they will not have to buy basic necessities for themselves). Workers' second preference is that workers alone get the shmoos, their third preference is that only capitalists get the shmoos, and their least preferred alternative is that the shmoos be destroyed.

The preference ordering of workers corresponds to what could be considered universal human interests. This is one way of understanding the classical Marxist idea that the working class is the "universal class," the class whose specific material interests are equivalent to the interests of humanity as such. This preference ordering also corresponds to what might be called Rawlsian preferences – the preferences that maximize the welfare of the worst off people in a society. With respect to the shmoo, at least, the material self-interests of workers corresponds to the dictates of Rawlsian principles of Justice.

What the story of the shmoo illustrates is that the deprivations of the propertyless in a capitalist system are not simply an unfortunate by-product of the capitalist pursuit of profit; they are a necessary condition for that pursuit. This is what it means to claim that capitalist profits depend upon "exploitation."⁸ Exploiting classes have an in-

⁸ This does not imply that the degree of exploitation is the only determinant of the degree of profits, or even that profits are solely "derived" from exploitation. All that is being claimed is that exploitation is one of the necessary conditions for profits in a capitalist economy.

terest in preventing the exploited from acquiring the means of subsistence even if, as in the case of the shmoo story, that acquisition does not take the form of a redistribution of wealth or income from capitalists to workers. To put it crudely, capitalism generates a set of incentives such that the capitalist class has an interest in destroying the Garden of Eden.

While in real capitalism capitalists do not face the problem of a threat from shmoos, there are episodes in the history of capitalism in which capitalists face obstacles not unlike the shmoo. Subsistence peasants have a kind of shmoo in their ownership of fertile land. While they have to labor for their living, they do not have to work for capitalists. In some times and places capitalists have adopted deliberate strategies to reduce the capacity of subsistence peasants to live off the land specifically in order to recruit them as a labor force. A good example is the use of monetized hut taxes in South Africa in the nineteenth century to force subsistence peasants to enter the labor market and work in the mines in order to have cash to pay their taxes. More generally, capitalist interests are opposed to social arrangements that have even a partial shmoo-like character. Capitalist class interests are thus opposed to such things as universal guaranteed basic income or durably very low rates of unemployment, even if the taxes to support such programs were paid entirely out of wages and thus did not directly come out of their own pockets.⁹ This reflects the sense in which capitalist exploitation generates fundamentally antagonistic interests between workers and capitalists.

1.2 The concept of exploitation

The story of the shmoo revolves around the linkage between class divisions, class interests and exploitation. There are two main classes in the story – capitalists who own the means of production and workers who do not. By virtue of the productive assets which they own (capital and labor power) they each face a set of constraints on how they can best pursue their material interests. The presence of shmoos fundamentally transforms these constraints and is a threat to the material

⁹ This does not mean, of course, that capitalists as *persons* could not be enthusiastic supporters of shmoos and shmoo-like social policy. Engels, after all, was a wealthy capitalist and was an enthusiastic supporter of Marx and revolutionary socialism. But in supporting shmoos, or socialism, capitalists are acting against their *class* interests.

10 Class counts

interests of capitalists. Why? Because it undermines their capacity to exploit the labor power of workers. "Exploitation" is thus the key concept for understanding the nature of the *interests* generated by the class relations.

Exploitation is a loaded theoretical term, since it suggests a moral condemnation of particular relations and practices, not simply an analytical description. To describe a social relationship as exploitative is to condemn it as both harmful and unjust to the exploited. Yet, while this moral dimension of exploitation is important, the core of the concept revolves around a particular type of *antagonistic interdependence of material interests* of actors within economic relations, rather than the injustice of those relations as such. As I will use the term, class exploitation is defined by three principal criteria:

- (a) *The material welfare of one group of people causally depends on the material deprivations of another.*
- (b) *The causal relation in (a) involves the asymmetrical exclusion of the exploited from access to certain productive resources. Typically this exclusion is backed by force in the form of property rights, but in special cases it may not be.*¹⁰
- (c) *The causal mechanism which translates exclusion (b) into differential welfare (a) involves the appropriation of the fruits of labor of the exploited by those who control the relevant productive resources.*¹¹

This is a fairly complex set of conditions. Condition (a) establishes the antagonism of material interests. Condition (b) establishes that the antagonism is rooted in the way people are situated within the social organization of production. The expression "asymmetrical" in this criterion is meant to exclude "fair competition" from the domain of

¹⁰ An example of an exclusion from productive resources which is not backed by force but which, nevertheless, could be the basis for exploitation, is the unequal distribution of talents. While one could stretch the notion of "coercive" exclusion to cover talents (since the untalented are coercively prohibited from owning the talented as slaves), in the actual functioning of capitalist societies, the relevant exclusion is not primarily guaranteed by force.

¹¹ The expression "appropriation of the fruits of labor" refers to the appropriation of that which labor produces. It does *not* imply that the value of those products is exclusively determined by labor effort, as claimed in the labor theory of value. All that is being claimed here is that a surplus is appropriated – a surplus beyond what is needed to reproduce all of the inputs of production – and that this surplus is produced through labor effort, but not that the appropriate metric for the surplus is labor time. For a discussion of this way of understanding the appropriation of the fruits of labor, see Cohen (1988: 209–238).