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Erik Olin Wright

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Class Counts combines theoretical discussions of the concept of class with a wide range of comparative empirical investigations of class and its ramifications in developed capitalist societies. What unites the topics is not a preoccupation with a common object of explanation, but rather a common explanatory factor: class. Four broad themes are explored: class structure and its transformation; the permeability of class boundaries; class and gender; and class consciousness. The specific empirical studies include such diverse topics as the sexual division of labor in housework, gender differences in managerial authority, friendship networks in the class structure, the expansion of self-employment in the United States in the past two decades, and the class consciousness of state and private-sector employees. The results of these studies are then evaluated in terms of how they confirm certain expectations within the Marxist tradition of class analysis and how they pose challenging surprises.

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Elsie: "WHAT'S THAT, DADDY?"

Father: "A COW."

Elsie: "WHY?"

Punch (1906)

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Like Elsie wondering why a cow is a “cow,” I have spent an inordinate amount of time worrying about what makes a class a “class.” Here is the basic problem. The Marxist concept of class is rooted in a polarized notion of antagonistic class relations: slave-masters exploit slaves, lords exploit serfs, capitalists exploit workers. In the analysis of developed capitalist societies, however, many people do not seem to fit neatly this polarized image. In everyday language, many people are “middle class,” and even though Marxists generally do not like that term, nevertheless, most Marxist analysts are uncomfortable with calling managers, doctors, and professors, “proletarians.” Thus, the problem is this: how can the social categories which are commonly called “middle” class be situated within a conceptual framework built around a polarized concept of class? What does it mean to be in the “middle” of a “relation”? The diverse strands of research brought together in this book are all, directly or indirectly, ramifications of struggling with this core conceptual problem.

My empirical research on these issues began with my dissertation on class and income, completed in 1976. In that project I used data gathered by the Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics, the Quality of Employment Survey and several other sources. None of these had been gathered with Marxist concepts in mind. When the data analysis failed to generate anticipated results, I could therefore always say, “of course, the data were gathered in ‘bourgeois categories’ and this may explain why the hypotheses were not confirmed.” It was therefore a natural next step to generate new data, data that would be directly tailored to quantitatively “testing” hypotheses on class and its consequences within the Marxist tradition, data that would leave me

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no excuses. This was the central idea behind my first grant proposal for this project to the National Science Foundation in 1977.

The original NSF proposal was framed as an attempt to generate a set of data in which the Marxist and Weberian traditions of class analysis could directly engage each other. I argued in the proposal that there was a tremendous gap between *theoretical debates* in class analysis – which largely revolved around a dialogue between Marx and Weber – and *quantitative research* – which largely ignored Marxism altogether. To close this gap required two things: first, generating systematic data derived from a Marxist conceptual framework, and second, gathering the data comparatively. Since Marxist class analysis is, above all, rooted in the concept of class structure (rather than simply individual class attributes), we needed a sample of countries which varied structurally in certain ways in order to seriously explore Marxist themes.

As often occurs in research proposals, because of the need to frame issues in ways which the reviewers of the proposals will find compelling, this way of posing the agenda of the research did not really reflect my core reasons for wanting to do the project. Adjudication between general frameworks of social theory can rarely be accomplished in the form of head-to-head quantitative combat, since different theoretical frameworks generally are asking different questions. Furthermore, the gaps between concepts, questions and measures are nearly always too great for a direct adjudication between rival frameworks to yield robust and convincing results. The Marx/Weber debate, therefore, was always a somewhat artificial way of justifying the project, and it certainly has not (in my judgment) proven to be the most interesting line of empirical analysis. My theoretical motivations had much more to do with pushing Marxist class analysis forward on its own terrain – exploring problems such as cross-national variation in the permeability of class boundaries, the effects of class location and class biography on class consciousness, the variations across countries in patterns of ideological class formation, and so on.

Nevertheless, from the start a disproportionate amount of energy in the project in the United States as well as in many of the other countries has been devoted to the problem of *adjudicating conceptual issues* rather than *empirically investigating theoretical problems*. I have worried endlessly about the optimal way of conceptualizing the “middle class” which would both be coherent (i.e. be consistent with more abstract principles of Marxist theory) and empirically powerful. This preoccu-

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pation has sometimes displaced substantive theoretical concerns and it has been easy to lose sight of the real puzzles that need solving. Rather than delve deeply into the problem of trying to explain why workers in different countries display different degrees of radicalism, I have often worried more about how properly to define the category “working class” to be used in such an investigation. It was as if I felt that if only I could get the *concepts* right, then the theoretical issues would fall into place (or at least become more tractable). It now seems to me that often it is better to forge ahead and muddle through with somewhat less certain concepts than to devote such an inordinate amount of time attempting to reconstruct the concepts themselves. To paraphrase a comment once made about Talcott Parsons, it is a bad idea to keep repacking one’s bags for a trip that one never takes. It is better to get out the door even if you may have left something important behind.

The initial plan when I began the comparative class analysis project was to do a survey of class structure and class consciousness in the US and Italy jointly with a close friend from graduate school, Luca Perrone. In fact, one of the initial motivations for the project was our mutual desire to embark on a research project that would make it easy for us to see each other regularly. By the time the final NSF grant was awarded, Sweden had been added to the project as the result of a series of lectures I gave in Uppsala in 1978. Soon, scholars in other countries learned of the project, and through a meandering process, asked if they could replicate the survey. By 1982 surveys were completed or underway in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Norway, and shortly thereafter additional surveys were carried out in Australia, Denmark, Japan, New Zealand and West Germany. Tragically, Luca Perrone died in a skin diving accident in 1981 and so an Italian project was never completed. In the early 1990s an additional round of projects was organized in Russia, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan and, most recently, Portugal. A second US survey was fielded in 1991 and a new Swedish survey in 1995.

Without really intending this to happen, the US project became the coordinating node of a rapidly expanding network of class analysis projects around the world. Originally, this was meant to be a focussed, short-term project. In 1977 I had absolutely no intention of embarking on a megaproject that would eventually involve more than fifteen countries and millions of dollars. I thought that the project would take a few years, four or five at the most, and then I would return to other issues. It is now seventeen years later and the end is just now in sight.

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Has it really been worth it to spend this amount of time and resources on a single research enterprise? If twenty years ago, when I was finishing my dissertation and contemplating whether or not to launch the class analysis project, I was told that I would still be working on it in 1995, I would have immediately dropped the project in horror. Certainly there have been times during the years of this project when I was fed up with it, tired of worrying endlessly about the minutiae of measurement and only asking questions that could be answered with coefficients. Nevertheless, in the end, I do think that it has been worthwhile sticking with this project for so long. This is not mainly because of the hard “facts” generated by the research. If you simply made a list of all of the robust empirical discoveries of the research, it would be easy to conclude that the results were not worth the effort. While I hope to show in this book that many of these findings are interesting, I am not sure that by themselves they justify nearly two decades of work.

The real payoff from this project has come, I think, from the effects of thinking about the same ideas, concepts and puzzles for so long. I have returned countless times to the problem of the difference between Marxist and Weberian ideas about class, the meaning of exploitation and domination as analytical and normative issues in class analysis, the conceptual status of the “middle” class in a relational class framework, and so on. It is not that the simple “facts” generated by the regression equations directly inform these issues, but repeatedly grappling with the data has forced me to repeatedly grapple with these ideas. The long and meandering class analysis project has kept me focussed on a single cluster of ideas for much longer than I would have otherwise done, and this has led – I hope – to a level of insight which I otherwise would not have achieved.

There are several limitations in the analyses in this book which should be mentioned. First, even though this is a book about class written from a Marxist perspective, there are no empirical analyses of two important segments of the class structure: substantial owners of capital, and the more marginalized, impoverished segments of population, often loosely labeled the “underclass.” When I refer to the “capitalist class” in the empirical analyses I am, by and large, referring to relatively small employers, not to wealthy owners of investment portfolios. There is certainly no analysis of anything approaching the “ruling class.” Similarly, the analysis of the working class largely

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excludes the unemployed and people who are outside of the labor force (discouraged workers, people on welfare, etc.). The irony, of course, is that within the Marxist tradition the critique of capitalism is directed above all against the wealthiest segments of the capitalist class, and the moral condemnation of capitalism is grounded to a significant extent on the ways it perpetuates poverty. The limitations of sample surveys simply make it impossible to seriously explore either of these extremes within the class structure with the methods we will use in this study.

Second, aside from relatively brief sections in Chapter 2 and Chapter 14, there is almost no discussion of the problem of race and class in the book. Given how salient the problem of race is for class analysis in the United States, this is a significant and unfortunate absence. However, the relatively small sample size meant that there were too few African-Americans in the sample to do sophisticated analyses of the interactions of race and class. What is more, even if we had had a significantly larger sample, the restriction of the American sample to the labor force and housewives would have precluded investigation of the crucial race/class issue of the "underclass." Given these limitations, I felt I would not be able to push the empirical analysis of race and class forward using the data from the Comparative Class Analysis Project.

Third, there is a methodological problem that affects the book as a whole. Most of the data analyses reported in this book were originally prepared for journal articles. The earliest of these appeared in 1987, the last in 1995. As often happens when a series of quite different analyses are generated from the same data over an extended period of time, small shifts in variable construction and operational choices are made. In preparing the book manuscript, therefore, I had to make a decision: should I redo most of the previously completed analyses in order to render all of the chapters strictly consistent, or should I simply report the findings in their original form and make note of the shifts in operationalizations? There is no question that, in the absence of constraints, the first of these options would be the best. But I figured that it would probably delay the completion of the book by a minimum of six months and probably more, and given that there would be no substantive improvement in the ideas and insights of the research, this just did not seem worthwhile. So, in Ralph Waldo Emerson's spirit that "foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds," I have retained nearly all of the original analyses (except in a few cases where I discovered actual errors of one sort or another).

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Finally, in revising, extending and integrating the various empirical studies I had to decide whether or not to attempt to bring the discussion of relevant literatures up to date. The analyses wander all over the map – from friendships, to housework, to class consciousness, to the transformations of class structures. Since on some of these topics I was hardly a real expert even at the time I wrote the original papers, the thought of once again reviewing the literature on all of these disparate topics was extremely daunting. In any case, I was not prepared to redo the analyses in light of any new literature I might have discovered, and thus I decided to forgo the task entirely. In a number of cases, therefore, the discussions of the broader sociological literature is likely to be somewhat dated.

This project would not have been possible without the financial support from the National Science Foundation, which funded the initial gathering and public archiving of the data and much of the data analysis. The Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation also provided generous research support for data analysis throughout the research. In the late 1980s, grants from the Spencer Foundation and the MacArthur foundation made it possible to conduct the second US survey in conjunction with the Russian class analysis project.

There are countless people to whom I am deeply indebted for the research embodied in this book. Without the love and comradeship of Luca Perrone, the project would never have been launched in the first place. His quirky spirit is present throughout the book.

Michael Burawoy has been my most steadfast and supportive critic over the years, encouraging me both to be a hard-nosed quantomaniac and to keep the big ideas and political purposes always in mind. In reading the draft of parts of this book he urged me to keep the overblown concept-mongering to a minimum; too much grandiose theorizing, he warned, would distract readers from the empirical message of the research. I am afraid that I have only partially followed his advice: I have not excised metatheoretical and conceptual discussions from the book, but they are generally cordoned off in specific chapters.

My collaborators in the various national projects in the Comparative Class Analysis Project contributed enormously to the development of this research. Göran Ahrne, the principal director of the Swedish project in the 1980s, was especially involved in formulating questions and designing the intellectual agenda of the project from the start and