Introduction

Erik Olin Wright

In March 2001, on the BBC Radio 4 *Today* program, a report was presented discussing a new seven-category class scheme being used in the British Census. Listeners were invited to the BBC website to see what class they were in. Within a few days there were over 50,000 hits on the site, a record for this sort of thing. At least for the segment of the British population that listens to the BBC morning news, class remains a salient issue.

In the broadcast a number of people were interviewed. One police inspector responded to being told that he was now classified in class I along with doctors, lawyers, and chief executives of corporations, by saying, "Does it mean now I have to wear tennis whites when I go out to do my gardening?... I don't see myself socially or economically in the same class as them." In a subsequent "live chat" program with Professor David Rose of Essex University, the principal designer of the new Census categories, many people called up complaining about the coding scheme. A truck driver objected to being in class VII on the grounds that his job was quite skilled and he had to use new information technologies and computers in his work. David Rose explained that the classification was meant to capture differences in the nature of the employment contract and conditions of work, not the skill level of jobs, and truck drivers typically had quite insecure conditions of employment. Another person asked, "How can you have a sense of solidarity and consciousness when you're 'Five' or 'Seven'? Can you imagine the *Communist Manifesto* written by the University of Essex? 'The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of little internecine wars between class groups 1 and 2 and class groups 3 to 7?' Doesn't have the same ring does it?"

These comments by listeners on the BBC reflect the general ambiguity of the term "class" in the popular imagination. To some people it connotes lifestyle and tastes, the wearing of tennis whites while gardening. To others it is mainly about social status, esteem and respect: to be reclassified "down" the class hierarchy is seen as demeaning. Some see classes as social categories engaged in collective forms of conflict, shaping the

destiny of society. Politicians call for "middle-class tax cuts" by which they simply mean "tax cuts for people in the middle range of the income distribution." And many people, like David Rose, see class as identifying the basic determinants of a person's economic prospects.

These ambiguities in popular usages are also present in more academic discussions of class. The *word* class is deployed in a wide range of descriptive and explanatory contexts in sociology, just as it is in popular discourse, and of course, depending upon the context, different *concepts* of class may be needed. Given this diversity of the explanatory and descriptive tasks within which the word class appears, it is easy to see why debates over class are often confusing. Sometimes, of course, there is a genuine debate: alternative proposals for what concepts are needed to answer the same question are in dispute. Other times, however, the debate simply reflects different agendas. Some sociologists proclaim that class is disappearing, by which they mean that people are less likely to form stable identities in class terms and thus less likely to orient their political behavior on the basis of class, while others proclaim that class remains an enduring feature of contemporary society, by which they mean that a person's economic prospects in life continue to depend significantly on their relationship to economically valuable assets of various sorts.

The central objective of this book is to clarify the complex array of alternative conceptualizations of class rooted in different theoretical traditions of class analysis. Each of the authors in the book has written extensively on problems of class and inequality within different traditions of class analysis. Each has been given the assignment of writing a kind of theoretical manifesto for a particular kind of class analysis. The goal is to clarify the theoretical foundations of their preferred approach: lay out the underlying assumptions, systematically define each conceptual element, demarcate the explanatory ambitions of the concept and, where possible, differentiate their approach from others. While to a greater or lesser extent most of the approaches have their roots in an intellectual tradition linked to some classical social theorist – Marx, Weber, Durkheim – the chapters are not primarily discussions of the concept of class within the texts of these founding figures. Nor are they meant to be authoritative canonical statements about what counts as genuine "Marxist" or "Weberian" or any other kind of class analysis. Each of these traditions has considerable internal variation and, accordingly, the concept of class will be elaborated in different ways by different scholars all claiming to be working within the same broad current of thought. The authors were also instructed not to present the kind of extended "reviews of the literature" one might find in a sociological textbook on social class. What each chapter attempts to do is elaborate the analytical foundations of the

conceptualization of class within each author's body of work, and by doing so, clarify the broader terrain of variation within class analysis.

Six different perspectives are presented. Chapter 1, by Erik Olin Wright, explores an approach to class analysis within the Marxist tradition. Here the central idea is defining the concept of class in terms of processes of exploitation and linking the concept to alternative systems of economic relations. Chapter 2, by Richard Breen, examines a form of class analysis linked to the Weberian tradition and associated with the work of the British sociologist John Goldthorpe. The central concern here is developing a concept of class built around the economic life chances of people, more specifically around the character of the employment relations available within labor markets and work organizations. Chapter 3, by David Grusky, develops a class analysis that he sees as located within the Durkheimian tradition of sociological theory. The guiding principle is the ways in which detailed locations within the occupational division of labor create homogeneous effects on the lives of people. Class locations are then identified with these highly disaggregated categories within systems of stratification. Chapter 4, by Elliot Weininger, lays out the central principles of class analysis identified with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In Bourdieu's framework, class is defined with respect to a variety of dimensions of "capital," where capital is understood as a multidimensional space of power-conferring resources that shape both the opportunities and the dispositions of actors. Chapter 5, by Aage Sørensen, presents an approach to class analysis that draws heavily on the reasoning of neoclassical economics, especially the notion of economic "rents." In this conceptualization of class, classes would not exist at all in a perfectly competitive market with complete information. Classes occur only where there are the kinds of market imperfections that create rents that can be captured by some groups of actors and not others. In Chapter 6, Jan Pakulski elaborates the foundations of what might be termed a "post-class analysis." He argues that class, especially as understood in the Marxist and Weberian traditions, is no longer an empirically useful category. Inequality may continue to be an important issue in contemporary society, but inequality, in his view, is no longer organized along class lines. Finally, the Conclusion to the book discusses how different traditions of class analysis are anchored in different central questions, and how this difference in questions underlies many of the differences in their concepts of class.

1 Foundations of a neo-Marxist class analysis

Erik Olin Wright

The concept of class has greater explanatory ambitions within the Marxist tradition than in any other tradition of social theory and this, in turn, places greater burdens on its theoretical foundations. In its most ambitious form, Marxists have argued that class – or very closely linked concepts like "mode of production" or "the economic base" – was at the center of a general theory of history, usually referred to as "historical materialism."[1] This theory attempted to explain within a unified framework a very wide range of social phenomena: the epochal trajectory of social change as well as social conflicts located in specific times and places, the macro-level institutional form of the state along with the micro-level subjective beliefs of individuals, large-scale revolutions as well as sit-down strikes. Expressions like "class struggle is the motor of history" and "the executive of the modern state is but a committee of the bourgeoisie" captured this ambitious claim of explanatory centrality for the concept of class.

Most Marxist scholars today have pulled back from the grandiose explanatory claims of historical materialism (if not necessarily from all of its explanatory aspirations). Few today defend stark versions of "class primacy." Nevertheless, it remains the case that class retains a distinctive centrality within the Marxist tradition and is called upon to do much more arduous explanatory work than in other theoretical traditions. Indeed, a good argument can be made that this, along with a specific orientation to radically egalitarian normative principles, is a large part of what defines the continuing distinctiveness and vitality of the Marxist tradition as a body of thought, particularly within sociology. It is for this reason that I have argued that "Marxism as class analysis" defines the core agenda of Marxist sociology.[2]

[1] The most systematic and rigorous exposition of the central tenets of historical materialism is Cohen (1978).
[2] For a more extended discussion of Marxism as class analysis, see Burawoy and Wright (2001) and Wright, Levine, and Sober (1993).

The task of this chapter is to lay out the central analytical foundations of the concept of class in a way that is broadly consistent with the Marxist tradition. This is a tricky business, for among writers who identify with Marxism there is no consensus on any of the core concepts of class analysis. What defines the tradition is more a loose commitment to the importance of class analysis for understanding the conditions for challenging capitalist oppressions and the language within which debates are waged – what Alvin Gouldner aptly called a "speech community" – than a precise set of definitions and propositions. Any claims about the theoretical foundations of Marxist class analysis which I make, therefore, will reflect my specific stance within that tradition rather than an authoritative account of "Marxism" in general or of the work of Karl Marx in particular.[3]

There will be two principal punchlines to the analysis: first, that the ingredient that most sharply distinguishes the Marxist conceptualization of class from other traditions is the concept of "exploitation," and second, that an exploitation-centered concept of class provides theoretically powerful tools for studying a range of problems in contemporary society. The goal of this chapter is to make these claims both intelligible and – hopefully – credible. Part I lays out what is the fundamental point of class analysis within Marxism, what it tries to accomplish. This is above all a question of clarifying the normative agenda to which class analysis is linked. In Part II we will carefully go through a series of conceptual clarifications that are needed to frame the specific analysis of class and exploitation. Some people may find this section a little pedantic, a bit like reading a dictionary in places, but I feel that it is necessary in order for the reasoning on which these concepts are based to be transparent. Part III specifies the core *common* explanatory claims of class analysis in both the Marxist and Weberian traditions. This will be helpful in setting the stage for the discussion in Part IV of the distinctive hallmark of the Marxist concept that differentiates it from its Weberian cousins and anchors the broader theoretical claims and agenda of Marxist class analysis. This will involve, above all, elaborating the concept of exploitation, one of the crucial causal mechanisms through which Marxists claim that class relations generate social effects. Finally, in Part V I will briefly lay out what I see as the pay-offs of the Marxian-inspired form of class analysis.

[3] There is a very large literature both of exegesis of Marx's own work on class and on varieties of class analysis within the broadly construed Marxist tradition. For an exegesis of Marx's treatment of class, see Cotreel (1984, Ch. 2). For a general review of alternative Marxist approaches, see Wright (1980b). For examples of Marxist class analyses that differ substantially from the approach outlined in this chapter, see Poulantzas (1975); Carchedi (1977); Resnick and Wolff (1987).

The big picture: what the Marxist concept of class is all about

At its core, class analysis within the Marxist tradition is rooted in a set of normative commitments to a form of radical egalitarianism. Historically, Marxists have generally been reluctant to systematically argue for these moral commitments. Marx himself felt that talk about "justice" and "morality" was unnecessary and perhaps even pernicious, believing that ideas about morality really just reflected material conditions and interests of actors. Rather than defend socialism on grounds of social justice or other normative principles, Marx preferred to simply argue that socialism was in the interests of the working class and that it was, in any case, the historical destiny of capitalism. Nevertheless, Marx's own writing is filled with moral judgment, moral outrage and moral vision. More significantly for present purposes, the Marxist tradition of class analysis gets much of its distinctive thrust from its link to a radical egalitarian normative agenda. In order to fully understand the theoretical foundations of the concept of class in the Marxist tradition, it is necessary, if only briefly, to clarify this normative dimension.

The underlying radical egalitarianism within Marxist class analysis can be expressed in terms of three theses. I will state these in a stripped-down form, without elaborate qualifications and amendments, since our purpose here is to clarify the character of the agenda of Marxist class analysis rather than to provide a defense of the theory itself:

Radical Egalitarianism thesis: Human flourishing would be broadly enhanced by a radically egalitarian distribution of the material conditions of life.[4] This thesis is captured by the classical distributional slogan advocated by Marx, "To each according to need, from each according to ability" and by the ideal of a "classless" society. This is the way material resources are distributed within egalitarian families: children with greater needs receive more resources, and everyone is expected to contribute as best they can to the tasks needed by the family. This is also the way books are distributed in public libraries: you check out what you need, not what you can afford. The radical egalitarianism of the Marxist tradition affirms that human flourishing in general would be enhanced if these principles could be generalized to the society as a whole.[5]

[4] The radical egalitarianism thesis as stated here is not, in and of itself, a thesis about *justice*. The claim is that human beings will generally flourish better under such egalitarian conditions than under conditions of inequality and hierarchy, but it does not stipulate that it is a requirement of justice that such flourishing be promoted. I believe that this is a question of social justice, but that belief is not necessary in the present context.

[5] The question of precisely what is meant by "egalitarianism" and on what grounds this is a justified normative principle has been the subject of considerable debate, some of it

Historical possibility thesis: Under conditions of a highly productive economy, it becomes materially possible to organize society in such a way that there is a sustainable radically egalitarian distribution of the material conditions of life. Egalitarian normative principles within the Marxist tradition are thought not simply to reflect some kind of timeless human value, although they may be that as well, but are also meant to be embodied in a practical political project. Central to the Marxist theoretical project is thus the attempt to understand the conditions under which these moral ideals can feasibly be translated into social practice. Here the basic idea is that radical egalitarianism becomes increasingly feasible as a practical principle of social organization as the productive capacity of a society increases and absolute scarcity is reduced. In the strongest version of this thesis, the egalitarian ideals are strictly impossible to implement and sustain until material scarcity is largely overcome; in weaker versions all that is claimed is that high productivity makes a basic egalitarianism of material conditions of life more feasible.

Anti-capitalism thesis: Capitalism blocks the possibility of achieving a radically egalitarian distribution of the material conditions of life. One of the great achievements of capitalism is to develop human productive capacity to such an extent that it makes the radical egalitarianism needed for human flourishing materially feasible, yet capitalism also creates institutions and power relations that block the actual achievement of egalitarianism. This sets the stage for the great drama and tragedy of capitalist development: it is a process which continually enhances the material conditions for an expanded scope of human flourishing while simultaneously blocking the creation of the social conditions for realizing this potential. The political conclusion of classical Marxism is that these obstacles can only be overcome by destroying capitalism through a revolutionary rupture. More social democratic currents within the Marxist tradition accept the idea that capitalism is the enemy of equality, but reject the ruptural vision of change: capitalism can be transformed from within in ways which gradually move in the direction of a more profoundly egalitarian social order. The full realization of the radical egalitarian ideal may, of course, be a utopian fantasy. But even if "classlessness" is unachievable, "less classness" can be a central political objective, and this still requires challenging capitalism.

Each of these theses is controversial and in need of extended defense, but here I will treat them as assumptions that define the broadest context

informed by the Marxist tradition. For a general overview of the issues see Swift (2001). For a penetrating discussion of an egalitarian theory of justice infused with Marxist sensibilities, see Cohen (1995).

for thinking about the concept of class.[6] Whatever else the concept of class is meant to accomplish, within Marxist class analysis it is meant to facilitate understanding the conditions for the pursuit of this normative agenda. This means that the concept needs to be linked to a theory of capitalism, not just inequality, and it needs to be able to play a role in clarifying the dilemmas and possibilities of egalitarian alternatives to existing institutions.

Let us now turn to the elaboration of the conceptual components with which we can build a concept of class suitable for this agenda.

Conceptual components of class analysis

The word "class" is used both as a noun and as an adjective. As a noun, one might ask the question "What class do you think you are in?" and the answer might be "The working class." As an adjective, the word class modifies a range of concepts: class relations, class structure, class locations, class formation, class interests, class conflict, class consciousness. In general, as will become clear from the analysis that follows, I think the term class is much more productively used as an adjective. Indeed, I think it is usually the case that when people use the term as a noun, they are speaking elliptically. An expression such as "the working class," for example, is often just a shorthand for a more cumbersome expression such as "working-class locations within capitalist class relations," or perhaps "working-class collective organizations within class conflicts." In any case, I will generally use the term as an adjective and only use the generic term "class" when I am referring to the general conceptual field within which these more specific terms are located.

In order to lay the foundations of Marxist class analysis, therefore, we need to figure out exactly what we mean by this adjective. Here the pivotal concepts are class *relations* and class *structure*. Other terms in the

[6] The objections to these theses are fairly familiar. Against the *Radical Egalitarianism thesis* two sorts of arguments are frequently raised: First, even if it is true that equality promotes human flourishing, the redistribution of resources needed for material equality is unjust since it deprives some people of material advantages which they have rightfully acquired; and second, far from creating conditions for a flourishing of human potential, radical material equality would generate passivity, laziness, and uniformity. Against the *historical possibility thesis*, many people argue that high levels of economic productivity can only be sustained when people have significant material incentives to invest, both in skills and capital. Any significant move towards radical material equality, therefore, would be unsustainable since it would lead to a decline in material abundance itself. Finally, against the *anti-capitalism thesis*, critics argue that while it may be true that capitalism blocks radical moves towards equality of material conditions of life, it does not block human flourishing; to the contrary, capitalism offers individuals the maximum opportunity to make of their lives what they wish.

conceptual menu of class analysis – class conflict, class interests, class formation, class consciousness – all derive their meanings from their link to class relations and class structure. This does not mean that for all problems in class analysis, the purely structural concepts of class are more central. It can certainly be the case, for example, that in trying to explain variations over time and place in state policies across capitalist societies, the variations in class formation and class struggle will turn out to be more important than the variations in class structure as such. Still, at the conceptual foundation of class analysis is the problem of understanding class relations and class structure, and thus it is on this issue that we will focus here.

In what follows we will examine eight clusters of conceptual issues: 1. the concept of social relations of production; 2. the idea of class relations as a specific form of such relations; 3. the meaning of "variations" of class relations; 4. the problem of complexity in class relations; 5. the meaning of a "location" within class relations; 6. complexity in specifying class locations; 7. the distinction between micro- and macro-levels of class analysis; 8. class "agency." While, taken as a whole, these conceptual problems are particularly relevant to elaborating the concept of class within the Marxist tradition, many of them will be relevant to other agendas of class analysis as well.

Social relations of production

Any system of production requires the deployment of a range of assets or resources or factors of production: tools, machines, land, raw materials, labor power, skills, information, and so forth. This deployment can be described in *technical* terms as a production function – so many inputs of different kinds are combined in a specific process to produce an output of a specific kind. This is the characteristic way that economists think of systems of production. The deployment can also be described in *social relational* terms: the people that participate in production have different kinds of rights and powers over the use of the inputs and over the results of their use.[7] The actual ways in which inputs are combined and used

[7] By "powers" over productive resources I mean *effective control over the use and disposition* of the resources in question. The term "rights" provides the additional idea that these powers are viewed as legitimate and enforced by the state. The expression "property rights" thus means "effective powers over the use of property enforced by the state." In most contexts in a stable system of production relations there is a close connection between rights and powers, but it is possible that people have effective, durable control over resources without that control being recognized in formal legal terms as a property right. In any case, for most of the analysis proposed here it will not be necessary to emphasize the distinction between rights and powers, and thus I will generally use the terms together as a couplet.

in production depends as much on the way these rights and powers are wielded as it does on the strictly technical features of a production function. The sum total of these rights and powers constitutes the "social relations of production."

It is important to keep in mind that these rights and powers over resources are attributes of social relations, not descriptions of the relationship of people to things as such: to have rights and powers with respect to land, for example, defines one's social relationship to other people with respect to the use of the land and the appropriation of the fruits of using the land productively. This means that the power relations involved in the social relations of production concern the ways in which the activities of people are regulated and controlled, not simply the distribution of a range of valuable things.

Class relations as a form of relations of production

When the rights and powers of people over productive resources are unequally distributed – when some people have greater rights/powers with respect to specific kinds of productive resources than do others – these relations can be described as class relations. The fundamental contrast in capitalist societies, for example, is between owners of means of production and owners of labor power, since "owning" is a description of rights and powers with respect to a resource deployed in production.

The rights and powers in question are not defined with respect to the ownership or control of things in general, but only of resources or assets *insofar as they are deployed in production*. A capitalist is not someone who simply owns machines, but someone who owns machines, deploys those machines in a production process, hires owners of labor power to use them, directs the process by which the machines are used to produce things, and appropriates the profits from the use of those machines. A collector of machines is not, by virtue of owning those machines, a capitalist. To count as a class relation it is therefore not sufficient that there be unequal rights and powers over the sheer possession of a resource. There must also be unequal rights and powers over the appropriation of the results of the use of that resource. In general this implies appropriating income generated by the deployment of the resource in question.

Variations in class relations

In some ways of using the term "class," it makes little sense to talk about qualitatively different *kinds* of class relations. Classes are simply identified with some universal, generic categories like "the haves" and "the have