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 is based on the conviction that class is a pervasive social cause and thus it is worth exploring its ramifications for many social phenomena, but not that it is universally the most important. 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.

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 provides a central part of the explanation of what can be termed the epochal trajectory of human history. The aphorism "class struggle is the motor of history" captures this idea. 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.

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 frought with contradictions that point towards a socialist future may form part of the intellectual backdrop to Marxist scholarship, most actual research brackets these arguments and, instead, focuses 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.

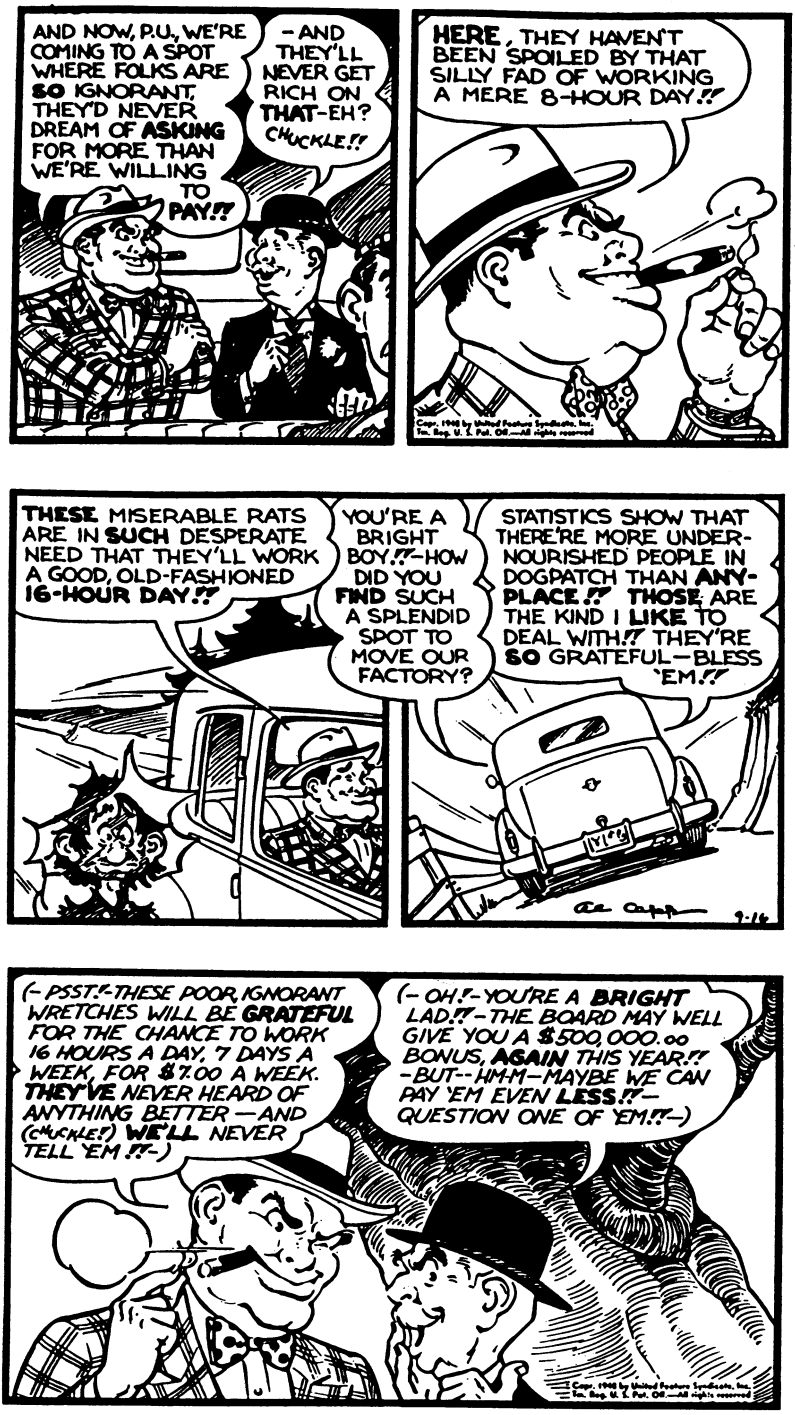
In chapter 10 we will explore a general model of the interconnections among these elements. The discussion in this chapter will be restricted to the problem of class structure. This is not because I believe that class structure is always the most important explanatory principle within class analysis. 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

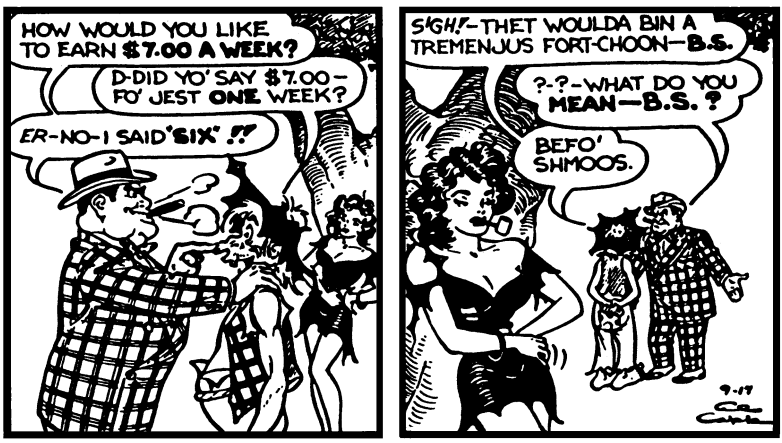
of collective actors organized around class interests within class structures; class struggle is the struggle between such collectively organized actors over class interests; class consciousness is the understanding by people within a class of their class interests. In each case one must already have 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.

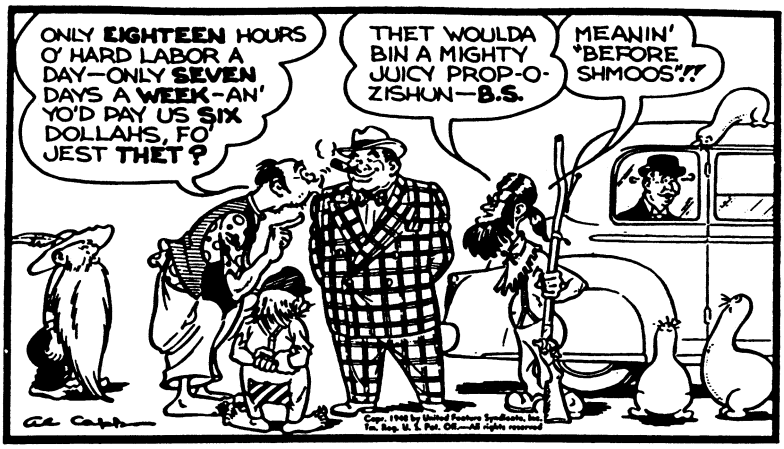
1.1 The parable of the shmoo

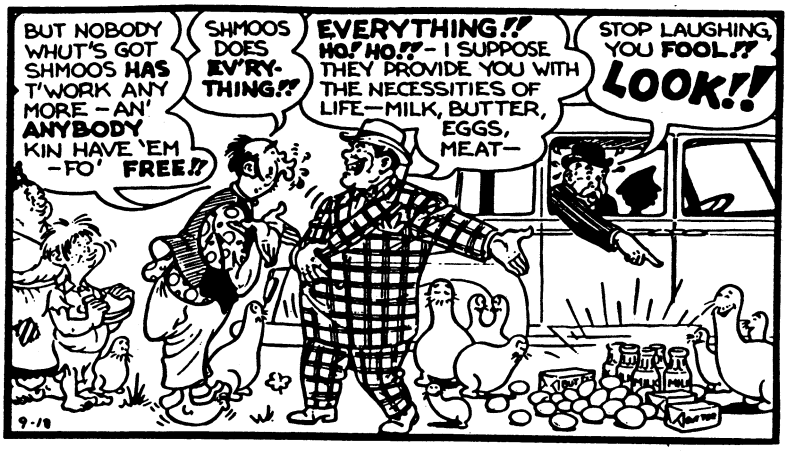
A story from the *Li'l Abner* comic strips from the late 1940s will help to set the stage for the discussion of the concept of class structure. Here is the situation of the episode: Li'l Abner, a resident of the hill-billy community of Dogpatch, discovers a strange and wonderful creature, the "shmoo," and brings a herd of them back to Dogpatch. The shmoos' sole desire in life is to please humans by transforming themselves 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 is 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 brow." 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 the following sequence of comic strips from 1948 (Al Capp 1992: 134–136).









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.

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. Let us look at this antagonism a bit more closely by examining the preferences of capitalists and workers towards the fate of the shmoo. Consider four possible distributions of shmoos: everyone gets a shmoo; only capitalists get shmoos; only workers get shmoos; and the shmoos are destroyed so no one gets them. Table 1.1 indicates the preference orderings for the fate of shmoos on the assumption that both workers and capitalists are rational and only interested in their own material welfare.[1] They are thus neither altruistic nor spiteful; the actors are motivated only by the pure, rational egoism found typically in neoclassical economics. For capitalists, their first preference is that they alone get the shmoos, since they would obviously be slightly better off with shmoos then without them. Their second preference is

[1] This preference ordering assumes that the shmoo provides only for basic necessities. For a discussion of the issues in conditions where the generosity of shmoos can vary, see Wright (1997: 5–7).

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

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

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. Given that the shmoo only provides for basic necessities, not luxuries, many workers will still want to work for wages in order to have discretionary income. Such 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 the 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. This is a remarkable correspondance, for it is derived not from any special assumptions about the virtues, high-mindedness or altruism of workers, but simply from the objective parameters of the class situation.

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." This does not imply that profits are solely "derived" from exploitation or that the degree of exploitation is the only determinant of the level of profits. But it does mean that exploitation is one of the necessary conditions for profits in a capitalist economy.

Exploiting classes thus have an interest 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 quasi-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. 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 interests of capitalists. Why? Because it undermines their capacity to exploit the labor power of workers. "Exploitation" is thus a key concept for understanding the nature of the antagonistic 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 interdependency 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 principle criteria:

(i) *The inverse interdependent welfare principle*: the material welfare of exploiters causally depends on the material deprivations of the exploited. The welfare of the exploiter is at the expense of the exploited.

(ii) *The exclusion principle*: the causal relation that generates principle (i) involves the asymmetrical exclusion of the exploited from access to and control over certain important productive resources. Typically this exclusion is backed by force in the form of property rights, but in special cases it may not be.

(iii) *The appropriation principle*: the causal mechanism which translates (ii) exclusion into (i) differential welfare involves the appropriation of the fruits of labor of the exploited by those who control the relevant productive resources.[2] This appropriation is also often referred to as the appropriation of the "surplus product."

This is a fairly complex set of conditions. Condition (i) establishes the antagonism of material interests. Condition (ii) 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" among equals from the domain of possible exploitations. Condition (iii) establishes the specific mechanism by which the interdependent, antagonistic material interests are generated. The welfare of the exploiter depends upon the *effort* of the exploited, not merely the deprivations of the exploited.

If only the first two of these conditions are met we have what can be called "nonexploitative economic oppression," but not "exploitation." In nonexploitative economic oppression there is no transfer of the fruits of

[2] 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 are exclusively determined by labor effort, as claimed in the labor theory of value. For a discussion of this way of understanding the appropriation of the fruits of labor, see Cohen (1988: 209–238). For a discussion of the concept of "surplus" as it bears on the problem of exploitation as defined here, see Wright (1997: 14–17).