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1 Introduction

Class is an embarrassing and unsettling subject. In many social situations it would be considered insensitive to refer to class, particularly to the class of someone to whom we are talking or who is within earshot. Unless they happen to be sociologists it is rare for people to ask others what class they are, not merely because it's usually obvious, but because it can seem rude to do so. It is significant that when we do mention it we generally use the euphemisms of 'working' class for lower class and 'middle' to include upper class. The embarrassment reflects the morally problematic nature of class, deriving from the fact that people's life-chances and who they become are strongly influenced by the accident of their natal class and the inequalities which follow from this. While we may want to say that class should not be seen as having anything to do with worth, this only makes the existence of class inequalities more troubling: how is it that our life-prospects, be they bleak or bright, have so little to do with what we need or deserve? Such questions are posed by the everyday experience of class, especially our relations with others of different classes.

Class matters to us not only because of differences in material wealth and economic security, but also because it affects our access to things, relationships, experiences and practices which we have reason to value, and hence our chances of living a fulfilling life. At the same time it affects how others value us and respond to us, which in turn affects our sense of self-worth. We are evaluative beings, continually monitoring and assessing our behaviour and that of others, needing their approval and respect, but in contemporary society this takes place in the context of inequalities such as those of class, gender and 'race' which affect both what we are able to do and how we are judged. Condescension, deference, shame, guilt, envy, resentment, arrogance, contempt, fear and mistrust, or simply mutual incomprehension and avoidance, typify relations between people of different classes. Some people may be, or want to be, respectful, considerate and warm to individuals from other classes, but the inequalities themselves are likely to frustrate their attempts by tainting them with suspicions of condescension, disrespect or unwanted familiarity. In

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responding in more or less subtle ways to others' class we are of course reacting to circumstances largely beyond their control, indeed to the accident of birth. To the extent that people are aware of this fact it can hardly fail to colour their feelings about class. All these things account for the common embarrassment and evasion that surrounds its discussion. Like it or not, class raises issues of how people are valued in a context in which their life-chances and achievements are objectively affected by factors which have little to do with their moral qualities or other merits.

In this book I attempt to analyse and explain the often-suppressed moral dimension of the subjective experience of class, and why it is significant. This dimension is implicit in many studies of this topic by sociologists, but is often overshadowed by emphases on the habitual character of behaviour, the pursuit of self-interest and power, and the influence of prevailing discourses. While all these are important, I want both to highlight the moral dimensions of actors' behaviour and struggles, and to analyse the lay normative ideas and sentiments that lie behind them in terms of their rationales. This is an analysis of how class inequalities influence people's commitments and their valuation and pursuit of goods, their ethical dispositions and their treatment of others, and how these in turn influence the reproduction or transformation of those inequalities. These are not simply mere facts about people; they clearly *matter* to them a great deal. They are things that they care about, and which make a difference to their well-being, indeed they are crucial to their identity or self-hood.

To analyse them I shall draw not only on existing work in sociology and social theory but on moral philosophy. This is an unusual combination but one that I feel is warranted by the complementarities in their strengths and weaknesses: insofar as sociology takes an interest in lay normative thought and feelings ('lay normativity', for short) it tends to be more interested in their social coordinates and in their implications for social order than in their actual rationales; on the other hand, in focusing on these rationales, moral philosophy tends to abstract moral concepts and sentiments from their social context, producing an individualistic analysis which imputes more responsibility to individuals than they can reasonably be expected to exercise. (Ironically, in view of the difference in degree of abstraction, this tendency to exaggerate the responsibility of individuals is common in lay thought too.) By these means, I hope not only to deepen understanding of class but to improve social theory's ability to illuminate lay normativity.

People's normative concerns in relation to class go beyond the unequal distribution of material goods and recognition and respect, to questions of just what is good in terms of ways of life, practices, objects, behaviours

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and types of character that people see as desirable. According to their class, gender, 'race', ethnicity and other social divisions, some may feel that they are achieving these goods, others that they lie beyond their reach. Actors compete and struggle both *for* such goods, that is compete for things which are agreed to be worthwhile, and over the definition of what *is* valuable or worthwhile. Some may want mainly the goods that the dominant groups monopolise, others may care most about different kinds of goods. I shall argue that we cannot understand these struggles purely in terms of a Hobbesian pursuit of advantage in terms of economic, cultural and social capital, as argued by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984). Although achieving these goods may bring power, recognition and perhaps envy, actors may pursue them for their own value too. The struggles are not merely for power and status but are about how to live.

People experience class in relation to others partly via moral and immoral sentiments or emotions such as benevolence, respect, compassion, pride and envy, contempt and shame. Such emotions should not be seen as counterposed to reason: as many philosophers have argued, they are about something; they are embodied evaluative judgements of matters influencing people's well-being and that of others. Thus a feeling of shame may reflect awareness of our lack of something that we and others value, which causes those who do have it to regard us as inferior. Compassion is a response to someone's undeserved suffering. Different moral sentiments have different normative structures and analysing these can tell us something about the situations in which they are produced. Moreover, insofar as moral sentiments are a response to people's circumstances and how they are treated, we can expect them to vary in their distribution roughly according to individuals' position in the social field. One of my main objectives is to suggest how this works out, though it would be too much to say that there is a 'logic' to this. While there might be some pattern to such feelings, reflecting common forms of reasoning, the sentiments and reasoning are as likely to involve slippages, blockages, non-sequiturs and wishful thinking, as logical inferences supported by evidence. For example, where there is a desire on the part of those in subordinate positions to be generous in spirit and to avoid the discontent that accompanies resentment, it may prompt a refusal to regard the advantages of the dominant as undeserved, no matter how strong the evidence to the contrary. As Bourdieu recognised, in the face of deeply embedded undeserved inequalities, resistance may be more painful and less rewarding than compliance and deference; practical pressures may obstruct the following of reason (Bourdieu, 1984).

However, nonconformity and resistance are not unusual; actors may be able to think beyond their own social position and self-interest, and moral

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ideas are one of the main resources in enabling them to do this. Insofar as our moral education, both formal and informal, encourages us to treat others with respect and as of equal moral worth, we confront a society in which people are manifestly not treated equally at the level either of distribution of resources or of recognition. Thus, class differences, like gender differences, conflict with moral principles and dispositions supporting equal recognition and respect. Of course, lay morality is itself inconsistent and often supports unjustified inequalities, wrongly imagining them, as in the case of gender inequality, to be naturally based. But scarcely anyone supposes that class differences have a natural basis.

There is a tension running throughout the book. It results from focusing on the moral significance of class while insisting on class's non-moral determinants. But I shall argue that this tension is generated by the nature of class itself and underpins popular unease and ambivalence about class. Class lacks a moral justification, but people of different classes are likely to feel obliged to justify their differences. This is problematic for them, because of the huge influence of natal class and the mechanisms of class reproduction and symbolic domination – neither of which reflects moral differences. They may seek to make sense of this either by ignoring these mechanisms and imagining class differences to reflect differences in moral worth or other kinds of merit, or by facing up to their own moral luck and acknowledging the undeserved nature of their advantages or disadvantages. Often, actors appeal to a mixture of both kinds of argument, and experience varying degrees of discomfort, embarrassment, resentment, shame and guilt about it, though some may feel proud of their class position. Some may see themselves as equals rather than inferior or superior, and want to be seen as such. Some may seek advantages over others. Some may assertively demand respect while others may deferentially seek respectability. Many may attempt to distinguish themselves from others through moral boundary drawing, claiming virtues for themselves and imputing vices to their others.

In their more reflective moments people may call upon and develop 'folk sociologies' to explain the behaviour and characteristics of others, particularly the behaviour of members of other classes which they find problematic. They may simply attribute it to class position, perhaps on the basis of simple stereotyping, but they sometimes take into account the effects of moral luck in terms of class position, so that they can judge others either to have done well or badly because of their class advantages or disadvantages, or well or badly despite them. While they may regard class as an influence on behaviour they usually also want to say that people have some responsibility for their behaviour and fortunes, so that class disadvantages do not excuse anti-social behaviour. They may sometimes

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try to distinguish their disapproval of such behaviour from their feelings about the class identity of the actor, so that they condemn them for their behaviour and not their class identity. These explanations, distinctions and evaluations are inherently difficult, yet people sometimes reflect on them in trying to make sense of social inequalities, and they may make a difference to their own behaviour and self-evaluation.

This project therefore requires us to take lay normativity seriously, particularly regarding the ethics of everyday life, and attend to its content and internal rationales. Given the dominance in recent sociology of accounts that marginalise these matters and emphasise habitual action, interest-driven behaviour and the internalisation of prevailing discursive scripts, this emphasis perhaps requires some justification. I am not the first to call for more attention to be paid to the moral dimension of social life. Authors such as Alvin Gouldner (1971), Janet Finch (1989), Zygmunt Bauman (2001), Carol Smart and Bren Neale (1999), Ralph Fevre (2000) and Jane Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2003) and many others have done so too. However, these tend not to have been followed up. There is also scepticism in some quarters about the continuing usefulness of concepts of class. Let me address these in turn.

Lay normativity

> [W]ithout a categorical opening to the normative standpoint from which subjects themselves evaluate the social order, theory remains completely cut off from a dimension of social discontent that it should always be able to call upon. (Axel Honneth, 2003, p. 134)

In everyday life, the most important questions tend to be normative ones. Of course we need to have a positive practical knowledge of what there is and of how at least some things work, but unless we are particularly curious, or are involved in education, these things matter less to us than questions of what is good or bad, how we or others should behave and what we or others should do. This is not to suppose that we always need to think directly about such things, for we tend to have 'a feel for the game', as Bourdieu would say, although we are likely to be pulled up and made to reflect upon things that happen to us that seem wrong or out of order.

Social scientists are taught to adopt and prioritise the positive point of view and, unless they also read philosophy, to suppress normative reasoning. The gradual separation of positive and normative thought that has occurred over the last 200 years in social science has involved not only an attempted (though incomplete) expulsion of values from science, but

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an expulsion of science or reason from values, so that values appear to be mere primitive, subjective beliefs, beyond the scope of reason.[1] This de-rationalisation of values is at odds with the fact that when necessary, as in the case of perceived injustices, we do reason about values, and not by appeal to personal preferences or mere convention.

This divorce of normative and positive thought has rendered much of critical social science unable to identify not only its own normative standpoints but the normative concerns, distinctions and valuations that figure so prominently in the lives of the people it studies. Consequently, social scientists are prone to theory/practice contradictions, that is, to producing accounts of action which do not fit their own mundane behaviour, and which they could not themselves live. Thus, while the behaviour of others is explained in terms of social positioning and discourses – in effect, implying 'they would say/do that, wouldn't they' – sociologists generally explain their own behaviour, like everyone else, by justifying it.[2] They do not, for example, say that the arguments that they put forward in sociological debate are no more than products of their position or self-interest. In the face of such theory/practice contradictions '. . . we ought to examine what has been said by applying it to what we do and how we live; and if it harmonizes with what we do, we should accept it, but if it conflicts we should count it [mere] words' (Aristotle, cited in Griswold, 1999, p. 49).[3]

Of course there are indeed important respects in which our justifications are indeed influenced by our social position and by wider discourses, but reflexivity is needed not only to examine such influences, but also in the opposite direction, to examine what they do *not* explain, that is, how everyday situations often require us to justify what we do.

Lay normativity should be taken seriously precisely because it matters to people, and it matters to them because it is about things that seriously affect their well-being. The struggles of the social field, between different groups, classes, genders and ethnicities, certainly involve habitual action and the pursuit of power, but they also have a range of normative rationales, which matter greatly to actors, as they are implicated in their commitments, identities and ways of life. Those rationales concern what is of value, how to live, what is worth striving for and what is not. It might seem that these are just different 'values', only important in

[1] The early founders of the social sciences combined positive and normative discourses seamlessly (see O'Neill, 1998; Barbalet, 2001).
[2] See Manent, for a profound historical analysis of the development of this spectator view of action in social science (Manent, 1998).
[3] Similarly, Marx comments: 'The idea of *one* basis for life and another for *science* is from the very outset a lie' (Marx, 1975, p. 355).

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terms of how they correlate with social position. There is certainly some interesting sociological research on this, for example, in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu and Michèle Lamont (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont, 1992, 2000), but what matters to people is whether these different values are defensible, and whether what they imply for well-being is true. There may be specific worries such as how they should bring up their children (Lareau, 2003; Reay, 1998b; Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989), concerns about whether others are treating them fairly and respectfully (Skeggs, 1997), or reflections on the way their lives are going in terms of balancing goods such as friendship and achievement (Archer, 2003).

Thus, if we are to understand lay normativity we need to go beyond a sociological reductionism which deflates and demeans lay justifications or rationales for beliefs and actions. Actors' rationales may indeed sometimes be little more than rationalisations of their position: the economically successful would value achievement, wouldn't they?; and the poor would say that other things than money are more important, wouldn't they? But while we all are capable of rationalisation, we are also sometimes capable of taking different views from the ones that fit our position most comfortably. Sociologists often do this themselves but are occupationally inclined to assume that those they study do not. I shall argue that it is as important to acknowledge how far moral evaluations of self and others are independent of class as it is to acknowledge how far they relate and respond to class. Indeed, it is only in virtue of this dual nature of lay moral judgements that we can understand why class is also a matter of embarrassment, resentment and shame. This is not to say that people necessarily have particularly coherent normative ideas. They tend to be disparate and sometimes inconsistent; middle class people may both resent snobbery from those more highly placed and be snobbish towards those below them. But however incoherent, the rationales are important in themselves, and as actors ourselves, we can hardly avoid engaging with them at least sometimes.

To be sure the rationales are to be found within available discourses, but they are more than mere internalised and memorised bits of social scripts. Discourses derive from and relate to a wider range of situations than those directly experienced by the individuals who use them, thereby allowing them vicarious access to the world beyond them. While they constrain thought in certain ways, they are also open to different interpretations and uses, and endless innovation and deformation, and they tend to contain inconsistencies and contradictions, making them open to challenge from within. Although they structure perception they do not necessarily prevent identification of false claims; for example, just because someone believes that the social world is organised on a meritocratic

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basis, it does not mean that no experience could ever lead them to have doubts about this. Many of the discourses relating to inequalities are also clearly normative, and normative discourse presupposes a discernible *difference* between what ought to be and what is – otherwise they would be redundant. Thus, feminism has developed an enormously rich critique of gender orders, showing, in effect, how patriarchal assumptions that legitimised and valued gender differences were ideological. In so doing it has not merely provided an alternative set of values which we can take or leave like individual preferences for colours, but has demonstrated that assumptions about what was good about traditional roles of women and men were *mistaken*, i.e., untrue, in that they had no natural basis and caused suffering and limitation of capacities rather than flourishing or well-being. As such it provides a compelling alternative moral discourse with which actors can engage.

The main kind of normativity that I shall focus on, and the most important one for our well-being, is concerned with morality. By morality I mean simply the matter of what kinds of behaviour are good, and thus how we should treat others and be treated by them. Moral feelings, ideas and norms about such things also imply and merge into what philosophers term 'conceptions of the good' – broader ideas or senses of how one should live – though in everyday life these are generally less coherent and explicit than philosophers assume. I shall follow older senses of 'morality' and include these implicit conceptions as part of what moral concerns are about. Some may prefer the term 'ethics' to 'morality'. Sometimes the two terms are assumed to correspond to a distinction between informal, embodied dispositions deriving from social life, perhaps from particular communities, and formal norms and rules, though confusingly the referents of the two terms are sometimes reversed. I shall be referring mainly to the informal embodied dispositions, but I shall use the adjectives 'moral' and 'ethical' interchangeably.[4]

To treat morality simply as a set of norms and rules, backed up by sanctions, which tend to produce social order, is to produce an alienated

[4] Following Hegel, it is also common to distinguish *moralität*, which identifies a universal conception of human needs or rationality against which existing social and political arrangements can be assessed, and *sittlichkeit*, in which 'the good of individuals – indeed, their very identity and capacity for moral agency – is bound up with the communities they belong to, and the particular social and political roles they occupy' (Kymlicka, 2002, p. 209). Hegel argued that *moralität* was too abstract to offer guidance and too individualistic, ignoring our embeddedness in communities. Of course, particular communal ethics may make claims to universality, and, conversely, universal claims may become part of a community's ethos, as at least partially seems to be the case with liberal societies. Another form of the distinction often made by political philosophers, particularly liberals, associates ethics with the good and morality with the right. This version of the distinction is very fuzzy and not useful for my purposes.

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conception of the moral dimension of social life, for it omits what matters to us and why morality should have any internal force. We don't treat others in a certain way simply because there are norms dictating that we should and because we fear sanctions if we don't. We also usually behave in a certain way because we sense that it is right, regardless of whether there are any penalties for not doing so, and because to do otherwise would cause some sort of harm.

In view of the prevalence of alienated conceptions of morality in sociology, in which it is viewed as of minor importance and as an external system of regulation of behaviour, and an inherently conservative and reactionary one at that, it is perhaps necessary to remember how important it is to our very identities and well-being. I would ask any readers who are accustomed to thinking of morality in this alienated way to pause and think awhile about the following questions:

- What matters to you in life – what do you care about?
- How do you feel you should be treated by others, and how do you feel you should treat them? Why do you get upset if someone mistreats you? And if you try to remonstrate and reason with them, how do you do this and through what kinds of argument? Why shouldn't they treat you like that?
- What kinds of behaviour would you feel ashamed of or guilty about and why?

It would be strange to claim that these are unimportant matters or ones that we could avoid, and there is nothing inherently conservative about them.[5] Considering them should bring home the gravity of morality and how it is tied up with our conceptions of ourselves and our happiness and well-being. Of course it is not usually simply other individuals that cause suffering and unhappiness but the very organisation of society, and its prevailing discourses with their taken-for-granted assumptions and ways of understanding, which pre-exist any particular individual and influence their identity. But these *matter* to us. The nature of these causes is important precisely because of the harm or good they do. Social science tends to be better at thinking about such causes than why they and their effects matter to us.

The moral dimension is unavoidable. Hardly any social relationship 'is intelligible without a recognition of the ethical responsibilities and obligations which it carries with it, and . . . much of our moral life is

[5] Nor need they have anything to do with religion. For those curious about the possible bases of a plea for taking morality seriously, I should perhaps point out that I am an atheist. I would argue that secularisation creates the possibility of our becoming responsible, reflective moral subjects instead of relying upon established religious authority and dogma for guidance, though of course we may fail to respond to this opportunity.

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made up of these kind of loyalties and commitments' (Norman, 1998, p. 216). Moreover,

> *Moral judgment is what we 'always already' exercise in virtue of being immersed in a network of human relationships that constitute our life together*. Whereas there can be reasonable debate about whether or not to exercise juridical, military, therapeutic, aesthetic or even political judgment, in the case of moral judgment this option is not there. The domain of the moral is so deeply enmeshed with those interactions that constitute our lifeworld that to withdraw from moral judgment is tantamount to ceasing to interact, to talk and act in the human community. (Benhabib, 1992, pp. 125–6, emphasis in original; see also Habermas, 1990)

Contemporary social scientists rarely talk about the moral dimension of social life. They are generally happier talking about the bad than the good, particularly about broad categories of exploitation, oppression and domination such as sexism and racism, and they tend to describe certain behaviours in these terms rather than in terms of virtues and vices such as kindness, sensitivity, callousness and selfishness. The emphasis on the bad rather than the good is not surprising, as it is what most needs attention.[6] Also, many of these bad things arise not out of ill will but on the basis of customs and practices, some of which are widely assumed to be justified, indeed as 'moral' or having some basis in nature. On the one hand, it therefore seems reasonable to by-pass their moral significance and provide a more political focus on the structures and discourses which reproduce them. On the other hand, if they did not produce some kind of mistreatment or limitation of people's capacities they would not be considered as problems. And without morality, any politics is directionless – as capable of increasing oppression as reducing it.[7]

Moral norms and sentiments or emotions are of course culturally variable, but this requires careful consideration. The specific practices about which actors feel proud or ashamed, the specific properties of which they approve or disapprove, the specific conventional forms of showing respect and disrespect, are all of course culturally variable, but emotions like pride and shame, respect and disrespect, along with more primitive ones like fear and security, appear to be transcultural. The variation seems to be less in the emotions themselves than in their referents or stimuli, but

[6] By contrast, moral philosophers – particularly Anglo-American ones – say remarkably little about evil, generally assuming that all that needs to be said about it is that it is the absence of good. Thus, with a few exceptions (e.g., Glover, 1999), one reads little in moral philosophy about the worst evils of modern society. These complementary deficiencies of moral philosophy and sociology cry out for a dialogue.

[7] As Carol Steedman (1985) notes, to enter the arena of subjectivity is not to abandon the political – on the contrary, subjectivity is a precondition of politics.

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