Themes for first session of Class Analysis Seminar

1. The problem of concepts and definitions

- Contrast between <u>concept formation</u> and <u>theory construction</u>
- Sociologists often take their concepts off the shelf
- The concept of class is a good one in which to really worry about the nature of concepts, what it means to refine the definitions, how to link the concept of class to an array of other concepts
- Note that there are different kinds of concepts: ideal types; heuristic concepts that are useful for developing a model; what can be called "realist concepts" – basically concepts which attempt to identify a causal mechanism of some sort.
- Defining and specifying a concept is always a question to <u>generating conceptual maps</u> – locating a concept with respect to others. For example, consider Weber's concept of class: the famous class vs status vs party. Part of the task of defining "class" is to differentiate it crisply from these two contrasts. Weber is a bit vague about this; I propose a specific way of doing this in a piece we will read in a few weeks. Another example: the current tendency to conceptualize the triplet class/gender/race. This is the problem of typology-mongering. I have proposed quite a few different mappings of the location of the concept of class. My first one was a tree structure:

Table 1. Theoretical Location of the Concept of Class in Weber's Explicit Formulations in *Economy and Society*

Sphere of Social Interaction[a]	Category That Locates Individuals within the Distribution of Power	Attributes Intrinsic to Categories of the Distribution of Power		
		Objective Properties	*Subjective Identity*	*Collective Action*
Economic	*Class*	Yes	No	No
Communal	*Status group*	Yes	Yes	No
Political	*Party*	Yes	Yes	Yes

[a] Weber's terms for these spheres are "economic order," "social order" or "sphere of the distribution of honor," and "sphere of power" (Weber [1922] 1978:938).

Classes are defined primarily in terms of *gradations* (1) vs. Classes are defined primarily in terms of *relations*

Class relations are analyzed primarily in terms of the *market* (2) vs. Class relations are analyzed primarily within *production*

Production is analyzed primarily in terms of the *technical division of labor* (3) vs. Production is analyzed primarily in terms of *authority relations* (4) vs. Production is analyzed primarily as a system of *exploitation* (5)
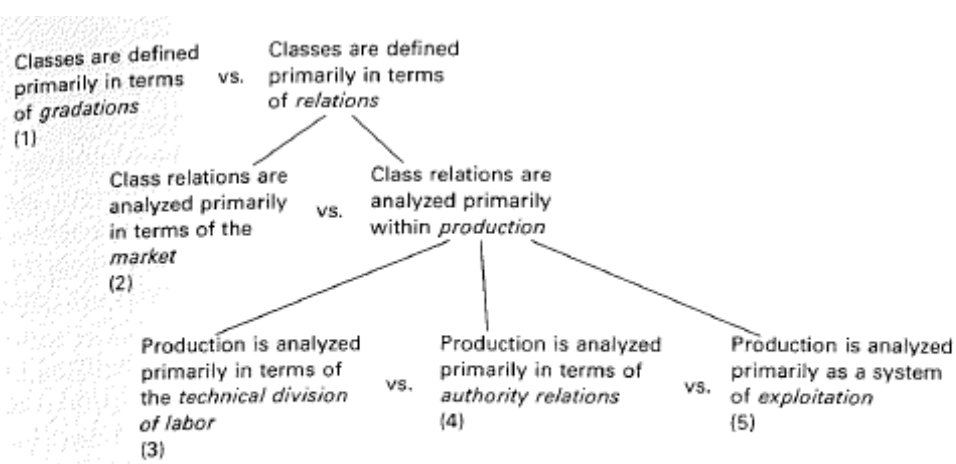
Figure 1.1.   A typology of definitions of class.

2. <u>The ambitiousness of the concept of class</u>:

how much work does it try to do. In Marxism – at least in some currents of Marxism – class is at the very core of a far-reaching explanatory structure; in other traditions, class is just a variable. In each thing we read, try to figure out how much work the concept does within the tradition. This is linked to what I have sometimes called Independent vs dependent variable class analysis – class as a core explanatory mechanism vs class as something you explain.

3. <u>Normative considerations</u>:

Class is always bound up with normative issues, with moral questions. Why do we care about it? What sorts of inequality does the problem of class tap? One big contrast here centers on understandings of class in terms of <u>inequalities of opportunity</u> and understandings in terms of <u>exploitation</u>. This is a theme we will explore throughout the semester.

4. <u>Some thoughts on readings & discussions</u>:

- Always read with an eye to what you can learn from a reading. This is not a call to quell your critical passion, but I think it is always trying to recover the rational kernel even in work you dislike. All of the things we will read are serious, careful pieces of scholarship – they are the results of concentrated, rigorous thinking. So, try to figure out what is worthwhile and insightful.
- This is also important for you as future teachers, for this is a pivotal skill in working with students: you need to figure out what is good in a students work, not just point out the flaws.
- In classroom discussions, listen carefully to what is being said. Good listening is often harder than good speech-making.