

**Lecture 5, Sociology 621**  
**WHAT IS CLASS?**  
**February 1, 2017**

**I. The Problem: Words, Concepts & Theories**

For nearly four decades I have been fussing and worrying about the concept of class. This began in an innocent enough way: I had a practical problem – I wanted to prove to mainstream sociologists that a Marxist class analysis was superior to sociology’s stratification analysis of inequality. The point of the battle was to create more space for Marxist work in sociology. I knew that to demonstrate the superiority of Marxist concepts convincingly I would have to play the game according to the established rules, and this meant I had to figure out how to operationalize Marxist class concepts and use them in quantitative research. My plan was to show that Marxist class categories explained income inequality better than the conventional sociological stratification categories. As soon as I began trying to do this I came across the pesky problem of the “middle class”. If I was to create a regression equation predicting income on the basis of class, I needed to put everyone in a class category. Where should I put managers? Engineers? Professors? Dealing with this nuts-and-bolts empirical task is what provoked the search for a coherent solution to the conceptual problem of how to elaborate and reconstruct the Marxist concept.

This effort immediately led to two tasks that I have worked on in various ways since the 1970s :

1. demarcating the Marxist concept of class from other concepts
2. producing a complex concept of class structure: from binary classes to a complex map of class locations

In this lecture we will focus on the first of these. In lecture 7 we will look at the second.

The task of drawing the conceptual lines of demarcation between Marxist class concepts and various alternatives turns out to be a very general problem in building concepts: figuring out the logical structure of a space of conceptual alternatives. This is especially important where the same *word* is used to specify very different kinds of concepts, which is certainly the case in the discussion of class.

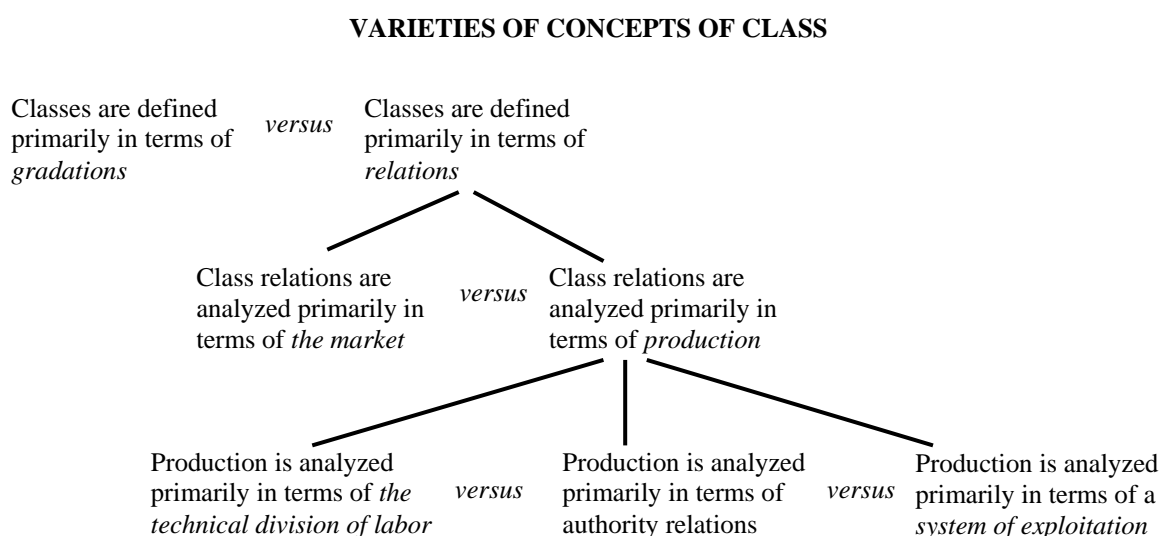
Over the years I have revisited this problem a number of times. In this lecture I thought it would be useful to go through the different approaches I have used in chronological order, since they reflect different strategies for the problem of concept formation and theory construction. My initial efforts at this were mainly concerned with establishing the differences between concepts. More recently, my focus is on seeing if there are ways of integrating different concepts into some broader framework or model.

There are four such strategies I have used for this purpose:

1. A branching tree diagram of alternative class concepts (1978)
2. A check-list inventory of conceptual difference (2005)
3. An micro/macro causal model that integrates different class mechanisms (2009)
4. Class specified in terms of Games/rules/Moves (2015)

### 1. A branching tree diagram of alternative class concepts (1978)

My earliest foray into the lines of demarcation between Marxist and other concepts of class came in my dissertation, published in 1978:



*Class Structure and Income Determination* (New York: Academic Press, 1978), p.5.

Comment: this does capture some of the salient issues, and some of these continue to appear in one way or another in subsequent efforts. But there is no attempt here at either integrating the different definitions or in figuring out their theoretical foundations/rationales.

### 2. A check-list inventory of difference (2005)

Different traditions of class analysis typically try to bring into alignment different groups of these questions. Thus, for example, some traditions of class analysis are concerned with the connection between on the one hand, objective properties of a person within a structure of inequality and their subjective states understood in terms of identity, tastes, lifestyles. This is characteristic of Bourdieusian class analysis, for example. A recent British study called The Great British Class Survey, for example, adopted a formal statistical classification algorithm which grouped people into classes on the basis of the empirical associations of occupational groups with income and various attitude and lifestyle indicators. The result was seven classes: the elite, the established middle class, the technical middle class, new affluent workers, traditional working class, emergent service workers, precariat. In contrast Marxist class analysis is rooted in the interconnection of the last three questions.

*Approaches to Class Analysis, Conclusion,*  
**Table 1. Six Primary Questions of Class Analysis**

*Anchoring questions*

Approach to Class Analysis	1. Distributional location	2. Subjectively salient groups	3. Life-chances	4. Antagonistic conflicts	5. Historical variation	6. Emancipation
Popular usage	***	*	**	*		
David Grusky (neo-Durheimian)	**	***	**	*	*	
Jan Pakulski	**	***	**	**	**	
Pierre Bourdieu	**	**	***	*		
Richard Breen & John Goldthorpe (neo-Weberian)	**	*	***	*		
Aage Sorenson	**	*	**	***		
Max Weber	*	*	**	*	***	
Erik Olin Wright (neo-Marxian)	*	*	**	**	**	***

\*\*\* primary anchoring question for the concept of class  
 \*\* secondary anchoring question (subordinated to primary anchor)  
 \* additional questions relevant to the concept of class, but not central to anchoring the definition

The questions within which “class” figures in the answers:

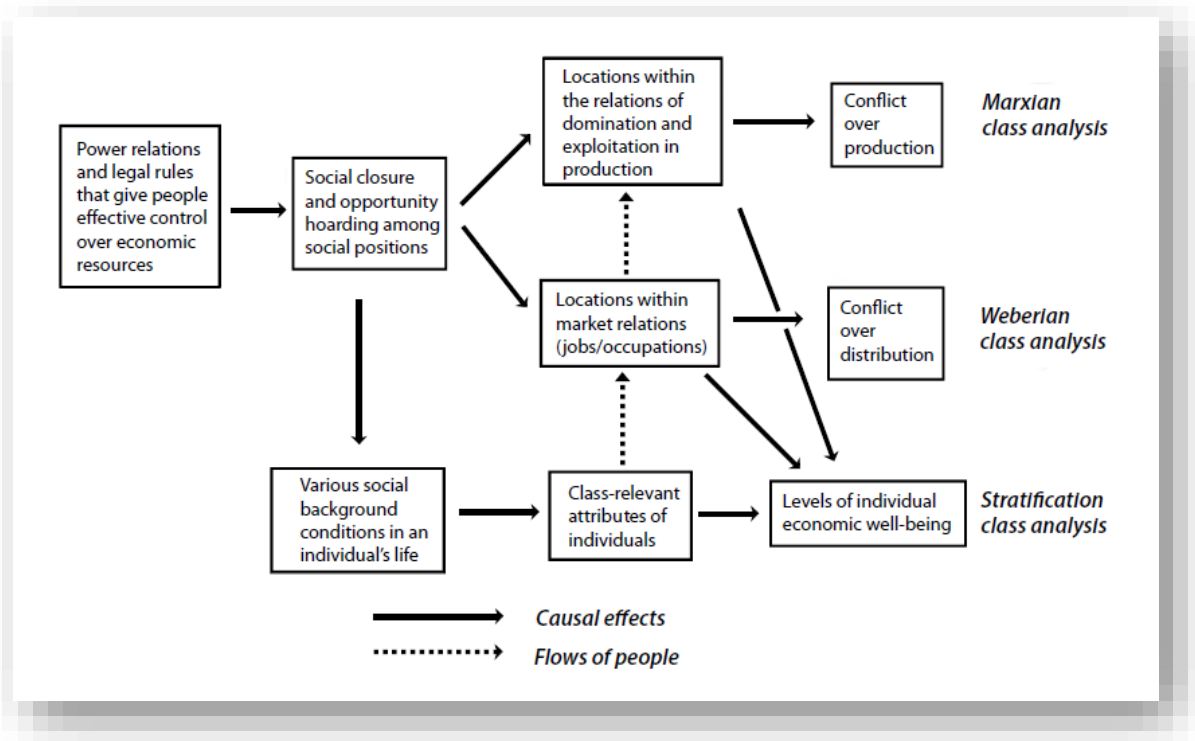
1. *Distributional Location*: “How are people objectively located in distributions of material inequality?”
2. *Subjectively salient groups*: “What explains how people, individually and collectively, subjectively locate themselves and others within a structure of inequality?”
3. *Life Chances*: “What explains inequalities in economically-grounded life chances and material standards of living?”
4. *Antagonistic conflicts*: “What economically-based cleavages most systematically shape overt conflicts?”
5. *Historical Variation*: “How should we characterize and explain the variations across history in the social organization of inequalities?”
6. *Emancipation*: “What sorts of transformations are needed to eliminate economic oppression and exploitation within capitalist societies?”

### 3. Different concepts as identifying different causal mechanisms

In terms of class rooted mechanisms we can distinguish three concepts:

1. Class as individual-attributes/conditions of life.
2. Class as opportunity-hoarding
3. Class as exploitation/domination

These are all real mechanisms which impact the lives of individuals and the structures within which they live.



#### 4. Class as identifying antagonistic conflicts of material interests within a Game

This is my most recent effort at integrating and layering different concepts and their associated theoretical arguments. The pivot is a metaphor: understanding a society as being a game with rules that delimit possible moves. This is a very useful triplet, and it can be treated in simple or complex ways.

The simple, stripped down version sees society like a sport: It is a single game, with a single set of rules, which determine the range of possible moves.

The more complex versions add complexity to this schema:

- There are multiple games being played at the same time. One may be dominant, others subordinate. They can be played simultaneously.
- The game itself is defined by a set of foundational rules – think of this as like a constitution. So, there are rules that are more or less important in specifying what game is being played in the first place.
- Struggles over the rules of the game can therefore become struggles over the game itself when they begin to touch seriously on the foundational rules.
- Some rules of the game are set as laws; others are norms and conventions. Moves in the game can be corrosive of softer rules, which can open up space for playing alternative games.

Level of System at which Conflict Is Focused	Game Metaphor	Political Form of Conflict	Stakes in the Conflict	Form of Class Analysis
System level	What game to play	Revolutionary versus counter-revolutionary	Capitalism versus socialism	Marxist
Institutional level	Rules of the game	Reformist versus reactionary	Varieties of capitalism	Weberian
Situational level	Moves in the game	Interest group politics	Immediate economic interests	Durkheimian

**Table 6.1. The Game Metaphor for Mapping Politics and Class Analysis**

### III. The conceptual foundations of the Marxist concept of class: A Step-by-step guide

#### Step 1. Relational vs. gradational concepts

- Key idea = “social relation” – not at all a simple concept.

#### Step 2. What kind of relations constitute “class” relations?

- Class relations vs gender relations vs race relations vs friendship relations

##### Step 2a. The concept of relations of production:

- Assets have to be deployed in production – tools, raw materials
- deployment can be described in technical terms: a production function
- relational terms: rights and powers of actors (note: power and rights over *things* = *relations between people*)

##### Step 2b. Production relations become “Class relations” when these rights and powers are unequally distributed.

#### Step 3. Variations in class relations

- key idea = qualitatively different kinds of relations
- of course also quantitative variation: gap between rich & poor can be big or little
- qualitative variation is more crucial: *what can be owned*
- slavery = absolute property rights in people; feudalism = joint ownership in the labor resource of the peasant by lord & serf

#### Step 4. Class locations within class relations

- the places occupied by people
- simple polarization → two categories within every relation

#### Step 5. Micro- and Macro-class analysis

- *macro-concept* of class structure: the totality of all the class relations within some unit of analysis = its class structure – class structures of countries, of cities, of corporations, of the world
- *micro-concept* of class location = impact on the lives of persons within relations via two primary processes – *experiences & interests*. Experiences refers to things that happen to you because you are in a class location; interests to what you have to do to meet your material needs because of your class position.

#### Step 6. Levels of abstraction for specifying class structure

- Adding complexity in a systematic and coherent way: from binary class relations to complexly differentiated class locations: a fundamental problem for all empirical research.

#### Step 7. The Explanatory Claims: *The fundamental theses of class analysis*

- What you *have* determines what you *get*
- What you *have* determines what you *have to do to get what you get*.
- What you *have to do to get what you get* determines *whose interests are opposed to your interests*: friends, enemies, allies

#### Step 8. Marxist class analysis: the specificity of class mechanisms

**Exploitation:** a way of talking about how the interests of people within class relations are intrinsically antagonist

**Domination:** a way of talking about control over activities. You can have domination without exploitation, but exploitation always entails at least indirect domination.

**IV. A REPERTOIRE OF CLASS CONCEPTS – class as an adjective rather than a noun**

1. *Class structure.*
2. *Class Interests.*
3. *Class formation.*
4. *Class capacities.*
5. *Class practices.*
6. *Class struggle.*
7. *Class consciousness.*