

Lecture 8, Sociology 621
WHAT IS CLASS?
February 18, 2008

I. ALTERNATIVE CLASS CONCEPTS: If “class” is the answer, what is the question?

1. Class as *Subjective location*. How do people **classify themselves** in the system of social stratification?
2. Class as *Distributional Location*. How are people **located objectively in distributions** of material inequality?
3. *Class as Empirical Summary of Stratification*. To what extent do the different empirical **dimensions of social inequality coincide** in ways which constitute empirically distinguishable groups?
4. *Class as Market-Opportunity structure*. What determines the basic **life chances** of individuals in a market society?
5. *Class as the basis for economic conflict*. What **forms of conflict** are most systematically linked to the social organization of production?
6. Class as *Historical Variation*. How should we characterize and explain the **variations across history** in the social organization of inequalities?
7. *Class and social emancipation* What sorts of transformations are needed to **eliminate economic oppression** and exploitation within capitalist societies?

II. THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF MARXIST CONCEPT OF CLASS:
A Step-by-step guide

Step 1. Relational vs. gradational concepts

- explain what a relation is

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. Class relations as a form of production 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
- consider slavery: people can be owned
- pure slavery = absolute property rights in people; feudalism = joint ownership in the labor resource of the peasant by lord and self

Step 4. Class locations within class relations

- the places occupied by people
- simple polarization → two categories within every relation
- we will see that there are lots of complications

Step 5. Micro- and Macro-class analysis

- *macro-concept* = 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* = 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. The Explanatory Claims: *The fundamental theses of class analysis*

- What you *have* determines what you *get* and
- 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*

Step 7. Marxist class analysis: the specificity of class mechanisms

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

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

III. CLASS AS A CRITICAL CONCEPT

Within Marxism, the analysis of the effects of class in capitalism is always from the point of view of the abolition of capitalist class relations.

IV. A REPERTOIRE OF CLASS CONCEPTS

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