

**Sociology 929 Reading Interrogations**  
**Session 11. The Death of Class debate**  
**November 14, 2006**

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**1. Joe Ferrare**

Paul Kingston's book, *The Classless Society*, is a provocative attack on the salience of class theory in advanced capitalist societies. I am generally sympathetic to the idea that if classes exist then there should be empirical evidence to support this claim, but I do not think the evidence he provides conclusively demonstrates that classes do not exist. Presumably his book has prompted much vehement criticism, perhaps deserved, but nonetheless I think it is productive to question any discipline's most fundamental assumptions. Indeed, while Kingston claims that the burden of proof is still upon the class analyst, he no doubt takes on a significant burden himself by challenging centuries of theoretical and empirical work in the social sciences. Ironically, I read this book at a slower pace than most of the other texts in this course; though not due to its complexity, but rather the time I spent writing down questions. Although this book provoked me in many different ways, my interrogation will focus on Kingston's conceptualization of class and the evidence he presents for mobility.

Kingston defines a class as "a substantial group having common economic circumstances and relatively distinct life experiences" (2000:53). It was rather surprising how narrow of a definition Kingston uses in his critique. He takes the position that if classes exist at all, they must be *the* primary structuring force in society. In this sense it seemed as though he created an "all or nothing" scenario for class. Perhaps this is because of the primacy so many class analysts have historically given to class as a concept, particularly within the Marxist tradition. Yet even contemporary Marxists back off of the idea that the specific mode of production of a given historical period determines all other spheres of social life, be they political, cultural, or sentimental. Could it not be the case that at this historical moment class no longer (if it ever) has causal primacy, and instead shares its explanatory power with relations of gender and relations of race, among others (depending upon the situation, of course)? In other words, why does class have to explain everything in order to be of any importance for social scientific inquiry?

One of the key arguments Kingston relies on to make his claim is that if classes existed, and were a structuring force in our lives, then inter and intra-class mobility would be rare. Kingston wisely uses data from sociology's most prominent class analyst to support his claim. However, although he successfully demonstrates that mobility is common in most class categories, this alone does not dispel the relevance of class. For example, even though many people will change occupational categories throughout their lives, a strong majority in five of the eight categories did not change, and in the other three categories the Modal occupation was the one already occupied by the respondent (see p. 80). Further, the inter-class mobility illustrated in Table 4.1 (p. 66) shows that for three of the five occupational classes the Modal occupation for the respondent was that of

his father's, and in another the Mode was downward mobility (with the next most frequent category being the origin). Furthermore, these cross-tabulations do not control for any other variables. While there is significant "mobility," one's class origin is still a significant predictor of class destination.

It also seems problematic to judge mobility solely on origin and destination of the same occupational categories. Is it safe to assume that the occupational categories of my parent's generation are same as in my generation? For example, if we adjust for inflation and consider the variable nature of organizational structure is it safe to assume that a manager in 1975 has the same class location as a manager in 2005? Is it not possible that occupations experience class "inflation" in a similar way as education credentials experience inflation (i.e. someone having a high school degree today is not the same as in 1975)? Perhaps it is equally important to determine the mobility of class actors relative to one another rather than relying only on class origin as defined by parental occupation.

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## 2. Jorge Sola

I am taken aback after reading Kingston's book. I have to recognize that it is an original, brave and well-documented work. Nevertheless, while I was reading the book this weekend, I watched Michael Moore's documentary "Roger and me", and this encouraged me to think that "class" is not just a dead category. I disagree with a lot of things Kingston says, but generally some of them are secondary ones. The most important thing is his general attack against class theories. In my opinion, the most convincing strategy of such criticism is the analysis of mobility. The other ones (class politics, class culture and class sentiments) are less important. But, what to say about such mobility that would make class as a non-existent reality? I don't have clear answers –and I would like to read the book more calmly and with greater detail to examine better the reasons Kingston gives– but I would like to raise two observations related to this point.

First one is that Kingston emphasizes the necessity of "relative discrete, hierarchically ordered social groups" to be able to talk about class; but Wright's neo-Marxian framework, for instance, stresses the concept of "class location", which "is not a class but a location-within-relations". It follows that these relations are also important to talk about class. But it is difficult to show empirically that these relations are exploitative ones instead of free ones, since it will depend on what theoretical framework you chose. There are some theoretical elements in social sciences which are not empirically proved, and even so they are useful to understand the social relations if they are theoretically well-founded.

Nevertheless, and in second place, even if we could talk about exploitative relations and thereby class locations, the Kingston's criticism on the high level of mobility will be very important, insofar as it could mean that this exploitation is due to the people's efforts or the pure chance instead the capitalist socio-economic structure. In regard to it, I think Kingston's conclusions may be contested. I am not sure if it is very fair to take empirical

data, which was not done to discuss about if class exists or not exists, but to analyze fine-grained topics. I am not sure if other data more focused on social polarization instead of mobility among middle classes would give the same results.

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### 3. Sarbani Chakraborty

Agenda for discussion: if 'class-ness' is not 'felt' by people, do we, as researchers abandon class as an analytical tool or do we proceed (in various ways) to understand why 'class-ness' is not felt, even when there seems to be an existence of 'class'?

I am not convinced from any of the arguments that advanced capitalist societies have become class-less societies. The individualized, conspicuous consumption oriented societies seem to require more of class-analysis and not less or rejection of class-analysis. Just empirically, if we look at income, as an important (but definitely *incomplete*) indicator of class especially in the US, then we see a huge increasing gap in income among people. How do we account for these following reports, if not in terms of class?

"Over the past 25 years the median US family income has gone up 18 percent. For the top one percent, however, it has gone up 200 percent. A quarter of a century ago the top fifth of Americans had an average income 6.7 times that of the bottom fifth. Now it is 9.8 times. Inequalities have grown worse in different regions. In California, home to both Beverly Hills and the gang-ridden slums of Compton, incomes for lower class families have fallen by four percent since 1969. For upper class families they have risen 41 percent. This has led to an economy hugely warped in favour of a small slice of very rich Americans. The wealthiest one percent of households now control a third of the national wealth. The wealthiest 10 percent control two-thirds of it" (from <http://crofsblogs.typepad.com/gap/2006/06/index.html>) OR

"Evidence for this can be found in a recent study, titled "**The Evolution of Top Incomes**," by University of California-Berkeley economist Emmanuel Saez. Consider the following info from the study about the nation's richest income gainers. This top 1% of all American households -- 719,910 of them -- had: • an average annual income of \$326,720 in 2004; • this represents 19.8% of the entire nation's pretax income; That's up more than 10% (from 17.8%) from 2003; • In 2004, the top 1/10 of that 1% -- 129,584 American households -- reported income equal to 9.5 percent of national pretax income. • Between 2001 and 2004, median, or midpoint, family income rose only 1.6 percent. • Median family real net worth - a family's gross assets minus liabilities - rose only 1.5 percent during those four years" (from [http://bigpicture.typepad.com/comments/2006/11/its\\_still\\_the\\_e.html](http://bigpicture.typepad.com/comments/2006/11/its_still_the_e.html)) OR

"Emphasizing his point, Mr. Webb (a democrat, fighting for a ticket in neck-to-neck fight against Rep senator, George Allen) told a crowd of about 50 supporters that corporate profits are at an all-time high, while salaries and wages are at an all-time low in terms of percentage of national wealth. Mr. Webb said that when he was 24, chief executive officers earned 20 times the salary of the average American worker. Today, business executives earn 400 times the salary of the average worker. Chris La-Civita, a spokes-man for Mr. Allen said Mr. Webb's message is "nothing more than tried and true class warfare." (from <http://www.washtimes.com/metro/20061023-103520-7362r.htm>).

This last statement is interesting – the dismissive-ness of class. In other circumstances, this “class warfare” would have seemed quite dangerous. But here

the republican representative does not seem to feel threatened because of the seeming comfort afforded by the fact that sociological inquiries may just put these differences as outliers and put all the rest in the middle of the bell-curve – as middle-class. People seem to be contended to be ‘categorized’ and also to ‘categorize’ themselves as middle-class that maintain the illusion of social mobility.

If social mobility and merit orientation of the US, for example, is ‘real’ in any sense, then people from outlying categories would be all over the spectrum of the bell-curve, but does that ‘really’ happen? Mobility is definitely there but it seems to be restricted within a particular *spectrum of class*, where there are thin but often visible or distinguishable boundaries, through analytic, empirical or hermeneutic theoretical orientations.

It seems to be important to understand both the ‘consumption’ and ‘expenditure’ patterns to understand class-ness and why there is an every day attempt by people to gloss over their class-ness. I once worked on transcripts (of a qualitative data set of poverty-stricken people) depicting consumption and expenditure patterns. I could ‘see’ how poverty was relative. In India, people who were poor would never even dream of spending regularly in salons to braid their hair, or paint their nails. There was a “personal care” category, which here we had to fill by going through the transcripts. Diapers were must in the US but in India, even middle class people use plain cloth for babies either due to cultural reasons or to cut cost. The point here is that consumptions and expenditure patters along with income (from multiple sources) provide very deep insights of this ‘class’ aspect. How do we understand the concept of poverty, if we do not bring in class? Is poverty then just about lack of income and nothing else? (it seems so though, in the US context at least).

Also, detailed historical analysis of capital and pre-capitalist modes of production relations seem (as is often done in postcolonial studies) to be vastly lacking. This seems peculiar for a country, which has its own colonial legacy, and tradition of slavery. The analytical privilege of the ‘now’ - of advanced-capitalism in the US - seems to be devoid of any sophisticated analysis of history to understand how the hegemony of the middle-class became possible and how a society is perceived as class-less. Sociological empirical analyses seem to have aggravated the problem of (mis)understanding class through their un-critical employment of *socio-economic status* as ‘class’ variable. Also, education, income and occupation seem to be the fixed parameters as they undoubtedly have powerful predictive ability for many outcomes. But they hide an enormous amount of complexities of the social-lives of people, especially with respect to the issues of identification and culture that are embedded in the class-ness of people. Very few researches of ‘class’ seem to be carried out in the US from so-called ‘qualitative’ perspectives, except in education, which however remains a highly marginalized form of research.

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#### 4. Assaf Meshulam

Kingston's book is definitely the proper book to end our class. Not only does the book, in a very clear and fluent way, summarize most of the readings we have had this semester, it also calls into question the main task we have struggled with—analyzing the concept of class. In the end, Kingston convinced me that class is an evasive term. That said, it is difficult to accept his argument regarding a classless society in the U.S., for two main reasons. The first reason is methodological: the limitations of his realistic and data-driven approach. The second reason is that, even if we accept the limited scope of his research and data, an alternative answer is possible. It almost seems (to me at least) as though instead of truly finding an answer to the problem that Kingston struggles with, namely, to “make sense of what actually happens in the lives of particular people” (Kingston, 2000:17), he first targeted the answer he thought and sought to find and then looked for empirical supporting evidence for that answer.

The one way to challenge Kingston is by questioning his methodology: Which data were chosen, and which were left out; the innate limitations of a realist approach for revealing what actually happens in peoples' lives; the processes that occurred in U.S. society (and elsewhere) that make it much harder to explain class according to its traditional concepts. But we can put this aside and take Kingston's endeavor seriously. He starts where, any sociologist should perhaps start: seeking to understand the individuals that make up people: “Classes are composed of people: that's the bedrock meaning of my commitment to an individualistic approach in analyzing class” (p. 25). My question is whether Kingston is committed first and foremost to class and those people composing classes (meaning the people outside the boundaries of class are not part of the analysis), or is he (and all of us) instead committed to focusing on all people by the virtue of their existence as individuals and to trying to understand to which class they belong? I believe that Kingston, like many other sociologists, is committed to understanding *all* people. This is the justification for the ninth chapter of the book (to some extent, the tenth and eleventh as well). What I did not understand, however, is why, if one is willing to be radical by collapsing class, can this not be done by “breaking” the traditional classifications of class and challenging definitions such as the underclass or working-class?

In answering the question what is class, Kingston offers two parameters: the one, “classes exist to the extent that class location—an objective position within the economic order—significantly shapes the fundamental content of social lives” (p. 3) and, the second, “*a small set of distinct groups...the number of these groups is small; the size of most groups is large*” (p. 4). There is an alternative answer in the book that meets these two conditions of Kingston's definition of class: there are three classes! The problem is with the way they are defined. The classes are the upper class (the rich), lower class (the poor), and middle-class (all the rest). I argue (and Kingston provides the evidence) that these classes can be categorized using all five of Giddens' criteria used by Kingston. There are problems, of course, with the three-class breakdown. First, there is not enough data on the upper and lower classes. Second, by not viewing all the population as relevant, the questions that were used in some of the research would not reveal what we are looking for. Third, the middle-class encompasses about 70-80% of the population. Fourth, how

would this three-class breakdown conform with traditional analyses of class under other theories and classifications that shape our thinking (i.e., were are the “proletariat” and “capitalist”, etc.)? A possible response to this breakdown could be that this is not class at all.

Here is the alternative answer present in Kingston’s book:

### Classes Based on Giddens’ Five Dimensions

<b>Dimensions/Class</b>	<b>Lower</b>	<b>Middle</b>	<b>Upper</b>
<b>1. Mobility</b>	almost none – always at the bottom	almost none – always in the middle	almost none – always at the top
<b>2. Interaction</b>	mostly with peers – don’t change living or working places voluntarily	mostly with peers – change living and working places voluntarily (and frequently)	with peers – close and exclusive members only
<b>3. Cultural Orientation</b> common socialization in the family	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>4. Class Sentiment</b>	the poor	middle-class (“we-ness” exists, see table at p. 91)	exclusive
<b>5. Political Action</b>	have no influence on rules in society  hardly vote	have moderate influence  tend to vote	have critical influence on rules in society  donate maximum amount allowed to representatives
<b>Size</b> %	13-20	75-85	0.5-1
people (similar country size)	39-60 million (Canada-U.K.)	225-255 million	1.5-3 million (Uruguay-Australia) <sup>1</sup>

The challenge then, is to understand the middle-class. That is exactly what Wright and Goldthorpe try to do, albeit not looking at the middle-class as presented above. And that is where we get lost. Is the suggestion above a real option for class definition? If it is, should the middle-class be divided into sub-classes or seen as one stratified class? I have yet to decide whether I agree with this classification. It does seem to give a clear and realistic description of our society. What I have tried to present is, according to my understanding, where Kingston could have gone based on his assumptions and ambitions—to understand society down to the individual, to find a small set of distinctive groups mostly of a large size, and, to be able to clearly indicate “groups of people sharing distinct life experiences” (p. 27).

The answer he provides feels like Kingston was not only looking for the answer under his nose, but was also using only one of his senses to find it. Perhaps he should have looked beyond the figures and data to see and feel the reality of the individuals in society.

<sup>1</sup> Taking some of the findings that Kingston presents, the numbers are between 1% to 6%. Yet was it not always the case that the elite/ruling class was an exclusive minority?

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## 5. Michael Callaghan Pisapia

Kingston writes that an “emphasis on class as collective experiences means that little is gained by asserting the analytical priority of class *structure* over class *formation*,” (Kingston 2000: 23): a structural theory of class has little value if commonly shared experiences are the thing to be explained. This is both right and wrong.

First, the right and good of Kingston’s argument. In turning away from structural theories and towards structured realities, Kingston tests the extent to which groups of people, categorized according to their economic circumstances, actually share life experiences and common patterns of social and political behavior. Proceeding from the compelling stance that “structurally defined collectivities may or may not have common experiences, and they may or may not be organized to act on their imputed common interests,” he argues that “class formation [structuration] is variable” and concludes that the extent of structuration in the United States is not significant: it would seem Americans live in a society not characterized by much class-ness. If we accept all of the evidence Kingston presents in chapters 4-9 to show that economic circumstances, defined primarily by occupational status, do not forcefully translate into low economic mobility, into the formation of families and friendships closed off according to class lines, into shared cultural tastes, nor into common political behaviors – that is, if we accept that class structuration is low in the United States, and that the social consciousness of Americans is not primarily rooted in their economic circumstances, it seems to me that we have good reasons to say that the social consciousness of Americans and the foundations of their political behaviors are not very classed.

Thus, Kingston’s book is an effective challenge to theorists who expect class structure to translate into social consciousness and collective political action: because of “economic differentiation, high levels of inter- and intra-generational mobility, and widespread availability of transportation and information technologies” (Kingston 2000: 219) similarity of experience flowing from economic circumstances is undermined. With diversity of experience on the rise, the class solidarity that is the foundation of collective action never solidifies. But, this does not mean that the United States is a classless society. Even if we can no longer expect class based social consciousness or class based political movements (again, I think Kingston presents a solid case for this), structural class theory still has an important role to play in explaining the economic experiences of workers and their families, and for helping to explain economic inequality. It is still desirable to push a structural theory of class in order explain the persistence of certain types of economic positions, and the way in which any persons who come to occupy those positions do in fact share similar kinds of experiences that matter for their well being.

Clearly, I do not agree with Kingston’s claim that “individual-level persistence in economic position is the necessary grounds for the formation of classes and a key indicator of their social impact,” (Kingston 2000: 61). He acknowledges theorists who

hold that “structure (class locations) persists even if people’s positions in the economic hierarchy differ from their parents, or if they have different sorts of positions in their own careers,” but he wonders “how there is structure unless the incumbents of class positions have sustained interaction with each other – the necessary basis for developing a shared sense of interests and for cultivating common practices and orientations?” (Kingston 2000: 60) It may be right to say that structure has little value besides a theory of structuration if a sense of “we-ness” is the thing to be explained. But, structure explains very well the types of experiences people have when they occupy structural positions – regardless of whether or not they develop a sense of “we all experience this together.” Structure explains very well the type of experience individual have when they occupy that position *for the duration of their occupation*, even if they move on to a different position later on. All persons who come to occupy the low-level service job at McDonald’s experience economic insecurity, even if they never sit around and share their experience, and even if some of them later come to occupy management positions affording them greater security. There is such a thing as common experience *without* a deliberative or identified sharing of that experience. And there is such a thing as a structured experience, even if the individual persons who at any given moment in time have that experience cease to have that experience in the future.

Finally, isn’t a capitalist political economy structured to reproduce inequality over time? Even if the specific persons who are dominating capitalists and exploited workers change, the structure is such that there will always be rich capitalists and poor, exploited workers. I do not understand Kingston’s argument against trying to understand inequality in non-structural terms.

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## 6. Adam Slez

In arguing against the efficacy and viability of class analysis, Paul Kingston notes that his account is based on a “realist” model of class which presumes that classes can only be said to exist “if it can be shown that there are relatively discrete, hierarchically ordered social groups, each with distinctive common experiences” (Kingston 2000: 16). In making his case for the importance of micro-classes, David Grusky also suggests that his argument rests on a realist foundation. Grusky, however, defines a realist approach as one based on “schemes in which the constituent categories are institutionalized in the labor market” (Grusky 2005: 52). The differences between these two conceptualizations of the realist approach to class analysis clearly extends well beyond unintentional definitional slippage. Whereas Kingston is suggesting that what is important is that class has “real” effects, Grusky is making a case for incorporating classifications that the actors themselves would recognize as being “real.”

Interestingly, both authors directly address the types of arguments made by the other. For instance, Kingston addresses Grusky’s point by noting that “no matter how many disaggregate occupations [Grusky’s indicator of micro-classes] display solidarity, their existence ‘saves’ class theory only by rather substantial definitional inflation” (Kingston 2000: 226). Grusky, on the other hand, argues that when “critics of class analysis complain that ‘class effects’ tend to be weak (esp. Kingston 2000), this argument



is likely capitalizes on the blunt and highly aggregate operationalization of class more than any true weakness in the effects of the site of production” (Grusky 2005: 71). How do we adjudicate between these two positions?

At least as the exchange is presented here, there is nothing to save Grusky from Kingston’s charge that class analysis can be saved through definitional sleight of hand; however, Grusky’s approach to developing a realist model of class is at least intuitively plausible, in that no one would deny that actors recognize occupational groupings as meaningful forms of social organization. The same cannot be said of Kingston’s model. If I am reading Kingston correctly, the implication is that the reality of any given phenomenon is determined by the magnitude of its measurable effects. If we ran a basic regression and found that the effects of a variable such as race or gender were insignificant, would we conclude that they are somehow less “real”? It may very well be the case that class variables produce relatively small, insignificant effects, but it would seem logically problematic to assume that the reality of variable depends on whether or not it registers effects.

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## 7. Charity Schmidt

\*\*\*Kingston’s confrontation to class analysis and claim regarding the decreasing significance of class represents a provocative challenge to sociology. How do we analyze class within the ever-transforming context of modern capitalism? However, I recognize a potential gap in his theoretical formation, based on his choice to focus on the nation, most notably the U.S., as an entry point. What would his analysis look like if it was applied on a global scale? Perhaps the difficulty in identifying a “class”-structured society is that class-related dispositions are increasingly less significant within national boundaries, but are becoming more significant across borders? Would we see more evidence of class structuration if we turned our attention world-wide?

\*\*\*Among Kingston’s findings are that class does not shape values, and he makes a good argument for that conclusion in chapter 7. How should we view this claim in light of Sayer’s exploration of how class differences are internalized and thus represented in moral sentiments and evaluations? Perhaps the evidence of similar value judgments does not wholly reflect how people come to those moral conclusions and the significance those moral concepts actually take in people’s lives. Simply put, individuals may make a similar moral judgment based on an entirely different set of interests or experiences. From the perspective of Kingston’s work, how do we come to understand some of the concepts of *the moral significance of class*; shame, pride, self-respect, recognition, etc? Are these reactions to inequality, but not class? Can we claim that there are no classes under modern capitalism if people perceive and are therefore influenced by impressions of class difference?

\*\*\*Kingston, if I understand correctly, explains such sentiments discussed above as belonging to the political sphere. He states that “class divisions don’t structure the political arena” (p. 229). What then is the relationship between class and politics, or are

we led to the conclusion that there isn't one? If class doesn't structure the political area and account for differences in political convictions, what does?

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## 8. Elizabeth Wrigley-Field

My main divergence from Kingston, I think, stems from his rejection of the class structure/class formation distinction. His argument is that class structure doesn't mean anything if it doesn't affect people's lives in observable ways.

1. One criticism I have of this is that Kingston's sense of the 'effect' of class is too narrow. One key missing dimension is the effect of the needs of the ownership class on the state. Kingston discounts this because he makes a distinction between "capitalism" and the reality of the classes taken by others to be fundamental to capitalism (pp. 26-27). I am unclear, though, on what this distinction amounts to.

I have no objection to Kingston's claim that "it is one matter to say that the political system favors *capitalism* and quite another to say that the political system reflects the mobilization of classes, much less that it reinforces their solidarity." (p. 105, underlining is my emphasis) But this seems to me to be quite different from his claim that "To varying degrees, there are 'winners' and 'losers' in the operation of the system, but the centrality of capital and labor as factors of production doesn't necessarily mean that there are 'capitalists' and a 'working class.'" (p. 27)

What about the idea that what "favoring capitalism" amounts to is the favoring of the interests of one class over those of another? It seems to me that there is an equivocation on the matter of objective interests in Kingston's book. On the one hand, when he writes about "class theories," he is somewhat dismissive of the concept of objective interest, seeming to see it as a "conceptual fiat"; on the other, quotes like the second one above seem to suggest that he thinks there *are* in fact objective interests ("winners" and "losers"), but that as an empirical fact, those interests aren't categorical, bounded, antagonistic ones.

Regardless, Kingston allows class as a meaningful concept only if it goes beyond the identification of interests to explain facts about how individuals organize their lives. His hesitance to allow "class" to be salient on the basis of interests seems to be a fear that it will become simply question-begging in the hands of ideological researchers. My point, then, is that it seems that we can have an analysis of ownership classes' interests that is *not* just question-begging because it is actually expressed in empirical social facts, but that nor is it always the case that those social facts are the direct, self-conscious mobilization of that class.

A question: how does this fit into the realist/nominalist distinction? Kingston defines classes in terms of experiences. Is there room for a concept of class that "meets the challenge of an empirical test" (p. 16) but without being defined primarily or solely in terms of experiences?

2. Another criticism, though, is that I don't think Kingston shows as much as he thinks he does. When he is dismissing the class structure/class formation distinction, he writes almost as though all of history has disproven the idea that classes will form into collectives, yet class theorists keep saying "Well, someday it could happen." (This is despite the fact that he says he finds it plausible that there *were* classes, and their non-existence is a more recent post-industrial development.) But it bears underscoring that his data seems to nearly all be from the 1970s to today. Indeed, this has been a period of very little class struggle in the United States. But I think the conclusions that can be drawn from that are relatively limited.

Part of the problem, I think, is that Kingston presents class consciousness too statically. His discussion on p. 99 (of Fantasia's critique) suggests that our choices are between seeing class consciousness as constant (arising in some deterministic fashion from objective class locations), and seeing it as inherently localized and limited (since, he says, only a limited number of workers will be actively engaged in struggle at one time). One problem that I have with this is that I think it underestimates the way that struggle happening in society affects the consciousness of those who are not direct participants.

For example, Deepa Kumar has shown that (despite the generally low level of class struggle, low levels of unionization, etc) the 1997 UPS strike received tremendous support among the working-class, broadly defined, and virtually no support from the "upper class." (This working-class support, by the way, is despite a media campaign that initially portrayed the strikers as responsible for preventing supplies from reaching hospitals, etc.) I find it plausible, though I'm not sure how to evaluate it empirically, that many of the working-class people who supported that strike (without having any direct connection to it beyond an identification with its demands or its slogan, "Part-time America won't work") would have scored low on abstract survey measures of their class consciousness before, and maybe even during, the strike; but the existence of the strike itself sharpened a class-based identification of interests and solidarities even among non-participants who were aware of it.

I find it notable that even in the absence of substantial working-class struggle for many years today (and, as Kingston points out, the absence of any working-class political party) there are such exceptions to the lack of class-based political identifications. Another example is last spring's immigrant rights movement, organized around the slogan "A day without an immigrant." What I think is interesting about this slogan is that it raises another way we might talk about the importance of class, beyond either "experiences" along Kingston's dimensions, or class interests, and that is class power. Ultimately this too should be empirically expressed, not always in consciousness (as it is in this case) or prevalence of struggle, but in the overall outcomes of struggles. (You might use this, for example, not only to look at who has power based on their labor, but who doesn't – such as, perhaps, Delphi workers today, in an industry that is largely closing its doors in the US.)

The point about immigrants is also important, I think, because of how it bears on Kingston's argument about mobility. The implication of his argument based on absolute, rather than relative, mobility seems to be that a class analysis must be committed to the constancy of the economic structure. I think it is neither true that occupational structure, on the gradient that Kingston categorizes them, can't change, nor is it true that the changes obviate the significance of class. The working-class organizing that takes place

today is less likely (relative to the past) to occur in industrial factory situations and more likely to be among nurses, janitors, teachers, telecommunications workers, transit workers... I haven't said much about what I think about the mobility arguments, but one question I will pose is whether the categorizations are the right kind to capture the most salient divisions among the working class.

Finally, I'd like to suggest a partial answer to Kingston's challenge (in the conclusion), if we are to salvage the class structure/class formation distinction, to explain why class location may again matter to class consciousness on a much wider scale. My partial answer is that class consciousness doesn't reflect only one's evaluation of the current situation and the future outcomes that seem likely if things proceed "normally," but also a sense of what the alternatives are. And the context of the empirical data that Kingston considers is one shaped by working-class economic and political defeats (such as the PATCO strike). That suggests that the beginnings of smaller, more localized struggles that can win real victories might affect the ideas of people beyond the immediate participants (like the UPS strike did for a short time) and increase their likelihood of political struggle as well. I don't see any reason why there could not be an ongoing process of working-class struggles building on themselves that would have the potential to make "class formation" salient once more.

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## 9. Adrienne Pagac

Paul W. Kingston declares that the United States is a 'classless society' based upon the conclusions drawn from his analysis which is shaped by four premises: 'class' is economically rooted; if 'class' exists, one should be able to point to discrete and hierarchically-ordered groups of individuals that share common experiences via empirical research (realist approach); if 'class' exists, one should be able to identify members of these groups and show that they have distinct life experiences; and lastly, 'class' exists to the extent that the economic character of the lives of people is systematically connected to other non-economic aspects of their lives. I wholeheartedly agree with Kingston on the first premise (no surprise), but I am not sure I am convinced that his analysis yields the conclusions he draws from the other three premises, esp. that of 'structuration'.

While I agree that empirical research would certainly aid in legitimizing the claim that 'class' does/does not exist, I do not know if it is necessary *or* when used, all that telling. In empirical research, how can you truly demonstrate what the life of a typical working class person is? Sure, sociological statistical methods are supposed to generate a representative sample, etc., but as we have mentioned numerous times during the course of the seminar, the impact of 'class' by itself and the ways it is experienced in social structures is very real to the *individual*. So, unless empirical research is able to tease out these experiences/attitudes/etc., of a majority of people, wouldn't the results give an inaccurate/stilted outcome? For example, the empirical data Kingston uses in Table 4.4 in the mobility chapter concerns a sample of white males; according to such data, occupational mobility is highly likely. But what about the working populations that are not white and not male (my guess would be that Kingston would suggest that this bit of empirical data would not be helpful unless paired with his other empirical 'examples' that class does not exist as relates to mobility)?

It seems to me there are other instances where Kingston's use of empirical research does not seem to do the work he suggests, such as the data used in Chapter 6. How helpful is it to use data on voting as a proxy for 'classness' in the United States when a great deal of the electorate does not vote? When the party options are such that they do explicitly (or implicitly by some accounts) not represent different 'class' interests? Where the political atmosphere heavily endorses bi-partisanship as legitimate and partisanship not so? Or in Chapter 5 on class sentiments, can empirical research on self-identification really act as an indicator of 'class'? Would it not depend on whether the social atmosphere promotes/downplays identification as such? In last week's reading, Andrew Sayer suggested that 'class' is a 'dirty word' to most Americans, so would it surprise me that when confronted by a concept that is either distasteful or one that has lay/sociological meanings that differ, self-identification may not provide an accurate reading?

I could really go on forever with my questions, but I will limit myself to this last one concerning structuration (which by now I think it is apparent that I do not know if I accept—at least with the measures that Kingston uses): exactly how would Kingston define the time period necessary to create 'lasting' impact of class? It seems to me he stresses this point at length, in particular how it relates to constructing/solidifying class boundaries. According to my understanding, he does not believe 'class' exists unless it remains constant over time (if it did, it would shape attitudes, life experiences, feelings of solidarity, you name it). If this is his meaning, does that mean he does not think people can act according to a class position they currently occupy? I think this relates to the idea of the development of consciousness and I am curious as to how one can determine definitely that class is 'real' after having been in a particular occupation for 15 years, but it is less so when one has only been in a particular position for 2 years?

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## 10. You-Geon Lee

Examining extensive empirical studies of social class, Kingston (2000) argues that American society is classless even though multi-dimensional inequalities continue. He argues that some degree of (economic) inequality is necessary for a class system to exist, but not a sufficient condition for class structuration (53). "Classes exist" he argues, "only if it can be shown that there are relatively discrete, hierarchically ordered social groups, each with distinctive common experiences (16)." The theory of 'class structuration' from Giddens, which includes inter- and intra-generational mobility, interaction patterns, cultural orientations, class sentiment and political action, is a main criteria for this. According to his argument, the class structuration of American society is not solid, so that U.S. is a classless society.

His 'frontal and fundamental challenge to class theory' seems very provocative and interesting. While his meticulous assessment of extensive empirical studies of social class seems very impressive to me, sometimes, I hesitate to follow his argument in terms of whether class exists. This is about an issue of "a half-empty glass" versus "a half-full glass (32)." He considers mobility, inter- and intra-generational, as the first indicator of structuration because "it is the most decisive one, shaping other aspects of people's collective lives (61)." In reviewing empirical studies of mobility, he seems to see some

evidences as “a half-empty glass.” For example, when I saw a ‘Table 4.1 Inflow and outflow mobility: Son’s current occupational group by father’s broad occupational group’ before reading his argument, I thought that there seemed to be some evidences of occupational inheritance while these were evidences for him to support active class mobility. He said that “Only the sons of upper nonmanual fathers had notable occupational inheritance, but nonetheless, more than four-tenths of them were downwardly mobile (67)” while I thought that ‘definitely, the sons of upper nonmanual fathers had notable occupational inheritance, and furthermore, no less than six-tenths of them sustained their fathers’ occupational status.’ How about a kind of argument that classes continue to exist insofar as it exercises any influence, seeing these evidences as a half-full glass instead of a half-empty glass?

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## 11. Fabian Pfeffer

“The Classless Society” is refreshingly critical and surprisingly bold in its central claims. The latter makes it open for much contestation. I believe that there is much leeway for class theorists to attack the central presuppositions of the book - but for this interrogation let me buy into Kingston’s approach, i.e. accept the realist orientation and accept that the proposed dimensions of class structuration establish the empirical relevance of class. Still, I believe that his central conclusions are flawed. Let me illustrate my argument with reference to his analysis of social mobility. For Kingston, mobility seems to be the most central dimension of structuration because of its causal role in admitting or preventing class sentiment and culture.

He notes that instead of asking whether classes exist, “[i]t would be better to ask: To *what extent* do classes exist” (p.18, italics by the authors). Nevertheless, his judgment of inflow and outflow rates seems to rely on some form of threshold model according to which mobility rates above some a priori set level are regarded as indications of “classlessness”. Setting such threshold is arbitrary and open to debate. How much immobility do you need to talk about classes, how much mobility do you need to talk about classlessness? Kingston owes us a concrete answer and I believe that if he had given it, it would reveal that he in reality attacks the straw-man of a deterministic class theory. No reasonable class theorist claims perfect class reproduction or rules out individual agency. If we want to argue against a probabilistic model of class structuration, one criterion for setting the threshold could be a very simple statistical test: that of independence in the mobility table. Thus, my question: what is the ultimate argument for the claim that relative odds are of limited relevance for class structuration? Remember that the highest odds in any mobility table are always found on the main diagonal. What about reference group theory, i.e. what if individuals correctly perceive their high odds of ending up in the same occupation *relative to* individuals from a different class background? “My argument isn’t absolutist - no signs whatsoever, anywhere, of classes” (p.207) - but why then: “Class theory - RIP” (p. 234)

Some additional points for discussion. 1) The assessment of absolute mobility rates does not do justice to class theories that incorporate predictions about changes in the class structure (see, for instance, Sørensen’s theory in which he also assumes the decline

of internal labor markets through processes of rent destruction). 2) In a gradational and multivariate view: if you saw clusters, how would you recognize them? 3) Wouldn't the most straightforward realist 'test' of class concepts be one of the correlation between income and class (see Halaby/Weakliem)?

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## 12. Ann Pikus

I greatly appreciate Kingston's realist orientation and his feeling that "Real people shouldn't get lost in abstract discussions" (p. 17). I am also impressed by the thoroughness of Kingston's treatment of the five dimensions of structuration (inter- and intragenerational mobility patterns, social interaction patterns, cultural orientations, class sentiment, and political action) and in anticipating and addressing likely critiques.

However, while at times I am persuaded by Kingston's analyses, I am largely frustrated by his own operationalization of class. Kingston defines a class as "...a substantial group having common economic circumstances and relatively distinct life experiences." (p. 53). While this definition sounds broad and inclusive, in his analyses and his argument, Kingston only uses occupational status as evidence of one's economic circumstances regardless of wealth and income. As Kingston illustrates in chapter 3 with his discussion of class maps (and as we've seen in our seminar this semester) most class theorists similarly use some form of an occupational status ranking as a proxy for class. However, I remain uncomfortable completely disaggregating income and wealth from class. Relying solely on occupational rankings has always seemed problematic to me once a theorist hopes to use class to explain social conditions outside the labor market (i.e. while where you stand occupationally might matter in the struggle against exploitation and for the means of production, does it matter for voting?), Does all this mean I really have rejected class in favor of a stratification theory or is there a theory of class that I have missed (or misunderstood) that does account more explicitly for income and wealth in its conception of the economic circumstances that make up a class (for example, distinguishing between a Starbucks employee with a trust fund safety net versus an employee solely reliant on the Starbucks wage because there I think you would see differences, perhaps in that person's sense of class sentiment and their chances for mobility)?

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## 13. Hsing-Mei Pan

Paul Kingston thinks that the structure of class constructed by some sociologists is not a real but abstract concept. In other words, in his opinion, class does not exist in contemporary society. He sets a multivariate variable to see whether different groups of people who pursue different careers have distinctive life experiences that represent the existence of the structuration and social classes. Ultimately, he demonstrates that there are no distinctive life experiences among people, and then comes to a conclusion that the divisions of social classes do not exist in contemporary society. My questions of his

arguments are as follows.

Paul Kingston respectively sets various variables to examine whether a social class shares distinctive experiences in each dimension of social lives, including mobility, interaction pattern, cultural orientation, class sentiment, political action, and so on. It seems that he does not really specify how he faces things outside these variables although sometimes he cites some ethnographic research results to demonstrate his points. Is it not necessary to explain those outside the variables he sets? In my opinion, people in different class locations may share some common points because they all belong to members of their own society. But, on the other hand, they may have distinctive life experiences with each other since they occupy different social locations. Moreover, he ignores possible meanings behind answers on questionnaire. For example, why do some people in the working class locations define themselves as the middle class? It may have other implications.

Paul Kingston thinks people in the United States have no class consciousness because they do not define their class locations in terms of authority, ownership, control over means of production, and so on. Although he tries to distinguish class consciousness from class identity, it seems that he does not really explain why identification of people, indicating social practices or cultural cognitions, cannot constitute the formation of social classes.

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#### 14. **Rahul Mahajan**

I found myself somewhat nettled by Kingston's book. I went into it with a very sympathetic attitude; I do think that the significance of class in the formation of identity and political consciousness in the United States I (and to a lesser extent in the First World) is vastly overrated. I think that in this regard workplace conditions are less significant than at least several other non-economic causes (position with respect to the market and consumption of goods is actually somewhat more significant).

I do think that the United States is significantly less "class conscious" a society than most First World countries. I also note that there's no treatment of class consciousness in the Third World in Kingston's book (although he does not pretend that his analysis applies outside the First World).

At several times while reading the book, I had to hit myself upside the head and re-read some particularly startling claim. Newspaper readership doesn't vary much by class? WTF? Children of capitalists and corporate executives regularly become "workers"? Significant upward mobility is actually a mathematical consequence in societies that have experienced significant steady long-term economic growth while maintaining roughly similar levels of inequality. But severe downward mobility is another matter -- how many



sons of doctors work at McDonald's after high school? I could not reconcile Kingston's world with mine.

There are also recurring analytical dodges that bothered me. Perhaps the most significant is this: to consider various social networking and "cultural capital" type elements of class and find that they're not very important in the United States (it's no surprise that we don't have a British upper crust or a French *haute* society), then insist that *by definition* effects that derive primarily from economic considerations are necessarily effects of stratification, not class. Effectively, in countries without a social and cultural aristocracy, the potential domain for class effects is eliminated by fiat.

Another problem, that amounts to an analytical flaw, is that Kingston repeatedly considers the effects of class on some phenomenon, finds that correlation coefficients, while positive and nonzero, are small and thus do not explain much variation, so he throws out the phenomenon in question. Of course, doing this one by one, phenomenon by phenomenon, completely leaves out the possibility that significant effects of class only emerge when you look at multiple phenomena or characteristics together. If you throw out 10 different effects because each only has a correlation coefficient of .2 with some measure of class, you may well be missing some more complex index of those 10 different effects that correlates much more strongly with class.

While at the beginning, Kingston acknowledges that this is a politically charged issue and claims to be cognizant and wary of the potential effects of having a political agenda when approaching the subject, in the last chapter he kind of gives the game away. He wants to argue for TINA and to demonstrate the nonexistence of class as a step towards that. Well, to say the least, TINA, like any other sweeping prognostication about the possibilities of all human society, is analytically a pretty dicy proposition, as well as one likely to bias the results of a study like this one.

Kingston doesn't seem to give enough attention to the view that class may explain things about the structural working of the economy, in addition to questions of personal attitudes and identity.

Finally, one big problem with the analysis is that Kingston starts out with analyzing societies in which there is a very broad partial consensus about political views – especially, I would argue, about basic economic questions of the kind that class might most directly affect. There is no class polarization on these questions partly because there is very little polarization period and partly because what little there is is motivated on the basis of a purely individualistic notion of politics (I pick my politics like a consumer shops, not on the basis of larger communal identity of any kind). This is a well-known phenomenon. A class theorist looks at this and wants to explain why there isn't class polarization of various views in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in the rest of the First World. Kingston derides this approach, but he does not really construct an argument against such an approach; instead, what he does is, in effect, at length rederive this basic starting point. When he approaches the starting point again, at the end of the book, he

claims to have shown that the “explanation” approach of the class theorist is an invalid paradigm, but he actually hasn’t even tackled the question.

I think the strength of Kingston’s book is that it does in some detail to suggest that various analytical schemas of class, like Goldthorpe’s and Wright’s, are very hard to correlate with attitudes and consciousness in a convincing way – although they do correlate somewhat. It does suggest that, relatively speaking, in many ways gross income level is more important than one’s detailed position with regard to the means of production. This makes sense if the workplace plays a smaller role in the production of identity than it used to, because outside of the workplace so many other life-chances – including opportunities for one’s children – depend much more strongly on how much money you have.

From the point of view of a class-related framework, this backs up the arguments I made several times near the beginning of the class that exchange relations in the market must be factored into notions of exploitation and thus of class.

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## 15. Johannes Glaeser

Kingston’s book is a really interesting work. The doubts I had about classes as real social groups got supported by his empirical investigation. He tries to prove the non-existence of class or better of class formation as real social groups with similar experiences, consciousness and political interest.

But inequality, as Kingston stresses, is reality. For Weberians or Marxists that inequality is based on different chances on the market or on exploitation. As one believes in class and sees Kingston’s work, he or she is confronted with the question why such objective material interests do not cause class formation.

Kingston gives good reason to doubt the actual formation of class. Maybe we should look when (at least temporary) objective class positions gets significant in peoples life. I believe that one’s economic situation is affecting one’s interests, beliefs and identity. It is true class mobility is very high, and therefore the experience of just one class position is seldom in one’s life. Experiences at the work place (exploitation, authority) and social position are just one part of social life. But shouldn’t certain experiences have a strong impact. My question is when such experiences get significant to the people. In the strike of workers, when you notice that friends on your party group themselves as programmed to university students and non-university students or other occasions we can see that there is a link between people objective life situation and social groupings. At least in certain moments. But when are these moments?

Maybe Marxists are right to say that if the material conditions for workers will get worse, class position will be experienced much stronger and therefore class formation is inevitable. Somehow the strength of class theory seems to be to me, that it stresses the material conditions in life and its effects on the other spheres of life.

I would like to talk about how constant the experiences of class (occupation, exploitation, life-style) can be and when they might get important for class formation?

What about other variables, like education, can we still say that nowadays the material side of life has strong affects on the life experiences of people and the other spheres of their life?

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## 16. Rudolfo Elbert

One of the fundamental conclusions of Kingston is that the current state of "classlessness" of the American society is the result of three convergent processes: economic differentiation, high levels of inter and intragenerational mobility and the widespread availability of transportation and information technologies that break down local solidarities. In first place, I would like to focus my interrogation on the process of economic differentiation, which is a fundamental topic in current debates among class analysts. The most relevant frameworks for the class analysis of contemporary societies (Wright and Goldthorpe's) share this concern about the impact of a complex division of labour in the socio-economic structure of societies, sharing the view that it is not appropriate to treat all employees alike as holding similar class positions. Even if the answers they give to this needed complexity is different, both authors consider that the new divisions among employees still allow us to talk about different social classes. On the other hand, Kingston considers that economic differentiation is so great in contemporary economies that we can no longer talk about social classes. This author affirms that "in wealthy societies like the United States the economy requires a complex division of labor, and this complexity generally undermines the widespread similarity of condition that promotes class structuration. Employees at all levels can often perceive many differences in work experiences and only limited commonalities with their co-workers" (220-221) Regarding this opposed views about the meaning of the process of economic differentiation, I would like to raise the following questions: The three mentioned authors agree that current economies imply a process of economic differentiation among employees. However, before talking about the differentiation among employees Wright defines employees as those that do not own the means of production and have to sell their labour force in the market. What is Kingston's perspective on this first differentiation between employers and employees? Even if we were ready to accept that the economic differentiation among employees prevents us from talking about social classes, does this also apply for the division between employers and employees? In other words: how does Kingston explains the continuing existence of employers and employees, even after the consequences of the process of economic differentiation for the homogeneity of employees? Does this existence challenges his argument about society's classlessness?

In second place, I would like to discuss the scope of Kingston's critique of class theory in both methodological and theoretical basis. In methodological terms, Kingston bases his analysis on the empirical findings of class maps based on the measurement of class locations of individuals trough certain occupational characteristics. Taking this into account, can he really say that he found a classless society or he really found the inadequacy of certain class models to explain class dynamics of the American society? In theoretical terms, Kingston states that his empirical analysis questions the fundamental

assumptions of class theory and class analysis. However, it seems to me that his book has a more limited scope, as Kingston's conclusions do not question class theory as a whole but certain theoretical assumption of some contemporary class models. The limited scope of his theoretical discussion can be seen in the relevance of the idea that because of the high levels of inter and intragenerational mobility we can no longer talk about social classes in contemporary societies. As Kingston points out, the relevance of social mobility in the study of social classes is based on Weber's idea that classes exist because economic mobility is low. Therefore, I would like to discuss the following: Can a refutation of the existence of classes based on the empirical finding of high intra and intergenerational mobility be directed to Marxist class analysis or it should be restricted towards weberian-inspired class analysis?