

Lecture 3, Sociology 621
WHAT IS CLASS?
September 14, 2009

I. On the Art of Concept Construction

For over three 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.

In this effort at elaboration one of the first tasks I encountered was more clearly drawing the conceptual lines of demarcation between Marxist class concepts and various alternatives. This 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. In the readings today I present two different expositions of the conceptual typology for specifying class: the first, in the conclusion of the book *Approaches to Class Analysis*, discusses alternative concepts in terms of the range of possible questions for which “class” figures prominently in answers. The second, in the forthcoming *New Left Review* article, links different class concepts to different clusters of mechanisms.

II. 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?

III. Different class concepts as specifying different class 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. As the NLR article argues, they can be linked within a micro-macro model of class conditions, class locations, and class structures. (see the article)

IV. 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
- 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.

V. 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.*