

Sociology 621 Lecture 6
Complexities of Class Structure:
the middle class, careers, families & other problems
September 23, 2003

I. The problem of “complexity”

The abstract concept of class relations defined with respect to the concept of exploitation generates a simple polarized concept of class structure: capitalists and workers in capitalism. In the shmoo story there were only two classes. Now, the world seems much more complex than this. If we want the concept of class to be useful in concretely analyzing real societies we somehow have to figure out how to deal with locations within the class structure which do not seem to fit into a polarized map: how should we deal with managers, foremen, professors, doctors? And there are other kinds of complexities too: people have careers in which they move across class locations. People live in families in which different members may have jobs in different class locations. Workers can own stock. So what should we do? These complexities have different conceptual statuses:

- The problem of the middle class is basically a problem in *defining the locations* within a class structure.
- the problem of families concerns the *units of analysis that fill locations* within class structures
- the problem of careers concerns *temporality of class locations* in a double sense: the relation of individuals to locations over time and the temporal character of locations themselves
- the problem of stock ownership concerns the relationship between *asset-ownership and job-structures* as bases for class locations.

Overall these can really be thought of as two sorts of complexities:

- (1) Complexities in the ways peoples *lives are linked to locations* in the class structure.
- (2) Complexities in *the nature of the locations* to which people’s lives are linked.

These are all very interesting issues. The readings have discussed some of these in great detail. Here we will only be able to briefly survey the issues. I will focus mostly on the knotty problem of the “middle class”, but we will briefly touch on the others as well.

Now, there are many ways of coping with complexity in social theory and empirical research. One strategy is: *keep it simple*. Perhaps it is best to retain the simple, polarized concept of class relations, and then simply add contingent, somewhat ad hoc empirical complexity in investigating any concrete problem. Perhaps it is best to retain the very broad encompassing concept of “the working class”, but then add all sorts of other elements in the analysis.

A second strategy is: *create coherent conceptual complexity*. This involves trying to refine the concept of class relations and class locations in a way that incorporates these complexities within the concept itself. This is the strategy I have adopted.

II. The Middle Class

The starting point for my attempt at building a complex class structural concept was the problem of the “middle class.” I wanted to do some hard-nosed quantitative research on class and income determination using Marxist categories and there was no way of doing this without coming up with some solution to the problem of classifying people, sticking people into categories. One option, again, was to put 90% of the population into the working class – defined as people who sell their labor power on a labor market. This didn’t seem very compelling, so I opted for what has turned out to be more or less 25 years of worrying about the class location of the middle class.

1. The Middle Class: a Double Problem:

- a. **Level of abstraction problem:** We know how to define capitalists and workers at the highest level of abstraction of the CMP. But is this class map adequate for understanding the class structure/class formation relation in the US or in South Africa in 2001?
- b. **Micro-Macro levels of analysis:** Does the polarized map adequately characterize the causal processes that impinge on the lives of individuals in class structures, either in terms of the **interests** of actors or in terms of the **experiences** of actors?

2. Problematic cases: engineers, actors, teachers, athletes, white collar employees, etc.

3. Many solutions. Methodological Issues in constructing a solution:

1. **Conceptual Constraints:** Legitimate Solutions must be consistent with the abstract criteria for the concept of class so that it can fit into Marxist theory. If this fails repeatedly → perhaps transform the theory itself.
2. **Empirical Constraints:** Legitimate solutions must be empirically coherent: consistent with what class distinctions are meant to empirically accomplish (descriptively, explanatorily)

Problem = to reconstruct the concept of class in such a way as to satisfy both of these types of constraints.

4. General Character of my proposals:

Break with assumption of class relations as unitary, one dimensional relation. Previous discussions = every location = every locations in a class structure is in only one class.

Two versions:

- version 1:** a given location can be simultaneously in more than one class → contradictory class locations.
- version 2:** a given location can be simultaneously exploiter and exploited with respect to distinct exploitation mechanisms.

5. Attractiveness of these strategies:

- a) They generate a more differentiated set of categories → more fine-grained accounts
- b) They are particularly useful in periods of rapid transition.
- c) They are easily adapted to micro-level analyses.
- d) They reaffirm the underlying logic: **class structure** –*limits* → **class formation**, where the “limits” are internal to the analysis of class structure itself.

6. Problems of the strategies

- a) Neither conceptual strategy attains the level of coherence that I hoped.
- b) **Contradictory Locations:**
 - Autonomy is quite problematic as a class structure criterion within contradictory locations.
 - The analysis fails to adequately anchor class structure in exploitation (domination becomes central).
 - No basis for analysis of postcapitalist class structures.
- c) **Multiple Exploitations:**
 - Skill exploitation is problematic because skill-owners also produce surplus (a skill exploiter may just be less exploited capitalistically).
 - Skill-based classes are also more weakly relational than property-based classes.
 - Organizational asset exploitation is elegant, but not entirely plausible as the basis for statist exploitation or as a characterization of managers in capitalism.

7. My current “solution” to the middle class

- a. Return to the earlier contradictory locations idea for managers: this captures their class logic more adequately
- b. Skill exploitation/privileges as the basis for *strata* within classes: **capitalization of surplus → transformation of class location into new kind of contradictory location.**
- c. new complexities as tapping the middleness of the middle class:

III. Other complexities

1. *Mediated locations* as a dimension of class structure: especially salient for gender issues

2. *Career structure* of class locations:

- The temporal dimension of locations is important because of the link between **location** and **material interests**. Interests = future-oriented concept. The extent to which interests are tied to current location is a function of the probability of staying in that location into the future: this implies **predictable** career mobility affects the nature of the locations themselves. Implication: the subjective time horizons of actors affects the nature of the “locational” properties of the class structure. New twist = **temporally indeterminate class locations**.
- **Capitalization** of surplus relevant here as well: rents from privileged strata → capacity to turn labor earnings into capital → change in nature of class location

3. *Capital Ownership and the Class Character of Jobs*

ESOPS, retirement funds, stock ownership: more generally the diffusion of stock ownership does transform the relationship between individuals and class relations – a new kind of contradictory location. Some people argue that workers owning stock means that they are no longer workers. I would argue that this means they are no longer *simply* workers. Owning stock does constitute a change in their relationship to the class structure, but not necessarily a profound change. Here is the critical issue: to what extent does owning some stock change the optimal strategies for advancing one’s material interests? If owning stock means that a person no longer needs to sell their labor power on a labor market – they can “live off returns to their capital” – then this surely does change their class position. But more generally it merely adds a new form of contradictory location.

4. *Unemployment/underemployment*: a dualistic structure of employment relations

- Van Parijs argues that holding a secure job becomes a kind of **property** right → a distinctive asset that divides noncapitalists in class-like ways: different material interests, different strategies. Should this be considered a class division also? Underclass vs working class as a **class divide**: we will examine this in the race & class section.
- Goldthorpe distinguishes the “service class” from the “working class” on the basis of the nature of the labor contract: selling labor power as a unit (working class) vs. being hired into a career (service class) in which prospective rewards are central.

5. *The State*: how should state employees be understood? Classes within post-capitalist class relations articulated to capitalism?

6. *Global Classes?* The North/South divide as a class divide: the working class in the US/Europe/Japan as a global middle class = exploiters through global redistribution of surplus?