

CONCLUSION

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If “class” is the answer, what is the question?

The specific definitions and elaborations of the concept of class that have been explored in this book are shaped by the diverse kinds of questions class is thought to answer. A concept whose task is to help answer a question about broad historical variations in the social organization of inequality is likely to be defined quite differently from a concept used to answer a relatively narrow question about the subjective identity of individuals in contemporary society. These questions, in turn, are embedded in broad theoretical frameworks. This is one of the things which theoretical frameworks do: they help pose questions. Questions are not generated simply by curiosity and imagination encountering the empirical world; they are generated by curiosity and imagination, organized by theoretical assumptions and animated by normative concerns, encountering the empirical world. These assumptions and concerns are what give specific questions salience and demarcate the tasks that the concept of class is called upon to accomplish. One way of trying to sort out the various perspectives on class explored in this book is thus to map them onto the salient inventory questions posed within class analysis. This will be the task of this chapter.

Six questions are particularly important for which the word “class” often figures centrally 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 life chances and material standards of living?”
4. *Antagonistic conflicts*: “What social cleavages 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 oppression and exploitation within capitalist societies?”

Of course, one could add to this list in various ways. For example, class is often used as part of the answer to questions like “Why do people vote for specific political parties?” or “What explains variations across people in consumption patterns, tastes, and life styles?” Such questions, however, are typically closely linked to one or more of those listed above. The voting question, for example, is closely connected to the problems of explaining life chances, subjective identity, and antagonistic conflicts, since an important reason why one might think class differences would be connected to voting is because of the opposing interests and identities of people in different classes. Similarly, the life-style question is closely linked to the questions about life chances and subjective identity. Since a menu of six questions already generates a fairly complex way of mapping the variations in frameworks of class analysis, for present purposes I will limit the discussion to this list.

The different approaches to class analysis discussed in this book build their concepts of class to help answer different clusters of these questions. Table 1 distinguishes three ways in which a particular question might be linked to an approach to class analysis: First, a question can constitute the *primary anchor* of a particular approach. These are the questions most fundamentally connected to the broader theoretical framework within which the tasks of class analysis are situated. Primary anchoring questions define the central criteria that the concept of class needs to fulfill in order to function within the agenda of the framework. If it could be shown that class as defined by a given approach was not a salient part of the answer to that approach’s primary anchoring question, then this would indicate either that the definition of the concept of class within the approach needed significant modification or that some more fundamental transformation of the broader theoretical framework was needed. Second, some questions are part of the core theoretical agenda of an approach to class analysis, but are subordinated to the primary anchoring question. These *secondary anchoring* questions help to specify the explanatory and descriptive reach of the proposed concept of class, but do not generate the primary criteria for the definition of class. If class, as defined within an approach, were shown not to contribute to answering these questions this would narrow the theoretical ambition of the concept, but would not necessarily undermine its core purposes. Finally, some questions may play some role in the broad empirical agenda of class analysis but be of secondary importance for the theoretical structure.

-- Table 1 about here --

Let us now look at each of these questions and see how they are linked to the different approaches to class analysis in this book. This task, of course, is not a simple one, for the theoretical approaches discussed in this book do not frame their agendas explicitly in terms of these precise questions, and all of them are anchored in more than

one question. I therefore sent this chapter to each of the living contributors to this book, inviting them comment on my evaluations, and I subsequently revised the chapter in light of comments I received. While this does not mean that the contributors necessarily agreed completely with my characterization of their arguments, there were no strong objections to the formulations presented here.¹

1. *Distributional Location*

Class is often central to the question, “How are people *objectively located* in distributions of material inequality.” In this case, class is defined in terms of material standards of living, usually indexed by income or, possibly, wealth. Class, in this agenda, is a *gradational* concept; the standard image is of rungs on a ladder, and the names for locations are accordingly such things as upper class, upper middle class, middle class, lower middle class, lower class, under class.² This is the concept of class that figures most prominently in popular discourse, at least in countries like the United States without a strong working-class political tradition. When American politicians call for “middle class tax cuts” what they characteristically mean is tax cuts for people in the middle of the income distribution. Class, in this context, is contrasted with other ways that people are objectively located within social structures, for example, by their citizenship status, their power, or their subjection to institutionalized forms of ascriptive discrimination

2. *Subjectively salient groups*

The word “class” sometimes figures in the answer to the question: “What explains how people, individually and collectively, locate themselves and others within a structure of inequality?” Class is one of the possible answers to this question. In this case the concept would be defined something like this: “Classes are social categories that generate subjectively-salient experiences which shape the identities used by people to locate those categories within a system of economic stratification”.³ With this definition of class, the actual content of these evaluative attributes will vary considerably across time and place. In some contexts, class-as-subjective-classification will revolve around life styles, in others around detailed occupations, and in still others around income levels. Sometimes the economic content of the subjective classification system is quite direct – as in income levels or occupational categories; in other contexts, it is more indirect, as in expressions such as “upper class”. The number of classes will also vary contextually depending upon how the actors in a social situation themselves experience and define the relevant distinctions and the salient groups. Class, in this sense of the word, would be contrasted to other forms of subjectively salient evaluation – religion, ethnicity, gender, etc. – which may have economic dimensions but which are not centrally defined in economic terms.

This question about the formation of subjective identity plays a particularly important role in three of the approaches to class discussed in this book. One of the core

themes of Pierre Bourdieu's class analysis, as elaborated by Elliot Weininger, is the salience of symbolic classifications, particularly as these are implicated in lifestyle differences and collective identities. Symbolic classifications and struggles over those classifications do not all revolve around class, but to the extent that they are linked to class-based differences in life chances, then symbolic classifications and their associated identities become central to Bourdieu's class analysis.

Subjective identity is also pivotal in the approaches to class elaborated by both David Grusky and Jan Pakulski. Grusky identifies classes in terms of what he considers "real" groups rather than simply nominal classifications. What makes a group "real" is that the boundaries that define the group have real micro-level effects on the life chances and experiences of individuals within the group in ways that are salient for identity, solidarity and action. In his view, in contemporary developed market societies such as the United States, such real, subjectively salient boundaries correspond to relatively disaggregated occupational categories, not to the "Big Classes" postulated in traditional Marxist and Weberian approaches to class. Disaggregated occupational categories are institutionalized in ways that systematically generate the kinds of salient experiences and opportunities for people that turn those categories into real groups, groups that are subjectively meaningful and consequential, not simply formal classifications. Pakulski also places the problem of subjective identity and group formation at the center of his approach to class analysis. There was a time in the non-distant past – from sometime in the 19th century until the middle decades of the 20th – in which stable group identities were, in significant ways, formed around economic inequalities within markets and production. By the end of the 20th century, however, these economically-rooted group identities, he argues, had broken down – the boundaries became fuzzy, individual lives crossed the boundaries of these previous class categories in complex ways, and other identities became much more salient. Class, Pakulski thus argues, is no longer a relevant answer to the question "What explains how people, individually and collectively, locate themselves and others within a structure of inequality?"⁴

3. *Life-chances*

Perhaps the most prominent question in contemporary sociological research for which class is offered as part of the answer is: "What *explains* inequalities in life chances and material standards of living?" This question plays a role, in one way or another, in virtually all approaches to class analysis. It is a more complex and demanding question than the first question about distributional location, for here the issue is not simply descriptively locating people within some kind of system of stratification, but identifying causal mechanisms that help determine salient features of that system. When class is used to explain inequality, typically the concept is not defined primarily by subjectively-salient attributes of a social location but rather by *the relationship of people to income-generating resources* or assets of various sorts. Class thus becomes a *relational*, rather

than simply *gradational* concept. Class, in this usage, is contrasted to the many other determinants of a person's life chances – for example, geographical location, forms of discrimination anchored in ascriptive characteristics, or genetic endowments. Geographical location, discrimination, and genetic endowments may, of course, still figure in the analysis of class – they may, for example, play an important role in explaining why different sorts of people end up in different classes – but the definition of class as such centers how people are linked to those income-generating assets.

The problem of life-chances is closely linked to the normative issue of equality of opportunity. A very broadly held view in liberal societies is that inequalities in material rewards and status are not, in and of themselves, generally morally objectionable so long as individuals have equal opportunity for achieving these rewards. This issue is especially salient in terms of intergenerational mobility – to what extent do children born into families of different economic standing have equal opportunities to succeed in life – but it also bears on issues of intra-generational opportunities. Equality of life chances, therefore, is a background normative idea in discussions of class as a determinant of life chances.

Explaining variations in life-chances plays a role in all approaches to class analysis, but it is especially salient in the traditions of Marx, Weber, and Bourdieu. Writers in all three of these traditions use the concept of class to talk about how the ways in which people are linked to various kinds of resources profoundly shape their opportunities and strategies in life. The three traditions of class analysis differ, however, in the precise elaboration of the question and relative importance of this question to their overall agendas, as summarized in Table 2.

-- Table 2 about here --

The basic insight of a class analysis of life chances is captured by the formula “what you have determines what you get.” This leaves open, however, what range of resources or assets is included under “what you have” and what kinds of outcomes are included in “what you get.” Bourdieu clearly has the most expansive notion of resources and the broadest conception of life chances. In Bourdieu's class analysis, the relevant resources for answering the life-chances question include financial assets (capital in the ordinary sense), skills and knowledge (or what is often called human capital), and most distinctively, what he calls cultural capital.⁵ Bourdieu also has a quite expansive notion of the scope of life-chances relevant to class analysis, for he includes not simply material standard of living in the narrow economic sense, but also chances for symbolic rewards crucial for inequalities in social status. For Bourdieu, then, life chances for both material goods and symbolic status are determined by the relationship to the three forms of capital. Marx, in contrast, adopts the narrowest inventory of resources relevant to the question. At least in his relatively systematic discussions of class, the only assets that

really matter for defining class in capitalist society are capital and labor power. Weber's class analysis falls between these two for he, like Bourdieu, explicitly includes skills as a distinctive kind of resource that shapes market capacities and thus life chances in a market society. Neo-Weberians, like Breen and Goldthorpe, often add to these market capacities job-specific attributes – like authority and responsibility for technically complex tasks – which also impact on life chances for people in such jobs.⁶

A second way in which these three traditions differ with respect to the life-chances question is in the extent to which their overall agendas of class analysis are anchored in this specific question. One of the reasons why Marxists often adopt a relatively thin understanding of the resources relevant to answering the question about life chances is that their concept of class is more deeply anchored in the questions about social emancipation and historical variation than in the question about individual life chances as such. This may explain why, when neo-Marxists try to systematically engage the problem of life-chances, they often incorporate Weberian ideas into class analysis.

The most basic anchor of Weber's own analysis of class is also not primarily the question about life chances, but rather, as I will argue in more detail below, the question about broad historical variation. His specific focus on market capacities in the question about life chances is derived from his theoretical concerns about historical variation and the distinctiveness of capitalism as a highly rationalized form of market society. For many neo-Weberians, particularly those whose empirical concerns are restricted to the analysis of developed capitalist societies, the issue of broad historical variation tends to get marginalized, and thus the life-chances question in practice becomes the basic anchor for class analysis.

In Bourdieu's class analysis the life-chances question plays the most pivotal role. Broad questions of epochal historical variation or questions about social emancipation are relatively peripheral and do not impose significant constraints on the elaboration of his class concept. For Bourdieu, the crucial issues in class analysis are found in the interplay between the question about life chances and the problem of subjective identity.

4. Antagonistic Conflict

The fourth question of class analysis adds further complexity to the underlying explanatory function of the concept of class: "What cleavages in society systematically generate overt antagonisms and conflicts?" As in the third question, this question suggests a concept of class closely linked to the causes of inequalities in economic opportunities, but here the concept attempts to identify those aspects of economic inequality that generate antagonisms of interest and thus have a tendency to generate overt conflict. Classes would not be defined simply by a commonality of the conditions that generate economic opportunities, but by those specific clusters of common

conditions that have an inherent tendency to pit people against each other in the pursuit of those opportunities. Class, here, would be contrasted on the one hand with non-economic sources of social cleavage – such as religion or ethnicity – and, on the other hand, with nonclass forms of economic cleavage – such as economic sector or geographical region.

This question about the basis of antagonistic conflict figures especially prominently in the Marxist tradition, although class also plays a role in explaining social conflict in non-Marxist theoretical traditions as well. Weber certainly sees class as a potential basis for conflicts, but he explicitly rejects any claims that there is an inherent general tendency for class relations to generate overt conflicts. Marx, in contrast, saw conflict as an intrinsic consequence of class relations. This does not imply that Marx saw explosive class conflict as a constant feature of capitalist society, but he certainly did believe first, that capitalist societies would be characterized by recurrent episodes of intense struggles generated by antagonistic class interests, and second, that there would be a systematic tendency for these episodes to intensify over time.⁷ While the aphorism “class struggle is the motor of history” is an oversimplification of Marx’s theory of historical dynamics, it does express the importance of the problem of conflict for his concept of class.

When one of the central questions of class analysis is explaining conflict, a concept like “exploitation” is likely to play a particularly important role. In Marx and most neo-Marxists this concept is elaborated in terms of the process through which labor effort is appropriated from one class by another. In Aage Sorenson’s approach to class, exploitation is elaborated in terms of the process through which economic rents are extracted. In both cases, conflicts of interests are not treated as contingent properties of class but are seen as built into the very structure of class relations.⁸

5. *Historical Variation*

The fifth question of class analysis centers on a broad macro-level problem: “How should we characterize and explain the variations across history in the social organization of inequalities?”⁹ This question implies the need for a macro-level concept, rather than simply a micro-level concept capturing the causal processes of individual lives; and it requires a concept that allows for macro-level variations across time and place. This question plays an especially central role in both the Marxist and Weberian traditions, but the two traditions treat the problem of historical variation in quite different ways.

Within the Marxist tradition, the most significant aspect of historical variation in inequality is the ways in which economic systems vary in the *manner in which an economic surplus is produced and appropriated*. Capitalism, in these terms, is contrasted feudalism on the basis of the specific mechanisms through which exploitation takes place. In capitalism this occurs through the ways in which labor markets enable

propertyless workers to be employed by capitalists, and capitalist control over the labor process enables them to appropriate labor effort from workers. In feudalism, in contrast, the surplus is extracted from serfs through the direct exercise of coercive power by lords. Both of these ways of organizing economic relations constitute class structures because both are built on the appropriation of the economic surplus by an exploiting class, but they are qualitatively different because of the process by which this is accomplished.

For Weber, in contrast, the central problem of historical variation is the *relative salience of different forms of inequality*, especially class and status.¹⁰ In these terms the critical contrast between capitalism and feudalism is not between two types of class structures, but between a society within which class is the fundamental basis of power and inequality, and a society within which status is the fundamental basis. While classes did exist in feudalism, since feudalism did contain markets and thus people engaged in market exchanges with different resources and market capacities, the market system was subordinated to the status order, and it was the status order which most fundamentally determined the advantages and disadvantages of lords and serfs.

The problem of historical variation also plays some role in specifying the concept of class in the analyses of Jan Pakulski and David Grusky, but in their case the central issue is the variation in the class-ness of social inequality across time *within* the history of capitalist development. For both Pakulski and Grusky, class (or “big classes” in Grusky’s analysis) describes the social organization of inequality in a specific period of capitalist development, from roughly the beginning of the industrial revolution until the emergence of the post-industrial (or post-modern) era. Here the issue is not, as in Weber, the relative weight of a class order and a status order, or, as in Marx, the large-scale historical variations in forms of exploitation, but the shift from a highly structured and coherent system of inequality in industrial capitalism to a fragmented, cross-cutting system of complex inequalities in postmodern societies.

6. *Emancipation*

The most controversial question asked by social theorists for which class is an important part of the answer is: “What sorts of transformations are needed to eliminate economic oppression and exploitation within capitalist societies?” This question implies not simply an explanatory agenda about the mechanisms that generate economic inequalities, but a normative judgment about those inequalities – they are forms of oppression and exploitation – and a normative vision of the transformation of those inequalities part of a political project of emancipatory social change.

This is the question that, I believe, most fundamentally anchors the Marxist approach to class analysis and infuses each of the other core questions with a particular set of meanings. In the context of the Marxian emancipatory agenda, the problem of

historical variation includes trying to understand possible future forms of social relations within which the exploitation and oppression of capitalist class relations have been eliminated. Historical variation relevant to class analysis thus revolves around the contrast not simply between capitalism and feudalism as empirically observable historical forms of class relations, but also between capitalism and a hypothetical communism (understood as an egalitarian classless society). Similarly with respect to the problem of class conflict: characterizing the antagonistic interests embedded in class relations as “exploitation” and “oppression” suggests that the conflicts generated by those relations involve issues of social justice, not simply morally-neutral material interests.¹¹ Within the broad agenda of Marxist class analysis, therefore, the concept of class contributes to the critique of capitalist society rather than just to description and explanation.

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Because of the ideologically charged character of many of the debates over class, the alternative frameworks of class analysis that we have reviewed often appear to be hostile camps, each trying to recruit supporters and defeat opponents. Students interested in class analysis thus often feel that they have to make a choice, to adopt one or another of these approaches to the exclusion of others. But if it is the case that these various approaches are organized around different mixes of anchoring questions, then, depending upon the specific empirical agenda, different frameworks of class analysis may provide the best conceptual menu. One can be a Weberian for the study of class mobility, a Bourdieuan for the study of the class determinants of lifestyles, and a Marxian for the critique of capitalism.

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:

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

Table 2
The Life Chances Question in Marx, Weber, and Bourdieu

	<i>Salient resources that shape life chances</i>			<i>Relative centrality of three class analysis questions</i>		
	capital & labor	human capital	cultural capital	life chances	historical variation	emancipation
Marx	x			3	2	1
Weber	x	x		2	1	
Bourdieu	x	x	x	1		

Notes

¹ David Grusky raised a number of issues with an earlier draft of the conclusion. In particular, he felt that his approach to class analysis is really anchored in a very broad question about micro-level variations in individual outcomes, and accordingly proposed an additional anchoring question: “*Individual-level outcomes*: What explains individual-level differences in life chances, lifestyles, attitudes, political behavior, and other forms of institutional participation (e.g., marriage, union membership, religious affiliation, other voluntary organization memberships)?” I reformulated some of the discussion in this chapter to respond to this, but felt that the first three questions listed above sufficiently cover these micro-level concerns that it was not necessary to add an additional question to the list.

² For a discussion of the contrast between *gradational* and *relational* conceptions of class, see Ossowski (1963) and Wright (1979: 5-8).

³ There is no implication in this definition that class, so defined, would provide a complete explanation of subjective identity and classification. Class would be seen as an experience-generating process, but experiences also require cultural practices to be turned into identities. This cultural mediation of the relationship between class and identity is an especially salient theme in Bourdieu’s work.

⁴ The difference between Grusky and Pakulski in terms of their analysis of these issues lies more in how they wish to use the word “class” than in their substantive arguments. Grusky uses the word class to identify highly disaggregated, subjectively-salient occupational groups. Pakulski uses the word in a more conventional way, restricting the term to those categories Grusky refers to as “Big Classes”. In any event, both Grusky and Pakulski argue that the kind of broad social categories that both Marxists and Weberians identify as “classes” no longer constitute subjectively operative identities of coherent groups with real boundaries.

⁵ There is ambiguity in Bourdieu’s writings about precisely how many conceptually distinct forms of capital should figure in the analysis of life chances. On the one hand, as Elliott Weininger argues (Lareau and Weininger 2003) it may not make sense to treat cultural capital and human capital as distinct “forms of capital”. On the other hand, it could also be argued that “social capital”, a fourth kind of capital discussed by Bourdieu (but not generally brought into alignment with the other forms of capital in explaining life chances), is relevant for understanding class differences in life chances. Social capital consists especially of social networks in which people are embedded and which, in a variety of ways, facilitate their pursuit of various goals (and thus “life chances”). In the present context it is not important to resolve these issues. The important point is that Bourdieu adopts a more expansive notion of the resources that figure in the class analysis of life chances than is typical of either neo-Weberian or neo-Marxist class analysis.

⁶ Authority and technically complex tasks in a job are not exactly “assets” in the same sense as capital and skills, since a person does not really “own” the authority or the complex tasks. Nevertheless, since incumbents of such jobs do have effective control over the exercise of authority and complex tasks, and since this does confer open them income-generating advantages, it is not too much of a stretch to fold this into the general Weberian conceptualization of class.

⁷ These two expectations underwrite two of the striking theoretical arguments of classical Marxism. The thesis that capitalism will be characterized by recurrent episodes of intense class conflict is the basis for the thesis that capitalist societies need political and ideological “superstructures” in order to be reproduced, since in the absence of such institutions, these explosive conflicts could not be contained. The thesis that

there would be a tendency for class struggles to intensify over time is a central part of the prediction that capitalism will eventually be transformed through revolutionary struggle.

⁸ The basic difference between Sorenson's rent-based view of exploitation and a more Marxist labor-appropriation based view is that in the latter the material interests of exploiter depend upon continued, on-going interactions with the exploited, not simply the exclusion of the exploited from access to the rent-generating process. As discussed in chapter 1, I refer to the Sorenson-type of exploitation as "non-exploitative oppression". For an extended Marxian discussion of Sorenson's approach, see Wright (2000).

⁹ I have framed the question here as the problem of historical *variation* rather than historical *trajectory* or historical *development*. Classical Marxism, of course, was concerned not simply with an account of structural variations across historical *époques*, but with elaborating a general theoretical explanation of the trajectory of historical development ("Historical Materialism").

¹⁰ The historical variation in the relative salience of different aspects of inequality is intimately bound up with a more general theme in Weber's historical sociology – the problem of *rationalization*. Class, for Weber, is the most fully rationalized form of economic inequality. For a discussion of the relationship between rationalization and class in Weber's class analysis, see Wright (2002).

¹¹ Not everyone, of course, believes that such explicitly normative questions should play such a major role in specifying concepts within sociological theory. John Goldthorpe, for one, has explicitly attacked Marxist approaches to class on precisely these grounds. In a footnote to an article in *the American Journal of Sociology* commenting on Aage Sorenson's rent-based concept of class, Goldthorpe says of the concept of exploitation that it is "a word I would myself gladly see disappear from the sociological lexicon." He adds, by way of clarification, "Its function in Marxist thought was to allow a fusion of normative and positive claims in a way that I would find unacceptable." And he concludes: "If invoking exploitation is no more than a way of flagging the presence of structurally opposed class interests that lead to zero-sum conflicts, then its use is innocuous but scarcely necessary." (Goldthorpe, 2000: 1574)