

INTRODUCTION

In March 2001, on the morning BBC Radio news program, a report was presented discussing a new seven-category class scheme being used in the British Census. Listeners were invited to the BBC website to see what class they were in. Within a few days there were over 50,000 hits on the site, a record for this sort of thing. At least for the segment of the British population that listens to the BBC morning news, class remains a salient issue.

In the broadcast a number of people were interviewed. One police inspector responded to being told that he was now classified in Class I along with doctors, lawyers and chief executives of corporations, by saying “Does it mean now I have to wear tennis whites when I go out to do my gardening?...I don’t see myself socially or economically in the same class as them.” In a subsequent “live chat” program with Professor David Rose of Essex University, the principle designer of the new census categories, many people called up complaining about the coding scheme. A truck driver objected to being in Class VII on the grounds that his job was quite skilled and he had to use new information technologies and computers on his job. David Rose explained that the classification was meant to capture differences in the nature of the employment contract and conditions of work, not the skill level of jobs, and truck drivers typically had quite insecure conditions of employment. Another person asked “How can you have a sense of solidarity and consciousness when you’re ‘Five’ or ‘Seven’? Can you imagine the Communist Manifesto written by the University of Essex? ‘The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of little internecine wars between class groups 1 and 2 and class groups 3 to 7?’ Doesn’t have the same ring does it?”

These comments by listeners on the BBC reflect the general ambiguity of the term “class” in the popular imagination. To some people it connotes lifestyle and tastes, the wearing of tennis whites while gardening. To others it is mainly about social status, esteem and respect: to be reclassified “down” the class hierarchy is seen as demeaning. Some see classes as social categories engaged in collective forms of conflict, shaping the destiny of society. Politicians call for “middle class tax cuts” by which they simply mean “tax cuts for people in the middle range of the income distribution.” And many people, like David Rose, see class as identifying the basic determinants of a person’s economic prospects.

These ambiguities in popular usages are also present in more academic discussions of class. The *word* class is deployed in a wide range of descriptive and explanatory contexts in sociology, just as it is in popular discourse, and of course, depending upon the context, different *concepts* of class may be needed. Four broad kinds questions are particularly common in the scholarly literature for which the word “class” figures centrally in the answer:

First, the word “class” sometimes figures in the answer questions such as: “How do people locate themselves within a social structure of inequality?” Class is one of the possible answers to the question. In this case the concept would be defined something like: “a social category sharing a common set of subjectively-salient attributes within a system of social stratification”. In this usage, class is typically understood as some kind of amalgam of status and economic attributes that are culturally salient in people’s identities. Class would be a special kind of status group in this conception, and like other status groups it would be marked by distinctive life styles, tastes, and sensibilities.

Second, class is offered as part of the answer to the question: “What *explains* inequalities in economically-defined life chances and standards of living?” Here, typically, the concept of class would not be defined by subjectively-salient attributes of a social location, but rather by the relationship of people to income-generating resources or assets of various sorts. While people may also share tastes and lifestyles and come to hold beliefs about their locations in the system of inequality generated by their relationship to these resources, and these beliefs and lifestyles in turn may be consolidated into salient identities, it is the relation to resources rather than the subjective identities as such which define classes. In this conceptualization, class would be contrasted with other possible bases by which life chances are determined: gender, race, caste, citizenship.

Third, class often figures in answers to the question, “What are the economic cleavages in society that systematically generate overt conflicts?” As in the second question, this one 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 which generate antagonisms of interest. Classes would not be defined simply by a commonalty of the conditions which generate eco-

conomic opportunities, but those specific clusters of common conditions which pit people against each other in the pursuit of those opportunities. Class, here, would be contrasted on the one hand with noneconomic sources of social cleavage – such as religion or ethnicity – and, on the other hand, nonclass forms of economic cleavage – such as economic sector or geographical region.

Finally, class plays a central role in answering the question, “What sorts of struggles have the potential to transform capitalist economic oppressions in an emancipatory direction?” This is a much more complex and normatively contentious question. It implies defining classes in such a way that they do not simply specify social categories with different economic opportunities, nor even simply social categories whose interests are pitted against each other. What is required is a specification of categories whose struggles contain the potential of fundamental transformations of the antagonisms themselves. The contrast here is with conflicts that are entirely contained within the existing “rules of the game” and conflicts that, by virtue of the nature of the cleavage on which the conflict is based, contain the potential to transform the very nature of the game itself.

Given this diversity of the explanatory and descriptive tasks within which the word class appears, it is easy to see why debates over class are often confusing. Sometimes, of course, there is a genuine debate: alternative proposals for what concepts are needed to answer the same question are in dispute. Other times, however, the debate simply reflects different agendas. Some sociologists proclaim that class is disappearing, by which they mean that people are less likely to form stable identities in class terms and thus less likely to orient their political behavior on the basis of class, while others proclaim that class remains an enduring feature of contemporary society, by which they mean that a person’s economic prospects in life continue to depend significantly on their relationship to economically valuable assets of various sorts.

The central objective of this book is to clarify the complex array of alternative conceptualizations of class rooted in different theoretical traditions of class analysis. Each of the authors in the book has written extensively on problems of class and inequality within different traditions of class analysis. Each has been given the assignment of writing a kind of theoretical manifesto for a particular kind of class analysis. The

goal is to clarify the theoretical foundations of each approach: lay out the underlying assumptions, systematically define each conceptual element, demarcate the explanatory ambitions of the concept and, where possible, differentiate their approach from others. While to a greater or lesser extent most of the approaches have their roots in an intellectual tradition linked to some classical social theorist – Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Ricardo – the chapters are not meant to be primarily an exegesis of the concept of class within the texts of these founding figures. Nor are they meant to be authoritative canonical statements about what counts as genuine “Marxist” or “Weberian” or any other kind of class analysis. Each of these traditions has considerable internal variation and, accordingly, the concept of class will be elaborated in different ways by different scholars all claiming to be working within the same broad current of thought. What they each do attempt to do is elaborate the analytical foundations of the conceptualization of class within each author’s body of work, and by doing so, clarify the broader terrain of variation within class analysis.

Six different perspectives are presented. Chapter 1, by Erik Olin Wright, explores class analysis within the Marxist tradition. Here the central idea is defining the concept of class in terms of processes of exploitation and linking the concept to alternative systems of economic relations. Chapter 2, by Richard Breen, examines a form of class analysis linked to the Weberian tradition and associated with the work of the British Sociologist John Goldthorpe. The central concern here is developing a concept of class built around the economic life chances of people, more specifically around the character of the employment relations available within labor markets and work organizations. Chapter 3, by David Grusky, develops class analysis along Durkheimian lines. The guiding principle is the ways in which detailed locations within divisions of labor create homogeneous effects on the lives of people. Classes locations should be identified with these highly disaggregated categories within systems of stratification. Chapter 4, by Loïc Wacquant, lays out the central principles of the kind of class analysis identified with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In this framework, class is defined with respect to a variety of dimensions of “capital”, where capital is understood as a multidimensional space of power relations that shapes both the opportunities and the dispositions of actors. Chapter 5, by Aage

Sorensen, presents an approach to class analysis that draws heavily on the reasoning of neoclassical economics. In this conceptualization of class, classes would not exist at all in a perfectly competitive market with complete information. Classes occur only where there are the kinds of market imperfections that create rents that can be captured by some groups of actors and not others. Finally, in Chapter 6, Jan Pakulski elaborates the foundations of what might be termed “anti-class analysis”. He argues that class, especially as understood in the Marxist and Weberian traditions, is no longer an empirically useful category. Inequality may continue to be an important issue in contemporary society, but inequality, in his view, is no longer organized along class lines.