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Posing the Problem

The Agenda of Class Analysis

The Legacy of Marx

As has frequently been remarked and bemoaned, Marx never systematically defined and elaborated the concept of class, in spite of the centrality of that concept in his work. To the perpetual frustration of people who seek in the texts of Marx authoritative answers to theoretical problems, in the one place where he promises such an elaboration—the final chapter of *Capital* Volume 3, entitled ‘Classes’—the text stops after only a page. Just before the end of this incomplete text Marx wrote, ‘The first question to be answered is this: What constitutes a class?’. Two short paragraphs later comes Engels’s sad comment, ‘Here the manuscript breaks off’.

While Marx never systematically answered this question, his work is filled with class analysis. With some exceptions, most of this work revolves around two problems: the elaboration of *abstract structural maps* of class relations, and the analysis of *concrete conjunctural maps* of classes-as-actors. The first of these kinds of analyses concerns the way in which the social organization of production determines a structure of ‘empty places’ in class relations, places filled by people. This structural analysis of classes is found particularly in Marx’s most celebrated theoretical works, especially in *Capital* where he decodes the structure and dynamics of the capitalist mode of production. The second kind of analysis, on the other hand, is not concerned with class structure as such, but with the ways in which the people within class structures become organized into collectivities engaged in struggle. This analysis of class formation is found most notably in Marx’s political and historical writing, where Marx is trying to understand the interplay of

collectively organized social forces in explaining specific historical transformations.

The images that emerge from these two sorts of accounts are quite different. From the abstract structural account of classes comes the characteristically polarized map of class relations which runs through most of Marx’s analysis of the capitalist mode of production in *Capital* and much of his more abstract discussion of epochal trajectories of historical development: masters and slaves, lords and serfs, bourgeoisie and proletariat. While non-polarized positions are occasionally referred to in these abstract discussions of class relations, they are never given a rigorous theoretical status and are generally treated as having strictly peripheral importance.

In contrast to this simple, polarized, abstract map of class relations, Marx’s conjunctural political analyses are characterized by a complex picture of classes, fractions, factions, social categories, strata and other actors on the political stage. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, for example, he refers to at least the following actors in social conflicts: bourgeoisie, proletariat, large landowners, aristocracy of finance, peasants, petty bourgeoisie, the middle class, the lumpen-proletariat, industrial bourgeoisie, high dignitaries. No attempt is made by Marx to present a sustained theoretical analysis of these various categories and of the conceptual status of all of the distinctions being employed. His preoccupation in this text is with understanding the relationship between the struggles among these actors and the state. In particular, he tries to explain the patterns of victories and defeats in these struggles, the effects of those victories and defeats on changes in the state, and the effects of changing regimes on the pattern of alliances and struggles among these actors. He is not concerned with elaborating a rigorous map of the concrete social structure inhabited by the protagonists in the drama. This is characteristic of Marx’s political-conjunctural writings. While he gives us a list of descriptive categories corresponding to the actual actors in the conflicts, he does not provide a set of precise concepts for decoding rigorously the structural basis of most of those categories.

What we have then, in Marx’s own work, is a polarized abstract concept of the ‘empty places’ generated by class relations and a descriptively complex map of concrete actors within class struggles, with no systematic linkage between the two. Marx of course felt that the historical tendency of capitalism was towards increasing concrete polarization. ‘Society as a whole,’ he wrote with

Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*, 'is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat.' Lest one think that this thesis of a tendency to polarization was simply a polemical flourish in a political pamphlet, an identical position is staked out in the ill-fated last chapter of *Capital* Volume 3.:

In England, modern society is indisputably most highly and classically developed in economic structure. Nevertheless, even here the stratification of classes does not appear in its pure form. Middle and intermediate strata even here obliterate lines of demarcation everywhere (although incomparably less in rural districts than in the cities). However, this is immaterial for our analysis. We have seen that the continual tendency and law of development of the capitalist mode of production is more and more to divorce the means of production from labour, and more and more to concentrate the scattered means of production into large groups, thereby transforming labour into wage-labour and the means of production into capital.¹

Throughout his work he refers to the petty bourgeoisie (self-employed who employ little or no wage-labour) as a 'transitional' class and emphasizes the dissolution of the peasantry. While there are a few passages where he acknowledges the growth of vaguely defined 'middle strata', the basic thrust of his work is to stress the increasingly polarized character of the concrete class relations of capitalist societies.² Given such an assumption, then, the conceptual gap between the abstract and polarized categories used to analyse class structures and the concrete descriptive categories used to analyse social actors in specific historical conjunctures would tend to be reduced over time. The real movement of capitalist development would thus produce an effective correspondence between the abstract and concrete categories of class analysis.

The Agenda of Contemporary Marxist Class Analysis

The historical record of the past hundred years has convinced many Marxists that this image of a pervasive tendency towards radical polarization of class relations within capitalist societies is incorrect. To be sure, there has been a steady decline in the proportion of the population owning their own means of production—the self-employed—in advanced capitalist countries, at least until the recent past.³ But among wage-earners, the growth of professional and technical occupations and the expansion of managerial hierarchies in large corporations and the state have at least

TABLE 1.1
Theoretical Objects and Levels of Abstraction in Marxist Class Analysis

<i>Level of Abstraction</i>	<i>Theoretical Object of Analysis</i>	
	CLASS STRUCTURE	CLASS FORMATION
MODE OF PRODUCTION	Polarized Class relations	Epochal struggle between classes
SOCIAL FORMATION	Co-existence of classes based in different modes of production and different stages of development of a given mode	Class alliances
CONJUNCTURE	Institutional variability in class relations in given jobs	Concrete class organizations: parties, shop floor organization unions

created the appearance of a considerable erosion of a simple polarized structure.

Given that it is no longer generally accepted that the class structure within capitalism is increasingly polarized, it has become more difficult to side-step the theoretical problem of the gap between the abstract polarized concept of class relations and the complex concrete patterns of class formation and class struggle. It is no longer assumed that history will gradually eliminate the conceptual problem. Resolving this problem has been one of the central concerns of the resurgence of Marxist class analysis in the past twenty years.

To understand the theoretical agenda of this new body of Marxist work on class it will be helpful to distinguish formally two dimensions of class analysis that have been implicit in our discussion so far: first, whether the analysis focuses primarily on class structure or on class formation, and second, the level of abstraction at which classes are analysed. This yields the six possible foci of class analysis illustrated in Table 1.1.

The distinction between *class structure* and *class formation* is a basic, if often implicit, distinction in class analysis. Class structure refers to the structure of social relations into which individuals (or, in some cases, families) enter which determine their class interests. We will have a great deal to say about how these relations should

be defined in subsequent chapters. The point to emphasize here is that class structure defines a set of empty places or positions filled by individuals or families. This implies that with respect to class structures we can talk about 'vacant' positions (positions which are not currently filled by actual people), about an 'absolute surplus population' (an excess of people with respect to the places within the class structure), and 'incumbents' of class positions (people actually located within a given class structure). While this does not imply that class structure exists independently of people, it does mean that it exists independently of the specific people who occupy specific positions.⁴

Class formation, on the other hand, refers to the formation of organized collectivities within that class structure on the basis of the interests shaped by that class structure. Class formation is a variable. A given type of class structure may be characterized by a range of possible types of class formation, varying in the extent and form of collective organization of classes. Class-based collectivities may be organized, disorganized or reorganized within a given class structure without there necessarily being any fundamental transformations of the class structure itself.⁵ If class structure is defined by social relations *between* classes, class formation is defined by social relations *within* classes, social relations which forge collectivities engaged in struggle.

The distinctions among levels of abstraction of class analysis is a somewhat more complex issue. Three levels of abstraction typically characterize Marxist discourse on class: mode of production, social formation and conjuncture.

The highest level of abstraction is mode of production. Classes are here analysed in terms of pure types of social relations of production, each embodying a distinctive mechanism of exploitation. When Marx talks above of the 'pure form' of classes in capitalist society he is referring to the analysis of classes at this highest level of abstraction.

In many discussions of the 'mode of production' level of abstraction it is assumed that no *variability* within a mode of production is admissible at this level of abstraction: all capitalisms are equivalent when discussing the mode of production. This, I think, is a mistake. Without shifting levels of abstraction, it is still entirely possible to define different forms of a given mode of production. Indeed it has been one of the central themes of Marxist theories of the capitalist mode of production that this mode of production itself has an intrinsic logic of development. This logic of develop-

ment means that the capitalist mode of production itself has an intrinsic tendency to pass through different 'stages', each with a distinctive form of capitalist social relations (primitive accumulation, competitive capitalism, monopoly capitalism, etc.). Like all tendencies, of course, this tendency may be blocked by various mechanisms, and the investigation of the actual processes which may facilitate or impede this trajectory of forms does require moving the analysis to a lower level of abstraction. But the analysis of the developmental logic of capitalist relations as such must be theorized at the level of abstraction of the mode of production itself.⁶

The term 'social formation' has come to derive its meaning from the analysis of societies as specific combinations of distinct modes of production or types of relations of production.⁷ The analysis of the presence of pre-capitalist classes within capitalist society, and more rarely, the analysis of post-capitalist classes within capitalist society, are examples of analysing class structure at the level of abstraction of social formation. The analysis of the specific ways in which different forms of capitalist relations are combined within a given society is also a problem of the social formation level of abstraction. For example, analysing the specific combination of competitive, small-scale capitalist production with large, concentrated and centralized capitalist production in a given society would be a social formation analysis. The problem of alliances between classes and fractions of classes is the principal object of the analysis of class formation at this level of abstraction.

Conjunctural analysis involves the investigation of societies in terms of the concrete institutional details and contingent historical factors that enter the story.⁸ The analysis of specific forms of labour-market segmentation within the working class, or the legal practices which define the powers of managers over workers, or the credit relations that link petty bourgeois to bankers, would all be instances of conjunctural analyses of class structures. The analysis of unionization, party formation, class-based social movements, etc., would be the analysis of class formation at this most concrete level.

The conjunctural level of analysis is also the level of abstraction at which the most sustained analyses of the relationship between class and non-class relations and practices usually occur (e.g. class and race or class and gender). This is not to say that in principal such issues cannot be addressed at higher levels of abstraction, but the conceptual apparatus for such more abstract investigation is

rather underdeveloped and when attempts are made they tend to be reductionist. For example, when the gender–class relationship is explored at the level of mode of production, most marxist analyses effectively end up reducing male domination to class domination. Typically this reduction occurs in some sort of functionalist manner: the existence and form of patriarchy is explained by the essential functions it fulfils in reproducing the basic class relations of capitalism.

In these terms, many debates can be interpreted as disagreements over the appropriate level of abstraction for addressing certain problems. If gender and class have completely contingent relations between them—that is, the causal interconnections between them occur simply because they affect the same people but not because they presuppose each other in any way—then their relationship can only really be analysed at the conjunctural level. If, on the other hand, there are structural properties of these two relations which are intrinsically related, then a mode of production analysis may become possible. To take another example, some theorists, such as Nicos Poulantzas, have argued that the relationship between the form of the state and social classes can be analysed at the level of abstraction of mode of production and this leads him to try to construct a general concept of ‘the capitalist state’. Other theorists, such as Theda Skocpol, argue that the state cannot legitimately be theorized at this level of abstraction and insist on a strictly historical (i.e. conjunctural) investigation of the relationship between states and classes.⁹

An analogy may help to clarify the distinctions being made between these levels of abstraction. In the scientific study of the chemistry of a lake, the highest level of abstraction involves specifying the particular way that the basic elements that go into making water, hydrogen and oxygen, combine to make water, H₂O. The study of the different forms of water—ice, liquid water, evaporation, etc.—would all be at this most abstract level. The middle level of abstraction corresponding to social formation analysis involves investigating the ways in which this compound, H₂O, interacts with other compounds in lakes. Finally, the conjunctural level involves investigating the myriad of contingent factors—nitrogen washed down from farms, chemical waste dumping from factories, etc.—which concretely distinguish a given lake chemically from all other lakes in time and space.

In terms of Table 1.1 the bulk of Marx’s analyses of classes is concentrated in the upper left hand cell and the lower two right

hand cells. Of course, Marx had something to say somewhere about every cell in the table, but he never provided a systematic theoretical exposition of the lower two levels of abstraction of class structure. Nor, as already stated, did he ever provide a sustained theory of the causal linkage between class structure and class formation, of the process through which positions within class structures analysed at different levels of abstraction become formed into organized collectivities.

Much of the recent development of Marxist theory and research on classes can be viewed as attempts at bridging the gap between the abstract analysis of class structure and the analysis of class formation. This new class analysis has had two principal thrusts: first, filling in the undertheorized cells in the structural side of the typology; and second, much more systematically analysing the problem of the translation of this structure of relations into the formation of collective actors.

In the work that has focused on the problem of class structure in advanced capitalist societies, the pre-eminent preoccupation has been with the ‘embarrassment of the middle classes’. The evidence of the existence and expansion of the ‘new middle class’ has been at the heart of most critiques of Marxist class theory, and Marxists have found it necessary to respond to those critiques in one way or another. However, the concern with the middle class, or, equivalently, with specifying the conceptual line of demarcation between the working-class and non-working-class wage earners, is not simply a defensive response to bourgeois attacks. Resolving this conceptual problem is also seen as essential if the classical concerns of Marxism—understanding the development of the contradictions of capitalism and the conditions for the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society—are to be analysed in a rigorous way.

The parallel problem for the structural analysis of classes in third-world capitalist societies is the ‘embarrassment of the peasantry’, which at least according to many earlier Marxist analyses was thought to be a class in rapid decline. The introduction of the concept of ‘articulation of modes of production’, which attempts to give specificity to the relationship between peasants workers and capitalists, and the elaboration of the world-systems approach to the study of third world societies were both important strategies for rethinking the class structures of these societies.¹⁰

As we will see in the next chapter, the result of these attempts to solve the problem of the middle classes and the peasantry has been a range of alternative conceptualizations of class structure at

the middle levels of abstraction. In the course of building these new concepts, the more abstract mode of production analysis has itself been subjected to scrutiny, and various elements in that analysis have been challenged and altered by different theorists. The full ramifications of these various conceptual innovations are still working themselves out.

The second general thrust of recent work attempting to bridge the gap between the abstract analysis of class structures and the analysis of class formation has focused on the process of class formation. The starting point of most of these analyses has been a firm rejection of the view that particular kinds of class formation can be deduced directly from the class structure. In its place is the general view that the process of class formation is decisively shaped by a variety of institutional mechanisms that are themselves 'relatively autonomous' from the class structure and which determine the ways in which class structures are translated into collective actors with specific ideologies and strategies. Some of this research has focused primarily on the political mediations of the process, showing how the process of class formation is shaped by the forms of the state, the strategies of parties and other political factors.¹¹ Other research has dealt primarily with the role of the labour-process and the organization of work in structuring the process of class formation.¹² Nearly all of this research has been concerned with showing the complex and contingent character of the relationship between class structure and class formation.

Neither of these kinds of contributions—contributions to the conceptual map of empty places in the class structure and contributions to the theory of the formation of collective actors from those empty places—is entirely new in the Marxist tradition. Theoretical discussions of the middle class can be found in scattered places and certainly by the time when Karl Kautsky wrote about the middle classes around the turn of the century, it was recognized as a significant problem.¹³ And the classical Marxist theory of the state and parties, particularly as elaborated by Lenin, is pre-eminently concerned with the political mediations in the formation of class actors, particularly the revolutionary working class.

But while the themes in this recent work are rooted in classical Marxism, the new Marxist class analysis is distinctive in two respects: first, much of this work has attempted a level of self-conscious conceptual precision that was only rarely encountered in earlier Marxist discussions of these problems. Secondly, it has sys-

tematically tried to develop concepts and theories at the 'middle level' of abstraction, less abstract than the exploration of modes of production but more abstract than the concrete investigation of the concrete situation. Increasing attention is being paid to the theoretical dimensions of variability in 'actually existing capitalisms'. While the more abstract debates of course continue, there is an emerging recognition that it is not enough to have good abstract concepts of the capitalist state, of bourgeois ideology, of the capitalist labour-process and of the capitalist class structure; we also need a repertoire of concepts capable of specifying the variabilities in each of these at more concrete levels of analysis.

This book will attempt to make a contribution to these debates on class structure. Part One will revolve largely around conceptual issues. Since these debates on class centre on the production and transformation of concepts, chapter two will begin with a brief methodological discussion of the problem of concept formation and then continue by exploring in considerable detail the development of one particular conceptual solution to the problem of the 'middle class', the concept of 'contradictory locations within class relations'. The chapter will end with an inventory of internal inconsistencies and theoretical problems with this conceptualization. Chapter three will then offer a new general strategy for analysing class structure which avoids the problems posed by the concept of 'contradictory locations'. The essential argument is that the concept of contradictory locations, like much neo-marxist class analysis, has effectively displaced the concept of 'exploitation' from the core of the concept of class structure, replacing it with the concept of 'domination'. The strategy proposed in this chapter attempts to specify the concept of exploitation in such a way that it can be reinstated as the central basis for defining class structures in general, and solving the conceptual problem of the 'middle classes' in particular. Chapter four will then explore the theoretical implications of this new approach for a wide range of problems of interest to radical scholars: the theory of history, the problem of class formation and class alliances, the problem of legitimation, the relationship between class and gender, and a number of other issues.

Part two of the book will deploy this new conceptualization of class structure in a series of empirical investigations. Too often conceptual debates are carried out strictly in terms of the internal logic and consistency of a conceptual apparatus with at best anecdotal

dotal reference to empirical research. Chapters five to seven, therefore, will systematically explore a range of empirical problems using quantitative operationalizations of the abstract concepts elaborated in chapter three. Chapter five will attempt a systematic empirical comparison of the merits of the definition of the working class based on the framework elaborated in chapter three with two other definitions, one based on the criterion of productive labour and one on the criterion of manual labour. Chapter six will use the new conceptualization to compare the United States and Sweden on a variety of issues involving class structure: the distribution of the labour-force into class locations, the relationship between this distribution and a variety of other structural properties of the society (economic sectors, state employment, firm size, etc.), the relationship between class and sex, the class structures of families, the effects of class on income, and a number of other problems. Finally, in chapter seven we will examine empirically the complex problem of the relationship between class structure and class consciousness.

Marx asked on the final page of *Capital* Volume 3, 'What constitutes a class?' This is the basic question this book hopes to answer. The answer which will be developed in the course of the analysis will undoubtedly not be the one which Marx would have given if he had finished his chapter. Not only have there been a hundred years of theoretical discussion of the problem of class since Marx's death, there have also been a hundred years of history, and if Marxist theory is at all scientific one would expect conceptual advances to have occurred in such a period. Nevertheless, the answer which I will propose will try to be faithful both to the theoretical agenda forged in Marx's work and the political goals that agenda was meant to promote.

Notes

1. Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. 3, London 1974, p. 885.
2. The very few passages within which Marx acknowledges the tendencies of certain types of 'middle classes' to expand are located in relatively unfamiliar texts and are largely unconnected to his more abstract theoretical discussions of class. For example, in *Theories of Surplus Value* Marx writes: 'What he [Ricardo] forgets to emphasize is the constant increase of the middle classes, who stand in the middle between the workers on one side and the capitalists and landed proprietors on the other, who are for the most part supported directly out of revenue, who rest as a

burden on the labouring foundation and who increase the social security and power of the upper ten thousand.' Quoted in Martin Nicolaus, 'Proletariat and Middle Class in Marx', *Studies on the Left*, no. 7, 1967, p. 247.

3. The data seem to indicate that in many capitalist countries self-employment began expanding in the early 1970s. In the United States, the lowest level of self-employment was reached in about 1972 at a level of about nine per cent of the labour force (according to official US Government figures). Since then self-employment has increased steadily every year, at least until 1984.

4. The problem of properly describing the relationship between flesh-and-blood human individuals and social relations has been the object of protracted and often obscure debates in sociology. It is often argued that since social relations would not exist if all the human individuals within those relations ceased to exist, it therefore makes no sense to distinguish the structure from the individuals within the structure. The formulation I have adopted does not give social relations an existence independent of people as such, but does give them an existence independent of particular persons. Stated differently: you can change all of the actual individuals in a factory in the course of a generation and yet the class structure of the factory could remain the same.

5. Understanding the variability of class formation in terms of the organization, disorganization and reorganization of class-based collectivities is derived from the work of Adam Przeworski. See in particular, 'From Proletariat into Class: The Process of Class Struggle from Karl Kautsky's *The Class Struggle* to Recent Debates', *Politics & Society*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1977.

6. It is because Marxist theory treats the developmental stages of capitalism as in some sense intrinsic to the logic of the capitalist mode of production that these stages can be analysed at the level of abstraction of the mode of production. This is similar to saying that the physiological stages of development of a human being can be analysed at the same level of abstraction as the general structural properties of the human being, since these stages are themselves a specific kind of general structural property (i.e. intrinsic to the structure of the organism). Specifying the properties which distinguish a child from an adult is not 'less abstract' than discussing the properties which are identical in both.

7. As I will use the term, 'social formation' refers to a level of abstraction, whereas 'society' refers to a 'unit of analysis'. Society is contrasted with groups, organizations and individuals; social formation is contrasted to mode of production and concrete conjuncture.

8. This does not imply that a conjunctural analysis has to be a 'snap-shot' situated statically in time and space. The point is that a conjunctural analysis includes the operations of contingent details and historically specific processes that are untheorized at the level of social formation and mode of production.

9. See Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, NLB, London 1973; Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, New York 1979, and 'Bringing the State Back In: False Leads and Promising Starts in Current Theories and Research' in Peter Evans, Theda Skocpol and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, eds, *Bringing the State Back In*, New York 1985.

10. See Harold Wolpe, ed, *The Articulation of Modes of Production*, London 1980.

11. The most innovative and important work on the political mediations of the process of class formation has been done, in my view, by Adam Przeworski. See in particular, 'From Proletariat into Class', op.cit; 'Social Democracy as an Historical Phenomenon', *New Left Review*, 122, 1980; 'Material Interests, Class Compromise

and the Transition to Socialism', *Politics & Society*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1980; 'The Material Bases of Consent: Economics and Politics in a Hegemonic System', in Maurice Zeitlin, ed., *Political Power and Social Theory*, vol. 1, Greenwich Connecticut 1979. Other examples of important work on the political mediations of the process of class formation include, Göran Therborn, 'The Prospects of Labor and the Transformation of Advanced Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 145, 1984; David Abraham, *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic*, Princeton 1981; Ron Aminzade, *Class, Politics and Early Industrial Capitalism*, Binghamton 1981.

12. See especially Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent*, Chicago, 1979 and *The Politics of Production*, Verso, London 1985; Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain*, New York, 1979; David Noble, 'Social Choice in Machine Design', *Politics & Society*, Vol. 8, nos. 3-4, 1978.

13. See Przeworski, 'From Proletariat into Class ...' for a discussion of Kautsky's view on the problem of middle strata.

Part One

Conceptual Issues