

**FROM GRAND PARADIGM BATTLES TO PRAGMATIST REALISM:
TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED CLASS ANALYSIS***

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When I began writing about class in the mid-1970s, I saw Marxism as a comprehensive paradigm confronting positivist social science.¹ I argued that Marxism had distinctive epistemological premises and distinctive methodological approaches which were fundamentally opposed to the prevalent practices of mainstream social science. While I argued that this battle should be engaged on an empirical as well as a theoretical terrain, I viewed Marxism and mainstream sociology as foundationally distinct and incommensurable. Looking back in the mid-1980s at this earlier work, I wrote: “I originally had visions of glorious paradigm battles, with lances drawn and the valiant Marxist knight unseating the bourgeois rival in a dramatic quantitative joust. What is more, the fantasy saw the vanquished admitting defeat and changing horses as a result.”

More than three decades have passed since this early work on class. In the intervening period I have rethought the underlying logic of my approach to class analysis a number of times.² While I continue to work within the Marxist tradition, I no longer feel that the most useful way of thinking about Marxism is as a comprehensive paradigm that is incommensurate with “bourgeois” sociology.³ Rather, I see different theoretical traditions as identifying different kinds of causal processes or mechanisms which they claim have explanatory power for particular agendas. These different traditions have scientific value to the extent that these claims are justified. The different mechanisms elaborated by different theoretical traditions intersect and interact in the world, generating the things which we observe. The Marxist tradition is a valuable and interesting body of ideas because it successfully identifies real mechanisms that matter for a wide range of important problems, but it does not constitute a full-blown “paradigm” capable of comprehensively explaining all things social or subsuming all social mechanisms under a unified framework. It also does not have a monopoly on the capacity to identify real mechanisms, and thus in practice sociological research by Marxists should combine the distinctive Marxist-identified mechanisms with whatever other causal processes seem pertinent to the explanatory task at hand.⁴ What might be called “pragmatist realism” has replaced the Grand Battle of Paradigms.

In this paper I will explore some of the implications of this pragmatist realism for class analysis. In my theoretical work in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I argued for the

¹ An early statement of my views on Marxism and mainstream social science can be found in the methodological introduction to *Class, Crisis and the State* (London: New Left Books, 1978).

² The principle publications in which I have discussed these issues are: *Class, Crisis and the State*, London: New Left Books, 1978), *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985), *The Debate on Classes* (London: Verso, 1989), *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis* (Cambridge University Press, 1997); and *Approaches to Class Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³ I prefer to use the expression “Marxist tradition” rather than “Marxism” precisely because the latter suggests something more like a comprehensive paradigm.

⁴ This stance towards the Marxist tradition does not imply simply dissolving Marxism into some amorphous “sociology” or social science. Marxism remains distinctive in organizing its agenda around a set of fundamental questions or problems which other theoretical traditions either ignore or marginalize, and identifying a distinctive set of interconnected causal processes relevant to those questions. For a discussion of this stance towards Marxism see Erik Olin Wright, *Interrogating Inequality* (London: Verso, 1994), especially part III.

general superiority of the Marxist concept of class over its main sociological rivals – especially Weberian concepts of class and class within mainstream stratification research. It now seems to me more appropriate to see these different ways of talking about class as each identifying different clusters of causal processes at work in shaping the micro- and macro- aspects of economically-rooted inequality in capitalist societies. For some questions and problems, one or another of these clusters of mechanisms may be more important, but all are relevant to a full sociological understanding of inequality and its consequences. Each of these approaches to class analysis is incomplete if it ignores the others. I continue to feel that Marxist class analysis is superior to the other traditions for a range of questions which I feel are of central importance, especially questions about the nature of capitalism, its contradictions, and the possibilities of its transformation. But even for these core Marxist questions, the other traditions of class analysis have something to offer.

For simplicity in this discussion, I will focus on three clusters of class-relevant causal processes, each associated with different strands of sociological theory and approaches to class analysis. The first identifies class with the attributes and material conditions of life of individuals. The second focuses on the ways in which social positions give some people control over economically valued resources of various sorts while excluding others from access to those resources. And the third identifies class, above all, with the ways in which economic positions give some people control over the lives and activities of others. I will call these three approaches the *individual attributes* approach to class, the *opportunity-hoarding* approach, and the *domination and exploitation* approach. The first is associated with the stratification tradition, the second with the Weberian tradition, and the third with the Marxist tradition.

Class as individual attributes and material conditions of life

Both among sociologists and among the lay public, the principle way that most people understand the concept of class is in terms of individual attributes and life conditions. People have all sorts of attributes including such things as sex, age, race, religion, intelligence, education, geographical location, and so on. Some of these attributes they have from birth, some they acquire but once acquired are very stable, and some are quite dependent upon a person's specific social situation at any given point in time and may accordingly change. These attributes are consequential for various things we might want to explain, from health to voting behavior to childrearing practices. People also can be characterized by the material conditions in which they live: squalid apartments, pleasant houses in the suburbs, or mansions in gated communities; dire poverty, adequate income, or extravagant wealth; insecure access to health services or excellent health insurance and access to high quality services. "Class", then, is a way of talking about the connection between individual attributes and these material life conditions: class identifies those economically important attributes of people that shape their opportunities and choices in a market economy and thus their material conditions of life. Class should neither be identified simply with the individual attributes nor with the material conditions of life of people, but with the interconnections between these two.

The key individual attribute that is part of class in economically developed societies within this approach is education, but some sociologists also include somewhat more elusive attributes like cultural resources, social connections, and even individual

motivations.⁵ All of these deeply shape the opportunities people face and thus the income they can acquire in the market, the kind of housing they can expect to have, the quality of the health care they are likely to get. When these different attributes of individuals and material conditions of life broadly cluster together, then these clusters are called “classes”. The “middle class,” within this approach to the study of class, identifies people who are more or less in the broad middle of the economy and society: they have enough education and money to participate fully in some vaguely defined “mainstream” way of life. “Upper class” identifies people whose wealth, high income, social connections and valuable talents enable them to live their lives apart from “ordinary” people. The “lower class” identifies people who lack the necessary educational and cultural resources to live securely above the poverty line. And finally, the “underclass” identifies people who live in extreme poverty, marginalized from the mainstream of American society by a lack of basic education and skills needed for stable employment.

In the individual attributes approach to class, the central concern of sociologists has been to understand how people acquire the attributes that place them in one class or another. Given that for most people in the countries where sociologists live, economic status and rewards are mainly acquired through employment in paid jobs, the central thrust of most research in this tradition is on the process by which people acquire the cultural, motivational, and educational resources that affect their occupations in the labor market. Because the conditions of life in childhood are clearly of considerable importance in these processes, this tradition of class analysis devotes a great deal of attention to what is sometimes called “class background” – the class character of the family settings in which these key attributes are acquired. In a stripped down form, the causal logic of these kinds of class processes is illustrated in Figure 1.

-- Figure 1 about here --

Skills, education, and motivations are, of course, very important determinants of an individual’s economic prospects. What is missing in this approach to class, however, is any serious consideration of the *inequalities in the positions themselves* which people occupy. Education shapes the kinds of jobs people get, but how should we conceptualize the nature of the jobs which people fill by virtue of their education? Why are some jobs “better” than others? Why do some jobs confer on their incumbents a great deal of power while others do not? Rather than focusing exclusively on the process by which individuals are sorted into positions, the other two approaches to class analysis begin by analyzing the nature of the positions themselves into which people are sorted.

Class as Opportunity-hoarding

The problem of “opportunity-hoarding” is closely associated with the work of Max Weber.⁶ The idea is that in order for a job to confer on its occupants high income and special advantages it is important that the incumbents of those jobs have various means of

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu is the leading contemporary sociologist who systematically includes a range of cultural elements in an expanded list of class-relevant individual attributes.

⁶ Among American sociologists, the term “opportunity-hoarding” was used most explicitly by Charles Tilly, especially in his book *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Bourdieu’s work on fields and forms of capital also revolves around processes of opportunity hoarding.

excluding people from access to the jobs. This is also sometime referred to as a process of *social closure*: the process where by access to a position becomes restricted, closed off to some people. One way of doing this is by creating requirements for filling the job that are very costly for people to meet. Educational credentials often have this character: high levels of education generate high income in part because there are significant restrictions of the supply of highly educated people. Admissions procedures, tuition costs, risk-aversion to large loans by low-income people and so on all block access to higher education for many people, and this benefits those in jobs that require higher education. If a massive effort was made to improve the educational level of those with less education this would itself lower the value of education for those with high education, for its value depends to a significant extent on its scarcity. The opportunity hoarding mechanism is illustrated in Figure 2.

-- Figure 2 --

Someone might object to this description of educational credentials by arguing that education also affects earnings by enhancing a person's productivity. Economists argue that education creates "human capital" which makes people more productive, and this is why employers are willing to pay them higher wages. While some of the higher earnings that accompany higher education reflect productivity differences, this is only part of the story. Equally important is the ways in which the process of acquiring education excludes people through various mechanisms and thus restricts the supply of people for these jobs. A simple thought experiment shows how this works: imagine that the United States had open borders and let anyone with a medical degree or engineering degree or computer science degree anywhere in the world come to the U.S. and practice their profession. The massive increase in the supply of people with these credentials would undermine the earning capacity of holders of the credentials even though their actual knowledge and skills would not be diminished. Citizenship rights are a special, and potent, form of "license" to sell one's labor in a labor market.

Credentialing and licensing are particularly important mechanisms for opportunity-hoarding, but many other institutional devices have been used in various times and places to restrict access to given types of jobs: color bars excluded racial minorities from many jobs in the United States, especially (but not only) in the South until the 1960s; marriage bars and gender exclusions restricted access to certain jobs for women until well into the 20th century in most developed capitalist countries; religion, cultural style, manners, accent – all of these have constituted mechanisms of exclusion.

Perhaps the most important exclusionary mechanism that protects the privileges and advantages of people in certain jobs in a capitalist society is private property rights in the means of production. Private property rights are the pivotal form of exclusion that determines access to the "job" of employer. If workers were to attempt to take over a factory and run it themselves they would be violating this process of closure by challenging their exclusion from control over the means of production. The capacity of owners to acquire profits depends upon their defense of this exclusion, which we call "property rights." The core class division within both Weberian and Marxian traditions of sociology between capitalists and workers can therefore be understood as reflecting a specific form of opportunity-hoarding enforced by the legal rules of property rights.

Exclusionary mechanisms that shape class structures within the opportunity-hoarding

approach do not operate only in the most privileged parts of the class structure. Labor unions can also function as an exclusionary mechanism, by protecting the incumbents of jobs from competition by outsiders. This does not mean that on balance unions contribute to increasing inequality, since they may also act politically to reduce inequalities and they may effectively reduce inequalities generated by other mechanisms of exclusion, especially mechanisms connected to private ownership of the means of production. Still, to the extent that unions create barriers to entry to certain jobs, they do create a form of social closure that raises the material conditions of life of insiders.

Sociologists who adopt the opportunity-hoarding approach to class generally identify three broad class categories in American society: capitalists, defined by private property rights in the ownership of means of production; the middle class, defined by mechanisms of exclusion over the acquisition of education and skills; and the working class, defined by their exclusion from both higher educational credentials and capital. That segment of the working class that is protected by unions is either seen as privileged strata within the working class, or, sometimes, as a component of the middle class.

The critical difference between the opportunity-hoarding mechanisms of class and the individual attribute mechanisms is this: Opportunity-hoarding means that the economic advantages people get from being in a privileged class position are *causally connected* to the disadvantages of people excluded from those class positions. In the case of the mechanisms connected to individual attributes, the advantages and disadvantages are simply outcomes of individual conditions. To state this in a simple way, in the case of opportunity-hoarding mechanisms, the rich are rich in part *because* the poor are poor; the rich do things to secure their wealth which contributes to the disadvantages poor people face in the world. In the case of simple individual attributes, the rich are rich because they have favorable attributes; the poor are poor because they lack these attributes; and there is no systematic causal connection between these facts. Eliminating poverty by improving the relevant attributes of the poor – by improving their education, cultural level, and human capital – would in no way harm the affluent. Where opportunity-hoarding mechanisms are important, in contrast, eliminating poverty by removing the mechanisms of exclusion potentially undermines the advantages of the affluent in the existing system.

*Class as exploitation and domination*⁷

This is the most controversial way of thinking about class. Most sociologists ignore this set of mechanisms when talking about class, and some explicitly deny their relevance. These mechanisms of class analysis are associated most strongly with the Marxist tradition of sociology, but some sociologists more influenced by Weber also include exploitation and domination in their conception of class.⁸

“Domination” and, especially, “exploitation” are contentious words in sociology because they tend to imply a moral judgment, not simply a neutral description. Many

⁷ For the present purposes it is useful to see domination and exploitation as closely linked mechanisms. For some explanatory purposes one or the other of these would be more salient.

⁸ Weber, of course, develops an elaborate general discussion of domination, power and authority, but mostly this is in the context of his analyses of organizations and the state, not his specification of the concept of class.

sociologists try to avoid such terms because of this normative content.⁹ I feel, however, that they are important and accurately identify certain key issues in understanding class. Both domination and exploitation refer to ways in which people control the lives of others. “Domination” refers to the ability to control the *activities* of others. Exploitation refers to the acquisition of economic benefits from the laboring activity of those who are dominated. All exploitation, therefore, implies some kind of domination, but not all domination involves exploitation.

In relations of exploitation and domination it is not simply the case that one group benefits by restricting access to certain kinds of resources or positions. In addition, the exploiting/dominating group is able to control the laboring effort of another for its own advantage. Consider the following classic contrasting cases: In the first case, large landowners seize control of common grazing lands, exclude peasants from gaining access to this land, and reap economic advantages from having exclusive control of this land for their own use. In the second case, the same landlords seize control of the grazing lands, exclude the peasants, but then bring some of those peasants back onto the land as agricultural laborers. In this second case, in addition to gaining advantage from controlling access to the land (opportunity-hoarding) the landowner also dominates and exploits the labor of the farm workers. This is a stronger form of relational interdependency than in the case of simple exclusion, for here there is an on-going relationship between the *activities* of the advantaged and disadvantaged persons, not just a relationship between their *conditions*. Exploitation and domination are forms of structured inequality which require the continual active cooperation between exploiters and exploited, dominators and dominated.

This contrast in the role of social relations within the three approaches to class analysis is summarized in Figure 3. The individual attributes approach is the least relational, since neither the economic conditions in which people live nor their activities are understood as directly reflecting the social relations. The opportunity hoarding approach sees the economic conditions of people as formed through relations of exclusion, but does not specify class as embodying relations among activities. The exploitation/domination approach includes both forms of relations.

-- Figure 3 about here --

The domination and exploitation approach to class is represented in Figure 4. Like the opportunity-hoarding approach, power and legal rules which enforce social closure are important in defining the basic structure of social positions, particularly the potent form of social closure and exclusion we call “private ownership of the means of production.” But here the critical effect of opportunity hoarding is domination and

⁹ John Goldthorpe explicitly objects to the concept of exploitation on 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)

exploitation, not simply market advantage.

-- Figure 4 about here --

Within the domination/exploitation approach class, the central class division in a capitalist society is between those who own and control the means of production in the economy – capitalists – and those who are hired to use those means of production – workers. Capitalists, within this framework, both exploit and dominate workers. Other kinds of positions within the class structure get their specific character from their relationship to this basic division. Managers, for example, exercise many of the powers of domination, but are also subordinated to capitalists. CEOs and top managers of corporations often develop significant ownership stakes in their corporations and therefore become more like capitalists. Highly educated professionals and some categories technical workers have sufficient control over knowledge (a critical resource in contemporary economies) and skills that they can maintain considerable autonomy from domination within work and significantly reduce, or even neutralize, the extent to which they are exploited.

In both the opportunity-hoarding and exploitation/domination approaches to class, power plays an important role. In both of these approaches, the inequalities in income and wealth connected to the class structure are sustained by the exercise of power, not simply by the actions of individuals. The inequalities generated by opportunity-hoarding require the use of power to enforce exclusions, and the inequalities connected to exploitation require supervision, monitoring of labor effort, and sanctions to enforce labor discipline. In both cases, social struggles that would challenge these forms of power would potentially threaten the privileges of people in the advantaged class positions.

Integrating the three clusters of class mechanisms

While sociologists have generally tended to base their research on one or another of these three approaches to class, there really is no reason to see them as mutually exclusive. Instead we can see the reality of class as being generated by the complex interactions of the different mechanisms identified within each approach. One way of combining the three approaches is to see each of them as identifying a key process that shapes a different aspect of the class structure:

1. The exploitation and domination mechanisms identify the fundamental class division connected to the capitalist character of the economy: the class division between capitalists and workers.
2. The opportunity hoarding mechanisms identifies the central mechanism that differentiates “middle class” jobs from the broader working class by creating barriers which in one way or another restrict the supply of people for desirable employment. The key issue here is not mainly *who* is excluded, but simply the fact that there are mechanisms of exclusion which sustain the privileges of those in middle class positions.
3. The individual attributes and life conditions mechanisms identifies a key set of processes through which individuals are sorted into different positions in the class structure or marginalized from those positions altogether. Opportunity hoarding

identifies exclusionary processes connected to middle class jobs. The individual attributes and life conditions approach helps specify what it is in the lives of people that explains who has access to those jobs and who is excluded from stable working class jobs.

These three processes operate in all capitalist societies. The differences in class structures across countries are produced by the details of how these mechanisms work and interact. The theoretical task is to think through the different ways these mechanisms are linked and combined; the empirical task is to figure out ways studying each and their interconnection.

One possible nested micro-macro model is illustrated schematically in Figure 5. In this model, the power relations and legal rules which give people effective control over economic resources (means of production, financial capital, and human capital) generate structures of social closure and opportunity hoarding connected to social positions. Opportunity hoarding, then, generates three streams of causal effects: 1) it shapes the micro-level processes through which individuals acquire class relevant attributes; 2) it shapes the structure of locations within market relations (occupations and jobs) and the associated distributional conflicts, and 3) it shapes the structure of relations within production, especially relations of domination and exploitation, and the associated conflicts within production. The first of these causal streams, in turn, shapes the flows of people into the class locations within the market and production. Jointly the class attributes of individuals and their class locations (defined within the market and production) affect their levels of individual economic wellbeing.

-- Figure 5 about here --

One final element in the broad synthetic model is needed. Figure 4 treats power relations and institutional rules as exogenous structures, whereas in fact these basic power relations are themselves shaped by class processes and class conflicts. This matters because structures of inequality are dynamic systems, and the fate of individuals within the system depends not just on the micro-level processes they encounter in their lives, or on the social structures within which those lives take place, but on the trajectory of the system as a whole within which those micro-processes occur. Treating the underlying power relations that support a given structure of class locations as fixed parameters is deeply misleading and contributes to the incorrect view that the fate of individuals is simply a function of their attributes and individual circumstances. What we need, therefore, is a recursive dynamic macro model in which the struggles generated by social relations contribute to the trajectory of change of the relations themselves. This suggests the macro model as pictured in a highly simplified form in Figure 6. A fully elaborated class analysis, then, combines this kind of dynamic macro-model of conflict and transformation with the macro-micro multilevel model of class processes and individual lives. In such a model the key insights of stratification approaches, Weberian approaches, and Marxist approaches are combined.

-- Figure 6 about here --

The American Class Structure in the 21st century within an integrated class analysis

Economic systems differ in how unfettered are the rights and powers that accompany private ownership of the means of production, and thus in the nature of the class division between capitalists and workers. The United States has long been characterized as a capitalist economy with among the weakest public regulations of capitalist property. This is reflected in a number of critical facts about the United States: a very low minimum wage, which allows for higher rates of exploitation than would otherwise exist; low taxation on high incomes, which allows the wealthiest segments of the capitalist class to live in extraordinarily extravagant ways; weak unions and other forms of worker organization that could act as a counterweight to domination within production. The result is that among developed capitalist countries the United States probably has the most polarized class division along the axis of exploitation and domination among the developed capitalist countries.

In terms of the formation of a middle class through mechanisms of opportunity hoarding, especially those linked to education, the United States has historically had one of the largest middle classes. The US was the first country to massively expand higher education, and for a long time access to higher education was very open and relatively inexpensive, allowing people with few resources to attend universities. The US has also been characterized by a multi-tiered higher education system – with community colleges, junior colleges, liberal arts colleges, universities, public and private institutions – that made it possible for people to enter higher education later in life and to move from one tier to another. People could screw up as a young adult, but if they “got their act together” there was at least the possibility of going back to school, getting a credential, and gaining access to middle class employment. This large and diverse system of higher education helped support the creation of a large number of middle class jobs. This was complemented, in the decades after World War II, by a relatively strong labor movement that was able to mute job competition for jobs in the core of the American economy that did not require higher education. This enabled unionized workers in those jobs to acquire income and security similar to the credentialed middle class.

Now, it was never the case, contrary popular rhetoric, that the United States was overwhelmingly a “middle class society”. Most jobs in the American employment structure did not gain advantages from exclusionary credentials, and the labor movement never organized more than about 35% of the non-managerial labor force. Furthermore, in recent decades there has been an erosion of at least some of these processes of middle-class exclusion: the labor movement has precipitously declined since the 1970s; many kinds of middle class jobs have become less secure, less protected by the credentials associated with employment in such positions; and the economic crisis of the end of the first decade of the 21st century has intensified the sense of precariousness of many people who still think of themselves as being in middle class jobs. Thus, while it is still certainly the case that higher education, and increasingly, advanced academic degrees play a central role in creating access to many of the best jobs in the American economy, it is much less clear what the future prospects are for a large and stable middle class.¹⁰

¹⁰ For a discussion of the patterns of job polarization in recent decades, see Erik Olin Wright and Rachel Dwyer, “Patterns of Job Expansion and Contraction in the United States, 1960s-1990s”, *Socioeconomic*

Finally, the American class structure has been characterized by a particularly brutal process through which individual attributes relevant to the fate of individuals in the class structure are formed. The educational system in the United States is organized in such a way that the quality of education available to children in poor families is generally vastly inferior to the quality of education of children of middle class and wealthy families. This deficit in publicly provided education for the poor is intensified by the extreme deprivations of poverty in the United States due to the absence of an adequate safety net and supportive services for poor families. The rapid deindustrialization of the American economy and the absence of comprehensive job training programs for people displaced by deindustrialization means that a significant number of people find themselves without the kinds of skills needed for the current job structure. The result is that the United States class structure is characterized by the highest rates of poverty and economic marginality of any comparable country.

Taking all of these processes together yields the following general picture of the American class structure at the beginning of the 21st century:

- An extremely rich capitalist class and corporate managerial class, living at extraordinarily high consumption standards, with relatively weak constraints on their exercise of economic power. The American class structure is the most polarized class structure at the top among developed capitalist countries.
- An historically large and relatively stable middle class, anchored in a expansive and flexible system of higher education and technical training connected to jobs requiring credentials of various sorts, but whose security and future prosperity is now uncertain.
- A working class which once was characterized by a relatively large unionized segment with a standard of living and security similar to the middle class, but which now largely lacks these protections.
- A poor and precarious segment of the working class, characterized by low wages and relatively insecure employment, subjected to unconstrained job competition in the labor market with minimal protections by the state.
- A marginalized, impoverished part of the population, without the skills and education needed for jobs above poverty, and living in conditions which make it extremely difficult to acquire those skills. The American class structure is the most polarized at the bottom among developed capitalist countries.
- A pattern of interaction of race and class in which the working poor and the marginalized population are disproportionately made up of racial minorities.

Towards an integrated class analysis

Adopting the integrated framework of class analysis proposed here poses different kinds of challenges for analysts working in the Marxist tradition and those working within the stratification and Weberian traditions of sociology. For many Marxists the main

challenge is recognizing that what is most powerful within Marxism is its theory of a specific array of causal mechanisms rather than its aspiration to be a comprehensive paradigm of social science. Historically the relevance of these mechanisms has been defended with the rhetoric of incommensurable paradigms, including arguments for a distinctive Marxist epistemology and methodology that sharply differentiated it from its rivals. I do not believe that this kind of defense of Marxist ideas is compelling. Marxism is a powerful tradition of social science because it provides powerful explanations for a range of important phenomena, not because it has some special method that differentiates it from all other currents of social science. Of course, it is always possible that in some future iteration of efforts to formulate Marxism as a distinctive comprehensive paradigm, this kind of paradigm aspiration could be realized. But for now it seems better to see Marxism as a research program defined by attention to a specific set of problems, mechanisms and provisional explanatory theories.

The challenge of an integrated class analysis may be even bigger for sociologists working in the stratification tradition. Marxist analysts of class, after all, have always in practice included discussions of individual attributes and the material conditions of life of people located within an economic structure, and opportunity hoarding is an integral part of the concept of social relations of production. Stratification theorists, on the other hand, have totally ignored the problem of exploitation, at most talking about “disadvantage”, and even domination is absent from this approach to class. To recognize exploitation and domination as central axes of class analysis is to recognize the importance of a structure of social positions distinct from the persons who fill those positions, and this too is largely alien to stratification research.

In a way, Weberians may have the easiest task. On the one hand, most Weberian-inspired sociologists have not aspired to create a comprehensive paradigm and have been satisfied with a theoretical tradition that provided a rich menu of loosely connected concepts addressing specific empirical and historical problems. This has been one of the things that has made the Weberian tradition attractive – it is basically permissive about the incorporation of almost any concepts from other currents of social theory. On the other hand, Weberians have always emphasized the importance of power within social structures and have no difficulty in distinguishing persons and structured positions. While exploitation has not figured centrally within Weberian class analysis, there is no fundamental barrier within the logic of Weberian categories for including exploitation in the study of class.

It might seem from this assessment that in the end we should all simply declare ourselves Weberians. This was one of the accusations leveled against my work and the work of other Marxists thirty years ago by Frank Parkin when he wrote, “Inside every neo-Marxist there seems to be a Weberian struggling to get out.”¹¹ I do not think this follows from the kind of pragmatist realism I am advocating here. Marxism remains a distinctive tradition of doing social science because of its distinctive set of problems, its normative foundations, and the distinctive inventory concepts and mechanisms it has developed.

¹¹ Frank Parkin, *Marxism and Class Theory: a Bourgeois Critique* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). p.25

FIGURES

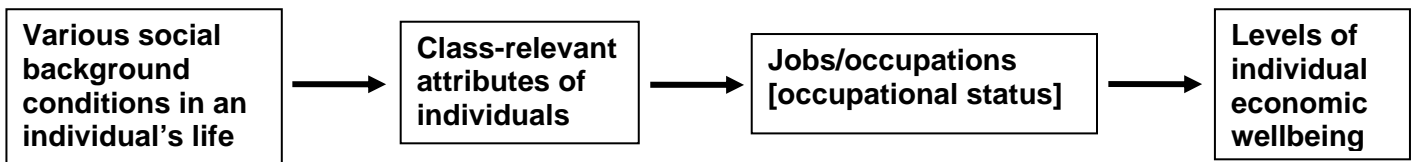


Figure 1. The individual-attributes approach to class and inequality

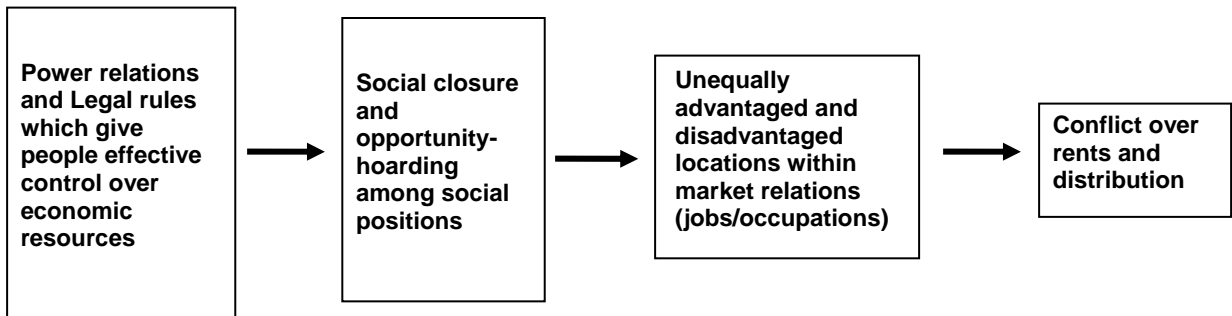


Figure 2. The opportunity-hoarding approach to class and inequality

Approach to class analysis	Economic Conditions	Economic activities
Individual attributes	Non-relational	Non-relational
Opportunity hoarding	Relational	Non-relational
Domination/exploitation	Relational	Relational

Figure 3. The role of social relations in different approaches to class analysis

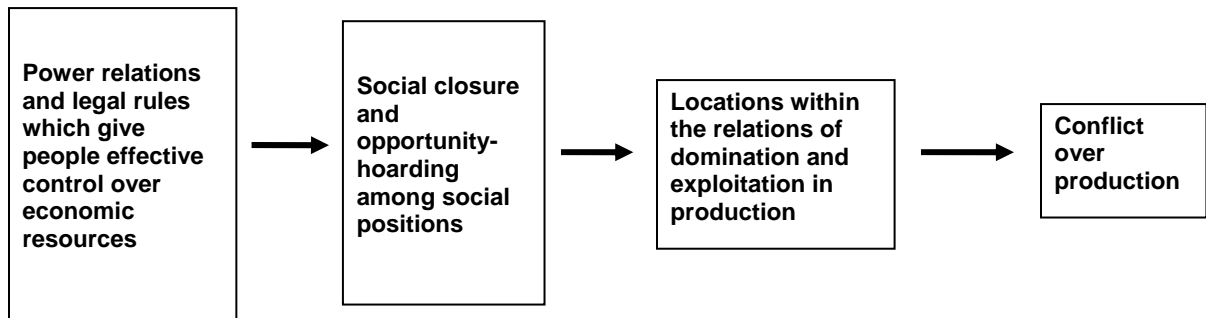


Figure 4
The exploitation and domination approach

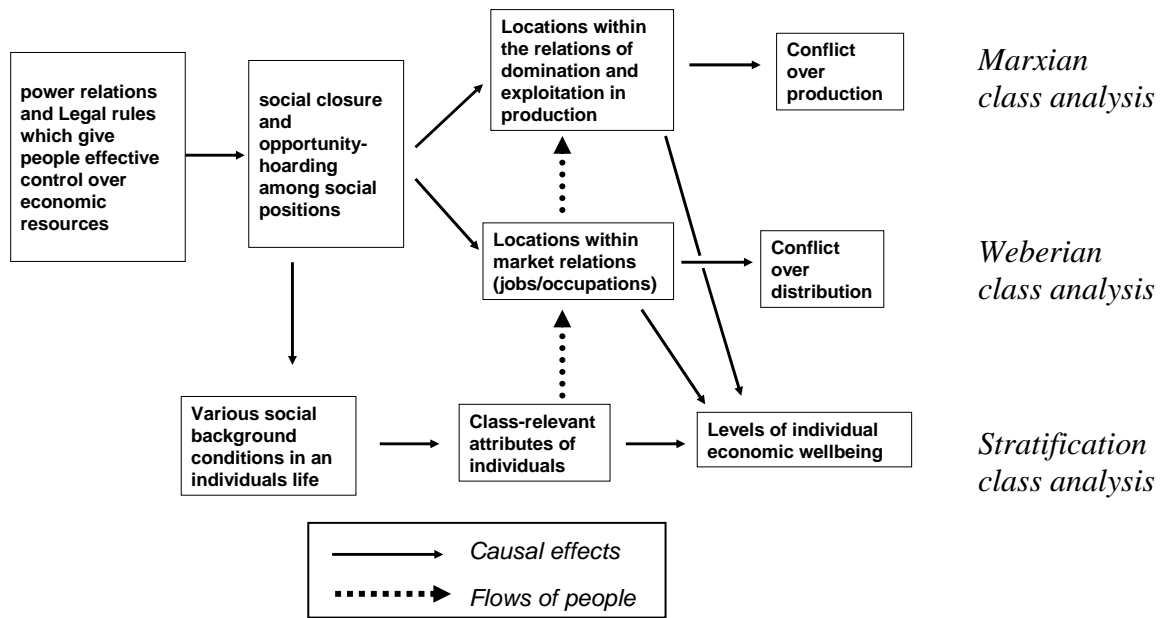


Figure 5. Combined class analysis: Macro and Micro processes

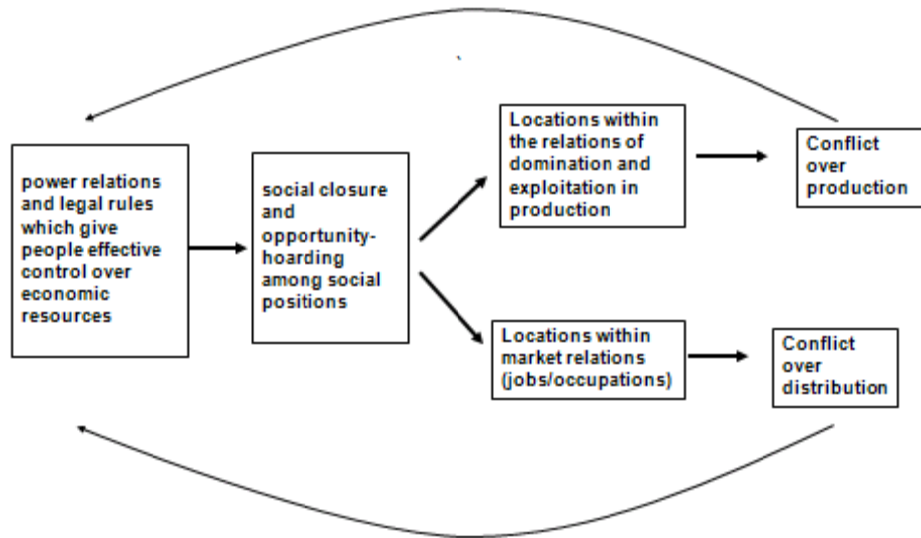


Figure 6
The dynamic macro model