

## From Stratification to Class Analysis (and back again?)

Erik Olin Wright  
American Sociological Association

At the very core of radical sociology is a simple, foundational empirical observation:

*The world in which we live involves a juxtaposition of extraordinary productivity, affluence and enhanced potentials for human flourishing and fulfillment along with continuing human deprivation, suffering and thwarted lives.*

Poverty in the midst of plenty is an undeniable, appalling fact of contemporary social life. Radical sociology, especially in its more Marxian variety, has made a distinctive contribution to explaining this fact and the larger system of inequality in which this fact is embedded. To anticipate the punchline of this presentation, this contribution can be captured by two propositions:

*Proposition 1:* Economic advantages and disadvantages, affluence and deprivation, are anchored in structures of exploitation and domination, not simply in differences among individuals in the ability to compete in markets. To state the matter starkly: the rich benefit from the poor being poor, and the poor are poor in part because of what the rich do to get and stay rich.

*Proposition 2:* The degree of economic inequality – and thus of poverty – is not primarily a function of the degree of inequality in the distribution of individual attributes (skills, knowledge, human capital, social capital, motivations) but of the power relations which constrain and regulate the process of income acquisition and distribution.

I will elaborate this contribution by briefly distinguishing three general perspectives on economic inequality, which I will refer to as the *individual-centered*, *exclusionary*, and *exploitation* approaches to inequality. Stratification research in American Sociology is most closely associated with the first of these; Weber-inspired approaches to class and inequality with the second; and Marxist class analysis with the third. Both the Weberian and Marxian versions of class analysis have figured prominently in Radical Sociology.

These three perspectives are differentiated on the basis of their answers to a question about the process through which inequality is generated: To what extent and in what ways are the economic advantages of particular categories of people causally dependent upon the deprivations of other categories?

In individual-centered approaches, a given person's economic standing is seen as the result of that individual's level of "achievement" which is largely determined by a

vector of individual attributes – education, family background, motivations, personal connections (or what is often called social capital). A person who ends up poor has deficits in the relevant attributes; a person who ends up rich has advantages in these same attributes. The social relation between the rich person and the poor person does not enter the explanation: the poor are not poor because of what the rich do to become rich, but rather because of their deficits in relevant attributes which would enable them to achieve higher statuses. The degree of inequality is thus primarily a function of the inequality in those attributes. All sorts of things determine how people acquire the economically relevant attributes, and many of these are social in character, but in general it is not the case that there are strong causal interconnections between the success of some and the failure of others. I thus refer to this approach as individual-centered not because it ignores all social determinants, but because the relevance of social determinants always works through the ways this shapes the characteristics of individuals.

This is, roughly, the dominant stance taken by quantitative sociological research on inequality in the US, particularly before the 1970s. The central idea of the research area that came to be known as social stratification is that you can understand the distribution of unequal economic statuses by understanding how individuals come to acquire their status. Given that economic status and rewards are mainly acquired through employment in paid jobs, the central thrust of most research was on the determinants of individual access to occupations and earnings. The elaborate “status attainment models” of this research tradition thus focused on the process by which people acquire the cultural, motivational, and educational resources they use to acquire their position in the system of stratification, mainly through the way these resources affect their entry into jobs through the labor market. Little was said about the determinants of the inequalities in the positions themselves which people occupied.

Class analysis, in both its Weberian and Marxian variants, adopts a very different strategy for understanding systems of inequality. Rather than focusing on the process by which individuals are sorted into positions, class analysis begins by analyzing the nature of and relations among the positions themselves, the positions into which people are sorted. Both Weberian and Marxist class analysis see the resulting patterns of inequality as deeply structured by causal connections among these positions.

The Weberian tradition emphasizes the process by which various mechanisms of exclusion and closure are built into occupational positions (a theme also stressed in the class analysis of Pierre Bourdieu). Credentialing and licensing are particularly important mechanisms for accomplishing this, but many other institutional devices have been used to restrict access to given types of jobs: color bars, marriage bars, gender exclusions, cultural capital criteria for access, etc. These forms of closure, as Aage Sorenson has emphasized in his analysis of class, systematically generate a flow of rents to incumbents of such jobs, and these rents contribute significantly to the overall levels of inequality in a society. In these terms, the advantages of people in such rent-appropriating jobs depends upon the causal processes which exclude others from access to those jobs. It may also be the case, as outlined in individualistic approaches to inequality, that individual attributes help explain who among the non-excluded actually gain access to such rent-appropriating positions, but inequalities in individual attributes alone do not adequately explain inequality. The prosperity of the advantaged causally depends upon the exclusionary mechanisms which contribute to the deprivations of the disadvantaged.

Marxist class analysis takes the relational interdependency of Weberian class analysis one step further by identifying exploitation as an additional causal process that generates inequality. In a relation of exploitation it is not simply the case that one group obtains rents by monopolizing certain resources or positions. In addition, the exploiting group is able to appropriate the laboring effort of another for its own advantage. Consider the following classic contrasting cases: In the first case, a large landowner seizes control of common grazing lands, excludes peasants from gaining access to this land, and reaps economic rents from having exclusive control of this land for his own use. In the second case, the same landlord seizes control of the grazing lands, excludes the peasants, but then brings some of those peasants back onto the land as agricultural laborers. In this second case, in addition to gaining rents from the monopoly of the land the landowner exploits the labor of the farm worker. This is a stronger form of interdependency than in a relation 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 is a form of structured inequality which simultaneously requires the continual cooperation between exploiters and exploited and generates systematic antagonisms of their interests.

In both Marxist and Weberian class analysis power plays an important role. The inequalities generated by closure and rent-appropriation require the use of power to enforce exclusions, and exploitation requires supervision, monitoring of labor effort, and sanctions to enforce labor discipline. Accordingly, the level of inequality depends in significant ways on the effectiveness of political struggle against the social structural bases of power and privilege. This is not simply because there is a zero-sum quality to distributional struggles, but because a sustainable reduction of inequality requires transformations of the underlying mechanisms of exclusion and exploitation. In this way class analysis suggests not simply an analysis of the structural mechanisms which generate and sustain inequality, but a critique of the social institutions which embody those mechanisms. Class analysis becomes a central element in the critique of capitalism.

Before the rise of radical sociology in the late 1960s and 1970s, these themes were quite marginal to discussions of inequality. If the structured inequality of social positions as such was discussed at all it was largely in terms of the functions such inequality was said to fulfill for providing the incentives needed to fill different kinds of positions. This does not mean that moral concern was completely absent from the stratification literature. Stratification theory did postulate social causes of the process by which people acquired the attributes that were relevant in labor markets, and there was a recognition that some people were born into situations in which they faced disadvantages in acquiring such attributes. But primarily this was regarded as a cultural problem of one sort or another played out on the terrain of socialization and motivation, and the solutions thus focused on education and cultural enrichment for the “disadvantaged”. With some notable exceptions, little attention was given to the ways in which the economic interests of privileged social categories depended on the deprivations of others, and the ways in which power supported those interests. This is what radical sociology brought into the center of the study of inequality.

Class analysis thus considerably expanded the research agenda of earlier stratification research. This expanded agenda incorporates the investigation of clusters of

mechanisms grounded in each of the three general approaches to the study of inequality discussed earlier:

1. Mechanisms linked to the ways in which individuals acquire economically-relevant resources and traits and the ways these individual attributes influence access to positions.
2. Mechanisms linked to the ways in which the positions filled by individuals construct boundaries and erect barriers, thus generating potential rents
3. Mechanisms linked to the power relations among positions that allow for the exploitation of labor.

The particular patterns of inequality we observe empirically result from the complex forms of interaction among these mechanisms.

In recent years there seems to be some waning of these central concerns with power, exclusion, exploitation, and the like. In part this may be the result of the increasing intellectual influence of economics in discussions of inequality and social policy, both in the world at large and within sociology itself. Economists, even more than sociologists in the stratification tradition, characteristically adopt highly individual-centered views of the process through which poverty and inequality are generated. Individuals are paid on the basis of their productivity, so if everyone's productivity went up everyone would earn more, and if inequalities in productivity across people were reduced, inequality in economic conditions would be reduced. The only important problem is improving the human capital of those at the bottom so that their productivity will increase. Exploitation and positional-exclusion have almost no role in such an account.

The retreat from class analysis, however, is not just because of the influence of economics. From within sociology as well there has emerged in the last decade or so a strong criticism of class analysis. The argument is basically that patterns of inequality have become so fluid and complex, with so many cross-cutting dimensions, that there really are no longer stable cleavages organized around access to economic resources and processes of exploitation. This does not mean that economic inequality has disappeared, of course, but it is no longer deeply structured through economic mechanisms in stable ways over the life course, but becomes highly individualized and variable. The result, the argument does, is that identities and collective action are no longer structured through class processes. In the extreme version of this thesis, offered by Paul Kingston, we are well on our way to a classless society; in more moderate views, class has simply lost most of its explanatory punch.

This is not the place to enter into a sustained debate with the "death of class" thesis. It seems quite unlikely that it will become the dominant view among sociologists, particularly in a period in which wealth inequality has increased considerably and mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization seem stronger than ever. Our task is to affirm the importance of these mechanisms in the face of new complexities in the ways individual lives intersect these social structural processes.