

ERIK OLIN WRIGHT

UNDERSTANDING CLASS

Towards an Integrated Analytical Approach

WHEN I BEGAN writing about class in the mid-1970s, I viewed Marxist and positivist social science as foundationally distinct and incommensurable. I argued that Marxism had distinctive epistemological premises and methodological approaches which were fundamentally opposed to those of mainstream social science. In the intervening period I have rethought the underlying logic of my approach to class analysis a number of times.¹ While I continue to work within the Marxist tradition, I no longer feel that it should be conceived as a comprehensive paradigm or as inherently incompatible with 'bourgeois' sociology.²

Having previously argued for the general superiority of Marxist class analysis over its main sociological rivals—especially Weberian approaches and those adopted within mainstream stratification research—I now take the view that these different ways of analysing the social category all contribute to a fuller understanding by identifying different causal processes at work in shaping the micro- and macro- aspects of inequality in capitalist societies. The Marxist tradition successfully identifies real mechanisms that matter for a wide range of important problems, but it does not have a monopoly on the capacity to identify them. Marxist sociological research should, then, seek to combine the distinctive insights of its own tradition with analysis of the causal processes drawn out by other theoretical strands, when they are pertinent to the explanatory task at hand.³ What might be called a 'pragmatist realism' has replaced the 'grand battle of paradigms'.

For the sake of simplicity, in what follows I will focus on three approaches to class analysis, each associated with a different strand of sociological theory. The first identifies classes with the attributes and material life conditions of individuals. The second focuses on the ways in which social positions afford some people control over economic resources while excluding others—defining classes relative to processes of ‘opportunity hoarding’. The third approach conceives of classes as being structured by mechanisms of domination and exploitation, in which economic positions accord some people power over the lives and activities of others. The first is the approach taken in stratification research, the second is the Weberian perspective, and the third is associated with the Marxist tradition.

Attributes and conditions

Both among sociologists and among the lay public, class is principally conceived in terms of individual attributes and life conditions. Attributes such as sex, age, race, religion, intelligence, education, geographical location, and so on, are held to be consequential for a number of things we might want to explain, from health to voting behaviour to childrearing practices. Some of these attributes are acquired at birth, others later in life; some are stable, others quite dependent upon a person’s specific social situation, and may accordingly change over time. In the stratification approach, people can also be categorized by the material conditions in which they live: squalid apartments, pleasant suburban houses or mansions in gated communities; dire poverty, adequate income or extravagant wealth, and so on. Here, ‘class’ identifies those economically

¹ An early statement of my views on Marxism and mainstream social science can be found in the introduction to *Class, Crisis and the State*, London 1978. The principal subsequent works in which I have discussed these issues are *Classes*, London and New York 1985; *The Debate on Classes*, London and New York 1989; *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis*, Cambridge 1997; and *Approaches to Class Analysis*, Cambridge 2005. A previous version of this paper was given at a conference on ‘Comprehending Class’, University of Johannesburg, June 2009.

² I prefer to use the expression ‘Marxist tradition’ rather than ‘Marxism’ precisely because the latter suggests something more like a comprehensive paradigm.

³ 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.

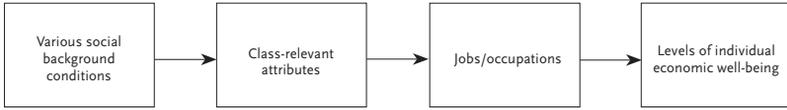
important attributes that shape people's opportunities and choices in a market economy, and thus their material conditions; it does not relate simply to the attributes themselves or the material conditions, but rather to the interconnections between the two.

Within this approach, the key individual attribute in economically developed societies is education, but some sociologists also include more elusive attributes such as cultural resources, social connections and even individual motivations.⁴ When these different attributes and life conditions broadly cluster together, then these clusters are called 'classes'. The 'middle class' here denotes people who have enough education and money to participate fully in some vaguely defined 'mainstream' way of life (which might include particular consumption patterns, for example). The 'upper class' designates people whose wealth, high income and social connections enable them to live their lives apart from 'ordinary' people, while the 'lower class' refers to those who lack the necessary educational and cultural resources to live securely above the poverty line. Finally, the 'underclass' are those who live in extreme poverty, marginalized from the mainstream of 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 characteristics 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 focus of research in this tradition has been the process through which people obtain the cultural, motivational and educational resources that affect their occupations in the labour market. Because the conditions of life in childhood are clearly of considerable importance in these processes, this approach devotes a great deal of attention to what is sometimes called 'class background'—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.

Skills, education and motivations are, of course, very important determinants of an individual's economic prospects. What is missing in this

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu was the leading contemporary sociologist systematically to include a range of cultural elements in an expanded list of class-relevant individual attributes.

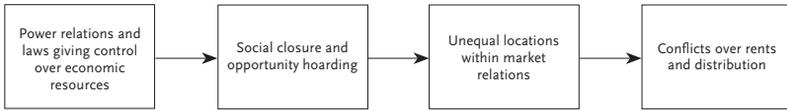
FIGURE I: *The individual-attributes approach to class and inequality*

approach to class, however, is any serious consideration of the inequalities in the positions people occupy, or of the relational nature of those positions. Education shapes the kinds of jobs people get, but why are some jobs ‘better’ than others? Why do some jobs confer a great deal of power while others do not? And is there any relation between the power and wealth enjoyed by some and the lack of it experienced by others? Rather than focusing exclusively on the process through which individuals are sorted into positions, the other two approaches to class analysis begin by examining the nature of the positions themselves.

Opportunity hoarding

The second approach, in which classes are defined by access to certain economic opportunities, focuses on ‘opportunity hoarding’—a concept closely associated with the work of Max Weber.⁵ In order for certain jobs to confer high income and special advantages, it is important for their incumbents to have various means of excluding others from access to them. This is also sometimes referred to as a process of social closure, in which access to a position becomes restricted. One way of doing this is by creating requirements that are very costly for people to fulfill. Educational credentials often have this character: high levels of schooling generate high income in part because there are significant restrictions on the supply of highly educated people. Admissions procedures, tuition costs, risk-aversion to large loans by low-income people, and so on, all tend to block access to higher education, to the benefit of those in jobs that require such qualifications. 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 more of it, since its value depends

⁵ Among American sociologists, the term ‘opportunity hoarding’ was used most explicitly by Charles Tilly, especially in his book *Durable Inequality*, Berkeley 1999. Bourdieu’s work on fields and forms of capital also revolves around processes of opportunity hoarding.

FIGURE 2: *The opportunity-hoarding approach to class and inequality*

to a significant extent on its scarcity. The opportunity hoarding mechanism is illustrated schematically in Figure 2.

Some might object to this; economists, for example, argue that education creates ‘human capital’ which renders people more productive, and this is why employers are willing to pay them higher wages. But while some of the higher earnings that accompany higher education reflect productivity differences, this is only part of the story. Equally important are the various mechanisms through which people are excluded from acquiring education, thus restricting 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, engineering or computer-science degree from anywhere in the world come to the US and practise their profession. The massive increase in the supply of people with these credentials would undermine the earning capacity of holders of the credentials already living in the country, even though their actual knowledge and skills would not be diminished. Citizenship rights are a special, and potent, form of ‘licence’ to sell one’s labour in a particular labour market.

Accreditation and licensing are particularly important mechanisms for opportunity hoarding, but many other institutional devices have been used in various times and places to protect the privileges and advantages of specific groups: colour 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 criteria, manners, accent—all of these have constituted mechanisms of exclusion. Perhaps the most important exclusionary mechanism is private property rights in the means of production. Private property rights, in this approach, are the pivotal form of closure 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 challenging their exclusion from control over the means of production; the capacity of owners to acquire profits, meanwhile, depends upon their defence of this exclusion. The core class division between capitalists and workers—common to both Weberian and Marxian traditions of sociology—can therefore be understood, from a Weberian perspective, 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 strata. Labour unions can also function as an exclusionary mechanism, by protecting incumbents 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 may effectively diminish those generated by other mechanisms of exclusion—especially those 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 improves the material conditions of life of insiders.

Sociologists who adopt the opportunity-hoarding approach to class generally identify three broad 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 seen either as a privileged stratum within the working class, or sometimes as a component of the middle class.

The critical difference between opportunity-hoarding mechanisms of class and individual-attribute mechanisms is this: in the former, the economic advantages gained from being in a privileged class position are causally connected to the disadvantages of those excluded from such positions. In the individual-attributes approach, such advantages and disadvantages are simply the outcomes of individual conditions: the rich are rich because they have favourable attributes, the poor poor because they lack them; there is no systematic causal connection between these facts. Eliminating poverty by improving the relevant attributes of the

poor—their education, cultural level, human capital—would in no way harm the affluent. In the case of opportunity hoarding, the rich are rich in part because the poor are poor, and the things the rich do to maintain their wealth contribute to the disadvantages faced by poor people. Here, moves to eliminate poverty by removing the mechanisms of exclusion would potentially undermine the advantages of the affluent.

Exploitation and domination

An approach to class analysis that focuses on mechanisms of exploitation and domination is most closely associated with the Marxist tradition. Some sociologists more influenced by Weber also include these mechanisms in their conceptions of class.⁶ Most sociologists, however, ignore them; some explicitly deny their relevance. ‘Domination’ and, especially, ‘exploitation’ are contentious terms because they tend to imply a moral judgement, rather than a neutral description. Many sociologists try to avoid them because of this normative content. I feel, however, that they are important and accurately identify certain key issues in understanding class. ‘Domination’ refers to the ability to control the activities of others; ‘exploitation’ refers to the acquisition of economic benefits from the labour of those who are dominated. While the former does not imply any particular interests on the part of social actors—parents vis-à-vis children, for example—exploitation intrinsically implies contending material interests. All exploitation therefore involves some kind of domination, but not all domination involves exploitation.

In this approach, 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 labour of another group to its own advantage. Consider the following contrasting, classic cases: in the first, large landowners seize control of common grazing lands, prevent peasants from gaining access to them, and reap economic benefits from having exclusive control of that land for their own use. In the second, the same landowners, having seized control of the grazing lands and excluded the peasants, then bring some of those peasants back onto the land as agricultural labourers. In this second case, the landowner not only gains from controlling access to the land (opportunity

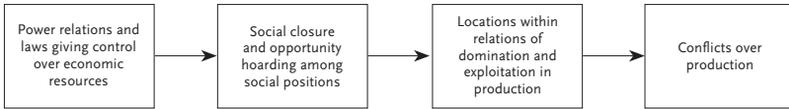
⁶ Weber, of course, develops an elaborate general discussion of domination, power and authority, but mostly in the context of his analyses of organizations and the state, not his specification of the concept of class.

hoarding), he dominates the farm workers and exploits their labour. This is a stronger form of relational interdependency than in the case of simple exclusion, for here there is an ongoing relationship between not only the *conditions* but also the *activities* of the advantaged and disadvantaged. Exploitation and domination are forms of structured inequality which require the continual active cooperation between exploiters and exploited, dominators and dominated.

We could, then, summarize the contrast between the role of social relations in each of the three approaches to class analysis as follows. In the stratification approach, neither the economic conditions in which people live nor their activities are understood as directly reflecting social relations; it is the least relational of the three. The Weberian approach sees people's economic conditions as being formed through relations of exclusion, but does not specify class as embodying relations among activities. The Marxist tradition is relational in both senses, drawing attention to the structuring effect of exploitation and domination on both economic conditions and activities.

The Marxist approach to class is represented in Figure 3. As in the Weberian tradition, power and legal rules which enforce social closure are important in defining the basic structure of social positions—particularly private ownership of the means of production. But here the critical effect of opportunity hoarding is domination and exploitation, not simply market advantage.

Within this approach, the central class division in capitalist society is between those who own and control the means of production—capitalists—and those hired to use those means of production: workers. Capitalists, within this framework, exploit and dominate workers. Other positions within the class structure draw 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 of technical workers have sufficient control over skills and knowledge—a critical resource in contemporary economies—that they can maintain considerable autonomy from domination within work and significantly reduce, or even neutralize, the extent to which they are exploited.

FIGURE 3: *The exploitation-domination approach to class and inequality*

In Weberian and Marxist approaches alike, power plays an important role. In both, 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 power to be used in order to enforce exclusions; the inequalities connected to exploitation require supervision, monitoring of labour and sanctions to enforce discipline. In both cases, social struggles seeking to challenge these forms of power would potentially threaten the privileges of those in advantaged class positions.

Integrating three 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. One way of combining them is to see each as identifying a key process that shapes a different aspect of the class structure:

- ▶ The Marxist tradition captures the fundamental class division in capitalist society: that between capitalists and workers.
- ▶ The Weberian approach identifies opportunity hoarding as the central mechanism that differentiates ‘middle-class’ jobs from the broader working class by creating barriers restricting the supply of people for desirable employment. The key issue here is not *who* is excluded, but simply the fact that there are mechanisms of exclusion that sustain the privileges of those in middle-class positions.
- ▶ The stratification approach focuses on the process through which individuals are sorted into different positions in the class structure or marginalized altogether. Where analyses

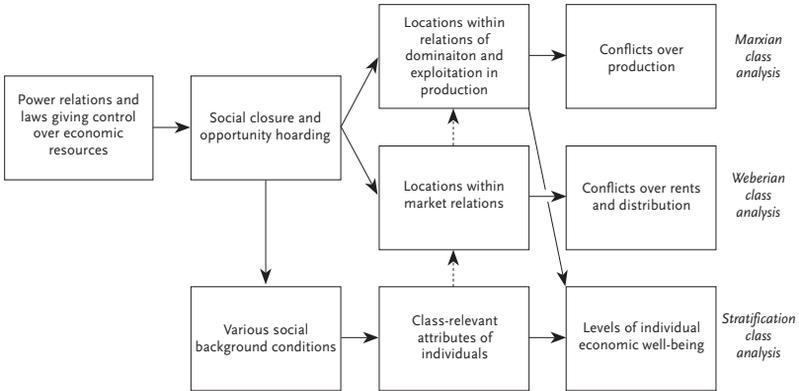
of opportunity hoarding draw attention to the exclusionary mechanisms connected to middle-class jobs, the stratification approach helps to specify the individual attributes that explain which people have access to them, and who is excluded from stable working-class jobs.

These three processes operate in all capitalist societies. The differences in class structures between countries are produced by the varying interactions of these mechanisms. The theoretical task is to think through the different ways they are linked and combined; the empirical task is to develop ways of studying each mechanism and the interconnections between them.

One possible nested micro-macro model is illustrated schematically in Figure 4. Here the power relations and legal rules that give people effective control over economic resources—means of production, finance, human capital—generate structures of social closure and opportunity hoarding connected to social positions. Opportunity hoarding then produces three streams of causal effects: firstly, it shapes the micro-level processes through which individuals acquire class-relevant attributes; secondly, it shapes the structure of locations within market relations—occupations and jobs—and the associated distributional conflicts; and thirdly, it shapes the structure of relations within production, especially relations of domination and exploitation, and the associated conflicts in that sphere. The first of these causal streams in turn directs the flow of people into class locations within the market and production. Jointly the class attributes of individuals and their class locations affect their levels of individual economic well-being.

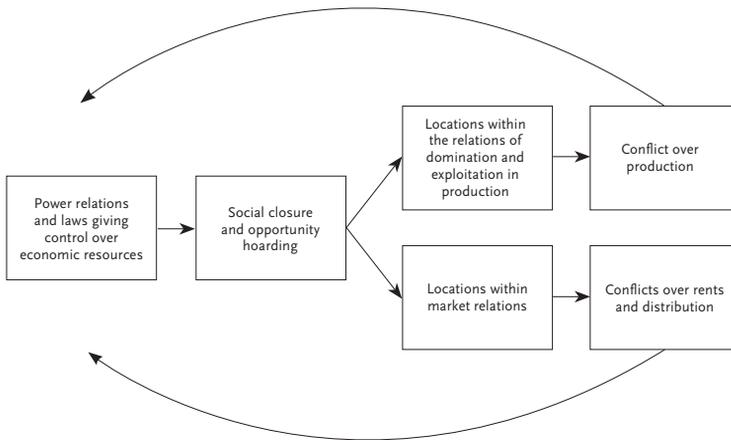
However, a further, final element in the broad synthetic model is needed. Figure 4 treats power relations and institutional rules as exogenous structures, whereas in fact they are themselves shaped by class processes and class conflicts. This matters because structures of inequality are dynamic systems, and the fate of individuals 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. 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.

FIGURE 4: *Combined class analysis: macro and micro processes*



What we need, therefore, is a recursive, dynamic macro-model in which social struggles contribute to changes in the trajectory of the relations themselves, as pictured in a highly simplified form in Figure 5. A fully elaborated class analysis, then, combines this kind of macro-model of conflict and transformation with the macro–micro, multi-level model

FIGURE 5: *The dynamic macro-model*



of class processes and individual lives. Thus the key insights of stratification, Weberian and Marxist approaches can be combined.

Class in America

We can now attempt to apply the three approaches to contemporary US society. Socio-economic systems differ in the degree to which they constrain the rights and powers accompanying private ownership of the means of production, and thus in the nature of the class division between capitalists and workers. The US has long possessed among the weakest public regulations of capitalist property. This is reflected in a number of crucial characteristics: its very low minimum wage, allowing for higher rates of exploitation than would otherwise be possible; low rates of taxation on high incomes, which enable 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, viewed along the axis of exploitation and domination.

Turning to the mechanisms of opportunity hoarding—especially those linked to education—that form the middle class, we can say that the US has historically had one of the largest middle classes among advanced capitalist countries. It was the first country massively to expand higher education, and for a long time access to such qualifications was very open and relatively inexpensive, allowing people with few resources to attend universities. The US also possesses 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, acquire credentials and gain middle-class employment. This large and diverse system helped support the creation of a large number of middle-class jobs. It was complemented, in the decades after the Second World War, by a relatively strong labour movement that was able to mute competition for those jobs in the core of the American economy that did not require higher education. This enabled unionized workers in such positions to acquire income and security similar to those of the credentialed middle class.

However, it was never the case—contrary to popular rhetoric—that the United States was overwhelmingly a ‘middle-class society’. Most jobs in the American employment structure did not confer advantages on the basis of exclusionary credentials, and the labour movement never organized more than about 35 per cent of the non-managerial workforce. Furthermore, in recent decades there has been an erosion of at least some processes of middle-class exclusion: the labour movement has precipitously declined since the 1970s, many kinds of middle-class jobs have become less secure and less protected by the credentials usually associated with them, and the current economic crisis has intensified the sense of precariousness among many who still think of themselves as working 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 providing 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.⁷

Finally, the American class structure has been marked by the particularly brutal process through which the attributes relevant to the fate of individuals are formed. The US educational system is organized in such a way that the quality of education available to children in poor families is generally vastly inferior to that on offer to children from middle-class and wealthy families. This deficit in publicly provided education for the poor is intensified by the deprivations caused by the absence of an adequate safety net and support services for poor families. The rapid de-industrialization of the American economy and the absence of comprehensive job-training programmes for those thrown out of work by the shuttering of factories means that a significant number of people find themselves without the kinds of skills needed for the current labour market. The result is that the US class structure is marked 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:

⁷ For a discussion of the patterns of job polarization in recent decades, see Wright and Rachel Dwyer, ‘The pattern of job expansion in the USA: a comparison of the 1960s and 1990s’, *Socio-economic Review*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2003, pp. 289–325.

- ▶ At the top, 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.
- ▶ A historically large and relatively stable middle class, anchored in an 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 that of 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 labour market, and with minimal protection from the state.
- ▶ A marginalized, impoverished part of the population, without the skills and education needed for jobs that would enable them to live above the poverty line, and living in conditions which make it extremely difficult to acquire those skills.
- ▶ A pattern of interaction between race and class in which the working poor and the marginalized population are disproportionately made up of racial minorities.

Towards synthesis

Adopting the integrated framework of class analysis proposed here poses different kinds of challenges for scholars working in the Marxist tradition and those adopting the stratification or Weberian approaches. For many Marxists, the main challenge is to recognize that what is most powerful within Marxist social science is its theory of a specific array of causal mechanisms, rather than its aspiration to be a comprehensive paradigm. In the past, the relevance of these mechanisms has been defended by a rhetoric stressing the incommensurability of Marxism with other theories, and arguing that Marxist epistemology and methodology sharply

differentiates it from its rivals. Such arguments are unconvincing. Marxism is a powerful tradition in social science because it provides far-reaching explanations for a range of important phenomena, not because it has some special method that sets it apart from all other theoretical currents. Of course, it is always possible that future efforts to formulate Marxism as a distinctive, comprehensive paradigm may succeed. But for the present, it seems more helpful to see Marxism as a research programme defined by attention to a specific set of problems, mechanisms and provisional explanatory theories.

The challenge of an integrated class analysis may be even greater for sociologists working in the stratification tradition. Marxist analysts of class, after all, have always in practice included discussions of the individual attributes and material life conditions 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 their approach. 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 sense, it is Weberians who may have the easiest task. On the one hand, most Weberian 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 principal attractions of Weberian sociology: it is basically permissive about the incorporation of almost any concept 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 between persons and structured positions. While exploitation has not figured centrally within Weberian class analysis, the logic of Weberian categories presents no fundamental barrier to its inclusion.

It might seem from this assessment that, in the end, we should all simply declare ourselves Weberians. This was one of the accusations levelled against my work and that of other Marxists thirty years ago by the British sociologist Frank Parkin when he wrote: 'inside every neo-Marxist there

seems to be a Weberian struggling to get out'.⁸ But this does not necessarily follow from the kind of pragmatist realism I am advocating here. Marxism remains a distinctive tradition in social science because of the specific set of problems it addresses, its normative foundations, and the distinctive inventory of concepts and mechanisms it has developed.

⁸ Frank Parkin, *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique*, New York 1979, p. 25.