

2. Class structure

The starting-point for class analysis is the problem of class structure. The investigation of class structure provides us with the way both of situating the lives of individuals for micro-class analysis and of describing variations in societies across time and place for macro-class analysis. In the previous chapter we explored the theoretical foundations for this concept. In this chapter we will descriptively map out the broad contours of the class structure in several developed capitalist countries and examine how it has changed over time in the United States.

In practical terms, this task involves pigeon-holing people into specific categories on the basis of responses they give to a questionnaire about their work. It is not possible to directly observe a "class structure" as such. What one observes are individuals who occupy specific places in a social structure. By asking them appropriate questions and aggregating their responses, we generate descriptions of the class structure as a whole. To some readers this may seem like a fairly sterile scholastic exercise. Taxonomy, classification, pigeon-holing – these are surely the tedious preoccupations of narrow academic specialists. What is worse, squeezing individuals into simple categories seems to obliterate the richness and complexity of their lives. Class becomes a static set of simple boxes rather than a complex, dynamic process. Would not it be better to pursue qualitative field research with relatively loose and flexible concepts capable of adapting to the complexity of the situation?

There is some truth in these criticisms. The categories we will be using are highly simplified representations of the complexity of class relations. The categories do become "fixed" in that once a set of criteria are adopted they are applied to all people in the same way in different countries. As a result, there will inevitably be many cases in which individuals are being squeezed uncomfortably into slots. The appro-

priate question, however, is not "do the categories we develop faithfully mirror the complexity of the world?" but rather, "are these categories capable of advancing our knowledge of specific problems in class analysis?" Do these categories, however crude they might be, enable us to identify interesting puzzles? Do they help to reveal places where existing theories run into trouble, and provide at least some relevant evidence for the reconstruction of those theories? In the end, as Engels once said, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating."

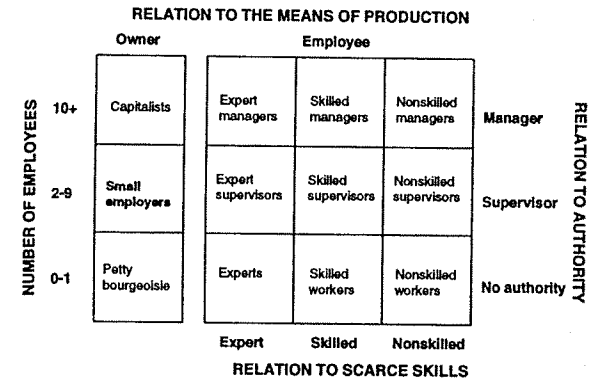
This chapter will be primarily concerned with describing the overall appearance of the pudding. In the rest of the book we will eat it and see how well it tastes.

2.1 The basic contours of the class structure

Figure 2.1 presents the distribution of the employed labor force into the twelve class locations described in chapter 1 for six countries: the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway and Japan.¹ We will first look at the patterns across the property dimensions of the class structure and then turn to class distributions among employees.

The property dimension

The capitalist class, defined as self-employed people who employ ten or more employees, comprises no more than about 2% of the labor force in any of these countries, and less than 1% in two of them (Sweden and Norway). Of course, this figure does not include those capitalists who are not technically "employers." Many people who own significant amounts of capitalist wealth may be employed as top executives of corporations, others are employed in jobs completely unrelated to their capitalist wealth, and some are formally out of the labor force altogether, living as pure rentiers off the income from their wealth. A few are even professors. Unfortunately, with the comparative data in this project it is not possible to estimate the proportion of the population who would fall into the segment of the capitalist class which is not self-employed. In any case, this would probably only add at most a few percentage points to these figures.²



United States (n = 1,493)

1.8	5.5	3.7	2.8	12.0
6.0	3.1	6.3	7.2	16.6
6.8	2.9	13.1	40.6	56.7
14.7	11.6	23.3	50.6	100.0

Sweden (n = 1,074)

0.7	3.2	4.1	2.3	9.6
4.7	1.3	5.0	4.2	10.5
5.4	2.7	17.4	49.1	69.2
10.7	7.2	26.5	55.6	100.0

Norway (n = 1,522)

0.8	4.8	4.1	3.5	12.4
2.9	3.7	3.8	3.4	10.9
10.3	4.2	21.0	37.4	72.6
14.0	12.7	28.9	44.3	100.0

Canada (n = 1,779)

1.0	5.3	3.9	2.5	11.7
3.2	2.2	4.9	3.7	10.8
13.5	2.8	21.7	35.4	59.9
17.7	10.3	30.5	41.5	100.0

United Kingdom (n = 1,146)

2.1	2.4	6.9	2.6	11.9
5.1	2.1	6.8	4.5	11.9
6.7	1.5	16.6	42.7	60.8
14.0	5.9	30.3	49.8	100.0

Japan (n = 612)

1.6	4.9	2.0	4.6	11.5
6.2	3.3	2.3	4.1	9.7
23.2	1.3	10.5	36.1	47.9
31.0	9.5	14.7	44.8	100.0

Note: the right hand marginal in each table is for employees only. Since these figures exclude owners, they do not add up to 100%.

Figure 2.1 *Class distributions in six countries.*

¹ The details of the measures and operationalizations of class structure used in this chapter can be found in Wright (1997: 74-90).

² According to Lawrence Mishel and David Frankel (1991: 162), in the richest 1% of US households defined by the income distribution, 47.8% of household income came from

As would be expected, there are considerably more small employers, defined here as self-employed individuals employing 2–9 employees, than proper capitalists. The range is between about 3% of the labor force in Canada and Norway to about 6% in the United States and Japan. Putting these two class locations together, between roughly 4% and 8% of the labor forces of these six developed capitalist countries are in class locations which are, to a greater or lesser extent, directly connected to the capitalist class.

There is much more variation across these countries in the size of the petty bourgeoisie (self-employed people with no more than one employee), which ranges from about 5% of the labor force in Sweden to over 23% in Japan. Japan is clearly the outlier. This high proportion of the labor force in the petty bourgeoisie in Japan compared to the other five countries occurs within nearly every major economic sector; it is not just a question of there being many small farmers or small shop keepers in Japan.³ The persistence of economic activity not directly organized by capitalist firms is thus considerably stronger in Japan than in the other advanced capitalist countries we are studying.

Employees

At first glance it appears in Figure 2.1 that there is a fair amount of variation in the class distributions among employees across these six countries. The expert manager category is more than twice as large in Japan, Canada and the United States than in the United Kingdom, and the working class is more than 30% larger in Sweden than in Norway, Japan and Canada. These cross-national differences, however, may be somewhat misleading because of the variation across countries in self-employment (especially the high self-employment rate in Japan) and because of possible measurement problems for some of the intermediary categories in the class map. To get a clearer picture of variations across countries within the employee part of the class structure, it is useful to look at class distributions among employees taken separately rather than

capital assets in 1988. For the next richest 4%, this figure drops to 23.2%. The average assets per household for the richest 0.5% of American households in 1989 was over \$8 million, and of the next 0.5% over \$2.5 million. These data suggest that the wealthy capitalist class defined strictly in terms of holdings of financial assets – i.e. individuals whose livelihood is substantially dependent upon income derived from capital holdings – constitutes probably no more than 2–3% of the population.

³ See Wright (1997: 50, Table 2.1).

for the entire labor force and to combine the two polarized categories among employees with the intermediary categories immediately adjacent to them by creating an “extended expert-manager” category (expert-managers, expert supervisors and skilled managers combined) and an “extended working-class” category (workers, skilled workers and nonskilled supervisors combined). In this modified class map of employees, the cross-national variability is considerably attenuated. In five of the six countries – the United States, Norway, Canada, the United Kingdom and Japan – 13–15% of all employees are in the extended expert-manager class location, and 71–74% are in the extended working class category. The one country which does differ modestly from these figures is Sweden, in which 79.2% of the employee labor force is in the extended working-class location and only 9.6% is in the extended expert-manager class location.⁴ Still, given how different are the work organizations and historical experiences of these countries, it is really quite striking that their class distributions among employees are so similar. The working class and the class locations closest to the working class constitute around three-quarters of the employee labor force in these countries, and the privileged segments of the “middle class” – the extended expert-manager category – constitute about 10–15%.

2.2 Class and gender

Any analysis of the linkage between class and gender must confront the problem of the appropriate unit of analysis for analyzing class distributions. As we will discuss in detail in chapter 7, one view, advanced forcefully by John Goldthorpe (1983), holds that families, not individuals, occupy locations in class structures. Since families are units of shared consumption, all members of a family, Goldthorpe argues, share a common interest in the family's command of economically relevant resources, and therefore it does not make sense to say that different members of a family household are “in” different classes. Goldthorpe therefore argues in favor of what he calls the “conventional” practice of assigning the class location of the “head of household,” typically the male breadwinner, to all members of the family including married women in the labor force.

An alternative approach is to treat individuals as the incumbents of

⁴ For detailed results, see Wright (1997: 54, Figure 2.2). For an extended discussion of why Sweden has a somewhat larger working class and a smaller extended expert-manager class location, see Wright (1997: 53–58).

Table 2.1 *Class distributions of men and women in the United States and Sweden using individual job-class and family-class criteria*

	Job-class			Family-class	
	Men	Women	Total	Women	Total
<i>United States</i>					
1 Capitalists and small employers	10.2	5.2	7.9	5.8	8.2
2 Petty bourgeoisie	6.4	7.5	6.9	6.8	6.6
3 Expert and skilled with authority	24.9	9.6	17.8	18.0	21.8
4 Nonskilled with authority	5.3	12.7	8.7	8.7	6.8
5 Experts with authority	3.3	2.7	3.0	3.7	3.5
6 Skilled employees without authority	18.0	8.6	13.9	10.7	15.0
7 Nonskilled without authority (workers)	31.5	53.7	41.6	46.2	38.2
<i>Sweden</i>					
1 Capitalists and small employers	7.8	1.6	5.2	2.1	5.5
2 Petty bourgeoisie	7.0	2.9	5.3	6.0	6.6
3 Expert and skilled with authority	9.7	10.0	15.7	18.5	19.2
4 Nonskilled with authority	9.4	5.3	7.7	7.2	8.5
5 Experts without authority	2.3	2.7	2.5	4.4	3.2
6 Skilled employees without authority	17.8	14.0	16.3	19.0	18.3
7 Nonskilled without authority (workers)	35.9	63.5	47.3	42.8	38.7

class locations. In this view, class locations are constructed within the social relations of production, not consumption, and, since jobs are typically filled by individuals in capitalist society, individuals are the appropriate unit of analysis. The class location of married women in the labor force, therefore, is not derived from that of her husband, and families can be internally heterogeneous in terms of class location.

These two ways of thinking about the class location of married women generate quite different pictures of the class structure, as illustrated in Table 2.1 for the United States and Sweden. (The job-class distributions in this table are not exactly the same as elsewhere in this chapter because different operational criteria had to be used for the comparison with family-class). Following the "conventional wisdom" announced by Goldthorpe, for men family-class is identical to job-class, while for women, family-class is defined by their own individual job-class if they are single or if their spouse is not in the labor force but by their husband's job-class if their husband is in the labor force.

As one would expect, the class distributions for men and women are much more similar when class location is defined by family-class than when it is defined by job-class. For example, in the United States 31.5%

of men and 53.7% of women are in the working class when this is defined by individual job-classes, but the figure for women drops to 46.2% when we use the family-class specification of class location. The contrast is even sharper in Sweden: 35.9% of men and 63.5% of women are in the working class defined in terms of job-classes, whereas only 42.8% of women are in the working class defined in terms of family-class. The result is that the comparison of the overall class structures in these two countries is decisively different depending upon which conception of class structure is used: in terms of *job-classes* we would conclude that the working class is significantly larger in Sweden than in the United States – 47.3% of the employed labor force in Sweden compared to 41.6% in the United States – whereas if we used the family-class criterion, we would conclude that the working class was essentially the same size in the two countries – 38.7% in Sweden compared to 38.2% in the United States. Sweden thus has more proletarianized *jobs*, but not more proletarianized *households*, than the United States.

We will systematically engage the theoretical and empirical issues raised by these alternative views in chapter 7. In the rest of the present chapter we will stick with practice of treating individuals as the relevant unit of analysis. The class-by-gender distributions we examine in Table 2.2, therefore, should be interpreted as the class distributions of jobs held by men and by women in the labor force.

When individuals rather than families are taken as the unit of analysis within class structures, the class distributions among women and men are sharply different in all six countries:

- 1 A much smaller proportion of women than of men in all six countries are in the extended expert-manager category, the most privileged segments of the employee class categories. A minimum of 77% of all people in the extended expert-manager category are males, and in several countries this figure is well over 90%.
- 2 In all countries except for Japan, men are much more likely to be capitalists or small employers than are women. In Sweden, for example, 1.5% of women are small employers or capitalists compared to 8% of men, and in the United States the figures are 5.1% and 10.1%. The result is that 70–85% of all employers and capitalists are men in these countries. Japan is the only exception to this, with 7.5% of the women in the sample being small employers or capitalists compared to 8.0% of men.
- 3 There is much less gender inequality within the petty bourgeoisie than

Table 2.2 *Class-by-gender distributions*

Class distributions within genders	Employers	Petty bourgeois	Extended expert-managers	Other "middle class"	Extended working class
US: Women	5.1	7.4	6.2	10.6	70.6
US: Men	10.1	6.4	17.5	13.2	52.8
Sweden: Women	1.5	2.9	2.2	10.9	82.5
Sweden: Men	8.0	7.2	13.2	9.5	62.1
Norway: Women	1.7	7.4	4.4	7.0	79.5
Norway: Men	5.0	12.2	18.0	14.5	50.3
Canada: Women	2.0	7.9	6.2	8.2	75.6
Canada: Men	5.6	17.5	15.2	11.5	50.4
UK: Women	2.5	5.4	5.6	9.4	77.1
UK: Men	10.5	7.7	15.3	11.9	54.6
Japan: Women	7.5	28.2	0.8	0.8	62.8
Japan: Men	8.0	19.4	17.5	17.9	41.3
% women within each class category					
United States	29.3	49.8	23.2	40.9	53.2
Sweden	12.3	22.4	10.9	45.5	49.1
Norway	17.9	28.0	13.5	23.9	50.4
Canada	20.3	24.2	22.1	33.3	51.1
United Kingdom	14.4	32.5	20.0	35.2	49.2
Japan	41.7	52.8	3.2	3.1	53.9

Definitions: "extended expert-managers" = expert-managers, expert supervisors and skilled managers; "extended working class" = workers, skilled workers and nonskilled supervisors.

within the two employer categories of the self-employed. While in four of the six countries (Sweden, Norway, Canada and the UK) there is still a higher percentage of men than women who are petty bourgeois, the differences are smaller than for employers and capitalists, and in the United States and Japan the proportion of women who are petty bourgeois is actually higher than the proportion of men.

- 4 In all countries, women are much more concentrated in the working class than are men. Across the six countries, roughly 60–80% of women are in the extended working class compared to about 40–60% of men. The result is that, while women are generally only about 40–45% of the employed labor force in these countries, they constitute about half of the extended of the extended working class (and 55–60% of the narrowly defined working class).

Men, unsurprisingly, are thus generally much more likely to be in privileged and powerful class locations than are women in all six countries.

There are two significant variations in these gender patterns across countries:

- 1 As we will explore in detail in chapter 9, gender differences on the authority dimension of the class structure vary considerably across these countries. The gender gap in authority is much greater in Japan than in any of the other countries, and greater in the two Scandinavian countries than in the three English-speaking countries. Only 3.2% of the extended expert-manager category in Japan are women, compared to 11–13% in the two Scandinavian countries and 20–23% in the three English-speaking countries. While males dominate the extended expert-managerial category in all countries, women have made greater inroads in some countries than in others.
- 2 The gender patterns in self-employment also vary significantly across the six countries. In Sweden, Norway, Canada and the United Kingdom, 17–25% of self-employed people are women, compared to 39% in the United States and 50% in Japan. This same configuration occurs when we look more restrictively at capitalists and small employers: 50% of all capitalists (defined as self-employed people employing more than 9 people) in Japan are women, about 20% in the United States, 12.5% in the UK and 6% or less in the other three countries.

At first glance, these results for Japan seem quite contradictory: Japan

has by far the greatest gender inequality among expert managers but the least among capitalists and small employers. This anomaly is reduced, however, when we look more closely at the nature of self-employment in Japan compared to the other countries. Many more women than men in all countries define themselves as "unpaid workers in a family business or farm." I treat such women as self-employed and place them in a specific class location depending upon the number of paid employees in the family firm. Most unpaid family workers work in traditional, family enterprises which are often organized in a highly patriarchal manner. Furthermore, some women who identify themselves as employers rather than "unpaid" family workers nevertheless still work in traditional family enterprises in which their husbands are also employers. In our Japanese sample, a much higher proportion of women classified as employers or petty bourgeoisie worked in such traditional family enterprises than in any other country.⁵

2.3 Class and race

Of the six countries included in this chapter, race is a salient feature of the social structure only in the United States. Table 2.3 presents the class by race and gender distributions for the US. The results in the table indicate quite complex interactions between race and gender. For the various categories of self-employment, the racial differences are generally much bigger than the gender differences. In our sample, at least, there are no black capitalists, only 1 black small employer (a woman) and only a handful of black petty bourgeois (all men). Among white women, in contrast, 5.6% are either capitalists or small employers and nearly 9% are petty bourgeois. In terms of access to property ownership, racial inequality appears to make a much bigger difference than gender inequality.

The situation is quite different when we look at the extended expert-manager class location. In this case it appears that black men are somewhat advantaged relative to white women: 8.4% of all black men (in the employed labor force) are in the extended expert-manager positions compared to only 6.9% of white women and 1.7% of black women. White men, of course, are unambiguously the most privileged, with 18.5% being in the extended expert-manager category.

⁵ For details of the situation of these self-employed women in Japan, see Wright (1997: 64-67).

Table 2.3 Class by race by gender distributions in the United States

Class distributions within race and gender categories (distributions sum horizontally)	Employers	Petty bourgeois	Extended expert-managers	Other "middle class"	Extended working class
White men	11.2	6.4	18.5	13.4	50.6
White women	5.6	8.8	6.9	11.7	67.0
Black men	0.0	3.6	8.4	11.4	76.6
Black women	1.3	0.0	1.7	10.1	86.9
Race-by-gender distributions within class categories (distributions sum vertically)					
White men	69.9	45.5	73.0	53.4	40.9
White women	29.1	51.1	22.7	36.8	43.8
Black men	0.0	3.3	3.7	4.9	6.6
Black women	1.0	0.0	0.6	4.9	8.7

See Table 2.2 for definitions of "extended expert-managers" and "extended working class."

If we combine these findings by defining a category of "privileged class locations" that includes capitalists, small employers and the extended expert-manager category, then just under 30% of white men occupy privileged class locations, compared to 12.5% of white women, 8.4% of black men and 3% of black women. In terms of proletarianization, nearly 87% of black women, 77% of black men and 67% of white women in the employed labor force are in the extended working class, compared to only about 51% of white men. Even excluding the problem of the so-called "underclass" – the chronically poor segment of the population outside of the formal labor force – race therefore seems to have a bigger overall effect on access to privileged class locations than does gender.⁶

When most people think of "the working class," the image that comes to mind is the white male industrial worker. When we define the working class in terms of individuals occupying positions within the social relations of production, this image is clearly grossly inaccurate. Only 33% of the people in the working class and 39% in the extended working class are white males. By a large margin, the American working class now predominantly consists of women and racial minorities.

2.4 Class structure: a summing up

This chapter has descriptively explored a wide range of properties of the class structures of advanced capitalist societies. Several broad generalizations stand out.

The working class, even if defined narrowly, remains the largest class location in the class structure of developed capitalist countries, and, if it is extended to include those contradictory locations closest to it, then it constitutes a substantial majority of the labor force. While, as we will see in the next chapter, the working class has declined somewhat in recent years, if the working class is defined in relational terms it is hardly the case that the working class has largely disappeared, as some commentators have suggested.

Not only is the working class the largest class location in all of the countries we have examined, among employees taken separately there is relatively little variation in class distributions across these countries. The

⁶ If anything, these results understate the contrast between racial and gender differences in access to privileged class locations, since many white women will have indirect access to privileged class locations via their husbands (i.e. their "mediated" class location will be to a relatively privileged class even if their direct class location is not).

only partial exception to this is Sweden, which has a somewhat larger working class and smaller expert-manager category than the other countries. This difference in Sweden may be due to the political specificity of the Swedish "class compromise" which may have somewhat reduced the need for intensive supervision and surveillance in the labor process, thus reducing the need for supervisors and managers. Still, even including Sweden, the variations in class distributions among employees across these countries is fairly muted.

In contrast to the relatively small variation across countries in class distributions among employees, there is significant variation in the size of the petty bourgeoisie. With the exception of the Japanese case, the differences in the size of the petty bourgeoisie across these countries is mainly due to properties of the sectoral structure of their economies: having a large state sector depresses the size of the petty bourgeoisie; having a large agricultural sector expands it. In the case of Japan, there is higher self-employment in all sectors. This indicates the stronger persistence of traditional, very small family businesses in Japanese society.

Compared to the relatively modest differences across countries in overall class distributions, there are very sharp differences between genders in class distributions within countries. In all countries, women are much more proletarianized than men and are particularly excluded from the expert-manager class locations. While these gender differences are considerably more exaggerated in Japan than in the other countries, the basic pattern is the same across all countries. In other words, in terms of the probabilities of a person being in a given class location, one's gender matters more than one's country.