

Neo-liberalism and consumer citizenship

Citizenship and welfare have been profoundly altered by the neo-liberal revolution of the late 1970s, which created a political environment in which governments were no longer committed to the universalistic principles of social citizenship, a comprehensive welfare state and full employment. These economic changes – reduction of state intervention, deregulation of the labour and financial markets, implementation of free trade, reduction in personal taxation, fiscal regulation of state expenditure – were a reflection of the New Right doctrines of F. A. Hayek, Karl Popper and Milton Friedman. New Right theorists argued that the spontaneous order of the market must not be regulated by the state, and that judgements about human needs should be left to the operation of the market. The neo-liberal revolution has converted the citizen into a passive member of consumer society, where conservative governments understand ‘active citizenship’ to be a method of regulating the efficiency of public utilities such as the railways. An active citizen is somebody who complains about poor services.

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CLASS

While class is one of the core themes in economic sociology, there is no general consensus among sociologists about how best to define this concept or about the broader theoretical framework within which it should be studied. Any elaboration of the concept of class, therefore, must simultaneously be an explication of the central differences in alternative conceptualizations of class.

In what follows we will begin by mapping out what might be termed the common terrain of class analysis – the inventory of interconnected concepts that are present in most approaches to the study of class. This will be followed by a detailed discussion of the concept of class in the Weberian and Marxist traditions of sociology.

A conceptual inventory

In ordinary language the word ‘class’ is most often used as a noun, as in expressions like ‘the working class’ and ‘the middle class’. In sociology, in contrast, the most analytically rigorous use of the concept appears mainly as an adjective, as in expressions like ‘class location’, ‘class relations’, ‘class structure’, ‘class struggle’ and

so on. To map out the conceptual space of class analysis, therefore, we must begin by defining the core elements of this inventory.

Class relations

Any economic system requires the deployment of a range of resources in production: tools, machines, land, raw materials, labour power, skills, and so forth. This deployment can be described in technical terms as a production function – so many inputs of different kinds are combined in a specific process to produce an output of a specific kind. The deployment can also be described in social relational terms: the individual actors that participate in production have different kinds of rights and powers over the use of the inputs and over the results of their use. ‘Powers’ refers to the effective capacity of people to control the use of means of production, including the capacity to appropriate the results of that use; ‘rights’ refers to the legal enforcement by third parties of those powers. Rights and powers over resources, of course, are attributes of social relations, not descriptions of the relationship of people to things as such: to have rights and powers with respect to land, for example, defines one’s social relationship to other people with respect to the use of the land and the appropriation of the products of using the land productively.

When the rights and powers of people over productive resources are unequally distributed these relations can be described as class relations. Both Marx and Weber understand class relations in this way for capitalist societies, where the core class relation is between owners of means of production and owners of labour power, since ‘owning’ is a description of rights and powers with respect to a resource deployed in production.

It is important to be quite precise here: The rights and powers in question are not defined with respect to the ownership or

control of things in general, but only of resources or assets insofar as they are deployed in production. A capitalist is not someone who owns machines, but someone who owns machines, deploys those machines in a production process, hires owners of labour power to use them and appropriates the profits from the use of those machines. A collector of machines is not, by virtue of owning those machines, a capitalist.

Class location

‘Class location’ is a micro-level concept referring to the location of individuals (and sometimes families) within class relations. Class relations are thus analytically prior to locations. Just as the location ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ within a family can only be defined within the social relations we call ‘marriage’, so the definition of specific class locations presupposes a definition of the social relations that bind them together.

In these terms, to say that someone is ‘in’ a working-class class location is to claim that they are embedded in a set of micro-level interactions within capitalist class relations in which, to gain access to means of production and subsistence, they must engage in an exchange activity with an employer and then obey the commands of a boss within a labour process. To say someone is ‘in’ a managerial class location is to claim that they are embedded in a set of interactions in which they are empowered to give various kinds of commands either directly to their subordinates or indirectly via their control over production decisions.

Class structure

‘Class structure’ is a more macro-level concept than the concepts of class locations and class relations. It designates the overall organization of class relations within some macro-unit of analysis. One can therefore describe the class structure of a firm as the

organized set of all the class relations within a firm, or the class structure of a region or a country or perhaps even the world as the organized set of class relations within these increasingly larger units of analysis.

Class interests

By virtue of their location within class relations, and by virtue of the broader class structure of which those class relations are a part, individuals have available different strategies for securing and improving their material interests. Owning considerable wealth means a person faces different alternatives and trade-offs from a person who simply owns labour power. 'Class interests' refers to the interests actors have by virtue of these class-determined strategic alternatives.

Class consciousness

'Class consciousness' refers to the beliefs actors hold about class relations, class structure and their own class interests. Insofar as actors may have faulty beliefs about the nature of the class structure in which they live, about their location within that structure and the strategies which would best advance their class interests, then one can speak of their class consciousness being 'false'. But, more broadly, the concept of class consciousness is not mainly about the truth-content of the beliefs people hold but about their class character.

Class practices and class struggle

'Class practices' are the activities actors engage in pursuit of their class interests on the basis of their understanding of class relations. Insofar as the interests of classes exist in antagonistic relation to each other, then class practices typically involve 'class struggle', i.e. the pursuit of interests *against* those of another class.

Class formation

'Class formation' refers to the formation of collectively organized actors in pursuit of class interests. When employers form a chamber of commerce or workers form a trade union or labour party to advance their respective class interests, they have constructed a particular kind of class formation. Class formations vary in many ways: in the extent to which they are encompassing or fractional; in the extent to which they challenge the institutions that define strategic alternatives they face or accept those institutions; in the extent to which they involve coalitions across different kinds of class locations. What renders all of these variations as instances of *class formation* is that they contribute to the organized capacity of actors to pursue class-based interests.

Taken together, this inventory of concepts provides a rich conceptual space in which to conduct class analysis. The space include micro-level concepts centring on the lives, conditions and experiences of individuals (class location, class interests, class consciousness, class practices), macro-level concepts mapping the contexts in which those micro-level processes operate (class structure, class formation, class struggle), and the concept of class relations which bridges the micro and macro levels of analysis: class locations are defined within class relations; class structures are made up of class relations.

The pivotal concept within this inventory is 'class relations', for it is this concept that gives the adjective 'class' its content in all of the elements. This is also the concept which best reveals the central difference in the theoretical apparatus of the two principal traditions of class analysis – Marxist and Weberian.

Class in Weber and Marx

The concepts of class in the Marxist and Weberian theoretical traditions share much

in common: they both reject simple gradational definitions of class; they are both anchored in the social relations which link people to economic resources of various sorts; they both see these social relations as affecting the material interests of actors, and, accordingly, they see class relations as the potential basis for solidarities and conflict. Yet they also differ in certain fundamental ways. The core of the difference is captured by the favourite buzzwords of each theoretical tradition: ‘life chances’ for Weberians, and ‘exploitation’ for Marxists.

The Weberian concept: class as market-determined life chances

The intuition behind Weber’s idea of life chances is straightforward: the kind and quantity of resources you own affects your opportunities for income in market exchanges (Weber [1922]1978). ‘Opportunity’ is a description of the feasible set individuals face, the trade-offs they encounter in deciding what to do. Owning means of production (the capitalist class) gives a person different alternatives from owning skills and credentials (the ‘middle’ class), and both of these are different from simply owning unskilled labour power (the working class). Furthermore, in a market economy, access to market-derived income affects the broader array of life experiences and opportunities for oneself and one’s children. The study of the life chances of children based on parents’ market capacity is thus an integral part of the Weberian agenda of class analysis.

The Marxist concept: class as exploitation

Within a Marxist framework, the feature of the relationship of people to economic resources that is at the core of class analysis is ‘exploitation’. Both ‘exploitation’ and ‘life chances’ identify inequalities in material well-being that are generated by

inequalities in access to resources of various sorts. Thus both of these concepts point to conflicts of interest over the *distribution* of the assets themselves. What exploitation adds to this is a claim that conflicts of interest between classes are generated not simply by what people *have*, but also by what people *do with what they have*. The concept of exploitation points our attention to conflicts within *production*, not simply conflicts in the *market*.

Exploitation is a complex and challenging concept. In classical Marxism this concept was elaborated in terms of a specific technical framework for understanding capitalist economies, the ‘labour theory of value’. In terms of sociological theory and research, however, the labour theory of value has never figured very prominently, even among sociologists working in the Marxist tradition. And in any case, the concept of exploitation and its relevance for class analysis does not depend on the labour theory of value.

The concept of exploitation designates a particular form of interdependence of the material interests of people, namely a situation that satisfies three criteria:

1. *The inverse interdependent welfare principle*: the material welfare of exploiters causally depends upon the material deprivations of the exploited.
2. *The exclusion principle*: this inverse interdependence of welfares of exploiters and exploited depends upon the exclusion of the exploited from access to certain productive resources.
3. *The appropriation principle*: exclusion generates material advantage to exploiters because it enables them to appropriate the labour effort of the exploited.

Exploitation is thus a diagnosis of the process through which the inequalities in incomes are generated by inequalities in

rights and powers over productive resources: the inequalities occur, in part at least, through the ways in which exploiters, by virtue of their exclusionary rights and powers over resources, are able to appropriate surplus generated by the effort of the exploited. If the first two of these principles are present, but not the third, economic oppression may exist, but not exploitation. The crucial difference is that in *non-exploitative* economic oppression, the privileged social category does not itself *need* the excluded category. While their welfare does depend upon exclusion, there is no ongoing interdependence of their activities. In the case of exploitation, the exploiters actively need the exploited: exploiters depend upon the effort of the exploited for their own welfare.

This conceptualization of exploitation underwrites an essentially polarized conception of class relations in which, in capitalist societies, the two fundamental classes are capitalists and workers. The Marxist tradition of class analysis, however, also contains a variety of strategies for elaborating more concrete class concepts, which allow for much more complex maps of class structures in which managers, professionals and the self-employed are structurally differentiated from capitalists and workers. Wright (1997), for example, argues that managers in capitalist firms constitute a type of ‘contradictory location within class relations’ in the sense of having the relational properties of both capitalists and workers.

The two traditions compared

Both Marxist and Weberian class analyses differ sharply from simple gradational accounts of class in which class is itself directly identified within inequalities in income, since both begin with the problem of the social relations that determine the access of people to economic resources. In a sense, therefore, Marxist and Weberian definitions of class in capitalist society share

much the same *operational* criteria for class structure within capitalist societies. Where they differ is in the theoretical elaboration and specification of the implications of this common set of criteria: the Marxist model sees two causal paths being systematically generated by these relations – one operating through market exchanges and the other through the process of production itself – whereas the Weberian model traces only one causal path; and the Marxist model elaborates the mechanisms of these causal paths in terms of exploitation as well as bargaining capacity within exchange, whereas the Weberian model only deals with the latter of these. In a sense, then, the Weberian strategy of class analysis is contained within the Marxist model.

This difference between Marx’s and Weber’s treatments of the causal mechanisms linked to class relations is itself derived from the broader theoretical agendas in which their specific conceptualizations of class are located. In Weber, the concept of class is deeply connected to his preoccupation with the theoretical and historical problem of rationalization of social relations. Running throughout Weber’s work is a threefold distinction in the sources of power that individuals use to accomplish their goals: social honour, material resources and authority. Each of these, in turn, can be organized within social interactions in highly rationalized forms or in relatively non-rationalized forms. Class, in these terms, designates highly rationalized social relations that govern the way people get access to and use material resources. It is thus contrasted, on one hand, with non-rationalized ways of governing access to resources, especially ascriptively based consumption groups, and on the other hand, with rationalized forms of social relations involving other sources of social power.

Weber’s definition of class relations in terms of market exchanges is intimately connected to the problem of rationalization. When people meet to make an

exchange in a market, they rationally calculate the costs and benefits of alternatives on the basis of the prices they face in the market. These prices provide the kind of information required for people to make rational calculations, and the constraints of market interactions force them to make decisions on the basis of these calculations in a more or less rational manner. Weber is, fundamentally, less interested in the problem of the material deprivations and advantages of different categories of people as such, or in the collective struggles that might spring from those advantages and disadvantages, than he is in the underlying normative order and cognitive practices – instrumental rationality – that are embodied in the social interactions that generates these life chances. This is precisely what his market-centred conceptualization of class relations accomplishes.

For Marx, in contrast, class is embedded in a theoretical agenda revolving around the problem of understanding the historical possibilities for human emancipation. Class plays a central role in answering the question, ‘What sorts of transformations are needed to eliminate economic oppression and exploitation within capitalist societies?’ This is a complex, and contentious, question for it implies not simply an explanatory agenda about the mechanisms that explain forms of economic action and generate economic inequalities, but a normative judgement about those inequalities – they are forms of oppression and exploitation – and a normative vision of the transformation of those inequalities. It suggests a concept of class which is not simply defined in terms of the social relations to economic resources, but which also figures centrally in a political project of emancipatory social change. Marx’s conceptualization of class relations in terms of both exchange and exploitation accomplishes this.

While the Marxist concept of class may be particularly suited to the distinctively Marxist question about emancipatory

transformations, is it still sociologically useful if one rejects that question? There are a number of reasons why elaborating the concept of class in terms of exploitation has theoretical payoffs beyond the specific normative agenda of Marxist class analysis itself:

1. *Linking exchange and production*: the Marxist logic of class analysis affirms the intimate link between the way in which social relations are organized within exchange and within production. This is a substantive, not definitional, point: the social relations which organize the rights and powers of individuals with respect to productive resources systematically shapes their location both within exchange relations and within the process of production itself.
2. *Conflict*: conflict is a prominent feature of both Marxist and Weberian views of class. The distinctive feature of the Marxist account of class relations in these terms is not simply that it gives prominence to class conflict, but that by identifying the antagonism of material interests generated by the exploitative character of capitalist class relations it understands conflict as generated by *inherent properties* of those relations rather than simply contingent factors.
3. *Power*: the concept of exploitation draws attention to the ways in which class conflicts do not simply reflect conflicting interests over the distribution of a pie. Rather, to characterize class relations as exploitative emphasizes the ways in which exploiting classes are *dependent upon* the exploited class for their own economic well-being, and because of this dependency, the ways in which exploited classes have *capacities for resistance* that are organic to class relations. Because workers always

retain some control over the expenditure of effort and diligence, they have a capacity to resist their exploitation; and because capitalists need workers, there are constraints on the strategies available to capitalists to counter this resistance. Exploitation thus entails a specific kind of duality: conflicting material interests plus a real capacity for resistance. This duality has implications for the way we think about both the individual and collective power of workers: As individuals, the power of workers depends both on the scarcity of the kind of labour power they have to offer in the labour market (and thus their ability to extract individual 'skill rents' through the sale of their labour power) and on their ability to control the expenditure of their individual effort within the labour process; as a collectivity, workers' power depends on their ability to collectively regulate the terms of exchange on the labour market (typically through unions) and their ability to control the organization of work, surveillance and sanctions within production.

4. *Coercion and consent*: the extraction of labour effort in systems of exploitation is costly for exploiting classes because of the inherent capacity of people to resist their own exploitation. Purely coercively backed systems of exploitation will often be suboptimal since it is frequently too easy for workers to withhold diligent performance of labour effort. Exploiting classes will therefore have a tendency to seek ways of reducing those costs. One of the ways of reducing the overhead costs of extracting labour effort is to do things that elicit the active consent of the exploited. These range from the development of internal labour mar-

kets which strengthen the identification and loyalty of workers to the firms in which they work to the support for ideological positions which proclaim the practical and moral desirability of capitalist institutions. Such consent-producing practices, however, also have costs attached to them, and thus systems of exploitation can be seen as always involving trade-offs between coercion and consent as mechanisms for extracting labour effort.

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CLASSIFICATION

In the natural sciences, the assignment of objects and beings to classes was long thought to be a simple function of the characteristics of the things themselves. The broad genus and the narrower species were