

## 12. Confirmations, surprises and theoretical reconstructions

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Class analysis, in the Marxist tradition, stands at the center of a sweeping analysis of the dilemmas of contemporary society and the aspirations for an egalitarian and democratic future for humanity. Class is a normatively charged concept, rooted in ideas of oppression, exploitation and domination. This concept underwrites both an emancipatory vision of a classless society and an explanatory theory of conflicts, institutions and social change rooted in intrinsically antagonistic interests. The ultimate ambition of this kind of class analysis is to link the explanatory theory to the emancipatory vision in such a way as to contribute to the political project of transforming the world in the direction of those ideals. Marxist empirical research of whatever kind – whether ethnographic case studies, historical investigations or statistical analyses of survey data – should further this ambition.

At first glance, it may seem that the empirical studies in this book have little to do with such grand visions. The topics we have explored have revolved around narrowly focused properties of contemporary capitalist societies rather than the epochal contradictions which dynamically shape social change. While I have invoked the themes of transformative struggles, only a pale reflection of “class struggle” has appeared in the actual empirical analyses in the form of attitudes of individuals. And, while the concept of class we have been exploring is conceptualized in terms of exploitation, none of the empirical research directly explores the problem of exploitation as such. In what ways, then, can the coefficients, tables and graphs in this book be said to push forward the central themes and ideas of the Marxist agenda?

Research pushes social theory forward in two basic ways. Where there is a controversy between contending theoretical claims about some problem, research can potentially provide a basis for adjudicating

between the alternatives. The more focused and well defined is the problem, and particularly, the more there is agreement among contending views on the precise specification of what needs to be explained, the more likely it is that research can play this role. Our explorations of alternative expectations about the transformations of the class structure or the permeability of class boundaries are in this spirit. Where successful, the results of research can be said to provisionally "confirm" a particular set of expectations linked to a theoretical perspective, at least in the sense of adding significantly to the credibility of those expectations even if it is never possible to absolutely prove theoretical claims. While, at least in social science, such adjudication and confirmation rarely bears directly on the adequacy of broader theoretical perspectives, the cumulative effect of such research can contribute to the erosion of some perspectives and the strengthening of others.

Adjudication and confirmation are at the core of the standard "hypothesis-testing" strategies of contemporary sociology. Although the standard rhetoric is "rejecting the null hypothesis" rather than "adjudicating between rival hypotheses," nevertheless, the underlying logic of inquiry is using evidence to add credibility to a set of expectations derived from one theory versus alternatives. There is, however, a second modality through which research pushes theory forward: the goal of research can be to find interesting surprises, anomalous empirical results that go against the expectations of a theory and thus provoke rethinking. It is all well and good to do research that confirms what one already believes, but the advance of knowledge depends much more on generating observations that challenge one's existing ideas, that are counter-intuitive with respect to received wisdom.

Surprises of this sort may be the by-product of the adjudication between rival hypotheses. After all, what is "surprising" within one theoretical framework may be "commonsense" within another. The accelerating decline of the working class is certainly a surprise within Marxism; it is hardly surprising for post-industrial theorists. Research which seems to confirm the expectations of one's theoretical rivals thus provides crucial raw material for efforts at theory reconstruction.

Empirical anomalies may also occur in research that is not explicitly directed at adjudicating between rival hypotheses. The surprises in our research on housework, for example, grew out of an exploration of the implications of class analysis for gender relations rather than a direct confrontation between alternative theories of housework. In any case, as Burawoy (1990, 1993) has strenuously argued, empirical surprises force

the reconstruction of theory, and it is through such reconstruction that social theory moves forward.

"Reconstructions" of theory in the light of empirical surprises, of course, may be purely defensive operations, patching up a sinking ship that is sailing in the wrong direction. There is no guarantee that reconstructions constitute "progressive" developments within a theoretical framework rather than degenerate branches of a research program, to use Imre Lakatos's formulation. Nevertheless, it is through such reconstructions that advances in theoretical knowledge are attempted.

The research in this book involves both of these modalities for linking theory and research. Some of the research was primarily concerned with empirically comparing the expectations of a Marxist class analysis with expectations derived from other theoretical perspectives. Other studies were less focused on adjudicating between well-formulated rival expectations than simply exploring the implications of the Marxist approach itself. Much of this research provides confirmation for what I believed before doing the research, but there were also many surprises, at least some of which may contribute to the ongoing reconstruction of Marxist class analysis.

It is mainly on these surprises that I want to focus in this chapter. In what follows, for each of the major themes in the book I will first present a stylized account of what might be termed the "conventional wisdom" within Marxism. This is not always an easy task, for on some of the topics we have explored Marxists have not had a great deal to say, and in any case there are many Marxisms from which to choose the "traditional view." My characterization of the "traditional understanding," therefore, is bound to be disputed. My intention is not to give an authoritative account of "what Marx really said," but to capture a set of theoretical intuitions shared by many – perhaps most – Marxists. This account of the traditional understanding will serve as the benchmark for assessing the ways in which the results of the various research projects provide confirmations of these conventional expectations or surprises. The inventory of surprises, in turn, will provide the basis for exploring some of the directions in which Marxist class analysis might be reconstructed in light of the research.

These issues will be explored for five broad themes in class analysis which we have examined in this book: 1. the problem of conceptualizing "locations" within the class structure; 2. the variability and transformation of class structure of advanced capitalist societies; 3. the intersection of the lives of individuals and class structures; 4. the effects of class on

class consciousness and class formation; and 5. the relationship between class and other forms of oppression, especially gender.

### 12.1 Conceptualizing "locations" in the class structure

More than any other issue, this research has revolved around the problem of what it means to "locate" a person in the class structure. If we are to link micro- and macro-levels of class analysis by exploring the impact of class on the lives and consciousness of individuals, some sort of solution to this issue is essential. The image is that a structure of class relations generates an array of "empty places" filled by individuals. To pursue micro-level class analysis we must both figure out how to define these empty places and what it means for an individual to be linked to those places.

#### *Traditional understanding*

Traditional Marxism developed a systematic conceptualization of class structure only at the highest levels of abstraction. The "empty places" in class relations were defined by the social property relations within specific modes of production. In capitalist societies this led to the rigorous specification of two basic class locations: *capitalists* and *workers* within capitalist relations of production. To these could be added class locations that were rooted in various kinds of precapitalist relations of production, especially the *petty bourgeoisie* within simple commodity production, and in some times and places, various class locations within feudal relations of production. In many concrete analyses, loose references were also made to other class locations, especially to the new middle class of managers and professionals, but these were not given firm conceptual status.

In the traditional account, individuals were linked to these empty places through their direct relationship to the means of production: capitalists owned the means of production and employed workers; workers sold their labor power on a labor market and worked within capitalist firms; the petty bourgeoisie were direct producers using their own means of production. Every class location was therefore in one and only one class. Individuals might, of course, change their class in the course of their lives, but at any given point in time they were located within a specific class.

#### *Initial reconstruction*

The framework elaborated in this book attempts to reconstruct the traditional Marxist concept of class structure in two different ways. First, the map of empty places has been transformed through the development of the concept of *contradictory locations within class relations*. Instead of defining class locations simply at the level of abstract modes of production, I have tried to develop a more concrete, multi-dimensional understanding of how jobs are tied to the process of exploitation. Specifically, I have argued that, in addition to the relationship to the ownership of the means of production, the linkage of jobs to the process of exploitation is shaped by their relation to domination within production (authority) and to the control over expertise and skills. This generates the more complex map of locations we have used throughout the book. In this new conceptualization, the "middle class" is not simply a residual category of locations that do not comfortably fit the categories "capitalist" and "worker." Rather, middle-class locations in the class structure are those that are linked to the process of exploitation and domination in contradictory ways. The "empty places" in the class structure, therefore, are no longer necessarily in one and only one class.

The second way in which the traditional view of class locations has been modified is through the concept of mediated class locations. The central point of trying to assign a class location to an individual is to clarify the nature of the lived experiences and material interests the individual is likely to have. Being "in" a class location means that you do certain things and certain things happen to you (lived experience) and you face certain strategic alternatives for pursuing your material well-being (class interests). Jobs embedded within social relations of production are one of the ways individuals are linked to such interests and experiences, but not the only way. Families provide another set of social relations which tie people to the class structure. This is especially salient in families within which different members of the family hold jobs with different class characters. Individuals in such families have both direct and mediated class locations, and these two links to class relations may or may not be the same. This introduces a new level of complexity into the micro-analysis of class which is especially relevant to the interaction of class and gender.

*Empirical confirmations*

Empirically "testing" concepts is a tricky business. Indeed, there are some traditions of social science which regard concepts as simply linguistic conventions, and thus there is no sense in which a particular conceptualization can be shown to be *wrong*; at most a given concept can be more or less *useful* than others. There is, however, an alternative view which claims that at least some concepts should be treated as attempts at specifying real mechanisms that exist in the world independently of our theories. For such "realist concepts," a definition can be incorrect in the sense that it misspecifies some crucial feature of the relevant causal properties (see Wright 1985: 1–37).

The concept of class being proposed in this book is meant to be a realist concept, not simply an arbitrary convention. The appropriate way of evaluating the concept, therefore, is to examine a variety of effects that the hypothesized class-defining mechanisms are supposed to generate. If a given conceptualization is correct, then these effects should follow certain expected patterns. Anomalies with respect to these expectations, of course, need not invalidate the concept, since failures of prediction of this sort can be due to the presence of all sorts of confounding mechanisms (including the special kind of confounding mechanism we call "measurement problems"). Nevertheless, as in more straightforward hypothesis testing, such surprises pose challenges which potentially provoke reconstructions.

In one way or another, nearly all of the results of this book bear on the problem of evaluating the adequacy of the proposed conceptualization of class structure, even though little of the research is directly geared towards "testing" this conceptualization against its rivals. Still, a few of the results have a particularly clear relation to the theoretical logic which underlies the conceptualization of class in this book.

First, in the analysis of class consciousness, the variation across class locations in individual attitudes towards class issues broadly follows the predictions derived from the three-dimensional class structure matrix. Particularly in Sweden and the United States, the extent to which individuals were likely to hold pro-capitalist or pro-working class attitudes varied monotonically across the three dimensions of the matrix. This does not, of course, decisively prove that this is the appropriate way of specifying the concept of class location within a Marxist framework, but it lends credibility to the approach.

The second specific way the results of this research support the

proposed reconceptualization of class is more complex. In the various analyses of the permeability of class boundaries, it was demonstrated that the probabilities of permeability events (mobility, friendships, cross-class marriages) occurring between specific class locations were not simply additive effects of permeability across the three class boundaries we studied – the property boundary, the authority boundary and the skill boundary. For example, the probability of a friendship between a person in a working-class location and one in a capitalist location was not simply the sum of the probabilities of a friendship across the property boundary and across the authority boundary. If the effects of these three boundaries had been strictly additive, then this would have suggested that aggregating the dimensions into a "class structure" was simply a conceptual convenience. Nothing would be lost by disaggregating the class structure into these more "primitive" dimensions and treating them as separate, autonomous attributes of jobs. The consistent interactions among these dimensions in the patterns of class permeability support the claim that these three dimensions should be considered dimensions of a conceptual gestalt – "class structure" – rather than simply separate attributes of jobs.

Third, the credibility of the concept of mediated class locations is demonstrated in the analysis of the class identity of married women in two-earner households. At least in Sweden, the class identity of such women was shaped both by their own job-class and by the class of their husband. While there are complications in this analysis which we will review in the discussion of class consciousness below, these results generally support the idea that individuals' locations in a class structure should be conceptualized in terms of the multiple ways in which their lives are linked to class relations.

*Surprises*

Most of the empirical results in this book are consistent with the proposed reconceptualization of class structure. There are, however, two specific sets of results that are somewhat anomalous and thus raise questions about the concept of contradictory class locations. Both of these involve the relationship between the authority and expertise dimensions of the class structure matrix, one in the analysis of permeability of class boundaries, the other in the investigation of class consciousness. We will discuss these results in more detail later when we examine the general results for class permeability and for class con-

sciousness. Here I will only focus on how these results bear on the conceptualization of contradictory class locations.

First, in the analyses of permeability of class boundaries, for each of the kinds of permeability we studied the authority boundary was always much more permeable than the expertise boundary (and in some analyses not significantly impermeable in absolute terms), yet, within a Marxist framework, authority is more intimately linked than is skill or expertise to the fundamental class cleavage of capitalism, the capital-labor relation. This relatively high permeability of the authority boundary compared to the expertise boundary is thus in tension with my reconstructed Marxist class concept in which authority constitutes a dimension of the *class* structure among employees rather than simply an aspect of "stratification" or even merely "role differentiation."

Second, in Japan the extremely muted ideological differences across levels of managerial authority compared to a rather sharp ideological cleavage between experts and nonexperts at every level of the authority hierarchy also run against the implications of the contradictory class location concept. Since the items we use as indicators of class consciousness center around capital-labor conflict, if it were the case that managerial authority defines the basis for a contradictory location linked to the capitalist class, then it is surprising that ideological differences along this dimension are so muted in a thoroughly capitalist society like Japan, and it is especially surprising that the expertise cleavage is so much more striking than the authority cleavage.

#### *Further possible reconstructions?*

Both of these anomalous results may simply be the result of measurement problems. The Japanese results are obviously vulnerable to all sorts of measurement errors on the attitude questions. But measurement issues may equally undermine the permeability results. Even though we tried to restrict the permeability of the managerial boundary to events that linked proper managers (not merely supervisors) to employees outside of the authority hierarchy, in several of the analyses it was impossible to rigorously distinguish managers and supervisors. Furthermore, even the "manager" category includes people near the bottom of authority structures. The fact that throughout the book we have amalgamated managers in small businesses with managers in multinational corporations may also confound the analyses. It is one thing for the manager of a locally owned retail store or a McDonald's franchise to be

good friends with workers and to have come from a working-class family, and another thing for a manager in the headquarters of IBM (let alone an executive) to have such ties. It may well be the case, therefore, that these results would be quite different if we restricted managers to people with decisive power over broad organizational resources and policymaking and distinguished large-scale capitalist production from small business.

However, if these anomalous results turn out to be robust, they may indicate that the concept of "contradictory class locations" does indeed meld a relational concept of class rooted in capitalist property relations with dimensions of gradational stratification. This is most obvious for the skill-expertise dimension, which seems to have a natural gradational logic of having more or less of something. Authority is inherently a relational property of jobs; yet its place within class analysis might better be understood in terms of strata within classes rather than a distinctive kind of class location. This line of reasoning might suggest a fairly radical conceptual shift away from the idea of contradictory locations within class relations: authority and expertise would be treated as the bases for gradational strata within the class of employees defined by capitalist relations of production. Such a class analysis could still claim to be Marxist insofar as the class concept itself remained deeply linked to the problem of exploitation and capitalist property relations, but it would no longer attempt to specify differentiated *class* locations at concrete, micro-levels of analysis among employees. If this conceptual move were embraced, then the distinctively Marxist class concept would primarily inform analyses at the more abstract levels of class analysis, whereas something much more like a gradational concept of social stratification would inform concrete levels of analysis.

I do not believe that these particular results for managers are so compelling as to call for this kind of conceptual transformation. For most of the analyses in this book, the divisions among employees which we have mapped along the authority and expertise dimensions appear to have class-like effects, and the concept of contradictory locations within class relations does a good job of providing an explanatory framework for understanding the results. Taken as a whole, the results of the studies in this book affirm the fruitfulness of the concept of contradictory class locations. Thus, while the conceptual framework does not achieve the level of comprehensive coherence, either theoretically or empirically, which I had hoped for when I first began working on the problem of the

middle class, the anomalies are not so pressing as to provoke a new conceptual metamorphosis.

## 12.2 Class structure and its variations in advanced capitalist societies

### *Traditional understanding*

The traditional Marxist view of the variations across time and place in the class structure of capitalist societies revolves around three broad propositions:

- 1 *The distribution of the population into different classes within capitalism should depend largely upon the level of development of the "forces of production" (technology and technical knowledge). This should be particularly true for the distribution of class locations within capitalist production itself. Since our sample is of countries which are all at roughly the same level of economic development, it would be expected that their class distributions should not differ greatly.*
- 2 *The broad tendency of change over time in class distributions within capitalist societies is towards an expansion of the working class. There are two principle reasons for this expectation: first, the petty bourgeoisie and small employer class locations are eroded by competition from larger capitalist firms, thus expanding the proportion of the labor force employed as wage-earners; and, second, rationalization and technical change within production, designed to maximize capitalist profits, tends to generate a "degradation of labor" – the reduction in the skills, autonomy and power of employees – which results in a relative expansion of proletarianized labor among wage-earners.*
- 3 *As a result of these two propositions, the expectation is that the working class should be the largest class within developed capitalist societies. The image of developed capitalist societies as becoming largely "middle-class societies" would be rejected by most Marxists, regardless of the specific ways in which they elaborate the concept of class.*

### *Confirmations*

Some aspects of these traditional understandings are supported by the data in Part I of this book. In all six of the capitalist societies we examined, the working class remains the single largest location within the class structure, and, when unskilled supervisors and skilled workers

are combined with the working-class location, in every country we have examined the "extended working class" is a clear majority (55–60%) of the labor force, and a large majority of employees (generally around 75%). It may well be the case that in terms of the distribution of income and life styles – the characteristic way that the "middle class" is defined in popular culture – a substantial majority of the population is middle class. But in terms of relationship to the process of production and exploitation, the majority of the labor force is either in the working class or in those contradictory class locations most closely linked to the working class. Also as expected, the variation in class distributions, at least among employees, across the six countries we examined is relatively modest: the extended working class constitutes about three-quarters of employees in all of these countries, while the most privileged segment of the middle class (the extended expert-manager location) constitutes about one-ninth of employees.

### *Surprises*

Two principal surprises stand out in the results on class structure. First, there is strong evidence that, at least in the United States, the working class is declining as a proportion of the labor force, and, what is more, this decline is occurring at an accelerating rate. While in the 1960s the decline in the relative size of the working class was entirely attributable to changes in the sectoral composition of the labor force (i.e. the sectors with the smallest proportion of workers were growing the fastest), by the 1980s the working class was declining in all major economic sectors. Experts and expert managers, on the other hand, have generally been expanding as a proportion of the labor force. Second, it also appears in the United States that the long, continuous decline of the petty bourgeois ended in the early 1970s and that since the middle of that decade self-employment has increased almost steadily. A similar growth in self-employment occurred in a variety of other developed capitalist countries. By the early 1990s, the proportion of the labor force self-employed in the US was perhaps as much as 25% greater than 20 years earlier. In the 1980s, this expansion of self-employment was occurring within most economic sectors. Furthermore, between 1980 and 1990 there was an expansion of small employers – not just the petty bourgeoisie – within economic sectors, indicating that the expansion of self-employment is unlikely to be simply a question of disguised forms of wage labor.

*Reconstructions*

These trends suggest that, while the working class is hardly disappearing, there is clear evidence of an expansion of class locations which are relatively "privileged" in various ways – in terms of autonomy and access to surplus, and even access to capital. The traditional Marxist thesis of deepening proletarianization within developed capitalist economies is therefore called into question.

There are two strategies for rethinking the problem of the transformation of capitalist class structures in light of these results. The first response leaves the basic theory of proletarianization intact, but identifies a misspecification of the empirical context of the analysis. It is possible, for example, that these trends are artifacts of the restriction of the analysis to changes in class structures *within* specific nation states. It has long been recognized that capitalism is a global system of production. This suggests that the proper unit of analysis for understanding the transformation of capitalist class structures should be the world, not specific firms, countries or even regions. It could be the case, for example, that the proportion of the employees of American corporations world-wide who are in the working class has increased, but that there has been a shift of the employment of workers outside the borders of the US. Global capitalism could thus be characterized by increasing proletarianization even if developed capitalism is not.

The second response calls into question more basic elements of the traditional Marxist understanding. As various theorists of "post-industrial" society have argued, the dramatic new forces of production of advanced capitalist societies may have fundamentally altered the developmental tendencies of capitalist class relations. Of particular importance in this regard are the implications of information technologies for the class location of various kinds of experts and managers. One scenario is that a decreasing proportion of the population is needed for capitalist production altogether, and, among those who remain employed in the capitalist economy, a much higher proportion will occupy positions of responsibility, expertise and autonomy. This implies a broad decline of the working class and purely supervisory employees, an increase of the "relative surplus population," and an expansion of experts and proper managers. Of course, this may simply be a short-lived phase, not a permanent reconfiguration of capitalist class structures. It is possible that once these new technologies have been in place for a while, a process of systematic deskilling and proletarianization might once again dominate

changes in class distributions. But it may also be the case that these new forces of production stably generate a class structure different from earlier industrial technologies.

**12.3 Individual lives and the class structure***Traditional understanding*

Marxism has never developed a systematic theory of the way the lives of individuals intersect class structures, and thus there is not a strong set of expectations about the class patterns of intergenerational mobility, friendship formation, and family composition. There is nothing in the Marxist concept of class to logically preclude the possibility of two class structures with very similar distributions of *locations* having quite different trajectories of individual lives across locations.

Nevertheless, the underlying spirit of Marxist class analysis suggests that in a stable capitalist class structure most people's lives should be fairly well contained within specific class locations. Specifically, Marxism suggests three general propositions about the permeability of class boundaries:

- 1 *The relative impermeability of the property boundary.* The antagonistic material interests and distinctive forms of lived experience linked to class locations should make friendships, marriages, and mobility across the basic class division of capitalist societies – the division between capitalists and workers – relatively rare. Such events should certainly be less common than parallel events that spanned the authority and skill dimensions of the class structure. In the language developed in chapter 5, the property boundary in the class structure should be less permeable to mobility, friendships and families than either the expertise or authority boundary.
- 2 *The authority boundary.* A weaker expectation within a Marxist class analysis is that the authority boundary should be less permeable than the skill/expertise boundary. Insofar as the class antagonisms generated by managerial authority are more closely linked to the basic class cleavage of capitalism than is skill or expertise, there should be greater barriers to intimate social interaction across the authority boundary than across the skill boundary.
- 3 *Variations in permeability across capitalist societies.* On the assumption that the degree of impermeability of a class boundary is based on the

antagonism of material interests generated around that boundary, then the more purely capitalistic is a class structure, the less permeable its property boundary should be, both absolutely and relatively to other class boundaries.

### *Confirmations*

The core results of our investigations of the permeability of class boundaries are quite consistent with the first and third of these expectations. In particular, the property boundary is generally less permeable than either the authority or skill boundaries to intergenerational mobility, friendship formation and cross-class marriages. Also, as expected, the property boundary is generally less permeable in North America than in Scandinavia, especially for intergenerational mobility. The contrast is especially striking in the comparison of the United States and Sweden: the chances of intergenerational mobility or friendships across the property boundary are over twice as great in Sweden as in the United States. Where capitalism is the most unconstrained and thus capitalist property relations make the biggest difference in the material interests of actors, the barriers to intergenerational mobility and friendship ties across the property boundary appear to be greatest.

### *Surprises*

Not all of the results in our analyses of class-boundary permeability fit comfortably with Marxist intuitions. First, even though the property boundary is the least permeable of the three class boundaries we explored, nevertheless it can hardly be described as highly impermeable. Roughly speaking, mobility, friendships and cross-class marriages across the property boundary occur at about 25–30% of the rate that would be expected if the boundary were completely permeable. Furthermore, in the broader analysis of the petty bourgeoisie in the United States in chapter 4, we observed that well over 50% of all workers say that they would like to be self-employed some day, and over 60% have some kind of personal connection with the petty bourgeoisie – through previous jobs, class origins, second jobs, spouses or close personal friendships. The extent to which the lives of people in capitalist societies cross the property boundary is thus greater than suggested by the traditional Marxist image of capitalist class relations.

Second, as already noted in the discussion of anomalies in the concept

of contradictory class location, the authority boundary turns out to be highly permeable to all three social processes we have explored in all four countries. Recall that for the purposes of these analyses we have tried to define the permeability of the authority boundary relatively restrictively – except for the mobility analysis, it involves a connection between proper managers (not mere supervisors) and nonmanagerial employees. With that definition, for many of the results the authority boundary creates almost no barriers. Again, while Marxist theory does not contain strong predictions about how individual lives intersect authority relations within work, given the importance of domination within production to Marxist class analysis, this degree of permeability is at least in tension with certain traditional Marxist themes.

Third, cross-class families are more common in all of the countries we studied than many Marxists would have expected. In roughly a third of all dual-earner families in these countries, husbands and wives were in different class locations. This is particularly important theoretically, since families are units of consumption with shared material interests. The existence of cross-class families, therefore, means that for many people their direct and mediated class locations will be different.

### *Reconstructions*

It is an old theme in sociology, especially in the Weberian tradition, that social mobility is a stabilizing process in contemporary societies. It is generally assumed that a class structure that rigidly constrains the lives of individuals will ultimately be more fragile than one with relatively high levels of fluidity. These issues have been largely neglected within the Marxist tradition of class analysis. Much more attention has been paid to the levels of inequality across class locations and the exploitative practices thought to generate that inequality than to the way individual lives are organized within those class structures.

The patterns of class-boundary permeability which we have explored indicate that this issue needs to be taken seriously within Marxist class analysis. The results suggest that the durability of capitalism in the developed capitalist societies is probably not simply due to its capacity to generate growth and affluence for a substantial proportion of their populations, but also because of the extent to which individual lives and interactions cross the salient divisions within the class structure. This is particularly the case for the permeability of the secondary class divisions in capitalist societies – class boundaries constituted by authority and

expertise – but it is also true for the primary class division. Of course, none of our analyses examine the probability of life events linking the working class and large capitalists, let alone the “ruling class.” Nevertheless, the personal linkages between workers and small employers are not rare events in developed capitalist societies.

This permeability of class boundaries has potentially important consequences for both the class identities and interests of actors. Insofar as identities are shaped by biographical trajectories of lived experiences, the relative frequency of cross-class experiences would be expected to dilute class identity. Even more significantly, to the extent that class boundaries are permeable to *intragenerational* mobility (a problem we have not explored) and family ties, then class interests would no longer be narrowly tied to individual class locations. Class interests define the strategic alternatives individuals face in pursuing their material welfare. Those alternatives are quite different where individual families contain members in different class locations or where individuals have a reasonable expectation that their future class location might be different from their present one. Class analysis needs to incorporate these facts about the interweaving of lives and structures.

#### 12.4 Effects of class structure: class consciousness and class formation

##### *Traditional understanding*

Forms of consciousness – at least those aspects of consciousness bound up with class – are deeply affected by the ways class structure shapes lived experiences and material interests. While political and cultural processes may affect the extent to which such consciousness develops a coherent ideological expression and becomes linked to collectively organized social forces, nevertheless, a strong and systematic association between class location and the subjectivities of actors should be generated by the class structure itself. While Marxism does not predict politically conscious, collectively organized class struggles to be a universal feature of capitalism, it does predict that, at the level of individual subjectivity, there should be a systematic association between location in the class structure and forms of class consciousness.

This general Marxist perspective on class location and class consciousness, suggests five broad theses about the empirical problems we have been exploring:

- 1 *The point of production thesis.* Within the Marxist tradition, class has its effects on people’s subjectivity not mainly through the standard of living generated by class positions (the “sphere of consumption”), but by the experiences and interests generated within production itself. Therefore, in cases in which there is a disjuncture between a person’s direct class location and their mediated class location, their class consciousness should be more powerfully shaped by their direct class.
- 2 *The polarization thesis.* Class structures should be ideologically polarized between workers and capitalists on aspects of consciousness concerning class interests.
- 3 *The multidimensional exploitation thesis.* Among employees, the extent of working-class consciousness should vary monotonically with a person’s location within the two-dimensional matrix class locations among nonproperty-owners. Even if one does not buy into all of the details of the concept of contradictory class locations, still most Marxists would predict that the more fully proletarianized is a class location along either the expertise or authority dimensions, the more likely it is that persons in that class location will have proworking-class consciousness.
- 4 *The macro-mediation thesis.* While class location should be systematically linked to class consciousness everywhere, the strength of this linkage at the micro-level will vary across countries depending upon the strength of working-class formations.
- 5 *Class formation thesis.* Within the common patterns postulated in the polarization thesis and the multidimensional exploitation thesis, the specific line of demarcation between class formations will vary cross-nationally depending upon a range of historically contingent processes, especially the political legacies of class struggles.

##### *Confirmations*

With the partial exception of some results concerning the point of production thesis (see below), the basic patterns of the relationship between class location and class consciousness in our various analyses are broadly consistent with these hypotheses. Even though we only have data on relatively small capitalist employers, in all three of the countries we studied, capitalists and workers are ideologically polarized in their attitudes towards class issues. Among employees, workers and expert managers are also polarized, with nonexpert managers and nonmana-

gerial experts having ideological positions somewhere between these extremes. Furthermore, as suggested by the macro-mediation thesis, the strength of the micro-level association between class location and various aspects of class consciousness does vary across countries. Specifically, this association is consistently very strong in Sweden where working-class formations are politically and ideologically strong, while the association is moderate in the United States and quite weak in Japan. Finally, as suggested by the class formation thesis, the specific ideological coalitions that are formed on the basis of these common underlying patterns are quite different in the three countries we examined. At least for Sweden and the United States, these differences can plausibly be interpreted in terms of the divergences in the two countries in the historical trajectories and institutional legacies of political class struggles.

*Surprises: direct and mediated class locations*

The results of the study of the effects of family-class composition on class identity partially contradict the point of production thesis. For men, the thesis holds in both the United States and Sweden: class identity is much more decisively shaped by the class character of the individual's own job than by the class composition of the household within which men live. For women, in contrast, mediated class locations (i.e. their links to the class structure through their spouses' job) matter much more than they do for men. In Sweden, for wives in two-earner households, direct and mediated class locations have roughly the same impact on the probability of their having a working-class identity; in the United States, for wives in two-earner households, direct class location has almost no effect on class identity net of the effect of mediated class location. At least for the study of the class identity of married women in two-earner households, therefore, this aspect of class subjectivity is affected at least as much by mediated class locations as by their direct position within the system of production, contradicting the point of production thesis.

*Surprises: class consciousness and class formation*

While the patterns of class structure and consciousness we observed are broadly consistent with Theses 2–5, the extent of cross-national variation in the strength of association of class location and consciousness is greater than suggested by traditional Marxist intuitions. In particular, the Japanese case falls outside of the range of variability that would be

expected within Marxist class analysis. While class location is a statistically significant predictor of class consciousness in Japan, nevertheless it accounts for a very modest amount of the variance in our attitude scales in Japan (about 5%) – about half of the variance accounted for by class in the United States and less than a third of the figure for Sweden. Even when an array of other class-related experiences and conditions are added to the equation, the explained variance in the Japanese data remains quite small compared to the other two countries.

The patterns of ideological class formation in Japan also do not conform with standard Marxist expectations. While it is the case that the basic monotonic relationship between class location and consciousness postulated in the multidimensional exploitation hypothesis roughly holds for Japan, the variation in consciousness along the authority dimension is highly attenuated compared to either the United States or Sweden. Divisions along the dimension of skill (especially between experts and skilled employees) clearly have much deeper effects on consciousness in Japan than divisions along the dimension of managerial authority. As already noted, given that domination (and thus managerial authority) is more closely linked to capitalist exploitation than is expertise, Marxism would generally expect that proworking-class consciousness should not vary more sharply across categories of skill and expertise than across levels of managerial hierarchies. Sweden and the United States conform to this expectation; Japan does not.

*Reconstructions: direct and mediated class locations*

The results for Swedish and American married women in the study of class identity suggest that the relative weight of the sphere of production compared to the sphere of consumption in shaping class consciousness depends upon the nature of the class formations within which class experiences are generated and translated into subjectivity. In Sweden, as a result of the cohesiveness of the labor movement and its strength within production, "class" is formed collectively at the point of production itself. In the United States, class is highly disorganized and atomized at the point of production, and is formed as a collective category primarily within the sphere of consumption, especially in terms of standards of living and the character of residential neighborhoods. When politicians talk about a "middle-class tax cut" they mean "a middle-income tax cut." This difference between Sweden and the United States in the sites within which class is constructed, then, is translated into

different salience accorded production and consumption in the formation of class identities. The point of production thesis, therefore, is not wrong; it is simply underspecified. To the extent that class becomes collectively organized within production, class experiences and interests generated within production itself will more strongly shape class identity than will experiences and interests in the sphere of consumption; where class formations remain highly disorganized within production, the sphere of consumption will have greater weight in shaping class subjectivities.

*Reconstructions: class consciousness and class formation*

The main results for class consciousness and class formation which are somewhat anomalous for the traditional Marxist understanding of these issues come from Japan. As in other cases, it is always possible that the surprising results for Japan are simply artifacts of measurement problems. The survey instrument used in this project was designed and tested within a broadly Western European cultural context. While there are still potential problems in the comparability of the meaning of identically worded questions between countries such as the United States and Sweden due to the differences in their political cultures, we tried to minimize such problems in the selection and wording of questions. The Japanese research team was not part of that process, and in any event it is possible that the differences in cultural meanings between Japan and the other countries might have undermined any attempt at generating genuinely comparable questions. With a more suitable survey instrument, therefore, it might turn out that Japan was not so different from the United States and Sweden after all.

On the assumption that these results do not merely reflect measurement issues, they are consistent with the conventional image of Japanese society in which significant segments of the working class have high levels of loyalty to their firms and in which the social distance between managers and workers is relatively small. In terms of the Marxist understanding of class consciousness, this suggests that the concrete organizational context of class relations may have a bigger impact on the micro-relationship between individual's class locations and class consciousness than is usually suggested within Marxist class analysis. Capitalism may universally be characterized by processes of exploitation and domination, but firms can be organized in ways which significantly mute the subjective effects of these relations. These organizational contexts may

thus affect not merely the extent to which the class experiences and class interests of workers can be mobilized into collective action, but also the way these experiences and interests are transformed into identities and beliefs.

## 12.5 Class and other forms of oppression: class and gender

*Traditional understanding*

While there has always been some discussion within the Marxist tradition of the relationship between class and other forms of oppression, until recent decades this has not been given concentrated theoretical attention. Traditionally, Marxist discussions have emphasized two somewhat contradictory themes. On the one hand, there is the classical formulation by Marx that the development of capitalism will destroy all traditional, ascriptive forms of oppression which act as impediments to the expansion of the market. Racism and sexism erect barriers to the free movement of labor and thus block the functioning of fully commodified, competitive labor markets. Marx – along with many contemporary neoclassical economists – believed that the long-term tendency in capitalism is for these barriers to be destroyed.

On the other hand, many contemporary Marxists have downplayed the corrosive effects of the market on ascriptive oppressions, and instead have stressed the ways in which both racial and gender oppression are functional for reproducing capitalism, and therefore are likely to persist and perhaps even be strengthened with capitalist development. A variety of possible functional effects are then posed: racism divides the working class and thus stabilizes capitalist rule; racial oppression facilitates super-exploitation of specific categories of workers; gender oppression lowers the costs of labor power by providing for unpaid labor services in the home; gender oppression underwrites a sharp split between the public and private spheres of social life, which reinforces consumerist culture and other ideological forms supportive of capitalism.

Such functionalist accounts do not necessarily imply the absence of any autonomous causal mechanisms for gender and racial oppression, and they certainly do not logically imply that the best way to combat racism and sexism is simply to struggle against class oppression. The *existence* of specific forms of racism or sexism could be functionally explained by their beneficial effects for capitalism, yet the ultimate

*destruction* of these forms of oppression could require concentrated struggle directly against them and could be achieved in spite of their functionality for capitalism. Nevertheless, these kinds of arguments do imply an explanatory primacy to class and suggest that whatever autonomy racial and gender mechanisms might have is circumscribed by the functional imperatives of the class system.

More recent discussions have tended to reject such functionalist arguments and have stressed greater autonomy for nonclass forms of oppression. Nevertheless, there is still a general expectation by Marxists that class and nonclass forms of oppression will tend to reinforce each other. This generates two broad theses about the interconnection of class and other forms of oppression:

- 1 *Nonclass oppression translates into class oppression.* Marxists would generally expect that social groups that are significantly oppressed through nonclass mechanisms will tend to be especially exploited within class relations. This can either be because the nonclass oppression affects the access of groups to the resources which matter for class, or because of direct discriminatory mechanisms within class relations themselves. In either case, it would be predicted that nonclass oppressions will be translated into class oppressions so that women and racially oppressed groups should be overrepresented in the working class and underrepresented in the most privileged class locations.
- 2 *Class oppression translates into nonclass oppression.* "Oppression" is a variable, not a constant. While all capitalist societies may be exploitative, the degree of inequality generated by capitalist relations varies considerably across capitalisms. Similarly, both racial and gender oppressions vary considerably. One of the factors which shape such variation in the intensity of nonclass oppression, Marxists would argue, is the power and interests of exploiting classes. Nonclass oppression will be more intense to the extent that exploiting classes, on the one hand, are able to take advantage of nonclass oppressions to further their own interests, and, on the other, are able to block popular mobilizations which might effectively challenge these forms of nonclass oppression. This does not imply that nonclass oppressions are *created* by exploiting classes, but it does imply that exploiting classes have interests in perpetuating such oppressions and have the capacity to act on those interests. A class analysis of nonclass oppression, therefore, would generally predict that, at any given level of capitalist

*development, the more oppressive and exploitative are class relations within capitalism, the more oppressive these other forms of oppression will tend to be as well.*

### *Confirmations*

The results in our various explorations of class and gender distributions are broadly consistent with the expectations of the first thesis. In particular, in every country we examined, women in the labor force are universally much more proletarianized than are men. In general, roughly 50–60% of women in the labor force are in the working class, compared to only 35–45% of men. Similarly, in our analysis of gender and authority, significant gender inequality in authority was present in all of the countries we examined. This gender gap in authority was quite robust, being present for a variety of different measures of authority as well as in equations in which a wide range of individual, job and firm attributes were included as controls. Our brief exploration of race and class also indicates that blacks are significantly more proletarianized than whites, and black women – subjected to both racial and gender forms of oppression – are the most proletarianized of all race and gender categories. These results correspond to the general expectation that inequalities generated by nonclass forms of oppression will be reflected in class inequalities as well.

### *Surprises*

Two results run counter to broad Marxist expectations about the intersection of class and gender. Most striking, perhaps, are the results for the rank ordering of countries in the gender gap in authority. The thesis that class exploitation intensifies nonclass oppressions would lead to the prediction that the Scandinavian countries should have the smallest gender gap in authority. On every measure, the United States has considerably greater class inequality than Sweden and Norway, yet the gender gap in workplace authority is much smaller in the US than in these social democratic countries. These results run directly counter to the expectation in the second nonclass oppressions thesis above that gender inequalities will be greatest where class inequalities are greatest.

The results for the study of housework also run counter to Marxian expectations. While Marxist theory does not explicitly generate explanations of the *variations* in the sexual division of labor across households,

nevertheless, most Marxists would expect the class composition of households to have at least some effects on the amount of housework men do. Specifically, in classical Marxism the most homogeneously proletarianized households would be predicted to be the most egalitarian, whereas in contemporary neo-Marxism households in which the wife was in a relatively more privileged class location than her husband would be predicted to be the most egalitarian. Neither of these predictions are supported in either Sweden or the United States – husbands did little housework regardless of the class composition of the household.

### *Reconstructions*

The results for authority and housework reinforce the standard feminist thesis that gender relations are quite autonomous from class relations. While many Marxists acknowledge this thesis, nevertheless there remains an expectation that empirically class and gender inequalities will be closely tied to each other. While the specific issues we have been exploring here are fairly limited in scope, they indicate that these two forms of oppression can vary relatively independently of each other.

This does not imply that struggles for women's liberation do not confront obstacles generated by existing class relations. Demands for quality, inexpensive childcare, for example, may be constrained by the difficulty of democratic states raising taxes in the context of global capitalism; equal pay for equivalent work may be impeded by the labor market for credentialed labor, an important aspect of the skill/expert dimension of class relations; and fully degendered authority hierarchies may be undermined by the competitive pressures of corporate organizations. Nevertheless, the degree of independent variation of class and gender relations supports the general claim that the struggles over gender inequality may have more scope for success inside of capitalism than Marxists have usually been willing to acknowledge.

This book was written for two rather different audiences: non-Marxists who are skeptical about the fruitfulness of Marxism as a theoretical framework for pursuing systematic empirical research, and radicals who are skeptical about the fruitfulness of quantitative research as a strategy for pursuing class analysis.

To the first audience I wanted to show that Marxist class analysis could be carried out with the same level of empirical rigor as non-Marxist stratification research, and that it could generate sociologically interesting

empirical results. To accomplish this I faced three principal tasks. First, I had to clarify the core concepts of Marxist class analysis so that they could be deployed in quantitative empirical research. Second, I had to show that Marxist theory generated interesting questions which could be productively addressed using quantitative methods. And third, I had to operationalize the concepts in such a way as to generate answers to these questions. Much of this book has attempted to carry out these tasks.

To the left-wing audience, my central objective was not to affirm the importance of class analysis, but to show that knowledge within class analysis could be pursued using conventional quantitative research methods. Left-wing scholars, especially Marxists, are generally skeptical of quantitative analysis and have traditionally relied primarily on historical and qualitative methods in their empirical research. In part this skepticism is rooted in the substantive concerns of Marxism – social change and epochal transitions, transformative struggles, dynamic processes in the historically specific lived experiences of actors. Since these themes in the Marxist tradition are not easily amenable to precise measurement and quantitative treatment, Marxist scholars have understandably primarily engaged in qualitative research.

The traditional Marxist skepticism towards quantitative methods, however, goes beyond simply a judgment about the appropriate kinds of data needed to answer specific theoretical and empirical questions. It has also reflected a general hostility by many (although not all) Marxists to anything that smacked of “bourgeois social science.” The terms of this hostility are familiar to anyone who has engaged the Marxist tradition of scholarship: Marxism, it has been claimed, is dialectical, historical, materialist, antipositivist and holist, while bourgeois social science is undialectical, ahistorical, idealist, positivist and individualist. This litany of antinomies has frequently underwritten a blanket rejection of “bourgeois” research methods on the grounds that they were unredeemably tainted with these epistemological flaws.

One of the main objectives in this book has been to counter this current within Marxist thought by demonstrating that quantitative methods could illuminate certain important problems in class analysis. This objective is part of a larger project for reconstructing Marxist thought in which the distinctiveness of Marxism is seen as lying not in its “Method” or epistemology, but in the concepts it deploys, the questions it asks, and the answers it proposes. Here I have attempted to show that there are important problems of class analysis in which knowledge can usefully be generated with systematic quantitative research.

In pursuing this dual agenda of demonstrating the usefulness of class analysis to non-Marxists and the usefulness of quantitative analysis to Marxists and other radical scholars, we have examined a diverse set of substantive problems. Some of these, like the study of patterns of class formation, the transformation of the class structure, or the problem of the class location of married women in dual-earner households, are central to class analysis. Others, like the permeability of class boundaries to friendships or the relationship between class and housework, are somewhat more peripheral. For all of these topics, however, I believe that our knowledge of class analysis has been pushed forward in ways that would not have been possible without systematic quantitative investigation.

In some cases, this advance in knowledge has taken the form of confirming various expectations that were grounded in less systematic observations. In other cases, the new knowledge has emerged from surprises, from unexpected results. And, out of these unexpected results, new questions and unresolved problems have been posed for future empirical research and theoretical reconstruction.

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