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What Is Class?

Sociology has only one independent variable, class.

—ARTHUR STINCHCOMBE, 1973

Sociology's one independent variable is a chameleon which blends into virtually every sociological tradition. To some sociologists, *class* refers to categories of people occupying common positions within status hierarchies (Warner, 1949; Parsons, 1970; Williams, 1960). To others, classes are defined as conflict groups determined by their position within authority or power structures (Dahrendorf, 1959; Lenski, 1966). Sociologists within the Weberian tradition see classes as groups of people with common economic "life chances" (Weber, 1922; Giddens, 1973; Parkin, 1971). And Marxists have defined classes primarily

in terms of common structural positions within the social organization of production (Bukharin, 1921; Lenin, 1914).

As Stanislaw Ossowski (1963) has emphasized, these diverse interpretations of class do not simply reflect differing claims about the causes and consequences of a particular phenomenon; they also represent different claims about the way inequality should be conceptualized in the first place. The concept of class is not simply a contested concept; it is an essentially confused concept (see Plant, 1978). The debate is over the very object of investigation—what the concept of class denotes—and not simply over the formal definition of an agreed-upon subject.

This chapter will try to sort out the salient theoretical underpinnings of these differences in the definition of class. The purpose of the chapter is less to adjudicate between the competing definitions than it is to clarify rigorously the distinctiveness of the Marxist definition of class. The validation of such a Marxist concept of class must come through a demonstration of its capacity to reveal the underlying dynamics of social processes (i.e., to explain the world), and not simply through a conceptual argument. The empirical investigation of income inequality in the second half of this book will attempt to accomplish such a demonstration. For the moment, the task is simply to specify the difference between the meaning of *class* within Marxist theory and the various meanings adopted in other traditions of social science.

At the risk of some oversimplification, the diverse definitions of *class* can be analyzed in terms of three nested theoretical dimensions: (1) Whether class is fundamentally understood in gradational or in relational terms; (2) if class is understood in relational terms, whether the pivotal aspect of class relations is seen as located in the market or in production; (3) if class relations are primarily located within production, whether production is analyzed above all in terms of the technical division of labor, authority relations, or exploitation.¹ These three theoretical dimensions generate five basic types of definitions of class, as illustrated in Figure 1.1.

¹There are other reasonable ways to categorize definitions of class. Various sociologists have stressed the contrast between unidimensional and multidimensional perspectives on class and stratification (e.g., Lipset, 1968, p. 310), the distinction between realist and nominalist conceptions (e.g., Lenski, 1966, p. 23), the distinction between continuous and discontinuous gradations (e.g., Landecker, 1960), the distinction between classes defined at the superstructural level in terms of political or ideological relations or at the economic level (Wright, 1976a), or the distinction between structural, historicist, and economic conceptions of class (Poulantzas, 1973b, pp. 58–70). I have chosen to focus on these three dimensions because I believe that they are substantively the most important for grasping the relationship of Marxist understanding of class to non-Marxist approaches.

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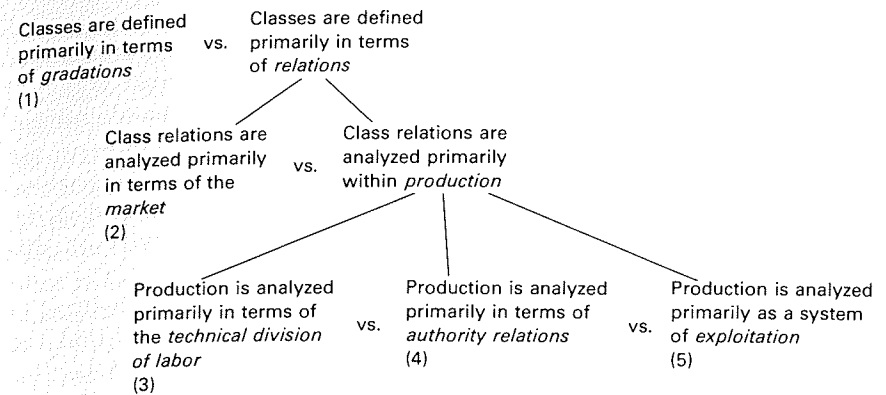


Figure 1.1. A typology of definitions of class.

GRADATIONAL VERSUS RELATIONAL THEORIES OF CLASS

The distinction between gradational and relational views of class is a familiar one in sociology. Using slightly different terms, Ossowski (1963) emphasized this distinction in his important study of conceptions of class structure. Theories of class, Ossowski argued, could be divided into those based on “ordering relations” (gradational views of class) and those based on “relations of dependence” (relational views). In the first interpretation, “the class division is conceived as a division into groups differentiated according to the degree in which they possess the characteristic which constitutes the criterion of division, as for instance income-level [p. 145].” In the second interpretation, on the other hand: “social classes form a system according to their one-sided or mutual dependence, dependence being understood in both cases as a dependence based on causal relations [p. 146].”

The hallmark of the gradational view is that classes are always characterized as being “above” or “below” other classes. The very names given to different classes reflect this quantitative, spatial image: upper class, upper middle class, middle class, lower middle class, lower class, and so forth. While there may be debates about the extent to which these divisions are purely conventional or real (the famous problem of continuous versus discontinuous gradations within systems of stratification), the basic conceptualization of classes remains the same: classes, in Barber’s (1957) words, are “divisional units within systems of social stratification [p. 73].”

Within contemporary sociology, there have been two basic versions of gradational conceptions of class: one defines class gradations primarily in terms of income, the other primarily in terms of social status. The former is undoubtedly the most common popular definition of class: poor people constitute a lower class; middle-income people constitute the middle class; and rich people constitute the upper class. Mayer and Buckley (1970) essentially adopt this view when they write: "In a class system, the social hierarchy is based primarily on differences in monetary wealth and income [p. 15]." Within such a conception, the shape of the class structure becomes virtually identical to the shape of the income distribution. The frequent claims that the United States is becoming a more or less homogeneous middle-class society moving from a "pyramid-shaped" to a "diamond-shaped" class structure usually adopt, at least implicitly, such a conception of class.

Most sociologists, even those working firmly with a gradational image of class, do not reduce the class structure to income differences. The most common gradational conception is that class distinctions reflect common positions within a status hierarchy. As Parsons (1970) writes, classes should be defined as "an aggregate of such units, individual and/or collective, that in their own estimation and those of others in the society occupy positions of approximately equal status [p. 24]." In somewhat simpler language, Williams (1960) also defines classes in status terms:

The distribution of privileges . . . begins to take on full sociological meaning only when it is related to *prestige rankings, social-interaction groupings and beliefs and values held in common*. We shall use the term "social class" to refer to an aggregate of individuals who occupy a broadly similar position in the scale of prestige. [p. 98]

In contrast to these gradational notions of class, relational conceptions define classes by their structured social relationship to other classes. Classes are not defined simply *relative* to other classes, but in a *social relation* to other classes. While classes may differ empirically along a variety of quantitative dimensions, the criteria for class are based on qualitative differences. Again, as in the gradational perspective, the very names of classes within relational views of class reflect this underlying definition. Classes are not labeled along a continuum from lower to upper; instead, they have names such as: capitalist class, working class; lord, serf; ruling class, subordinate class. In a gradational view of classes, lower classes are simply defined as having less of something that upper classes have more of—income, wealth, education, status—but within a relational view, the working class is

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defined by its qualitative location within a social relation that simultaneously defines the capitalist class. Within Weberian theory, for example, workers are understood as sellers of labor power, capitalists as buyers of labor power. The issue is not that workers have less of something than capitalists, but rather that they occupy a specific qualitative position within a social relationship which defines both the capitalist and the worker: the social relation of exchange on the labor market.

It could be argued that, at least implicitly, there is within gradational views of inequality a notion of social relations. After all, to argue that someone has "more" social status than someone else requires that both people agree on the relative rankings of status positions, and this implies that the two people exist within a social relation: the person in the lower status acknowledges the person in the higher status as having greater status, and vice versa. Even for a dimension of inequality as seemingly gradational as income, it can be argued that a person's income is lower only in relation to someone else's higher income; thus there is an implicit relational aspect of inequality within income gradations.

All concepts of inequality must, by definition, capture some aspect of relative position. The key issue is whether the operative criteria for class are based on the qualitative social relations which define such relative positions, or on the quantitative dimensions which are generated by such positions. Gradational perspectives all organize their definitions of class around these quantitative dimensions; relational views, in contrast, all attempt directly to map the social relations themselves.

At one level, it appears that the debate between relational and gradational conceptions of class is a purely semantic one, a disagreement about how the word *class* should be used. At a deeper level, however, as in many apparently semantic debates within social science, the disagreement over the use of a term reflects a more fundamental disagreement over how to study the world. Relational conceptions of class all insist, in one way or another, that the basic structures of inequality in a society are also structures of interests and thus the basis for collective social action. Social relations do not simply *define* classes, they also *determine* classes; classes as social forces are real consequences of social relations.

A class structure defined in gradational terms remains fundamentally a static taxonomy. Such definitions may provide a basis for descriptively labeling people in terms of the distribution of valued rewards, but they are incapable of designating the dynamic social forces

which determine and transform that distribution. To give just one simple example, it is hard to see how the French Revolution could be explained in terms of gradational schemes of class. While it might be the case that most of the participants in the storming of the Bastille had status scores of under 40, and most of the French aristocracy had scores above 70, such labels do not capture the underlying dynamics at work in the revolutionary process. The decisive actors in the revolution were people defined by their position within qualitative relations (nobles, peasants, merchant capitalists, professionals, petty bourgeois, and sans-culottes) not by their location on a simple, quantitative dimension.

All relational views of class, regardless how they conceive of those relations, see class structures as the potential basis for collective class struggle, class activity. Marx's distinction between a class-in-itself and a class-for-itself, Dahrendorf's definition of classes as conflict groups determined by authority relations, and Weber's conception of classes as the potential bases of communal action all attempt to link the analysis of class structure to a dynamic theory of class struggle. Gradational definitions of class are wholly inadequate to this task.

Knowing that a theory of class is based on a relational understanding of inequality, however, is only the starting point. A wide variety of social relations have laid claim to constituting the relational basis for classes: authority relations, occupational relations, market relations, social relations of production. It is, therefore, necessary to make theoretical distinctions among relational conceptions of class.

CLASSES DEFINED BY MARKET RELATIONS VERSUS PRODUCTION RELATIONS

In the theoretical debates over relational definitions of class, two spheres of social relations have vied for the role of constituting the foundation of the class structure: market relations and production relations. In the most general terms, market relations are defined by the relations of exchange between the sellers and buyers of various kinds of commodities. Production relations comprise the relations between actors within the production process itself.

The classic formulation of the market conception of class appears in a chapter in Weber's *Economy and Society* (1922) entitled, "The Distribution of Power in the Community: Class, Status and Party." Weber writes:

In our terminology, "classes" are not communities; they merely represent possible, and frequent, bases for communal action. We may speak of a "class"

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when (1) a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, in so far as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and (3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets. . . .

But always this is the generic connotation of the concept of class: that the kind of chance in the market is the decisive moment which presents a common condition for the individual's fate. "Class situation" is, in this sense, ultimately "market situation." [1968 ed., pp. 927-28]

One of the implications of this definition of class is that classes exist only in capitalist societies, that is, only in societies in which there is a genuine market for labor power and capital. While there may be conflict groups in other societies, they cannot, within Weber's formulation, be properly viewed as classes, since the structural basis of their life chances is not ultimately rooted in a market situation.

Weber's basic notion that classes are defined by capitalist exchange relations has been extended by recent theorists in a number of ways. Wiley (1967), for example, has argued that classes in American society are determined by three different, intersecting markets: the market for labor, the market for credit, and the market for commodities. These three markets define six classes: employers (capitalists) and workers, creditors and debtors, and sellers and consumers. The more these three dimensions of class (exchange relations) overlap, Wiley argues, the more intense class conflict is likely to be.

Giddens (1973) emphasizes Weber's argument that "market capacity" is defined not simply by the possession of capital or labor power, but also by the possession of market-relevant skills (see also Parkin, 1971, pp. 18-23).² Giddens defines market capacity as "all forms of relevant attributes which individuals may bring to the bargaining encounter [in the market; p. 103]." He then discusses the specific capacities which shape classes in capitalist society:

There are three sorts of market capacity which can be said to be normally of importance [in structuring classes]: ownership of property in the means of

²When market capacity is extended explicitly to include skills, then the market definitions of class may closely coincide with definitions based on occupational categories, since skill level is one of the basic ways in which occupations are differentiated within the technical division of labor. Frequently, in fact, when sociologists equate blue-collar workers with the working class and white-collar workers with the middle class, they are thinking of occupations in terms of market capacities more than technical conditions per se. Unfortunately, very few discussions of occupation and class attempt to provide a coherent theoretical rationale for the linkage of occupations to class categories, and thus it is often impossible to know exactly what substantive criteria underlie the analysis. For a sustained discussion of class and occupation, see Mok (1978) and Wright (1978b).

production; possession of educational or technical qualifications; and possession of manual labor power. In so far as it is the case that these tend to be tied to closed patterns of inter- and intragenerational mobility, this yields the foundation of a *basic three-class system* in capitalist society: an 'upper', 'middle', and 'lower' or 'working' class. [p. 107]

Giddens then extends Weber's analysis by trying to link the concept of classes defined by market capacities to an analysis of social relations within the production process itself. In particular, he elaborates a number of social processes which he labels as sources of "proximate structuration" of class relationships. Two of these directly tap aspects of relations of production: the division of labor within the enterprise and the authority relationships within the enterprise. Giddens argues that in capitalist society such "proximate structuration" overlaps with the patterns of market capacities and thus tends to reinforce class divisions defined by market relations.

However, in spite of this reformulation of Weber's conception of class, Giddens still sees the capitalist social organization of economic relations as fundamentally defined by exchange relations, and thus, like Weber, he sees classes as still fundamentally determined at the level of the market. As a result, class struggles are seen primarily as market struggles. Weber stresses that the distinctive class struggle within capitalist society is "wage disputes on the labor market [1968 ed., p. 131]" and Giddens emphasizes that "of predominant importance in sociological terms are the types of overt conflict which are linked to oppositions of interest entailed by differing forms of market capacity [1973, p. 135]." Struggles within the production process might reinforce such market-based conflicts, but the prime arena of class conflict is clearly outside of production itself.

In contrast to Weberian conceptions of class as market relations, a number of different theoretical traditions have argued that the heart of a class analysis must be located within the sphere of production. Although, as we will see below, there is little agreement among such perspectives about how production itself should be theorized, in all cases there is a recognition that the relational basis of social conflict, and thus of classes, should be sought in the structure of production rather than simply in the structure of exchange. In one way or another, each of these production-level theories argues that the location within production defines decisively the command over social resources and social action.

Within such theories, market relations may still be of theoretical interest, but that interest is derived from the relationship of markets to production. Generally speaking, this relationship is conceived in two

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ways. First, market relations are seen as important in helping us to understand how actual individuals are sorted into the production positions themselves. Although classes are defined in terms of the structure of positions in production, it is recognized that the structure of the sorting process may influence the ways in which classes become organized collectively. Secondly, markets are seen as one of the important arenas within which classes engage in struggles. Workers are, as Weber emphasized, sellers of a particular kind of commodity, labor power, and since capitalists attempt to buy that commodity for as little as possible, conflicts over wages become an intrinsic feature of capitalism. To say that conflicts take place within the market is not to say, however, that the actors in that struggle are fundamentally defined by market relations *per se*. In different ways, each of the production-level accounts of the class structure argues that such conflicts are themselves ultimately shaped by the structure of class relations within production.

CLASSES DEFINED BY THE TECHNICAL DIVISION OF LABOR VERSUS AUTHORITY RELATIONS VERSUS EXPLOITATION

In order to put real content on the claim that classes should be defined within production rather than within the market, it is necessary to understand what it is about the organization of production that forms the basis for the determination of class. Three different ways of understanding the structure of production relations have dominated the analysis of classes within production: production is defined primarily as a system of technical divisions of labor; production is analyzed above all as a system of authority relations; and, production, insofar as it determines classes, is seen fundamentally as a system of exploitation. Let us look at each of these in turn.

Classes and the Technical Division of Labor

Perhaps the most common of all definitions of class among sociologists is that based on categories of occupations: blue-collar occupations define the working class; white-collar occupations the middle class; and professional and managerial occupations the upper middle or upper classes (or sometimes even the "professional class"). The precise theoretical status of this occupational typology of classes is generally not very clear. Sometimes occupations are basically viewed

as status categories; in that case this conception should rightfully be seen as one variant of the gradational view of class. This is particularly true when occupation is scaled as an occupational status or prestige variable and then treated as a measure of class (or class background). In other situations, occupation is treated as a proxy for market capacity, and thus forms part of the definition of classes in terms of exchange relations (see below). But at least among some theorists, occupational categories are seen as defining classes by virtue of their location within the technical division of labor (or technical relations of production). Since, it is argued, in modern industrial society the technical relations of production determine the conditions of work, the command over resources, and the relative power and status of different positions in the social structure, and since occupations represent similar locations within the technical division of labor, occupations should be considered the structural basis for classes.

Probably the most important contemporary version of this conceptualization of class can be found in certain theories of "postindustrialism." Bell (1973), among others, has argued that in advanced stages of industrial development, experts of various sorts—scientists, engineers, certain categories of technicians—are gradually emerging as a new dominant class. Their position within the technical relations of production gives them a monopoly of scientific knowledge, which, Bell argues, enables them to control the key institutions of the postindustrial society. In a deliberately exaggerated manner, Bell describes the class structure of postindustrial societies as follows:

In the Scientific City of the future there are already foreshadowed three classes: the creative elite of scientists and the top professional administrator . . . ; the middle class of engineers and the professorate; and the proletariat of technicians, junior faculty and teaching assistants. [pp. 213-14]

Touraine's (1971) analysis of technocracy follows a similar logic, although Touraine tends to be somewhat closer to Ralf Dahrendorf in emphasizing the role of bureaucratic authority in the definition of class. In any event, for both Touraine and Bell, the role of experts and technocrats within the technical division of labor becomes the basis for defining them as a class in postindustrial society.

There are relatively few sustained theoretical reflections on the logic of linking class to positions within the technical division of labor. Perhaps the most influential theoretical rationale for this conception is found in the classic functionalist account of stratification by Davis and Moore (1945), although the authors do not systematically discuss class as such. Davis and Moore attempt to understand the structural basis for distributive inequality in terms of the "functional importance" of posi-

tions within the technical division of labor. The logic is that unequal rewards are needed to induce people to fill the functionally most important positions, and that the functional importance of positions is derived from the technical imperatives of production systems. With minimal extension, this can become an argument that the class structure is ultimately based on the functional imperatives of the technical organization of production.

Classes and Authority Relations

In authority definitions of class, the social content of class relations returns to the center of the stage. Classes are understood as based directly on a system of relations of domination and subordination, and while those relations may be shaped significantly by technical constraints, the classes themselves cannot be defined in terms of the technical division of labor.

More than any other sociologist, Dahrendorf (1959) has championed the conceptualization of class in terms of authority relations: "classes are social conflict groups the determinant (or *differentia specifica*) of which can be found in the participation in or exclusion from the exercise of authority within any imperatively coordinated association [p. 138]." Within such imperatively coordinated associations there are always two basic classes—command classes and obey classes. Since in the society at large people generally belong to more than one such association, it is likely that many people will occupy command positions in some associations and obey positions in others. The overall societal class structure, therefore, is likely to be a complex web of cross-cutting class cleavages based on intersecting structures of authority relations in different organizational settings.

Lenski adopts a similar position to Dahrendorf, although he tends to pursue a more eclectic usage of "class," including a variety of other dimensions besides authority. Lenski (1966) first defines class broadly as "an aggregation of persons in a society who stand in a similar position with respect to some form of power, privilege, or prestige [p. 75]." He then goes on to say that "if our goal is to answer the question 'who gets what and why?' . . . power classes must be our chief concern," where *power class* is defined as "an aggregation of persons in a society who stand in a similar position with respect to force or some specific form of institutionalized power."

Several general characteristics of authority definitions of class are worth noting. First, authority definitions of class tend to treat all organizations as conceptually equivalent. Dahrendorf in particular sees classes as being defined by authority relations in any imperatively

coordinated association, and provides no criteria for ordering those associations into those which are central to a class structure and those which are peripheral.³

Secondly, authority definitions of class tend to see authority itself as a unidimensional relation of domination/subordination within a given organization. No systematic theoretical distinctions are made concerning the object of authority. What matters is having authority or power; little is said about how it is used. Conceptions of class in terms of authority relations thus tend to emphasize the form of class relations over the content of those relations.

Finally, because of this formal character of the conception of class, authority definitions generally do not provide a sustained account of *why* social conflict should be structured around authority relations. Implicitly, one of two arguments is usually made. Either it is assumed that human beings somehow have an intrinsic drive for power for its own sake, and thus the division between the powerful and the powerless intrinsically constitutes the basis for social cleavage; or it is argued that power and authority enable the powerful to appropriate various kinds of resources, and that as a result the powerless will attempt to gain power for instrumental reasons. The evidence for the first of these assumptions is particularly weak. People may have an intrinsic drive to control their own lives, but there is little evidence that most people have a basic need or drive to control other people's lives. In any event, empirically most struggles over power are struggles over the use of power, not simply the fact of power. The second assumption is thus more plausible. But in order for it to provide a sound basis for an explanation of the relationship of authority to social conflict, it is necessary to develop a systematic theory of the relationship between authority and the appropriation of resources. Most discussions of authority lack such an account. This is precisely what the theory of exploitation is meant to accomplish.

Class and Exploitation

The hallmark of Marxist discussions of class is the emphasis on the concept of exploitation. In later chapters we will discuss exploitation

³Because of this it is perhaps inaccurate to consider Dahrendorf's theory of class as strictly a variety of production-level conceptions, since he explicitly rejects the notion that classes can be viewed as simply economic categories. Nevertheless, since his analysis is so bound up with a specific way of understanding the social organization of production (i.e., as a system of authority relations) it is useful to discuss his work in comparison with other more narrowly production-based theories of class.

in much greater depth; here it is sufficient to define it in very general terms. Exploitation within Marxist theory denotes a relation of domination within which the people in the dominant position are able to appropriate the surplus labor of people within the subordinate position. Such labor is generally appropriated in the form of products produced by that labor, and thus in many instances the expression "surplus product" is used as an equivalent to "surplus labor." Surplus labor or surplus product, in this context, refer to labor above and beyond that which is required simply to reproduce the individuals who perform that labor.⁴

Why is the capacity to appropriate surplus labor of such significance that it can be considered the core of the definition of class relations? Several reasons can be given. First, the capacity of a dominant class to control the surplus makes it possible for members of that class to consume without producing (or at least to consume far in excess of anything that they produce). The control over the surplus product, as we shall see in later discussions, is thus one critical basis for the distribution of income across classes. Secondly, the control over the surplus product gives the dominant class substantial social and political power beyond purely economic concerns, both because it provides material resources for political activity and because it shapes the economic framework within which social practices take place. Ultimately this implies that control over the social surplus product gives the dominant class the capacity to shape the direction of social change, social development. This is most obvious in the case of material development, since such development comes directly out of the use of the surplus (i.e., investments). But it is also true for political and cultural development, since the use of the social surplus directly and indirectly constrains their possible directions of development as well.

When class is understood in terms of relations of exploitation, the initial task of an analysis of class structure is to understand the social mechanisms by which surplus labor is appropriated. The Marxist theory of modes of production is designed to accomplish this task. Modes of production are differentiated fundamentally in terms of the central mechanisms through which dominant classes appropriate the surplus labor of subordinate classes. For example, in classical feudal societies this labor is appropriated through forced labor dues; in capitalist societies it is appropriated through the difference in the labor

⁴"Reproduction" in this context does not primarily refer to biological reproduction, but to the day-to-day reproduction of the capacity of individuals to work. This is usually referred to as the "reproduction of labor power" within Marxist discussions.

time embodied in the wages of workers and the labor time embodied in the products produced by workers. (The logic of this claim will be discussed more thoroughly in chapters 3 and 4.)⁵

Once such mechanisms of exploitation are adequately identified, then the analysis of class structure itself can begin. Lenin (1914) provides an extended definition of classes based on this conceptualization:

Classes are large groups of people which differ from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labour and, consequently, by the dimensions and method of acquiring the share of social wealth of which they dispose. Classes are groups of people one of which can appropriate the labour of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definite system of social economy. [1947 ed., p. 492]

The heart of an analysis of class structure, then, revolves around defining, for every class, the content of the "different places they occupy in a definite system of social economy."

Within such an account of class relations, a discussion of both the technical division of labor and the authority relations within production will also play a role. The technical division of labor enters the story since, as we will see in chapter 2, one of the critical aspects of the "places" within the system of social economy is their capacity or incapacity to control the technical organization of production. To say that workers do not "possess" their means of production in part at least means that they do not have the capacity to shape the basic contours of the technical division of labor itself.

Authority relations enter the account of class structures since within the capitalist mode of production the capacity to command labor (i.e., to tell workers what to do and be able to impose sanctions if they do not do it) is an essential requirement for being able to ensure that surplus labor is actually performed within production. A capitalist

⁵Because different class systems are seen as rooted in qualitatively different mechanisms of exploitation, Marxist theory cannot rest on a purely technological typology of macrohistorical development. Instead, history is understood as marked off by epochs stamped with different dominant modes of production. The names of different historical periods, therefore, are not such things as "agrarian society" or "industrial society," but feudalism, capitalism, socialism. In a sense, this distinction between typologies can be considered the macrostructural analogue to the gradational-relational conceptions of class structure. Typologies of society based on the technical organization of production can be viewed as gradational conceptions of whole societies; typologies based on modes of production, in contrast, reflect relational or qualitative views of the structure of societies.

may hire workers for eight hours, but unless the labor of those workers is controlled within the production process (i.e., unless they are subordinated within authority relations), there is no way of ensuring that they will perform anything near eight hours of actual labor.

Exploitation views of the class structure therefore incorporate both technical and authority definitions, but subordinate them to the dynamics of control over the surplus product. Classes, in these terms, are most pivotally defined by the relations of appropriation of the surplus product and secondarily defined by the relations of control over the technical division of labor and relations of authority.

This chapter has tried to establish the distinctive character of Marxist definitions of class. To recapitulate:

1. The Marxist concept of class defines classes in relational rather than gradational terms. Although classes do differ along various quantitative dimensions, the fundamental theoretical criteria for classes are based on an analysis of their qualitative location within social relations.

2. Within the Marxist concept of class, the central axis of class relations is located within the social organization of production rather than within the market.

3. Within the analysis of the social organization of production, Marxist theory roots the analysis of class relations in an examination of the process of exploitation rather than either the technical division of labor or authority relations (although both of these play a role in the theory as well).

Classes within Marxist theory, in short, are defined as *common positions within the social relations of production*, where production is analyzed above all as a system of exploitation.

As should be clear from the discussion of alternative definitions of class, the Marxist definition rests on a number of pivotal assumptions: in particular, that economic relations play a basic role in structuring (setting limits upon) other relations, and that within economic relations, the social relations of production structure both technical relations of production and social relations of exchange. If these assumptions are accepted, then the Marxist definition of class is very compelling; if they are not, then this definition has no privileged claim over other possible definitions.

There is, of course, no simple way of empirically "proving" these assumptions. While it is possible to establish their plausibility and to illustrate them by recourse to historical examples, it is hard to imagine

a critical social or historical "experiment" which would directly validate them to a skeptic. These assumptions thus constitute paradigmatic premises, to use Kuhn's (1970) formulation, and as such they are not subject to immediate validation or refutation. Instead, they should be judged on the basis of the coherence and power of the substantive theory of class relations which is built upon them. The central objective of this study is to take one particular theoretical problem, income determination, and demonstrate this coherence and power through a systematic empirical investigation.

Before we can do this, however, it is necessary to develop more rigorously the Marxist conception of class relations. Although the definition above may adequately differentiate the Marxist concept of class from other definitions, it is not yet precise enough to be used in empirical study. How should the specific social relations of production of capitalist society be defined? Once defined, how can they be operationalized for research purposes? What concrete criteria define the various positions within the social relations of production? These and other related questions will be discussed in the following chapter.

2

Classes in Advanced Capitalist Societies

We must of course not be surprised to find classes differing from each other along various lines: in production as well as in distribution, in politics, in psychology, in ideology. For all these things are interdependent; you cannot crown a proletarian tree with bourgeois twigs; this would be worse than placing a saddle on a cow. But this connection is determined, in the last analysis, by the position of the classes in the process of production. Therefore, we must define the classes according to a production criterion.

—BUKHARIN, *Historical Materialism*

The previous chapter focused on the differences between Marxist and other conceptions of class. In this chapter* we will look more deeply at the Marxist conception; in particular, I shall try to elaborate a

*Parts of this chapter have appeared in Erik O. Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State* (London: NLB, 1978), ch. 2.