

# **The Concept of Class**

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## PRELIMINARY REMARKS

These are times of most extraordinary inequalities. Extreme wealth and power is concentrated in the hands of capitalist organisations and individuals like Bill Gates, whose “net worth” of \$50 billion in 2009 was greater than the GDP of 140 countries (Blankfeld, 2009), while – according to the (now former) UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Jean Ziegler (Ziegler, 2007) – *36 million people* died from hunger and malnutrition in 2006 alone! This radical injustice magnifies the same fundamental, global capitalist class dynamics which operate in Britain.

The basic purpose of this paper will be to set forth a perspective which is capable of acknowledging and accounting for these class dynamics – the underlying relations of economic and social power in contemporary society. In the course of this discussion, I shall seek to demonstrate the superiority of a dialectical, non-orthodox, non-reductionist historical materialist perspective “focused on changes in the mode of production and their social relations as the generators of historical change” (Hobsbawm, 2010, 150). While acknowledging the potential utility of the currently more popular class or stratification approaches – particularly “neo-Weberian” and “Weberian Marxist” stratification schemes – for certain investigative purposes, I shall also assess their limitations from the general perspective I have just outlined.

In opposition to postmodernist authors such as Pakulski and Waters (1996), who claimed that the distribution of wealth was becoming progressively more egalitarian by the end of the twentieth century, various authors with a more classical position on class such as Westergaard (1996) have identified a very sharp increase in class inequalities in the last decades of the century. Furthermore, in contrast to mass media, mainstream politicians and fashionable “modernising“ theorists (Dahrendorf, 1959; Beck, 1992; Pakulski and Waters, 1996), who have propagated a view that the importance of class is declining, and (in Beck's case) that society is witnessing the individualisation of social and economic risk, Westergaard and others have argued that the importance of class inequalities for one's life chances is actually increasing.

Just as class inequalities were beginning to explode in the 1980s, resurgent capitalist ideology in the mass media and the academia began to expound opposite perspectives, with an unprecedented disregard for facts: “While rich and poor have grown further apart, both predominant ideology and social theory have set out to dismiss this; or to argue that it does not matter anyway. If we are to believe the commentators, politicians and academic theorists who have set this tone in the current debate, class inequality has lost social, moral and political force“ (Westergaard, 1996, 141). In reality, class relations and class locations most often crucially determine both individual life chances and the functioning of social institutions.

One definitional, conceptual point is particularly important for the future discussion. The clash between those who claim class is still important and those who claim it is decreasing in importance is sometimes actually a result of strongly differing definitions of what the term “class“ is supposed to denote. Although various fashionable newer theorists (Beck, 1992; Casey, 1995; Pakulski and Waters, 1996 etc.), as well as some post- and neo-Marxists – notably E.P. Thompson (Thompson, 1966) – analyse (or even define) "class" as essentially subjective identification and action, or deny that there is any validity in methodologies which distinguish between structure and action (Poulantzas, 1978), I agree with those who, after Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy* ([1847] 1955), distinguish between a “class in itself“, the objectively existing mass that is “already a class in opposition to capital“ (Marx, 1955, 195), and a class conscious, organised “class for itself“. This distinction between class membership vs. class awareness and class-based collective organisation, or (to put it differently) between structural “class determination“ and politico-ideological, subjective “class position“, also accepted by many non-Marxists including Max Weber (Giddens, 1973) and C.W. Mills (Mills, 1962), seems necessary if the objectivist, non-voluntarist approach to social theory is to be preserved.

This is, however, a theoretical and analytical model (ideal-type), which cannot comprehensively condense the complexities of concrete historical existence. Though Poulantzas appears to have somewhat overlooked the usefulness of the polemical bent inherent in the division between “Klasse an sich“ and “Klasse für sich“ (Marx [1847] 1955), dialectical thinkers who did not abandon this distinction could still concur with his understanding that “class powers (...) are constitutively tied to the political and ideological relations which (...) are not simply added on to the relations of production that are 'already there', but are themselves present in the form specific to each mode of production, in the constitution of the relations of production“ (Poulantzas, 1978, 21). It would certainly be wrong to consider the relationship between these two modes of viewing class as firmly separated in concrete life, let alone as uni-directional. Longer-term subjective class positioning significantly reverberates on processes of material class determination and reproduction, and *vice versa*. Yet although “class in itself“ and “class for itself“ intertwine and influence each other, there is often no linear correlation between changes in class consciousness and class-based organisation on the one side, and change in the objective structure of class positions on the other, as Poulantzas (1978) also notes. Class consciousness, organisation and action (patterns of ideology, behaviour, political affiliations etc.) are highly contingent, not necessarily a direct reflection of - or in direct correspondence with - the objective, material structure of class positions. The centrality of class relations in shaping social inequalities, or even the centrality of class in determining the main lines of long-term social antagonisms, do not automatically translate into overt and conscious conflict. Antagonistic class interests are woven into the very fabric of the economy and society, and their manifestations only under exceptional historical circumstances fundamentally break out of the established, regularised channels for communicating these interests.

The objectivist definition of the class structure, which is most sensibly based on the fundamental antagonisms stemming from the relations of production (broadly conceived to include not just production but also distribution and exchange), is commonly accused of reducing the complexity of social interests and contradictions to a single source. We shall see shortly that an emphasis on the most basic, structural economic cleavages does not at all preclude a serious examination of other inter-class tensions and gradations of interest. As far as the relationship between class and non-class lines of division (like ethnicity or gender) is concerned, “in practice the two twine together, to reinforce the effects of class rather than to go against them“ (Westergaard, 1996, 149). For instance, enormous differences in economic and social power persist among women depending on which class they belong to. In terms of more narrowly economic criteria, “disparities of pay and conditions of work are, by and large, as sharp among earning women as among earning men, according to the 'class' of work done. Opportunities for advancement and the risks of demotion differ at least as much among women as among men, according to the individual's level of work and point of origin in the class structure“ (Westergaard, 1996, 150). Of course, it is still often true that various other social formations and constructs like religion, gender, race, ethnicity etc. “not only blur the basic class divides but also generate their own divisions“ (Thrift and Williams, 1987, 7). The main point for my discussion here, however, is that these multiple social positions do not “cancel each other out“ (as implied, among many others, by Pakulski and Waters, 1996), but coexist and mutually interact. Anthias (2005) calls this “translocational positionality“; others use just the somewhat less grandiloquent term “intersectionality“ (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Moreover, it is important to establish how these different aspects of inequality function *within the general matrix* of class formation and social reproduction; “a reconstruction of the central core is necessary“ (Stewart, Prandy and Blackburn, 1980, 281).

## THE CENTRALITY OF CLASS ANTAGONISMS

This central core of class reproduction is still to be found in the relations of production. The historical materialist viewpoint still seems eminently reasonable: “It is sufficient to argue that the class structure constitutes the central mechanism by which various sorts of resources are appropriated and distributed, therefore determining the underlying capacities to act of various social actors. Class structures are the central determinant of social power“ (Wright, 1985, 32).

Exploitation (primarily through the expropriation of the fruits of surplus labour, or “surplus value” in Marx’s account) and domination (in the relations of production, distribution and exchange) are the source of antagonistic class interests; they are the causal link “between the wellbeing of one class and the deprivation of another“, giving the antagonism “an 'objective' character“ (Wright, 1985, 36). The antagonism between capitalists who are driven by the logic of capital accumulation and workers who are compelled to protect their livelihood is an inherent characteristic of the capitalist system. Class analysis – as I understand it - is differentiated from conventional stratification models (with their arbitrary and often abstruse gradational taxonomies, as I shall later show)

precisely by this relational approach, which (in its expanded form) encompasses the examination of class positions and interactions within the relations of production, distribution and exchange. In a class society, these fundamental socio-economic relations are characterised by objective antagonisms.

In John Roemer's game theory approach to adjudicating on the existence of exploitation, actors S are exploited if they could retreat to an alternative game in which they would be better off than presently, while S' (the exploiters) would be worse off under this alternative, and S is dominated by S' by being prevented from withdrawing to an alternative game (Roemer, 1984). In his account of class exploitation, Wright adopts these criteria (he calls it "the inverse interdependent welfare principle"), but also adds the "exclusion principle", defined as "the asymmetrical exclusion of the exploited from access to and control over certain important productive resources", and the "appropriation principle", defined as "the appropriation of the fruits of labour of the exploited by those who control the relevant productive resources" (Wright, 1997, 10). This definition seems reasonable and hard to challenge, not least because he avoids the controversies surrounding the labour theory of value by extending the concept of exploitation to the "appropriation of the fruits of labour" (after Cohen, 1988) in the sense wider than the "surplus value" which labour theory of value attributes exclusively to "labour effort" (Wright, 1997).

Roemer's method of testing whether exploitation could be said to exist will also prove stimulating in our subsequent consideration of antagonisms between the "working" and "middle" classes. Even Weberian class theory, although it fails to acknowledge the central role of exploitation in structuring class interests, firmly recognises a certain commonality of material class interests, which it situates in shared "life chances". Nonetheless, its limited gradational approach lacks in explanatory power with regards to the root causes of distributional and relational inequalities. Economic and social inequalities aren't just a result of different abilities, effort or chance – they are *fundamentally* a result of (more or less concealed) structural coercion and exploitation, as we shall subsequently demonstrate. One of the central functions of class analysis must be to illustrate this essential fact.

Although Marx's historical materialist theory postulates that class relations are grounded in relations of production, Antonio Gramsci and various other neo-Marxists refined and transcended the original base-superstructure model by placing emphasis on the relative autonomy of non-economic factors, and even the structural Marxist Louis Althusser identified that economic relations might not be dominant, even if they are determinant in the last instance (Larrain, 2003). Various non-Marxists like Max Weber also understood the active influence of non-economic factors such as culture in social processes, including class formation. In particular, grand historical narratives based on simply "decyphering" the influence of (abstractly isolated) material factors have rightly gone out of fashion. This isn't the embracement of the postmodernist "incredulity towards meta-narratives" (Lyotard, 1984, xxiv) *en general*, since dialectical thought has the ability to preserve an understanding of totality along with the heterogeneity of relevant social factors. However, it would be

wrong to conflate the analytical separation of material, ideological and other agential factors with a vulgar materialist theory. To the extent relevant for this work, I shall use this interpretative approach in order to retain a certain methodological elegance and expositional clarity. In Wright et al.'s words, “specific definitions and elaborations of the concept of class (...) are shaped by the diverse kinds of question class is thought to answer“ (Wright et al., 2005, 180). Of course, although agency and structure are dialectically intertwined, an analytical separation for research purposes is possible (Archer, 1982 and 1996). For Crompton (2008, 68-69), “it is not possible to identify particular schemes which are 'right' or 'wrong'; rather, different schemes are more or less appropriate for particular tasks“. This eclectic tolerance seems a bit much (it can serve as an all-too-easy escape from the need for theoretical consistence and coherence), though it is true that several existing class schemes might be appropriate depending on the particular application in question.

### MY LINE OF INQUIRY

In addition to the already mentioned conceptual conflicts about class which largely stem from disparate terminological or analytical conventions (the substantive structure-agency debate has largely been surpassed by serious analysts through the adoption of greater theoretical dialecticity), another major line of division in approaches to class analysis revolves around the level and direction of concrete sociological inquiries. It is here that some of the biggest methodological inadequacies still go unnoticed. In particular, short-range, mid-range and long-range investigative class models (be they empirical, theoretical, or both) are commonly muddled up according to the conventional preoccupations of the mainstream debate. For example, plenty of vulgar materialist - and even more sophisticated neo-Marxist - writing (e.g. Westergaard's or Wright's class schemes) tends to invest the Marxian objectivist “class in itself” model with a non-existent clear and immediate predictive meaning, since this is a concern that the contemporary sociological debate on class has consistently favoured, even though this integration of mid-range and long-range levels is not necessarily in the spirit of Marx's approach (especially in his mature and non-propagandist works), let alone in the spirit of leading modern Marxists like Gramsci. Marxian conceptualisation of material “class structure”, at least in its most lucid and intellectually cogent form, is a long-range theory which aims to cast light only on the most fundamental, abstracted structural social relationships, and on the broad lines of historical development. It does not preclude the use of a variety of other methodologies – including those seemingly “non-materialist” – in the course of concrete empirical inquiry, and particularly in the detection of immediate predictive social variables for the level of everyday life. However, I shall later also demonstrate the robustness of the historical materialist approach in empirically and theoretically understanding the underlying class basis of the various institutional frameworks (legal, political etc.), as well as – in a more attenuated manner – its relevance for wider social and cultural dynamics.

Let us first explore the common ground of this perspective with Weberian-inspired class or stratification schemes. It might be hard to find serious social scientists who would

entirely dismiss David Lockwood's now almost "classical" typology of "class situation" – work situation, market situation and status situation (Lockwood, 1958) – though some would, after Weber, distinguish "status groups" from "social classes" (Wright et al., 2005), and I shall soon also sharply qualify my broad support for including these elements in the examination of concrete class dynamics. Runciman's stratification model (1990) based on differences in ownership, control and marketability is also broadly plausible in its enumeration of variables relevant for social power dynamics (conventionally subsumed under the contentious term "class structure"). Similarly, Bourdieu's renowned account of economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) points to the multi-causal sources of social "class" power, which are rather difficult to theoretically isolate from each other in a credible manner. It is doubtless that "no class, when analysing concrete society, can ever be defined only on the economic level: its economic level (...) is, however, a necessary although not a sufficient step" (Carchedi, 1977, 45). This is largely why sociology has been moving away from the more constricted, overly economic interpretations of class formations (Bottero, 2005). Class-based social formations emerge through numerous mediations, and the factors enumerated by Lockwood and others are all relevant to this work. Along with the majority of modern researchers and theorists, including neo-Marxists and neo-Weberians, I recognise that both the production-based and the market-based perspective contain essential truths, and an intelligent synthesis of both approaches seems to offer the most fruitful results for a wide range of empirical investigations (though in some cases only a few carefully selected variables can offer relatively efficient predictive results, as evidenced by the Cambridge Scale – see for instance the CAMSIS website). Therefore my subsequent analysis of social strata, and of the ideological and political implications of class, will employ a broader perspective which will encompass not just the narrowly defined sphere of work, but also market- and even status-based factors.

What, then, is the watershed at which our paths diverge? Unlike existing neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian "class schemes", which uncritically operate under the highly dubious assumption that the theoretical, enumerative empirical and immediate predictive class schemes are supposed to be identical, I shall separate these diverse viewpoints on class in my analysis in order to avoid both the dilution of my broad theoretical points, as well as to avoid the overbearing influence of the ideal-type theoretical model on the complex empirical reality and prognostic indicators. I shall firstly look at the crucial class relations, as they are embodied in the relations of production and the social division of labour. This will allow me to identify certain major divisions and antagonisms stemming from the relations of production and the social division of labour (transcending the orthodox materialist two-class model in so doing by critically drawing on the innovative perspectives of Carchedi, Roemer, Stewart, Blackburn and Prandy, Wright etc.). Establishing this basic lens or vantage point enables one to apply an analysis of the influence of occupational inequalities, inequalities in marketable assets and in access to other sources of social and political power on class formation to an integrated theoretical and empirical outlook which can synthesise factors of the social and technical division of labour, labour process and

labour market analysis, as well as an analysis of other institutionally and culturally constructed social hierarchies.

In addition to greater theoretical clarity, a focused emphasis on the salient theoretical points, an added advantage of this methodical multi-tiered approach is that – unlike most research which tries to force together theoretical and short-term predictive criteria for the sake of convenient “one-size-catch-all” schemes – my approach discards false pretensions that a materialist theory grounded in the social relations of production can (in a non-mediated form) consistently serve as a precise predictor of immediate social phenomena, by the same token as it rejects the assumption that a complex agglomeration of work, market (and in some approaches status) elements can do justice to the goal of comprehending and keeping sight on the roots of fundamental (objective) class antagonisms.

As Giddens noticed in what is also the foundation of my critique of neo-Weberian and neo-Marxist class schemes, the approach which bases class categories on the variable market-based individual resources and capabilities includes the possibility of constructing “as many classes as there are concrete individuals participating in market relationships” (Giddens, 1973, 78), leading to possibly innumerable, under-theorised, *ad hoc* divisions. Variables concerning the character of the work experience entail a similar flaw as far as constructing class schemes is concerned (considering that differences in work conditions exist along a continuum), as illustrated in the critique made by the architects of the Cambridge Scale (which I shall briefly discuss later).

Neo-Weberian class approaches also generally seek to locate individuals in a relatively static class structure, failing to discern underlying class relations (Smith and Willmott, 1996). In particular, they fail to fully grasp that the market is a field of socio-economic interaction on which the antagonistic class relationships are both manifested and reproduced: “Skill is not a given individual capacity which endows a subject with power (...) Skill is a product of social power (...) In Weberian theory exchange is a relationship of equality which functions to create inequalities, only because individuals bring differential capacities to the relationship, while Marxian theory attempts to explain why exchange is unequal” (Johnson, 1980, 345). This is also a good place to bring attention to the sensible critique made by Blackburn and Mann (1979) against the vulgar Marxist and Weberian tendency to draw a sharp theoretical line between relations of production and relations of exchange. The capitalist production process is finalised through the process of exchange, the realisation of profit. Furthermore, in a dialectical sense, these relations of production are embedded in the capitalist market (and *vice versa*) – the market can be viewed both as a “superstructure” and a part of the “base”, to use the older, reductionist terminology. Institutions and processes of production and exchange are closely interwoven. Still, Marx’s analytical and partially conceptual distinction between market and production relations (Marx, [1867] 1976) carries some validity, and has for instance displayed its utility in the analysis of the persistence of “capital relations” in state socialist or state capitalist regimes (for more on the concept of “capital relations” see Mészáros, 1995).



These general criticisms extend to the Goldthorpe et al. influential scheme (Goldthorpe et al., 1980), whose limitations additionally include an untenable concept of the “service class“ (which shall be discussed below), the failure to acknowledge the domineering class function of the managerial occupations, and perhaps the even more problematic failure to account for the fundamental differences between higher-level professionals, top managers and large capitalists (Wright, 2000).

## THE CAPITALIST CLASS

I shall start my analysis here by stating that the basic “classical” criteria for defining the capitalist class – ownership of the means of social production and the employment of wage labour (Engels, [1888] 1967) in order to make profits through the extraction and appropriation of surplus value - seem essentially correct.

Although capitalists share the material interest in maintaining a system which ensures their superiority in the allocation of resources and authority, it would be very mistaken to perceive this class as internally homogenous and entirely harmonious. In fact, it is typically riddled by more or less overt antagonisms, despite their fundamental commonalities. These include intra- and inter-firm antagonisms, some of which are mentioned below.

1)

The antagonisms of material interest on the company level (inter-firm competition, including competition between clusters of subsidiary companies, corporate webs, economic branches etc.) can be classified into three main areas of tension and conflict:

- a) General competitive market positioning between companies, which is a rivalry inherent to their underlying profit-seeking motive (or “the bottom line“ in informal managerial parlance). This general type of rivalry has been intensified over the recent decades by technological and organisational innovations, as well as by spatial and financial “fixes“, but has also been offset by oligopolistic and monopolistic tendencies.
- b) This general market competition results in one of the basic lines of interest differentiation between capitalists (and the institutions they own and control) which originates from differences in their size, economic and political power. The basic typology according to their “levels of concentration” (Therborn, 1978, 157) divides firms into monopoly and non-monopoly capital.
- c) Antagonistic interests and competition between different economic sectors, and the capitalists which embody these economic branches. These main sectors include manufacturing, commercial and financial capital. As far as capitalist class locations are concerned, they include top managers (executive capitalists), financial capitalists

(who often hold multiple directorships), rentier capitalists (whose capitalist location stems from their extensive savings and investments) and entrepreneurial capitalists (who own shares in companies which they personally control) (Scott, 1997). Despite their ultimate dominance over other economic actors, shareholders and financial capitalists are essentially marginal and external “to the actual process of production” (Scott, 1991, 20).

Despite certain tensions within various fractions of the capitalist class, links are still maintained between them through various social ties and interest-based alliances. Processes of integration between different economic branches have broken down some of the previous divisions which had set them firmly apart. This has particularly been the case in the recent decades since the rise of financialisation which has enveloped many new economic sectors, as well as due to the corporate strategies of investment diversification, both of which could also partially be analysed as specific ways of responding to inter-capitalist antagonisms.

2)

a) Intra-firm antagonisms conceived as rivalry between company affiliates, which typically takes place due to the core company's ability to relocate specific project contracts and production in general according to the costs and type of labour it requires (Ladipo and Wilkinson, 2002).

b) Intra-firm antagonisms between different capitalist corporate actors. I won't deal here with the usual competition between individuals which characterises so much of the typical corporate atmosphere, but will elaborate on the structural distinction between legal owners and operative, managerial capitalists.

A wide range of authors (Marx, [1865-7] 1972); Renner, [1904] 1949; Veblen, 1924; Berle and Means, 1933; Burnham, 1945; Galbraith, 1972) argued that the development of the (modern) joint stock company, starting in the 19th century, led to a separation of ownership and control. Berle and Means (1933) predicted that the ownership of shares would become increasingly dispersed as large business operations began to require the pooling of capital on the scale which individual capitalists were unable to follow.

James Burnham (1945) even proclaimed the advent of a “managerial revolution“, and held that a new managerial ruling class was developing, basing its power on organisational skills and technical knowledge. His argument was taken up and expanded by Enteman (1993) who, along with Galbraith (1972) before him, claimed that managerial power dominated the decision-making process in corporations, governments and other social institutions. In common with many other reductionist conceptions, there is a degree of truth in managerialism. It is correct in arguing that managerial know-how has become an indispensable resource to large, complex and bureaucratised organisational systems with somewhat diluted ownership structures, thus elevating the material and status position of managers to unprecedented heights, and placing them at the centre of operational decision-making processes. Yet, principally, managerialism fails to prove that managers have indeed

displaced the capitalist class, replacing the rule of elite individuals by the rule of (by some accounts, e.g. Bell, 1961; Galbraith, 1972) increasingly classless, meritocratic organisations. This argument, which went as far as to prophesy the decline of the profit logic and the rise of fiduciary, “trust” capitalism in some versions (Drucker, 1951; Berle, 1960; Galbraith, 1977), conveniently sought to locate managers as the increasingly neutral intermediaries between capital and labour, overlooking the relatively intact sources of decision-making power in modern economy, and its inherent logic. Through training and monitoring, managers are (regardless of their backgrounds) generally socialised into a role of “responsible discretion” (Smith and Willmott, 1996). They depend on large shareholders for future capital and endorsement of key policies (Scott, 1997). Where all this proves insufficient, the force of the law clarifies their position: “No amount of performance of the function of direction confers on the manager the capacity to alienate or appropriate the means of production in question, or even the right to continue to exercise the function of direction” (Cutler et al., 1977, 305). Yet it seems doubtless that the boards of directors largely direct company policies in many cases, and that top managers do wield a significant degree of power within enterprises, especially in cases where a significant dispersal of share ownership leaves a certain power vacuum within the company. Hence in most cases “control through a constellation of interests” (Scott, 1997, 48) increasingly appears to be the best general approximation to a realistic perspective on decision-making in large corporations. This is compounded by recent tendencies of rising executive compensations and especially share options, concentration of decision-making power by managing directors and a partial interest dealignment between shareholders and executives (Blackburn, 2006).

Furthermore, the managerialist assumptions of Berle and Means didn’t predict, and later adherents of the theory failed to take account of, the growing importance of institutional forms of capital ownership and control since the second part of the 20th century, which has largely “depersonalised” capital ownership (Scott, 1997). Consequently, share ownership has actually become more concentrated (rather than diluted, as Berle and Means assumed would happen). Although the number of individual-owned shares increased, the proportion of UK shares owned by individuals and families fell from 65.8 per cent to 17.7 per cent between 1957 and 1993 (despite Thatcherite share buy-out policies and propaganda about “popular capitalism”), and institutional shareholding grew accordingly (Scott, 1997; Stearns and Mizruchi, 2005), particularly by insurance and pension funds (Lash and Urry, 1994). The rise of institutional shareholding has, according to some (Useem, 1993; Useem, 1996; Davis and Thompson, 1994), steered large corporations in the direction of shareholder-oriented management. Moreover, Davis and Thompson (1994) note that in early 1990s shareholders acquired the authority to vote on the “golden parachute” pay packages of corporate executives, to seek more information on the executives’ pay, as well as the creation of shareholder consulting and advisory boards. Useem and Gottlieb (1990) describe related changes in managerial behaviour and policies as a result of pressure from institutional investors, such as the expansion of performance-based salaries, contracting out of headquarters’ management and staff, decentralisation of decision-making

authority to operating business units etc. The rise of managerial bonuses, which strengthen the profit incentive and encourage speculation to the detriment of use value and wider public or social interests, has further integrated top layers of corporate management with the capitalist class, partially breaking the barrier between corporate profitability and the managerial wages of superintendence (though a certain “basic” market price for managerial labour remains). In a way, the alignment of corporate executives with institutional shareholders might produce a stabilising effect for large corporations by increasing coordination and control, and it apparently tends to include greater research and development spending (Jarrell et al., 1985; Baysinger et al., 1991) - which may appear counter-intuitive considering the differing demands of dividend pay-outs and capitalisation - as well as lower levels of debt (Chaganti and Damanpur, 1991).

Yet, despite the massive increase in institutional ownership, one or more individuals (often a family) may in some cases conceal their controlling interest through holding companies, secretly owned affiliates or nominally independent component firms (Granovetter, in Smelser and Swedberg, 2005). In some cases, it would actually appear that an “anonymisation” rather than depersonalisation of ownership has occurred. In any case, the emphasis by Cutler et al. (1977) that institutionalised corporate practices and mechanisms are irreducible to the will of individual corporate actors (be they managers or shareholders), while formally correct and in some cases overwhelmingly true, implausibly generalises against the importance of individual action. In common with many overly structuralist and functionalist narratives, this argument fails to take account of the objective socio-economic context within which individuals function - without reducing their subjectivities to naught.

It is possible to criticise the categorisation which includes managers (especially those without significant “stock options”) into the capitalist class on the grounds that they still often remain ultimately responsible to (large) shareholders. It seems, however, more productive to conceive of their relationships as power balancing *within* the economic elite, considering the presence of substantial managerial counter-power which often in practice seems to assure their (stable or contingent) decision-making dominance over shareholders, and considering the fact that legal owners and managers unequivocally share the underlying profit-making interests: “Growth, sales, technical efficiency, a strong competitive position are at once inseparable managerial goals and the determinants of high corporate profits – which, in turn, are the determinants of high managerial income and status“ (Zeitlin, 1989, 79). Moreover, top managers are not only very richly rewarded, but often also legally own private capital, which they frequently amass through stock options, privileged access to inside information, exceptional social capital etc.

Poulantzas, Hegedüs and Wright distinguished between juridical ownership and effective “possession” (control over the operation of the means of production and of the labour process) (Poulantzas, 1975; Hegedüs, 1976; Wright, 1985) by managers. Pahl and Winkler, on the other hand, distinguished between strategic control and managerial “operational control” (1974, 15). Some also argue that managers take part in the

exploitation of workers on account of their “ownership of capital assets“ and their “control of organisational assets“ (Wright, 1985, 283), while Carchedi talks about the “function of capital” which managerial layers perform (Carchedi, 1977). Top managers could thus be said to constitute a part of the capitalist class in so far as they have effective possession over capital, or perform “the function of capital”, direct the labour process and are able to hire and fire: “in practical terms it is management itself which effectively has the capacity to transfer rights to control organization assets from one person to another, and this could be considered one crucial aspect of having a property right in the asset itself” (Wright, 1985, 81).

## THE WORKING CLASS

If, instead of trying to dogmatically stretch the concept of the “working class” as an immediate predictor of other social phenomena such as ideology, patterns of social interaction and conflict, we first circumscribe the concept to the underlying structural relations of material power (which, I have argued, remains the most salient methodological perspective for assessing fundamental social cleavages and long-term structural constraints on the dynamics of social consciousness and action), then the “classical”, fairly straightforward Marxian interpretation of the concept is still essentially valid. The “working class” denotes the great majority of the population which is expropriated from the essential means of production, distribution and exchange, has no supervisory function and is forced (through impersonal market forces) to sell its labour power to capitalists. Workers have to sell their labour power for a price lower than the overall value of the fruits of their labour. However, as I shall soon explain, concrete circumstances in certain cases dilute this straightforward ideal-type.

As indicated earlier when discussing basic parameters of class analysis, I also consider market, status and wider work situations to be relevant for determining concrete class experiences and even class positions in a broader sense. At the moment, however, I shall restrict my analysis of these factors to their relevance (or lack thereof) for the first level of class determination, which encompasses the social (rather than merely technical) relations of production and the social division of labour (including the functional relationship of employees to capital).

How to determine where the boundaries of what can sensibly be called “the working class” end and the “middle class” or “classes” begin? The ambiguities regarding the class location of occupational categories generally tend to centre on “white-collar” occupations, which are popularly considered to belong to the “middle class”, although “non-manual” occupations (of service, administrative, professional and managerial varieties) exhibit greater levels of income inequality (Lloyd et al., 2008) and greater differences in work conditions and status than do (skilled and unskilled) manual occupations. These approaches therefore abandon “Weberian” criteria and opt out for more popular stratification models,

not to mention their failure to devise non-arbitrary responses to the boundary problem in class categorisations.

My approach here, centred on the location in the relations of production, enables one to examine these controversies regarding the class locations of employees from a less arbitrary and *ad hoc* vantage point, considering the clearer (although not always unambiguous) boundaries with regards to individual's relationship towards the ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange and control over the central economic relations. Yet, there are certain erroneous theories stemming from an apparently similar "objectivist" viewpoint, which we must first evaluate.

The most off the mark of all the main theorists in this broad tradition is perhaps Poulantzas who, in a strangely dogmatic fashion, distinguishes between "productive", manual primary and secondary sector jobs and "unproductive" service sector jobs, constricting the membership in the working class only to those who perform "productive labour" (among certain other conditions), since he takes surplus value as the necessary criterion for the existence of "real" exploitation, and holds that surplus value can only be produced by "productive" labourers, which he narrowly defines as those directly engaged in "material production" (Poulantzas, 1978). For Poulantzas, quite bizarrely, all those engaging in "mental" wage labour automatically constitute the "new petty bourgeoisie" (along with those engaged in subaltern supervision), simply by virtue of (as the argument goes) objectively and subjectively "internalising" and "concentrating" the relations of ideological and material domination over manual workers (Poulantzas, 1978, 273). However, though he attempts to situate his theory within the bounds of Marxist canon, Marx's thoughts on this matter differed quite significantly. He explicitly considered labour to be productive if it produced "use values", but held that these "use values" didn't have to entail material products (Marx, 1976). "As the co-operative character of the labour-process becomes more and more marked, so, as a necessary consequence, does our notion of productive labour, and of its agent the productive labourer, become extended. In order to labour productively, it is no longer necessary for you to do manual work yourself; enough, if you are an organ of the collective labourer, and perform one of its subordinate functions" (Marx, 1976, 508-509). Furthermore, as he pointed out, non-industrial fields of economic activity also affect and contribute to material production, and are essential for the realisation of profit. Profit – which is the central goal of the capitalist mode of production - is produced in various spheres of capitalist economic activity, and all wage employees whose central work task is to ensure this new value for the capitalist can be considered to belong to the working class, at least from the basic perspective which I set out in the beginning of this section. "Non-manual" workers are therefore also exploited – as well as dominated within the labour process and the wider social division of labour – thus sharing the same basic antagonism and the same basic class interests with "manual" workers. Besides, Marx actually referred to the "commercial proletariat" (Cottrell, 1984), even though he excluded – somewhat imprecisely, as Cottrell (1984) shows - the labour of circulation from the production of "use value" (which, as I already mentioned, he considered to be the sole criterion for the existence of "productive labour"), giving a certain credence to Colliot-Thélène's (1975)

doubt whether Marx even considered the division between “productive” and “unproductive” labour as being relevant to the issue of class determination. And, after all, “productive” and “unproductive” work, especially when considered in the narrow-minded Poulantzian fashion, are frequently just two “dimensions” of work inherent in the same occupation (Wright, 1976). Not to mention some senseless conclusions intrinsic to Poulantzas’ classification, e.g. that women are far more prevalent in the “new petty bourgeoisie” than are men, considering the gendered structure of employment.

Erik Olin Wright (1976), on the other hand, identifies “contradictory class locations”. For Wright, these contradictory locations originally included managerial layers, who hold powers of “economic possession” over the means of production and the labour power and process, but have limited or no access to “economic ownership”; secondly, supervisors, who share much of the working class situation but have partial control over the labour power of others; thirdly, “semi-autonomous employees” who have limited control over their own labour process; and lastly, small employers, “whose control over the labour power of others is minimal” (Cottrell, 1984, 75). While I would agree with the way he positions three of these layers in the class structure, in his characterisation of “semi-autonomous employees” he collapsed two analytically distinct sets of criteria into an *ad hoc*, theoretically strained amalgam of materialist, production-oriented (“Marxian”) and market and ideology-based (“Weberian”) outlooks, and used a typically Weberian, arbitrary approach to categorisations regarding “non-autonomous” and “semi-autonomous” employees (since no exact boundaries are possible here: are truck drivers “middle class” because they have a certain autonomy in choosing which road to take?). Wright has, however, later accounted for skilled non-supervisory employees by switching from autonomy to the ownership of “skill assets” (skill- and credential-based privilege) as a basis of their supposed contradictory class location (1985), in addition to formulating the concept of “control over organisation assets” as a more materialist counterpart to Roemer’s “status exploitation” (Roemer, 1984). As far as “skill exploitation” is concerned, he bases his argument on the assumption that the holders of credentials “have artificially restricted the availability of certain skills” (Meiksins, 1989, 176), thus managing to extract an exploitative “monopoly rent” component in their wages. However, as Meiksins (*ibid.*) pointed out, Wright failed to provide evidence for his claim that the holders of credentials are getting paid above the “real” value of their product (let alone to prove that all workers with credentials exploit those without them), or to give proof which could defeat the counter-claim that the skills of credentialed employees make them more productive. Instead, he radicalised his argument by extending skill exploitation to the natural advantage stemming from “genetic lottery” which allows higher productivity (Wright, 1989, 193). This approach detracts from the truly relational understanding of exploitation (extending the designation of “skill exploitation” even to those workers who do not control their own credentialisation, or do not credentialise their occupations for non-professional, self-serving motives), and would, if consistently applied, lead to such nonsense as to claim that an opera singer is a “skill exploiter” on account of her genetic advantage. In his challenge to Wright’s theory, Meiksins (1989) also noted the possibility that credentials might at times actually prevent

capitalist attempts to drastically cheapen the price of labour, thereby giving some protection to credentialed employees against the capitalist “race to the bottom” in wages and conditions. On the other hand, Edwards (1979) and others have pointed out that it is easier to manage a workforce divided by different skills and credentials, while Larson (1977) explored the individualistic and anti-egalitarian implications of “credentialist” ideology. As far as his concept of “skill exploitation” is concerned, Wright (1989) established that it can only exist provided skill is a scarce resource which enables certain individuals to extract additional income due to that scarcity.

In effect, through identifying the extraction of a skill-based and organisation-based “rent”, Wright is trying to give a Marxist account of the closure strategies used by professional and skilled workers, as well as by supervisors and managers, to strengthen their position on the labour market, which had already been analysed by “Weberians” like Parkin (1979), among others. However, he has made a welcome modification of his position by suggesting that what “this relative vagueness in the link between skill exploitation and class relations may imply is that the expert-versus-nonexpert distinction should perhaps be treated as a form of *stratification* within classes rather than a class relation itself. This could, for example, define a type of class *fraction* within particular classes“ (Wrights, 1989, 22-23).

This distinction between the concepts of *class* and *strata* is also relevant when assessing Goldthorpe’s concept of the “service class”, a similar attempt to combine production-based and market-based criteria, which mistakenly conflates working class professionals and self-employed individuals (“free professions” like lawyers, doctors and consultants), failing to account for the fundamental production-based differences in their position through an oversimplified argument about the “trust”- and autonomy-based “service contract”, which supposedly puts them in an altogether different class from employees in “ordinary”, “wage contracts” (Goldthorpe et al., 1980). In reality, as Wright (1989, 333) later noted, these semi-autonomous professional employees actually belong to a more privileged stratum of the working class; different strata can be distinguished by “varying *degrees* of exploitation within a common location in the social relations of production. Strata within the bourgeoisie, accordingly, depend upon the amount of surplus they appropriate (...)“. Still, as I have already explained, performance of labour or capital functions also largely determines individual class locations and market- and status-based “class” or “stratification” hierarchies which often have the greatest impact on the individual’s consciousness and behaviour.

Additionally, some occupations entail inherent class trajectories (class mobility) which place them in an ambiguous position. One aspect of contradictory class locations and dynamics is the possibility that employees in the same or very similar occupations are actually “at different stages of diverse careers“ (Stewart, Prandy and Blackburn, 1980, 278). Different class trajectories or class biographies might structure individual class interests in significantly different ways, as the case of upwardly mobile employees most clearly illustrates (Stewart, Prandy and Blackburn, 1980; Wright, 1985). The temporal dimension or



“class trajectory” of some professional workers – in the sense of an ordered career promotion ladder - places them closer to the supervisory and lower and middle managerial contradictory class locations, i.e. “the middle class” (Wright, 1989).

The most lucid categorisation of the “middle class” in the Marxian tradition was made by Carchedi (1977), who distinguishes the “middle class” from the “working class” on the basis of a separation – consistently made at the level of the relations of production - between the “function of labour”, which is the only function ordinary workers have access to, and the “function of capital”, which supervisory (“middle class”) wage-workers perform, although they don’t own the means of production and do not control the extended reproduction of capital, therefore experiencing exploitation as well. This “capital function” consists of organising the exploitation of others (which objectively pits supervisors against workers’ interests to a degree) without really contributing to the labour process itself. However, this might be only one dimension of the work activity of supervisors, who in the course of their job frequently also perform tasks closer to the productive function of job coordination. Determining what degree of capital functions is necessary in order to warrant positioning an employee in the “middle class” is therefore likely to be a contentious matter. Armstrong et al. (1986) usefully suggest that the primary determinant of the class position of supervisors is how their class interests are attached to their job tasks. From the perspective I have taken, it would seem most constructive to restrict the use of the (non-petit bourgeois) “middle class” category only to those whose basic job description or job benchmarks focus on the execution of the function of capital, since this option is at least founded on the goal of reaching a less arbitrary conceptualisation, and can help avoid the trivialisation of the “middle class” category (which often happens through the inclusion in the “middle class” of all the employees who, for instance by virtue of their seniority, can be said to possess certain basic supervisory entitlements, although these constitute a relatively marginal aspect of their work load, both quantitatively and in terms of the importance of these activities to managers who monitor their job performance). An additional point to bear in mind here is that, as Marx illustrated in his famous reference to the orchestra conductor (Marx, 1976, 644), “work of coordination and unity” of the labour process need not imply “work of supervision and management” in the capitalist sense (to use Carchedi’s phrases). Similarly, although draughtsmen, planning engineers and programmers are undoubtedly positioned higher than ordinary manual workers on any serious *stratification* scale (considering their higher skills, higher income and better work conditions, participation in the conceptual side of production, higher status etc.), they cannot be considered to belong to a higher *class* by the criteria used here, since these higher-end technical workers “act in a cooperative way towards manual workers (...) [,] they are not concerned with monitoring the intensity of manual labour, they do not control that labour, but are rather chiefly concerned with the craft aim of ensuring the quality of the finished product” (Smith, 1986, 90). This analysis could also be extended to plenty of professional “white collar” work as well. Of course, concrete analyses of the complex and changing reality of work are needed.

This overview points in the way of conclusion that the large majority of UK employees belongs to the working class, notwithstanding “the infinite fragmentation of

interest and rank into which the division of social labour splits labourers as well as capitalists“ (Marx in McLellan, 2004, 545).

## THE MIDDLE CLASSES

Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* ([1848] 1967) seemed to have believed there is a tendency towards an increasingly two-class social structure. However, Marx was too astute an analyst of social reality not to identify various other strata in the *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* ([1852] 1967), a concrete analysis of a class society in motion. After all, according to Marx, social division of labour divided his three main classes (workers, capitalists and landowners) into an “infinite fragmentation of interest and rank“ (Marx, 1972, 886). Speaking about a plurality of interests within the “working class”, Dahrendorf (1959, 51) rightly wrote that “in modern industry, “the worker” has become precisely the kind of abstraction which Marx quite justly resented so much. (...) Demands of the skilled for security may injure the semiskilled; wage claims of the semiskilled may raise objections by the skilled; and any interest on the part of the unskilled is bound to set their more highly skilled fellow workmen worrying about differentials”. People belonging to the middle classes also tend to assume various contradictory class locations.

One significant debate concerning the ambiguities of membership in the “middle class” has to do with differences between supervisory vs. higher, properly managerial functions (the latter belonging more to what is commonly dubbed the “upper class” in my analysis). Although some Marxist authors such as Carchedi (1977) and Cottrell (1984) usefully define the non-owning “middle class” through its performance of the “function of capital”, their rejection of the division made by Poulantzas (and others) between juridical ownership and “effective possession” (in the sense of control over the operation of the means of production and of the labour process) also discards a useful tool for differentiating between higher managerial layers who quantitatively and qualitatively differ in the performance of the “function of capital” from the supervisory and administrative “middle class” – precisely by virtue of their managerial prerogatives regarding the operation of business, i.e. by virtue of their “effective possession”.

Other major intermediate class locations are those usually known as the “traditional middle class”, like individuals engaged in autonomous self-employment (as opposed to the more proletarian self-employed, such as ordinary builders, who are forced to discard their autonomy as soon as they enter a job contract) and owners of small-scale businesses, either individually- or family-run, or with minimal exploitation of other people’s labour power. There is also a segment of the salaried employee population which owns significant capital assets (in addition to the relatively asset-rich but economically inactive segment of the “middle class” population, e.g. some landlords). The existence of pension schemes, unit trusts etc. complicates the issue still further. However, my relational approach puts light on the persisting paradigm of hierarchical class dynamics. Instead of embodying “popular

capitalism”, let alone economic democracy, existing pension schemes tend to reflect the familiar patterns of democratic disempowerment and alienation, in favour of unaccountable fund managers (Blackburn, 2006).

### CLOSING REMARKS

At this point, I briefly reiterate why the use of a dialectical, historical materialist analytical lens seems more appropriate as a backdrop in the examination of various work-, market-, status-based and other stratification factors than the adoption of any particular conventional class scheme. Although the analysis of social attitudes and their class correlates is not directly relevant for my current approach, this is also a good place to note some advantages of the Cambridge Scale over the conventional “neo-Marxist” and “neo-Weberian” stratification schemes.

I have already pointed to some of the serious theoretical limitations of Goldthorpe's stratification scheme, which has served as the prototype for the official governmental statistical socio-economic categories (SECs), including the scheme devised by Rose and O'Reilly (1997). One of the essential methodological problems (in common with Wright's scheme, I would add along with Bergman and Joye, 2001) is the relatively arbitrary nature of “class” categories based on a hierarchy of occupational positions which do not actually cluster into discontinuous, clearly demarcated groups (Prandy and Blackburn, 1997; Blackburn, 1998). These “class” categories are of dubious theoretical value, especially since they are gradational rather than relational (on this point see also Bradley, 2014). Moreover, the artificiality of this typology is reinforced by the artificial nature of primary classifications such as promotion opportunities, levels of autonomy and job security, which are in fact continuous variables (Prandy and Blackburn, 1997). As Prandy (1998) emphasised in his critique of the Rose and O'Reilly scheme, “in this particular case we are actually dealing with a (secondary) classification of a set of (primary) classifications, because the data being used to (attempt to) construct the classes are responses to a set of items, usually reduced to dichotomies, about features of the employment contract”.

Instead of employing such an unpalatable *mélange* of arbitrarily devised categories in the exploration of class correlates, I am therefore more inclined towards the Cambridge continuous scale (now CAMSIS), initiated by Stewart, Prandy and Blackburn (1980) on the basis of patterns of sociability (i.e. marriage and friendship patterns). In addition to the already mentioned arguments, an added advantage of the Cambridge Scale is that, rather ambitiously, it doesn't simply equate individuals with their occupations and current jobs (Stewart, Prandy and Blackburn, 1980). Instead it seeks to integrate the economic system with the broad social context with which it is co-determinate, though it of necessity restricts this aim to the general indices of social life as expressed in the patterns of friendship and familial relationships (this model might also constitute the best approach to the economically inactive - people with long-term or permanent disabilities, the students, the unemployed, the homemakers, the retirees etc.). Finally, the class continuum approach

allows researchers to distinguish medium- and long-range investigative models in a way made impossible by the confusing and not very firmly based theoretical ambitions of the more fashionable Goldthorpe and (less overtly) ONS-SEC schemes.

Of course, it is necessary to bear in mind that it is not just the nature of the topic, but also the kinds of evidence available that should determine one's approach to various aspects of class analysis. My perspective does not exclude the possibility that more conventional stratification schemes have their valuable uses. Nonetheless, Dorling (2014, 455) is certainly right to point out that we seem to be "returning to a gilded age where family wealth matters more", and that class categorisations based on occupational hierarchies do not reflect the complexity of "the market in people, property and prestige". Wealth and market relations are, however, still (in the last instance and on a certain level of abstraction) derivatives of a class order based on a dispossessed mass of workers and the ruling class which expropriates the workers and appropriates the fruits of their labour. This remains the crucial relationship of the capitalist system and is therefore, in my opinion, a solid basis for a lucid relational conceptualisation of the class structure. Inquiries which seek to illumine secondary class relationships, or to develop better predictive indicators of various social processes, are likely to find more use for other perspectives which incorporate additional intervening social variables.

My analytical approach here, however, concentrates on the recent historical continuity and mutation of the dominant mode of production and its attendant institutional pillars in Britain, for this is the perspective which provides the greatest theoretical and empirical clarity about the underlying relations of class domination and servility in the British economic and political order. These are the essential structural bases of class inequality and class power.

Unlike the non-dogmatic historical materialist perspective which I have defended, the more conventional stratification schemes are not particularly suited to the aim of grasping the central relationships of the capitalist society. My approach is also a *plaidoyer* for the practice of distinguishing between different levels and forms of "class" analysis. In particular, I argue against the essentially unchallenged conflation of the concept of class as a structural indicator of social power and inequality and more narrowly instrumentalist categories focused on the detection of immediate predictive social variables.

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