

Is class 'dead' in modern Britain?

INTRODUCTION – DEFINITION OF CLASS AND ITS SUPPOSED DEATH

From a common-sense point of view, few people when questioned about 'class' in Britain would suggest that it no longer exists. In the British Social Attitudes Survey of 1996, two-thirds of respondents agreed that 'there is one law for the rich and one for the poor' while 87% believed that 'the gap between those with high and low incomes is too large'. Yet many scholars have argued that, in its strictest sense, class in Britain is now 'dead', and some have even argued that it is 'dead' in any theoretical sense. I will argue that class is very much alive in both its 'strong' and 'weak' forms, and that class analysis still has a useful role to play.

Any assessment of the 'death of class' must start with definitions both of class itself, and of what exactly people are suggesting when they claim it is 'dead'. Traditionally, class analysis has been split into 'strong' and 'weak' forms. 'Strong' class analysis, associated initially with Marx, adopts a holistic approach: class is, or was, a causal factor in historical change and the overall organisation of society. In this view, a class is defined as a group 'in itself' (as an objective social cleavage) and 'for itself' (as a socio-economic group with a collective identity and common political action). Such views generally tend to focus on the ownership of productive capital as the determinant of class. 'Weak' class theories on the other hand, largely influenced by the work of Weber, are principally positional, focusing on empirically identifying groups with certain other characteristics in common. They tend to focus not just on ownership of capital but also control, and on individuals' 'market capacity' – their saleable skills in the labour market.

It is important to separate two related but different points contained within the 'death of class' argument. One suggests that modern Britain is 'classless' – in other words, any given person's chance of success in society is no longer determined by their social class, as defined by either of the views above. The other point suggests that 'class' is no longer useful as an analytical concept. Both of these views contain serious flaws.

MYTHS OF CLASSLESSNESS

Saunders (1990) is critical of the 'socialist-feminist orthodoxy' rooted in the Marxist approach to class. He argues that class analysis is wedded to the old notion of structured social inequalities generated by the property relations of capitalism, and emphasises instead the trickle-down effects of increased income among the rich, increased social mobility allowing people to overcome their disadvantages from birth, and the absence of a dominant capitalist class, which widespread share

ownership has fragmented 'into millions of tiny pieces'. However, Saunders has been criticised for ignoring the evidence of researchers such as Scott (1991), which suggests that a dominant class representing the interests of transnational capital shapes the fortunes of all those small shareholders. There is also the problem that the National Child Development Survey finds deep class differences at age 11; children of parents in its top two social classes average 50.6% in a general ability test, compared to 40.2% from the remaining classes.

Any suggestions that this is caused by genetic inheritance of intelligence are deeply implausible. A notably lopsided class concentration of intelligence could not have occurred in the two to three generations over which intelligence came to play a largely separate role from inherited class in the market for jobs and sexual partners. Such arguments are also pessimistic; Marris cites research on how intensive education programmes in the USA have raised the IQ of low-IQ children by huge amounts, sufficient to reduce school drop-out rates by a factor of five. This may be reflected in the academic success of British independent schools. Finally Saunders' argument is simply counter to common sense – one cannot be oblivious to class differences between schools in recruitment and learning.

A number of 'new' myths of classlessness have appeared. The 'citizenship' argument, championed by TH Marshall (1981) points out the freedom of choice of individuals as consumers and political beings, making class largely redundant. 'Post-industrialism' arguments are associated with the decline in manufacturing and agriculture in favour of services, and point out that theoretical knowledge, not private capital formation, is the axial principle of society. Related post-Fordist theories, such as that of Piore and Sabel (1984) point out that there has been an increase in semi-skilled workers (including many women) working on a non-contractual basis, and that the working class are no longer a fully-employed, coherent social group. Finally, post-modernist thinkers such as Lyotard (1984) suggest that social class is less important as the modern social structure is so complex and fragmented on the lines of age, gender, ethnicity and culture. Personal identities are pluralised and constructed on the basis of individual choice (through consumption) rather than traditional location (through production).

Few of these theories have much support from empirical class analysis. They have a tendency to treat speculative assertions on the future of all societies as established fact, and fail to rival the objective findings of rigorously conducted sociological research into class.

THE 'WEAK' VERSION OF CLASS ANALYSIS

FACTS OF STRATIFICATION

That serious stratification exists in Britain is an undisputable fact. In 1991 the DSS considered 13.5 million residents to be below the poverty line (up from 5 million in 1979). Runciman (1990) talks of stratification in terms of 'economic power', based on ownership (shareholding, trust holding and partnership), control (the contractual right to manage capital and/or labour) and marketability (the material value of one's skills and capacities). According to Runciman, the working class are those who

'lack ownership of any property other than minimal personal possessions, lack control over anything other than their own persons and who lack marketability of anything other than their labour to which there attaches no premium of any kind'

Any such stratification is not disappearing – far from it. Between 1979 and 1990, the top 10% of the income distribution gained over 60% in real income (after housing costs), while the bottom 10% of the distribution actually *lost* 6%.

IS THIS VERSION OF 'CLASS' SIMPLY ABOUT OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE?

Some have suggested that we should not use 'class' to describe the underlying continuum of positions in 'weak' versions of class, but instead describe people as being within a certain 'income level' or 'socio-economic grouping'. The counter-argument is that the use of 'class' *can* be justified as occupation is a major source of variation in authority, function, conditions and reward. However, problems with this usage of 'class' remain, particularly as very distinct groupings exist (such as those of Wright and Goldthorpe) and because it is difficult to link these positional statistical correlations to the distribution and control of capital.

OTHER ASPECTS OF STRATIFICATION

In assessing social divisions, occupational structure is clearly part of the story, but also clearly not all of it. Firstly, it does not deal effectively with the long-term unemployed, full-time housewives, the homeless or poor pensioners. It is hard to see how they constitute a coherent 'class'. Lydia Morris argues that the formation of this large 'underclass' requires a more subtle understanding of labour market processes than either formal measurement or theories of 'class formation' can provide by themselves.

Feminist theorists have criticised empirical class analysts such as Goldthorpe for ignoring or dismissing gender, and deciding 'class' on the basis of the occupation of the male in a household. Goldthorpe reluctantly revised his model to a 'head of household' system, focusing on the family member bringing in the most income whatever their gender, but problems still remain. The most radical critics claim that gender is a more important determinant of social inequality than occupation, claiming that the first class conflict was, and still is, between men and women, with men exploiting the women who provide for them domestic and sexual services. Many more critics believe that women within households simply do not enjoy the same access to resources as the (generally male) breadwinner.

Others focus on ethnicity as an important factor in determining one's life chances. They claim that the elite remains virtually impregnable to non-whites, and that the social and economic record of ethnic minorities is so divergent that it is difficult to fit them in to a 'white' class system based on occupational structure. The 1987 general election produced the first Asian MP since 1929 and the first Afro-Caribbean MP ever. In 1997, only 6 out of 651 MPs were black or Asian. Labour engaged in controversial positive discrimination over the selection of female MPs, but pointedly refrained from doing the same for ethnic minorities. In the current legal elite, there is not a single non-white judge in the nation's top three courts, and in the ascendant elite, ethnic minorities make up only 12 out of around 1000 QCs at the Bar.

WHAT DOES 'WEAK' CLASS ANALYSIS STILL OFFER?

These criticisms strongly suggest that a class is not simply a layer of stratification based on occupation. The 'classes' of Goldthorpe and his ilk are not communities, simply aggregate statistical groups. Classes are based on social relations and identities, not just economics. It is clear that some kind of synthesis of 'strong' and 'weak' versions of class is needed, and this is what will now be (ambitiously!) attempted.

BUILDING A 'STRONG' THEORY OF CLASS

INTRODUCTION

As a result of many of these criticisms and others, there has been a tendency in neo-Marxist theoretical writing from the 1960s onwards to abandon the rigidly deterministic causal linkage between the economic organisation of society, collective culture and political action. This has given the impression (unintentionally) of a shift towards 'weak' analysis. However, the stimulus given to empirical research by this has been influential in strengthening theories of class. In

particular Erik Olin Wright has treated Marxism as a scientific hypothesis which must be tested empirically. This positivist approach provides a precise analytical framework for such vague terms as 'capitalists', 'proletariat' and 'petit bourgeoisie'. The concept of 'exploitation' has undergone a radical revision using elements of rational choice theory, normally a tool of the New Right. This does mean that 'class' has been redefined in a quite catholic fashion in order to unite all class theorists in its defence. Lee believes that a 'strong' theory simply means that class is a property of social relationships per se, and is not reducible to the situations and actions of individuals.

Much of the defence of the 'strong' class theories rests on the twin ideas of closure and reproduction. Social closure is a Weberian term for the actions of groups who restrict entry and exclude benefit to those outside the group in order to maximise their own advantage. Class reproduction is the concept that, over time, groups of people reproduce their social structures and patterns.

THE WORKING CLASS

It has been suggested that the working class have a strong sense of community through a common experience of adversity and subordination. However this must be taken with a pinch of salt, as there has been a tendency to extrapolate community studies of, for example, miners and steelworkers to the working class as a whole. Strong boundaries such as the restrictive practices of unions are designed to favour particular occupational groups rather than the working class as a whole. However there is still a certain degree of 'closure' between the working class and the long-term unemployed; the unemployed do not necessarily act as a 'reserve army of labour' bidding down prices, due to the acquired skills and networks of 'insiders' and the consequences for motivation of making a current employee redundant.

The crucial element in working-class reproduction is low 'cultural capital' leading to educational disadvantage and poor job prospects. Working-class children tend to perform less well than middle-class ones, even in the same schools, as academic success is often an extension of non-school family experience, culture and tradition. Disadvantage and discouragement at school 'pushes' many working-class children to leave at age 16, and this is combined with the 'pull' of the labour market that provides pay and 'adult' status. Willis (1977) argues that working-class children escape the constraints of school as soon as possible, and quickly run into the constraints of their subordinate position in the labour market. The National Child Development Survey shows that nearly 50% of those with parents in the bottom fifth of the income distribution ended

up in this category themselves, and 16-year-old males with unemployed fathers were twice as likely as those with employed fathers to end up unemployed themselves before the age of 33.

THE MIDDLE CLASS

Urry claims that classes exert 'causal powers' which allow them to bring about social change and create structures which serve the interests of their members. He has focused in particular on the 'service class' segment of the middle class, who he claims have expanded the state (in particular welfare and universities) in order to serve their own interests. Managers have acted in a similar way, adopting Taylorist practices to take control away from their employees. The middle class have both material advantages (such as higher pay, more secure employment and less dangerous working conditions) and cultural advantages (derived from higher levels of education and training, especially among professionals, managers and administrators). Social closure for the middle class is no longer as secure as it once was, as the massive growth in office work has required recruitment from a much wider pool than just middle-class offspring. However it has been suggested that such jobs have now become 'proletarianised', and that middle-class recruitment to the traditional professions through networks remains as strong as ever.

As for reproduction, educational success is now a more important means than ever for delivering middle-class jobs. Initially this may seem to suggest a more meritocratic system, whereby children from working-class backgrounds can, through educational success, experience upward social mobility. While this may be true to some extent, middle-class children do tend to be educated in schools with much higher levels of teaching, which may even exacerbate the problem. Adonis points out that, since the abolition of grammar schools, 'comprehensive schools have largely replaced selection by ability with selection by class and house price'. The same author claims that

'middle-class children now go to middle-class comprehensives, while working-class children are mostly left to fester in the inner city comprehensives their parents cannot afford to move away from.'

THE RULING CLASS AND THE RISE OF THE 'SUPERCLASS'

The ruling class can be split into three overlapping groups, the 'upper circle' or aristocratic status group, the 'establishment' or governing elite, and the 'power bloc' of commercial and financial interests. Empirical studies suggest that the 'upper circle' has declined in influence, and displays of aristocratic behaviour such as the presentation of debutantes at Court are either vanishing or becoming less visible. It is widely believed that the 'establishment' in its old sense of a cohesive governmental class is more fragmented than it has been in the past; entry to the Foreign Office

no longer requires an education at Eton (though it still helps). However, the 'power bloc' are as powerful as ever, maintaining a tight hold on the economy and (indirectly) on the government. The capitalist class is not, as Marx suggested, made up mainly of owner-industrialists, but of those with control over finance (City professionals) and large corporations (top managers).

Adonis defines these private sector professionals as a 'superclass' who are increasingly distant from the rest of society and entirely dominant in the interconnected global economy. Bottomore and Bryn (1989) claim that this class still enjoy privileged access to networks of power that have generally defended the wealth on which they depend. Carroll and Lewis claim that international capitalists

“operate within transnational circuits of capital and they thereby can be expected to manifest less and less of a connection to ‘national priorities’.”

Private schools offer a means of class reproduction far greater than even the middle-class comprehensives mentioned above. Adonis states

“The entire basis of privilege has changed. Money and upbringing are no longer enough; effort, education and exams – the ‘three Es’ of modern meritocracy – are the new order, and the prime job of private schools is to convert money into meritocratic success.”

In other countries as well, there is some segregation in education – in the USA with its private schools and Ivy League, in Japan with private tutors, and in Europe with the status and support of parents. What makes England distinctive is the degree to which the school system segregates the privileged from the rest. Money matters when it counts most – between 5 and 18 years old – and the nearly free universities are “largely a state subsidy and reward for those who have paid their way to get there”. Few members of the elite have a close personal interest in the success of state schools.

A consequence of the new emphasis on meritocracy is that those who fail may be seen to fail due to their own lack of intelligence or initiative, not through the circumstances of their birth. Educational credentialism and 'cultural capital' tend to reinforce class boundaries. Brown and Scase (1991) claim that

“Inequalities, privileges and disadvantages are now more likely to be viewed as the outcome of individual actions rather than of structurally-determined economic and political forces”

George Walden puts this in even stronger terms:

“[Classlessness] is not freedom from social caste...but class consciousness erected into a system more rigorous, intrusive and unforgiving than any that has gone before”

CONCLUSION

Lee claims that money is the ultimate collective representation of our time, almost religious in its nature. It is a form of power, both Weber's 'weak' power (the 'ability to realise one's will against the resistance of others') and Durkheim's 'strong' power (the general power of social relations over actors). In order to develop a solid theory of class applicable to the 20th century we need to reject both Marx and Weber themselves.

Marx saw capital as only being accumulated via the appropriation of surplus value in 'production'. This is a problem for the 20th century, with its interpenetration of state and industry, growth of a 'non-productive' middle class of administrators or managers, and the increasing power of finance with its speculation and takeovers. It is clear that the status of belonging to the 'capitalist class' does not simply come through production.

Weber believed that class inequality was associated with economic 'life-chances' and that money is a mere symbol of 'real' economic relations. Lee counters that money is *the* collective representation of 'economic society', and as such we do not need to look beyond money for a 'strong' theory of social class. He claims that strong and weak approaches can

“share a common view of class as pecuniary classification based on relationship to existing means of capital accumulation.”

It may be fair to say that social 'caste' is dead, or rapidly dying, in Britain; aristocratic birth is no longer a guarantee of economic success, and birth into a traditional working-class family is no guarantee of failure. 'Working-class culture' is no longer as cohesive as it once was, and the 'upper circle' are less obviously separate from the rest of society. It is no longer as simple as it once was to pick out someone's 'class' by, for example, clothing or accent.

Yet to say that 'class is dead' is to grossly misrepresent the current situation. A 'superclass' of private sector professionals are increasingly cut off from the mainstream by their private consumption of goods otherwise provided by the state (education, health and pensions in particular). Both they and the large 'middle classes' reproduce themselves through educational advantage over the poor. While the strictest Marxist definitions of class are no longer appropriate, 'class analysis' still has much to offer beyond a system of stratification based on occupational position.

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