

## Séminaire d'étude doctorale

"La théorie des 'classes' et la théorie des 'élites' dans les analyses des mouvements sociaux américains"

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### Some Critical Notes and Definitions

#### "An Essentially Contested Concept" :

A category of general concepts in the social sciences, e.g. "power", the application of which, according to Gallie (1955) and Lukes (1974), is inherently a matter of dispute. The reason given for this is that competing versions of concepts such as "power" inevitably involve relativity to Values. According to this view, hypotheses using concepts such as "power" can be appraised empirically, but will remain relative to the evaluative framework within which the particular versions of the concept are couched. There are parallels between this notion and Weber's earlier view that social science propositions are "value -relative". [See **Howard Zinn**, *The Politics of History*, where he discusses the difference between "instrumental values" and "fundamental values".]

#### "Elites":

Literally « the best or most talented members of society » (e.g. educational elite), however in sociology the term most usually refers to political elites. Here, the assumption of Elite Theory has been that a division between elites and Masses is an inevitable feature of any complex modern society, and that the aspirations of radical democrats that the people as a whole could rule is mistaken.

#### Elite Theory:

The hypothesis that political elites are inevitable in complex modern societies. In its original form this theory was a sociological response to the relative failure of modern democratic movements, judged by their own highest objectives. Rather than power to the people, the advent of modern Democracy brought new bases of elite membership. Associated particularly with the pessimistic view of modern democracy taken by **Vilfredo Pareto** and, to a lesser extent **Gaetano Mosca**, elites were seen as an inevitable consequence of psychological differences between elites and Masses and the organizational requirements of modern societies. (See below: 1) *The Iron Law of Oligarchy*, 2) Robert Michaels, 3) Power Elite, 4) Power, 5) Stable Democracy, & 6) Plural Elitism.)

In its more recent form (democratic elitism), elite theory has modified its pessimism about modern democracy. Building on arguments already implicit in the work of theorists such as **Mosca** and **Michels** that different bases of elite power have important social consequences, what some theorists (e.g. **Robert**

**Dahl**, 1961) now propose is that a democratic competition between rival representative elites constitutes the best practicable form of modern government. (Compare power elite and stable democracy.)

The study of elites and the testing of elite theories has been a notably controversial area. While some researchers (e.g. **James Hunter**, 1963) have pursued a “reputational” approach asking respondents “who holds power,” others, including Dahl, have argued only the careful study of actual “decisions”—the outcomes of the operation of power—can satisfactorily establish who in fact is powerful. Even this, however, is not decisive, for as **Peter Bachrach** and **Morton Baratz** (1962) have argued, the study of overt “decisions” fails to explore the existence of “non-decisions” (community power), the many circumstances in which the balance of power may be such as to preclude political debate and political contest, so that no overt point of “decision” is actually observable.

### **\*1 “The Iron Law of Oligarchy”:**

The tendency for political organizations (political parties and trade unions) to become oligarchic, however much they may seek internal democracy. “He who says organization, says oligarchy,” said **Robert Michels**, who first formulated this law in his book *Political Parties* in 1911. Michels’ suggestion was that once parties move beyond the fluid participatory structures which often accompany their formation, they inevitably become more bureaucratic and more centrally controlled, falling under the domination of a professional leadership. In this process the original goals of the organization may also be replaced by more narrowly instrumental goals including a concern for the maintenance of the organization (see goal displacement). Three sets of factors were identified by Michels as central in this process:

- (a) “Technical Factors,” i.e. the need to maintain an effective fighting machine, but when this happens the machine develops its own vested interests, and is able to control agendas and communications, manage internal opposition, etc. . . .
- (b) “Psychological characteristics of leaders,” i.e. that they may be gifted orators, relish the psychic reward of leadership, come to share the motivations and interests of a wider political elite, and thus tend to cling to power at all costs.
- (c) “Psychological characteristics of the masses,” i.e. that the rank and file members of political organizations tend to be apathetic, are willing to be led, are readily swayed by mass oratory, and venerate the leadership. Critics of Michels’ “iron law” theory point out that the tendency to oligarchy in political organizations is highly variable. For example, it may be a feature of *trade unions* more than of *political parties*. The extent of oligarchy is also affected by characteristics of the membership and by the constitutional context in which the organizations in question operate. Nevertheless, Michels’ work has exerted a strong influence on the study of political parties and trade union democracy.

### **\*2 Robert Michels (1876-1936):**

German sociologist and political scientist, best known for his book, *Political Parties* (1911), in which he formulated the tendency for an “Iron Law of Oligarchy” to operate in formal democratic political organizations. It was a work which arose from Michels’ disillusionment with the leadership of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). A tension existed between Michels’ critical indictment of the “class betrayal” and reformism of the leadership of the German SPD and his suggestion that such a betrayal was perhaps inevitable, given the operation of the “iron law of oligarchy.” In his later work, Michels’ position achieved greater coherence, and he was one of a number of theorists (including his friend, Max Weber) to advance a theory of the social benefits of “Limited Representative Democracy.” The theory can be seen as the forerunner of the modern theory of “Stable Democracy.”

### **\*3 “Power Elite”:**

The inner circle of powerholders in modern US society, according to **C. Wright Mills** (1956). As portrayed by Mills, this elite group was composed of three loosely interlocking groups who had come to occupy the pivotal positions of power in modern American society”: (a) the heads of industry, (b) military leaders, and (c) leading politicians. Mills insisted that these three groups constituted a “power elite” rather than a Ruling Class (in the Marxist sense), in that the basis of their power is not simply economic. Instead, the relative unity possessed by the power elite is seen as arising from their shared

cultural and psychosocial orientations, and often also their shared social origins. (see “military-industrial complex”). The further main theory of modern political elites is “Plural Elitism”, in which multiple elites are held to exist but not regarded as acting in a unified way.

#### **\*4 Power:**

[Power/knowledge (**Michel Foucault**) refers to the idea that “forms of rationality open up fields of *possible practices*”, and *vice versa* (D. Owen, *Maturity and Modernity*, 1994). The precise “power/knowledge” relationship can only be established by analysis of specific discursive and non-discursive practices.]

#### Definitions include...

1. The “transformational capacity” possessed by human beings, i.e. “the capacity to intervene in a given set of events so as in some way to alter them” (**Anthony Giddens**, 1985).
2. “The probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance” (**Max Weber**, 1922).
- 3) The reproductive or the transformational capacity possessed by social structures, which may be seen as existing independently of the wills of individual actors, e.g. the power of market forces under capitalism.
4. Discipline, Surveillance, Discourse, Knowledge/Power (**Michel Foucault**).

Although power, especially in senses 2 and 4, is often seen in negative terms, as involving coercion and conflicts of interest, all four senses of “power” can also be seen in more positive terms, as “enabling”. Power relationships may involve both interdependence and conflict. For **Talcott Parsons (1963)**, for example, power is the capacity to achieve social and societal objectives, and as such can be seen as analogous to Money, i.e. is the basis of a generalized capacity to attain goals.

As Giddens expresses it, power must be recognized as a primary concept in sociological analysis. It is potentially an aspect of all relationships, but one which he suggests has to be broken down into its various components before it can be used effectively in sociological analysis. A major distinction made by Giddens is between two types of resources involved in power (neither of which has primacy):

- (a) control over material resources, i.e. economic or allocative resources;
- (b) authoritative resources, including Legitimate Authority, but also numerous other expressions of “authoritative power”, e.g. “surveillance”.

A further important distinction made by students of power is between the power visible in overt **decisions** and that involved in **nondecisions**, i.e. situations in which power is the outcome of a “mobilization of bias” within communities, the passive acceptance of established institutionalized power in which potential issues simply never reach the political arena.

Within structures or organizations we may also talk of the scope of intensity of the power or control which superordinates exert over subordinates. But control is never total. A “Dialectic of Control” can be said always to exist in that no agent (even a slave or child, or the inmates of a prison or an asylum) is never totally powerless in a relationship, given that the active compliance of the subordinates is usually essential if a power relationship is not to become onerous for both parties to the relationship. Even when the balance of power between participants is unequal, there usually will be some reciprocities in power relationships.

While power is an aspect of all areas of society and all institutions (e.g. in families, churches, groups and in organizations of all types), in modern societies the major concentrations are the power of (a) Nation States and (b) Capitalism. The first rests on the maintenance of Legitimate Authority, but is ultimately grounded in physical violence. The second, in contrast to political power, is in its pure form quintessentially “non-political”, and their major modern manifestation of “allocative resources” in modern society. However, in modern Western societies, capitalism too plays a central role in the maintenance of “political legitimacy”, in view of its effectiveness and widespread acceptability compared with other economic systems, although some commentators regard this as involving ideological and Cultural Incorporation, contrary to long-term interests (compare “legitimation crisis”).

Studies of the distribution as well as the implication of power in modern society have occupied a central place in Political Sociology, with its focus on Elites and Ruling Classes, on Parties and Pressure Groups, on *political and economic power holders of all kinds*.

For **Harold Laswell**, for example, political sociology is about “Who gets what, when and how.” While some theorists such as **C. Wright Mills** have suggested that modern societies are dominated by a narrow *Power Elite*, others including **Robert Dahl** or **Seymour Lipset** strongly contest this view, seeing the situation as one involving *Plural Elites* grounded in participant political cultures (see “stable democracy”). In an important study followed by a seminal debate, Dahl sought to ground his viewpoint in empirical studies of community politics. However, his conclusions remain contested, being opposed particularly by those who point to his failure to take into account “non-decisions” in reaching his conclusion that no one person or group is in a position to dominate (see community power).

A third main viewpoint is provided by **Marxist theorists**, who argue either that an overt capitalist ruling class exists or, more usually, a more diffused structural power, seen as arising from Capitalism’s general allocative power, backed by control over what Althusser refers to as the Ideological State Apparatus or else by a more diffuse Hegemony.

Feminism, in both its radical and materialist forms, has utilized the four definitions of power very effectively. The “transformational capacity” of humans is regarded not as a neutral process, but one that is clearly gendered. Analyses of both social relationships and social structures have revealed persistent patterns of inequality based upon the subordination of women to men. Radical feminists have it that Patriarchy is a more fruitful paradigm for analysis of power within social structures than class, status or purely political formations, whereas materialist feminists insist upon, minimally, the inclusion of the particular position of women within analyses of class in capitalist societies.

One thing is evident from all such debates is that the issues arise in the conceptualization and study of power which are not readily resolved. So much so that doubts have been raised (e.g. by Lukes, 1974) as to whether “power” is not an “essentially contested concept,” by which Lukes means that the value issues surrounding it can never be resolved in empirical terms, or indeed ever satisfactorily resolved. There are similarities between **Steven Lukes’** position and **Max Weber’s** (see “value relevance”).

It can be argued, however, that both views are needlessly restrictive. The complexities and the contested character of the concept of “power” can be acknowledged. But rather than singling out notoriously difficult concepts such as “power” as having a special status, sociological inquiry might be better served simply by a recognition of the way in which many concepts in sociology tend to carry value loadings, leaving open the question of whether this makes them irresolvable contested. This would be closer to the viewpoint of **Duncan Gallie (1955)**, the originator of the notion of “contested concepts”.

Lukes is also cautious in the support he gives to any concept of structural power. This raises a final point about “power” that must be mentioned: its overlap with both the concept of agency and the concept of structure, suggesting that Lukes’ dismissal of “structural power” is too sweeping. Although there are problems in the use of either of these concepts in isolation, recently their use as a paired-set has been held to offer greater prospects of a resolution of problems that have attended the use of either alone (see “structure” and “agency”).

#### **\*5 “Stable Democracy”:**

A distinction drawn by **Seymour Lipset (1960)** between “stable democracies,” defined as those polities which have enjoyed an “uninterrupted continuation of political democracy since the First World War, and the absence of a major party opposed to the *rules of the game*, and “unstable democracies”, which fail to fulfil these conditions. For non-European/non-English-speaking nations, Lipset also distinguished between “democracies” and “unstable dictatorships” on the one hand and “stable dictatorships”.

Six factors sustaining “stable democracy” according to **Lipset** are:

- 1) Political Cleavage between main competing political parties, institutionalizing broad class conflict between non-manual “middle class” and manual “working class”;
- 2) The historical replacement of previous main bases of political cleavage (e.g. religious, rural-urban, center-periphery);
- 3) Broad “consensus” on the fundamental legitimacy of prevailing political institutions, a “secular” politics (“end of ideology”), and the absence of major Parties of Integration opposing the rules of the game;
- 4) A socioeconomic system which is economically effective and delivers high levels of literacy, welfare, etc.;
- 5) A fluid “open” class structure and class mixing, which produces “crosscutting ties” and “cross pressures” acting on the individual which help to moderate class conflict and competition between parties;
- 6) A “participatory political culture”, including extensive participation in “Voluntary Associations” and a general strength of groups of all kinds which functions as a “protective screen” against Mass Society.

Reworking ideas drawn from the classical political sociology (especially **Tocqueville** and **Weber**), **Lipset** also suggested that “stable democracy” depends on an elite-mass structure in which representative elites (see “plural elitism”) are central to the working of the system, and can also be seen as safeguarding “central democratic values”. For Lipset, “stable democracy” is not just another political system, it is “the good society in action”. The theory of stable democracy in these general terms arose as a synthesis of behaviouralist and structural-functional and systems-theoretic approaches in US political science and political sociology. It has been influential (although also widely criticized) not only in discussions of western democracies but also in the discussion of Political Modernization and “nation-building” in developing and Third World nations.

Theories addressing the sources of stability and instability in democracies have gained a new lease on life in assessments of the newly emerging democracies of central and eastern Europe.

#### **\*6 “Plural Elitism”:**

The doctrine that power in modern liberal democratic states is shared between a multiplicity of competing elites (Dahl, 1967). Plural elite theorists acknowledge that in complex modern industrial societies elites will inevitably dominate. In this they are at one with classical *Elite Theory*. *Modern plural elites theory* differs from classical elite theory, however, in two key respects:

- (a) in accepting that elite in modern liberal democratic societies are representative elites –thus while the people may not rule, the people’s elite do;
- (b) in asserting that in modern liberal democracies, power is either shared between multiple elites or these elites compete openly and continuously for political power without any one group achieving a lasting dominance over the others. It is in these terms that modern elite theory distinguishes between democracies and non-democracies.

Critics of plural elitist theory (e.g. *The Theory of Democratic Elitism*, **Bachrach**, 1967) object, first, to what they see as its tendency to understate systematic biases in the actual distribution of power in modern societies (“nondecisions” “mobilization of bias”) and, secondly, to the restricted conception of political participation and individual development with which a “democratic elitism” is associated. In responding to these criticisms, plural elite theorists point to the greater realism of their own view of Democracy compared with traditional models, further insisting that the distinctions between democracies and non-democracies captured by their models reflect key differences between actual political systems.

#### **A Short History of “Elite Theories”:**

The elite theories were constructed, notably by **Vilfredo Pareto** and **Gaetano Mosca**, in conscious opposition to Marxism, and contradicted the Marxist view in two respects: (1) They asserted that the division of society into *dominant* and *subordinate* groups is a universal and unalterable fact, In

Mosca's words (1939): "Among the constant facts and tendencies that are to be found in all political organisms, one is so obvious that it is apparent to the most casual eye. In all societies—from societies that are very meagrely developed and have barely attained the dawning of civilization, down to the most advanced and powerful societies—two classes of people appear—a class that rules and a class that is ruled." (2) They defined the ruling group in quite a different way; **Pareto** mainly in terms of the superior qualities of some individuals which gave rise to elites in every sphere of life, **Mosca** in terms of the inevitable dominion of an "organized minority" or "political class" over the unorganized majority, though he too referred to the "highly esteemed and very influential" personal attributes of this minority. But **Mosca** also introduced many qualifications, and eventually outlined a more complex theory (closer to Marxism) in which the political class itself is influenced and restrained by a variety of "social forces" (representing different interests) and is connected with a large sub-elite that is a vital element in ensuring political stability. This led **Antonio Gramsci (1929)** to say that Mosca's "political class is a puzzle . . . so fluctuating and elastic is the notion", though elsewhere he concluded that it might simply be the intellectual section of the ruling group.

The impact of these views upon Marxism is well illustrated by the case of **Robert Michels**, whose study of political parties (1911) has been described as "the work of someone who has passed over from revolutionary Marxism to the camp of elite theory" (**David Beetham, 1981**). Michels, disillusioned with the leadership of the *German Social Democratic Party*, asked why socialist parties deviate into reformism and concluded that the leaders necessarily become divorced from the membership and assimilate into the existing social elites. His "iron law of oligarchy"—drawing upon the ideas of Pareto and Mosca, and to some extent **Max Weber**—formulates the conditions under which this divorce occurs and the leaders come to constitute a dominant elite in the party. It is partly because of the contrast between the ability and determination of the leaders, further nurtured by education and experience, and the "incompetence of the masses"; partly because, as a minority, they are better organized and also control a bureaucratic apparatus.

**Nikolai Bukarin (1921)** responded to part of Michels' argument by saying that the incompetence of the masses is a product of present-day economic and technical conditions and would disappear in a socialist society; hence there is no universal law of oligarchy. Among recent Marxists, Poulantzas (1973) briefly reviewed the elite theories and still more briefly dismissed them as not providing any explanation of the basis of political power (which is scarcely accurate). Other Marxists, or *sympathisants*, have been more inclined to incorporate some elements of elite theory into their own conceptions, and certainly to recognize that difficult (though not necessarily unanswerable) questions have been posed, especially by Michels. The thinker who went furthest in accepting elite theory (strongly influenced by **Weber's** concept of power) is **Mills (1956)** who used the term "power elite" rather than "ruling class", because in his view the latter is a "badly loaded phrase" which presupposes that an economic class rules politically, and "does not allow enough autonomy to the political order and its agents". He went on to distinguish three major elites—economic, political and military—in American society, and then faced, but did not resolve, the difficulty of showing that these three groups actually form a single power elite, and how they are bound together.

Others (e.g. **Ralph Miliband, 1977**) have discussed elites mainly in terms of the state bureaucracy, and particularly in relation to the question of whether the USSR and other socialist countries can be described as being dominated by a bureaucratic "power elite". This raises difficult problems in the analysis of political power in such societies, and notably whether the ruling group should more properly be conceived, in Marxist terms, as an elite, or as a class which effectively "possesses" the means of production.

More generally, Marxist political theory still needs to develop a more precise concept of elites, and to examine in a more comprehensive and rigorous way the relation between elites and classes, particularly in relation to socialist regimes and to the distinction between leaders and followers not only in social life as a whole, but in socialist parties themselves.



## Definitions of “Social Class”:

1. The hierarchical distinctions that exist between individuals or groups (e.g. occupational groups) within a society. In this general sense class is an alternative general term to *social stratification*. The term “social class” is also widely used as a general synonym for “class”.
2. Any particular position within a social stratification system or class system, e.g. “middle class”, “working class”, etc...
3. *Descriptive classificatory categories* used by State Census Bureau, e.g. the Federal Gov't. has divided the population into five categories of “social classes”.
4. Occupational classes or “socioeconomic status groups”, e.g. manual workers, non-manual workers, as well as “occupational scales”.
5. The particular form of “open”, rather than “closed”; stratification of class system found within modern industrial societies, in which individual and collective *Social Mobility* is relatively commonplace (compared with *Cast* and *Estate* systems).
6. (**Karl Marx, 1848**) The economically determined and inherently conflictual divisions of society based on ownership and non-ownership of property, e.g. lord and serf in feudal society; bourgeois and proletariat in capitalist societies, which characterize all large-scale societies and which are held ultimately to determine the destiny of each type of society. Marx also identifies a multiplicity of lesser classes and groupings which influence the outcome of political and social conflicts.
7. (**Max Weber, 1922**) Differences between categories or groups of persons in their “typical probabilities” of “procuring goods”, “gaining positions” ...  
-- *Life Chances*: For Weber, “class” means “all persons of the same class situation”, whatever the basis of this and whatever its implications may be for the longer-term destiny of societies. Weber identified a number of overlapping possible bases of class situation, based on ownership and non-ownership of property and also including reference to different kinds of property and the different kinds of income that this yields. In particular he identifies 3 classes and 4 sub-categories of “social classes”:
  - a) Property classes;
  - b) Commercial classes, somewhat misleadingly so-called, since these include individuals able to safeguard their position through political or organizational activity, e.g. professionals and others monopolizing qualifications, as well as entrepreneurs possessing other bases of monopoly;
  - c) Social classes, the “totality” of such class situations, defined in terms of situations within which “individual and generational mobility is easy and typically occurs”. The main “social classes” identified by Weber in this sense are:
    - (i) the working class,
    - (ii) the petty bourgeoisie,
    - (iii) the “propertyless” intelligentsia and specialists,
    - (iv) classes privileged by property and education.

Class situations, and the social classes these give rise to, may be “positively privileged” or “negatively privileged”, with various “middle classes” in between. Since mobility among, and the instability of, class positions is considerable, for Weber “social class” is highly variable, and only sometimes are these the bases of class consciousness or collective action.

Overall, concepts of class tend to be either *descriptive* (e.g. **3 & 4** above) or more *analytical* (e.g. senses **6 & 7**). Of the analytical approaches to class, the most influential uses in sociology stem from Marx, who was influenced by social theories from the Enlightenment and by French utopian socialists. In his works, Marx applies the concept of class for different purposes, but the *essential aspects of class* remain the same:

- 1) Every society has to produce a surplus to feed, house and clothe dependent children, the sick, and the elderly. Class differences begin when one group of people claim resources that are not consumed for immediate survival as their private property;
- 2) Classes therefore are defined in terms of ownership (or non-ownership) of productive property which makes the taking of the surplus possible. At different times in human

history different forms of property (e.g. slaves, water, land, and capital) have been crucial in shaping social relationships, but all class systems are characterized by two major classes. The most important class relationship as far as Marx was concerned was that found in Capitalism, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat;

- 3) The historical importance of classes, for Marx, is that they are intrinsically exploitative: one class, because it takes the surplus produced by another class, exploits and oppresses that class, and therefore conflict is an inevitable product of class relationships. The conflicts associated with class antagonisms are the most important factor in social change: ultimately it is class conflicts, associated with underlying social and economic contradictions, which transform societies;
- 4) Marx distinguishes between the “objective” aspects of class, as set out in (2) above, and the “subjective” aspects, i.e. the fact of membership of a class is not necessarily accompanied by an awareness of membership or a feeling of political identity with the interests of a class. It is only when members of a class realize their common interests and act together to gain them that one can fully talk about a social class.

It should be noted that the above is a theoretical model and, as such, should not be taken as simply descriptive of any historical situation but as indicating the most important structure and processes for understanding social relations and for directing empirical work. In his own empirical work, Marx introduced a number of factors into his understanding of social class. In the 18<sup>th</sup> *Burmaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), for example, he discusses the French peasantry of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and he come close to a formal definition of class which includes variables such as shared culture and a national political organization.

Major problems arising out of **Karl Marx's** work have inspired most of the subsequent sociological work on class:

- a) the fact that Marx's account of classes and the role of class in pre-capitalist societies was relatively limited leads to questions as to whether class has the centrality of importance in the generation of change in these societies;
- b) the existence and growth of important groups other than the proletariat and the bourgeoisie;
- c) divisions within classes which have often proved as significant, politically, as divisions between classes;
- d) The important effect of factors other than social class on people's lives, Gender and Race in particular;
- e) The fact that Class Consciousness, in practice, has never shown evidence of a simple correspondence with Marx's view of objective class situation and, historically, for subordinate classes, has normally been much at variance with “objective” conditions as defined by Marx.

### **Analytical Conceptions of “Class” -Weber:**

The most influential alternative theory of class is found in **Max Weber's** work. Unlike Marx, Weber emphasized other factors which promoted inequality. In particular, he considered status or honour and prestige as a distinct variable. He also emphasized the link between class and opportunity, arguing that a class is a category or group of people who share similar “life chances”. With Marx, he saw ownership and non-ownership as a basic criterion, but Weber stressed divisions within classes (partly based on social Status) and empirical changes in class boundaries to a much greater extent than Marx. Examples are Weber's distinction between ownership and commercial classes, and also the way that different skill levels divided the working class in terms of life chances. Here Weber is emphasizing the importance of “markets” rather than simply ownership or non-ownership of property as the basis of inequality, i.e. level of skill and demand for skills determining differences in rewards. Weber also differs from Marx in seeing Bureaucracy, as well as class, as a fundamental nexus of power in modern societies.

Weber's stress on a variety of factors influencing opportunities and rewards (class, status, and party, for example) has made his approach to the analysis of class and social stratification very influential in

sociological theory. In British sociology, for example, scholars have emphasized the importance of taking account of “status” as well as “market situation” and “work situation”

### **Analytical Conceptions of “Class” –Modern Approaches:**

Most recent approaches have tended to take either Marx or Weber as a starting point. There have been numerous attempts to adapt or refute elements of the classical approaches. Efforts to repair deficiencies in Marx’s work, for example, as seen in studies by Poulantzas (1973) and others. A common preoccupation of all these theorists is the problem of Class Boundaries, of accounting for the position of the “middle classes” within the Marxist theory of class. They all accept the deficiencies of the orthodox Marxist view of such groups as professionals, managers and white-collar workers, but they differ in their attempted solutions to the problem posed by the continued existence and role of this group, which the classical Marxian theory assumed in the long run would simply be assimilated into one of other of the two main classes in capitalism, or disappear.

**Nicos Poulantzas** follows **Louis Althusser’s** concept of the *Mode of Production* to argue that there are *three* relatively autonomous aspects of class relations: *Economic* (productive versus unproductive labour), *Political* (supervision versus nonsupervision), and *Ideological* (mental versus manual labour); and hence, the definition of social classes cannot be purely economic. The direct production of commodities (the economic role) is still seen as the main criterion which defines the proletariat, but the situation is complicated by further relations of power. Any worker, productive or not, who occupies a subordinate position in any of the three spheres should be seen as a member of a distinct class: the “new petty bourgeoisie”.

Carchedi proposes a variation on this approach. He distinguishes between ownership and functional aspects of the capitalist labor relation. He argues that, as capitalism developed, production became more and more a collective process and, similarly, the function of the capitalist in controlling and organizing the labor force became separated from ownership with the growth of managerial hierarchies. *The New Middle Class* exercises the function of capital (control and surveillance) without being part of the class which owns capital. Similarly, Wright (1978) distinguishes between ownership and control, arguing that people who do not own the means of production but have important powers as managers or semiautonomous professionals were in “Contradictory Class Locations”. In a later critique, Wright (1985) re-emphasizes ideas of property and exploitation as central to an understanding of class relations. Each of these approaches attempts to overcome the problems which the “new middle classes” pose for Marxian accounts of class by treating power and control of the Labor Process as in some way independently definitive of class relations. These “new” approaches, therefore, despite their location within the Marxian tradition and different conceptual frameworks, bear, at some points, a striking resemblance to aspects of Weber’s approach, the difference being, however, that they see their new approach as rehabilitating the Marxian view. The ultimate basis of class, and the fundamental dynamics of society, remain “objective” economic class interests.

Many other writers have preferred to look more directly to Weber rather than to Marx to develop a more satisfactory theory of class. Among the most influential of these, along with **David Lockwood** and **John Goldthorpe**, has been **Frank Parkin** (1971). Parkin draws on Weber’s discussion of *Social Closure*, the idea that groups try to monopolize resources and opportunities for their own benefit, and to deny resources and opportunities to others. The key point here is the idea of exclusion of non-members. In different societies, criteria of eligibility for membership of dominant classes differ: religion, ethnicity, gender, for example are bases for exclusion in different societies. Birth into a particular group is a common criterion, so kinship and descent are crucial, and, in this type of rigid system, privileged groups can maximize closure to their own benefit very successfully. Closure in modern societies is not based upon descent, but distinct strategies of exclusion are nevertheless employed. It should be noted that much empirical work on “class” and social mobility operates with “occupational definitions rather than with one based on “property”. Sociological approaches to class have also been much criticized recently for their “gender blindness”, that is, for being models of

inequality relating to males only, and treating women's class positions as dependent on those of their male partners.

In Britain, some social science theorists have proposed an end to class and to the saliency of class analysis (e.g. **Jan Pahl, 1989**), however stripped of rhetoric, such claims represent less a call for a reevaluation of the centrality of class (compared to values, and lifestyle and milieu analyses) than a preference for particular versions of class analysis.

### **The Marxist Concept of "Social Classes":**

The concept of class has a central importance in Marxist theory, though neither Marx nor Engels ever expounded it in a systematic form. In one sense it was the starting point of Marx (1818-1883) whose theory is based on his "discovery of the proletariat" as "the idea in the real itself" (letter to his father, 10 November 1837). This "discovery" of a new political force engaged in a struggle for emancipation, led him directly to an analysis of the economic structure of modern societies and its process of development. During this period (1843-44) **Engels** (1820-1895), from the perspective of political economy, was making the same discovery which he outlined in his essays in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (1844) and developed in *The Condition of the Working Class* (1845). Thus it was the class structure of early capitalism, and the class struggles in this form of society, which constituted the main reference point for the Marxist theory of history. Subsequently, the ideas of class conflict as the driving force of history was extended, and the Communist Manifesto asserted, in a famous phrase, that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles"; but at the same time Marx and Engels recognized that class was a uniquely prominent feature of capitalist societies –even suggesting in the *German Ideology* that "class itself is a product of the bourgeoisie" –and they did not undertake any sustained analysis of the principal classes and class relations in other forms of society. Kautsky, in his discussion of class, occupation and status (1927), argued that many of the class conflicts mentioned in the *Communist Manifesto* were in fact conflicts between status groups, and that Marx and Engels were quite aware of this fact since in the same text they observed that "in the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, as manifold gradation of social rank", and contrasted this situation with the "distinctive feature" of the bourgeois epoch, when "society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great classes directly facing each other –bourgeoisie and proletariat". Yet there is clearly a sense in which Marx wanted to assert the existence of a major class division in all forms of society beyond the early tribal communities, as when he argues in general terms that "it is always direct relation between the owners of the conditions of production and the direct producers which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden foundation, of the entire social edifice" (*Capital*, vol. III).

Most later Marxists have followed Marx and Engels in concentrating their attention on the class structure of capitalist societies, and they have had to deal with two main questions. The first concerns precisely "complications" of social ranking or stratification in relation to the basic classes. In the fragment on "the three great classes of modern society" which Engels published as the final chapter of *Capital III*, Marx observes that even in England, where the economic structure is "most highly and classically developed . . . intermediate and transitional strata obscure the class boundaries"; and in discussing economic crises in the *Theories of Surplus Value* (ch. 17) he notes that he is disregarding for the purpose of his preliminary analysis, among other things, "the real constitution of society, which by no means consists only of the class of workers and the class of industrial capitalists". Elsewhere in the *Theories of Surplus Value*, he refers explicitly to the growth of the middle class as a phenomenon of the development of capitalism: "What [**David Ricardo**] forgets to emphasize is the continual increase in numbers of the middle classes . . . situated midway between the workers on one side and the capitalists and landowners on the other . . . [who] rest with all their weight upon the working basis and at the same time increase the social security and power of the upper ten thousand" (ch.18). Further on he says again, with respect to **Thomas Malthus**, "his greatest hope . . . is that the middle class will increase in size and the working proletariat will make up a constantly diminishing proportion of the total population (even if it grows in absolute numbers). That is, in fact the tendency

of bourgeois society” (ch.19). These observations do not fit easily with the idea of an increasing polarization of bourgeois society between “two great classes”; and since the middle class has continued to grow, Marxist social scientists, from **E. Bernstein** to **N. Poulantzas**, have been obliged repeatedly to examine the political significance of this phenomenon, especially in relation to the socialist movement.

The second question concerns the situation and development of the two principal classes in capitalist society, bourgeoisie and proletariat. In the *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire*, Marx gave this negative definition of a fully constituted class: “In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not form a class.” In the *Poverty of Philosophy* (ch.2), describing the emergence of the working class, Marx expressed the same idea in positive terms: “Economic conditions had in the first place transformed the mass of the people into workers. The domination of capital created the common situation and common interests of this class. Thus this mass is already a class in relation to capital, but not yet a class for itself. In the struggle, of which we have only indicated a few phases, this mass unites and forms itself into a class for itself. The interest which it defends become class interests.” Among the later Marxists, Poulantzas (1975) has rejected (as Hegelian residue) this distinction between “class-in-itself” and “class-for-itself”, arguing as though classes sprang into existence fully equipped with class consciousness and a political organization, in specific opposition to the view expounded by Lukacs (1923) which attributed crucial importance to the development of class consciousness, conceived as being brought to the proletariat from outside by a revolutionary party.

Most Marxists, in fact, have recognized (increasingly in the past two decades) that in the case of the working class the development of a “socialist” or “revolutionary” consciousness poses problems which require more careful and thorough study. “Class interest” itself is no longer conceived (as it was in general by Marx) as an objective and unambiguous “social fact”, but rather as having a sense which is constructed through interaction and discussion out of the experiences of everyday life and the interpretations of those experiences in political doctrines, hence as something which may assume diverse forms, as is indicated in one way by the historical divisions in the working-class movement. At one extreme some Marxists (e.g. **Herbert Marcuse, 1964**) have suggested that a distinctive class interest and class consciousness of the working class is virtually extinct as a consequence of its more or less complete assimilation into advanced industrial society; while others have questioned fundamentally the view that political action is determined mainly by class relations (**Albrecht Wellmer, 1971**) or have rejected the conception of ruling class interests in an era of comprehensive state regulation of social life (*Frankfurt School*).

In a less extreme way the socialist movement in advanced capitalist societies has been seen as depending only partly upon the working class, and increasingly upon an alliance of various groups (Eurocommunism); a position which gains plausibility from the prominence in recent years of radical political movements which are not class-based, among them the women’s movement and diverse ethnic and national movements.

Such questions are, if anything, even more germane to the study of class structure in non-capitalist societies. In the Asiatic society, as Marx defined it, the development of classes as the principal agents of social change seems to be excluded by the absence of private property, and the dominant group in this type of society may be seen as comprising not the owners of the means of production but the controllers of the state apparatus. In *ancient (slave) society* the lives of actual social conflict are far from clear—though the distinction between master and slave obviously is—and Marx himself referred sometimes to the class struggles between freeman and slave, sometime to those between creditors and debtors. There are also difficulties in identifying the social conflicts which led to the decline of feudalism, and Marxists have been in substantial disagreement about the part played by class struggles between lords and serfs, and on the other hand, the significance of the emergence of a

new class –the town burghesses—and of the conflict, which Marx emphasized, between town and country (the transition from feudalism to capitalism).

A more general issue is that of the place of the peasantry in the class structure and its political role in different types of society. Marx, as has been noted did not regard the peasants of 19<sup>th</sup> century France as a class in the full sense, still less a revolutionary class; but the socialist revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have taken place mainly in peasant societies, and sections of the peasantry have played an important part in the revolutionary movements, as they still do in many Third World countries, although they may often be led by urban based parties or by urban intellectuals.

An issue of a different kind which has confronted Marxists of the present generation concerns the emergence of a new class structure in the socialist societies. In broad terms, two alternative approaches can be distinguished. The first asserts that a new dominant class, stratum or elite has established itself in power. Thus **Leon Trotsky**, while denying that a new class had appeared in the USSR, regarded the bureaucracy as the ruling group in a “degenerated workers’ state”.

The most thorough recent study is that of **György Konrad (1979)** who argues that “the social structure of early socialism” is a class structure, “and indeed a dichotomous one. . . . At one pole is a evolving class of intellectuals who occupy the position of redistributors, as the other a working class which produces the social surplus but has no right of disposition over it”. But he continues: “This dichotomous model of a class structure is not sufficiently for purposes of classifying everyone in the society (just as the dichotomy of capitalist and proletarian is not in itself sufficient for purposes of assigning a status to every single person in capitalist society); an ever larger fraction of the population must be assigned to the intermediate strata” (middle class).

The second approach is best exemplified by **Włodzimierz Weselowski’s analysis (1979)** of the transformation of the class structure in Poland in which he argues that there has been a gradual disappearance of class differences as a result of the declining importance of the relationship of individuals to the means of production, and that this is accompanied by diminution in secondary differences related to the nature of work and to attributes of social position such as income, education and access to cultural goods. Hence Weselowski excluded the idea of a new dormant class and strongly emphasizes the decomposition of class domination, but at the same time he recognizes that status differences persist, as do conflicts of interests between different social groups and strata. In judging these alternative conceptualizations of the social structure of socialist societies two issues are crucially important. The first is whether there has been a real change in the relation of individuals to the means of production, in the sense of genuine public, collective control rather than a new form of “economic ownership” and “possession” (i.e. effective control, not legal ownership) by a specific social group which exercise power through the party and state apparatuses. The second is whether the conflicts in socialist societies are only between status groups or whether they have a broader class character, as various social upheavals in the countries –most recently in Poland—may suggest.

Marxist studies since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have made it abundantly clear that class structure is a much more complex and ambiguous phenomenon than appears from most of the writing of Marx and Engels, who were greatly influenced in their views by the undoubted salience of class relations in early capitalism, and above all by the irruption into political life of the working-class movement. An array of problems firefly mentioned here –among them the transformation of class structure in capitalist and socialist societies and their political implications, the constitution and role of classes in the Third world, the relation of classes and class struggles in other social groups, including nations, and to other forms of social conflict –remain as a challenge to more profound and rigorous investigations. To use Marx’s own words, they will not be resolved by “the pass-partout” of a historical-philosophical theory” (letter to Mikhailovsky, 1877) but by an analysis in each separate case of the “empirically given circumstances”.

### **“Class Conflict”:**

Marx and Engels stressed –and this came to be the general Marxist view—that major classes are most clearly differentiated, class consciousness most fully developed, and class conflict most acute, in capitalist society, which constitutes in these respects a culminating point in the historical evolution of class-divided forms of society. From this perspective modern class struggles have a central importance in Marxist theory, because their outcome is conceived as “a transition to socialism” i.e. to a classless society.

One issue among Marxists is the question whether there has been an intensification of class conflict in the period of Modern Capitalism. The first to question this idea explicitly –though Marx and Engels had already suggested some doubts in their references to the “labour aristocracy” and to a more general “*embourgeoisement*” of the working class, at least in Britain—was **Eduard Bernstein (1899)** who contended that it was evident by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that a polarization of classes and an intensification of class conflict were not occurring. Among the factors he adduced to explain this changing situation were the growth of the middle class, the growing complexity of the class structure, and rising levels of living; and these themes have figured prominently in all subsequent discussions. Recent historical studies have also drawn attention to other features: thus **Foster (1974)** is a study of the labour movement in three 19<sup>th</sup>-century English towns examines in detail “the development and decline of a revolutionary class consciousness in the second quarter of the century”, and explains the decline as a result of changes associated with liberalization (extension of the suffrage, growth of mass parties, legal recognition of trade unions) which made possible a reimposition of capitalist authority. Clearly, this is a process which has been repeated in different forms in later historical periods. A particular problem has always been posed by the development of American society, where neither a mass socialist party nor political class struggles on an extensive scale have ever emerged; and “American exceptionalism” has been the object of much sociological analysis, Marxist and other, since the early years of this century (**Werner Sombart, 1906**). This situation has led some Marxists and other radical thinkers in the USA to make very sweeping revisions of Marxist theory; for example **Mills’** dismissal (1960) of the conception of a fundamental class conflict (and of the working class as a primary agent of social change) as a “labour metaphysic”, or **Marcuse’s** broadly similar argument (1964) about the incorporation of the working class into advanced capitalist society.

Another question is posed by the conflicts in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe, where it is a matter of deciding whether movements of opposition and rebellions, such as those of 1956 (Hungary) 1968 (Czechoslovakia), 1981 (Poland), are class conflicts, or if not, what social forces they do represent. Here the interpretation depends upon a prior judgment about whether a new class structure has been formed in these societies, and in particular whether there is a new ruling class. It is also evident that in some of these societies national struggles have acquired considerable importance, and this phenomenon has a much wider significance, for in the western capitalist countries too, in the past few decades, social conflicts have involved not only, or even mainly, classes, but national, ethnic or religious groups, as well as a number of broad social movements –feminist, ecological, anti-nuclear. The task of present-day Marxist analysis is to comprehend these diverse struggles in the framework of a consistent theory, and to determine empirically the specific importance of class conflicts in diverse structural and historical conditions. This also involves –as a number of recent Marxist studies (e.g. Poulantza, 1975) demonstrate – re-examining class conflict in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, not simply in terms of a confrontation between bourgeoisie and proletariat, but more in terms of alliances between various social groups which on one side dominate and direct economic and social life, and on the other side are subordinated and directed.

### **“Class Consciousness”:**

From an early stage Marx made a distinction between the “objective” situation of a class and “subjective” awareness of this situation; that is, between class membership and class consciousness. In a strict sense social distinctions first take the form of “classes” in capitalist society, because only in this case is membership of social groups determined solely by the ownership (or control) of the means of production or exclusion therefrom. In pre-bourgeois estates-society a legally sanctioned order of estates was superimposed upon differences in the ownership of means of production. An

aristocrat always remained an aristocrat, and as such a possessor of definite and exactly circumscribed privileges. The system of property relations was hidden behind the structure of estates. The estates system harmonized fairly well with the system of property relations only so long as land remained to most important means of production and for the most part property of the aristocracy and the church. But with the rise of the urban bourgeoisie and their development of mercantile, manufacturing and finally industrial capital, and as the (partly ennobled) bourgeoisie intruded upon the domain of large scale agricultural interests, the harmony was increasingly undermined. Estates consciousness was fundamentally distinct from class consciousness. Membership of an estate is as a rule hereditary, and it is clearly apparent from the ascribed rights and privileges or exclusion therefrom. Class membership, however, depends upon becoming aware of one's position within the production process; hence it often remains concealed behind a nostalgic orientation to the old estates system, particularly in the case of bourgeois, petty-bourgeois and peasant "intermediary strata".

Marx describes the emergence of class consciousness in the bourgeoisie and the proletariat as a consequence of the increasingly political struggle of the *tiers état* with the ruling classes of the *ancient regime*. He illustrates the difficulties in the development of class consciousness by the example of the French small-holding peasants who use their voting rights to subjugate themselves to a lord (Napoleon III) instead of establishing themselves in a revolutionary way as the dominant class:

In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, and their culture from those of other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasant, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not form a class. They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interests in their own name, whether through a Parliament or through a Convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them. (18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire)

The formation of class consciousness in the proletariat can be seen as the counterpart of the necessary miscarriage of political class consciousness among the small peasants. In this case the initially limited conflict (e.g. a trade union struggle in a particular enterprise or branch of industry) is widened on the basis of an identity of interests until it becomes a common affair of the whole class, which also creates an appropriate instrument, in the form of a political party. Collective labour in large factories and industrial enterprises, and the improved means of communication required by industrial capitalism, facilitate this unity. The process of formation of class consciousness coincides with the rise of a comprehensive class organization. They mutually support each other.

Marx is quite aware that the understanding and active pursuit of the common interests of a whole class can often come into conflict with the particular interests of individual workers or groups of workers. At the least it can lead to conflicts between the short term and the short sighted interests of individual skilled workers in their own social advancement, and those of the class as a whole. For this reason particularly great importance is attached to *solidarity*. The differentiation of the wage structure and the temptations of increasing affluence have usually brought about a weakening of class solidarity and hence of class consciousness in highly industrialised societies. In this process the "isolating effect" of individual competition for prestige consumer goods, which has reached at least parts of the working class, may perhaps play a similar role to the "natural isolation" of the French small holding peasants in 1851.

According to **Karl Kautsky** and **Lenin**, an adequate—that is to say, *political*—class consciousness can only be brought to the working class "from outside". Lenin maintained further that only a "trade union consciousness" can arise spontaneously in the working class; i.e. a consciousness of the necessity and utility of the representation of trade union interests against those of capital. Political class consciousness can only be developed by Intellectuals who, because they are well educated and informed and stand at a distance from the immediate production process, are in a position to comprehend bourgeois society and its class relations in their totality. But the class consciousness developed by intellectuals, which is laid

down in Marxist theory, can only be adopted by the working class, not by the bourgeoisie or petty bourgeoisie. As the organizational instrument for transmitting class consciousness to the empirical working class, Lenin conceived a “new type of party”, the cadre party of professional revolutionaries. In contrast to this Leninist conception **Rosa Luxemburg** gave prominence to the role of social experience, the experience of class struggle, in the formation of class consciousness. Even errors in the course of class struggles can contribute to the development of an appropriate class consciousness which guarantees success, while the patronizing of the proletariat by intellectual elites leads only to a weakening of the ability to act, and to passivity.

**György Lukacs (1923)** developed a kind of metaphysics of class consciousness which was immediately and decisively condemned by Leninist and Social-Democratic Marxists alike. However, Lukacs’s formulation actually corresponded perfectly with Leninist theory, as does his conception of the role of the party. **Lukacs’s** definition of *class consciousness* proceeds, like Lenin’s, from the thesis that “adequate”, or political, class consciousness must have as its content :

Society as a concrete totality, the system of production at a given point in history and the resulting division of society into classes. . . . By relating consciousness to the whole of society it become possible to infer the thoughts and feelings which men would have in a particular situation if they were able to assess both it and the interests arising from it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society. That is to say, it would be possible to infer the thoughts and feelings appropriate to their objective situation . . . Class consciousness consists in fact of the appropriate and rational reactions “imputed” to a particular typical position in the process of production. This consciousness is, therefore, neither the sum nor the average of what is thought or felt by the single individuals who make up the class. And yet the historically significant actions of the class as a whole are determined in the last resort by this consciousness and not by the thought of the individual –and these actions can be understood only by reference to this consciousness.

A class whose consciousness is defined in this way is thus nothing other than a “historical imputed subject”. The empirically existing class can only (successfully) act if it becomes conscious of itself in the way prescribed by this definition, or –in Hegelian language—transforms itself from a “class in itself” to a “class for itself”. If a particular class like the petty bourgeoisie is in fact incapable of this, or (like the German proletariat in 1918), fails to accomplish the transformation fully, then its political action will also necessarily miscarry. The problem with Lukacs’ definition is that it can be exploited by political elites, which, invoking their “possession” of theory of imputation, patronize or indeed demoralize the real proletariat (“ideology”).

### **The “New Class”:**

This concept was first formulated by Yugoslavian dissident writer, Milovan Djilas in 1957. Eastern European societies had not succeeded in overthrowing class rule, he argues, and were in fact dominated by a new dominant class of party bureaucrats.

More recently, the American sociologist, **Alvin Gouldner (1979)** has generalized the notion, suggesting that, despite Marx’s assumptions, the underclass in any revolution never come to power, nor do they seem likely to do so in the future. Gouldner identifies five theories of the forms in which the “New Class” appears within modern societies:

- (1) A “new class” of “benign democrats” and managers, (e.g. the theory of **John Kenneth Galbraith, 1964.**)
- (2) The “new class” as a “master class”, which is simply a further “movement in a long-continuing circulation of historical elites”, and still exploitative (e.g. **N. Bakunin’s** view);
- (3) The “new class” as “old class ally”, in which the new class are seen as “dedicated professionals” who uplift the old moneyed class to a new “collectively-oriented” view (e.g. Parsons);
- (4) The “new class” as the “servants of power”, in which the moneyed or capitalist class retains power much as it always did (e.g. **Noam Chomsky, 1969 & Maurice Zeitlin, 1977**);

(5) The “new class” as a “flawed universal class”(Alvin Gouldner’s own view); that the new class remains “self-seeking” and out to control its own work situation, but is “the best card that history has presently given us to play”.

Gouldner suggests that the new class in this fifth sense is growing, and is more powerful and independent than suggested by Chomsky(3) but less powerful than suggested by Galbraith(1)