

## *Is class a useful concept in explaining social action? It has been argued that social classes are dying - how can this be?*

Herbert Blumer (1962) stated that “the organisation of human society is the framework inside of which social action takes place”. In this essay I will look at sociological theories presented by Marx and Weber defining and explaining the concept of class and a brief evaluation of functionalism before considering the degree to which it can be used to explain the actions of individuals and groups within a society. I will then explain why there is now the belief that social classes are “dying”, yet emphasise that class differences remain highly evident.

Working with Engels, Marx (1962) asserts that the course of human history is greatly focussed around the struggle between classes. Examples range from the patrician and plebeian in biblical times to the lord and serf in 17th century feudal societies – this shows that throughout time, the oppressor and the oppressed have stood in constant opposition to each other. Although not ever precisely defining the ‘class concept’, for Marx class relationships are integral production relationships, i.e. the patterns of ownership and control. So for a capitalist society the two key classes are ‘bourgeoisie’ (the owners and controllers) and the ‘proletariat’ (the labour force), though he did recognise that actual society was composed of a multiplicity of classes. Crompton (1998) gives the example of him identifying numerous classes such as the industrial and petty bourgeoisie, financiers and ‘lumpenproletariat’ in his account of ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’ (1962).

However, Marx goes further than explaining the concept of class by ownership and non-ownership, using the term ‘class’ for both analytical and historical concepts (Crompton, 1998). Engels described Marx’s concept of labour value as one of his greatest achievements— here Marx argues that in a capitalist society, labour is a commodity like any other except it is unique in the fact that it can create new values. For example, raw materials (a commodity) are converted to new commodities when worked on by labour, for example raw wood being converted into furniture. Marx sees the labourer as exploited since they only spend some of their working day creating these new values, and the rest of the day is spent creating surplus value which is retained by the capitalist, used for investment and profit amongst others. Social classes play a role in transforming societies, with Marx claiming that classes are “social forces, historical actors”, with groups making their own history, though sometimes through circumstances beyond their control (e.g. due to an oppressive leading authority).

His Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1962) presents the theory that the structure of a human society (politically and ideologically) is determined by its economic power, and that human consciousness is driven by material possessions. This can be demonstrated by looking at feudal society, as presented in Marx & Engels’ Communist Manifesto (1962). Here the peasantry, the material basis of the ‘superstructure’, were bound to work on the land by feudal obligations, with the existing social order justified by the Catholic Church. However, the aristocratic nobility could not resist the increasing status of the bourgeoisie or ‘revolutionary class’, resulting in the creation of the Proletariat class that could sell only the commodity of labour as a means of subsistence, constituting the revolutionary class within the newly formed capitalist society. So overall, Marx saw classes as strong social forces, able to transform society, explaining the structure of social inequality through the relationships to the means of production.

This contrasts with Max Weber, a promoter of ‘value-free’ social science, critical of Marx’s historic materialism (Parkin, 1982). Whilst Marx claimed that social classes have shaped human history, Weber argued that everything is reducible to their individual constituents and explainable in those terms. So as Gerth & Mills (1948) suggest, for Weber the term ‘class’ is used when a group have a similar “specific casual component” of their ‘life chances’,

represented in economic terms by the possession of goods, financial opportunities and market conditions. So here class is a reflection of market-determined 'life chances', the contributing factors including property (where owners and positively and non-owners are negatively privileged), and education & skills, leading to positively and negatively privileged 'acquisition' or 'commercial' classes. Weber recognised the difficulty of identifying a 'class' due to numerous market situations, citing over twenty positively and negatively privileged classes in his *Economy and Society* work.

However, this problem was resolved by Weber defining four 'social classes', in which individuals of each group have similar mobility. These were the working class, petty bourgeoisie, specialists / low level management, and those privileged through property and education topping the social class hierarchy. So whilst Marx & Weber have similar definitions of 'class structure', the former bases the source on production relationships, the latter on market ones. However, Gerth & Mills (1948) suggest that Weber does not actually see classes as different communities, simply possible bases for "communal action". Weber developed his historical sociology in opposition of Marxist ideologies, giving a pluralistic account for the rise in capitalism, with 'rational' Protestantism providing ideal rules such as diligence in work and efficient use of time giving "a particularly fruitful seedbed" (Crompton, 1998) for developing capitalism.

Weber not only denies that class action and conflict is inevitable, but also that different classes are a fundamental source for differentiation within societies. Gerth & Mills (1948) state that Weber suggests the concepts of class and status simply show the distribution of power within a community. Instead of suggesting that in a feudal society the lord would be of a dominant class, Weber would assert he is in fact in a particular 'status group'. Weber uses the term 'status' to highlight a particular set of life chances or fates for the status group in question, "associational groups sharing common cultures" (Collins, 1971) and "cultural practices such as dress, speech, outlook and bodily dispositions" (Turner, 1988). However, the latter definition may well overlap with common use of the concept of 'class'.

Such stratification is essential for functionalism – Davis & Moore argue that it makes an important contribution to social order, and therefore inequality is seen as "beneficial, positive and necessary" (Chapman, 2000). A society must ensure that the most functionally important roles are filled by those most talented and efficient, with education and stratification allowing individuals to have an occupation that best suits their abilities. Whilst they claim that a meritocratic society gives high reward (financially and status-wise) to motivate the most gifted and inequality means those disadvantaged wish to improve on their position, there is much resentment over 'fat-cat' pay packets in today's world. Davis & Moore neglect these dysfunctions of stratification – for example reward possibly being due to unjust economic and political power, and that poverty negatively impacts education and lifestyle.

Whilst there are other later theories such as Aron highlighting the importance of social development in terms of capitalism's internal evolution and its supersession, and Ossowski focussing upon the analysis of society's "vertical representation" with class divisions, these appear to focus more upon critique of the key theories presented by Marx and Weber. Since the latter two are the most respected and well-known academically, I will now relate the significance of social action and then the belief that social classes are dying to the two theories that have been explained.

The focus by Weber on the relationship between class and education and resultant skills is reflected in the UK's Registrar General's Scale, which Chapman (2000) believes is the "best known and most widely used way until 2000" into categorising social classes. Here five classes are used based solely upon the job of the head of household's associated skill group, ranging from doctors and solicitors in Class I (Professional) down to road-sweepers and refuse collectors in Class V (Unskilled Manual). A number of problems with this model have been highlighted, such as it excludes the wealthy upper class living off stocks and shares and groups outside paid employment, and that it assumes the unemployed continue to enjoy the same status and lifestyle as when they had a job. However, it can still be considered as quite

a useful model for highlighting differences in social action depending on the class of the individual:

One could fairly assume that income and skills category are directly proportional – excluding anomalies such as unemployment, an individual with better skills can obtain a better paid job. For example those with a university degree such as teachers and managers (Class II – Intermediate) are likely to be earning more than those without in the class below (Class III - Skilled Non Manual / Manual), such as shop assistants and factory workers. Social action of an individual can be considered as quite directly related to wealth, since the degree of affluence influences lifestyle choices and attitudes. For example, whilst those at the bottom of the class hierarchy may, as Davis & Moore suggest, prioritise on trying to work themselves out of poverty (for example a family trying to show their child the importance of gaining 5 Grade C qualifications at GCSE), the more affluent who do not suffer such hardship may act to ensure their offspring receive the best possible education, for example paying for public school.

Indeed, John Scott (1982) recognises the unique social action of the upper class, highlighting practises such as 'social closure' – i.e. keeping their wealth and status restricted to their class, for example with an old-boy network with strong Oxbridge links (still evident today with Oxbridge accepting 65 candidates from Winchester School in year 2001) and the membership of exclusive gentleman's clubs. Adonis & Pollard (1998) have suggested that a new group is being formed known as the 'super class', mainly living in London and the rest of the South East, distinguishable due to their 'social action' regarding consumption patterns – i.e. exotic holidays, BUPA, nannies and servants.

Giddens (1980) distinguishes between the conditions and structure of the middle and working class, and the resultantly the different actions and behavioural patterns of each. Firstly, it is important to note that the 'middle class' can be further be broken down into three groups – professionals, managers and routine white collar workers. Giddens, along with Savage et al make a number of assertions about the behaviour of professionals, such as that they actively pursue their interests via occupational organisations such as the British Medical Association, recognise common interests and are willing to take collective action to protect them, and recognise the worth of 'cultural assets' which they pass on to their children. Whilst these may be seen as 'sweeping generalisations', I believe that they are valid assertions that could apply to the majority of this specific class or status group.

Such social action and behavioural patterns greatly contrasts with the 'underclass', with Murray & Saunders asserting that this "distinct group" of individuals in the inner city and council estates subscribes to a culture of deviance – for example being work-shy and dependent upon welfare (for example, the "I'm on the dole" attitude), a failure to commit to family life and criminal tendencies. This appears to somewhat contradict Davis & Moore's theory that there will be determination to rise from their current position – instead individuals being de-motivated often appears prevalent. Dahrendorf (1959) highlights that different social groups have different interests, which has been evident through the analysis of two classes on opposite poles of the societal hierarchy, and agrees with Weber's concept of 'status groups'.



*"We are all middle class now"*

Tony Blair, 1999

Whilst there is now the theory that social classes are now dying, the above statement attracted controversy, since inequality in the UK remains as strong as ever (Marshall et al,

1988) across fields such as education and morbidity. Indeed, child poverty has trebled in the past 20 years. Nevertheless, surely class differences in some aspects are not as contrasting as before. For example, no longer is Oxbridge a haven solely for Etonians, with 9% of students being from the lowest social classes (note that this is still a very low figure, certainly not representative of the population). To correspond with Davis & Moore's theory that the working class desire societal shift upwards, Zweig (1963) argues that the working class have adopted the economic and cultural lifestyle of the middle class. On the other hand, comprehensive research (e.g. Goldthorpe & Lockwood's Affluent Worker study) contradicts such statements, for example with 77% of their sample voting Labour.

Crompton (1998) considers whether social classes are dying as one of the problems of class analysis. He firstly highlights a problem with discussing the death of social classes being the ambiguity of the definition – an article by Clark & Lipset (1991) which fuelled extended debate used the term rather generally to mean hierarchical differentiation. Therefore, their claims that social classes are dying focuses upon the decline of hierarchies in production, employment and the family, and the decline in the relationship between class and voting patterns. For the latter, it is highlighted that in previous generations, political viewpoints shifted with increasing wealth since greater affluence meant taking basic provisions for granted (thus perhaps preferring the Tory attitude to having of pay for additional amenities rather than Labour's approach in providing facilities for all, as a generalisation). This contrasts with young educated people live in a less hierarchical society and thus have moved away from such traditional class politics. However, Clark & Lipset attracted criticism by Hout et al (1993) for using the terms 'class' and 'hierarchy' interchangeably leading to confusion, failing to recognise the complex relationship between class and voting behaviour. Pakulski (1993) asserts that their claim that social classes are dying is actually the death of Marxist class theory of social change, distinguishing between using the class concept to explain this theory as opposed to using it to highlight patterns of social inequalities.

In Pakulski & Water's (1996) 'The Death of Class', there is recognition that the key academic theories may have been of importance at the time of writing, but in recent years class has lost its "ideological significance and political centrality", with both poles not so focussed upon the concept of class. The key argument in this text is that the globe's most advanced societies are no longer "class societies", with class identities and ideologies being a thing of the past in Europe, perhaps important in the mid 20th century. For example, the right are turning more towards morality and ethnicity (for example the Conservative Party emphasising their desire for racial integration, and even the BNP's manifestos not being as extreme as previously) whilst the left are concerned with factors such as gender and citizenship. This shift corresponds with increased scepticism towards class models and structures (perhaps now seen as outdated), creating "an auspicious climate for reaching conclusions on its relevance". Pakulski & Water suggest that the rise and fall of class societies can be viewed historically, rising with the arrival of industrial capitalism, developing as organised / corporate capitalism becomes more dominant, and dying in the period of postmodernisation. Note that the key Marxist theory is based on industrial capitalism, and thus could be seen as somewhat outdated today. However, there is the important assertion made that the death of class does not mean the end of social division and conflict, with post-class societies possibly being even more crippling and destabilising than class societies, and certainly not necessarily meaning social harmony. So once again there is the problem of defining class, and like Weber these authors have recognised that social conflict is not solely a result of different classes.

In conclusion, whilst Marx & Weber may have presented very interesting sociological theories regarding class, their significance may be somewhat diluted today since the focus upon industrial capitalism and production relations was arguably a more dominant concept in their time of writing. Whilst there does indeed appear to be 'blurring' between class boundaries, and often less significance of class contrasts, diverse behaviour and social action depending on class does remain evident – one cannot deny the massive contrasts in behaviour and social attitudes of the working and upper classes of 21st Century UK. As a final matter of interest, it may be useful to analyse the class structure and concepts of other societies, since many of the academic theories here appear to relate only to Britain or western Europe. For example, India's strict caste system remains in place, greatly influencing social action and restricting mobility (eg marriage between different castes is still widely disapproved), and

class is salient in some African and Latin American societies which have not reached an advanced economic level.

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