

The Enduring Relevance of Class Analysis

**Professor Roger Penn
School of Sociology
Queen's University, Belfast
2015**

'The Times They Are A-Changin'

- We live in period of significant social turbulence
- This is epitomised politically in the growth of parties like Syriza, Podemos, Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement and Jeremy Corbyn's successful campaign to lead the Labour Party
- Another aspect has been the best selling study *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* by the French economist Thomas Piketty [2014] and Paul Mason's *PostCapitalism* [2015], both of which foreground relations between capital and labour
- One interesting feature in these developments has been the resurgence of interest in Marx, Marxism and **class analysis**

The Continued Relevance of Class Analysis?

- This presentation explores the relevance of class analysis for contemporary studies of social inequality
- It examines the 'classical tradition' in relation to social stratification research in Britain and assesses why it went out of fashion and whether the baby was thrown out with the bathwater

The Classical Tradition

- The classical tradition incorporated theoretical underpinnings derived from Marx and Weber
- These were conventionality conceptualized as **binary opposites** [Dahrendorf, 1959; Giddens, 1973]
- In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s much empirical sociology was structured around the 'debate' between the two positions [see Dobbin, 2004]

'Post-Class' Approaches

- A series of interconnected changes problematized the hegemony of traditional class approaches
- The first involved manifest *lacunae* within the dominant paradigm: these included the absence of research on gender, ethnicity, age and disability [see Penn, 1996]
- A second element in the demise of traditional class analysis was the increasingly turgid and arcane [not to mention scholastic] nature of much of the literature

'Post-Class' Approaches

- A third feature was the collapse of the notion of the 'working class' itself amongst sociologists
- I had a part to play in this with my research on skilled manual workers that showed how they were a distinct stratum within the wider matrix of social stratification [see Penn, 1982; 1985 and 1990]
- There was a loss of certainty and confidence in terms like 'working class' and 'middle class'

'Post-Class' Approaches

- A fourth element were changes in the world that lay outside academia and the main groupuscles on the Left
- These included the **Falklands War**: this puzzled many academics like Howard Newby who stated at the 1983 Social Stratification conference that “nobody realized that the working class was nationalistic”
- They also included the **implosion of the Labour Movement** symbolized by the 1984/5 Miners Strike in Britain
- The 1980s also witnessed successive Conservative Party electoral victories in Britain and led, ultimately, to the defeat of the Left within the Labour Party and the creation of **Blairite 'New Labour'**

'Post-Class' Approaches

- More recently there has been an infusion of American-style approaches to the study of social inequality
- By this I mean an application of **rigorous statistical modelling** and an emphasis on **dimensions of stratification**
- This has also involved a great deal of agonising about **how best to measure individual-level inequality** and **which occupational scale is the best for assessing social stratification** [see Lambert & Bihagen, 2014]
- Many data sets now allow the use of a wide range of such scales based primarily upon occupation as a well as education and social interaction

'Post-Class' Approaches

- The problem with this 'second wave' revisionism is that it is difficult to express results in a language that is intelligible to more than a few specialists
- As a consequence most sociologists still rely on common sense categories to interpret results and/or they use these scales in an arbitrary and 'ad hoc' fashion
- This can be seen in handbooks like Shaw *et al* [2007] which provides long lists of different conceptual schemes without any guidance as to which might be the most appropriate

'Post-Class' Approaches

- In my review of literature in the field, certain features became apparent
- There is a myriad of different ways of measuring inequality
- All rely, in the main, on data collected about occupations
- All are rooted in the way such occupational data was categorized by Census authorities around the time of the First World War: new occupations are forced into this procrustean template
- All assume a hierarchy to these underlying measures; terms like 'gradient' or 'ladder' crop up regularly
- All place the same occupations at the bottom of the ladder and nearly all put the same groupings at the top
- If there is a large difference between each pole, all will [and do] inevitably explain a degree of variation on other outcomes [health, education, income etc]

The Return of the Classical

- In order to gauge whether there is a case to re-engage with classical forms of class analysis it is important to re-examine some of its key aspects

Key Axioms of the Classical Tradition

- Marx and Marxists emphasize the **capitalist nature of contemporary societies**
- Their models vary between **synchronic binary** [capitalist: proletarian] and **more complex diachronic models** that emphasize ‘fractions of capital’ [finance vs industrial capital] and/or the ‘petty bourgeoisie’
- These categories are firmly rooted in the structures of **property relations** within capitalist societies

Key Axioms of the Classical Tradition

- Weber also identified the capitalist class as a central feature of contemporary societies
- He developed notions that as well as the basic dichotomous divide between capitalists and routine manual workers there were also **‘positively privileged’ groupings** whose relative class advantages were rooted in the labour market and the world of work
- These ‘intermediate classes’ included the self-employed, professional/managerial strata and ‘exceptionally qualified’ workers
- We can see that such a Weberian class model allows for ‘multiple nodes of market power’ as a basis for a **wider, more complex class model**

Dubious Assumptions

- The first is the reliance on **occupation** as the central component of measures of social stratification
- This is evident in Goldthorpe's various efforts over the years and in the CAMSIS scale
- In a real sense the tail wags the dog: conveniently collected official data on occupation produces occupationally-driven measures of stratification[either categorical or scaled]

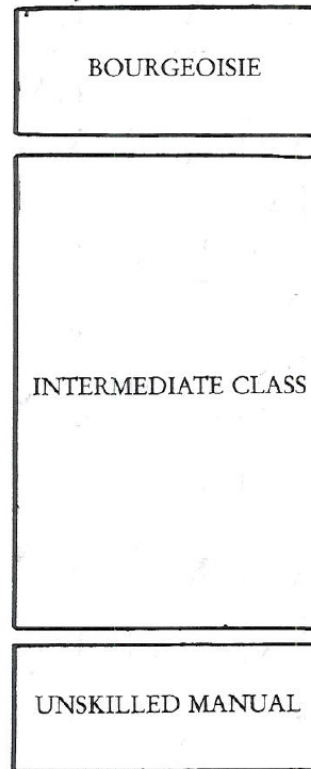
Dubious Assumptions

- I made a serious attempt to remedy this in the model proposed in 1981 in my critique of the Nuffield 'class' categorization and which I subsequently used [Penn & Dawkins, 1983; Penn, 1984] to model patterns of intermarriage over time [NB not to convert data on intermarriage into a scale]
- I showed that property relations were fundamental to understanding how these patterns were structured empirically over time

Key Axioms of the Classical Tradition

TABLE 4

A Model of the Generic Class Structure of British Industrial Capitalism



Dubious Assumptions

- The second is the continued reliance on a **binary** ‘**working class**’/’**middle class**’ explanatory model
- In Goldthorpe’s recent formulations he continues to insist that ‘manual workers and routine nonmanual workers’ form a lower category than ‘salaried employees’
- This reproduces his long held assumption that there is a ‘working class’ in contemporary capitalist societies

Typical Market and Work Situation

- From the late 1960s through the 1970s class was generally conceptualized in terms of ‘typical market and work situation’
- This involved a close inter-connection of the study of work [industrial sociology] and the study of labour market position
- This was exemplified in Goldthorpe & Lockwood *et al*’s seminal *Affluent Worker* research [1968a,1968b and 1969]
- It was also seen in Blackburn and Mann’s classic study of *The Working Class in the Labour Market* [1979]

Typical Market and Work Situation

- In terms of typical 'market and work situation', the relative power of skilled manual workers continues to be underpinned by strategies of exclusion aimed simultaneously at management and the nonskilled [as well as other skilled groups]
- The notion of some homogenous 'working class' remains a fixation of sociologists but is, in reality, a chimera [or even a fantasy]

Typical Market and Work Situation

- But does it make any sense to lump all manual workers together?
- Many manual workers are salaried nowadays as are many routine nonmanual workers [NHS, Universities, Bae]
- In terms of 'market position', many skilled manual workers are paid much more than nonskilled manual workers or routine nonmanual workers [see Penn, 1996]
- These include traditional apprenticed craft workers and skilled manual workers at the apex of internal career trajectories, particularly in capital-intensive industries like paper, steel and chemicals [see Penn, 1990]

Typical Market and Work Situation

- Unfortunately this synthesis has been lost in most contemporary economic sociology
- Sociology lacks detailed maps of the changing nature of modern work and how this has impacted on conventional boundaries within the class system
- In particular, the growth of computerisation and the enormous expansion of people with university degrees has not been incorporated satisfactorily

A New Agenda for Stratification Research

- I think there is a strong case for a different set of questions and empirical research in the field
- These could include studies of the capitalist class [owners]
- In the field of research into football there is a conspicuous gap in the sociological literature: the owners have never been studied systematically

A New Agenda for Stratification Research

- I also think that more research should be undertaken in the world of work where all these schemes are rooted
- I have previously pointed out the importance of logistics as a neglected terrain
- I also think that occupations like nursing and administrative work warrant greater attention
- Given the globalization of economic activity, this research needs a global frame of reference

A New Agenda for Stratification Research

- New styles of research would be valuable
- Too much stratification research has become statistical and technical and, to most outsiders, both dull and uninteresting
- Case studies and qualitative research has much to offer
- So do visual methods





References

- Blackburn, R. and Mann, M. [1979] *The Working Class in the Labour Market* London: Macmillan.
- Connelly, R. (2012) 'Social stratification and cognitive ability: An assessment of the influence of childhood ability test scores and family background on occupational position across the lifespan' in P. S. Lambert, R. Connelly, R. M. Blackburn & V. Gayle (Eds.) *Social Stratification: Trends and Processes* Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Dahrendorf, R [1959] *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* Stanford: Stanford UP
- Dobbin, F. [2004] *The New Economic Sociology* Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Ermisch, J., Jantti, M., & Smeeding, T. (Eds.). (2012). *From Parents to Children: The Intergenerational Transmission of Advantage*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Erola, J. [2012] 'Family background and the life cycle effects of father's class and income' in P. S. Lambert, R. Connelly, R. M. Blackburn & V. Gayle (Eds.) *Social Stratification: Trends and Processes* Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Ganzeboom, H. & Treiman, D.[1996]'Internationally Comparable Measures of Occupational Status for the 1988 International Standard Classification of Occupations' *Social Science Review*, 25.

References

- Giddens, A. [1973] *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies* London: Hutchinson
- Goldthorpe, J. [2010] Analysing Social Inequality: A Critique of Two Recent Contributions from Economics and Epidemiology. *European Sociological Review*, 26(6), 731-744.
- Goldthorpe, J., Lockwood, D., Bechhofer, F. & Platt, J. [1968a] *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goldthorpe, J., Lockwood, D., Bechhofer, F. & Platt, J. [1968b] *The Affluent Worker: Political Attitudes and Behaviour* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goldthorpe, J., Lockwood, D., Bechhofer, F. & Platt, J. [1969] *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hillmert, S. [2012] "Cumulative inequalities along the life course" in P. S. Lambert, R. Connelly, R. M. Blackburn & V. Gayle (Eds.) *Social Stratification: Trends and Processes* xxx
- Lambert, P., & Bihagen, E. [2014] 'Using occupation-based social classifications' *Work, Employment and Society*, 28(3).

References

- Leiufsrud, H., Bison, I. And Jensberg, H. [2005] *Social Class in Europe: European Social Survey 2002/3* Department of Sociology & Political Science, Norwegian University of Technology and Science
- Mason, P [2015] *PostCapitalism* London: Allen Lane.
- Penn, R. [1981] 'The Nuffield Class Categorization: Some Critical Remarks', *Sociology*, 15, 2.
- Penn, R. [1982] 'Skilled Manual Workers in the Labour Process, 1856-1964', in S. Wood (ed), *The Degradation of Work? Skill, Deskilling and the Labour Process* London: Hutchinson
- Penn, R. & Dawkins, D. [1983] 'Structural Transformations in the British Class Structure' *Sociology*, 17, 4 November 1983, pp.506-23, republished in *Social Statistics: Volume II The Development of Statistical Modelling* Sage:2010 (with D. Berridge)
- Penn, R. [1985] *Skilled Workers in the Class Structure* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Penn, R. [1990] *Class, Power and Technology: Skilled Workers in Britain and America* Cambridge: Polity Press

References

- Penn, R. [1996] 'The Relative Significance of Class, Ethnicity and Gender in Sociological Analysis' in W. Bottero (ed) *Post-Class Society?* Cambridge: Sociological Research Group, 1996.
- Piketty, T. [2013] *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* Cambridge: Harvard UP.
- Rose, D. [2006] *Socio-Economic Classifications: Classes and Scales, Measurement and Theories* ISER, University of Essex.
- Rose, D. & Harrison, E. [2010] (eds) *Social Class In Europe: An Introduction to the European Socio-Economic Classification* London: Routledge.
- Shaw, M., Galobardes, B., Lawlor, D., Lynch, J., Wheeler, B., & Davey Smith, G. (2007) *The Handbook of Inequality and Socioeconomic Position: Concepts and Measures*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Treiman, D., & Ganzeboom, H. [2000] 'The Fourth Generation of Comparative Stratification Research' In S. R. Quah & A. Sales (Eds.), *The International Handbook of Sociology* (pp. 123-150). London: Sage.
- Wright, E. [1997] *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis* Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Wright, E. [2005] (ed) *Approaches to Class Analysis* Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Wright, E. [2015] *Understanding Class* London: Verso.

