

**Is the German Ideology Regarding Class relevant in British Society?**

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The categorising of people according their status within society is as old as mankind itself. The study of class has been viewed as the means to comprehend the structure of social society. Analyzing class has become a characteristic of much sociological debate. Leading class theorists including Marx, Weber, and functionalist thought assembled many complex approaches to class analysis near the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In today's industrial society, such as Britain, the system of social structure is adaptable. People can more easily ascend the social ladder than in the past. Modern theorists have attempted to explain what constitutes a particular social class and whether it is the type of neighbourhood one lives, their career, ethnicity or income that defines to which class they belong. Although there is no specific definition of class as in say, India where there is a caste system, social differentiation does indeed exist.

Is the term underclass a suitable identifier and a persuasive symbolic label as Marxists contend, or is it a post-industrial experience? The term underclass is largely used to define the unemployed who have little prospects for long-term, permanent employment. The general term cannot be applied broadly to all who are out of work for an extended period. This classification of people may be inclined to be chronically unemployed or unskilled but they have little else in common. The post-industrial class does not generally work in the mills or farms. They are an educated and skilled group which developed after WWII and constitute the middle to upper-middle class of society. The unskilled worker class has decreased as the class of the more educated workers becomes increasingly prevalent.

Class is a matter of social perspectives. Position in the hierarchy is determined by personal merit and personal wealth. Most Britons view our own situation as in a middle

class life-style. A person living in a Council Estate tenant views owning a home as a move into the middle-class. This is the height of their social objective. The title-holder of a house would view moving into a terraced house as a step down into the working class. Working class people see society levels in terms of the haves and have-nots. In a utopian world, a person's circumstances would be of no significance. Everyone would compete for jobs under the same equitable environment. We do acknowledge, however, that there are noticeable inequalities in the social circumstances of classes, of male and female and people of various ethnic origins. Everyone doesn't begin at the same starting block in life.

This discussion has explored class perspectives in general and will focus on contemporary debates concerning varied class structures. It will also include how Marxist, Neo-Marxist, Functionalist, Weberian and Neo-Weberian theories of social structure responds to these debates as well as their views of class in our society. According to research by Ivan Reid, "Britain has produced considerable evidence to show that class remains a major causal factor in people's lives. Research has produced a valuable compilation of evidence, using a variety of class measures, to show the effects of class."<sup>1</sup>

### **The Debates**

Social citizenship, or status, implies social inclusion. The underclass feel excluded from mainstream society while others, who are usually not in this situation, say there is a blamable reason for their predicament and/or there is a need for the underclass in a well-rounded society. Debating the issue has yet proved unsuccessful in coping with this

impasse.<sup>2</sup> Some see the underclass as a cultural problem; others view it as a social attitude dilemma. Still others claim the Government has failed to generate jobs, which has led to a less stable family structure. Some speculate that the concept of an underclass is a philosophical move by extreme Marxists or functionalist ideologies. The debate centers on those who argue who would do the thankless and dirty jobs if not for the underclass against those who argue that the government has not achieved enough monetary equality throughout society. “The widening gap in income and wealth around the globe has recaptured social scientists’ concern about inequality, which has been important to sociology since the work of Marx, Durkheim and Weber. Aristotle’s advice to ‘treat equals equally’ is ambiguous unless we specify what goals are valued, who is (un)equal to whom and what principles are used.”<sup>3</sup>

Research on class awareness show that people’s immediate financial situation has an influence on their current perceptions of inequality. Other research has demonstrated that people’s attitudes to class variances seldom compare with one’s own material possessions.<sup>4</sup> Runciman’s study could not establish the precise interrelationship among all the components of structural inequalities, nor has anyone else. When examining social divisions, many facets of social life must be factored in such as personal value ideals and an individual’s philosophies regarding “income, wealth, status, political power, health, education, employment opportunities, housing and freedom within societies, and across nations and over time, particularly along the lines of class, gender and race.”<sup>5</sup> A defect in class perception studies is that “researchers have failed to explore the full sources of the social imagery that influences people’s perceptions of inequality.”<sup>6</sup> Perception is the key to how a person views the status of another. Those that view

society as something everyone should fit into (functionalists) have a more fixed viewpoint of class than the average person.

Marxist philosophy cannot be narrowly viewed as a simply an explanation of the conflict between poor and rich. Marx wrote about economic concerns at times in great detail but their primary interest was deeply philosophical in nature which has spawned many others in varied fields to advance theories based on Marxism.<sup>7</sup> Marx's purpose was to incite a not-so-subtle call to action and his words spoke to the potential he believed society could achieve. Marx theorized that the conversion of minds and social structures to communism would end the divisions between social class in addition to erasing the tyrannical line that divides governmental authority and society. There would be no need for political institutions or private property. Social justice would not have to be legislated because the antagonistic obstruction to social accord Marx believes stems from an individual's ego and 'one-sided development' would be all but eliminated. Individuals would 'de-alienate' and be absorbed into a new, closer-knit society and recognize humanity as more than a concept. "Voluntary solidarity, not compulsion or the legal regulation of interests will ensure the smooth harmony of human relations [...] the powers of the individual can only flourish when he regards them as social forces, valuable and effective within a human community and not in isolation."<sup>8</sup> According to Marx, communism allows people to make suitable use of their human capabilities.

Marx's writings showed he was concerned about the outcomes of capitalism. It has been more than a century and a half since Marx's writing and capitalism has evolved considerably since that time, though structurally, not fundamentally. This system remains one of an exploitative nature. The production of commodities still alienates

people from what is produced and in a very real sense from themselves as well. It can be reasonably suggested that Marxism is concerned more for the alienation factor present in capitalism than the uneven distribution of wealth inherent in the system and the impoverished conditions that results. This is not to imply that Marxist thought is not concerned with the depravation and suffering that comes from poverty but to illustrate Marx's profound apprehensions regarding the reduced quality of existence that capitalism is responsible for. For example, consider the pollution of the environment for the sake of capitalistic ventures, sardine-like rush-hour traffic and sensationalistic news programmes that seek revenue over critical, thoughtful information.

Marx could not have been more wrong regarding the demise of capitalism and in their calculations regarding the timing of a communist rebellion. Engels foretold of the end-time of capitalism being about eight years from 1845, the year of his prediction. He viewed the 1847 depression as the beginning of the end for capitalism. Marx and Engels were rather over-optimistic in their collective assessment of the rise of socialism and somewhat unwise to set a specific date. This can be written-off to their confidence in the socialist system but it is puzzling that these learned men believed the working masses would collectively and quickly educate themselves then systematically adopt socialist ideals.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Theories**

The functionalist vision of class inequality is predisposed to a politically conservative ideology which defends the continuance of the status quo, so to speak. This point of view believes that class inequality is not only inevitable but necessary as well.

Positions in society have specific but dissimilar purposeful significances. Various occupations needed for the harmonious functions of society demands a ready work force in every level of the social order. “Positions that require long tedious training will require higher rewards in order to ensure an adequate supply of candidates. For example, higher incomes, status and prestige are necessary to ensure that people will take on the years of privation and training that lead to success in medical practice and to meet the needs of the society for health care.”<sup>10</sup> Positions that require little skill or training, such as garbage collectors, are necessary too. They play an important role in society but are paid at a lower rate than a physician as their lack of schooling and training translate to a smaller income. The functionalist argument reasons that this system is the most effective and easiest method to ensure a smooth running society. The post-industrial class has evolved to its own fit with society’s needs along with the underclass, according to a functionalist.<sup>11</sup> British citizens generally assume only chance connections between the unemployed, single-parenthood and high crime, but the functionalist would argue that this is hardly the case. The functionalist views social deviance such as chronic unemployment, crime and high single-parenthood as interrelated. Welfare benefits as a result of unemployment and single-parents have helped to cause the decline of the family unit. Functionalists think that this is an illness of society that has encouraged a culture of ne’er-do-wells which fail to recognize a work ethic. It also encourages crime and a culture dependant on welfare.

“Marx conceptualizes class as an objective structure of social positions, whereas Weber’s analysis of class is constructed in the form of a theory of social action.”<sup>12</sup>

Marxism theories maintain a one-dimensional comprehension of social status with class

relations being paramount whereas Weberism supports a multidimensional view in which class relations intersect with and are usually offset by other bases of association, not class. “In Marx’s theory, the essential logic of class relations and class conflict is one of exploitation, where political and ideological domination are interpreted as merely the means by which exploitation is secured, whereas for Weber domination is conceived as an end in itself, with its own independent force and logic.”<sup>13</sup> Classes are an expression of the social relations of production to a Marxist while Weberism sees classes as common positions within the market. Neo-Marxist theory shows how perspectives traditionally associated with Weber have been incorporated into new Marxist analyses of class. “Marxists and Weberians alike have exaggerated or oversimplified the differences in their theoretical perspectives. This neo-Marxist perspective occupies a middle position between the classical Marxist and Weberian theories of class and forces us to rethink some of the traditional oppositions between these two theoretical schools.”<sup>14</sup>

From the Weberian perspective, classification of social status, or class stature, is the result of the equal or unequal distributions of material goods and employment opportunities. Property ownership and the lack of create class division. Unemployment issues are connected to and follow the unequal distribution of property. “What Weber called ‘class situations’ exist wherever property and employment relations generate specific capacities or powers to acquire income and assets and so to enhance or diminish life chances.”<sup>15</sup> Weberian theorists argue that it is possible to speak of social classes as separate from a purely economic class position. “A social class is a demographic cluster of households whose members owe their life chances principally to the specific property ownership or employment relations that constitute their class situations.”<sup>16</sup>

A neo-Weberian approach to class analysis goes further than its predecessor. It supports a class ideology based on the many dimensions of labour markets and production elements that are vital for the dispersal of life chances. They study the significance of class by the numerous explanations of the variations of life chances, “particularly in comparison with other bases of social inequality such as ethnic group membership, gender, and so on. And of course such an inquiry can be extended to make comparisons in the strength of class effects between countries and through time.”<sup>17</sup> The link between what starting block the post industrial class as opposed to the underclass began at may be contingent on other circumstances and variations in life when considering class position. A poor poet or cellist may be considered of a high social stature for example. To a Neo-Weberian, there may or may not be solid justification for the relationship between cash and class.

The concept of exploitation and domination in class analysis is a distinctive characteristic of Marxist thought. The subject of exploitation is a multifaceted conception. It is designed to assign an interdependence of people to material possessions. “Exploitation is a diagnosis of the process through which the inequalities in incomes are generated by inequalities in rights and powers over productive resources. The inequalities occur, in part at least, through the ways in which exploiters, by virtue of their exclusionary rights and powers over resources, are able to appropriate surplus generated by the effort of the exploited.”<sup>18</sup> This interdependence of individuals to producers or owners makes exploitation a volatile type of social relationship as it comprises a social relation which concurrently matches the interests of one group against another. “Because human beings are conscious agents, not robots, they always retain significant levels of

real control over their expenditure of effort. The extraction of effort within exploitative relations is thus always to a greater or lesser extent problematic and precarious, requiring active institutional devices for its reproduction.”<sup>19</sup> The ability of an employer to impose exploitive tactics can be costly in the form of the costs of supervision, surveillance and sanctions simply to impose a form of power among the workers. Domination is a simpler concept to explore than exploitation. “It identifies one dimension of the interdependence of the activities within production itself rather than simply the interdependence of material interests generated by those activities.”<sup>20</sup> Some people are in a position to control the activities of others, “to direct them, to boss them, to monitor their activities, to hire and fire them, to advance or deny them credit.”<sup>21</sup> Domination is a relationship into which people enter as a result of their rights and powers they have over productive resources. “The Marxist class analysis thesis, therefore, is not simply that ‘what you have determines what you have to do to get what you get’, but ‘what you have determines the extent to which you are dominated or dominating when you do what you have to do to get what you get.’”<sup>22</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Economically speaking, class conditions relate to property and employment status that define the individual but British society has a richer and more diverse culture that cannot simply be categorised as the privileged and the peasant classes as it once was. With technological advances came the rise of the post-industrial worker and as time goes on, the lines separating the upper-crust and the underclass get considerably murkier. Sociologists are forced to reconsider the relevance of class in present-day Britain and all

industrialised countries. Class analysis is not the same as nor provides a comprehensive base for social analysis on the whole but is an interesting and mobile debate as to the way different points of view interpret class designations. There is much involved in the analysis of class theories. Social classification theories are but one way to enhance the perceptions of social division and social identity. Class relations are far less defined than 200 years ago but still exist in a far more complex way as there are many steps in between each social rung and many differing attitudes regarding class structures. The study of class structures helps to evolve to what extent a particular imagery of class is perceived and whether it molds the future awareness of present class perceptions.

Marxists view inequality as inevitable because of conflict inherent to the industrialized, capitalistic system. Social inequality will only be leveled when the blue-collar and underclass revolt replacing individual ownership with collective ownership of production facilities. Weberism views inequality as a multifaceted segment within the societal organizational structure. Functionalists focus upon a pre-conceived culturally structured ideology to ensure the proper fit in the various class standings of society. Class divisions persevere as a vital structural characteristic of modern human culture, influencing an individual's life chances. The discussion of class division is integrated amongst various facets of social divisions. Theorists can hardly claim to possess a full, descriptive analysis of class distinctions and attitudes relating to the subject. Conversely, the social consequences of class identifications should not be denied.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Reid, I. (1998). *Class in Britain*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- <sup>2</sup> Morris, L. (1994). *Dangerous Classes: The Underclass and Social Citizenship*. New York: Routledge.
- <sup>3</sup> Swift, A. (2000) "Class Analysis from a Normative Perspective." *British Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 51, p. 663.
- <sup>4</sup> Runciman, W. (1966). *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- <sup>5</sup> Grusky, D. (ed.) (2001). *Social Stratification: Class, Race, Gender in Sociological Perspective*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- <sup>6</sup> Marshall, G. (1983). "Some Remarks on the Study of Working-class Consciousness." *Politics and Society*. Vol. 12, p. 263.
- <sup>7</sup> Kolakowski, L. (1978). *Main Currents of Marxism*. Vol. I, The Founders. Oxford: Clarendon.
- <sup>8</sup> Marx, Karl & Engels, Frederick. (1968). "Manifesto of the Communist Party." *Selected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, p. 179.
- <sup>9</sup> Hunt, R.N. (1974). *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels*. Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, p. 141.
- <sup>10</sup> Anderson, R. H. (2000). *Inequality and Conflict*. Denver, CO: The Department of Sociology, University of Colorado at Denver.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Burrus, C. (1987). "Chapter 3." *The Neo-Marxist Synthesis of Marx and Weber on Class*. Portland, OR: University of Oregon, p. 68.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Weber, M. (1914; reprinted 1968). "The Distribution of Power Within the Political Community: Class, Status, Party." *Economy and Society*. Ed. G. Roth and C. Wittich. New York: Bedminster Press.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Breen, R. (2004). "Foundations of a Neo-Weberian Class Analysis." *Approaches to Class Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- <sup>18</sup> Wright, E. O. (1999). "Foundations of Class Analysis: A Marxist Perspective." *Approaches to Class Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.

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